

## *Chapter 2*

### *Minus One Again (1946)*

In the end, it was as if someone flicked a switch – War On/War Off. Emperor Hirohito of Japan surrendered unconditionally on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1945, after the horrific and unprecedented decimation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the atomic bombs.

Although a few British servicemen had teamed up with Chinese locals, mostly members of the Malayan Communist Party, to spearhead a resistance movement, Malaya had seen nothing of the fierce fighting in the Pacific. In remote villages, some Japanese soldiers did not know of the surrender until radios were dropped to them. Even then, it was with utmost reluctance that they obeyed their emperor's order.

The Japanese did not formally surrender to the British until the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 1945, the earliest date that necessary personnel and requisite pomp could be organized. This resulted in a month-long power vacuum. Meanwhile, British

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soldiers died daily from disease and malnutrition in war camps, and locals meted out their own brand of brutality on Japanese collaborators.

Once the Japanese left, the dark cloud of despair over the entire town lifted. The Hakka Association, opposite our house, revived their band; my eldest, biological brother played the saxophone there. My father decided to celebrate by having our family portrait taken professionally. Everyone wore their best clothes and we carefully avoided buffalo droppings on the street as we walked to the photography studio. Father wore his only jacket (long-sleeved with a mandarin collar and big round buttons), and his good leather shoes. My mother and sister wore cotton *sam foo* – Chinese-styled shirts, with a mandarin collar and cloth buttons just below the right shoulder, and loose trousers – sensible and functional. My mother's hair was pulled back from her face in a bun; it made her look older than she actually was. My sister had had a perm.



**Family photo circa 1946. I am seated between my parents. Standing from left to right are my sister, Kum Ying, my second brother, Kum Chin, and my eldest brother, Chan Chin.**

Looking at the photograph today, I see that my mother, second brother and sister all have roundish faces in contrast to the angular jaws of my father and my eldest brother. I was a scrawny boy with knobby knees and laced up sneakers. In the photograph I look bemused. The bottom roller of the painted backdrop (a moonlit night in a stone pavilion) is clearly visible. The studio floor is of tessellated mosaic. My father looks old enough to be my grandfather. The

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photograph captured a happy time, a hopeful time. The six of us have turned a corner; perhaps better days are ahead.

In the four months between the Japanese surrender and the new school year in January 1946, teachers and school administrators all over the country scrambled to get classrooms ready and scrounged scant resources together. At five and a half years of age, I could not understand why, all of a sudden, everyone had to go to school.

My sister walked me to school on the first day. We passed Mr. Loke's house next door. I could see that some of my friends had already kicked off their wooden clogs at the base of his staircase. I heard them chanting their lessons upstairs. Chinese could once again be spoken without fear. At the Hakka Association across the street, early risers were reading the day's paper.

My father had decided that I would attend Wan Hua Primary, just a stone's throw away from my home. It was an all-boy's

school; there were very few Chinese girls' schools in those days and none in Menglembu. With a cloth satchel slung around my shoulders, I stepped hesitantly into my classroom and sat down at one of the 30 wooden desks, arranged in ordered rows facing the blackboard. There were no familiar faces around and I resigned myself to studying the grooves and swirls of the wood grain on the table before me.

On that first day of school, my teacher appointed a very confident and charismatic student to be class monitor. The bell rang signalling recess and we streamed outside.

"Hey," yelled the class monitor in my direction, "What's your name?"

"Sing Qing," I whispered in the official Mandarin pronunciation. The words seemed to get stuck in my throat. Something in his demeanor made me tremble deep inside. Apart from this, the first day of school was uneventful. I spent most of the time thinking about after school football with my neighbourhood pals.

That afternoon we congregated as usual on the vacant land beside the Hakka Association.

“Where were you today?” they asked.

“At school,” I replied.

“Why do you have to go to that school? My dad says the things they teach you there will turn you against tradition and against your ancestry,” said one.

“My dad says those who attend Wan Hua will grow up to be important people, rich enough to own cars. But I refused,” said another.

I could not imagine refusing anything my father asked me to do. As they all looked at me, I thought that their teacher, Mr. Loke and my father, both teachers in the traditional style, had chosen to send their sons to Wan Hua Primary, but to explain all that would require a lot of talking, so I simply shrugged, “Dunno, nothing much on the first day, probably the same as your school. Boring. Enough talk, let’s play.”

I gave our little rubber ball an almighty kick and all talk of school was quickly forgotten.

As the days wore on, the class monitor recruited other children to join his gang. Some of the boys were nonchalant but others were quick to tag along. They offered him bottle caps and rubber bands in exchange for his approval. These impressionable ones started behaving like him. His domineering approach spread like gangrene.

It didn't take the gang leader long to choose me as his emotional punching bag. I have always asked myself "Why me?" The depressing answer was that I was the smallest, shortest and most soft-spoken 6-year-old in my class. The class monitor nicknamed me *Moi Chai*, which means "little girl" in Hakka, the dialect most of us spoke at home. He explained to the class that this was a suitable name, because I was so small, so cute, so quiet, and so shy.

"Moi Chai speaks SO softly, teacher can't even hear her!" he taunted.

Everyone burst into hysterical laughter. I just stared, blurry eyed and expressionless, at my math book. A huge wave of hurt rose up within me but I did not cry; I knew that would give them more wicked pleasure.

“Moi Chai, where are you going, why are you rushing home? Come here for a moment, we need to have a look at you,” the class monitor said after school that day.

I quickened my pace towards the school gate.

“Wait! You think you can get away from us?”

I started to run, my heartbeat loud in my ears. I felt like throwing up. Till then the taunts had been restricted to verbal abuse within the classroom. They had never bothered me outside class, for they had always been too absorbed with their after-school gambling of boyhood treasures. Everything happened so fast. Before I knew it, the class monitor and his followers surrounded me.

“Let me go home,” I whimpered.

“Of course we will little girl, but first we have to check if our suspicions have been right all along. You are a girl, aren’t you?” My body started to shake in fear, the boys who were larger than me started to close in. Tears streamed down my face.

“Oh, don’t cry Moi Chai, we won’t hurt you. Since you won’t admit that you are a girl, I have to check it out myself. It won’t

hurt. It'll be very quick." By this time the boys had formed a tight circle around me. The class monitor reached out his hand; there was a determined look in his face.

I don't really know what happened next. All I remember is that they didn't manage to take off my pants. The class monitor must have let me go. Terrifying images replayed over and over in my mind. I felt a deep sense of shame; it was as if it was plastered all over me. It was something that I wanted to peel off, to throw far away, to discard. Yet I realized that there was nothing I could do to erase this hateful, putrid thing. I hated myself – how I looked, how I talked. Horrible as that encounter was, there was more to come. They threw my guava snack away, they shoved me into a drain, they made my life miserable. I learnt that small and timid equals powerless and defenceless.

Around this time, there was a comforting distraction at home – a baby brother. In the cool evenings, when strains of music floated into our living room from the Hakka Association band, my younger brother would dance, his small feet tapping and prancing joyfully to the beat.

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One day he became gravely ill. My younger brother, once so jovial, lay barely moving, curled up in a dark corner, his eyes sunken and lifeless. Desperate for a cure, my parents brought him to a Chinese temple, where plumes of joss stick incense rose in its ornate columned halls, and painted dragons looked on with unblinking eyes.

When they brought him home, he was still too weak to cry. I heard footsteps and unfamiliar voices, so I ran to hide in the front bedroom upstairs. I peeped from a window in the room, which opened out into the main hall. I saw huddled figures gather around my brother. Were they dispensing advice? Were they suggesting a cure?

My mother handed my brother over to the strangers, along with his bottle and his bedding. They took him away and left a cake behind. I remember eating the cake. Perhaps in my mind I linked the two. I was terrified. I wondered if there was not enough food to go around, would I be next? I did not know that a temple medium had pronounced that the only cure for

my younger brother was to be given away. I retreated further into myself.

My daily chore at the time was to draw water from the sunken well in the courtyard, to fill a huge clay urn by the kitchen wall. The well was about eight feet in diameter and lined with brick from bottom to top. The brick lining protruded six inches from the ground. The well water was so clear that we could see right down to the sandy base of the well, which was about 12 feet below. An average of 20 buckets would meet all our needs – drinking, cooking and cleaning.

I used to lower the bucket by a rope, and sometimes in my carelessness, I let the rope slip out of my hand. The rope was not tied to anything so I would have to climb into the well to retrieve the bucket. As I made my way down, my fingers would search for gaps to grip onto in the uneven brickwork. The water was only four feet deep so there was no danger of drowning. I would grab the rope, wrap it around my arm and climbed up again, the sound of the metal bucket bumping against the wall echoing to announce the success of my mission.

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One day, as I hauled up a bucket of water, something glinting in the water caught my eye. Kneeling by the well, I saw that it was a little fish. The way it glided through the water mesmerized me: calm, serene, and undisturbed. From that day, whenever I had done my chores and homework, I sat myself comfortably on the brick protrusion, to watch the fish swim round and round in circles. It was a mystery how the fish got into the well. In all those years, I never saw another fish have the good fortune of finding its way into this safe haven.

Although my father was in his mid-sixties by this time, he managed to get a part-time job keeping accounts for a Chinese secondary girls' school in Ipoh. Once a month, he would take me on a trip there. These were the only times I remember going out with him. We went to submit the updated account books to the nuns for review, and to receive payment. The outing was a treat for me.

With slow, deliberate movements he put on his only jacket and laced up his brown leather shoes. He then checked if I

looked presentable enough in my good shirt and shorts to accompany him. On some trips I would ask if I could carry his case for him as we waited to board the bus to Ipoh. The most exciting thing for me was when the conductor gave us our tickets. My father would hand his to me. A bus ticket in my day was a boy's prized possession, used for gambling, along with other treasures such as bottle caps and rubber bands. I would stay close to my father throughout the trip, afraid of the bustling activity all around.

Ipoh was a thriving town, with rich Chinese investors, tin miners and British officials in automobiles. Tailor shops stocked everything from the finest Chinese silk to humble cotton cloth. Vendors shouted and beckoned to passers-by from their portable wagons – cooking utensils, hammers, saws and nails, bed linen, clothes and shoes, toys, knives and scissors sharpening. August-looking Chinese medicine shops with their countless little wooden drawers and glass jars of dried seahorses, bird's nests, and tree roots were fascinating, as were the funeral shops where lengths of rattan were twisted and wrapped in coloured paper to resemble houses, servants, clothes – anything that the deceased might need in

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the next life. We would sometimes stop and look at a noisy vendor showing off his wares or enjoy the spectacle of animated bargaining between buyer and seller. Eventually we came to a large and imposing school building, with a vast playing field in front. I ignored curious stares from giggly girls, and focused my attention on my father as he exchanged a few words with fierce-looking nuns and left.

My mother opened a noodle stall at the Menglembu market. Each day she plunged thick yellow noodles into boiling water and served them up in a bowl of chicken broth, garnished with spring onions and deep-fried shallots. The profit margin for each bowl was only a few cents. Nonetheless, with my mother contributing to the family income once again, we were able to afford small luxuries.

Each morning, not long after the cockerel crowed, hawkers made their rounds, some on foot, others on bicycles, and we bought our breakfast from them – deep-fried dough sticks and red bean paste doughnuts. In our kitchen someone filled a muslin cone bag with local coffee, and poured boiling water through the bag into an enamel coffee pot. We washed down

the crunchy fried doughnuts with sweet black coffee. Then either my father or I would walk next door to the coffin maker's office. We paid him a few cents for my father to have the privilege of reading day-old newspapers. Luxury indeed! When I eventually learned to read in school later, I joined him. All my siblings were busy working. For most of my childhood, it was just my father and I, doing simple things on either side of the rectangular study table by the blackboard in the upstairs living room.

The blackboard appeared on the wall one day when I was still in Standard One. I didn't think much of it when I put down my school bag and went downstairs to get lunch. The smell of tobacco permeated the air. Our new tenant was an enterprising bachelor who rolled up sticks of tobacco for sale from the front bedroom downstairs. His business was so successful that he eventually came to own one of the only cars in Menglembu.

"Ah Hen, come here," my father called me when I had washed and put away our bowls and chopsticks.

"What did you learn in school today? Show me your book."

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I opened my textbook that day's lesson.

"Memorize it and then write it out on the board," he instructed.

"Copy?" I asked.

"No, memorize: *mok se*," he said.

My face fell. Not only did I have to memorize the text, I had to learn every Chinese character therein. *Mok se* was literature, spelling and handwriting practice all rolled up into one behemoth task.

"If you get everything correct, I'll give you ten cents," said my father.

"What if I make one mistake?"

"Hmm, one mistake, five cents. More than one mistake, no money."

Feeling slightly more cheerful, I started looking at the page. It was probably only four lines or so, no more than twenty characters in all but my football friends had most likely already started playing. If I just ran over and opened our shuttered

windows, I would probably see them kicking the ball. After looking over the passage a few times I thought I might just be able to manage it. I closed the book and picked up a new piece of chalk; its end still perfectly chiseled. The chalk screeched unpleasantly on the new board. White dust fell as I wrote and smudged my clothes.

“Let’s have a look,” said father when I finished. He glanced over my childlike scrawls and circled a few characters.

“So many mistakes, no money today. Try harder tomorrow.”

My disappointment was mitigated by the thought of football. In the early days, I hardly made any money out of this at all. Nonetheless, the discipline my father instilled in me paid off. At the end of the year, my teacher singled me out, “Sing Qing, come here.” As the other students streamed out of the classroom, I stood by his desk.

“You have worked hard and done very well this year,” said my teacher, the one who had chosen Bully King to be class monitor. His thin cotton shirt was threadbare, with wisps of loose threads around the sleeves. He rummaged in his trouser

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pocket and pulled out a small piece of candy. “Here, have this – your reward for being top in class.”

“Thank you, teacher,” I said.

“Next year you can skip a year and go to Standard 3.”

My father and sister looked very pleased when I gave them the news that evening.