



PART ONE

*Innocence
to Nuisance*

1938

Adolf Hitler seized control of the German army, and invaded Austria and part of Czechoslovakia.

The first colour television was demonstrated in London by John Logie Baird.

Instant coffee was invented by Nestle.

The ballpoint pen was invented by Laszlo Biro.

Tupperware was invented by E S Tupper.

The game of Scrabble was invented by A M Butts.

Superman made his first appearance in D. C. Comics' *Action Comic Series* Issue #1. It sold for 10 cents.

Bugs Bunny made his debut in the cartoon, *Porky Hare's Hunt*.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the first full-length Technicolor cartoon film, was released by Walt Disney.

Japan declared war on China.

A 23-year-old man, tall and handsome, left his village in Anxi, China, in search of a better life across the Southern Seas...

My father regretted coming to Singapore.

He had left his village of Anxi, in China's Fujian province, to escape a civil war as well as a war with Japan. He had heard about an island at the other end of *Nanyang* (Southern Seas), where the streets were literally paved with gold. He would seek his fortune there and return to China once the wars were over. After enduring nearly two weeks of hunger and sea-sickness, he landed in Singapore. He had no money. He found no gold.

He had to sleep on the streets and fight with fellow immigrants for scraps of food in the garbage. But unlike the others, he never begged for money; he only begged for a job. Eventually, a fellow native from another village found him a job as a coolie at the port. He had to work extremely hard, carrying heavy gunny sacks of rice and other produce from bumboats to warehouses along the Singapore River. Yet the bulk of his earnings was 'taxed' by the triad societies that ruled the docks.

Then came the Japanese invasion of Singapore during World War II. He was taken prisoner by the Japanese and forced into hard labour. After the war, he became a coolie again.

1945

Adolf Hitler committed suicide, taking with him his bride of one day. Germany surrendered, thus ending the war in Europe.

The first atomic bombs were dropped by the US on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima on 6 August, and Nagasaki on 9 August. Japan surrendered on 2 September. The Second World War ended.

The US occupied South Korea; the Soviet Union occupied North Korea.

Indonesia declared independence from Dutch rule on 17 August.

The United Nations was established on 24 October.

Microwave cooking was discovered by Percy Spencer when a chocolate bar in his pocket melted while he was experimenting with microwave radio signals.

The first plastic mannequin was introduced.

George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm*.

Paramount Pictures released a cartoon featuring *Casper, the Friendly Ghost*.

Singapore returned to British colonial rule after World War II.

A young girl of 20 married a tall and handsome coolie whom she hardly knew...

My mother must have regretted marrying my father – even though she never once expressed it.

She was 19 when she first met him, a tall and handsome man 10 years older than she was. It was love at first sight. They married three months after they first met, in spite of violent objections from her parents, and in spite of her not knowing anything about his background. She did not realise that she would be left to go hungry soon after the wedding dinner – which was not much of a feast in the first place.

In the second month of her marriage, she complained about not having money for food. He said his coolie's pay was not enough to support the two of them. So, for the first time in her life, she went in search of work and was hired by a wealthy family as a day-time domestic helper.

One week after she started work, he turned up unexpectedly at her employer's house and asked her for money, saying he urgently needed to buy some things for the house. She said she would be paid only the following month. He asked her to borrow from her wealthy employer, but she refused, fearing that she would be sacked. She promised to give him some money later.

That evening, she handed him a folded handkerchief with a \$10 note. Her parents had given her the money to use in the event of an emergency. Back then, \$10 was a considerable sum of money, as a bowl of noodles cost only 5 cents. He, however, looked annoyed, took the money and left hurriedly. He did not return until two nights later, still looking annoyed. She was beginning to feel

uncomfortable about him.

In the third month, he began to stay out more often. On those nights when he returned, smelling of alcohol, he would ask her for money. When she told him that she did not have any, he would call her a liar and accuse her of hiding money from him, just as she had done previously when she gave him \$10 folded in a handkerchief. She never told anyone about his behaviour.

In the fourth month, he surprised her by returning home to sleep almost every night, bringing with him chicken and other foods that were considered extravagant. For the first time, she told her parents about how blissfully married she was. She also told herself that she should stand by her man, through thick and thin.

In the fifth month, she happily told him that she was expecting a baby. He appeared overjoyed. Every night, he brought back nourishing food for the expectant mother and her child. One day, he expressed the hope that the child would be a boy. When she said she did not mind a girl, he flew into a rage, claiming that what she had just said was a bad omen. He left the house and did not return till several nights later.

In the tenth month, the baby was born with the help of a Malay mid-wife who lived in the same *kampong* (village). It was a girl. He did not hide his disgust. He took a single glance at the baby and left without a word.

Shortly after the birth of the child, she got pregnant again. Again, she gave birth to a daughter. Again, he expressed his utter disgust. By that time, she had already gotten used to his unreasonable behaviour. She had also started to fend for herself and her children, by selling noodles as an illegal hawker by night, in addition to her day job as a cleaner. She finally discovered what sort of man she had married.

1958

The US launched three satellites and established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) – a year after the Soviet Union launched two satellites, including one with a space dog, Laika.

In China, Mao Zedong began the ‘Great Leap Forward’.

The first heart pacemaker was installed by Dr Ake Senning in Stockholm.

A prototype silicon integrated circuit was built by John Kilby of Texas Instruments.

Barbie doll was patented by Ruth Handler, and marketed the following year.

Lego was introduced as a toy system by Gotfred Christensen, who built upon ideas that his carpenter father, Ole Kirk Christensen, developed in 1949.

The Hula Hoop was ‘reinvented’ by Richard Knerr and Arthur Melin. Various types of hoops had existed since 3,000 BC in Egypt.

Instant noodles were invented by Momofuku Ando, who founded Nissin Co.

The first ‘Greatest Hits’ album, featuring the songs of Johnny Mathis, was introduced and it stayed on Billboard’s Top 100 chart for nine years.

Pop stars Michael Jackson and Madonna were born.

So was I.

If babies could regret being born, I would have. I never knew the years of pain and suffering that awaited me.

I was born on 7 February 1958. There were five other children in the family. The eldest was my sister Angel, followed by another sister, Phoenix. The rest were boys – my eldest brother Crown Prince and a set of twin brothers, Elder Warrior and Younger Warrior. Another boy, Little Emperor, would be born a year later.

My father broke with Chinese tradition in the way he named me. In Chinese families, all the children – especially those of the same sex – usually share the same middle name. Often, the middle name is also shared by the same sex cousins on the father's side of the family. All the male cousins would have the same middle name, likewise all the female cousins. While my three older brothers had the middle name Hai, mine was Chwee. Later, my younger brother's middle name was to be Seng.

I did not know the significance of my name until very much later. It was to have a major impact on my life.



1959

Singapore was 'born' the year after me. It gained self-government from British colonial rule and introduced the state flag, state crest and national anthem.

In the country's first general elections, the People's Action Party (PAP) swept 43 of the 51 seats in Parliament. Lee Kuan Yew became the Prime Minister, and retained the post until he stepped down in 1990 to become Senior Minister and, in 2004, Minister Mentor. The PAP remains in power today.

1962

The Beatles released their first album. So did the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and Barbara Streisand.

Actress Marilyn Monroe was found dead, apparently from suicide.

The Profumo sex scandal arose, and eventually led to the downfall of the British Conservative government in 1963.

Thalidomide, a morning sickness drug, caused thousands of birth defects.

Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, highlighting the harm of pesticides.

Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II, which modernised the Catholic Church.

The Cuban Missile Crisis lasted from 16 to 29 October.

Esalen, a centre of the human potential movement, was founded in California.

Singaporeans voted overwhelmingly to merge with Malaya and form Malaysia. People in Sarawak and North Borneo voted likewise.

Four-letter words first went public in the play, *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Marvel Comics introduced *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Amazing Spiderman*.

I grew up catching spiders, using four-letter words and suffering incredible abuse by my father.

The jinx

My father disliked me intensely as a child. Among the five boys in my family, he disliked me the most. It was clear to me, from my earliest memory, that my brothers had more of everything than I did – more food, more clothes, some toys... The only thing I had more of was canings. My father caned me more often, and more harshly, than any of my brothers. And he never once caned my younger brother, Little Emperor. My father's prejudice was blatant.

I knew also that my father did not like my two sisters, Angel and Phoenix. As I was to understand when I grew older, girls were of lesser status than boys in a traditional Chinese family during the 1950s and 60s. In fact, even today some families treat their daughters as less equal to the boys. But at least my sisters did not get caned. I seemed to be the most unlucky one. In fact, that was what my father called me while caning me: *Suay kia*, a Hokkien term that translates directly to 'bad luck child', although what it really meant was 'child that brings bad luck'.

At least, my mother loved me. But she kept completely silent about why my father treated me as if I was a jinx. I simply could not understand.

The water gun

A translucent red water-gun was my first toy. Yet it was not mine to begin with. It first belonged to Little Emperor. He threw it aside after it could no longer

squirt water, so I picked it up to play with. Meanwhile, he shot water from a new, translucent green water-gun that our father had bought for him to replace the old red one.

The memory is vivid. It was the first time I felt envy. I was just over four years old. Yet that part of my brain which enabled me to sense love, or the lack of it, must have already been fully developed. At that age, I was also able to make comparisons between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’. Little Emperor and I were a year apart. Yet my father’s love for him was a world apart from what he felt for me.

Why?

The music turnover

Another thing I did not understand was my father’s black ‘music turnover’. I was fascinated by it. ‘Music turnover’ was how my brothers and I, in our less-than-perfect English, described his gramophone, which had a radio and a turntable combined. Even though we were extremely poor – to the extent that we sometimes had only rice porridge with soy sauce for our meals – my father somehow found the money to buy it. He placed it as the centerpiece in the dining area of the kitchen. To Little Emperor and me, it was simply magical because of the various sounds that could jump out of it. Whenever we heard the first sounds that jumped out of the music turnover, we would know that our father had returned from work.

Little Emperor would be most excited, running into Father’s open arms and climbing onto his strong broad shoulders. Father would return the affection with sweets, a new toy or a new shirt. These were the only open expressions of affection that I had ever seen in my family, one exclusive to Father and his Little Emperor. These were also the only times that I witnessed the generous side of my father. Whatever he gave to Little Emperor, I could only long for. I dared not touch.

One day, my father bought a pair of slippers for Little Emperor. It made me yearn to wear something under my feet. I no longer wanted to walk barefoot. I wanted to be no different from my four other brothers who wore slippers or shoes. I did not know then that it would take a much longer while before I could

have my first pair of slippers.

After spending time with his youngest son, my father would want to be left alone with his music turnover. He would rather eat with the music turnover than with us. We would see him fiddle with the tuning knob as if searching for some news of particular interest to him. Later, he would slip a black disc onto the music turnover and sing along with the melancholic Hokkien tunes. As he sang, he would drink the imported Chinese wine straight from the bottle, and smoke his '555' cigarette.

My father would gaze at the moon as if he was dreaming of somewhere far, far away. He was so enchanted with the moon that he would shift his sitting position according to the position of the moon. Sometimes, he would sing till the neighbours complained. But he would tell them off, and turn up the volume of the music turnover instead.

After a while, everybody left him alone. Nobody dared meddle with his love affair with the music turnover. Without being told, we knew not to disturb him, or touch his music turnover. My father's obsession with the music turnover made it ever more intriguing to me.

The miraculous yellow oil

The only thing louder than the music turnover was the loudspeaker of the *koyok man*¹ (Chinese medical vendor). He came a few evenings a week in his little van with the loudspeaker mounted on top, from which he would proclaim slogans about how good his *koyok* was.

Little Emperor and I could chant almost every word blasting from the loudspeaker in Hokkien:

*Whether you are a worker, housewife or child
suffering from all sorts of cuts and bites,
all you need is the yellow herbal oil,
its miraculous healing effect is guaranteed
by its forty-year-old trademark!*

¹ *Koyok is the Malay word for plaster, although a koyok man usually sells medicated oils and ointments.*

The two of us liked to go with our mother to the koyok man's stall, because he always offered gifts with each purchase – a pencil, a rubber (we had not yet learnt the word 'eraser') or a pencil sharpener. My mother would automatically give them to Little Emperor. Again, I would feel envy. But at least my mother did not favour Little Emperor as blatantly as my father did.

The miraculous healing yellow oil – the Chinese, herbal version of Betadine – was indispensable in our household. Many a time, I had seen my mother use it to treat her wounds from the slips and knocks that she suffered at school where she worked as a cleaner. She would sometimes rub in some red herbal powder – tobacco – which she also used to roll her own cigarettes. Many a time too, I had seen my two sisters applying the yellow oil on the cuts which they suffered from slicing bread at the push-cart bread stall. My two sisters did not attend school and took turns with my mother to man the bread stall, so that my mother could continue her day-time job as a school cleaner.

My four brothers and I, too, would always reach for the miraculous yellow oil every time we hurt ourselves or were hurt by others, whether in little fights amongst ourselves or with the neighbourhood kids, or by our father's cane.

1963

US civil rights leader Martin Luther King made his famous speech: “I have a dream...”

US President John F Kennedy was assassinated. In Vietnam, Buddhist monks set themselves on fire to protest against the government. Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated.

Ronald McDonald replaced a little hamburger man called *Speedee* as McDonald’s mascot. Ray Kroc, CEO of McDonald’s, served the 1,000,000,000th hamburger.

Robbers in the Great Train Robbery in Britain made off with £7.2 million.

The first discotheque, *Whisky-a-go-go*, opened in Los Angeles.

Touch-tone telephones were introduced.

Malaysia was formed by Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah) on 16 September. Indonesia declared a *Konfrontasi* (confrontation) with Malaysia.

In Singapore, television began transmission, while industrialisation began with the setting up of National Iron and Steel Mills. A severe drought led to prolonged water rationing, prompting Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to launch a Tree Planting Campaign in the hope that more trees would attract higher rainfall. The campaign sowed the seeds of a Garden City.

Smiley was created by Harvey Ball, who was paid \$45 for the artwork.

Smile? How could I?

The ceiling hook

I cannot remember when I was first caned by my father. But the mere sight of a cane always struck fear in me. I feared too the ceiling hook in the living room. From this hook, my father would hang me upside down and cane me for crimes that I did not commit, understand or remember.

My father would cane his children whenever he was in a bad mood – which was often. Whenever he came home with a black face, one of the older family members would whisper to the rest that he had probably lost at gambling. We would then try to avoid him, or otherwise put on our best behaviour. If my father had not been drinking, he would soberly pick on one of his sons – but never Little Emperor – and vent his frustrations on the chosen one. If he had also been drinking, he would smash his wine bottles and whatever else in his path. In his drunkenness, he might forget the cane or the ceiling hook. But he never forgot the jinx.

Why I was the jinx, I did not know. But it made the miraculous yellow healing oil ever more indispensable to me.

The tenant family

My eldest brother, Crown Prince, was six years older than I was. My twin brothers, Elder Warrior and Younger Warrior, were four years older. Little Emperor was a year younger.

We grew up in Tiong Bahru, a peaceful neighbourhood where the *samsengs* (gangsters) were virtually non-existent. It was then one of the largest self-contained housing estates² in Singapore with its own market, school and community centre. Our family had re-located to Tiong Bahru after the floods of 1954 washed away a number of *kampongs* and, along with them, my parent's attap³ house. We lived in a small flat rented from the government. It was in a four-storey block, with a spiral fire escape stairway at the back, leading into the kitchen.

Our flat had two bedrooms and a living room joined to the kitchen – about a thousand square feet all in. Despite the limited space, one bedroom of our flat was sub-rented to a Teochew family of five, as we needed the rental income. So there were nine of us and five of them. The two families took turns to use the kitchen. All 14 of us took turns to use one toilet and bathroom.

The tenant family's room was always closed. I never knew what they thought of my father's beatings. They never tried to stop him; I never saw or heard any beating within their family. They were quiet to the point of being almost non-existent.

The tenant family sold eggs at the market – not just chicken's eggs but luxury eggs such as duck's eggs, preserved 'century' eggs and quail's eggs. Unlike my mother, they had a licensed hawker stall⁴. Thus, they did not have to live in constant fear of surprise raids by the *Te Gu's* or 'earth bulls', the term used by the Chinese to refer to hawker enforcement officers. We never bought a single luxury egg from them, nor did they buy a single loaf of bread from my mother. We never shared any food, not even leftovers. They celebrated their children's birthdays with red eggs; we never mentioned birthdays. Their children never played with us. Our five playful boys and their three quiet girls were as if from different worlds.

Copyright trousers

Of the games my brothers and I played, I remember the *layang-layang* (kites)

² The self-contained concept was an experiment of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) in the 1950s. The Housing and Development Board, which replaced SIT in 1960, developed this concept further

³ Attap, also known as *nipah*, is a mangrove palm whose dried leaves were commonly used for the thatched roofs of wooden houses in Southeast Asia. The attap palm is today an endangered species in Singapore.

⁴ In 1963, Singapore had about 5,000 licensed hawkers, plus an estimated 35,000 hawkers without licences.

best. The back of our flat opened out to a playground about half the size of a football field. This was where we flew our kites. It was where we had our happier moments. My four brothers would run around the playground with their slippers, and I without. Elder Warrior, Younger Warrior and I would let our sweat flow freely down our naked chests; Crown Prince and Little Emperor would let theirs soak into their shirts.

But all five of us stood out as brothers, thanks to the one-piece shorts so uniquely sewn by my mother according to her own logic. She would cut a piece of cloth into two halves, sew a fold at the top to insert a nylon string to tighten at the waist, and join the sides. Next, she would cut an inverted 'V' at the middle of the bottom section and again join the sides. Voila! A unique pair of one-piece trousers was created. These one-size, pocketless trousers came in blue, green or grey. We adjusted their length by folding up the ends. While my mother could make one-size trousers, she never learnt how to sew shirts as it was not possible to make one-size, one-piece shirts according to any logic.

Crown Prince and Little Emperor tried as much as possible not to wear my mother's copyright trousers, especially when they went to play with the neighbourhood kids. Crown Prince preferred the trousers and shirts that he bought through his mysterious means. He was the Crown Prince by birth right and he dressed as one. As for Little Emperor, he was dressed almost exclusively by his father.

King of Kites

The older kids in the neighbourhood taught us how to make 'cutting' strings for our kites, using pulverized glass. The finer the glass powder, the better the cutting edge. The best quality glass came from used fluorescent tubes, which we would sometimes find as treasures among the garbage bins. We would smash the glass and place it in a cloth. We would melt a brownish block of starch, cool it, and then submerge a roll of kite string in it. We coated the starched string with the glass powder by pulling it slowly through the cloth. To add a further thrill to the fight and flight of the kites, we would make coloured string by adding dye to the melted starch. The dyes could even be mixed to produce unique colours: purple, orange and maroon. Finally, the string would be tied between two trees,

for it to dry.

Flying the kites, especially in very strong wind, was pure painful joy. It was painful because the stronger the wind, the deeper the string would cut into the two fingers masterfully controlling it. Yet it was pure joy because the kite would rise to great heights, until it was just a tiny speck in the sky. We had many cuts on our fingers but we persisted to test the limits of the sky as we battled for the title of 'King of Kites'. The King was the one who successfully cut loose all the other kites, leaving his to fly alone. Certainly, there could be a series of crownings and dethronings in a single day. The King might be in another field in another part of the neighbourhood, unseen and unrecognised by his rivals and victims. That did not matter. What mattered was that his kite remained up in the sky, visible to one and all.

We were so absorbed in such thrills that we often forgot about our father's caning the night before. To avoid our father's wrath, the five of us took turns to be *jaga* (watchman). The *jaga* of the day would stop flying his kite just before sunset and keep watch from a vantage point. At first sight of our father on his bicycle, the *jaga* would run down to inform the rest. We would then run towards the backyard door, up the spiral fire escape stairway, two steps each time, and into the kitchen. We often made it just in time.

It felt like a game of criminals versus the policeman. Not that it was wrong to fly kites. Rather, the law was never consistent. Any act could be 'criminal' according to my father's own logic for the day. My father was the law.

Kung fu

I first learnt to tell good from evil from watching *kung fu* (Chinese martial arts) and sword fighting movies from Hong Kong. My brothers and I watched them at the community centre⁵, which screened black-and-white movies for the residents, free of charge, on most nights. We did not have a television set at home then.

⁵ Community centres, which offered recreational and educational facilities, were set up throughout Singapore in the 1960s as part of the government's efforts to foster racial and social integration.

For reasons I could not understand, our father forbade us from going to watch the movies. We decided to counter this with a relay strategy: we would take turns to watch the movie and summarise the show for the rest. This way, we hoped that our father would not notice which son was missing. The strategy did not always work but the lure of *kung fu* was too great to resist. We persisted in taking the risk.

Whenever my father caught the risk taker red-handed, he would cane him severely – except when it was Little Emperor. He was always spared. After a while, my father discovered that each of his four little prisoners had become immune to caning. His law was unenforceable. So, he decided to chain the ‘law-breaker’ to the window. He thought this would serve as the ultimate deterrence, but it did not. The more ruthlessly my father enforced his law, the more daringly his sons risked the penalties of breaking it behind his back.

Breaking the chains

I distinctly remember the last time I dared to break not only the law but also the chains of my father. I was five years old then. It began with a wet night. It was wet not because it had been raining. Rather, my brothers and I were wet from storing water in whatever containers we could find: buckets, pots, kettle, bottles, etc. This had been a nightly chore assigned to us by my father ever since water-rationing was imposed because of a drought.

My father was drinking wine, with his music turnover keeping him company in the dining hall. Half-way through storing the water, Crown Prince signaled that it was my turn that night to go over to the community centre to watch the *kung fu* movie.

Like a mouse, I sneaked out of the wet kitchen and down the spiral fire escape. Then like a leopard, I leapt out of the backyard door and ran all the way to the community centre, without looking back. The *kung fu* movie had already started, but I could immediately tell which character was evil, which was good. It was like telling my father and my mother apart. In any case, the same actor was almost always cast as the bad guy and the same other actor as the good guy. I tremendously enjoyed such movies. The display of *kung fu* was dazzling. At the

end of the show, the good always prevailed over the evil and the audience would clap and cheer.

I felt good, enormously good. Perhaps such movies kindled some hope and faith in me, that good would ultimately triumph and the evil guy would be completely crushed. Such movies seeded the good in me, making me want to be good. They made me feel a closeness with my mother and model my behaviour on hers.

With this good feeling, I ran back home. I could hardly wait to demonstrate to my brothers the *kung fu* which was used to terminate the evil guy in the film. But the moment I leaped into the kitchen, I bumped right into my father. He had been waiting with a cane in one hand, and a chain in the other. My newly-acquired *kung fu* was good enough for demonstration but not for any real self-defence.

A naked, chained animal

My father dragged me by the neck, chained my ankle to the window grill in the living room, stripped me of my mother's copyright trousers, and started caning me. He caned as if he had gone mad; as if he had gone blind. The tip of the cane dropped like acid on my head, my face, my legs, my arms and mainly on my hands which I instinctively used to cover my most vulnerable parts.

I did not utter a single cry, not a single tear. My brothers and I had long ago learnt that tears only worsened the madness and blindness of my father. My brothers pretended to be sound asleep. This was our strategy to stay out of the range of such madness and blindness. My mother and my sisters had not yet returned from the bread stall. My mother will put the miraculous yellow oil on my body, I comforted myself as the acid rain continued to pour.

The next morning, I was awakened by the kids from the upper floors playing outside my house. They stopped to look at me through the window, as if I was a zoo animal. I was still chained to the window grill. My naked body had been painted with the miraculous yellow oil over the red, bloodied markings.

The kids laughed at my nakedness, at my exposed self. They laughed at

my body decorated with red and yellow, as if it was some kind of outrageous artwork, or I was some kind of *wayang* (street opera) boy. They laughed at the chain around my ankle as if I was a captive animal.

I felt lousy, enormously lousy. My four brothers came and shooed them away. I pleaded with my brothers to get me out of the chains. From nowhere, Crown Prince produced a saw. “From now onwards, we will help each other saw off the chain,” he declared heroically. We betted that by the time my father returned from work that evening, he would have forgotten that he had chained me the night before.

Like a freed bird, I flew downstairs to join the other neighbourhood kids. Never mind if they had laughed at me just a while ago. They were going on a spider hunt and, for the privilege of joining their adventure, I was ready to forgive them even though they continued to tease me.

I did not realise they were going so far away to catch spiders. Very soon, my feet began to feel the heat of the tarred road and the cemented pavement in the hot sun. But the thrill of spider hunting was too great to resist. There was no question of turning back. I just had to bear with the heat – and with the lousy feeling that everyone wore slippers except me. By the time the expedition ended, my two feet were scorched and blistered. And I only managed to catch one spider that day!

I was applying the miraculous yellow oil on my feet when my father came back. I had forgotten what my brothers and I did that morning. My father had not.

A convict captured

“How dare you cut the chain!” my father roared.

He grabbed me and pushed me to the floor. He was absolutely blind with mad rage. He could not imagine that his sons would have had the guts to saw the chain off. He saw this as an absolute challenge to his authority. He stripped me of my trousers and tied my wrists and ankles with a long rope. With his

coolie's strength, he swung my body upside-down and hung it by a rope from a ceiling hook in the hall. With his cane, he began to inflict more bloody marks and cross-marks as if fully determined that no part of my body should be left untouched. My body squirmed and curled, yielding to the force and speed of the cane. As the tip of the cane pierced open the wounds of the night before, as it hit at my most vulnerable tender parts, I let out uncontrollably sharp cries. I was a small pig being mercilessly slaughtered.

The cane split and gave way. My father replaced it so quickly, it was as if he came well-prepared. The replacement cane was thinner. The thinner the cane, the bloodier the marks. My cries grew hoarser as my tears dried, until my muscles and bones seemed to have completely given way.

Everything upside-down around me started to glow in a ghostly green light. I made out a weeping womanly figure. It was my mother. She was like a helpless hen that dared not even chirp at the sight of her chick being punished without mercy. She had tried to intervene twice before when my elder brothers were punished. But that only resulted in heavier penalties for them, followed by punishment for her.

Mother's love

Abruptly, my father ended the sadistic outrage and turned on the music turnover. The Hokkien tunes became louder and more melancholic.

My mother cried silently as she took me down from the ceiling hook. I felt a gush of comfort as she carried me in her warm arms. Things began to return to their familiar colours. I saw my four brothers sticking their heads out of the bedroom door that was slightly-ajar. I managed a weak smile at them.

My mother was busily putting the miraculous yellow oil on my wounds when she saw my scorched soles. Once again, her tears welled up. I began to complain not only about the beating, but about my father's unequal treatment of the brothers. I complained about not having been provided with a pair of slippers. I demanded my right to be given a pair. For the first time, I asked: "Mama, do you love me?"

My mother kept silent. She spoke not a single word as she hugged me close to her chest, crying softly into my ears. Her tears and her hugs had an effect that was hard for me to comprehend. It was perhaps the first time that I recognised the comforting love of a mother and its overwhelming power to take away the pain of my body and soul. I stopped my complaints and wiped the continuous flow of tears off her face.

Mother's slippers

After a long silence, my mother put me down, went to the doorway and came back carrying her pair of slippers. I never noticed them before. They were worn out with holes. For the first time too, I saw the soles of her feet – rough, ugly soles, too ugly for a lady. My mother told me that she had worn that pair of slippers for many, many years. Rather than throw away her meagre money for a new pair of slippers, she would scrape every cent to feed her seven children.

I listened, totally soaked in my mother's tearful story. For the first time, I learnt about my family in the past. I learnt that, before I was born, my family was once in even more dire straits: my father almost died at the hands of the creditors because there was no money to return what he had borrowed for gambling; my elder sister almost died of sickness because there was no money for medical treatment; my other sister and my brothers had no money for food...

So my mother began to think about what she could do, in addition to her day-job as a school cleaner. She decided to sell prawn noodles as an illegal food hawker. She borrowed some money from a sympathetic neighbour and began her first enterprise.

In the first month, she suffered a huge loss as she could not compete with others that lined the streets outside amusement centres. She persevered and improved on her hawking skills. Later, she decided to move her mobile stall to where few had ventured – the newly-developed housing estates. There were several blocks of flats in each estate. Balancing two heavy hot pots of gravy on each end of a bamboo pole, she went knocking on door after door. She climbed ten storeys in each block. At times, a careless slip on the stairs would empty and even break her pots. This never broke her resolve.

“It is all about endurance,” my mother said.

For my mother, endurance was not merely physical. I recalled, vaguely, a number of dramatic moments when my father demanded money from my mother. She, in turn, would show her empty purse. I had seen her hiding money, stuffing it between old clothes. But each time she tried to outsmart my father, who stood two heads taller, she would very quickly be overcome by sheer brute force. At the first sound of smashed glass, she would dutifully surrender all her hidden money. After that, she would pray, with tears in her eyes and joss sticks in her hands, before her Buddha statue that sat on an altar in the living room.

That night, throughout the night, with my mother’s story in my head, I looked at my cane wounds and my scorched soles. They still hurt. But soon they would not, just like my mother’s soles. I made a promise to myself that I would endure pain. I recalled one of those *kung fu* movies, where Shaolin monks handled red hot coal with their bare hands and mastered the ‘Iron Palm Skill’.

Endurance. The first soulprint in my life. I was five years old.

After that beating, the five brothers became good boys for a while. But not for long. We soon learnt to break the law of my father only in his absence, and we learnt to go elsewhere other than the community centre to watch our favourite *kung fu* movies. Whenever the music turnover was silent, there would be an expectant mood among the five brothers. Crown Prince would announce that my father had gone gambling. And off we would go, to the cinema.