

## STIR-FRIED AND NOT SHAKEN

Singapore's favourite cookbook author, TV chef and food writer Terry Tan was born during the Japanese Occupation when Singapore was not Singapore but Syonanto. By the time he'd learnt to spell Syonanto it was back to being Singapore. Confusion reigned until Terry found how to make sense of the world through words and food. Schooled in the art of Nonya cooking and trained in broadcast journalism, Terry is the author of over twenty cookbooks, former Editor-in-Chief and, at time of press, Editor-at-Large of *Wine & Dine* magazine. He has also been a schoolteacher, chef, broadcaster, journalist, copywriter and food consultant.

After forty years in Singapore, Terry relocated to London, where he continues to represent Singapore as its unofficial food ambassador. This trip down Singapore's memory lane is rich with the author's comic patter and wry observations. And flying fox curry.

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# Introduction

As you turn the pages of this book that has been gestating for more than twenty years, a passage of time that I spent mulling over my six decades and tickling my funny bone, I hope you find moments of mirth and poignancy that match those of your memory bank. I honestly do not know why I chuckle at the worst possible moments of life's many treadmills, but as the saying goes, laughter is the best medicine, and if you find something to laugh about in the morning, the rest of the day takes care of itself. A philosopher I am not, but it is far better to laugh than steep yourself in negative juices that only put more lines on your face. Heaven knows, the lines on my face resemble a map of the London Underground. Call them what you may—laughter lines, ageing crevices or plain dying skin—but they are at least a crinkly indication that there is still fire in the grate, even if there's snow on the roof. Forgive the occasional blurring of the years; trends are not necessarily dictated by calendar phases and my endorphins have dwindled somewhat. This book is dedicated to all who have lived through the same eras as I, as well as those who have not but still find my chronicles amusing enough to provoke a chuckle or two.

1940s

## Japanese Occupation

I was born on 27th September 1942, not exactly a pleasant moment to arrive in a world turned upside down by the Japanese invasion of the little British colony of Singapore. Actually it was the Japanese fighter planes that were upside down and every which way as they bombed the bejesus out of our pleasant island. I never actually saw any aerial battles or bombing missions, but when I was old enough to understand that there was something terrible going on, I asked many questions of my mother: 'When is the next plane coming?' 'Are they going to bomb us?' 'Can I watch the bombing?'

The only answer I got was a clout on the ear from Mother who intimated that I would bring even more bad luck with my morbid sense of doom. I was only curious, as any toddler would be living amid the kind of violence that kids today can only watch on television or experience through computer games.

It all began on 8th December 1941, when the Japanese megalomania went into overdrive and they invaded Malaya with an amphibious assault on the northeast coast of the peninsula at Kota Bahru. The wily Japanese had already coerced the Thai government into letting them use Thai military bases to launch their attacks into Malaya, after having fought Thai troops for eight hours early in the morning. While the Imperial Japanese Army was well trained and focused into narrow-eyed concentration, the British and Allied Forces were wide-eyed with unawareness of the situation and not exactly primed for defence.

There were Allied fighter squadrons already based in Malaya but they had poorly built equipment and war planes, few spare parts, insufficient support staff and an incoherent command structure.

British offensive aircraft were decrepit or obsolete, and were quickly destroyed by Japanese fighter planes in the air and on the ground. By mid-January the Japanese had reached Johore.

On 7th February 1942 they landed on Pulau Ubin and strafed Changi from there.

My grandfather, who had a few coconut plantations in the area, later told us that the Japanese had ground his coconuts into milk. I dared to ask if that was why Grandmother used so much coconut milk in her cooking, which earned me a thwack on my head. The next day the Japanese sneaked in from the northwest, and furious hand-to-hand fighting took place. By the morning of 10th February, they had secured a foothold on the island.

There was some resistance from the Indian Army and several British Army battalions but it was a futile attempt. The Japanese had even used bicycle infantry overland through terrain that hampered heavy vehicles. They had really done their homework and it was humiliating to know that we had been overcome by an enemy on bicycles! Grandfather was heard to say he wouldn't have been surprised if they had used trishaws as well, as it was the Japanese who brought this mode of transport to Singapore in the early twentieth century. Can you imagine a trishaw being armed with an ack-ack gun? Eventually the Allied Forces and the British surrendered unconditionally on 15th February. The rest is history that most Singaporeans would rather forget.

## Syonanto

If I could turn back the clock, it would have to be a made-in-Japan timepiece. Come to think of it, we were to become awash with made-in-Japan appliances for the next few decades. You couldn't turn on a fan, rice cooker or transistor radio that was not made in Japan. You see, I was actually born in a part of Japan that probably

few can, or wish to, remember today. But I wasn't allowed to forget. Every time I applied for anything remotely resembling a job, I had to present my birth certificate as documentary evidence of my existence. This decaying, almost putrid piece of yellowed paper still reads: 'Date of birth: 27th September 1942, Syonanto.'

Once, in London, when I had to present this same certificate for a legal matter, I was asked if I'd been born in one of the Polynesian islands! Perhaps it was my full Chinese name of Tan Kim Tho that prompted this line of questioning. 'Was it something of a clan thing then?' the official asked, as if everyone born in Syonanto would have a name ending with the same consonant.

We can thank Buddha the Japanese did not name their new colony Ajinomoto. And if they had not been routed by the end of 1945, we would be eating shabu shabu, teppanyaki and sashimi instead of our beloved hawker fare. This would have been a fate worse than death, no? I had other problems too. My family had this peculiar penchant for inventing nicknames. My genealogy was really stir-fried—and not just shaken—to confusion. Maybe Mother was fed up to her betel-nut-stained teeth with dragging me and my two brothers around during numerous evacuations from bomb shelter to bomb shelter. During the formative years of my life, I really believed my name was Jepun Kia (Japanese waif).

When I was old enough to feel the prick of verbal chastisement, I bore the onerous belief that I had been found in a dustbin as an abandoned Japanese orphan. A bundle of joy I was not, for the slightest whimper from me would evoke a hissing retort from Mother. 'Quiet, you weeping devil, or I will give you back to the Japanese.'

She grumbled that it was bad enough having to carry me through such difficult times without me rewarding her with bad behaviour. So the threats came fast and thick. It wasn't just Mother who had this knack but other mothers too, as I have heard many a time even today. Why do we have such a punitive philosophy about bringing up

children? Like if a child wandered into a dark room, he would be told the devil would catch him. If you didn't finish the rice on your plate, you would end up with a pock-marked wife. Or if I cut my fingernails at night, I would release devils, for underneath each nail lived some unmentionable spirit itching to get out. For years afterwards I didn't dare indulge in nocturnal manicures. Even today I am still not totally comfortable in a darkened room and cannot sleep without at least a night light. In every gloomy corner, it seemed, lurked some ghoul or other, especially dead Japanese soldiers.

As for the Japanese-waif threat, long afterwards I could not walk past a dustbin without feeling a squeamish sense of *deja vu*. In truth, Japanese soldiers during the post-war years—many stayed back right through to the 1950s—were not too pugnacious out of uniform. One small group had laid claim to a house next door to ours, and from our upstairs side balcony we could see them going about their peacetime activities.

Father even learnt to speak fairly good Japanese, but the only words I learnt in later years were *banzai* and *hara-kiri*. The former was a war cry meaning 'attack' and the latter was employed by the Japanese who preferred to commit suicide than be dishonoured. *Banzai* became a favourite word among my childhood friends whenever we played war games, but no one committed *hara-kiri*, to the best of my knowledge.

There was one disconcerting thing, however. A few Japanese were in the habit of walking around their forecourt wearing T-shaped loincloths, similar to those that sumo wrestlers wear. Some even took to bathing at public standpipes, of which there were several dotted along the road on which we lived. These were meant for the fire brigade but the Japanese, obsessed with cleanliness, would spend a long time sitting on small stools, sluicing themselves with buckets of water, cleansing their near-naked bodies in full view of the neighbourhood.

They were pretty nonchalant about it all but Mother made my three sisters look and act like boys. Their hair was shorn, they were made to wear trousers and ordered to behave like boys, or else it would be a fate worse than death. They were also warned never to go near any public standpipe or they would end up as handmaidens of the soldiers. In secret, my two sisters would whisper to each other about how well-endowed the soldiers were, as when their loincloths were soaked, their manhood would be clearly visible. If Mother had heard these whispers, she would have been horrified enough to lock my sisters in our attic.

It didn't happen, thank goodness, but it was a few years before my sisters were allowed to look like girls again. As young boys we were still terrified of the unknown; war stories told around the dinner table were scary, to say the least. Many people's houses had been bombed, and as many had lost their lives. Even though the war was over, we still looked over our shoulders, or rather, over our balcony.

There was some social interaction though, really to placate the soldiers so they wouldn't let their rampaging hormones spill over to my sisters. Mother occasionally cooked curries and *sambals* and offered them to the soldiers, and we were, in turn, introduced to sushi and endless pickles. If American GIs could not fight without their beloved Coke, the Japanese would rather have committed *hara-kiri* than go without their pickles. I don't think they liked *sambal belacan* as upon tasting some, they curled their lips in disgust. The departing Imperial Army did give us another memento that is still in my brother's possession. It was a war relic, a samurai sword no less, I swear, and it had bloodstains on the blade. We used to play with it until Mother put a stop to it.

And so the 1940s rolled on. Peace reigned and we were less twitchy after the soldiers were ordered by their superiors to return home. If they had stayed on, there would probably now be a sushi bar or two in our neighbourhood. There were plenty of reasons to

celebrate after liberation, and bonfires were lit with some trepidation. There was a crackly reason for this.

During the occupation, the Japanese had printed, willy-nilly, their own currency with tropical designs of banana trees. These banana notes became utterly useless tender and we had baskets of them. I remember my parents' discomfort at incinerating hundreds and thousands of banana yen. Privately, Father had said they might come in useful one day if the Japanese were to return. But the British instructions were quite stringent: destroy them or we would be regarded as dissidents. My brothers and I managed to keep a few in secret and we made paper boats out of them for play. We would sink them in rain-swollen monsoon drains shouting 'Banzai!' as each was swallowed by the murky water. This was our soggy contribution to the war effort.

## Chin Peng, the Guerilla

Some unpleasant situations also arose after the war had ended. During the war, a bunch of guys had formed guerrilla units so they could fight back. They lived mostly in the Malayan jungle, frequently instigating skirmishes on Japanese camps. After the war, for some inexplicable reason, they refused to return to civilian life and became turncoats, chafing at the bit against British colonialism. Singapore was still part of the Malayan Peninsula and the threat to Singaporeans now came from a different quarter.

One such personage was the Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party, Mr Chin Peng. He was born in Sitiawan, Perak, in 1921 and his father ran a small bicycle shop. Rumour has it that he sold his bicycles to the Japanese when they mounted their two-wheeler units, but this has never been proven and was probably a vicious rumour to besmear Chin Peng. He joined the Party in 1940 and became the leader of the 5th regiment of the Malayan People's

Anti-Japanese Army. He liaised with British officers of Special Operations Executive Far East and was later awarded an OBE.

After the British defeated the Japanese forces in 1945, Chin Peng became frustrated with the Party's slow progress and eventually abandoned the 'united front' strategy in favour of armed struggle. The British declared a State of Emergency which would last until 1960. The Communists adopted Maoist techniques, deploying between 4,000 and 5,000 guerrilla fighters, supported by a network of food and intelligence gatherers, in order to undermine colonialism and establish liberated areas.

After failing to gain recognition after many years of political negotiations, and starved of supplies by the British counter-insurgency forces, he returned to the Thai border in 1955. They launched sporadic incursions but this Cold War ended in 1989 and Chin Peng was last heard of as recently as 2006 to be living in Southern Thailand. Selling bicycles no doubt, one wag commented.

During these years it was unsafe to visit Malaya, but one time Father took my second sister with him on one of his frequent visits to Endau, where he had interests in a sawmill. His jeep was attacked, probably by Chin Peng's henchmen, and flipped over. Father escaped unscathed but my sister suffered a deep gash to her left arm.

She still bears the scars today. As she was First Mother's daughter, and therefore our half-sister, there was little love lost between Mother and her. I shall not go into the many battles of will between them as it was all so long ago, and we do get along with our half-sister today who is in her eighties. My mother had a smug smile or two on her face when my half-sister came home in a bloody mess, and she used this as means to threaten us: if we ever dared to go on such a trip, we would end up in the same way or worse.

We didn't, else I wouldn't have been able to write this book.

## My Father, the Monkey's Uncle ...

I guess it would have been marginally better to be likened to an anorexic ghost than a monkey. This strange twist of the tongue could be a lifetime's bane. My father's parents had named him Tan Ah Kau, the reasons for which had been lost in the mists of antiquity somewhere in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, Borneo. We knew nothing of our paternal antecedents as Father had stowed away as a young lad of ten or eleven in a trader's junk to come to Singapore to seek his fortune. By the time he had made his fortune in several enterprises, he was ready to take a wife or two.

Mother never ceased to moan about how unfortunate she was to be married to a man sight unseen, and to top things off she was his secondary wife. Till the day he shed his mortal coils, he was Lau Kau (Old Monkey) to her. But for the difference in tonal pronunciations, his name could have been Old Dog. But, no. In the Swatow dialect, *kau* means more monkey than mongrel. It never seemed to bother Father none, not even when the whole community in which we lived referred to him as Kau Peh (Monkey Uncle). The belief that we are descended from apes is not that improbable after all.

There was another reason for the monkey tag. On one of his trips, Father brought back a baby monkey as a house pet. It had orange hair and we kept it on a long leash until it became very tame. I called him Jeremy and would often show him off to my classmates. Jeremy became very attached to me and would cling to my neck, whimpering like a baby when frightened. I don't know what breed of monkey he was but he was really cute, especially when First Mother made him a little pink dress in satin. But whenever we dressed him in it, Jeremy would claw at it in protest.

I told First Mother that Jeremy was a boy monkey and probably objected to being dressed like a girl. Actually it was the satin that irritated him, and was crinkly and scratchy where First Mother had

made ruffles. Sadly, one night during a storm Jeremy must have been frightened out of his wits as we'd forgotten to bring him in from his cage that we'd placed on our balcony. I found him cold and dead the next morning and we buried him in our back yard with full ceremony. I had him for about three years.

And thus we earned this primate progeny taunt, all of us bearing the brunt of cruel jibes by the neighbourhood children. We grew up trailing in the wake of childish spiteful monkey remarks. First I had been called Jepun Kia (Japanese waif), then Kau Kia Tee (Little Monkey's Brother on account of Jeremy), neither of which I particularly thrived on.

I had a brief eight years with Father for he died before I reached my ninth year. It could have been ninety years for all the wonderful memories he bestowed on us during his brief sojourn on Earth.

## ...and His Testosterone

Several things about my father still live in my memory: he liked women, gold and castor oil. For his penchant for the first, he bore the brunt of my mother's and his principal wife's regular wrath. Whether it was by tradition or choice, Mother paid due respect to the latter, who was always referred to as First Mother. No, she was not the mother of a president but we and the grandchildren had to differentiate between them. The penchant for nicknames came to an 'udder' pinnacle, and for some imponderable reason Father addressed Mother as 'Mother Cow'.

I shudder to think what friends and schoolmates thought about our family menagerie. Still, Mother received the affection of the community as a Nonya lady of munificent culinary skills. As for his fondness for the ladies, we knew only of Father's indiscretions during his frequent absences, ostensibly to play mahjong. In truth—and I can bear this out with impunity—he was off having it off with some

painted sing-song lady or off-duty cabaret girl. That Father made me privy to his philandering was probably due to paternal guilt.

There was a Teochew business association house near where we lived called Chwee Huay Lim. Father used to take me there sometimes. Businessmen would gather there to chew the fat about their enterprises. Actually, it was much more than business matters they chewed on. Amid the raucous blend of clacking mahjong tiles and animated chatter about rice and rubber prices were the tinkling voices of women who, to my childish mind, looked like painted dolls with red talons and vermilion lips. They seemed to do no more than lean heavily on old men's shoulders, and in between cracking melon seeds they would tickle the ears of whichever man they were clinging on to.

I cannot now recall which one of these 'aunties' was Father's favourite, probably because during these long mahjong sessions, Father would send requests to the cavernous kitchen wherein several sweaty cooks were forever stirring or frying in huge woks. Thus I was fed endless rounds of *char kway teow*, chicken macaroni soup, red bean soup, duck porridge, red bean paste cakes and many more dishes that I do not remember. What I do remember through the haze caused by dyspepsia is not worth remembering. Father displayed all the shrewdness of his primate characteristics, as each time I could never identify his particular painted trollop, even when I got home to Mother's threats to spill the beans. What I did spill was more of the regurgitated variety, due to a surfeit of red bean paste cakes.

However, I do have one vague memory of a lady who not only gleamed from her fingernails but from her mouth too. She was always the one lingering closest to Father. I remember the sun's rays bouncing off her two incisor teeth when she smiled—which was often, especially when Father fondled her lustrous hair. She wore gold on her wrists, neck, ankles and earlobes. I never actually saw Father giving her the jewellery but the conversations I overheard

amongst the gold-bedecked ladies were peppered with references to Poh Heng and Meng Heng. They were not names of their children or gynaecologists, for sure. It was only much later, when I was in my teens, that I discovered them to be goldsmiths along North and South Bridge Roads.

There were brief interludes during mahjong breaks when Father and the other men would fish wads of notes from their pockets and press them into their ladies' perfumed palms. The delighted recipients would squeal, tinkle with merry laughter and disappear en masse for a few hours, only to return with even more jangling gold hanging from their cheongsam-clad bodies.

## Of Trousers and Sarongs

The never-ending dilemma for the younger generation of my family was how to address our two matriarchs, especially in later years when they themselves had grandchildren. It would have been confusing to refer to both as Ah Ma, or Grandmother, in all the local dialects. So it came to pass that one would be Grandmother With Trousers, and the other would be Grandmother Without Trousers. The translation of this can be rather risqué: Cheng Kor Ah Ma and Bo Cheng Kor Ah Ma in Hokkien. First Mother always used to wear a pair of black cotton or silk trousers and a white *samfoo* top. My mother's regulation gear was, without fail, a sarong and *kebaya*, the typical dress of traditional Indonesian and Malay women.

These unflattering honorific titles stuck with both women all their lives but there is further reason for my mother's trouserless state. Nonya women of a certain age did not see the need for underwear as they rarely left the house. Such modest cover was deemed unnecessary in the home so Mother only had a few pairs of cotton shorts. I say this without any snide mirth, for it was true. She would only wear a pair of these shorts if she went out, which was usually to the wet

market. This knickerless state was truly a Nonya tradition, at least in my family.

Actually, wearing a sarong was not exclusive to the female domain. Practically every off-work Malay man wore one as well, but not the ones with ornate batik designs. Men's sarongs were inevitably bold checks in muted colours (they still are) and when I was growing up it was popular to wear them to sleep in. Till this day I do not wear pyjamas to bed, and have in my wardrobe two checked sarongs that I wear during the warmer months, or when I visit my home in Penang. Sarongs are most versatile for you can whip one up and wrap it around your shoulders to ward off wind—with underwear on, of course—or let it down to cover your ankles. It is also useful as a mat for when you go to the beach, as a tablecloth, although perhaps not expedient, and even as a child's cradle suspended from a spring attached to a strong rope fixed to a ceiling. Many of the babies in my family were coddled this way, and it was believed to be extremely comforting as the sarong cradle simulates the closeness of the womb. Alas, by the 1960s sarongs rapidly became passé as they were not considered to be garments conducive to the fast-paced life of working women, Nonya or otherwise.

## Adoption

After the war, many children had been made orphans and adoption was commonplace. At that time it was largely a process derived from compassion and less about legal parameters, compared with today's adoption laws. There was no bureaucracy involved and there were no watchdogs. If a child needed parents and if a couple wanted one, some money changed hands, the child was taken in by the new family and that was that.

Most of the time orphaned babies and even older children were taken in not by childless couples, but by those who felt sympathetic

or wanted a larger family.

However, there were also more traditional and less humane reasons behind people wishing to adopt. Many migrant Chinese women, who'd left behind their mother country, were used to having what was then called *mui tsai* (Cantonese for 'slave girls'). These women were not necessarily middle class or of the social elite; they simply subscribed to the age-old practice of having such indentured handmaidens. (Janet Lim's book *Sold for Silver*, published by Monsoon Books, deals with this issue.)

For these unfortunate orphaned girls it was to be a life of toiling servitude—slavery if you like, whichever way you cut it. Some local Singaporean old-school ladies, though not migrants, were also persuaded by their mahjong cronies to get themselves one of these babies or, better yet, an older girl to be at their beck and call. This brought a social cachet that would be considered criminal today but it happened a lot. I truly believe this term 'handmaidens' came about because these little girls were made to endlessly pummel the backs of their mistresses to alleviate imagined aches and pains.

I saw this happen within the families of some of my relatives. Even in my own family, for my mother adopted two girls: a one-month-old baby from a fisherman's wife from Siglap; and a much older girl under circumstances I shall mention later. The baby's father had recently died leaving his sick and ailing wife with six children, ranging in age from one month to ten years old.

At first I thought Mother had adopted the baby out of pity, but lurking not far behind her seemingly humane decision was the fact that she was looking for someone to tend to her in her old age. This was explained to us in a way that seemed acceptable enough, given the fact that the baby would probably have otherwise had a wretched life. So she came, a sickly bundle of pink with her head covered in cradle cap. When she was old enough, we forced Mother to send her to school, a decision that Mother probably wouldn't have made

without coercion. We could not condone this kind of slavery. She is now fifty-five and, I'm happy to say, a contented wife and mother of a pretty daughter. She never took our family surname but retained her own family name of Lim.

Other adopted girls—rarely boys as male progeny were too precious, however poor families might have been—were not so lucky. In later years I heard many horror stories about these slave girls who were treated abominably. They were no more than chattel, tending to the every need of their madams. They were not paid and lived Cinderella-like lives with no hope of a Prince Charming coming to their rescue. They cooked, cleaned and generally slaved from sunrise to sunset and were never sent to school. Some were even abused by the sons of the family but they had little recourse for complaint. When they got too old to be of use, these girls were simply shunted to one side or married off to the first desperate man looking for a wife.

As for my other adopted sister, she was about twelve when she was brought to our attention by her former neighbour. Her family home had been bombed by the Japanese and her parents killed. She was illiterate and homeless. Mother took her in out of pity and she was useful as another pair of hands.

When she was seventeen, probably due as much to raging hormones as seeing her future as bleak, she ran away from our home to become a prostitute. We did not know she'd taken up this profession until a neighbour chanced upon Ah Muay, as she had been named, somewhere in Jalan Besar.

'Ayoh, I saw her standing in a back alley in Desker Road and she was a *pai char bo* (bad woman or hooker). Such shame on your family,' gloated the neighbour, clearly in her element.

My mother was utterly mortified and we were never again allowed to mention her name or try to see her. Many years later I chanced upon Ah Muay on the beach at Tanah Merah. There she was, as large as life. By then she was in her late thirties, and was with

a man who appeared to be either her partner, husband or lover.

I said hello and was quite keen to catch up with her after more than two decades. I discovered she had married, had several children and her husband was a taxi driver. When I asked if she was okay, she smiled and showed me her arm decked with many gold bangles. She did not have to say anything and I didn't probe further. I haven't seen her since.

## My Sex Education

When Ah Muay was growing up, she was a kind older sister and was often up to her wanton tricks. She would flirt with all the neighbourhood boys and once told me that she felt strange urges and wanted to meet men. She had an overt sexuality that could be unsettling. My mother called her 'itchy', a term generally reserved for girls of a carnal bent.

Our neighbours were a Eurasian family and one of the sons, a boy called Jerry, used to make unsavoury remarks about Ah Muay whenever she passed by their home. Taunted thus for many months, she got her own back one day in full measure. Jerry was passing by our home on his way to school when she sneaked up behind him, pulled up her *samfoo* top and pressed his now-quivering face into her ample bosom. He ran home shrieking but never offended her again.

In an obtuse way, she gave me and my brothers the kind of sex education you could not obtain in any classroom or back alley, going into extremely graphic detail about her menstrual cycles or her 'itchiness' ad nauseam. She was my Masters and Johnson, if you like.

Talking of back alleys, my sex education was to continue during my secondary-school days. I attended Beatty Secondary School, off Serangoon Road, and my daily trudge to school took in a short cut via the unsavoury part of Jalan Besar. There were many back alleys in the area where hookers plied their trade. My daily journey also passed

a makeshift coffee stall, and even at the ungodly hour of seven in the morning, some of the women would be having coffee and breakfast, probably after finishing their night's business.

They were wicked and would call out to me in their gin-cracked voices, making suggestive remarks and gestures. I was so nervous that I persuaded a neighbour's son, who was in the same school, to walk with me along this route. Years later, this street called Desker Road would become synonymous with the sex trade, and every mention would send us pubescent boys into sniggering fits of laughter.

## My Personal Barber

Some people brag about their personal trainer and the *chi chi* set have their personal shopper. For most of my childhood I had a personal barber. Until the age of seven I never went to a barber because my barber came to me, so there! He was called Muthu, a tall, Indian gentleman with a debonair manner. He always wore a spotless white *dboti* and tunic, and a pair of leather sandals. In one hand he'd carry a leather case containing his barber's tools, and in the other a rolled up black umbrella.

He had the knack of knowing exactly when my father, brothers and I needed to have our hair cut. For one thing, we never found out where he lived and we had no telephone, let alone hand phones. Like clockwork he would turn up on our doorstep every so often and cut the family's crops. When he'd finished, he would spend a few minutes giving us a hefty back massage, then whip off the protective cotton wrap-around and powder our necks. All for fifty cents each.

Sometime in the early 1950s he left for India for good, but not before visiting our house to say goodbye and coyly suggest we give him a going-away present. Actually, he specified watches, and not one but several to give to his sons and daughters. It was only then that we found out he had left his family back home in Tamil Nadu

so he could earn a living in Singapore. Such dedication and discipline are rare today, and I can still see his face in my mind's eye. I cannot help but smile when I read about superstars paying their personal hairdressers thousands of dollars just for one haircut. Where are you, Muthu?

## Our Personal Milkman

No, we did not have a milk cart pass by our door each week. We had a personal milkman, even if he was just a Punjabi who'd lead his cow to our doorstep every week. We got our milk rations straight from the udder. Mother loved milk, and as we waited he would flip out his three-legged stool, perch on it and proceed to milk his placid bovine. The milk was expressed into a small tin pail then transferred to a glass jug. Mother would then gently boil it for hygiene reasons. The cowherd's hands were none too clean to look at, but at least we got fresh milk, such that you do not get today.

Sometimes we would persuade him to let us try the milking and he would comply, albeit unwillingly. I would give him an extra ten cents (each jug of milk cost thirty cents but it was enough for three or four glasses). My attempts at milking were clumsy and often only resulted in viscous dribbles. It required a certain knack and you had to massage the udder a little before tugging at the teats. It was fun, but messy.

Some years later the cowherd sold his cow and began to turn up with a goat! Mother did not like switching her drink, and the rather mangy goat had a peculiar gleam in its eyes every time they stopped by. The milkman stopped coming when tinned milk—Bear Brand, I remember—could be bought from the local shop. At other times we had to depend on condensed milk for our coffee. We never drank tea with milk, but condensed milk became rather a vile spread on sandwiches, something I still loath to this day.

## Soaps and Scents

During my childhood, bath products ran the gamut from bars of carbolic soap to latter ones called Sunlight and Ayam. Mother would cut a square from each bar and this was all the cleanser we had. It was really rough on the skin and smelled like medicine. There was little else available, and we even used the same soap for laundry. It was only years later that we had scented soaps like Palmolive and Lux, two brands that became iconic.

As for toothpaste, it came in little round tins and was coloured pink. I cannot remember the brand name, but it was slightly minty and you had to scrape it with your toothbrush before using it. Mother had her own formula that I never understood. We used wood as fuel to cook with, and after the wood had turned to fine, grey ash, Mother would collect the top layer to use as her toothpaste! She didn't even bother with a toothbrush, but instead found a twig the thickness of a finger, bashed in one end to form a rough brush and from then on cleaned her teeth with it. It must have taken off a layer of her gums but she did it for years.

Years later we were able to buy branded products like Darkie and Kolynos. The former was taken off shelves worldwide in the 1970s for being politically incorrect, but someone cleverly put out a similar brand under the name of Darlie. The objection was to the picture of a black man in a top hat, like something out of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*.

Perfumes, only imported ones, were expensive and hard to come by but Mother and my aunts were adept at making their own infusions. It was my job to go round the neighbourhood and hunt for highly scented blossoms like jasmine and other tropical flowers. Mother and my aunts would steep them in a mixture of rose-water then boil the liquid for a few minutes. This would then be put outdoors—to catch the dew, Mother said—overnight, then strained through thin muslin.

The Nonya ladies would anoint themselves with this lightly scented perfume whenever they went out.

Some years later I found a little bottle that I mistook for some sort of perfume. I dabbed it on my neck and nearly fainted from the uric odour. It was smelling salts, meant to revive someone who has fainted. I had done the reverse, to my gagging discomfort! I later found out it was called *beh jio*, which literally translates as 'horse urine'. In actual fact it was a highly concentrated ammonia. I never raided Mother's dressing table again.

She also had a veritable collection of strange creams and lotions, but the one she'd had the longest was something given to her by a Malay neighbour. It was an ointment called Tonic Chap Gajah (Elephant Brand Tonic) but I never knew whether it was supposed to be drunk or rubbed onto the skin. Mother had accepted it out of politeness but had never used it.

For her muscular aches and pains she relied on something called Pak Fa Yeow (White Flower Ointment) that was very popular. It was a pungent oil that you rubbed onto any part of your body that ached. Once, I had a stuffy nose and used it, to my chagrin. My skin started to feel like it was burning and I had to wash the oil off using gallons of water.

The universal panacea in our home were Zambuk and Tiger Balm, both of which still exist today. Sometimes Mother would buy a bottle of what looked like wine but it had a snake in it! Apparently she would use it for her aching joints and it lay behind her bed for years. It looked horrid and smelled awful. I never knew what the snake was for, but she insisted it did her a power of good. Even today men in China drink snake bile in the hope of acquiring endless virility, so there must have been a reason for this serpentine wine.

Mother used to have frequent massages from a Malay neighbour called Wak Wak, who was a grandmother trying to earn pocket money. Whether the weekly rubs she gave Mother worked or not,

I never knew, but she was practically a permanent feature in our house. At other times she would come bearing this or that home-made ointment and persuade Mother to let her use them on us. As a result, Mother's bedroom always smelled like a dispensary. Wak Wak had weird home cures you wouldn't believe.

When one of us suffered from skin ailments like ringworm, which was often in my case, she would suggest home cures that amounted to torture. Ringworm was the bane of my childhood on account of the fact that I often played barefoot outdoors. The symptoms were extremely itchy soles peppered with tiny dents.

Once, Wak Wak suggested that I take the thorny branch of a rose tree and scrape the soles of my feet with it. Mother believed her and subjected my feet to the most excruciating pain. All I got were bloody feet but the ringworm soon subsided, making Mother more respectful of Wak Wak's cures.

When I contracted ringworm on my groin, probably from being unwashed most of the time, she rubbed an oily, gritty substance on it that made me wince. First of all it was in a very sensitive and private area, and secondly the substance was apparently a mixture of ash, ginger and powdered sulphur. I found out years later that sulphur is the best treatment for ringworm. The ash and ground ginger did absolutely nothing except make me pong like a wet market. Where this woman learned her herbal skills from, I never knew. Probably some village witch doctor or *dukun*. It is probably the reason why *lor kun* means 'doctor' in Hokkien, its derivation most telling!

## Betel Nuts and Other Stains

Mother herself often looked like she had been in a bloody battle as her lips were always stained a flaming red from the endless chewing of *sirih*. This was a favourite Nonya addiction, much like smoking, and Mother would wrap these little leaves with a mixture

of ground betel nut, gambier and a smidgeon of white lime. She chewed them day and night, staining not only her lips but her teeth and gums as well. This was supposed to be a mark of Nonya beauty but I doubt that Father considered it alluring, given the fact that he was attracted to other red lips that were the result of lipstick, but more of that later.

All of Mother's cronies and my aunts enjoyed this habit, and each would never be far from a little enamel spittoon, used solely for the purpose of spitting gobs of red juice caused by chewing. It was a custom practised by early Polynesians thousands of years ago, which then filtered down to India and became common among Hindus in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar. The Malay word for betel nut is *pinang*, after which the Malaysian island of Penang is named.

Considered an auspicious ingredient by Hindus, the betel nut is used along with the betel leaf in religious ceremonies and also as a social offering to guests. Betel nuts are chewed mainly as a euphoric stimulant, attributed to the presence of psychoactive alkaloids. Chewing betel nuts is believed to increase the capacity to work but more importantly it is a cultural activity much like drinking coffee.

Mother would cut her betel nuts with a sharp pair of secateurs called *sarota*, made specially for the purpose. She would then wrap the shavings in a betel leaf along with lime and sometimes cloves and cardamoms for extra flavouring. This was more a Hindu practice. It was common after chewing to swipe the mouth with a ball of loose tobacco, and I saw that most of my Nonya relatives would have one of these balls sticking out from their mouths. I never understood the purpose but it was de rigueur among them, whether they were simply chatting or playing mahjong.

Each Nonya had a special container for all the paraphernalia and it was usually made of lacquered wood or brass. I still have in my possession Mother's brass thingy that is a treasured keepsake.

Nonyas were also seen with a square of batik cloth, like a large handkerchief pinned to their sleeves purely for wiping their mouths. These would be stained red over the years but they were an important item in Nonya fashion. As for the spittoons, they are very much a collector's item today and you can still find them in antique shops in Katong, Malacca and Penang. They are no more than the size of a large coffee mug and many are beautifully enameled with motifs of birds and flowers in brilliant green, red and yellow.

Strangely, though, my grandmother did not indulge in the same habit but was fond of her hand-rolled cigarettes. When she became blind with glaucoma in later years, she would ask one of her grandchildren to roll them for her. I blame it squarely on her for starting me smoking when she came to live with us in the late 1950s. Of course I rolled her cigarettes but could not resist smoking the odd one. Actually, the main reason why Mother asked her to come and live with us was because she nearly set fire to Grandfather's house several times.

She would sleep on a large platform and, being nearly blind by then, would often simply stub out her still-smouldering cigarette butts on her mattress. Once, the mattress caught fire and if it had happened at night when everyone was asleep, she would have gone up in smoke. Whenever she smoked at our home, Mother would make sure she had one of her little spittoons on standby just in case Grandmother did her usual sightless and mindless stubbing.

## Perky Memories

**M**y memoirs are not really to chronicle the horrors of war or its aftermath; we know enough about this today given that every day, somewhere in the world, atrocities are being perpetrated in the name of one cause or another. I prefer to perpetuate happier memories instead. When you are six or seven, life does not rest on

gloom and doom but rather on the brighter moments, on the perks and highlights, however small they may be. One such perk came in the form of an unexplained aunt to whom we would run for comfort and sustenance.

We had any number of such relatives, for many had fled their homes in Malaya and elsewhere in Singapore, and had come to live with us. It was meant to be temporary but a few stayed on for years afterwards as their own homes no longer existed. In more than one comforting sense, our family was really extended as there could be as many as twelve people living under the same roof. This unexplained aunt had a son of her own, born around the same time as me.

She was motherly, buxom of stature and a prolific milk producer. Mother was too distraught to breast-feed (what with constantly having to evacuate during bombings) and was only too glad someone else could take on the duty to lactate. 'Aunty Milk Bar', as we were to call her in later years when she reminded us of her milky largesse, would chide us often: 'Humph, if it had not been for my milk you would have become a skinny devil.' See what I mean about nicknames?

She was also something of an expert in home remedies and we were subjected to many holistic treatments that were sometimes successful but more often foul and reeked. If any child suffered colic or stomach ailments, she would grind shallots and ginger and heat the mess in a muslin bag. This would then be unceremoniously slapped on the patient's belly, and he or she had to endure the ignominy of walking around smelling of burnt onions. It happened to me more times than I care to remember.

This aunty had a cure for everything, even dog bites! In our neighbourhood there were many mangy strays that we would often torment, only to earn a bite or two on our ankles and derrières. Once when it happened to me—honestly, today I am an avid dog lover but I was an ignorant eleven-year-old then—I ran home shrieking and clutching my behind, that now had a small chunk missing. Aunty

Milk Bar leapt into action and hurriedly heated up some rice that she promptly slapped onto my wound. The rice quickly became a blood-soaked lump. She exhorted me to feed the guilty dog with it. ‘Why, for heaven’s sake?’ I asked between sobs.

‘You silly idiot, don’t you know that if the dog eats the rice that contains blood caused by its bite, you will heal instantly!’ It was a medical diagnosis of the most mystical nature, but I was not about to go after a mangy cur that had just had part of my rump for its lunch, much less hope that it would eat the bloody lump of rice.

Once, I nearly severed my thumb while sawing a piece of wood trying to make a toy gun. The pain was excruciating and I ran into the kitchen to try to stem the blood that was spurting from the wound like a red fountain. Auntie Milk Bar was just preparing some *sambal* and, quick as a medicine woman, she heated a wad of raw *belacan* and rubbed it onto my thumb. She wrapped it in a length of not-too-clean kitchen towel and instructed that I not remove the dressing for four weeks. Too traumatised to question yet another home cure, I silently obeyed. And the miraculous thing was that I did not have blood poisoning or any other side effect. The thumb healed—probably from being cauterised and the salt in the *belacan*—and I had a new-found respect for this ingredient. Don’t try it at home, though.

## Rule Britannia and First Mother

As I have already mentioned, First Mother was Father’s principal wife, a little lady no more than about four feet eight inches tall. She had a son, who unfortunately died at the age of one, and two daughters, one adopted and the other biological. It must have appeared odd to friends whose domestic arrangements did not follow this custom, as some of my classmates often asked: ‘How come you have two mothers?’

It was too complicated to explain so I simply replied, ‘Two for the price of one!’ and left it at that.

First Mother was feisty and full of fun while my own mother was more sombre and a disciplinarian. They had respect for each other, with Mother belonging to the old school of thought that didn’t question the status quo as long as we were well provided for. However, if it had not been for First Mother, we wouldn’t have had any fun at all. When I longed to own a pair of roller skates—all the rage then—my mother vetoed the idea. It was First Mother who went out secretly to buy me my first pair. She would also take us on trips to the cinema because Mother would not allow us to go. Their relationship was firmly one of first and secondary wife and my mother kept to her place, such was the hierarchy.

The first movie First Mother ever took me to was showing at the Sun Talkie cinema that, even then, Mother still barred us from. I still remember the film: *Shane* starring Alan Ladd.

First Mother had plenty of stories to tell, some funny and others completely baffling. She frequently mentioned a certain Prince Alwi who had visited Singapore some years earlier.

‘Who is Prince Alwi?’ I asked, as I had never heard of such a dignitary. I thought he was from some Middle Eastern sultanate but no, First Mother said he was from *chor keh* (the Mother country). This meant England because during this time many Singaporeans had been conditioned to refer to England as Mother Country. However, I was still baffled as the European history I’d learnt in school had never mentioned an English Prince Alwi.

Years later I discovered that she had completely mangled the title Prince of Wales to Prince Alwi as a dialectal pronunciation as she spoke no English. He was Queen Elizabeth’s grandfather and one of the several titled Prince of Wales over the centuries. There are quite a few in the British Monarchy, Prince Charles being the current Welsh honcho. First Mother was at least single-minded in her loyalty to the