

# GROWING UP WITH GHOSTS

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BERNICE CHAULY



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GROWING UP WITH  
**GHOSTS**



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**MATA  
HARI**

**Growing up with Ghosts**

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Also by the author:

*Going There and Coming Back*  
*The Book of Sins*  
*Lost in KL*




For Mother and Papa  
because they fought to love

Janice and Bernard


Anjuli and Maya  
Tasnem and Leia  
who came from this love

Bapuji and Manji  
Ah Kong and Poh Poh  
for bringing the continent  
together



I ask for blessings from you Papa, Mother, Poh Poh,  
Bapuji and Manji, to give me the strength to write this  
book. Guide me that I may do the task that I know I  
must complete. All I have are memories, stories, letters,  
fragments of your lives; let me remember so I can write,  
write what is to come.

I summon you, the angels of the four watchtowers,  
Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel and Mikhael, to bless this  
journey, to bless this to be.



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A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.

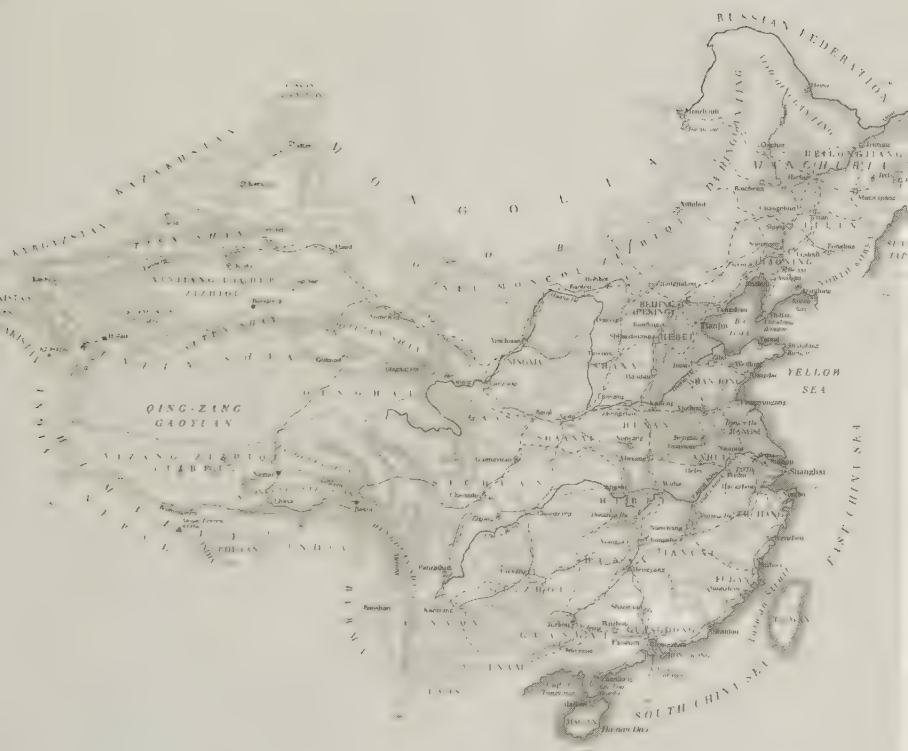
*Franz Kafka*

To begin writing or living, there has to be death ...

*Helene Cixous*



# INDIA



# CHINA



PENINSULAR MALAYSIA



# FAMILY TREE



I remember the day my father stopped singing. Just as he sang me to sleep, he sang me to wake. *Wake up, my darling little girl, your Papa is here, your Papa is here.* In lilting tones and in different registers, he would sing to me throughout the day and into the night. In the quiet, windowless room of the blue, wooden house in Pasir Puteh, and in the whiteness of the room in Taiping with sunflower-splashed orange and white curtains, and in the hard, concrete room of Bapuji's house in Penang, where the windowpanes resembled patterns on my colouring book. The room that smelled of talcum powder and coconut oil, where he last put me to sleep and woke me that day. When we drove in the wide blue car with fins, with the windows open, he sang to me while we drove past the Chinese mansions on Macalister Road and onto the winding road with trees that would take us to the beach on Batu Ferringhi. He sang when he tickled my wriggling feet and splashed water on my open face, stinging my eyes. I heard him singing as I wandered up away from him, to be towelled dry, my face turning again and again to see him waving to me, his voice getting fainter and fainter. *Don't worry, my darling little girl, your Papa is here, your Papa is here.*

And then the sea came up and swallowed my father. The sea slithered salt, water and sand into his mouth and throat and lungs and his heart, the sea coiled its might around my father and silenced him. I was a child of four, and my father never sang to me again.



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PART I

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## THE GIRL IN THE STRIPED DRESS

The old scrapbook. Big and bound with you in a turban flanked by many flags. Summer 1960. You were in Europe and you went to many places. I see the colourful faded guidebooks, yellowed photographs, lager labels, postcards of Liverpool, Arvika, Bremen, Hamburg, Volendam, Odense, Copenhagen, Goteburg, Amsterdam. The old scrapbook now tattered with age, gnarled pages, sticky tape and fingerprints that have traversed page by page, year after year, decade after decade.

The scrapbook. A door into memory. A great big book of your memories. Passages from the past into no future. I want more memories. More books, pages filled with your hand, but there are none.

Did you have enough life, dear Papa? It seemed that you had so much; that you embraced the world, and the world embraced you back. You were 21, your face full of life, your journeys just beginning. Life brought us together and then took you away. The world loved you too much.

Only memory is left. The dead are still dead with memory. I still mourn you. My memory begins on the day you died. My memory begins and ends there.

Static. Cloudless. Beach, sand, laughter, silence. Mother's screams. Manji beats her chest.

A dead body.

Papa.

My Papa.

Grey hospital walls.

The doctor talks and talks.

Mother cries.

I sit and stare at the grey hospital walls.



9 JANUARY 1973

Cemetery. Taiping. White roses, a striped dress.

Boy Scouts lining the walkway. Your students. Friends in tears. The white nuns. Devastated. The blue and white urn. Your bones, ash, teeth all inside. Mother in black.

Stares. Don't look at me! Turn away. I am tired. It is hot. The roses are tired in my hand. I want to jump in. I want to die with you.

I want to be with you, Papa.

My Papa.

Then we cover you with earth. We cover you with fists of earth. They have to tear me away.

*The little girl wants to jump into the grave.*

And you are gone.

And I am gone with you.

Forever.

#### THE LADY WITH THE LONG HAIR

The night my father is buried, I dream of a fire. I see his dead body on the beach and I reach out to touch him, but then I see a flame inside his body. It begins like a small ball in his belly and then, like melted butter, it spreads upward into his chest and into his glowing heart, and then onto his throat, mouth, nose, eyes, and then it reaches his head. I see my father burning before my eyes. *Pop! Pop!* His head cracks open and I see the flames eating him up, the liquid yellow flames rushing out and then there is a large *Bang!* and then there is nothing. He is gone, and I am standing alone on the beach, screaming.

I wake up clutching my blanket, and my mouth is open, wide, but I am silent. My bed is by the window and I can see the bougainvillea tree swaying outside. The white room glows and I

reach out for my Golliwog. His white-rimmed eyes are gentle and I hold him tight. I caress his face and his frizzy hair, and I begin to suck my thumb. I feel better.

I am awake now, and I know my mother and baby sister are in the next room. There are relatives sleeping on mattresses in the living room. I see shadows playing on the wall from the branches of the bougainvillea tree outside. My Auntie Lai is snoring silently in the next bed. She is tired from crying. I pick up my Golliwog and I peer outside the window. I see the lawn, I see my tricycle glowing in the dark and then I see her, a woman by the gate. Her back is turned away, but I see her long silvery hair swaying in the night breeze. She does not move, she stands there silently. I know she is a ghost, but I am not afraid. I suck my thumb, and I cradle my Golliwog and I stare at her for a long time.

She is the first ghost I ever saw, and she would be there every night, standing alone outside our gate, outside the white house on Jalan Merpati, Taiping.

I ask my father to come to me in my dreams. *Come to me, Papa, your darling girl is here, please come to me, Papa. Come and play with me.* And he does, and I would laugh aloud in my dreams. My mother hears me once, and she asks me why I am laughing when I am asleep and I say, *Papa came to me, he played with me, we drank fresh cow's milk and then he pulled my toes and tickled me.* My mother's face changes and she rushes into her room and starts pulling down the blanket and bedsheet onto the floor. Then she sits on the floor and cries. I hug my Golliwog and suck my thumb and then I run into my room and close the door.

One day in school, I step on a cockroach and I kill it. It is squished up under my white Bata shoe and there are brown bits and milky white bits, and my friend Kalpana goes 'Oh-oh, can die! The ghost of the cockroach will come and visit you tonight!' I am very scared all day after that. She says that the only way

the cockroach will not come is if I hold a crucifix to my heart when I sleep. That night, I ask my father to stop the cockroach from coming and I pray to him, *Please Papa, don't let the ghost of the cockroach come and get me. Jesus will protect me, I know, I know you will, too.* I see the lady with the long hair at the gate before I wriggle under my blanket and I hold my Golliwog close to me. My mother's crucifix is at my heart and I try to pray before I go to sleep. I am too scared to suck my thumb as I do not want the crucifix to slip.

That night, the cockroach enters my dreams, it enters my bedroom door and stands over my bed, it is so big it fills up the whole ceiling. The ghost of the cockroach is there, hovering over me, its spindly legs trying to get at me. I see its face, its glowering eyes, and then it sees the crucifix on my chest and then with a screeching wail, it disappears. *Pufft!* It is gone.

The next morning, my mother comes in to wake me and she sees me lying there, like a dead child with my Golliwog and her crucifix, and she screams.

My mother is always sad but her belly grows bigger and rounder. My brother Bernard is born on the first day of September, eight months after my father died.

We live in the house on Jalan Merpati for three more years, until my mother says that we are to move to Ipoh to be closer to her parents. And so we pack our bags and we get into the car with fins, my sister Janice, my brother and I, and we drive to the cemetery and we say goodbye; goodbye to my father's grave, goodbye to the other graves we step over, goodbye to all the dead people of Taiping, goodbye to the white house on Jalan Merpati, goodbye to the nuns in the Convent, goodbye to the lady with the long hair, and we drive all the way to Ipoh.

And we start a new life, a life without my father.

## ORIGINS

I am Punjabi, a sardarni of the Khalsa. Of the pure, from the tenets sprung from the loins of Guru Nanak. From the plains of the Punjab, and the wheat fields of Amritsar.

I am Chinese, from the port city of Canton, from Fatshan, from Lam Soy Chea, from the village of fishermen and of joss stick makers.

I had two childhoods. A childhood with my father and a childhood with my mother.

This is a love story, of how my parents found each other. This is a life story, of how I found them and how I found myself.

I grew up with ghosts. I grew up with the dead, and the voices that resonate. I grew up with myth. I grew up with grief, and its untold stories.

In Ipoh, in the heart of the Kinta Valley, in the light of pre-war shophouses, cloth merchants and food. Of pigs, of slaughter, of tears.

I grew up in Penang, in my grandfather Bapuji's house. Of snakes, and the Granth Sahib. Of my grandfather's typewriter and his white turban.

I speak from five voices and I speak from my own. These are our stories.

My great-grandmother was a witch. She reared snakes, they were white cobras. I was told this as a child. She used to worship the snakes in the village. She was a Naga worshipper.

There was a famine in the Punjab and many people died. Her husband died, and then her brothers died. Her sons were away in the army and when they returned, she sent them away. She sent them away so they would not suffer the same fate.

The villagers banished her. They sent her away. She was a curse, a bad omen.

She left her village in Verka, close to Amritsar, and went to live in the caves, close to the border of Kashmir and there, she lived with her snakes.

After my father died, I did not know what it meant to be Indian. I grew up Chinese, yearning to be Indian. Death created distance.

Chapatti, saag, dhall. Manji, Bapuji, nehi.

Chapatti, saag, dhall. Manji, Bapuji, nehi.

Those were the only words I needed to know. Bapuji spoke English, he was a petition writer. My grandmother Manji stayed in the kitchen all the time. She made chai, lots of it. We were the half-breeds, the Chinese-Punjabi pariahs of Cheeseman Road, Penang. We drank chai, and we felt Indian.

My father's death evicted me from the world and now, I write myself back into it.

Sixteen years after my father's death, I wrote a letter to my grandfather Bapuji and I asked him about our origins. He wrote me a letter, and this is what he told me.

*Your great-great-grandfather Bhag Singh was born in the Punjab, in the village of Verka in 1860. He inherited five acres of land from his father and his father before that. We were Jats, landowners, descendants of the agricultural caste of the Punjab.*

*Your great-grandfather, my father, Tehil Singh was born in Verka on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1880. Tehil had an older brother called Surain Singh and they inherited their father's land after he died.*

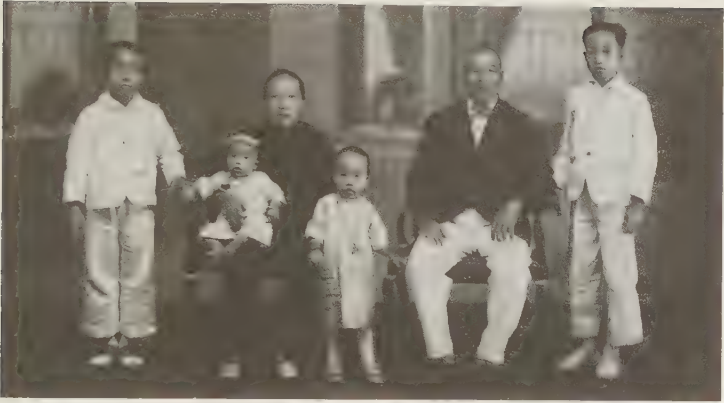
*Tehil Singh left to join the Indian Army in 1902 and was stationed at Gilgit, an army post on the border with Afghanistan. He returned to Verka in 1907 to find the village ravaged by a famine and his bullocks dead. So, he mortgaged his share of the land, left his young bride, Bantoh in the care of his mother and left for Singapore in 1908.*

I had to go back to the beginning. I had to find bloodlines. I had to find secrets and stories, and then begin to tell them. But first, I had to begin with the snakes, I had to understand the curse.

*The ancient Kings of Kashmir and Punjab were known to have kept giant serpent guardians as pets. Nearchos, Admiral of Alexander the Great's army was known to have seen two giant serpents kept by King Abhisana of Kashmir after the Macedonian army retreated from its Indian onslaught in 326 B.C. One was 80 cubits in length and the other was over 140 cubits. These were giant serpents more than a hundred feet in length. However, Nearchos told of yet another beast, the most sacred of all serpents, one that lived entirely in a cave. When the Macedonian army marched past its cave, this giant Naga extended its head outside and emitted gusts of rage that terrified the army into retreat. Its eyes were as large as two Macedonian shields. And the race of people who worshipped the serpents were known as the Nagas.*

*Indian Serpent Lore or the Nagas  
in Hindu Legend and Art – J.P. Vogel, 1926*

This is where one story begins.



My great-grandfather Loh Heong Ying and family; possibly mid 1920s in Ipoh.  
My grandfather Loh Mooi Fatt is standing on the right.

## PAPAN, PERAK

My Chinese great-grandfather Loh Heong Ying came from Canton, Guangdong, China in 1910. My grandfather Loh Mooi Fatt, the eldest of three sons and one daughter, was born in 1916 at 14 Leech Street in Ipoh, Perak. This is my ancestral home.

Loh Heong Ying was a pig slaughterer. That's what it said on his death certificate. Pig slaughterer. It was his trade, much like a joss stick maker, bricklayer, bamboo chick blind maker, noodle seller, rice merchant. Like most Chinese tradesmen at that time, the lure of Perak was in Papan.

Papan, located on the Ipoh-Batu Gajah road, was named after the Papan River, a tributary of the Kinta River, the bringer of life to the valley that tin built. The hills flanking the town are called Gunong Hijau, the Green Hills, which connect to the Kledang Hills converging in the north-east of the majestic Titiwangsa Range, the scaly backbone of the Malay Peninsula. If you drive to Papan, the Green Hills follow you, like guardians of a prehistoric monster which once sheltered a gigantic snake-like creature, seen some hundred years ago, struck down by lightning after gobbling



Ho Siew Ngan's parents, my great-grandfather Ho Seng and great-grandmother Wong Hung, in Fatshan, China

down a child of six. The villagers, stumbling onto this monster, sawed its limbs apart. These were then carted in 13 bullock carts for viewing by the British and then dumped into the Kinta River, which swallowed them piece by piece.

Papan was a lumber town and one of the earliest settlements of the Chinese community in Malaya. It was rich, teeming with Malay woodcutters and Chinese sawyers, secret societies and their vice dens. This is where Loh Heong Ying started his pig-slaughter business. He named it Ying Woh. Peace.

There were only two rows of shophouses in Papan, which still stand today. Many are dilapidated and falling apart, overgrown with ficus creeping in and out of barren walls and broken doors. But Papan still has the same allure as it did a hundred years ago. In the evenings, the winds rush down from the Green Hills, casting a creepy shiver over the

town. Many believe that the area is full of jinns and spirits hungry for blood. Or perhaps they are the laments of the dead, rising at nightfall to haunt those who still live there.

The Mandailings from Sumatra settled here, the Malay penghulus rose and fell. The British saw through many wars. The Larut Wars in Taiping and the Penang riots in the 1860s and 1870s



forced many to flee. The Ghee Hin and Hai San secret societies merged with the Tua Pek Kong to find roots in the Kinta Valley. Papan, Pusing, Gopeng, Lahat. These towns were ripe for conflict and the British brought in many Sikhs, Pathans and Punjabis to quell the discord. The Papan riots in 1887, which began in a brothel, escalated out of control. Looting and deaths ensued. The Chinese outnumbered the Malays; they ran the tin mines, the brothels and many businesses. Such was life in Papan. Robberies, riots, tin mining, and of course, the making of planks, or papan, from which the town derived its name.

This is where my great-grandfather started his business, and this is where my second story begins.

### SINGAPORE. 1915

It is a time of war. Singapore is a Crown Colony, World War I rages in the western hemisphere and Generalissimo Sun Yat Sen has set up the Singapore headquarters of his Kuomintang party. The Boxer Revolution of 1900 has claimed China's last dynasty and the Qings have been overthrown. The Cantonese migrations begin. The Ghadar Party is formed in 1913 in the United States, by a Punjabi exile, Har Dayal, with the sole purpose of getting the British out of India, by force.

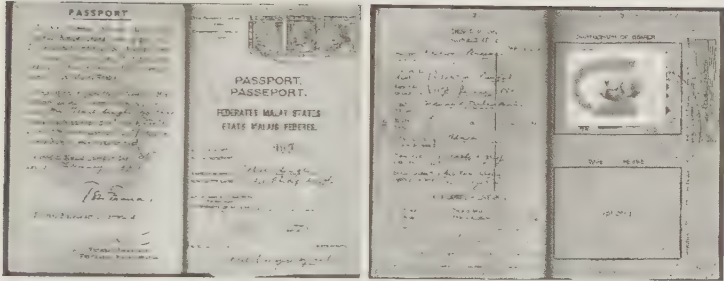
Tehil Singh is a tram driver by day and a jaga, a watchman, by night. The trams run on rails and are powered by electricity. The Chinese rickshaw drivers don't like the trams, so they lie on the rails as protest. But they know that if a Sikh is driving the tram, they will surely be run over. Tehil Singh, fresh from the Indian Army, is hired on this basis. He had served on the Indian frontier and now he is a tram driver in Singapore. It is 1915. My grandfather Jaswant Singh is two years old. He was born in Tanjong Katong, in the servants' quarters of a seaside bungalow of a wealthy Arab trader.



Undated photo of Tehil Singh; efforts were made to try and establish details about the photo, and subsequent correspondences with the Imperial War Museum in London also failed to shed any light

Sepoy. Soldier. From the Persian word sipahi. Sepoy, a native of India, a soldier allied to a European power. To the British or the Portugese. Tehil Singh was a sepoy with the Indian Army. He is no longer a sepoy, and does not know that mutiny is afoot. The Ghadar fervour travels across the continents to Singapore and whips the 5th Madras Native Light Infantry into revolt.

At 3:00 p.m. on 15 February, Ismail Khan fires a single shot. That is enough to drive over 800 sepoys into mutiny. It is the Chinese New Year, and many are on leave. Singapore is defenceless. The German troops at Tanglin Barracks are the first to be massacred, the mutineers then move on to Keppel Harbour and Pasir Panjang. No European is spared. No white man, woman or child. The killing goes on for 10 days. Martial law is imposed. Allied ships in the area are summoned. The French, Russian and Japanese marines trawling the area along with the



Tehil Singh's British passport

Malay Johor Military Force and 5th Shropshire Infantry come to help the British. The mutineers begin their surrender, some try to swim across the Johor Strait to Johor but they are captured and sent back.

The trials begin on 23 February and end three months later. Two hundred sepoy are court-martialled and 47 are to be shot. On execution day, Tehil Singh takes his son Jaswant to the Sepoy Lines near Outram Prison. It is a hot day, and there are 15,000 people cramming into the square. Tehil Singh carries his firstborn son on his shoulders so he can see better. He is told that the firing squad is led by Captain Tongue, and assisted by Lieutenants Blair and Hay. Tehil Singh is not a tall man, so he walks further away and manages to find a rocky outcrop. He sees a row of men, standing against the wall. The crowd is cheering. Baying blood for blood. He can see the guns, he recognises the short barrels: Lee-Enfield's Number 1. He hears the order and the guns fire. He sees the men fall, in twos and threes, then all fall. Their turbanless heads tumble. These were his brothers, Mussulmans from the Punjab, who had fought the same cause as he. His son is fretting, the sun beats down onto their white turbans. One big, one small. Tehil Singh wipes away his tears. He turns, picks up his young son, kisses him on the cheek and they walk away, back to the seaside bungalow in Tanjong Katong.

## GRANDPARENTS' BIRTHS

### Paternal

**Grandfather:** Jaswant Singh is born in Tanjong Katong, Singapore – 30 April 1913

**Grandmother:** Karam Kaur is born in Buntong, Perak, Malaya – 8 October 1918

### Maternal

**Grandfather:** Loh Mooi Fatt is born in Ipoh, Perak, Malaya – 16 October 1916

**Grandmother:** Ho Siew Ngan is born in Fatshan, Guangdong, China – August 1919

## ANCESTORS' VOICES

### KARAM KAUR. BUNTONG. 1926

I am told that my father has died. Udham Singh is his name. He was found in Kampar, at the bus stop on the way back to Buntong. He was lying on the bench with his turban over his face. Budoh is my mother's name. Chendi is my mother's mother's name. My mother cries. My eldest brother Thakar is making arrangements for the cremation. He is my mother's firstborn, he was born in Thata in the motherland. He came to this country with my father when he was eight. My other brothers Kartar and Tara are still out with the cows. They are probably having fun in the fields. My brothers are hooligans. They will only be back in the evening. I work in the dairy, I milk the cows every day. I boil the milk and I churn it into butter. We sell the milk, we sell the ghee. It is hard work. I do not go to school, I cannot read or write. My mother says that I be married in the second year of the red moons.



Karam Kaur's father, my great-grandfather Udham Singh, seated on the far right in a photo taken in Ipoh in 1913

I will wait now with my mother, she is crying. My brother Thakar is trying to be brave. He will light the funeral pyre. I wanted to swim in the lake but I will not be able to do that today. I am not afraid of the water, I like to jump and dive in deep. Sometimes, I see snakes, they follow me. But I catch their tails and I smack their heads against the rocks.

My father is dead now and I don't know how we will live.

#### JASWANT SINGH. SINGAPORE. 1930

My father has decided to move north to Malaya. My Uncle Harbans now works with Malayan Railway. He is the chief locomotive inspector, living in a town called Taiping. We have heard good things about Malaya, many Punjabis are moving there. I will finish my Higher School Certificate and then we will move. There are almost 10 of us now and we have to start to make our own lives. I want to be a priest, I

am teaching myself the language of the sacred book. I teach myself the words, the alphabet, Gurmukhi. Then I will become a priest, and I will marry a good Punjabi girl.

**KARAM KAUR. BUNTONG. 1932**

I want to learn to read and write, but it is not allowed. I am 14 now. Girls like me do not go to school. There is too much work to be done. We are poor, Mother still cries, but she knows when to stop. She says that she will marry me off to the best family. I am her only daughter. I am becoming a burden for her. I am not stupid, but sometimes I think I am. My brothers are all smart. They read the newspapers every day. I see the pictures, but I do not know what they mean. Tara tried to teach me to write my name, but it is difficult. I do not know how to hold the pencil.

I am in the first year of the red moons. In two years, I will be married. There are few boys in the village. Many have left. Only women are here. I will pray for a good husband. I hope he will be kind to me.

**JASWANT SINGH. TAIPING. 1933**

I am studying to be a priest and soon, I will be a granti. The gurdwara is always full of people here. There are many who just come and pray and stay all day long to help in the kitchen. I eat and sleep here sometimes. It is very peaceful. My Gurmukhi is getting better and better. The old granti here is pleased with me. He says that I am learning well.



Karam Kaur in her mid 20s

My father has told me that I will be wed in a year. He says that he has found a young girl in a village near Ipoh. She cooks and sews well. Her name is Karam Kaur. She is from Buntong, near Ipoh. She is to be my wife.

**KARAM KAUR. BUNTONG. 1 APRIL 1934**

My husband is in the next room. We were married this morning at dawn. I wore a pink salwar which I made myself. Our neighbours and friends came early. Some slept outside in the sitting room. My mother put a white bedsheet over my head. She was saying that our neighbour's daughter had fallen in love with Jaswant when he came in the door. The girl saw him and she wanted to marry him. She did not know that he was to be my husband. When they said he was the groom, she fainted.

My mother says that Jaswant is very handsome and that I am lucky. I wonder if he thinks I am pretty?



Jaswant Singh in his early 20s

**HO SIEW NGAN. FATSHAN. 1936**

That young man, the one who came in the dead of night, he is to be my husband. His name is Loh Mooi Fatt. He has smooth skin and a high forehead. He has come from Malaya on the ship to accompany me to the new country. He comes from a town called Ipoh, but my father says he was educated here. I will have to leave my mother and father, my sister will go to Kowloon. Her husband waits there. My beloved brother has been dead six years. He took his own life, I know.

My parents will never tell me the truth, but this, I know. The Japanese were cruel, he was only a young soldier who fought for our freedom. He is brave to have taken his life. He did not want to suffer. I loved my brother, he is the only one I have loved. I will leave this place, and I will forget him.

Will I have servants? Will I have to cook for my husband? My bondmaid will follow me, she will carry my trunk, and my gold ingots. I will make her swear to spinsterhood. She will watch over me. She will have her own room and she will live and die there. I will leave this house, this village. The servants will carry me to the dock. I do not know if I will ever return.

My name is Ho Siew Ngan. Siew means happy. Ngan is colours. Happy colours. That is my name. My new life awaits me.

#### **KARAM KAUR. GEORGETOWN. 1939**

We live in the top of a house on King Street in Georgetown. We are renting it from the chettiar downstairs. My husband is away again. He has to work, far north. He comes back every weekend and then we are together again. I have given birth to two daughters, and I am pregnant again. I hope it will be a son.

The Chinese towkay across the street is very nice to me. He gives me extra rice and salted fish. He knows I am craving it.

#### **HO SIEW NGAN. IPOH. 1940**

My belly has swelled three times now. And I am pregnant again. I miss my mother, my village. The rickshaw puller comes to take me to the market every day. It is nearby but my belly is too heavy. I crave the pickled



cabbage. It is the only thing I can eat with watery porridge. When I sit on the rickshaw, I feel dizzy and I have to ask the rickshaw puller to slow down, slow down. He is Hakka. At the market, I see the pickles I am looking for. I see slabs of meat, chopped-off heads of goats, chicken and ducks. The smell of meat makes me want to vomit. I hear the vegetable sellers saying that war is coming! War is coming! My husband says there is already a war in the west, across the seas. I get some meat for the children, my husband is away again. My bondmaid has refused to eat now, she stays in the attic all day. She is no help to me at all. I should have left her behind. She is no use to me at all, the lazy thing! I scold her but she does not care.

The rickshaw puller has to help me up. We go up Panglima Street, and there I see it. An elephant. It is walking slowly across the street. The motor cars and gharries have to stop. We all stop and stare. The rickshaw puller does not seem to care and wipes off his sweat with a dirty cloth. There is someone sitting on top of the elephant, on a wooden chair. A man in white is guiding the elephant, he smacks a long stick at its legs. We wait until the elephant crosses the road and disappears in between the rows of shophouses. I will tell the children about this. An elephant. I saw an elephant today.

#### PARENTS' BIRTHS

**Father:** Surinder Singh is born in Georgetown, Penang before the stroke of midnight, 31 December 1939

**Mother:** Loh Siew Yoke is born in Jelapang, Ipoh at 2:50 p.m., 7 July 1940



## THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

The Japanese Imperial Army invades Kuala Pak Amat in Kota Bharu, Kelantan 25 minutes after midnight on 8 December 1941. The invasion is 90 minutes earlier than the attack on Pearl Harbour. World War II has come to Malaya. The Japanese Army advances swiftly into the Malayan interior. The British Indian Army puts up brave defences but the Japanese are unstoppable. In 45 days, the invasion is complete and the Japanese Occupation of Malaya begins. After the surrender of Emperor Hirohito in August 1945, over a hundred thousand men, women and children would have been killed.

On 11 December, my grandfather Jaswant Singh is in Butterworth, Province Wellesley. Japanese fighter planes take to the sky, their low drones driving people out onto the streets, gazing upwards at the cloudless skies. Bombs are dropped. Six hundred dead men, women and children scatter the streets. Thousands flee into the hills. By car, by bicycles. On foot.

He sees the warplanes hovering above, heading for the island. People are fascinated, transfixed by the swift steel birds. Little black spots drop. Then the screams begin. He imagines the explosions breaking on the ground, opening the earth, shattering steel, glass, bone, sinew.

He runs towards the railway station in Butterworth. He sees hundreds of people doing the same. They carry babies, trunks, chickens, provisions. He sees the panic, he sees fear in the eyes of people. He runs and sees the steam engine rumbling slowly out of the station, *paa thum, paa thum, paa thum*, hundreds jump on, grabbing at rails, window, doors. Parents shove children and infants into the hands of strangers; bags of food, clothes are passed over hands and heads, resting on uncertain ground. He runs, faster, the

train picks up speed, accelerating its exit from Butterworth; he runs, his loose pants flapping around the length of his legs. He takes a leap, flying onto the final carriage, his right hand claws a metal sheath. His body sways over the platform and he sees the ground moving. A man steadies him and he is on the train, heart thumping, *pa thum, pa thum pa thum*, the train rolls faster now, and on it, thousands of others, all fleeing the bombing of Penang.

**KARAM KAUR. BUNTONG. 11 DECEMBER 1941**

We hear on the radio that the Japanese dropped bombs on Penang. We ran into the hills this morning to hide. I brought the children with me, along with my mother. We are very scared. They say that the Japanese come on bicycles and on foot, with sharp guns that can stab and shoot. I am very afraid. My husband is in Penang. I do not know if he is dead or alive. It is night now and I cannot sleep. I cannot sleep! Waheguru Waheguru, please keep my husband alive.

Night has overtaken, the children and I rise to walk. My mother's house is silent and cold. I walk outside and I see the moon, it is still shining and bright from its fullness. It is yellow, like a thick curd, glowing like a single breast, full of milk. I am still nursing my children. They still drink from me. I stand outside in the dark and the moon comforts me.

Then I see something walking on the path towards the house. It walks alone, it carries no gun, it carries nothing. It walks straight on. The moon shines brighter and I see it fall on the curve of a turban. It is my husband! It is my husband! He is alive! He has come home.

*Ipoh is invaded on 15 December 1941 and occupied on 28 December. Violence and chaos ensues and spreads towards the south as the towns fall to the Japanese.*

**JASWANT SINGH. BUNTONG. 1942**

The Japanese are here. They arrived yesterday, on bicycles and on foot. They want to set up camps. We have heard of the atrocities, they are killing their enemies the Chinese. Whole families have been killed. My wife's brother says that we will be safe. We all speak and write English well, we can work with the Japanese. Thakar says that we will give them food to eat, we will give them chapattis to eat, we will help them manage their rations, we will help them write their letters, and perhaps, they will give us sugar. I pray they will not harm us.

*General Percival surrenders to General Yamashita in Singapore on 15 February 1942 and the Japanese Occupation of Malaya begins.*

**HO SIEW NGAN. IPOH. 1942**

We are stuck here in the shophouse on Leech Street. The communists have come to visit us. They want my husband and his father to join them, but we have said no. I hope they will not kill us. The town is in ruins. We hear explosions, the firing of guns. The Japanese are here. I hate them. They killed my brother.

I hide in the room under the stairs every day. My husband has sent the children away to Jelapang with their grandmother.



Ho Siew Ngan in her mid 20s

Ipoh is not safe. I sit here all day, in this room. My bondmaid is upstairs in the attic, she refuses to leave it. She hides under her bed. She has been there for days. She refuses to eat or drink but she still manages to piss into the metal pot.

We do not know how long this war will last. I am tired. I thought I would be safe here. Safe from war, safe from the cruelty of the Japanese. My husband says that the Japanese have come to liberate us. From what? I do not need to be liberated. I know nothing of this land. I came here to be married. I came here to start a new life. And now I am stuck here in this room with nothing. There is nothing to eat. No fish, no pork, no vegetables. At least we have a little rice. I cook it over the charcoal stove in the back and we eat silently in the dark, with our hands. I am not scared. They can do what they want to me. If I see a Japanese soldier, I will kill him. If he tries to rape me, I will kill him with my knife, the one I keep under my breast cloth. I will kill him. With my own hands.

#### KARAM KAUR. BUNTONG. 1943

I like to watch the Japanese drop the bombs from the sky. There is a hill near the house. When the day is clear, I can see the planes flying over us. I see the small black balls dropping from the planes, and I count, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and then the explosion happens. *Wheeeee bang! Wheeee bang!*

My brother Thakar says that we have to make extra chapattis today. Some Japanese officers will come to our house to eat tonight. I have to make more dhall with vegetables. There is no meat. Maybe they will give us some sugar and I will be able to make some chai. I wonder if the Japanese will like chai.

There are four of them in the house. They eat very fast, they must be hungry. I have made some chai with the sugar they brought. We have not had sugar in almost a year. The chai is hot and sweet, it is very good. After dinner, they sit and talk with my brothers and my husband. I make more chai and they keep drinking it. They sit and talk for a long time. I am tired, so I go to bed.

**HO SIEW NGAN. IPOH. 1944**

We have dug a hole. With our bare hands. The Japanese are raping women and children. Yesterday, they cut off the heads of a few men who were caught stealing food. Then they stuck the heads on sticks near the market, so that everyone could see. I saw four heads. Their eyes had been gouged out and there were crows pecking at the sockets. I felt like vomiting but my stomach churned from pain.

The Kempeitei are getting close to the shophouse. My husband tells me that we will have to hide for a while. Yesterday we were all told to come to People's Park, near the river, we have been digging all night.

We will have to stay here for a while. Days, weeks, months? I don't know. There is nothing to eat at all. I tried to eat some tree bark yesterday. It tasted horrible. I was so sick, I threw up. But there was nothing inside me, just bright yellow bile.

I hear screams all the time. Women are being raped, then beheaded. Their children are forced to watch. They are barbarians. Heartless. Animals. I hate the Japanese. I curse them from the depths of my soul.

Many have already died. Maybe it will be my turn to die.

LOH SIEW YOKE. JELAPANG, IPOH. 1944

They were older than me actually, and I must have been about four when they died. I don't even remember their names. They were always sick so they had to be sent away. My mother never talked about them at all. My dead sisters.

When the war broke out, I was sent to live in Jelapang, I lived with my eldest sister, Third Aunt and my grandmother Ah Ma. My mother lived in the shophouse called Ying

Woh on Leech Street with my father and Ah Yeh, my grandfather. Third Aunt was quite sickly as well. I think she suffered from heart disease. My grandparents favoured boys so my father and uncle were treated differently. Third Aunt was very good to me, took care of me and she used to sew me clothes. She was a good tailor. I remember she had to eat raw liver all the time. We believed that you had to treat blood with blood, you see. So Ah Ma would chop raw liver very fine, pour boiling water on it, swirl it around with chopsticks and Third Aunt would have to drink the liver water. She died when she was 28 or 29, she was so young, her body was so swollen when she died. I remember touching it. She was cold. Swollen and cold.



Ho Siew Ngan with her two oldest daughters; my mother Loh Siew Yoke is on her left

We lived on sweet potatoes for almost two years. There was nothing else to eat during the war. The shophouse sold pork but there wasn't much meat then. I remember my stomach got so big once and Ah Ma said I had worms. It was from the sweet potatoes. Maybe because it wasn't cooked long enough, maybe the water wasn't clean enough. I don't know. Maybe it's because I was barefoot all the time. I had sores on my feet and had to soak my feet in hot water every day for hours. Just sitting there for hours with my feet in a tub of hot water.

Then one day, they came. The Japanese came. The house was old, wooden, and in the back there were jambu trees and then there was the jungle. I loved to climb the jambu trees. So one evening, they came. There was a commotion outside. I thought it was from the neighbour's house. There was a lot of noise outside the door. They barged in, two or three of them, they had guns. They were talking very loudly and one of them went into the bedroom and started ransacking the drawers. I shouted at him in Cantonese, 'What are you doing?' He turned around and slapped me. I ran to hide. They found nothing. They must have thought we were rich because we had a horse cart. We went from Jelapang to Ipoh in a horse cart in those days.

Then they dragged Ah Ma by her hair out the door and Third Aunt said, 'She's old, leave my mother alone! Take me!' But they were already out the door. We were crying, hugging each other, not knowing what to do. Somehow the news got to Ying Woh and then the rest of the family came. My father had to make a police report and the policeman came to ask us questions. Ah Ma had been kidnapped by the Japanese. I cried and I cried. We could not sleep that night.



The next morning, I got up very early, I went to the window to look out. And I will never forget this for the rest of my life.

I saw her running. Ah Ma looked as if she was flying, she was running through the air through the back of the house, through the jungle and the jambu trees. Her hair was wild. She ran into the house and collapsed onto the floor. Her feet were swollen and torn. She told us that she had escaped in the middle of the night when one of the Japanese soldiers went off to urinate. She had started running and ran and ran until it was dawn.

She said she was guided out of the jungle by a white butterfly.

#### THE JAPANESE COUPLE IN KUALA KANGSAR. 1945

Jaswant Singh spends most of the war years working in Buntong and Kuala Kangsar. He is a clerk at the Japanese Club and is given a small house to live in. It is a basic house, with a zinc roof and two small rooms. The house faces the river, and Jaswant Singh has a cow, Niki, with soft brown eyes, which gives fresh milk to the children. There is not much food, but he is grateful that the children have milk. He works hard, managing the accounts, and the comings and goings of many Japanese officers. He has heard of the killings, but he is grateful that he is safe. There is a Japanese couple that sit at the bar every evening. The wife looks very sad. When he brings his son and daughter to the clubhouse, they sometimes smile at him. The wife looks at his daughter and plays with her. She picks up little Shan and carries her in and around the garden, talking to her. She looks kind.

On weekends, Jaswant takes his children back to their mother in Buntong. There are no buses, no cars on the road.

The Japanese have seized all vehicles for themselves. All he has is his big, black bicycle. They pack their small bags, he puts Shan on the seat behind and Surinder sits on the handlebars. They ride towards the railway track. Jaswant follows the track on his bicycle and they sing songs and nursery rhymes, and they tell stories to each other. His son in the front, his daughter at the back. They start the journey at dawn, when the air is cool and the mist hangs low by the river. It will take five hours, this 50-mile journey. They will ride like this - father, daughter and son on the big black bicycle - by the railway tracks, until they reach their mother's house when the sun is low in the sky.

On one such weekend, Surinder decides to play a trick on them all. Like most people during the war, he lives on sweet potatoes, which fill hungry bellies, but also fill the bellies with worms. He finds an oblong sardine can, punctures its side with a nail and ties a string to it. He then passes out the worms in his belly into the can. He jumps up and down with glee. He sees the squirming worms, thick and full, filling the sardine can to the brim. He pulls the can back to the house, and shouts, 'Sardines, sardines, who wants sardines?' He beams proudly and says to the adults staring down at him, 'See, this is what came out of my tummy.'

When they return to Kuala Kangsar, they will find Niki the cow still tied to the fence behind the house, by the river. Surinder and Shan will jump onto the cow, ride her like a horse, pull her ears and sing to her. They will then strip their clothes and jump into the river. And they will swim and shout and jump from the low branches into the water. Unbeknownst to them, the Japanese lady will look from above, from her bedroom window. She will look upon the playing children and she will make wishes.

One day, the Japanese couple see Jaswant Singh and his two children in the clubhouse and they beckon him over. The lady sits there with her legs crossed and hands clasped. She is wearing bright red lipstick, pearls and a dress with green flowers. Her husband is wearing a dark suit, his hair has been slicked back. They ask Jaswant and his children to sit next to them. They order orange cordial for the children. The Japanese gentleman starts speaking slowly and says that there is something they need to tell him. Jaswant sits there, his children fidgeting in a chair. The Japanese lady tries to smile. The Japanese man says that his wife has become very fond of Jaswant's daughter and would like to adopt her. They want to take her back to Japan when the war ends, and they want to raise her as their own.

The lady is nervous, her lips quiver and she tries not to cry. The man continues saying that they will be given some money, to help raise the son.

Jaswant gets up, he shakes the man's hand. Then he shakes the lady's hand. He picks up his daughter, still fidgeting with her brother, presses her hair down and kisses her. He shakes his head and says, 'No, I cannot give you my child. God has given me this child, only he can take her away.'

And with that, he walks away with his two children. The Japanese couple sit silently. The lady puts her hand to her mouth and begins to cry softly. The man, he stands up, lights a cigarette and looks away.

*The Japanese Occupation came to an end on 15 August 1945 after the Americans dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In less than three weeks, the British had returned to reoccupy Malaya.*



The Tribune. 16 August 1947

**Jawaharlal Nehru delivers his inaugural speech after taking office as the first Prime Minister of India.**

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity."

## PARTITION

JASWANT SINGH. KANGAR, PERLIS. 1947

And so they have carved the Punjab in two.

Hindustan and Pakistan. Hindustani. Pakistani.

Nehru and Jinnah, they have butchered the Punjab. A limbless child. A sure death.

Nehru said we would get freedom at midnight. "When the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom." India is not free, it will never be free.

We hear stories of the carnage, of ghost trains rumbling into our villages in the dead of night. Women, children, men hacked to pieces. Breasts cut off. Men with arms and legs chopped off. All disembowelled, girls with their privates hacked off.

The past has come back to haunt us. Mussulmans killing Sikhs. Sikhs killing Hindus. Hindus killing Sikhs. Sikhs killing Mussulmans. Brothers killing brothers.

Guru Nanak said, 'There is no Hindu, there is no Mussulman, We are Punjabis. Sikhs of the Khalsa. That is all that matters.'

We have lived with the Mussulmans all our life. We live with them here, in Malaya. I work with the Malays now. I keep the accounts. The lawyer Jagjeet has many working for him. The rubber plantation is big, more than 50 workers.

My father's house in Verka is surrounded by Mussulmans and Hindus. Now, they have turned against each other. Now the killing starts. They have turned us against each other, they have forced us to choose, when there was no choice to be made.

Nehru and Jinnah. They decide to split India. Our people pay the price.

Gandhiji. You are silent. Why?

The five rivers, the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej, Beas, all soaked with blood. I weep for our lands of wheat, mustard and rice, now poisoned by the dead who used to till it. This is our land, the land of the Mahabharata, the land of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The land of the Sikh kingdom is now in two. The serpent gods will get angry, they will create rains and floods, and the sting of the nagas will be felt by many.

How many have died? Will we know? Will we ever know?

On the wireless, they are saying that peace has returned, that the unrest has stopped. But we hear that hundreds and thousands have died. The gurdwara in Kangar is full. We pray. Someone said the milk from his cow came out sour. We are afraid.

We hear that thousands have started walking across the border, thousands are dying of hunger and disease, that many have been left behind.

The lawyer Jagjeet Singh is saying that many sardars are returning to the Punjab. They want to see their relatives, to make sure their lands are not taken by the Mussulmans, or by the Hindus. They hope that their mothers, grandmothers, wives and sisters have not been raped.

It is an ugly thought. We must never give up our lands. It is everything to us.

I am fearful. The Sikh nation must prevail. The Khalsa must prevail. But we must not kill, only when they kill us.

Waheguru, Waheguru, Waheguru, bring peace upon our land.

There has been enough blood.

I pray for rain, Waheguru, bring the monsoons, bring the big rains onto the plains to wash the blood away.

The Tribune. 20 February 1948. Lahore

**Abducted Women Blot on Pakistan.**

"The governments of India and Pakistan have resolved to see through the business of restoring abducted women to their relatives and I appeal to my countrymen to co-operate with their government whole-heartedly in this work," said Khan Iftikhar Hussain Khan of Mamdot, Premier of West Punjab in a broadcast talk from Lahore.

"The Mussulmans of the East Punjab had to undergo great sufferings and privations and were forced to leave their homes as destitutes."

The Tribune. 3 March 1948. Bombay

**Seven refugee camps with 1 Lakh inhabitants.**

"There are 3,000 refugees arriving daily from Pakistan and this number is expected to shoot up to 5,000 a day," says Lt Col M.T. Gulrajani as Director of Evacuation and Chief Refugee Officer, Mr C.T. Valecha.

The Tribune. 4 March 1948. New Delhi

Mr William C. Bullit, former US ambassador to Russia says, "Communists are Stalin-driven slaves. The Communist conquest of China will lead to rapid Communist victory in Indo-China, Siam and the Malay Peninsula. China is our key to the entire Far East. If our government should permit the Communists to take over China, it would have failed to bar the way to attack on our country by overwhelming masses

of Stalin-driven slaves. We propose to give 570,000,000 dollars in non-military aid to the Nanking government."

**Parliament at Work - Do not grudge relief to refugees**

Mr Thakurdas Bhargana urged Parliament not to grudge the small relief being extended to people from West Punjab who had come to India, having lost everything they had. Finance Minister Mr R.K Shanmukhan Chetty said that individuals would be given loads of Rs 50,000 and joint stock companies would be given Rs 1 lakh to rebuild their lives.

**The Tribune. 8 March 1948**

**Simla Hindu Villages Attacked.**

Majlis Ittihadul Mussulmin attacked Hindu residents of four villages of Aurangabad district. Some Hindu women were molested.

**The Tribune. 22 March 1948**

"Employment Exchange Organization in East Punjab has helped rehabilitate 15,000 Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Punjab by giving them employment of Rs 40 per month," says Lahri Singh, Minister for Public Works.

**Pak Muslims raid Ferozepore village**

500 Muslims from Pak raided the village of Kamalwad in Ferozepore Tehsil and took away one Mangal Singh. Firing between the Muslims



and Rai Singhs continued for one hour and the raiders had crossed the Sutlej River when Indian military and police arrived.

**The Tribune. 19 March 1948. Lahore**

Total number of non-Muslim girls restored to East Punjab on March 6 was 502, with 204 majors and 298 minors.

459 abducted Muslim girls were recovered during the same week.

14,463 Muslims were collected from various pockets in East Punjab.

**The Tribune. 27 March 1948. Dacca**

Mohammad Ali Jinnah addressed a convocation at Dacca University. He said, "the students of this university are fortunately leaving to enter life in a sovereign individual state of your own. Let me tell you something of the difficulties that we have over come, of the dangers that lie ahead. Thwarted in this desire to prevent the establishment of Pakistan, our enemies turned their attention to finding ways and means to destroy us.

Thus, hardly had the new state come into being, then came the Punjab and Delhi holocaust. Thousands of men, women and children were mercilessly butchered and millions uprooted from their homes. Over 50 lakhs of these arrived in Punjab in a matter of weeks. The care and rehabilitation of these unfortunate refugees stricken in body and soul present problems

which might have destroyed a well-established state. But those of our enemies who had hoped to kill Pakistan at its very inception by this means, were disappointed, Not only has Pakistan survived the shock of that upheaval, but it has emerged stronger, more seasoned and better equipped than ever."

**JASWANT SINGH. GOPENG. 1947**

My brother-in-law Kartar gives me the newspapers from India after he reads them. He gets them from a friend who works at the library in Ipoh. Kartar is my wife's youngest brother. He is a teacher. He gives me the newspapers with tears in his eyes. He shakes his head and says, 'Murderers! They are killing each other!' He puts his head in his hands and weeps. I read the headlines and imagine the carnage in Delhi, Lahore, Ferozepore, Bombay. I imagine the breasts of women in sacks, I imagine the blood on the streets with hacked-off limbs, children with arms and legs torn off. I try to imagine the pain. I cannot imagine it.

Today my son Surinder came home from school crying. He said his teacher Mr Arumugam scolded him in front of the whole class because he was drawing pictures of cowboys on horses. Mr Arumugam was angry because my son was not paying attention. So he scolded Surinder for drawing. Surinder showed me his drawing. There were two horses galloping fast and the cowboys were throwing lassoes. I picked up my son, my beloved son, I smoothed his cheeks and hugged him. I said that it was all right for him to draw. He could draw anything, and I would never scold him.

KARAM KAUR. GEORGETOWN, PENANG. 1950

We now live in the house of the lawyer Jagjeet Singh on 34 Northam Road, Penang. We moved from the shophouse on King Street and then we came here. My husband now works for the lawyer Jagjeet here in Penang. He is also my husband's best friend. He has looked after us well.

The house is very big. It is by the sea. It is a very grand mansion. I have never seen such a beautiful house in my whole life. The rooms are very big and full of furniture. There are chandeliers and long curtains with flower patterns. There are purple carpets and shiny, long wooden tables with crystal vases. There are always flowers on the tables. We stay in the back where the servants live. We have a room all to ourselves. My husband goes to work in the morning and every day he gets on his bicycle with his typewriter on the back, he rides to Carnavon Street and there he sits under the big tree. He writes letters for the lawyers. He is a good writer. I can write my name now. My husband taught me that.

My husband is a good man. He looks after us well. We are not rich, but we are happy.

Surinder was 10 when the sea first took him. I was washing clothes in the back of the house. It was a cloudless day and it was so hot. The children were playing in the garden. I could hear them running and playing with the ball.

Then I heard a shout. *Aiiiiiiiiii!* Someone screamed.

I ran. The children said a wave had taken him, a wave had taken my son. A wave had come over the sea wall, into the garden and taken my son.

I climbed onto the sea wall. I could see him. He was being pulled in deeper and deeper. I closed my eyes and jumped in.

I entered the water and opened my eyes. I held my nose with one hand and then I saw the beautiful locks of my son's hair, his juda, below me, flailing gently. I pulled, I pulled fistfuls of his hair. I pulled him all the way up to the surface and we both came up gasping, gulping mouthfuls of air.

It was 1950. I saved you once, my son.

**SURINDER SINGH. PRANGIN ESTATE, PENANG. 1952**

And after that, we live in the house by the sea.

The house in Penang, the wooden one, by the port, stinking of faeces and salt water.

The house by the big, big tree. Always full of birds. The house that is now our home. Our very first home.

We play by the beach. We see the Chinese fishermen pulling up their nets and laying them out to dry. We see the salted fish on the wooden boards, we see the ikan bilis being laid out to dry. Sometimes we steal some to give to the cat. The Chinese towkay sees me and shouts, 'Kalau awak mau, lu mesti kasi duit!' ('If you want, you must pay!')

The house with smells of my father's masala mix and my mother's chai. The house where we all sleep together, like sardines in rows. The house that is full of birds.

An owl. You once said that I was the son of an owl.

'Ulu da patha.' Son of an owl.

Father, what was it you wanted? Was it the fragrant cardamom for chai? Was it atta flour for chapatti? Was it fennel or coriander or mustard seed?

I ran to the sundry shop. It was almost closed. I could not remember what you wanted so I bought some flour and sugar.

When I came home, you cuffed me on the ear. You wanted cardamom, you wanted cardamom seeds for chai. You were tired and you wanted the hot, aromatic tea that would revive you. Mother's chai.

I ran to the shop again. It was already evening and the tide was going out.

The sea stank. The salted fish stank. I could see the swarm of flies hovering over the wooden stacks.

A car almost ran me over. I was running as fast as I could. I crossed the road and a car stopped suddenly. The door opened. A man was inside, shouting. Then a bird flew out, Father. It flew out of the car. It was an owl, Father. A baby owl. I picked it up and brought it home.

I gave you the cardamom and I showed you the owl. Yet you didn't believe me.

You cuffed me again. 'Ulu da patha!'

Why would I lie to you, Father? I never lie. You taught me never to lie.

I am your firstborn son. I know that I can be foolish.

I know that if I am indeed the son of an owl, then I am indeed your son.





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PART II

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## FROM MELBOURNE TO KIRKBY

After the Japanese left, the British came back to re-colonise Malaya and used the age-old tactic of “divide and rule” to keep the peace. But divided we were, and divided we still remain. The Japanese Occupation left fragments of societies and communities all embroiled in the rage of Communism. The Chinese had been butchered, and hatred of the Japanese was rife. The Malays had simmering resentments towards all. The Indians were just grateful to be alive.

The Chinese were used by the British to regain economic confidence. Businesses were revived and many families went back to what they did before the war. The Malays were left to cultivate, plant and reap what they could from the lands and fields of Malaya. The Sikhs were summoned to the railways and security positions. The Tamils became modern-day slaves in the rubber plantations.

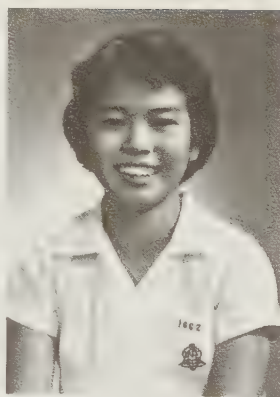
Malaya was fractured, shell-shocked by the trauma of war. The British tried to instil a semblance of normality.

The Malayan Union was formed in 1946 and the British appointed Sir Edward Gent as its Governor. The Malay rulers were coerced into signing away their rights as many were accused of collusion and collaboration with the Japanese. Many Malays opposed the Malayan Union and thus, the seeds of Malay nationalism were planted. Onn bin Jaafar formed the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1946. UMNO was a front for anti-British sentiment and sowed the seeds of Malay nationalism as the British were also granting citizenship to immigrants and descendants of the Chinese and the Indians.

Anti-British sentiment was brewing and Malay nationalists began their fight to oust the British from the country.



After the war, Siew Yoke attended the Perak Girls' School on Kampar Road, one of the best Chinese-language schools in Ipoh. She excelled in Mathematics, English and Mandarin and became one of the school's top students. She was small and lithe and enjoyed playing basketball, eventually playing for the school team in regional tournaments. She loved reading and besides her love for the Chinese classics, she also devoured all works by Han Suyin



Loh Siew Yoke in her late teens

and Pearl S Buck. She also developed a love for the writings of the American-Russian philosopher and writer, Ayn Rand. After scoring six As in her Malayan Certificate of Education (MCE) examination, she was sent up north to the Penang Chinese Girls' School, the most elite Mandarin school in Malaya. She read even more voraciously and had dreams of becoming an intellectual, an educator. She rented a small room in Pulau Tikus and cooked simple meals for herself every night. Sometimes she would go to the market in the mornings and eat the famous hokkien mee there, drinking up all the prawn-flavoured soup and every strand of the yellow and white noodles, then walk alone and explore the streets that were becoming more and more familiar.

Jaswant Singh had become a petition writer and was known for his temerity and eloquence. He wrote beautifully and was commended on his knowledge of the law. He became the cursory headman in Prangin Estate, winning the hearts of his Chinese neighbours who still carried the spirit of Communism in their hearts. They would often meet by a large tree beside Jaswant's house and he would sometimes attend and listen to their fiery



Class of 1953, St Xavier's Institution, Penang; Surinder Singh is kneeling on the bottom right

speeches and their arguments and debates into the night. In 1950, Jaswant decided to run for elections in this area, encouraged by the lawyer Jagjeet. He lost to another Punjabi candidate, Triptipal Singh, by just four votes, was shaken by the experience and vowed never to enter politics again.

Karam Kaur was a devoted wife and mother and continued to bear children. There were now eight. Five girls and three boys.

Ho Siew Ngan was scarred by the war. She had nightmares for years. Her bondmaid had died of dysentery and she was alone, the link to her village in Fatshan, China erased. She too, continued to bear children. There were now nine. Seven girls and two boys.

Surinder continued to draw and went to St Xavier's Institution in Georgetown, Penang. He became a Boy Scout known for his leadership abilities. He also became an avid sportsman, running and playing hockey and rugby for the school. A particular passion began with biology. He loved dissecting animals and then drawing them. His drawings of gutted frogs were his favourites. He too had

dreams and aspirations of becoming a teacher. His sister Shan nicknamed him Kako, an endearment for her little brother.

In 1957, Malaya achieved a bloodless independence from the British, and Surinder was responsible for hoisting the Malayan flag on the field in Georgetown, in front of the crowds that shouted *Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!* for the first time.

Peace had finally come to the nation.



Surinder Singh in his Boy Scout uniform

1958

SURINDER. GEORGETOWN

I received a letter from the School Principal today. He says that I have been given a scholarship to go to the Malayan Teachers' Training College in Kirkby, Liverpool. I cannot believe it! I am going to England. I will have to get on a ship and sail all the way to Liverpool. Father will be so proud of me. Europe, here I come!

SIEW YOKE. GEORGETOWN

I received a letter from Mother today. She says that Father wants me to go to Melbourne for my matriculation. She says that she told Father that I had to be the first to go abroad. She has fought for me to do this. She says that she has saved enough money for me, and that she wants me to go to study. Melbourne, Australia. There are kangaroos there. And winter with snow. Will I fall in love there? Will I meet my husband there?

**SURINDER. GEORGETOWN**

Before I left, my friends wanted to bet with me. They dared me to drink a bottle of whiskey in less than a minute. I did. In 58 seconds. Birinder was with me luckily. I thought I was going to die. For two days, I thought I was going to die.

**SIEW YOKE. IPOH**

There is a lot to pack. I am afraid of the cold. I do not like the cold, but I would like to see snow.

**SURINDER. GEORGETOWN**

I leave on the ship tonight. I am sad to say goodbye to Father, Mother and Shan, Ranjit, Devinder, Birinder, Pami, Surjit and Manjit. I will write to them, I will send them postcards. I will not forget my family.

**SIEW YOKE. IPOH**

Father has given me my ticket on Malayan Airways Limited. I will get on an aeroplane for the first time in my life. I will fly from Ipoh to Singapore and then from Singapore to Melbourne. Mother looks very sad, I am the first child to leave her. I am her Mui Tow, her little head. She does not get along with my elder sister, so I am treated like the eldest. I am leaving Ying Woh. I will be back in four years.

1959

**SURINDER. KIRKBY**

I have begun student-teaching. My students are aged 12 and 13. Many have never seen a Sikh in a turban before! They want to touch my turban and feel it. I am enjoying it here. There is a lot of work, but we manage. The food is not very good, so we try and cook sometimes. On the weekends,



Surinder in Punjabi dress, Kirkby, Liverpool

we go to the pub. I am planning to travel in the summer. There is a lot to see in England and Wales. My guardians are the Needhams, they are helping me plan my trip. Mrs Needham is a wonderful cook! She knows I miss Indian food, so she tries to make her meals more spicy sometimes, but Mr Needham does not like it too much.

#### SIEW YOKE. MELBOURNE

My guardians are the Websters. They are very kind. Mrs Webster makes sure that I am warm enough. The room is cold at night and the heater is not very warm and I am always shivering in my bed. The school is not too far, so I



Siew Yoke in Melbourne

can walk. Camberwell Girls School is one of the best here. I have made a friend. Her name is Bernice, she is from here so she lives at home. She is very tall and she has red hair. Bernice says it's ginger but I don't think it is the colour of ginger.



Surinder at student-teaching practice

**SURINDER. KIRKBY**

I go to church every Sunday now. The pastor at St Chad's is a nice chap. I sent a letter back to Shan today. I told her that I like the pastor's daughter and I sent Shan a picture of the both of us standing in front of the church. I told Shan not to tell Father and Mother that I am in love with a girl who is not Sikh. That would upset them very much. Father especially.

**SIEW YOKE. MELBOURNE.**

Bernice has become my best friend. We talk about everything. She is the first real European person I got to know. We go out on weekends and we go shopping to David Jones. There are such nice dresses there. I decided to buy one. Bernice says that I look beautiful in it. There is a dance next weekend. I think I will wear it then.

**SURINDER. KIRKBY**

Shan has replied. She says that Father received a letter saying that I had been offered a scholarship on the Colombo Plan to study medicine. I am very upset. That is a real honour, I could become a doctor, but now it is too late! I do not know what to do. I would much rather become a doctor than a teacher. What do I do now?

**SIEW YOKE. MELBOURNE**

The dance was so much fun. These girls really know how to carry themselves. I was a bit shy, so I sat down for most of the time. But Bernice said I had to dance, so I danced with her for a while. Some of the girls said that I looked really pretty in the new dress, and Bernice took a picture of me. I will send it back home.



Siew Yoke at home

**SURINDER. KIRKBY**

I was suicidal for a while and I spoke to the Pastor at the church. He says that this is God's will. He has asked me if I want to convert. I don't know yet. Father will kill me. The pastor's name is Bernard. If I did become a Christian, I would take the name Bernard.

**SIEW YOKE. MELBOURNE**

I am leaving the Websters soon. When I go to University, I will have to live in a flat. Luckily, Bernice is going, too, but she is doing Business, I am doing Science. We will still be

friends, but maybe we won't be as close. I think if I ever have a daughter, I will name her Bernice. I went back to her house on Sunday. Her mother is lovely and they have such a nice house. They even had an apple tree in the backyard. I have never had apples from a tree before!

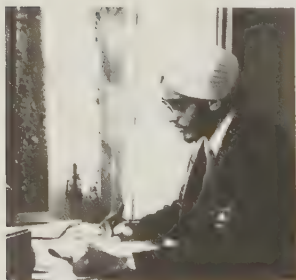
**SURINDER. KIRKBY**

Father has written to me saying that he is looking for a new house. It is time to move out of Prangin Estate. He says that Birinder is going to help him look for a house when he is back on leave from the army. It is an exciting thought. A new house. A house that is away from the sea.

**1960**

**SIEW YOKE. UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**

There is so much work at the University. I am finding it very difficult. I am sharing a flat with Pek Keng and Ping, who are both from Kuala Lumpur. Pek Keng comes from a very rich family there. I like her because she is very frank. But she smokes, which I don't like. There are many Malaysians here, more than at Camberwell. It is very nice when we get together, we can all speak in Cantonese.



Surinder studying for exams

**SURINDER**

A group of us have decided that we are going to travel this summer. We are going to go to Europe and travel across the continent. We will have to start planning now. We will try to go to Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. What a trip this will be!





Siew Yoke with friends on the grounds of the University of Melbourne

### SIEW YOKE

We always cook on weekends now. We all go to the market and try to find some fish to steam with some fresh vegetables. The pork here is not as nice as at home but we do our best with some soya sauce and ginger. There is someone in our group that I like very much. He is older than me. He is so handsome, he looks like a Chinese Warren Beatty. Oh, what do I do? Pek Keng says I have to be careful. He has had many girlfriends, but I like him so much. He comes from a rich family in Penang. He always wears nice clothes.

### SURINDER

The weather is getting warmer. I am going to travel around England this spring and will probably try and hitchhike and rent a bicycle around. Am planning to go to Cornwall and Wales. I must try to see as much of England as I can.

## SIEW YOKE

I am madly in love with him. He says he wants to marry me. He says he will go home to Penang and speak to his parents about me, and then he will return.

*First love. She is desperately in love with the handsome man from Penang. She wants to be his wife. He has made promises to her, promises that she hopes he will keep. She keeps a picture of him close to her heart at night. His smooth skin stretches over taut cheeks and tapers up towards a high brow, his oiled hair is curled slightly and he smiles. At her. How she traces those lips again and again, how she caresses the picture as she drifts to sleep. His eyes, his forehead, his nose, his ears. How she wishes that he were next to her, holding*

*her against the wintry Melbourne nights. How she wishes she would not have to go to classes and sit and stare while the professors rattle on and on. How she wishes she could be there with him now in Penang.*

*He sits with his parents in the living room of their tree-lined mansion who inform him that they have found him a wife. A wife who is as rich as he is. As they are. Who is as pretty as a film star. Who is already at the door with her parents at which point he turns and rises and sees a tall, shapely figure in a flowery cheongsam. He greets her. They sit and drink tea served by amahs in white and black samfuss from delicate teacups with hand-drawn red and gold dragons all the way from China. The handsome man from Penang is immediately smitten by the pretty rich girl from Penang. Their parents promise to consult the priests and the ephemeris and to come to a suitable date for*



One of my favourite pictures of my mother

*these new lovers. A suitable marriage between two families, a shared wealth now assured.*

*She waits patiently for a letter from the handsome man in Penang. It comes, but after many weeks. She has missed a moon and her belly has begun to swell. Her face is pinched with worry and she tries not to show her terror. She is unable to eat and her sleep is plagued with recurring nightmares. Her friends, who begin to notice her anxiety, try to placate her by saying he is still talking to his parents, don't worry, it will be fine. The letter arrives, her hands shake as she tears open the flimsy envelope. Within minutes, she utters a cry and slumps to the floor.*

*She enters the abortion clinic and the white nurse looks at her disapprovingly. This is White Australia. Asians are not wanted here. She sits alone in the corner. She does not want company. Later, still in a swirl of chloroform, her friends come to accompany her home, her grief torn away from her body, along with her heart.*

Siew Yoke tries to continue with her Science degree and makes it through to the second year. But her devastation becomes a silent scourge and she is unable to study or concentrate, her mind struggling to comprehend the enormity of her loss. With her slipping grades and numerous warnings from professors, she writes a letter to her Father to inform him of her decision to return home, citing reasons that included homesickness and a failure to adapt to Australian society.

## THE SCRAPBOOK

In the summer of 1960, Surinder departed with eight college friends on a back-packing adventure across Europe. He kept a scrapbook of the travels and it opens with a map of the route and a collage of cropped photos and captions of "The Party". This included Joseph Chin, the "leader" of the Malayan Communist Party; Stephen Wong, the real gentleman; Peh Soon Liang; Thomas Tham, the cheroot smoker; Raymond, Rev Father Raymond; Lim Yoke Kim, the sleepy head; Huseein, caught between two girls; and Mohd Sha'ari. They left Liverpool and headed east to London, crossing over to Holland and Germany, heading north to Denmark and Sweden, westward to Norway and then crossing the North Sea to Newcastle, England. The trip started on 12 August and ended on 14 September. These are a series of excerpts from his scrapbook.



The scrapbook's battered cover

## SUMMER 1960

OUR DEPARTURE FROM COLLEGE

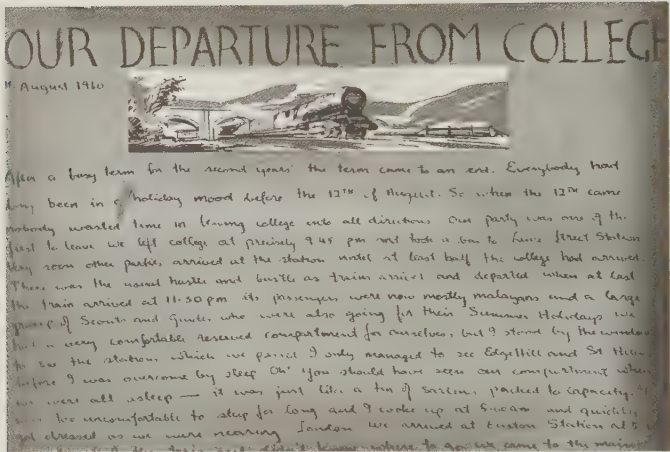
SURINDER. 12 AUGUST 1960

After a busy term for the second years', it finally came to an end. Everybody had long been in a holiday mood before the 12th. Our party was one of the first to leave. We left college at precisely 9.45pm and took a bus to Lime Street Station. Very soon other parties arrived at the station until at least half the college arrived. There was the usual hustle and bustle as trains arrived and departed when at last our train arrived at 11.50pm. Its passengers were mostly Malayans and there was a large group of Scouts and Guides who were also going for their summer holidays.

We had a very comfortable reserved compartment for ourselves, but I stood by the window to see the station. I only managed to see Edgehill and St Helen's before I was overcome by sleep. Oh! You should have seen the compartment when we were all asleep – it was just like a tin of sardines, packed to capacity. It was too uncomfortable to sleep for long and I woke up at 5.00am and quickly got dressed as we were nearing London.

13 AUGUST 1960

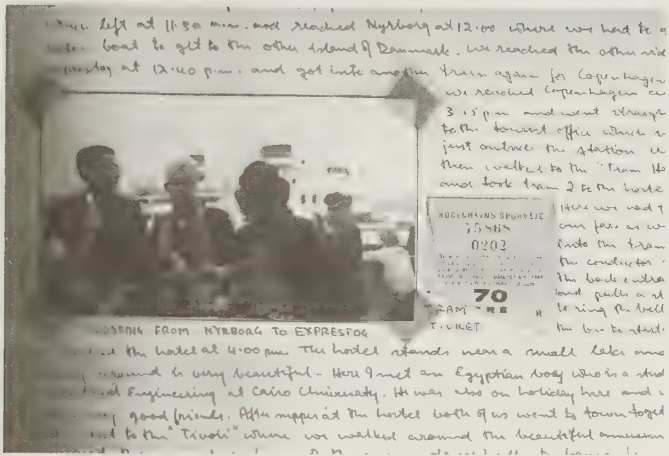
We arrived at Euston Station at 5.30am. We got out of the train and did not know where to go. We went to the main entrance and had a glimpse of a busy London street, even at that early hour before a friendly policeman guided us to the Tube. This was my first ride in the Tube and I think it is very cheap, fast and easy. We took a train to Liverpool Street Station where we had time for some breakfast before we took the train to Harwich. This time it was a much more comfortable journey. We had the whole coach to ourselves



The scrapbook's first page

with two other parties of our college students. We arrived at Harwich and then carried our luggage to the harbour, which was just next to the station. After the usual inspection of passports and baggage we were allowed to embark on the "Princess Beatrice". It was the biggest ship I had ever travelled on. It was packed to the bows with holidaymakers and us Malayans. Goodbye England!

The boat left Harwich at 11.30am and for the first time in my life I had a glimpse of the English Channel. It is said that the sea here is usually very rough but we were lucky to have chosen a fine day as it was so calm. I went to the bar to have a drink with another boy and there we started discussing Indian politics with an Englishman who bought more drinks for us. It was my first taste of a martini. It was wonderful. We had more drinks and then some sandwiches and tea for lunch. By the time we finished lunch, we had our first glimpse of Holland. It looked beautiful and fresh in the distance. The boat entered the harbour called Hook of



Pasted meticulously into the scrapbook - coins, ticket stubs, lager labels, travel brochures and more

Holland and we stepped ashore onto the Land of Windmills and Flowers.

From Hook of Holland we took an electric train to Rotterdam. It was not a very long journey and the train was very fast. When we reached Rotterdam everybody stood and stared at us specimens – especially at my turban. The city itself was very new with modern buildings everywhere. It had just been rebuilt after the last war when the whole city was razed to the ground. The streets were very clean and on the whole there was an atmosphere of calm and friendliness. We took a tram to the Youth Hostel where we booked in. We found out that most of the guests were German and we made many friends among them as they were all very curious to know about my funny headgear.

Since no cooking could be done without any food we went to a shop and for the first time since leaving Malaya, we had a taste of Malayan food. We ate popiah or lompiah as the Dutch called it. There too we attracted many customers and



On the coast in Wales; Surinder hitch-hiked and cycled all over England, Ireland and Wales

the shopkeeper was very pleased. He showed us the other eastern food he sold at his shop. I made friends with the two German boys with whom I went for a walk around the town. They were very interested in the Malayan money, which I showed them.

The town looked very beautiful at night, so we just walked along the streets to enjoy the beauty. But it looked funny to see the traffic going on the other side of the road, because here in Holland it is a right-hand-drive system. Many a time we almost walked into a car. We reached the hostel safe and sound and we went up to our dormitories, but the German boys were very noisy so we couldn't go to sleep for some time until the wardens came and shut them up. So came to an end a most enjoyable day in my life.

#### 14<sup>TH</sup>

We woke up at 7.00am to the sound of a bell. All the hoteliers assembled for breakfast – our first real breakfast





In Killarney, Ireland

since leaving college. After that we walked to town with some of our German friends. It was a Sunday and so all the shops were closed. Instead we went to see a monument, "Lady with a broken heart" – it represents the city of Rotterdam, which was broken into pieces during the war. It is a huge bronze statue about 25 feet tall. We strolled leisurely along the empty streets and followed a sign leading to the "Floriade".

We paid 2.25 guilders to enter the Floriade, a huge international horticultural competition, and another 1.50 to take a lift up the Euromast. From the top – 400 feet high – we had a wide view over the whole Floriade, harbour and city and the Maastunnel going under the harbour, and a wonderful pattern of roads, some crossing over or under another. We came down and spent the whole day walking about the Floriade. There were millions and millions of flowers from all over the world. There was entertainment for the weary to relax, music and dancing and food. Time flew fast and we reached the hostel at 7.00pm, without having a

meal all day. We had bought some food, which we cooked in the typical Malayan way to the astonishment of the Dutch and German 'observers'. They wondered at our funny tastes and the way we gobbled down the hot fried mien.

#### 16TH. GROETEN UIT DEN HAAG

As usual, we woke up at about 7.00am and washed up and had breakfast. After that we took a bus and stopped at the Hall of Knights. Here Queen Juliana comes on the third Tuesday of September in a golden coach to deliver a speech. The seat of the Speaker stands opposite the throne.

Much of the internal structure is in oak. The roof forms the hull of a Viking ship. No steel nails were used in its construction except wooden nails. Flags from the eleven provinces hung on their stands and coats of arms from all ages could be seen hung from the walls. The throne is 360 years old and there are 225 seats for the members of Parliament.

This is also the Reception Hall for foreign sovereigns. There are three huge old tapestries hanging on the wall above the fireplace. One piece was presented by "Nero" and the other was from Saul. I don't know the origin of the third. The fireplace was used as a place to roast deer after the knights returned from their hunting. In the 18th century, this was a market place.

After the Hall of the Knights, we went to an art gallery, the Mauritshaus. There are 17 works by Rembrandt and several by Vermeer, Van Dyck and Reubens. Rembrandt's masterpiece "The Operation Theatre" shows the expressions on the faces of the surgeon from those days and the students who are watching the operation. The person being operated on is lying still and is blue and pale like death. We paid 50 cents each as entry fee into the gallery.

20TH

Today we had to leave the youth hostel in Amsterdam as we can stay a maximum of three nights, so we shifted to the student's hostel nearby. We left our baggage there and went to the pier to get a boat to the other side of Amsterdam and from there we took a bus to Monnikendam. Here we saw the real Dutch countryside with farmland, windmills, cattle and pastures.



The hitch-hiker

We bought some souvenirs and then took a boat to the Island of Marken. We walked through the village with the villagers staring curiously at us. We visited a typical Dutch house where an old lady explained some of their customs and costumes. All the people on this island wear national costumes including wooden clogs. The majority of the men are fishermen, even small boys work on boats. The small village has an electric supply so there is no need for windmills. The main occupation is fishing and farming. We bought some souvenirs and walked back to the pier from where we took the boat to Volendam, another typical Dutch village. We walked along the pier and saw fishermen bringing in their catch of snake-like fish, which are boiled or fried and sold as such at small way-side stalls. We saw some small boys



One of Surinder's many postcards home; this is from Bremen, Germany

fishing and swimming in the cold water. Here we saw the first dykes of Holland.

We returned to the hostel to rest for a while and then went out to look for a slot machine where we could get some hot popiah for dinner. After that we returned to the hostel where we started arguing with two American boys on the "colour bar" in America. They said that the Negroes are far below the white Americans in their social status. They say that the Negroes speak differently from the whites and it is impossible for a black to marry a white as the social differences are so great. I thought the argument would never come to an end so I went to bed and slept soundly while the others went on arguing.

## 21ST

We reached the German frontier at 10.25am, when the engine was changed to a steam engine, because there were no more electric trains on this route. In Germany, there are many woodlands compared to Holland's bare plains. The last Dutch town was Oldenyaal and the first German town was Blenheim. We could already see a change in the buildings which was red brick. Bremen was reached at 1.40pm. We left our luggage at the station and went strolling in the town as it was quite early. The city didn't look very much different from Rotterdam or Den Haag. The buildings were all new because the city had been rebuilt after the war. Here we also came across slot machines for food. I put in one mark and got four peaches, and after that we went to a stall and had our first German sausages – one foot long. Two of these followed by a cup of tea makes a wonderful lunch.

## 26TH

We reached Odense at 3.15pm and could not find the way to the bus stop. Some passersby wished us "Welcome to Denmark". We accidentally found the Information Bureau and asked for the way to the Youth Hostel. We found that the bus stop was just outside it and we took the No 6 to the Youth Hostel. It is a funny bus system as we have to pay the fare as we leave the bus. We reached the hostel and at once set about to cook a meal. It was my turn to cook, as tired as I was, I set about the cooking and prepared a decent meal.

As I was eating my dinner, I started reading from a tourist guide book of Denmark.



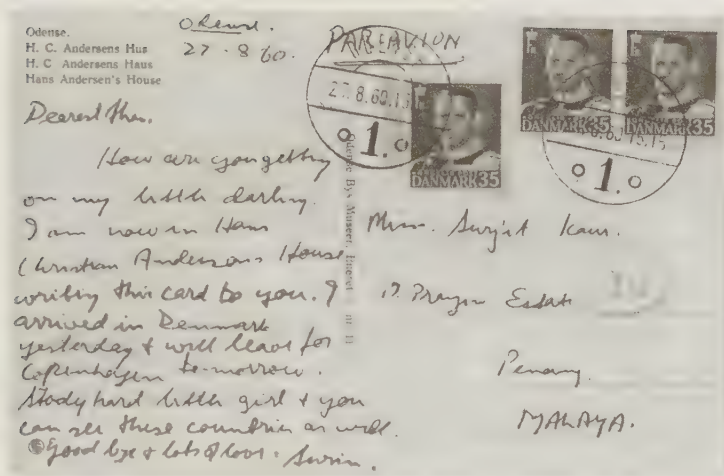
Postcard from Odense, Denmark, to his sister Surjit (front)

**Meals:**

*Breakfast usually consists of coffee or tea with rolls, butter and marmalade, costing 3-5 kroner. For anything over and above this there is an extra charge. A full breakfast with bacon and eggs costs about 7 kroner.*

*Lunch can vary to suit every taste. Most Danes take smorrebrod (open sandwiches), which some large restaurants serve in more than 1000 varieties. After the sandwiches comes a hot course followed by cheese and coffee. The price varies from 4.50 to 10 kroner – excluding drinks.*

*Dinner usually consists of three hot courses and costs from 6-18 kroner. Supper consists of smorrebrod or a single course and costs from 4-12 kroner. But both cheaper and more expensive meals can be found.*



Postcard (back)

**Good Friends:**

The friendliness of the Dane is one of his most prominent characteristics. He delights in meeting people – especially people from abroad – and he never wearies of hearing about their countries and showing them his own.

Wherever you go in Denmark, the Dane – he or she – is always anxious that you should see all the local 'sights'.

If you have not, the Dane, as full of local patriotism as he is of international friendliness, will do all in his power to help you see them.

To be on good terms with the world is a kind of national hobby for Danes.

27<sup>TH</sup>

As it was a fine day we went into a park and took photographs with Hans Christian Anderson's statue after which we visited his childhood home and there we plucked pears in the garden. The old man, a descendant of Hans Christian, and his son Itams who are now staying there were very pleased to meet us. The old man plucked a bunch of flowers and put them in my coat lapel. I was very proud to wear it. After that we went into his house where we saw many of Hans Christian's original writings, relics and his library of books. We had a lunch of cakes and tea, which we bought at a shop and ate at a park. We then lay down on the grass beside a stream to rest for a while.

28<sup>TH</sup>

We reached Nyborg at noon and got onto a boat to get to Exprestog, on the other side of Denmark. Then we got into a train for Copenhagen and went straight to the tourist office which was just outside the station.

We got to the hostel at around 4pm. The hostel stands near a small lake and the scenery is quite beautiful. I met an Egyptian boy who is a student in Electrical Engineering at Cairo University. He was also on holiday and we became good friends. After supper, the both of us went to the Tivoli, a beautiful amusement park, and then we went into one of the many dance halls to have a few dances and a drink. We left the Tivoli and got into the tram at 10.30pm. Thus, we were seven minutes late in reaching the hostel, which had closed at 11pm. We jumped over the gate, together with a few others who were also late. This made the warden angry. He fined each of us 2.50 and ordered us to go straight to bed. He later came into our rooms to check if we were in bed. I was almost asleep when he came because I was so tired out.



29<sup>TH</sup>

We took a tram to the Carlsberg Factory in Copenhagen and we got there at around 10.45am. We had a conducted tour but there were not too many technical details given by our guide. This was not like a visit to the Guinness Factory in Dublin where I learnt much more about how the beer was made. Here, he did not tell us about that, but instead told us a brief history of the company. At the end of the tour we were all taken to the factory bar where we had a sample of every kind of beer and fruit drink made by Carlsberg. I only got the chance of tasting four, but I got a wonderful souvenir of all the labels of every kind of beer and soft drink made by Carlsberg.

30<sup>TH</sup>

Today we visited Rosenburg Castle. Although it was drizzling slightly, we walked there and walked around the garden and saw guards on parade. Some new recruits were just coming out and they were laughing at the guards. We left the castle and walked to the harbour where we saw the statue of the Little Mermaid. I bought a small souvenir of it and we took some photos. It began to rain heavily and we ran for shelter under a tree but we were soaked through.

We saw school children walking barefoot in the rain to prevent their shoes from getting spoilt.

1<sup>ST</sup> SEPTEMBER

I was playing chess with an Arabian boy when others came and called me away. We were leaving for Sweden today. I said goodbye to my friends and we left the hotel at 9.30am and took a tram to the railway station. We arrived at 10.15am and still had three hours to wait for the train. So we left our bags at the station and went for our last look round the



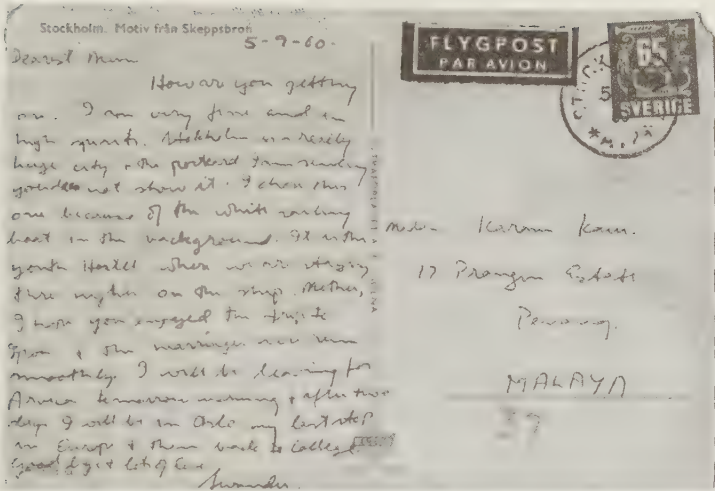
Postcard from Stockholm, Sweden, to his mother (front)

town and to buy some food for Sweden as we were told it was expensive there. We bought several packets of spaghetti, eggs, chicken noodles, enough for a few days. We came back to the station and a group of schoolgirls who were about to board a train pounced upon me for my autograph.

We wanted to take a local train to Helzingor where the Hamlet castle stands but some complications arose. We had to pay an extra 2.50 to book seats on the train, so we decided to take the direct train to Gothenburg. We bought a Daily Express and boarded the train, that's when we read that "Malaya's Second King Dies".

## 2ND

After breakfast we came across a trade fair, which had "tinned pineapples from Malaya". We sat down in a park near the river and had our lunch of a few fruits and returned to the hotel where Joe cooked our dinner. After that we watched



Postcard (back)

the Olympic Games on TV and when there were no more programmes, I played chess with a German boy while the others went back to the trade fair.

### 3RD

We were on our way to Stockholm! I went out in the morning and bought a large supply of bread for breakfast and lunch on the train. I also bought a copy of the Daily Express and read again that our King had died, so we paid our respects to the late King by standing up in the already moving train, and observed a minute's silence after which we sang the Negara Ku.

There were many beautiful lakes on both sides of the railway line and the scenery was exceptionally beautiful. There were some isolated shacks on the hill-sides covered with coniferous trees. There were also modern buildings even so far out in the country, and every building was

supplied with electricity because I could see telegraph poles nearby. We reached Laxa at 3.05pm, which is exactly halfway between Goteburg and Stockholm. This is a beautiful winter resort with all its mountains and beautiful lakes. We reached Stockholm at 6.15pm and received a 21-gun salute as one of the battleships in the harbour was having shooting practice.

We found our way to the Youth Hostel which was an old sailing ship given to the Y.H.A by the navy. There was no supper on board so we went out to town to have a few hot dogs and a drink. I left the others and went for a walk with Soon Liang, in the city centre. We lost our way coming back, but we saw the real nightlife of the city. Teddy boys went around in huge old American cars, with absurdly long aerials, and went screeching along the streets at high speed. There were also teddy boys on motor-cycles, tearing and roaring along at terrific speed regardless of the pedestrians and other traffic.

## 6TH

We reached Arvika at 2.48pm and found that it was a small, dead town. Even the tourist office had long been closed down. As we were wondering where to go, a gentleman came to us and directed us to the right bus to the hostel. He later turned out to be the Mayor of the town. We took the only bus to town and paid 55 ore for the short journey to the hostel. The Youth Hostel turned out to be a typical Swedish log cabin. It was already closed for the winter but since we booked in advance, the warden opened the door for us. He asked us to help ourselves to his apples. A newspaper reporter came to interview us and after that we went to town and had a supper of hot dogs and coffee

at "Kaffe Bar". It was extremely cold inside the building, the cold air seeping through the crags between the logs. A hitch-hiker from Israel joined us at the hostel. We were very cold in bed inspite of the fact that we each had 7 or 8 thick, warm blankets. I curled myself up until my knees touched my chin and only then was I able to go to sleep.

## 7TH

We went to the Town Hall in Oslo, which is a huge building of red brick. The walls are covered in huge murals, the biggest I have ever seen. We then walked to the waterfront and saw fishermen bringing in their catch of prawns, which they boiled and sold on the quayside and people ate them there and then. So we did the same. My! They were lovely, just like Malayan prawns and not like the leathery ones we get in college.

We returned to the hostel but as it was quite early went for a walk and had hot dogs at a restaurant. While we were there it started raining so we ran back to the hostel. Khoon Voon's party had arrived with the tragic news that our friend C. Navasothy was killed in a car accident in Vienna. The other members of the party were injured and were in hospital. Navasothy's party arrived later to confirm the news. The news was so shocking that I simply could not believe it, yet I knew it had to be true. I couldn't eat any more that day and went to bed at once.

## 10TH

After breakfast today we took the bus 30 to the other side of the city to see the Viking ships and the Kon-Tiki raft. We visited the Viking ships first where we saw remarkable relics from the Viking age, which included tools, utensils and

even a cart. These included the Oseberg ship, the Gokstad ship and the Tune ship, which were all found near the Oslo Fjord. Examination of the Oseberg ship brought to light a collection of household objects, garments etc, large and varied enough to give us a good idea of daily life in 9th Century Norway.

After that we visited the Kon-Tiki Museum which was erected in 1957. It houses the raft which Thor Heyerdahl and five companions drifted on 5,000 miles across the Pacific Ocean. It was quite incredible.

We also went to The <<Fram>> where we saw the vessel that was built for Nansen's Polar Expedition in 1893-96, which was later used by Roald Amundsen on his South Pole expedition in 1910.

We then returned to town where we were separated by the lunch crowd. I went on alone and bought some souvenirs and returned to the hostel with a supply of bread for tomorrow. Tonight, the hostel is packed with Malaysians, about 50 of us.

## 11TH

Took a tram to see the Vigeland sculptures in Frogner Park. The sculpture covers an area of 75 acres and is a world of human beings and animals in stone, iron, bronze and wood, the gigantic work of Gustav Vigeland. It took Vigeland and three others to make all this – the masterpiece of which is the gigantic monolith, made from one piece of stone, carved into 121 figures, all struggling to reach the top – Heaven.

Every piece of work is full of sentiment and emotion. Another piece is the "Life Cycle" consisting of five figures – two men, two women and a boy – all rolled into a circular ring. It is really amazing how the sculptor worked it all out.

## 13TH

Today I went to town and made a tour of the museums. I first visited the Town Museum (Frogmerveiren) in the main building of Frogmar Hovedgard which was completed in 1790. It contains an interesting collection from the last 300 years. There were maps, a portrait gallery and a number of interiors, displayed in 23 rooms. I then went to the National Gallery, which had a large collection with emphasis on Norwegian painting, sculpture, drawings and graphic arts. The most outstanding were Edvard Munch, Erik Werenskiold, Harriet Backer and Christian Krogh. There was also some work by Matisse, Cezanne and Van Gogh.

Finally I went to The Museum of Applied Arts, my last gallery in Europe. The collection covers a period stretching from the Middle Ages to the present. The most impressive piece was the Baldishol tapestry, woven in the Hedmark in the 1180s, one of the five tapestries which had been preserved since the Romanesque epoch.

By now, I was fed up of art galleries so I decided to return to the hostel. I waited till the others came back and then we cooked our last meal in Oslo.

## 14TH

Goodbye Europe.

At last the day has come when we have to leave Europe for England, back to College and our books. We woke early and packed up, had breakfast and said goodbye to the warden. Then we went to the shipping company to get our luggage. As it was still early, we walked about town for the last time and came back to board the ship, the S. Braemar. We went up to the deck and there was a large crowd at the pier, but there was no one to wave to us except the seagulls which

flapped their wings as they flew about, as if waving white handkerchiefs to say farewell to us.

We passed through Oslo Fjord and then through many more fjords. We had a life-boat drill and then had a first-class dinner. It wasn't too cold on the deck but it was quite foggy. Later we had some drinks but the others were knocked out after one or two bottles because they became sea-sick with the ship's rolling. They lay in bed vomiting all through the night. I was the only one who did not become sea-sick and had a very comfortable sleep. In fact, I liked the ship rolling.

## 15<sup>TH</sup>

I woke up early and had breakfast. I was the only one in the dining room as the others were all too sick. I felt quite lonely so I walked all over the ship to pass away the time. At 6.15pm, we put our watches one hour back, to English time. As the sea was getting too rough, I decided to go to bed early and slept well through the night.

## 16<sup>TH</sup>

Today everybody was feeling better and we woke early. We reached Newcastle at 5.30am and went ashore after 7am. After the customs check, we took a train to Newcastle and from there changed train to Lime Street Station, Liverpool. We reached there at 3.00pm and were back in college by four. We hurriedly washed up and changed for high tea. Well, the holiday is over and there is a long busy term ahead of us.

We will never see all the places we visited again in our whole lives.



**SIEW YOKE. MELBOURNE. 1960**

I have been going to church regularly and am thinking of giving myself a Christian name. I think the name Jane will suit me. It is a sweet name. Yes, I think I will be Jane Loh.





PART III



## JANE, WILL YOU MARRY ME?

1961

It is the first "upside-up year" since 1881 and millions starve in China due to Chairman Mao's failed policies in the Great Chinese Famine. The relatives in Fatshan write often to ask for money and the shophouse dwellers on 14 Leech Street do their best to save their family in China from starvation.

Jane returns to Ipoh, with a heavy heart, an acute sense of failure. She had disappointed her father, herself. This was the beginning of what she calls "the dark years". She feels alone in a house that is full of rowdy teenage siblings, a mother who is silent most times and a father who is consumed with his pork-selling business. The only constant in the shophouse upstairs is the Rediffusion, tuned to the "yuet kuk" or Chinese Opera channel, day and night. Her mother loves the Cantonese opera from her home province of Guangdong and listens to the stories of *Princess Chang Ping* and *Legend of the Purple Hairpin* again and again. Jane hums to the all-familiar strains from *Princess Chang Ping*, which tells of two ill-fated royal lovers who drink poison as the Manchu troops arrive at the imperial gates.

*Tuk tuk tuk tuk chiang!*

*'We will take the poison on our wedding night.'*

*Tuk tuk chiang!*

*'We can still preserve our names.'*

*Tuk chiang!*

*'Are you sure?'*

*Tuk tuk tuk tuk tuk.*

*'Yes, my love, we will die together.'*

*Chiang chiang chiang chiang chiang!*

Her mother lies down on the planter's chair in the dark corridor flanking the bedrooms, fanning herself silently, above her heart, oblivious to the world.

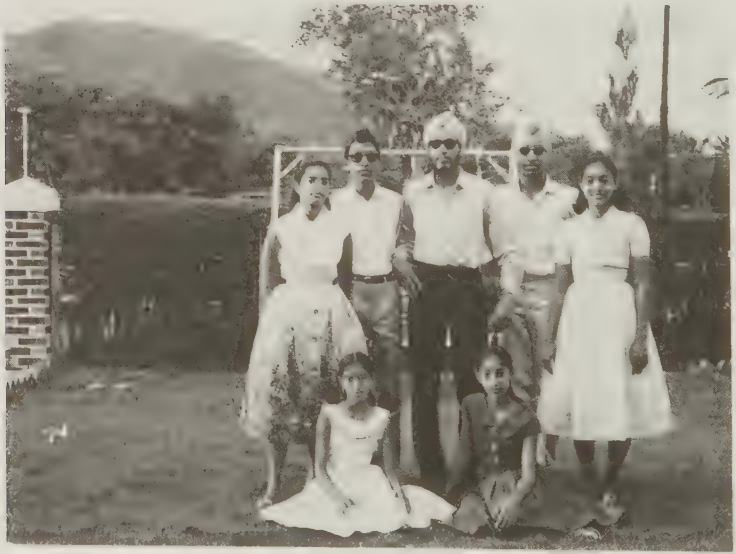
Jane spends her days wandering around Ipoh's old town, passing alleyways of lorries unloading flour, onions, freshly-milled rice and sweaty dried fish. She loves wandering into Wah Pan, the coffee shop on the corner, inhaling the smells of fresh pau stuffed with sweet morsels of pork or red bean, fluffy egg tarts, and aromatic white coffee. Sometimes, she sits and reads the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, orders a coffee and an egg tart and watches the other customers; there is the chain-smoking lady from the crockery store across the street, the old man who sells biscuits, hunching over his steaming hot Milo and the stingy man with the thick glasses from the toy shop. Then, she takes a familiar path down Leech Street, passing the rival pork shop, the tin-man's shop, the new Rolex shop, the Chinese medicine shop, the sundry shop owned by the grumpy Chinese lady with a stoop, until she finds herself again at Kwong Fatt.

She loves entering the air-conditioned coolness of its high doors, its glass windows of pasty mannequins draped in the latest fabrics. She loves the bolts of cloth, divided into silks, cottons, linens, georgette and rayon. She loves the bright bold colours of the local batik prints, she loves the smooth sheen of satins, but most of all, she loves the feel of pure cotton. She imagines herself wrapped up in a cocoon, hiding away from all the smells that emanate from the street, from top to toe in creamy Indian cotton, in the sanctuary of Kwong Fatt. She saunters from table to table, gazing intently at the delicate prints of synthetic Japanese fabrics, bright polyesters from America, counting bolt after bolt of riotous colour, making mathematical configurations of the endless bolts of cloth. She walks upstairs, does the usual round of looking at the latest women's fashions, marvels at the kinds of sweaters and

skirts that are all the rage and the shelves of dressmaking and embroidery books. Then she wanders downstairs and in a corner, listens to the *swish, swish, swish* of the scissors slicing through fabric. It comforts her.

She then walks out of the doors, grasps the sunlight into her eyes, and slowly makes her way home.

Surinder returns to Georgetown a different man. He has seen the world, its wonders, its art and architecture. He returns to a heroic welcome, to a new home at 23 Cheeseman Road. His siblings greet him with hugs, 'Your beard has grown', 'Look how thin you are', 'Kako, did you bring me something nice from Germany...?'



The siblings at 23 Cheeseman Road; left to right - (back) Ranjit, Birinder, Surinder, Devinder, Shan, (front) Pami and Surjit

His mother smiles, grasping her firstborn son onto her bosom and hugs him, tears streaming down her cheeks. His father takes him on a grand tour around the house. The single-storey semi-detached house is located across a park, one of many houses in a horseshoe, an area recently gentrified. Gone were the stinking mudflats, the stench of flies and salted fish; gone was the house by the sea.

Then there was talk of marriage. There was Mohinder Kaur, a widow; Surinder felt sorry for her, but could not bring himself to marry her. Then there was Gian Singh's daughter, who was too ugly. Then there was another, and another: some distant uncle's daughter, and some thrice-removed aunty's daughter, until there was even a first cousin who was available and in the words of her father, 'This way, we can keep our lands in the family.' To which Surinder replied, 'I am very sorry, but I cannot marry my cousin.'

Then, he receives a letter in the mail of a posting that will send him to his first teaching position in the town of Pasir Puteh on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Surinder buys a white Vespa and begins to pack for the long journey ahead. It will take him two days, and he will stop by Kuala Kubu Bharu to visit his - brother Devinder on the way.

On the day of his departure, Surinder wakes up at dawn. His mother has already strapped a few aluminium pots on the handlebars, there is a rolled-up chequered purple mattress, and inside, a thin blanket and pillow strapped on the back. His mother hands him a stack of freshly fried puris with onions and chilli, some dhal and chicken curry. Surinder gets on the Vespa after breakfast, straps on his backpack, and weaves out of the gate in a clatter of pans, and rides away to Pasir Puteh.

1964

Mencinta Lounge. Johor Bharu. Pek Keng has returned from Melbourne and opens the country's first striptease club. She receives a phone call in the afternoon and is told that an unexpected guest has decided to turn up. She is none other than Malaya's "Queen of Striptease". Tonight, Rose Chan will perform at Mencinta Lounge. Pek Keng makes calls and orders extra bottles of Anchor, Tiger, Guinness and Bulldog and several extra crates of whiskey. The floors are swept and mopped and then mopped again. Tables are wiped spotless. Jane has been helping Pek Keng out at the lounge. She is in Singapore doing a course in Interior Design and comes up to JB to visit her friend often. She helps out with waiting tables and selling tickets on some nights. Pek Keng says that men will start queuing up as early as 6:00 p.m. 'All this to see a woman take off her clothes and do extraordinary things with her lady bits,' she says excitedly, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Rose Chan is a legend. And for her to come to Mencinta is big business. Pek Keng is delirious, 'I wonder if she will do her python act, or pop the Coca Cola bottle?' Jane is horrified. Pop a Coca Cola bottle with her lady bits? What kind of woman did that? What *kind* of vagina could do that? Wrestle with pythons? Jane has a mental image of a petite Chinese lady trying to fight off serpents with a Shaolin sword or with kung fu. She has a deep, irrational fear of snakes. She cannot even mention the word "snake" and has come up with the word "Mr Long" as an antidote. The very thought of a naked lady writhing with several "Mr Longs" on stage made her quite ill. She cannot bear the thought of it. She decides to sneak off quietly. And so she does, before the queue gets any longer, easing herself quietly out the back door, walking quickly home, and going to bed. And so she misses the only performance Rose Chan ever gives in Johor Bharu. Pek Keng comes back late that night smelling of cigarettes and whiskey and tells her that Rose Chan had given the crowd the performance of her life.

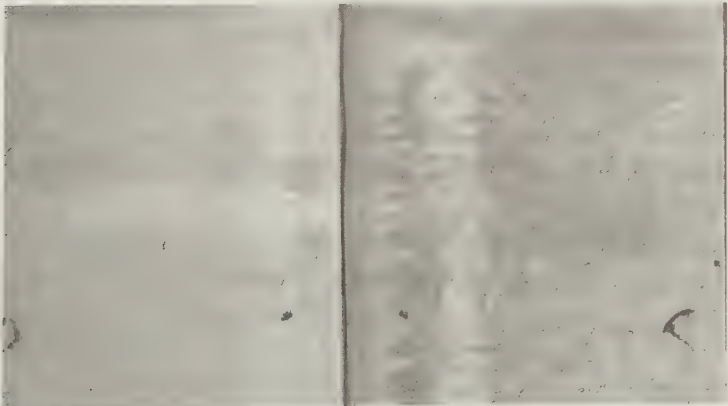


1965

Surinder has been teaching in Kelantan for four years. He learns to speak Malay with a distinct Kelantanese dialect and picks up mah-jong. He enjoys his time there very much and likes the slow pace of life in sleepy Pasir Puteh. But after four years, he decides to pursue a specialist course in Science at the Malayan Teachers' College (MTC) in Glugor, Penang.

After losing interest in Interior Design in Singapore, Jane finally decides to do something with her life. She finds herself at the very same college in Penang. This decision by both would change their lives forever.

*She writes this journal for her children. She writes of how she met their father and how they came to love each other. She writes this from memory, from the house in Taiping where they lived, with the baby kicking in her belly. She writes this so they will know, and never forget.*



The journal's first page

## **SURIN AND I**

TO BERNICE, JANICE AND BABY

MAY 1973

BY JANE LOH SIEW YOKE

### **GLUGOR, PENANG. JAN 1966**

I returned to the Malayan Teachers College for my second year of the teacher-training course. This was going to be my last year in college. Before I returned, I had promised myself that I must do some solid work to pass my final exams. When I first came in last year, I was confused. I didn't really want to be a teacher. After failing my first year at the University of Melbourne two years ago, I had no aim in life. A friend suggested that I should do this course. My mother also suggested that teaching is a noble profession and most suited for girls. In the end, I listened to their advice. During the first two months, I wasn't happy in College as I found myself older than most of the college-mates and had no common interest with them.

Most of them were still teenagers who behaved like schoolchildren. The Seniors ragged the Freshies and gave us a miserable time. As a result, I mixed with the third-year students, who were already qualified teachers and had returned to College for a specialist course. They were more matured and understanding. So, Lye Ling, Jenny and Keng Kwan and I were always together outside the lecture rooms. Since all of us came from Ipoh, we went back together during the weekends. If we didn't go back to Ipoh, we went out to see the pictures with Lye Ling's boyfriend, Woon San. During this first year the lectures were easy for me as I had studied most of this before, except Education and Modern Maths. Oh, there was one more subject, Malay, which I never studied before. It was a challenge for me, because if I couldn't pass this subject, I would not be a qualified teacher. Whenever I wanted

to write an essay, I had to seek help from Geok Lan, Bee Bee or Josephine, another third year student. I was learning the language but was not really serious about it.

So when I came back for my final year, I made up my mind to work hard for Malay. It turned out to be the most important year of my life.

During the first two weeks, College was rather quiet with only the second year students around. The first year and third year students were to come in later. Lectures went on as usual for us. However, most of us were planning ways and means of ragging the incoming Freshies. The Welcoming Committee was also full of plans. After tasting the rough treatment from our Seniors, I only wanted to be nice to the newcomers. I intended to make friends with them when they arrived and made them feel at home. I was looking forward to having a nice year in College. Since my clique had already left, I was rather lonely. When the new group of specialist students arrived, I wanted to make new friends.

I went home for Chinese New Year at the end of January. CNY is quite an affair every year. Father gave us big ang paws on New Year's Eve. He loves us very much although we are nine brothers and sisters in all, I have not done very much to repay what he has done for us. He was the last person I would want to hurt again since I returned from Australia. Oh, how I hurt him when I came back without achieving anything! He would do anything for us to make us happy. When brother Chat failed his LCE (Lower Certificate of Education) because of only one subject, Malay, father decided to send him to Australia for further studies last year. We are not a rich family. But father wanted to give every child a chance to complete his or her education. Mother is a typical Chinese housewife. Her whole life is devoted to the family. On Chinese New Year's Day, she prays for more good fortune for the whole family and the welfare of her children. And, we taste

the nice Chinese dishes cooked by her. Whenever we spend New Years away from home, we miss these special dishes very much. When all the relatives are gathered together, we gamble a little. The adults sit down and drink whiskey till sunset. We feast for at least four days. At the same time, we have to pay visits to the numerous relatives. So when it was time for me to go back to college this time, I was quite exhausted.

Life was back to normal after the break. For our own enjoyment, Bee Bee and I joined the Square Dancing Group under Mr Currie, our American Maths lecturer, in the Great Hall. We enjoyed it very much. It was relaxation for us after a long day of long lectures.

Then, at last the third year students arrived. The Seniors were excited. The College would not be so dull anymore.

At night, we had an informal social gathering in the Hall. The newcomers gave their self-introductions on stage. They were all very sporting and friendly. I could not remember every one of them that night. I did talk to some of them. They were very mature as most of them were married.

## FEBRUARY 1966

The noise outside the dining room was getting louder and louder as more and more joined the waiting crowd. The doors leading to the dining room would not be opened until 7.00 p.m. sharp. So us girls had to wait patiently with the impatient boys who shouted away loudly, joking and even teasing openly some of the girls.

Suddenly a loud voice called out, "Surrender!" I turned my head to see a man with a turban answer the call. He was tall, dark and slim with a neatly trimmed beard. My very first impression of him was that he looked different from the rest.

Later when we adjourned to the Hall for an informal dance practice, I learned that the same man was a very good dancer. The best I had ever seen! He was so graceful when he waltzed with his partners. When he came to ask me for a dance, I was quite surprised. I told him what I thought of the way he waltzed. He smiled back at me and said that he thought that I wasn't bad myself. I was conscious of my own height as he was so tall. Yet he came back again and again to ask me. I liked to dance with him from the very beginning.

His name was Surinder Singh. So, the boys teased him "Surrender!" Usually Sikhs are huge and heavily built. They look fierce and inhuman with their beards and turbans. They are known to be rough and tough.

As days went by, and we met more and more in the dance hall, I found him truly to be a gentleman. Although we danced more than we talked, he was very pleasant to be with. He was soft-spoken and very polite. He did not ask me a lot of questions. Even when he danced, he seemed more interested in the music than in his partner.

Before long, I became his constant partner in the square-dancing group. He would look for me among the others when he was late. I missed his companionship when he was not there.

He was also very active in sports. That was how he maintained his trim figure. Every day on the field, I could see him either running or playing games. I couldn't help looking out for him as I was beginning to like him a little bit too much. I usually went down to the Common Room to play table tennis in the afternoon. Sometimes, he sat down there in his shorts to watch us play. He seldom joined in, as he preferred other more active games, like hockey and football.

Before the first year students arrived, during the second week of the month, the second and third year students were getting on well. We found that this batch of third year students were very friendly, mature and pleasant. We had planned some interesting programmes together to welcome the Freshies. So, when they turned up eventually, they were given much better treatment than what we received from our Seniors. I managed to talk to some of them. My, they looked so scared when they looked up to a Senior.

At least, the HSC (Higher School Certificate) group was not so green, as some of them were in the University before. One of them was my old friend Vincent Tan whom I met in Singapore when I was staying with my best friend Pek Keng, who was my college mate in Melbourne. Vincent was in the Singapore University then doing second year at a Bachelor of Science. He failed the next year. So, he had at last decided to join the teaching profession. As he was one who liked to argue, he would have quite a time with the Seniors, who didn't like the Freshies to argue back. When I asked him how he liked the college he complained of the rough treatment he received from the boys. Poor Vincent! He was quite a nice chap. I could talk to him about my problems. And he could give good advice. I could still remember the times when Vincent, Pek Keng and I got together, we could sit down and talk for hours.

As the first year students came in so late, it did not give the Seniors a chance to rag them properly because we began our third teaching practice the next day after they arrived.

I was sent back to Phor Tay Girls School again. I was there for my first teaching practice last year. This time my group was under Miss Nicol-Smith, a very nice English lecturer. In the school, Lily, one of the teachers was pleased to see me again. It was a good school, but the boys and girls were too quiet. They gave very little response in class to the trainee teachers.

That night, we had a gathering in the Hall. The President of the Student Council and the Welcoming Committee gave welcoming speeches to the Freshies. They were later given name tags to be put on for a week.

Surinder came round to ask me for a dance. He smiled and asked how my school was.

I liked teaching practice, as we were free from lectures and assignments during that period. Early in the morning, we left for our various schools by bus. By the time we returned to college, it was about 2.30 p.m. After our cold lunch, we retired to our rooms for a rest or prepared for our lessons in class. At night, we were quite free most of the time.

If there was a dance practice, I would go to the Hall. Most of the time, Surinder was there with his third year group; Ong, Francis, and Leong. Ong and Francis were from Malacca. Leong was from Ipoh. Our favourite records were 'Patches' and 'Whispering Pines'. 'Patches' was sung by Dickie Lee and it is a heartbreaking song about teenage love. 'Whispering Pines' was sung by Johnny Horton. We all knew the words to the songs,

*Whispering pines, whispering pines, tell me is it so  
Whispering pines, whispering pines, you're the one who knows,  
Whispering pines, send my baby back to me*

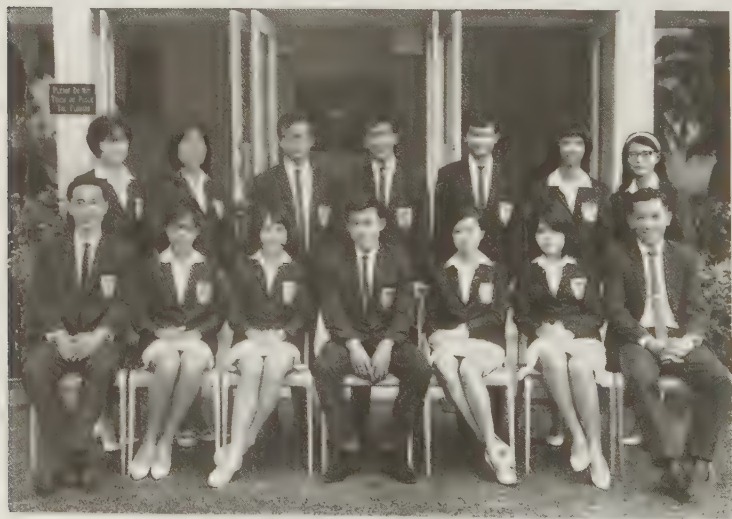
To mark the end of Orientation Week, there was to be a formal dance and buffet. Surinder did not ask me but he expected me to be there I suppose. We still talked very little. We danced more. On the night, Bee Bee and I went into the crowded hall by ourselves. Surinder was sitting at one corner. When he saw us, he came to sit next to me and smile at me. He was fully dressed up with a coat and tie. He explained that when there was a formal function in Kirkby Teacher Training College, where he was trained,

everyone was supposed to dress formally. Whenever there was a waltz, he would dance with me. Other boys also came to ask me, while he always preferred to ask Peggy to do the Spring Waltz with him. At the buffet, he shared some of my cakes. We stayed together till the end of the dance, and said Good Night to each other. When I lay down on my bed that night, I thought of the dance and considered him to be an excellent dancing partner. He could be a very good friend as well.

'Vote Raja for President!'

'Vote for Miss Lee to be Secretary General'

Election fever was on. There were posters everywhere put up by supporters of the nominees. Surinder was standing for the post of Sports Secretary. His was the only nomination for that post.



Malayan Teachers' College, Penang; Jane is seated third from left



For the rest of that election week, the boys talked of nothing except the coming election. Every day after lunch, those who were interested in the election gathered around and talked in the dining room corridor. So, noise went on until it was time for games.

It was during this time that I first noticed that Surinder sat along the corridor with the others. He usually ate very fast and came out to wait for the others. Every time when I walked to my block after lunch, I would see him sitting on the veranda, smiling, watching and talking away.

One night, after my prayers, as I was walking back to my room, I saw him sitting there with one or two boys. I was quite surprised when he stopped and asked me to go for square dancing. I told him I would go later. When I joined him later, one could see that he was full of life and energy. He asked me to go down to the canteen for a drink after the dance, but I gently refused. I was shy because of our racial differences. I was conscious of the great barrier between us. I only wished to be his dance partner, although I found him to be very pleasant and charming. He was not the boastful type. He never talked much when we were together. Whenever he talked, it was when he wanted to drive at something. Yet, with his quiet ways, one could feel at ease in his company. He must have found my company pleasant too, I thought.

At last the polling day came. S. Retnaraj, a second year student, was elected President. Kulwant Singh was elected VP and Surinder was elected the Sports Secretary, unopposed. It was one of the strongest Councils formed, according to many observers. Many of the elected were experienced workers.

I smiled at Surinder the next time I saw him to show that I was glad that he won.

The night before our teaching practice ended, our group bought a huge bunch of flowers for Miss Nicol-Smith. She had been very nice to us during our teaching practice. To mark the

end of it, she took us to the Penang Swimming Club for a lovely lunch. We were very grateful for her help and kindness. She was, of course, delighted with the flowers.

When we got back from her house, I found Surinder waiting for me outside the Hall. The dance practice was already on to mark the end of teaching practice. Now, I noticed that he seldom danced with the other girls. The others began to realise that we were always seen together in the Hall. Others considered this very common as friendships developed very quickly on the college campus. But to those who knew me, they thought I had completely changed. Bala, a good friend, shouted to tease me, 'Jane, something has happened! We never saw you in the Hall last year!' It was true that I seldom joined in any college social functions last year, as I did not enjoy going with anybody. This year, I had found myself a very good dancing partner. And I liked him. I couldn't see anything wrong as long as we remained as friends. If I like someone, I would always like them.

### MARCH 1966

The night before our teaching practice ended, I went out to see the pictures with Lily. She had a car and came to fetch me. We went to watch 'The Professionals', which was a Western and then we went for supper. We had been out before and we enjoyed each other's company. We liked to talk about many things. Boys, families, marriages and dresses. By the time she sent me back to college, it was about 10 o'clock.

Just before I entered the corridor leading to the Girls' block, I saw a figure sitting in the darkness. I recognised the turban. He stopped me. "Jane, the third year students are having a dinner this coming weekend, would you like to come?"

It was quite unexpected, so I didn't know what to say. I was tongue-tied for a few minutes.

'I've just bought a car today, please do come,' he continued.

Eventually, I said, 'I am not sure, can I give you the answer tomorrow?'

He accepted that and we said good night to each other.

Poor chap, he must have waited there for some time, I thought to myself.

The next day, I was still not sure if I should accept the invitation. It would be the first time he took me out. I went round to ask if the other second year girls were going. Ai Leng said that she might go. We decided to go together.

I didn't see him during lecture hours, but after lunch, I saw him sitting in the same place again, waiting. He raised his eyebrows, expecting an answer. I nodded towards him, as there were too many people around me.

I had mixed feelings when I was getting dressed for my 'date'. I was proud that he had asked me and wanted to take me out in his new car. But I also thought, 'What would my parents think if they knew I was going out with a Sikh boy? What would his parents think of this?' I was both nervous and excited. I must not lose my head, I comforted myself, this was just a social outing.

I managed to smile when I met him that evening. He looked very handsome in a white shirt and black tie. His car was a brand new Ford Cortina. He told me he had traded in his scooter and bought this as he needed it for his teaching. It was blue and it had cream leather seats. It was very wide inside.

He seemed quite nervous at the dinner, and didn't know if he should serve me or not. He took a few glasses of brandy, perhaps he wanted to calm himself down. He was not the type who was experienced with girls. He must have plucked up a lot of courage to ask me out. I quite enjoyed the food. It was a change from the college's 'grass and worms'. After dinner we went back to college and joined the others for a dance. Before we parted for the night, I thanked him for a lovely evening.

We seldom met during lecture hours. Whenever I saw him waiting outside a lecture hall, my heart would start beating very fast or miss a beat. I dared not look straight into his eyes, fearing that I might find some meaning there.

Very often, I found him waiting along the corridor, sitting and waiting (for me!). I would walk past him, and I knew he was watching me. I could not let our friendship develop further. We could keep on seeing each other in the Hall, but not outside. When Friday night came, he would wait for me to go to the Hall. I could not refuse him for that. Sometimes Ong and Francis would suggest going out for supper after the dance. If I refused to go, it would seem odd. We usually went to the 'Custom', which was just outside the College. It was a mee-shop and the food there was not good at all.

I managed to keep our distance and was quite at ease with it. He seemed quite at ease with me as well, as he didn't mention any outings alone.

I seldom discussed this with my friends. Maybe I was afraid to do so. Boey Siew Hong once told me that he liked me and suggested that he was interested. I told him straight away that I wasn't. Was I trying to protect myself? As far as I could see, it was impossible. Surinder must be mad. How could he be interested in me, how could it even be possible when we are of different races and religions?

But every time after saying good night, I thought about him often when lying in bed. If I had my own choice, I could even love him, as he was so terribly nice. There was a great BUT. And there were our families to think about. However strong I could be, however rebellious I wanted to be, I could not go against my father, especially in marriage. Both my parents are traditional and old fashioned. They would lose face, it would be too shameful to them. Even if they knew that Surinder and I were friends, they would not like the idea at all.

I had to do something! I had to show Surinder that I didn't care a thing for him.



A delegation of Japanese students came to visit our college one day. We were asked to go down and entertain them. They were very friendly, most of them were already in University. That night we had an informal dance for the visitors, and when Surinder came to ask me eventually, I could see that he was very relieved. I knew he had been watching me all night. My heart ached for him. Oh God, what was I going to do?

#### APRIL 1966

I had to go back to Ipoh to see my brother Chat off to Australia. He had come back for a holiday and was going back to Sydney for his Matriculation. Surinder was disappointed, as I would miss the formal dance and buffet organised by the Malaysian Cultural Society for Chinese New Year and Hari Raya Puasa. I wished him a nice time.

At Ipoh airport, I told Chat to work hard so Father would not be disappointed. He had high hopes for Chat, as he had for every one of us. He tended to spoil us by giving us too much. Yet we could be so ungrateful at times. When I was schooling in Ipoh and Penang, he was very proud of me as I was one of the best students in the schools. I used to top the whole form from Standard Five to Form Three. Even after passing my Matriculation in Australia he was happy that I could be admitted to the University of Melbourne. When I failed my first year, he was very disappointed. He advised me to change course, as all along he wanted me to take up Social Studies instead of Science. I refused to listen to him and he was broken-hearted. In the end, I landed myself at MTC

Penang. I regretted it very much that I did not listen to him. I had to pay for my own stubbornness. Deep in my heart, I wished my brother well.

By the time I returned to College, it was late and I was too tired to do anything and went to sleep.

When I met Surinder the next day, I asked him if he had enjoyed the dance, he said he did not and went back early to sleep.

We talked about the coming holiday. He said he was thinking of joining our Math lecturer, Mr Frank Swetz, to climb Gunung Tahan. I wasn't surprised because he was a good sportsman. He also mentioned his relatives in Ipoh. He said that he would most probably take his mother down for a holiday. His home was in Penang. Very often, he went back for his meals.

I met him outside the Council room and wished him 'Happy Holiday!' He said he was not looking forward to it, as it would be dull for him. He was not going for the excursion after all. He looked restless all right when I left him.

Another girl and I took a taxi for Ipoh immediately after lunch. The sooner I left for home, the better I thought. Things might be different after the holidays, I hoped. In a way, I was glad that I would not see him for the next three weeks. Perhaps my mind would be more at ease.

I usually read a lot when I was at home. Reading, eating and sleeping were what I enjoyed the most in life. One can find so much comfort and pleasure in books. They are the best companions when one's lonely.

However, I could not help thinking of Surinder sometimes. I wondered what he was doing at home. He loved to read also. It seemed his parents were very strict and would not allow dating of any sort. When I thought of him, I became restless. I went around to visit old friends, and took my little brother, Dong, out.

Whenever I saw a blue Ford Cortina in town, I would look out for the turban. I began to miss him. I said to myself, but what's the use, he couldn't even come to my house as a friend.

One day, sister Pek Yoke brought home two friends. They were brothers. The older one was working in KL. He was a graduate of Sydney University. His surname was Tay, he was quite jovial and nice. He said he would pay me a visit at the college if he went back to Penang. Before I went back to college, I made up my mind not to go to dance practice anymore. I must pass my final exams. Hence, I must concentrate more on my studies. The main reason behind my decision was not to see Surinder too much again. There was no future in our friendship. Before we got involved deeper, I must withdraw and find a way to prevent any serious result from happening. If I didn't see him too much he might take the hint and stay away also. Or, maybe if I started going out with someone else, he might not want to see me anymore. However, things were not what I expected them to be! I had underestimated his feelings for me.

I was all tensed up before I returned to College. So much so that I fell sick on the first day back. I went to see the Matron and she asked me to rest for two days. I was glad. I stayed away from the dining room and asked someone to buy food for me. At night, I went down to the canteen to have my dinner. One night, I walked past the Council room, I saw him there. When I got back to my room, Geok Lan came to say that he was looking for me. I asked her to tell him that I was not well.

The next morning, I felt better but looked very pale. I went down to have my breakfast. As I walked back to get my books, I heard someone running after me. It was him all right.

'How are you, Jane? I thought you hadn't got back.'

I smiled. Having not seen him for more than three weeks, I thought he looked tired also. Poor chap, was he really so worried about me?

Later, Leong Wah, Geok Lan's boyfriend, told me that Surinder was looking for me all over the place.

'He kept asking me if you had come back. He asked me at least six times,' Leong Wah said.

When I heard this, I didn't know what to say.

'What for?' I pretended not to care.

'You better go and ask him,' he replied.

I really wanted to laugh out, so was he really as interested as that?

For almost two weeks I avoided him as much as I could. After lunch, I went straight back to my block, or straight to the library. At night, I used a different corridor to go to the library so that he would not see me. The library closed at 10 p.m. and the lights usually went out at 11.30 p.m. From my room, I could see people dancing in the hall. I was tempted to go down and longed to dance with him.

One night, I heard 'Jane Loh!'

Philip Boey a first year student was calling out below my window. I put out my head.

'Come down to the hall!' he shouted again.

I told him I was tired, truly I was. I was still feeling weak and wanted an early sleep.

'Surinder asked you to come down!'

I knew it. But I told Philip I couldn't. There were so many girls in the hall. He could dance with THEM if he wanted to. I comforted myself and tried to sleep when the music was still on. I could hear 'Patches' being played. It was my favourite song.

*Patches my darling of old shanty town  
Patches oh what can I do  
I swear I'll always love you  
It may not be right but I'll join you tonight  
Patches, I'm coming to you.*



I began to feel miserable, knowing well that he had been waiting for me the whole night.

Later I could hear everybody in the hall. I could picture Surinder's disappointed face when he left. I was not sure how serious he was about me. But I was not prepared to play with my own feelings. I was hurt once, I didn't want to be hurt again. I didn't believe in casual friendship between a man and a woman. When a woman loves a man, she should love him whole-heartedly at all costs.

Within the college campus, one could lose his head and heart easily as the whole setting was romantic and beautiful. Boys met girls every day. They studied together, ate together and played together. Surinder and I were two people who enjoyed music and dancing. We could meet on the dance floor but could we face the outside world together? Our racial and religious differences were two great walls between us. Could we have the strength to conquer all this? I didn't know him enough to answer this. Today, he might care so much for me. After College, he might forget our friendship completely, once he is happily settled with a Sikh girl. I remembered him telling me once that his family was looking for a Sikh girl for him. They wanted him to settle down as quickly as possible. Perhaps they had even found one for him. And he wanted his last fling at College.

'Oh why do I have to worry so much about that?' I asked myself. 'If I have decided to keep my distance from him, I don't have to worry about him anymore.' Eventually, I went to sleep but didn't sleep as well as before.

For the next few days, I managed to go about my own way. Yet I couldn't help thinking of him at times. Ai Leng and Siew Hong came into my room to tell me that he had been asking about me. He was wondering what was wrong with me. I told them I was fine. Just that I was too busy with my own work and I didn't have time for other things.

Then one night, Geok Lan and I went down for dinner. We joined the crowd outside the dining room and waited. Suddenly I turned to face him, he was right in front of me. I looked straight into his eyes, which looked so intensely into mine. I could never forget that look on his face. He was so thrilled and happy to see me. His eyes were full of tenderness and longing for something very precious. That was the first time I had dared to look into his eyes. I wondered if he had ever looked at me like this before. I was dazed by his look for a few minutes before I could turn my head again.

I was really touched. I guess nobody had ever looked at me like that before. I almost believed at that moment that he loved me.

On Friday, Ai Leng came to call me after dinner. She scolded me and said that I was wicked. I knew what she meant. It seemed many knew that Surinder cared for me. I could still see him waiting for me along the same corridor while I used the other one. I was sure Ai Leng and Siew Hong knew that I wanted to avoid him. Meanwhile she asked me to go down for dance practice. I couldn't give her a good excuse, so I decided to oblige.

When he saw me, he was delighted. But when I danced with him I was so very, very confused. I didn't know what to say. He was also silent as if he understood my feelings. He had been so patient with me. I wondered where he got his patience from. He was never angry. He had never showed impatience. Whenever I cared to talk to him, he would give a sigh, or look at me. 'How can you be so wicked!' I agreed with Ai Leng's remark. But why, why did he like me so much? I just couldn't understand.

'Twelfth Night' was on at our College Open Air Theatre. I walked down to the open air theatre after dinner. It was already filled with people. We chose a seat, which was quite far up. When I looked around I saw Surinder helping out with the lights. He smiled and I smiled back. The play was good. Miss Nicol-Smith went to a lot of trouble to have it produced. The sum of 650

ringgit was raised from the play and it was donated to the Lady Templar Tuberculosis Hospital.

Tay came to College to visit me one day. He and his brother arranged to take me out for dinner. I agreed, as I was free to go out with any of my friends.

As we were driving past Surinder's block on the way out, a few boys saw us. I couldn't help thinking if Surinder knew I was going around with other boys, what would he think of me. Would he keep away from me?

I quite enjoyed the dinner. We then went for a drive.

Tay was quite a joker. He talked about his job. He worked in a brewery producing beer, and he talked about his family too. It seemed a complicated one.

They sent me back, before lights off. Tay promised to write soon, which he never did.

## JUNE 1966

We began our final teaching practice in the first week of June. This time I went to the Light Street Convent. It was the first time I was in a convent. One of my Form One classes was full of life. Most of the girls in that class were inquisitive, talkative and naughty. They asked a lot of questions about my background. They even asked if I had a steady boyfriend.

We had lots of fun together in the science laboratory, it was impossible to keep them quiet. They talked and moved about. But when Mr Goon came to observe me, they were cooperative. They liked me so much that they thought I was their best teacher. I was really flattered. As far as I could remember, that was my most enjoyable teaching practice.

In the meantime, all sorts of sports activities were going on in College. Surinder was kept very busy as I seldom saw him these days. Maybe he knew I was avoiding him and he took the hint.

One afternoon, we all went out to the field to watch the annual cross-country race. We felt sorry for the boys who had to run miles in the hot burning sun. When the competitors were running back to college to finish off the race, boys and girls cheered wildly. When I saw Surinder coming in third, I felt happy for him. After he had finished the race, he looked so exhausted. Poor man, he was still panting and sweating away when I congratulated him.

Later we walked back from the field together. He asked me to go down to the canteen to have a drink. I agreed, as I hadn't been with him for quite some time as I had missed the dance practice a few times.

Siew Hong, Ai Leng and Philip asked a lot of questions when they saw me. Siew Hong told me how disappointed Surinder was when he found that I wasn't there.

'Where is Jane?' Siew Hong related, 'That was the first question he asked. He walked out as soon as he found out that you were not there.'

So, everybody knew he cared for me, and it looked as if many knew that I didn't care.

Now that I was sitting opposite him, he seemed quite relaxed and asked me to come to the hall the following weekend. I told him I would try.



I told myself I was fighting a losing battle. He didn't seem to want to lose hope. He would still wait for me whether I turned up or not. Every night after dinner, he still sat along the corridor, hoping that I would stop to talk to him. Till now, he had not

asked me to go for a walk with him around the campus. This was the usual practice for couples after dinner. We called it 'dining' which meant 'courting' actually. I didn't expect us to go so far. However, if he just wanted to talk and dance with me, why was he so determined? I just didn't understand.

I must admit that I missed him when I didn't see him. I even became restless sometimes. I wanted to talk to him, but I was afraid. Was I afraid of myself or of him? Both, I suppose. I had liked him too much already. Before I went down to the field that day, I had not seen him for days. I became angry with myself as if I had done something wrong. So, I decided to go down to cheer for him.

Why did I have to keep avoiding him? He seemed so harmless, perhaps he just wanted to be friends with me. That's all. I cursed myself for imagining too much. How could I go on like this, knowing that he waited for me every day? How could I let him do this for the rest of the year? I began to feel sorry for myself and for him. This was going to affect my studies. Oh God, what was I going to do? I couldn't fight him any longer. He seemed so quiet and calm. Yet he could be so stubborn to wait every day! What a man!

I struggled with myself for the next few days. As our teaching practice was coming to an end, there were more worries. Everyone was worried that he or she might be picked to be observed by Professor Ruth Wong.

After I had thought about Surinder and myself carefully, I finally came to the decision that I would continue seeing him in College. There was no way to escape him as long as we were there. If I did, I made both of us miserable and unhappy. I would let Nature take its course. As we were happy together, we should make good use of our time and enjoy our days in College. Nobody really knows what lies ahead. When we are happy today, we must be thankful and enjoy it.

Furthermore, I have a right to like or even love whomever I choose. This is the basic right of an individual.

If I liked Sumner, nobody could stop that, not even myself. It's cruel to suppress one's feelings. I did try and I was unhappy. Why must I make myself unhappy unnecessarily? I could love the man I liked!

If I couldn't do this, I might as well not live at all.

Therefore, the next time I see him, I could look into his eyes and smile.

When I stepped into the dance hall again, I felt a bit strange at first. I stood listening to the music for quite some time before I allowed him to take my hand. It was nice to dance with him again. I was sure that he was glad. But he was so quiet. He never asked why I didn't come for so long. I was sure he understood. It seemed that he didn't care much, yet he cared so much...

After the dance, our usual group went out for supper in his car. We returned to College before lights off.

One day, our Principal, Mr Chye Kooi Ngan came to the Convent unexpectedly. We panicked. He told me that he would observe me during my next lesson - which was with that ever-lively class. I went in to warn them beforehand. They were excited but promised to do their best. I taught them equations. The response was good and the girls understood what I explained. Mr Chye was satisfied but told me not to give too much homework. I got a B+ from him. 'Not bad!' I was very satisfied.



My pupils came to visit me at College one day. There were five of them. They came up to my room and I served them fruits and sweets. We talked about many things. They were forever asking me personal questions, and even suggested that I enter a beauty contest. I laughed like mad after that. One of the girls' brother was coming to fetch them and she wanted him to meet me. That girl wanted to introduce me to her brother! Just imagine. Form One girls wanted to be matchmakers. I showed them around. Outside the dining room, we met Surinder. I stopped and talked to him for a while. The girls teased me and asked if he was my boyfriend. If only they knew!

I took them to the famous laksa stall opposite the college. After eating, a car drove up. It was the brother coming to fetch the girls. They tried to pull me along to meet him but I managed to say good-bye and run back to my room. They were disappointed that I did not meet the brother. The things these girls get up to these days!

Professor Ruth Wong came to observe some of us during the last week of teaching practice. Purashothman was the only one who got a distinction from her. After the external examiners left, we all heaved a big sigh.

On my last day at the Convent, I was feeling a bit sad to leave my girls. During my last lesson in the Science Lab, the girls stared at me, they were there attentively, but I knew they weren't listening. When the bell rang, they rushed up to me and I saw presents stretched out from their hands. Goodness me! I had been given gifts from other schools before, but there were so many this time. I never asked for or expected this. They must have thought that this was the only way to show their gratitude. I was very, very touched.

Surinder came to fetch us as he had been to St Xavier's to get his timetable. It was just opposite the Convent. He was an old boy and was happy to go back there for his teaching practice, which would start a few days after ours.

He took me down to the canteen after we returned and he smiled at my presents. He told me he was going to have an easy time at the school. In fact, he had come back to College to relax. I had no doubt that he was doing so as he seemed to enjoy College very much. In the afternoons, he would spend hours on the field and at night, he would sit and relax with his friends.

We began to be together more often and we could relax and talk now. I felt at ease with him. I was happy with him. I was glad that I had made the right decision for myself and for him. There was no doubt that he liked me very much and I liked him very much too, very much indeed.

He was so gentle and sincere. I could also see that he was kind and patient. His manners were pleasing to everybody and he didn't boast about himself or shout rudely. He talked very softly most of the time. So far, he hadn't uttered a single flattering word to me. That was what I liked about him most. I disliked men who had a sweet tongue and a flattering mouth.

I had not met many boys and Surinder was one I liked so much. But he was a Sikh.

He told me he liked to play mah-jong when he had nothing to do as a pastime. When he was teaching in Kelantan, he played mah-jong with his friends, most of the time. I told him that it was not a game for men. I had always disliked the game, as when women played it, they tended to neglect their families and children. When men played it, they looked sissy and useless. A man should behave like a man.

When we sat down we talked about our likes and dislikes. I knew that he liked to drink and smoke, habits he picked up when



he was in England. But as a Sikh, he said he was not supposed to smoke and never smoked at home. Living in England had given him a sense of freedom and he could not imagine living at home any more. He was very happy in Kelantan as he led a carefree bachelor life, away from his parents and relatives. To be honest, I didn't know much about Sikh customs and from what I gathered, he had to respect and obey his parents and their traditions when he was at home. But his outlook in life was quite different from theirs. As far as I was concerned, I was raised to do whatever I thought was right. Although my parents were old fashioned, they allowed us to have some freedom, as long as we didn't do anything untraditional, like marry out of the race.

#### JULY 1966

To celebrate the end of our teaching practice, a formal dance and buffet was organised. Without asking me, Surinder took for granted that I would go with him. This time I met him outside the hall, and we went in together. We both loved the slow music. When we didn't like the fast music so much, we sat down and watched the others. It was enjoyable and full of fun.

Our new Social Secretary, Cheam Boo Sang was a very good singer. He went up and sang 'Yesterday' for us.

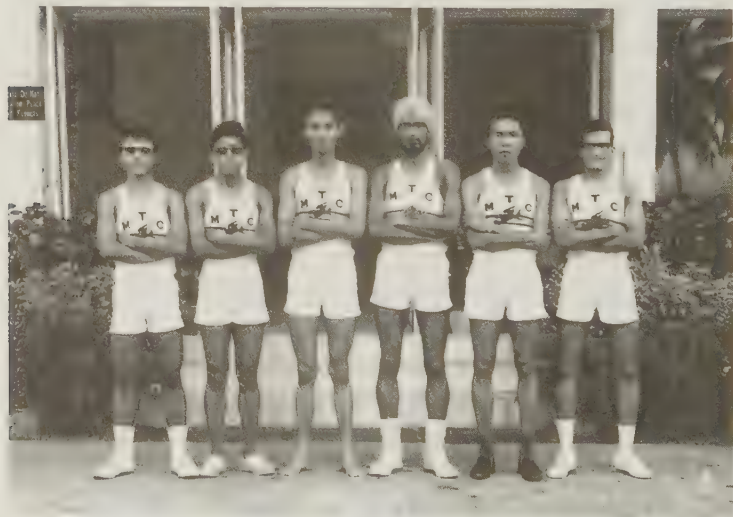
*Yesterday  
All my troubles seemed so far away  
Now it looks as though they're here to stay  
Oh I believe in yesterday...*

After the dance, Surinder managed to get a balloon for me. Before I left him, we stood and talked for quite some time. We looked like lovers when we stood in the darkness. As far as I was concerned, we were not. We were just good friends. But I felt him

close to me, although he didn't touch me. Once or twice, I looked up into his face and smiled at him. We were lovers to the others, as we were so happy.

When I lay down on my bed that night, I thought of him and wondered if he thought of me.

As the college sports day was only two weeks away, Surinder was kept very busy. He had frequent meetings with the Sports Organising Committee and was required to write a lot of letters in Malay. He showed me the ones he wrote to the Minister of Education, Enche Mohd Khir Johari, inviting him to our sports day. I had a good look at it, and couldn't understand head or tail. He told me he had mastered the language during his four years in Kelantan.



Surinder with the athletics team at Malayan Teachers' College, Penang

This was the first time the Students Union had to organise the Annual Inter-Home Athletic Meet, unlike previous years when it was organised and partly financed by the college's authorities. Therefore the Sports Council had a great task ahead.

Surinder never talked to me about his problems in organising the event. But he did mention that every member was very hard working. As long as everybody co-operated, everything would be all right.

I promised him that I would help in the preparation of tea on that day. Hor Yin, who had to see to everything that day, asked me to be in charge of crockery. There was to be about ten different cakes to cater for two to three hundred people, so it was no small matter.

One evening, Surinder and Ong asked if I would go to the pictures with them the following Saturday evening. In fact, it was Ong who started asking me. I suppose Surinder didn't want to ask first as he was afraid I might turn him down. He did ask me once casually, but I brushed the topic aside. Now, he had asked Ong to come along. I told them I usually went for Novena on Saturday. They said they would pick me up at the church. Knowing that we were going out in a group, I agreed. That was the first time we went out to the pictures. After that we went to have a Chinese dinner. When we returned to College, we stayed back for an informal dance.

Two or three days before Sports Day, Hor Yin, some other girls and myself went down to the new canteen for a big wash-up. It was built near the gymnasium. Though it was a new building, it was a great mess. We had to seek help from the boys to clean it up.

To transfer hundreds of plates and cups from the dining room to the new canteen was another problem. I was responsible for some of the good pieces of china. So, we had to pack them nicely in a box before we could move them. Luckily, Surinder was ever willing to help me. Although he had so many things to see to before the Sports Day, he helped me to transfer all the crockery down with his car.

As every student wanted the Sports Day to be a success, all of us worked hard and put in our best effort. We were all worn out the day before, but we were all happy that we had finished our jobs in time and happy to know that most had cooperated, happy to know that most of us cared.

Surinder worked late in the Council room, especially during the last week before the Sports Day. Luckily he was having his teaching practice. He didn't have to worry about assignments.

When the Sports Day came, the field was nicely decorated in the morning. The colourful tents were put up. We girls who were in charge of the tea were busy in arranging flowers for the tables, setting it up, and arranging chairs and so on. Our warden, Miss June Kaur, helped us with the flower arrangements. We had some very beautiful ones done by her.

As soon as we had our early lunch, everyone went on with his or her own duty. We girls in the kitchen had to start boiling water to make tea. We didn't have enough teapots. So we had to make sure that we could supply tea continuously to over two hundred people. We were fortunate to have Mr Cardoso and Mr Lionel Koh to help us, as they were more experienced than we were. By now, most of the cakes had arrived, and we could place them on plates. They certainly looked very delicious. But we were more interested in our work. When everything was ready, the new canteen looked lovely with all the decorations.

In the meantime, the Principal had declared the Sports Day open. The St Xavier's Institution Corps of Drums and Pipes led a march pass. It was an unforgettable sight. Girls were in college blazers, white shirts and white shoes. The boys were very smart also in the full college uniforms.

During interval, the Principal Enche Muhammad led the Honourable Minister of Education, Khir Johari and his wife Puan Tom, into the canteen. All of a sudden, the whole canteen was filled with guests, judges, lecturers and invited parents. A few of us were allotted to entertain the honoured guests at the main table. The Minister seemed to be happy and enjoyed the tea very much. He seemed to be a very nice man.

Those who served tea at the counter were having a terribly busy time. Most of us never imagined that we would have such a huge crowd to cater to. Luckily, we had more than enough food. After our guests were properly served, I went to the counter to help the others to fill up the teapots. I also went round to see if there were enough cakes at the table. I spotted Surinder standing there, talking to someone. I hardly saw him that day. Knowing that he must be tired and thirsty, I went to get him a cup of tea. He was surprised, but happy to receive the cup. I smiled and went back to serve the others. The band also entertained the guests during the interval. Everything went smoothly.

Surinder came to remind us that we should keep some cakes for the band boys, as they had worked so hard. After the interval, I had to take part in the Inter-Home relay and I rushed to change into my shorts. However, I was already exhausted after the running about and did my best. Our house, Plato, did not win the race.

Surinder also took part in the relay and his house, Dewey, came in first as good runners like Tan Ghee Lim, a national runner who had been selected for the SEAP (South East Asian Peninsula) Games and Asian Games, was also in Dewey.

After we made sure everything was in order, we helped to lock up the canteen. On our way to the Blocks, Surinder asked me to get ready earlier than usual that night as we were supposed to lead the ball rolling at the Sports Dance. I felt flattered.

At dinner, I learned that I had to bring back all the crockery I borrowed from the dining room for the Sports Tea. Surinder said he would help me with the car. But we could only do it after the dance had started.

That night, I wore a new dress made of green lace and satin. My mother sent it to me for my birthday. I liked it very much. When I went to meet him, he looked pleased. He was wearing his coat and tie, and looked distinguished.

There was a good crowd in the Hall. Everyone looked so happy and well groomed. At the sound of the first song, Surinder led me to the floor. Soon afterwards, the others also joined in. After a day's hard work, it was time to relax and enjoy the evening.

For the first time in my life, I really felt that I had achieved something through working and co-operating with the others. It was a great sense of achievement. I was sure that Surinder felt the same. In his own quiet way, he could do so much and at the same time inspire others to work and feel satisfied. I felt safe in his company, knowing that he was so reliable and strong.

When we went down to the canteen to collect the plates, the car had to move slowly down the narrow lane. The canteen was in complete darkness when we entered. Being alone with him for the first time, I felt close to him. I wanted to tell him how I felt. And to show my appreciation for his hard work, I felt like hugging him and giving him a kiss. Oh! I must be getting crazy! I was falling for him! If I felt like having him, I must have loved him already.

However, he walked so fast that I had to follow him quickly. He didn't stop for a second to talk to me. Was he afraid of me in the dark? I wondered.

We managed to move the crockery to the car. He was doing most of the work. Luckily, the plates and cups were already packed in boxes. Afterwards I knew that he was sweating away. But he didn't say a word and we were back in the car.

When we got back to the Hall, the dance was in full swing. It was one of the best I had seen so far. The crowd seemed to have increased. And the music was getting hotter and hotter. One could forget all his worries now. College is such a paradise, how I wished I could stay there forever!

After a short break for the buffet, the music went on until past midnight. Everyone was exhausted. This was the longest function we had so far.

I told Surinder that I was totally worn out. He said that he felt the same. I congratulated him in the great success of the Sports Day. He said that it was the effort of the organising committee and every member of the General Body. But I knew that he did most of the organising and many people liked to work with him.

That night, I slept very soundly after a full and tiring day.

The next morning after breakfast, I had to go down to the new canteen to do the tidying-up. There were others who helped to pack up the remaining crockery. We also had to wash up the whole place. Later, Surinder came to join us. He never idled around. He even went to pick up empty bottles left on the field. He even helped us to carry the crockery back to the Domestic Science room with his car.

To thank him for his help, I told him that I would give him an ice-cream treat. We called Philip to come along. Philip Boey had more or less become our middleman. Whenever Surinder wanted me to go out with him after our first date, I pulled Philip along.

The three of us went out to see the pictures twice just before the Sports Day. One of the pictures was called Thunderball.

I suggested that we go to Tip-Top to have the ice cream. Tip-Top is famous for its cakes and ice cream. I gladly asked them to order what they liked, as it was time for me to return Surinder's treats.

The next day was a college holiday granted by the Honourable Minister of Education. However, all the third year students had to go for teaching practice. I managed to do some work in the library.

This was the last week of teaching practice for the third years'. Some of them were excited about the External Examiner's arrival. Surinder was very calm about it. He was confident that he would not be observed as he thought he wasn't an outstanding teacher.

On the last day of his teaching practice, Surinder suggested that we should go out and celebrate. After dinner he asked me to go and get dressed, as he, Ong and Francis had planned to go to Chusan, a nightclub near the beach. Francis and Ong had gone to look for their partners. As I had a test the following week, I asked him to look for another partner. He smiled. I said I would not be dancing tonight. He smiled again, but said, 'Please go and change. I'll wait for you.' I wasn't very keen, as I wanted to revise for my test. He said I could do it on Saturday and Sunday. It was no point arguing with him.

At about 9 p.m. the six of us left for Chusan in Surinder's car. The place was very crowded. We managed to find a table near the dance floor. We sat down, sipped on drinks and watched the crowd for a while.

Ong asked me to dance first, while Surinder was still relaxing and smoking. The band was not very good. We had hardly any space to dance. Somehow or rather, I didn't enjoy dancing with other people. I felt uncomfortable.



When the next song started, Surinder stood up and took my hand. We danced among the crowd and couldn't move much. I felt his strong arms around me. So far, we had always kept a distance when we danced. Around us, couples danced very closely, I felt a bit uneasy when I looked at them.

During the next dance, I felt his arms tighten around me. I tried hard to keep my distance. This was the first time that I was really aware of his arms. And then, he was trying to pull me towards him. I could feel his arms getting tighter and tighter. I dared not look up at him. I knew what he wanted to do. I managed to resist him for quite some time. My arms were getting tired. Then suddenly without knowing how, my whole body was in his arms. My hand was against his strong chest, I could feel his heart beating away, his beard against my forehead.

'Ah, Jane...', he gave a long sigh. He started kissing my hair, and my forehead. I felt his warm lips and was dazed for a long, long time.

We were lost in our own world. We didn't move much, fearing that we might wake up from our dream. When the music stopped, he sighed and was reluctant to let me go. We held hands and walked back to our seats. In the dim hall, we sat down and were quiet. There was no need to talk. We understood each other.

For the rest of the dances, he held me very closely to him. He tried to lift up my face once or twice to kiss me. But I didn't want him to kiss me for the first time in public. I buried my face in his chest and didn't allow him to do that. Oh Surinder, Surinder, why must I fall in love with you?

He was unusually happy when we left Chusan. I was sure the others noticed it also.

After we had supper, it was past midnight, I wondered how we could get past the jaga at the gate. The men took care of that by giving the jaga a packet of cigarettes. They had already made a good friend out of the jaga. I never knew Surinder could be as thoughtful as that.

That night, I admitted to myself that I had loved him for a long time. What had happened tonight was inevitable. He had wanted to take me in his arms for a long, long time.

When I met him the next day, I felt a bit uneasy and didn't know what to say to him. He asked if I had a good sleep the previous night. We sat down for a while but didn't say very much.

That night after dinner, we stood there and talked about cars. I told him that I liked the Volkswagen, as it was a tough car. He then said he would change his for one when he got married. I saw a sparkle in his eyes when he said that. I could not quite understand what he meant. In my mind, I thought of the girl who was to be his wife. She must be a girl of his own race.

For a moment, I kept quiet. He said he was feeling restless. I suggested without thinking, 'Come let's go for a drive.' He agreed at once.

When we were out of the college, he turned to the road leading to the airport. It was a long and straight road.

At first, he drove in silence.

'Why do you sit so far from me?' he asked a moment later.

I smiled and moved myself a bit nearer towards him. I was surprised that I liked to obey him.

However, he stretched out one hand and pulled me nearer to him. Once or twice, he pressed his head against mine.

'Jane, let's find a quiet place and talk,' his voice was full of emotion.

He sped to a quiet side lane and reversed the car. We were now on the way back to college. After a while, he suddenly turned the car and parked it in an open field.

He turned and asked, 'Jane, will you marry me?'

I was stunned.

'Oh I can't!' That was all I could say. I was almost in tears.

Suddenly, I was in his arms, sobbing softly. Was I happy? Was I sad? Perhaps I was more happy than sad. Happy that he wanted to marry me all along. Sad that I had to say 'No!'

'I won't accept no as an answer!' He said firmly and kissed me on the mouth. This was the first time he really kissed me. I could feel his beard tickling my chin, his wet lips on mine...

'Oh Jane, I love you, I promise that I will be a very good husband to you. Please say yes to me. If you are worried about your family, I will have mine to worry about also. We'll find a way as long as you say yes.'

'I have made up my mind ever since I first saw you. Please marry me Jane. I don't know what to do without you. Please say that you love me.'

He kissed me again and again passionately, holding me closely to him, in his arms.

'Oh my darling, of course, I love you. But I can't.'

I thought of my parents, my relatives, my friends. What would they say? As far as I could see, it was a big 'No' from all directions.

'We are mad!' I said to myself. I mentioned my family.

'We are not going to live with our families for the rest of our lives. Jane, our families are not our biggest problems. Do you love me enough to marry me? I can't accept no from you!'

He was so sure of what he was saying. He must have made up his mind long ago. He had thought of all the problems we had to face. He was even prepared for a 'No' answer from me!

I was all mixed-up. I still could not believe that he asked me to marry him. How wrong I was all along. He was serious about me from the very beginning. Somehow or rather, I still could not believe that he could love me so much.

'Every night, I lay on my bed thinking about you. So much so that I can't sleep.' He held me close and said, 'I was so hurt when you refused to look at me.'

What could I say now? I still could not say 'Yes' knowing that I could not. I loved him. Truly loved him without any doubt. Truly loved him with all my heart. But, I just could not marry him.

When I told him I couldn't say yes, he was desperate. He nearly cried out, but said 'I don't accept it. I'll give you time to think it over.'

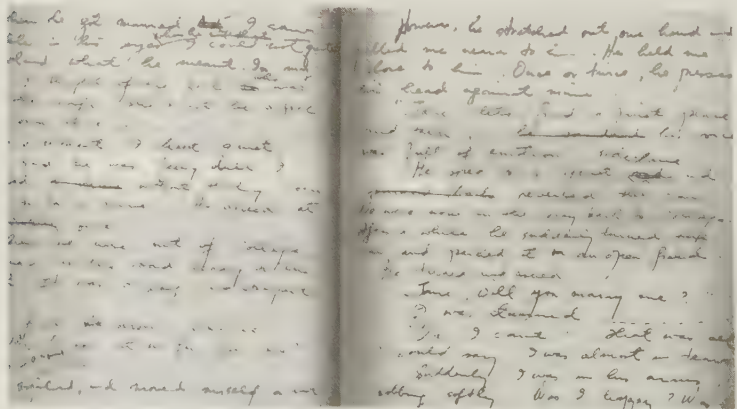
It was getting very late. Before we left for college, he kissed me again. When he drove me back, I felt I was in a dreamland. Could this be true? A Sikh boy had fallen for me and had asked me to marry him. I loved him but how could I marry him?

We said 'good night' to each other. Before he left, he said he would be going to Ipoh for a Sports Meet the next day. He would see me in the evening.

I couldn't sleep well that night, thinking of the possibility of a marriage between us. I couldn't see the slightest chance at all.

What am I going to do? Will he give up the idea if he sees that it is impossible? Oh, it is not possible for him to change his mind!

He had made it very clear to me already. Or is it possible for me to change mine?



Handwritten pages from Jane's journal

When I saw him again the next day, he looked very tired. He asked me to go for a short drive with him. We went to the park nearby.

'I didn't sleep the whole night, thinking about you. Today, you were on my mind the whole day. Oh Jane, I love you so much.'

He asked if I had thought about the question he had asked me. I told him that I might hurt him in the end. He looked so depressed. I did not know what to say.

I handed him a photo of mine. I wanted him to keep it. He was very happy to have it.

Before he left, he said, 'I'll wait for you to say yes.' I knew he would never give up. He then held me close and kissed me for a very long time. I was so happy! It was so wonderful to be in love, to be loved so deeply by someone and to be wanted by him for the rest of his life.

After he knew that I loved and cared for him also, he was entirely a changed man. You could see him smile now. He was so relaxed and happy. He joined me at my table and ate a big plate of rice for lunch and dinner. He told me that he could hardly eat before. The girls at my table also teased him. They understood. When we were inseparable, the others all knew that we were in love.

We had one more week before the term came to an end. During this last week, we had tests and assignments and we were kept quite busy.

After lunch, we usually sat down for a while and talked. I would go and rest, he always said, 'You go get your sleep,' and he would go back and rest also, for if we didn't rest in the afternoon, how could we stay up together till late at night, every night?

After dinner, we would go to the library to finish our work. Now, he went to the library with me. Before this, you hardly saw him there. The boys teased him for this too. He just smiled happily.

'It's all written on my face, everybody knows and understands me.'

He said, 'Everybody knows that I have been interested in you from the very beginning, except you. I told everybody that. On the first day I saw you, I told Ong that I liked you. You were then standing beside the other girls in the hall. Such a simple and quiet girl.'

I laughed at his comment, I didn't think that I was simple.

'I told Ong that I was serious and asked for his advice,' he continued, 'But I heard that you were not interested at all. I was so hurt. But I had already made up my mind to make you my wife. All this while I have been waiting and waiting for some response from you. So many times I wanted to ask you to go out, but was afraid that you might turn me down. When you came back after the holidays, I knew you tried to avoid me. I was so very frustrated. I walked up and down the whole college to look for you. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't sleep at night, Oh Jane...'

This he told me when we were alone together, after the library had closed. We walked to a private corner so we could hold each other for some time. We would kiss and hug till we were short of breath. I felt so safe in his strong arms, and I wanted to love him also.

'If I were engaged to someone or had a boyfriend somewhere, what would you do, as you said you made up your mind before you knew me?' I couldn't help asking him.

'But you were so quiet and reserved. I knew you didn't have anybody, you know I asked many people about you.'

Ha, he had been spying on me also. But one couldn't be angry with him, as he was so sincere and frank. He didn't mean any harm in any way. He thought me simple and quiet all the time.

I told him that I could be cruel and liked to hurt people.

'Please don't say that Jane, I love you. How could you hurt me?'

When we were together, the night seemed so short. We talked and held each other close. We had so much to say to each other. And we wished that we didn't have to say 'good night' so soon.

When it was time for us to part for the night, we wished each other 'sweet dreams' and looked forward to the next morning.



The holidays were drawing nearer. We dreaded the parting for one month. Every night when he held me in his arms, he said, 'Jane, I love you more and more every day. How can I live without you? This holiday is going to be a real torture for me. Please go home and talk to your parents about us. Please darling...'. He then kissed and held me tight. 'Oh, I am going to miss you so much.'

I didn't really know what to say whenever he mentioned marriage. I never expected him to ask me that question. Perhaps I was hoping that he didn't take me so seriously. I loved him, but I still could see no way to a marriage between us. I was so confused, so mixed-up that I dared not think of our future. I was torn between my loyalty towards my family and my love for him. Which was stronger? Who meant more to me for the rest of my life?

But I couldn't bear the thought of not seeing him again. I was sure of this.

So I told him frankly that I couldn't afford to fail my exams at the end of the year. We couldn't worry about the future yet. If we did, we would never pass. It was better to leave our future plans till after the examinations. But I did promise that I would talk to my mother. He seemed satisfied with my answer.

'I have made up my mind to be a Catholic. We'll start the religious instruction together next term. When I was in England, I always visited a priest named Bernard. I am going to take this name as my Christian name. Do you like it?'

I was very surprised that he had made up his mind so fast. He never told me that he had the intention to become a Catholic if I became one. I knew that he was educated in St. Xavier's and had been brought up to have faith in Christ. I remember him telling me once that he wanted to be a Catholic when he was in England. His parents did not allow him. Now, this decision amazed me. I wondered if he had made the correct decision. Everything seemed to be happening at the same time. As he had made up his mind long ago, it was nothing new. But to me, his every move was a big surprise. Firstly, he wanted to marry me. Secondly, he wanted to be a Catholic, what was next?

I started to have my faith when I was schooling in Penang Chinese Girls School. I used to go for mass with a friend. I wasn't very serious about being a Catholic then. When I was in Australia, I went to church also, but not often. After I came back to Malaysia, I started going to church again. During my first year in college, I went for Novena every week without fail. My faith was getting stronger and stronger, till I met Surinder. And now, he wanted to be a Catholic also. He was so determined when he said it. Whatever he said, he meant.

On the last day of the term, we stayed up late that night. He promised to write very often and said that he was going to talk to his family about us.

'Darling, you are the most important person to me now. I know my family will object strongly, but as long as you are with me, I am not afraid. I can do what I like. I have always wanted to marry the girl of my choice. Now that I have chosen you, no one is going to stop us. You must stand beside me, my darling Jane.'



He was so sure of himself. He was so confident that things would not be as difficult as I imagined. Not knowing his family background, I never expected what he had to go through later on.

I knew my parents would disown me as soon as they heard of my intention of getting married to a Sikh. My brothers and sisters would not mind so much, but my parents and relatives would never, ever forgive me.

The thought of my family left me cold. No one in my family had ever married out of our race. My parents would be the last people on earth to give their permission.

Suddenly I felt the despair and fear, I clung to him for a long, long time. I would miss him so much.

He said he might come to Ipoh to see me, I promised to ring him as often as I could. Before we parted for the night, we poured out all what we had to say to each other. It was so painful to say farewell to one you love, though it was only for a short time.

The next day, I left for Ipoh with my friends in a taxi. He carried my bag down for me. We managed to hold each other for a few minutes. I could see tears in his eyes. Then I waved and said goodbye. I felt miserable and sad to leave him behind.

## AUGUST 1966

When I was at home with my parents, I became very quiet and didn't know what to say. I knew I could not tell my father yet. Perhaps I could just talk about Surinder casually to my mother. I stayed at home most of the time, waiting for a chance to talk to my mother. Then, Surinder's first letter arrived two days after I reached home.



*You want to marry a Chinese girl from Ipoh? Who is she? What is she? We are Sikhs, Punjabis from the Chauly clan, how can you do this to me? I will kill you if you do this and I will then kill myself! This will not happen, this cannot happen.*

*You will not marry her! If you do I will kill you and then kill myself. This is simply not done! We are Sikhs, and I am the priest of Bricklin Road Gurdwara. How can you do this to me?*

*I am your father, and you will do as I say. I will not let you bring disgrace to our family.*

1.8.66

My darling Jane,

It seems ages since I last saw you, and I have longed for your loving arms and tender lips every moment of the day and night. I must come and see you as soon as I can.

I was alone with my father for two long days and we didn't say a word to one another until last night when my mother came back from Kuala Lumpur. Then I told them about us. My father had been expecting something of this kind and so it wasn't so much a surprise for him as for my mother. My father has no objections but my mother is really heartbroken. Have you spoken to your father yet? Jane, please do not let anything come between us now. As far as my parents are concerned, I can do what I like, so please try to persuade your parents. I will be coming to Ipoh on Friday the 5th and I shall ring you as soon as I reach there. I shall probably have to stay at a hotel since my sister has strong objections to our getting married.

Dearest Jane, please do not let me down now. I have nobody else in this world but you. I will be counting the minutes until I can see you this Friday when I can hold you in my arms. I may have cropped my hair by the time I come and see you. Do you think I will look nice without my turban? Please write to me as soon as you can and let me know whether you will be in Ipoh this weekend. Honey, I can't wait a moment longer. I must see you as soon as possible so I can talk to you. I don't know what to write now, as my lonely heart is so full of longing for you.

Please do write to me as soon as you receive this letter. You can either write to my home address, which is 23 Cheeseman Road, or you can write to me at the college since I will be there every day to do my work. I must stop now.

Yours forever,  
Surinder Singh  
xxxxxxxxxx

3.8.66

Dearest Jane,

I was sitting in the Council Room doing my work when the office boy brought me your letter. On reading it, I burst into tears, finding it hard to believe what you have said. My darling Jane, why do I love you so much? I haven't been able to eat or sleep for the last three days and am longing for the day when I can hold you again.

When I first told my father about us, he was too stunned to say anything. He simply said I could do what I wanted to do. But for the last two days, he has been scolding me and trying to bring me to my senses. He says it is impossible for me to marry you. If

I do, he says he will kill me and then kill himself. He has found a girl for me and wants me to get engaged to her at once. She is a beautiful girl but she is uneducated. But I have not said anything to him yet. I love you too much to say anything.

All my brothers and sisters are against me. They will never let me be married to you. I don't know what to do. I love you but I love them as well, and I don't want to break their hearts. I will never be able to look at them or at any of my relatives if I were to even do such a thing.

Please Jane, help me to decide. Do you really love me enough to give up your family? If you do, then I am prepared to do anything.

You say that you are not pure. How can anyone be pure in this world? Do you think I am pure? I am not. As you know, love is blind. I too have hurt my father on more than one occasion. I failed my exams, and then he found out that I smoke and drink. This is the last straw. He will never forgive me for doing such a thing. Darling, I am so confused. I don't know what to do. Please do your work. I don't want you to fail your exam at the end of the year. We both have our exams. I want you to pass with flying colours. But what has come over me during the past few weeks, I cannot understand.

I may not be able to come and see you during the holidays. My mother went through my purse and has taken all my money so that I will not be able to leave home. What can I do? I told my father that I must see you, but he won't allow me. He thinks you are still in Penang and that I come out every day to see you instead of coming to college to work. In fact, he even asked my mother to follow me and have me watched all the time. But they found out that I was actually doing my work. Will it not be possible for you to come to Penang for a day or two? I'm sure you could stay with Geok Lan, and then I will be able to see you and talk things over with you.

Perhaps I could be wrong in loving you so much. Please Jane, tell me once and for all whether I should wait for you or not. At the end of this year, we may be sent to different parts of the country and may not be able to see each other again at all. I want to know for sure, so that I can give a reply to my father.

But darling, I will be too ashamed to face you again if I were ever to say yes to my father. Can we still be friends and go on seeing each other as we have in the past? What am I saying? I am so confused, I don't know what to do. Tell me Jane if you really love me then I'll wait for you. If not?

I cannot carry on writing any more. I am too overcome.

Lots and lots of love,  
Yours,  
Surinder

He was pressing for a definite answer now as he was under pressure by his family. I didn't really know what to decide. I loved him but I didn't want to say yes knowing very well that my parents would definitely say 'No'. I loved him but it looked as if I could not marry him.

I was thinking of my parents and all the difficulties we would have to go through if we ever decided to marry, I felt helpless. So I wrote to tell him what I felt. I said that it was impossible for us to marry, but I would love him still even though he had to marry someone else.

15.8.66

My dearest Jane,

I was in college the whole day today waiting for your reply and it really warmed my heart when I saw the letter in the office. I quickly ran up to the council room to read it with your photograph in front of me.

It really gives me great pleasure to know that my love will be with you for the rest of your life. Here I too must reciprocate the feeling. Your love will be in my heart for as long as I live. I know it has been a difficult decision for both of us to make that we will never be able to live together for the rest of our lives. But we had to make it sooner or later. I think it is better for both of us that we have made the decision so soon, as it would have been more heartbreaking later on.

I am so happy to know that in spite of this you will not stop seeing me when you return to college. I wouldn't have been able to face life in college without you. Now with that promise, I can concentrate on my work with my whole heart. By the way, since I have been spending most of my time in the council room, I have nearly finished typing the long essay. I should be able to finish it now by putting my whole heart and soul into it. I have dedicated the work to you. It shall always be a loving memory of our college days.

I am so sorry that I am unable to come and see you in Ipoh, much as I wanted and longed to. But as I have said in my last letter, it will not be possible. Neither will I be able to see you in Taiping on the 9th, as my brother will be coming to Penang on that day for a few days' holidays. As he is only able to have a few days of leave each year, I would like to be at home when he comes. Moreover, I will have to discuss my future with him. As I said in my last letter, my father has already found a girl for me. She is a childhood friend, very pretty but educated only up to Standard Six in a private school.

She will make a loving wife, but not a good housewife, since she is so lazy. She does not know how to cook or take care of a baby. My parents took me to her house yesterday, but I could only see your face in her. When I returned home, I cried my guts out to think that I would never be able to marry you. I took your photograph to show my parents. My father had a good look at it but didn't make any comments. But he promised me that he would not stop me from being friends as long as I promised that I would marry the girl of his choice. He also said that I could have as many girls as I wanted to, but I must not break his heart by marrying anyone outside the race or religion. Then he passed the photograph to my mother. The moment she took it, she dashed it to the floor and the glass frame broke into a million pieces. At that moment, my heart couldn't bear it any longer. I took up your picture and held it to my heart and ran out of the house to the nearest shop where I got myself really drunk.

Now I have a new frame for your picture and will always keep it with me in the college so that I can have it in front of me as I do my work. Your beautiful face and smile will give me encouragement and the will to work.

But, my dearest Jane, I can't think of the years ahead without you. I cannot bear to think of it. Why is the world so cruel? Why can't our parents be more broad-minded and 'Western'? I would give up all the pleasures in life if I could make you my wife, my darling little wife. You could be mine. Now I can only look forward to the few short months that we have left to be together, until the time comes and we must part and go our separate ways. I will go and settle down quietly on the East Coast with the everlasting memory of our happy days together.

As I write this, I have your picture in front of me and when I hold it to my heart, I can imagine you in my arms again. How long do I have to wait until I can really hold you again? I shall be anxiously awaiting your phone call from Maxwell Hill on the 9th.

How I wish I could be there with you, but I can't. But please Jane, do have a good holiday and enjoy yourself. Imagine that I am there with you and I too will imagine that I am there with you.

As I look out through the window, I can see all the R.T.C teachers around. They must think that I am mad, working like a slave from morning to night every day. Of the three hundred odd students there are only about eighty men, all the rest are girls. The girls are occupying A, B and C Blocks. Each time I look up towards your window, I can imagine you standing there. Oh, how I pray that you will be with me soon.

My darling, I must stop now. Please think of me. I will always pray for your success and happiness. Pray that someday we may be together, if not in this world, at least in another life.

Goodbye now, and lots and lots of love and kisses,

Yours forever

Surinder

XXXXX

After reading the letter, I cried and cried knowing that I was about to lose him due to strong objections from both families. I felt very sorry for him for all the trouble he had with his parents who were determined to get him engaged to a Sikh girl. Oh, I couldn't bear to lose him. That was one thing I was sure about!

I had once asked my mother if she would like to have an Indian son-in-law. She was so shocked and said I must be joking. She added that no one in our family could ever think of doing such a thing. It would be so disgraceful to the family.

'If you ever do such a thing,' she said, 'Your father will never be able to face the relatives and his friends. He has loved you so dearly. How can you do this to him!'



I expected that. My father and my mother would never say Yes. It seemed pointless to talk to them at all.

However, I was miserable.

I sat down and asked myself if I could love someone else after I had loved Surinder. If I married someone else, would I be happy? No! How could I love one and marry another? I would be miserable for the rest of my life. How could I be happy with another man whom I didn't love? I loved Surinder, I loved him.

If I couldn't marry the man I loved, what was the point of going on living? How would I face life without the man I loved? I had been waiting for someone all my life. Someone I could love forever and I had found him at last. I loved him from the bottom of my heart. There was no pretence about my love for him. And he loved me whole-heartedly. How could I reject such a true and sincere love?

I wanted very much just to be his wife. I knew that I had to marry him for the sake of my own happiness!

So, I sat down and wrote to tell him that I loved him and wanted to marry him. But he had to wait and not rush me. It was better to convince our parents. I prayed that he would find a way. My sisters, my little brother Dong and myself were going up to Maxwell Hill in Taiping for a short holiday. I told Surinder about this and asked him to go there with us.

After I had written the letter, I rang him up and talked to him. He was someone who couldn't really talk much over the telephone. But I was very happy to know that he could meet in Taiping after all. We arranged for the place and the time to meet.

On the 9th, one of my father's old family friends drove us to Taiping. On the way, I told Mr Chin about Surinder. He was quite sympathetic. He agreed that if I really loved him, I should go ahead and marry him. I wished my father was as understanding as he was. As he was very close to my father, I asked him to talk to Father and see how he would react to the news.

When we reached Taiping, we went straight to the Lake Gardens where we were supposed to meet Surinder. He was not there yet. So, we waited. About ten minutes later I saw the blue car approaching. It was him all right. He was not alone. Geok Lan and Leong Wah were with him.

Was I happy to see him again! His tall and slim figure coming down from the car really warmed my heart. His turban was gone and I could see that it had a curl in the front. He walked over to say 'Hello' to us. I introduced him to Mr Chin and my brother and my sisters.

He was obviously very happy to see me again. He asked me how I was. I only smiled and asked him about his journey. Both of us walked back to his car. I said 'hello' to Geok Lan and Leong Wah and got into his car.

We were now heading for the foot of the Hill, where we took a jeep to go up. After the 45-minute drive up the winding path, we were all exhausted. We were going to stay at Speedy Rest House. My family knew that caterer for Speedy very well. They were surprised that we had brought along a Punjabi friend.

After lunch, Surinder and I took a walk down the narrow path. He held me close and kissed me when we were alone. We had so much to talk about, yet, when we were together now, we were quite tongue-tied.

We chose a spot and sat down. He started talking about our future. He asked again if I had made up my mind. I told him that I had but we had to wait till our parents gave us their permission. He said he would wait, but hoped he didn't have to wait for too long. We talked about our families. He said that his parents could not force him to marry someone else. I didn't want to have to worry about him. He looked so gentle. Yet, he could be so determined.

We sat down there and talked for quite some time. Then we returned to the rest house to have some tea. The caterer always

gave us plenty to eat. For tea, we had two big plates of biscuits and a comb of bananas.

After tea, the whole group of us went exploring. We hiked up to the Box, which is a beautiful bungalow reserved for VIPs only. It had a lovely view of Taiping below us. Surinder took some pictures for us. He was really happy to be with us. My brother and my sisters seemed to like him.

They were supposed to return to Penang after dinner. So, we had an early dinner so that they could take the jeep down at 7 p.m.

He was sad to leave us. I told him I would try to go back to college early. With that promise, he said farewell and went down the hill with the others.

I stayed on with Dong and my sisters till the 11th, and I had quite a good rest up there.

## LETTERS TO JANE

10.8.66

My darling Jane,

The few hours we had together yesterday were the happiest hours of my holidays so far. How I wish I could have stayed longer. I almost couldn't bear it when four of your sisters came down to see us off. I hope they will at least accept me. After all, it is the brothers and sisters who are going to share our lives for the remaining years after our parents are gone. I especially liked your little brother and the cute sister of yours whose picture I snapped. Please give them my best regards.

The jeep reached the bottom at about 7.40 p.m. and we went to Taiping to do some marketing first before we left for home at 8.05 p.m. The journey back was so tiring as we spent all our time discussing you. We reached Penang at 10 p.m. and after I had dropped off Leong Wah and Geok Lan, it was 10.15 p.m. By the time I reached home, everyone was awake, waiting anxiously for me. My parents had already suspected that I had gone outstation, as I said, my father had seen me in town driving towards the jetty. Well, I told them the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. My mother didn't say anything about my coming to see you, but she demanded that I give her my motorcar key so that I cannot leave the house again. I told her that the car was mine and that I was no longer a child, that I was capable of taking care of myself, and that nobody could stop me from going where I wanted to go. With that I went to bed and my mother left me alone. My father didn't even look at me. He did not say a word. I lay in bed thinking about you and couldn't sleep until about 2.00 a.m.

I slept until 10.00 a.m. this morning, and when I got up, they had already finished their breakfast so there was nothing left for me. My mother and sisters didn't say a word to me. So I got dressed and came to college to have my breakfast and continued with my work. But I would only take a cup of coffee. I only had something solid to eat at 2.30 p.m. The last meal I had was the dinner at Maxwell Hill.

While I was doing my work, Geok Lan came along. She had come to see some of her friends. By the way, she is willing to let you stay with her during the last week of holidays if you are coming earlier. But I have also spoken to Mr Thomas about letting you stay in college and he is willing to open a room for you in Block A. But I'm afraid you can't stay in your own room, as he doesn't want others to see you so openly. I will also be moving into the college on Sunday night the 21st. So I would like it very much if you could stay in college than with Geok Lan so we can be together most of the time and we can do our work together. I hope the library will be open also so that we can do our research.

Jane, my love, I'll be counting the days before you return to College. Please let me know when you will be able to come. Today I received your letter, which you had written on the 6th in which you said you cried upon reading my letter. Please darling, do not cry. You said that I am a baby if I cry for you but you are also another baby if you cry. Please have courage. I know now that you will really marry me even in spite of our parents. But of course, I will try to get your parents to accept me. Jane I told you yesterday that I can wait for two or three years, but do you really want me to wait for so long. Darling, why can't we get married as soon as we have finished our course? Please darling, I wouldn't like to go back to Kelantan without you. I want you to go there with me so that we can start life afresh, away from all our parents and relations. My brother still hasn't shown up yet and I am going to tell my

parents once and for all that I will never marry anyone else but you. They can do what they like to me and to themselves but my mind is made up. Please stand by me now Jane. Please, love, please don't let me down now. I am sure of myself now, no matter what happens. I am determined to marry you.

My darling, how long can you be tied to your family? Many men are miserable because their wives are still tied to their families even after many years of marriage. After all, Jane what is the purpose of getting married? The first love is for your husband and if after that you still have any love left, it is for your family and friends. Please let us be definite Jane. There is no doubt about our love for each other. So what does it matter what others think or say about it? After all we are both over twenty one years of age and legally, nothing, not even our parents can stop us from getting married if we want to.

I know what is going to happen when I tell my father that I will never marry any other girl but you. He is going to gather together all the uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters to try to put pressure on us. My mother is even capable of working a charm on me so that I will not marry you. But no amount of pressure, or force, or even torture will make me budge. No charm will work on me as I have faith in Christ. From now on, I will always carry a rosary with me, and nothing they do will change my mind. I am prepared to remain a bachelor for the rest of my life if I am unable to marry you my love. Please love me Jane. I need you. Please stand firm by me. I have made my decision and nothing in the world can make me change my mind now. Please come to me Jane. So please come my darling. I want to be close to you all the time. We will have the college to ourselves. But I promise you, I will be a good boy and behave myself. Please trust me Jane.

Having seen you and held you close to my heart, I have gained more confidence. This morning, I sat down and finished typing all

the work I had prepared. Also, I will have to get down to doing some experiments in the lab and then write and type them out. That will form the last chapter of my long essay. I will have to get down to the hospital one of these days to take some photographs of the functioning of the blood bank, and if possible gain admission into the operation theatres and get some snaps of actual blood transfusions. I have a letter from Mr Bedford, which I hope will gain me admission to see the C.H.O. or the Chief Surgeon.

By the time you come here I should have finished all my work and I should be able to devote more time to working with you and for you. I may not be able to spend much time in the college, as my brother should be in Penang until the 15th. So please don't try to ring me up as I may not be able to receive it. But of course, I will drop in every day to receive any mail from you and also to write to you. As you know, I only write to you when I am here, as I wouldn't have much privacy at home.

I must stop now. Please write to me soon. I shall be waiting anxiously for your reply.

Bye now, my love.

Yours forever  
Surinder xxxxxx

15.8.66

My Dearest Jane,

I have been waiting anxiously to receive your letter for the past few days. I expected it on Saturday but had to go home disappointed when I didn't see your letter in the rack.

Again I was disappointed when I read your short note. I hope to hear more from you darling.

My darling Jane, you do not know how much trouble I have been having with my family for the last few days. Even the little love I had for my father has been lost for what he said to me. I was feeling so mad on Friday night that I went out and cropped my hair. I didn't return home that night, but stayed in the College. When I went home the next day my parents were so mad with me that they beat me. But my love for you is too strong for them to make me change my mind. They can kill me for all I care. Please love me Jane. I need your love. I do not have anybody left in my world but you my darling. Please come back to me as soon as you can.

Yesterday my parents forced me to go and see a priest in Taiping. I refused to go but they forced me into my brother in-law's car and took me there. There I was forced, in front of the whole congregation in the temple to drink some holy water and some other things. But they will have no effect on me. The priest even took away the money I had with me. They tried to force me to say that I will stop loving you and not marry you, but I just kept my mouth shut and didn't say a word.

On the way back to Penang I nearly wanted to jump into the sea from the ferry but my father was with me all the time. My darling, if they do not let me have my way I am going to kill myself. I am prepared to die, rather than face life without you my love. Please, my darling, please say that you will marry me. Please write it in your letter so I can show it to my father that you want to marry me, he saw one of your letters in my car and read it, for that he thinks that you are trying to fool me. Please, my love, please say that you love me and that you will marry me. My father wants to come and see your parents to try to tell them to prevent you from marrying me. But I told him he had no business to go to say that to your father. He brought some elders of the community to talk to me to try to make me change my mind.



But I told them that I would have my way. Nothing in this world will prevent me from doing what I want to do. Please stand by me now, my love. I need you Jane.

I am going to move into the College on Saturday or Sunday, so you can come back on Monday. I want to be with you so that I can hold you close to my heart. I love you Jane, and I am prepared to face all the hardships if you stand by me, for better or for worse. I only want you in the rest of my life. I am prepared to break all ties with my family. They can do their worst but nothing can make me change my mind.

My darling, I have not much to say to you but I don't know how to write it. I am feeling so mad that I can't even write properly, as you can see by the number of scratches.

I hope you will be able to read what I have written down. Please write to me soon, I must stop now. I haven't been able to do any work for the past few days. But I must go to the library now to do some work.

I love you with all my heart, my Jane.

Please come back to me soon.

With all my love  
Surinder xxx

P.S. I'm sorry I didn't ask about your health. You said in your letter that you had a terrible headache. I hope you are better now. Please do not worry too much. I wonder what you will think of me when you see me without my turban. When I came to the office this morning, they couldn't recognise me. They all said I look much better. My head feels so much lighter now.

16.8.66

My Dearest Jane,

I just received your letter and am so disappointed that you are unable to return earlier. Of course I don't mind, but I would have loved to be with you a few days longer, but I suppose it can't be helped. I realise your exams at the end of the year are more important and I wish you every success.

Jane, I'm sorry that I've had to put you in such a difficult position as to giving me a definite answer so soon but I can't help it. Please do understand my position. I know your difficulties and I know that it will be very difficult for you to break away from your family but as far as I'm concerned my parents have no more respect for me after what I have done. I am so desperate I don't know what to do. For the time being I am quite happy to know that you love me. I do understand that you can't give me a definite answer and I suppose I'll have to wait. But my love, what is there to live for? I have nobody in this world but you. I'm getting more and more sick as the days go by. I can't concentrate on my work. I lock myself up in the Council Room and cry my guts out worrying and thinking about you. I find life so dull that I don't know what to do. Without proper and regular meals my stomach is getting worse that I'm unable to sleep at night. Sometimes I just come to the College and sleep in the Council room dreaming about you and wishing that you were here. My parents are also getting sick of worrying about me. But I just don't seem to worry about them. I don't know what has come over me sometimes I just sit down and try to think of the simplest way of ending my life, but I don't have the courage to do it. I am so miserable, my love. I hope you do not worry too much. I don't want you to get sick because of me. Oh my darling, why, why? Why was I ever born to cause so much

trouble to my parents? Why did I have to come to this college and fall in love with you? Perhaps it is my fate that I have to meet you after all these years. And now that I had at last found some happiness, it is taken away from me. I love you my darling. I love you. Please know that no matter what happens I will always love you. But I must be patient and give you more time to think. I shall be waiting anxiously for your return to college even if you can't come earlier. But please let me know when you are coming so that I can go to Prai and wait for you at the station. I need you so much. I can't bear to think that you may say no and my life will be so miserable. Why is life so difficult?

Please know that I love you and I shall wait for you as long as you want me to. I pray to God that you will one day say 'yes'. I cannot write anymore. All I can say is that I love you with all my heart. Please say that you love me. Please my love. I love you. I love you.

Yours forever,  
Surinder

19.8.66

My Dearest Jane,

The two days we had together were not happy ones. But I was so disappointed that I was unable to see you before I returned. Anyway I felt so happy and contented that I was able to do some work today in the library. Yesterday afternoon I spent my time in the Stadium watching the Malaysian Athletic Meet. This afternoon I'll be going again.

Jane, yesterday my father talked to me for the first time after so many days and asked me to forget about what happened in the past. He seems to have noticed a bit and asked me to marry any girl of my choice, provided she is Indian. I felt so happy to know that he had softened a bit, and I'm sure we might be able to convince him. My darling, please try to convince your parents as well. I will try to see them myself and see what I can do. I will be moving into College on Sunday night and I will try to come and see you in Ipoh on Friday the 26th. I'll probably stay in a hotel for two nights and then we can return to Penang together on Sunday. Will that be all right? If possible I'll try to meet your parents if you want me to. Do you want me to? If I can get some money from the friend who owes me then I'll definitely come. Otherwise I'll be unable to. I'll ring you up on Thursday evening to let you know definitely if I'm coming. I won't be able to move around much in Ipoh as I don't want my relations to find out that I am there. Most of them already know that I have cropped my hair and also about you, as such news is bound to spread like wild fire.

I'm sure you must have enjoyed your stay in Penang. I hope your friends had a good time as well. Are they still in Ipoh or have they returned to Singapore? Please give them my best regards. Did your Auntie speak to your mother about us and try to convince her? I'm sure she must have noticed how close our relationship is

and I think she understands our position. Please ask her to try to convince your parents.

What time did you arrive in Ipoh yesterday? I hope you had a pleasant journey. I'm looking forward to coming to visit you in Ipoh and then bringing you back. I hope you don't mind my coming. If you don't want me to come please let me know. I won't mind. But certainly I would like to come, if, as I said earlier, I am able to get the money from my friend.

I know the next term will be a tough one, but a happy one, as we will be together all the time. I'm looking forward to knowing that we can work together and love each other. I am so happy now, knowing that we will be married in 6 months. I'm looking forward to the happy day with all my heart. Please don't let me down now my darling. I love you with all my heart. I must stop as I have to go home now for lunch. I promised my mother that I would. After that I will be going for a haircut and then to the stadium to see the sports. Bye now. Please dream about me. I'm thinking of you all the time.

With all my love.

Yours,

Surinder xxxxx

P.S. What name would you like me to have? I like either Alan or Bernard. Then I will be called Alan Surinder or Bernard Surinder. Alan and Jané or Bernard and Jane.

Love

xxx

22.8.66

My Darling Jane,

You don't really know how much I love you. I have just received your two letters, as I have been unable to come to the college for the past few days now as my brother is here. I have just been talking to him and he says that he will not try to stop me. But as usual, he still supports my parents and wants me to change my mind. But I told him that it is too late for me to change my mind. He told my mother about it and she fell at my feet trying to convince me. Oh my darling, I love my mother, but I love you more. I promise you that I will be faithful to you with all my heart. I shall never let you down. I love you and I know you love me. That will overcome all barriers. I am prepared to die rather than face life without you. I am going to write to my Headmaster and ask him to reserve a place for you in my old school so that we can go back together.

My darling, please know that I love you with all my heart and nothing will stop me from marrying you. If you don't want me to come to Ipoh to see your parents it's all right, but I do want to come to see you.

As I have told you before, we will have a lot of problems at the start, family and financial problems. But I know that our love will overcome all problems. Please trust me my love, I will be faithful to you no matter what happens. My second brother will be going back tomorrow morning and my other brother is going back on Saturday, But I do want to come to see you. If you can come back on Friday, then I don't have to come to Ipoh, but if you are coming back later, then I must come to Ipoh on Friday. Please, my love, please trust me. I have promised that I will be a good boy once I marry you. I will give up my bad habits of smoking, drinking and gambling. Can't you trust me? Please do, my love.

I will do anything for you. Isn't that enough? If you don't want me to see your parents just yet it is all right. But I'll need to see them sometime. I do hope and pray that Mr Chin will be able to convince your father. Even if he doesn't, I pray that we will be married in six months' time. I love you my darling.

I do want you to pass your exams. I want to pass my exams as well. I will help you to pass your exams and you will help me to pass mine, with your love for me.

My darling Jane, I love you more than anything in this world. You like the name Bernard so I will be baptised with that name. But you still want to love me as Surinder. That is all right by me. After all that is my name and that is what you know me by. No matter what other name I take, I will still be Surinder.

I must stop now, as I have to return home. I will be working in the library for the next few days, after my brother leaves. My parents were expecting me to return to college last night as they thought the college reopens today. But I didn't want to lie to them. So I told them that the college reopens on the 29th but that I will be returning to college earlier as I want to do my work. Also, if I am in college, then I can come and see you in Ipoh. Oh my darling, I do want to come and see you. If I am coming I will let you know by phone on Thursday morning or Friday morning. I want to be with you for as long as possible.

I love you with all my heart.

Yours forever,  
Bernard Surinder

XXXXX

23.8.66

My darling Jane,

I'm so glad and happy that I have finally managed to make you realise how much I love you and trust you to have finally decided that you love me. Nothing can come in our way now.

I have been reading your last two letters over and over again to find comfort in your thoughts. My love, having thought it out very carefully, I agree with you that it would be no use my coming to Ipoh this weekend to see your parents. So I shall wait for you at Prai on Friday evening. Please let me know definitely if you are coming.

I talked things over with my brother yesterday and told him that nothing will stop us. I also showed him your letter and he realises that our love for each other is really strong. After that he spoke to my parents about it and told them that it would be useless to try and change my mind. My father also realised that taking me to the priest in Taiping did not have any effect so now he may try other means. Please do not doubt my love for you now. I am prepared for all the hardships that may come in our way. But I promise you over and over again that I will not let you be unhappy. I shall always remain faithful to you and love you till my last day. Please have faith in my love. Please trust me. I shall stop drinking straight away to make you happy. I will have to start saving for next year, whatever little I can. I do realise it is going to be difficult to make a start in life, but as long as our love is strong we will overcome all problems. Of course we must try our best to win our parents' consent but even if we do not get their consent, please do not worry my dear. I will never let you down. I will make you the happiest woman in the world and I know you will make me the happiest man in the world. You don't know how much our two days in Penang meant to me after all the difficulties I have



been having with my family. They are slowly realising that I will not change my mind. At least I must try to win over your parents to my side so that we will not be alone in the world. I am sure your parents are not as strict as mine. Even if they do not accept this idea now, one day, maybe a few years from now, they will realise it. Mothers usually return to their sons and daughters once they have a child. I have come across so many similar cases.

I shall be anxiously waiting for your reply. I will be moving into the college tomorrow morning and I have asked Mr Thomas about your coming back on Friday. He says it is all right. So, if you want to ring me up, I'll be hanging around the phone booth at about 2.00 p.m. every day until Friday. In the morning I'll be in the library as it is only open from 9.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m.

Please come back to me my love. I need you so much.

With all my love  
B. Surinder xxxxxx

My Dearest Jane,

I too just finished moving all my things into the college and then I came to the office to collect your letter. I'm so glad that you had no friends. This will probably be my last letter to you before I see you on Friday. I'll be waiting for you at 11:30 please be on the lookout for me.

My love, I have promised you ever since that I'll be a good boy from now on. I have already stopped drinking and will also try to cut down on my smoking. Surely I hope to stop it completely. Now that I am sure of your love I will do anything for you. I have finished the section on ecology for you and I was going through my old University notes and I was rambling on Quakerism, at least something about customs & missions. During the next few days I'll try to look up some more notes for you. This evening I'll go over to Jerry's work place & try to borrow the "Quiet American" & try to finish that before the college re-opens. I went over to see him last week but couldn't meet him.

I do realize that we both have to pass our exams at the end of the year and as such we must both concentrate on our work & do our best. If we were by working together we will be able to do well. We can help one another in our work. All the time we will pray that all will be well for our future plans. I pray that we will one day be able to convince our parents that we really love each other & that nothing will stop us. Please write for this my love. Please pray for us. We will both

Kanit Secondary School,  
Pune, P. Moh.

31.1.67.

Darling,

After I left you last night I stopped at a coffee shop to buy some coffee. I drove very slowly all the way back & reached P.P. at 9.30 pm. Darling I miss you ~~so~~ much. I couldn't sleep the whole night. This morning the cold in both feet & am having tooth ache now. I went to the clinic just now and was given 1 day's medical leave. So I'm going to have a good rest today.

I spoke to H.M. about your coming to P.P. and he has no objection to our staying together as long as Dad is in with us. Some of the lower people think we are already married. He says to let them do so. In fact it would be better that way. If they knew that we were not married, then they would talk. But since they think that we are already married, then they will not talk.

S. Darling, I'll come to K.S. on Thursday immediately after lunch & you get all your things ready. We'll move to P.P. on Thursday night. I also spoke to Wm. Hansen & he says that he can

c/o Secretariat  
First Malaysian Jamboree  
Teluk Behrang  
3.12.66

My darling Jane

I feel so lost and miserable without you darling. Sorry I have to use this paper as I haven't anything else to write on. How I long to hold you in my arms.

This morning, had I known that the train was leaving before the launch, I would have waited a little longer with you. The train left at 9.15 a.m. and the launch left at almost 10.00 a.m. so I had to wait miserably. I arrived back at the college at 11.00 a.m., quickly packed up everything and went home. Only my sister was at home as my mother had gone to Ipoh. After lunch, I left for the Jamboree at 12.30 p.m. and after cycling like hell for an hour I arrived half-dead at the camp without realising that I had to report for duty at 2.00 p.m. and until now I haven't had a bite or a drink. I have only been smoking. All the other helpers don't seem to be around at all. Only two of us have been sitting here doing all the work. The rest of the college students just seem to be hanging around doing nothing. I'll be going for dinner in a short while, as the other chap has already gone and I must wait until he returns. I hope the food is good or I'll lose plenty of weight. I must have lost at least five pounds by cycling all the way here.

So far the scouts from India, China, Korea, Australia, England, Philippines, Thailand and some Malaysian states have already arrived. There are still quite a number to arrive. My duty ends at 9.00 p.m. when I'll go have a bath and a good sleep. My next duty will be from 7.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. tomorrow.

I'm sorry I have been talking about myself. How did you reach home today? Any troubles along the way? I hope you reached home safely. Did you have problems with your luggage?

Sorry I had to stop for a while to go and have my dinner. It was quite nice, but not enough, as we cannot have second helpings. I'll have to go and have something else to eat in the canteen afterwards.

I'll be dreaming of you every minute of the day darling. Do write to me soon. I'll be looking forward to it. In case you wish to ring me up you can do so at either of the two numbers. Batu Ferringi 266 or 267, but there will be no privacy. Anyway if you wish, I would love to hear from you.

The whole camp is buzzing with activity. The Kelantanese will be arriving tonight and in case there are any of my friends, I'll ask them to make arrangements for lodging for us. It would be nice to meet up with so many of my old friends here. Hope to pass the time without worrying too much darling. I beg of you again not to try and change your posting. I could not bear to be parted from you for so long. Must stop now, I love you forever.

Surinder xxxxx

c/o Secretariat  
1st Malaysian Jamboree  
Penang  
5.12.66

My darling Jane,

How are you getting on my darling? I hope and pray that you are hale and hearty. As for me, because the weather has been so lousy, I'm having a bad cold. Ever since I came to the camp, the wind has been howling and it's been drizzling most of the time. During the day we can barely walk around because it is so cold. How I long for your warm and loving arms. . .

Have you told your parents about your posting? What was their reaction when you told them about it and have you told them that you will be going there with me? I still pray that they will not try to do anything to stop you from going through. I wouldn't know what to do. Even here, among so many friends I feel so lost and miserable. I couldn't live without you.

I hope to meet some teachers from Pasir Puteh as I could make some arrangements about accommodation. But I haven't met any teachers though I've met about a dozen of my pupils. They are all so happy to know that I'll be going back there.

If I were not feeling so lonely, I would have quite enjoyed the time with all the other scouts. But as it is, I just don't feel like doing anything. All the other MTC students seem to be having a good time. They pass their time playing cards, but I just walk aimlessly around the camp, as if in a dream, or come back to the tent and sleep. This morning appeared to show the promise of a good day. For the first time the sea was calm. But now I sit in my tent and it has started to rain heavily again. Our bedding is all damp. We hoped to hang it out to dry today but the rain doesn't seem to want to stop. The monsoon this year seems to be quite bad. I haven't read any papers or heard the news for the past three days, so I don't know the flood situation in the east coast. I hope by the time we get there, it would have improved so that we won't be stranded anywhere.

Tell me truly darling. Don't you want to be near me? If you love me enough you wouldn't mind going to my place with me. Even if you don't want to go there, please do not say so in my presence. It makes me so embarrassed. The listener might tend to think that you do not love me enough to be with me. Please darling. Love me as much as I love you. I need you so much. I couldn't bear to remain parted from you for so long. Even the next two or three weeks seem to be an eternity.

I may not be coming to Ipoh after all, since my mother, whom I wanted to take down, has already gone there and will be returning to Penang with my sister. If my sister is in Penang later than the 23rd (pay day) then I won't come down. But if she returns earlier then I may come to Ipoh. On the other hand, my brother, who will be going to Sarawak soon, will also be coming to Penang when I return from camp. I don't know how long he will be here. Of course, I'll try my best to come down. If you could come here, it would be wonderful especially, while I'm at the camp. As there is not much work to be done, I could easily get out. This is my duty roster for the next few days, in case you wish to come down.

Today (5th) from 9.00 p.m. - 7.00 a.m.

6th 2.00 p.m. - 9.00 p.m.

7th 7.00 a.m. - 2.00 p.m.

8th 9.00 p.m. - 7.00 p.m.

9th 2.00 p.m. - 9.00 p.m.

10th 7.00 a.m. - 2.00 p.m.

11th 9.00 p.m. - 7.00 a.m.

I haven't seen the Penang Sec since yesterday. I don't know where he has disappeared to. I'll have to sleep in the afternoon today and I'll have to stay awake the whole night.

Must stop now. Do write to me soon darling. If you wish to ring me up, please do so during the time that I am on duty, otherwise they may not take the trouble to come and call me. I will be in the office all the time, so do try and call. In fact if there is a phone call, it is part of my duty to take down messages.

Bye now. I love you darling.

Yours forever,  
Surinder XXXX

c/o Secretariat  
1st Malaysian Jamboree  
Penang  
6.12.66

My darling Jane,

It is now 2.00 a.m. I am sitting here in the Secretariat office with sleepy eyes. I came on duty at 9.00 p.m. last night and I will have to remain here until 7.00 a.m. so I have decided to write to you.

Something just struck me that it would be a good idea for you to write to the C.E.O in Kelantan informing him that you are from M.T.C Penang and that you have been posted to Kelantan and that you would be very grateful if he would post you to Kamil Secondary School, Pasir Puteh, because your fiancé is in that school. If you don't want to mention your fiancé then just say that you would like to go there because you have friends and relations in Pasir Puteh. Peng San is sitting here and he is also writing to the C.E.O of Terengganu requesting to be posted to Besut (which is about twelve miles from Pasir Puteh) because he has many friends there. Please send the letter by registered post.

Siew Hong will be paying me a visit on Thursday. It would be nice to have some visitors. This morning I looked anxiously through the mail but was so disappointed when there was nothing from you. I hope there will be a letter from you this morning.

I haven't been able to shave since I came to camp and my beard has grown quite long. I won't be able to shave until I return home.

Do write to me darling. If possible, a long letter so I can pass the time reading it over and over again. There is also a D.T.C girl here who is posted to Negeri Sembilan and we are discussing our postings. It's nice to have someone to talk to.



Must sign off now. In a few hours, the trumpet will be sounded in the camp for everyone to wake up. It is so crowded and colourful during the day. There are around three thousand people in the camp right now. So far there hasn't been much swimming because the sea has been too rough but there are plans to have some water sports once the weather improves.

Darling, how I long for you. Yesterday morning as I sat down to write to you all the other boys started teasing me as if I couldn't wait for the holidays to be over. Well darling, I can't. If you don't come to Penang then I must try my best to go to Ipoh. Bye now.

Lots of love from yours forever  
Surinder xxxxxx

8.12.66

My darling Jane,

It truly grieves me to read your letter. You didn't have a single nice thing to say to me, not a single loving word. I am so disheartened and sad that I can't do anything. Darling, please say that you love me. Don't you still realise that I love you so much that even a slight response from you hurts so much? My love, please don't make me feel so miserable.

You say that you want to die. I want you to live and love, both your family and me.

You accuse me of admiring other pretty girls and wanting to touch them. Please don't say that darling. It really hurts me. Just because you have been let down by one man doesn't mean that all of us are like him. Don't you trust me darling? I want to touch and hold you because I love you and not because of anything else. You say that you simply detest being touched by other men, do you

mean to say that you detest me touching and holding you? If not darling, why do you say such a thing to me? It hurts me so much.

We have only known each other for less than a year, but during this short time I have grown to love you more and more every day. You yourself have told me that you have realised that you really love me. So how can you still say that you are not sure of yourself? How long do you want me to wait for you? Darling, I know that I love you and I am prepared to wait. But I don't want to wait in vain. I don't want to be let down at the end. Please don't let me down Jane. I love you and I will do everything in my power to give you all the love and care that you want. Don't you think that I am capable of doing this?

Perhaps by telling me about your past you hoped that I might forget you. But darling, I love you the more for telling me the truth and not hiding it from me. I respect you for what you are. Please love me in return. Please don't let it be a one-sided affair.

You say that you have been having bad dreams about the future. Why darling? Don't be afraid. I am not asking you to leave your family. They may not accept me in the beginning but I will do everything in my power to win them over. I want to be close to them too. Do believe that darling. I am not going to take you to a dark corner of the world away from all you love. It is just unfortunate that we are posted to the east coast away from all our relations. In a way, I know it is a good thing. During the time that we are there, they will eventually come to accept us so that at the end of our contract, we can return to them. They may not accept us in the beginning, but "blood is thicker than water" and in the end, they will surely come to love us.

I have been feeling so lonely and miserable over here. The weather hasn't been too good, though the sun did shine bright yesterday. Since I received your letter this morning I have been feeling even more miserable. I try not to feel so lonely but I can't get you out of my mind. I think of you all the time when I am not too busy with my work. Do give me a nice reply this time. Make me feel a bit happier darling.

As I will be leaving the camp on Sunday morning, you may send the reply to my home address. Last Sunday, Father Tavenne came to the camp and said mass. He was very happy to know that you are going to Kelantan. This morning we had another priest because it is the feast of Immaculate Conception. Father will be coming again next Sunday, as I'll leave for home after the mass. I may not be able to come to Ipoh after all, as my sister from Ipoh came to Penang yesterday and she will be here until Christmas. I may even return to Ipoh together with her, as after that we can proceed straight to Kelantan. But as I have said before, I'll be coming to Ipoh on the 20th. If you could come to Penang, it would be very nice.

Must stop now darling. I love you with all my heart.

Yours forever  
Surinder

12.12.66

My darling Jane,

Since receiving your letter yesterday, I have been feeling miserable. Although the weather has been lovely, my cold has gotten worse. I've been here for a week now and I haven't stepped into the sea yet. Please do not worry unnecessarily about our future. Don't keep imagining that you will be all alone in this world. I love you darling, and I'll give you all the love and care I possibly can.

I couldn't sleep until 4.00 a.m. last night. My duty was from 9.00 p.m. to 7.00 a.m. but we were allowed to go back at midnight. I came back to my tent but couldn't stop thinking of what I would do if you were to say no, or if your parents got you to another place. I just sat on the beach and gazed at the stars, writing your name in the sand until I was so tired that I managed to fall asleep. I would have slept on this morning but the others woke me up for breakfast. I've just finished my breakfast and after going through the mail, saw that there was nothing from you. So I have come back to my tent and after writing this letter, I'm going back to sleep.

I want to come to Ipoh and see you but I'll not be able to make it. The excuse I would have given to my parents would have been that I would like to take them to Ipoh to visit my sister and to visit my uncle in Parit. Since my sister is already in Penang and since my uncle will be coming to Penang in a few days' time, I can't think of any other excuse. So if you can come to Penang darling, it would be wonderful. Please write to me and let me know if you will be able to make it.

I'm too sleepy now darling and I must stop. Hope to hear from you soon. This is the fifth letter I have written to you and you have written me only once. Every morning and afternoon I go through the mail and am so disappointed when there is nothing from you. Do write to me darling. Even if the letter is not very nice, at least it is comforting to hear from you. When you are with me you seem to be so loving, but when you return home you seem to be an entirely different person, as your letter indicates. Please return my love darling. I love you so much and will never stop loving you. I will only love you more and more every day.

Bye my love. Hope to see you soon.

Yours forever  
Surinder xxxxxx

P.S When you write to me at my home address, please don't write my Christian name on the envelope.

Love,  
Surin

17.12.66

My darling Jane,

I am so shocked to learn that you are to be posted to Kota Bharu. I don't know what I'll do if I am posted to Pasir Puteh or some other town. My H.M promised to do his best to get us both to Pasir Puteh, but now I am so sad and disappointed. I won't be able to sleep in peace until I know for sure where I am posted. Darling, when you wrote to the C.E.O, you should have said that you would like to be posted to Pasir Puteh since your fiancé is there. On the other hand, it is fortunate that you are posted to K.B and not to some other town. Just in case I am not posted to P.P then it would have been more difficult if you had been posted to P.P. I'll write to my H.M as soon as possible and ask him to find out where I am posted to. I do hope and pray that if I am not to go to P.P then I'll be sure to go to K.B also. That would be best of all. Anyway, will go to the Department to find out if it's possible to be as near to you as I can. Darling, I am so worried. If I am posted far away, I'll come and see you every day. I couldn't bear to be parted from you even for a week. I have been looking forward to going to Kelantan but now all my hopes are shattered. Darling, if you are posted to a different town, then I would like to get married at once so that you can get transferred to the same school early while there is still a lot of confusion at the beginning of the term. We will manage somehow darling even if I have to take a loan from the school. I wouldn't want to be parted from you again darling.

A friend of mine rang up to say that he has reserved a house for us just opposite the school gate. Now that you are posted to a different school, I'll probably rough it out with some of the other bachelors until we can get married and settled down.

When you rang up just now, I would have liked to talk intimately but my parents were sitting nearby and I couldn't even say 'love'. Darling I love you. I've said it so many times that you must be quite fed up of hearing it, but darling I just can't help it. I wouldn't know what to do if you were ever taken away from me.

Darling, please do not worry too much. We'll try to work things out the best we can. I won't be able to post this letter until Monday as I have no stamps, but I wanted to write it now. I'd better stop now, as I'll have to write to my H.M as well.

Good night darling.

With all my love,  
Surin

18.12.66

My darling,

I didn't have any coins with me just now as I was calling you so I couldn't carry on the conversation. I'm sorry for breaking off halfway. Darling, I've been so worried the whole day since you told me about your posting last night.

This morning I went to see a friend who is teaching in Pasir Puteh. He is a very good and a very old friend of mine (we were school mates). He told me that he has reserved a house for us just opposite the school gate and that the H.M is doing his best to get you to Pasir Puteh. The Deputy C.E.O. is a close friend of my friend and I went to see him this morning. So even if the H.M can't get you to Pasir Puteh then we'll go and see the Deputy C.E.O and try to plead with him. If it still doesn't work then darling the only way is for us to have a registry wedding. I couldn't bear to be away from you. I want you to be close to me.

If you are in Kota Bharu and I am in Pasir Puteh then our expenses will be very great. You will have to pay rent and I too will have to pay rent. Eating separately costs a lot of money, whereas if we do our own cooking the expenses will be half. Even if we are both in Pasir Puteh it will be very difficult for us to stay separately. By staying together we cut the expenses by half. I've spent the whole day discussing these things with my friend. He is willing to lend us some of his furniture so that we won't have to spend so much initially. In fact he is also willing to loan me some money so that we can get the essential things to start a home. Darling, please let us get married. I promise you we won't have a child until I have finished the payments on my car. Darling, it will be so difficult for us to live separately in Pasir Puteh. As it is, if we are unable to get you to Pasir Puteh then you'll have to stay in K.B for at least a few weeks. If we can get married as soon as possible then you could come to Pasir Puteh earlier. Darling, please say YES. To get married in a registry we have to give at least three weeks' notice. That means we can only get married three weeks after we apply for a registry wedding.

I am looking forward to going to Kelantan, thinking we could be together, but now I'm so worried. I have been with my friend the whole day, I went to see him in the morning, then came home for lunch and went back again. We went to see a picture to pass the time. We went to Cathay and watched 'How to Steal a Million', starring Audrey Hepburn. I couldn't enjoy the picture, thinking of you. Every time I put my hand out to touch you sitting beside me, all I felt was my friend's hairy arm. Darling I miss you so much. After the show, we sat in King's for an hour drinking coffee. I had just come back and had my dinner when I rang you just now.

Darling, you say that we will have financial difficulties if we get married now. But after thinking about it I realise that by staying separately it is going to cost us more. By staying together



we are going to save a lot of unnecessary expenses. Darling, please say that we will get married as soon as possible. For the time being, I will have to find accommodation for you in Kota Bharu. But you could stay with me in Pasir Puteh and travel daily by taxi. It will cost two ringgit up and down each day. That is what my friend's wife had to do for one whole term until they decided it was cheaper to get married. If you are to stay in K.B then I couldn't stay in P.P alone. I must come and see you everyday. Darling, I beg you. Please let us get married. Once we are married then we can concentrate on our work, and all our problems can be solved by putting our heads together. As far as finances are concerned please do not worry. I will try to manage with what I earn. With your help it will be easier. So darling, please say YES. Please let me know what you think. If you want to ring me up at the house do so, but I won't be able to talk privately as the phone is in the kitchen and that's where my mother is all the time. It'll be better if I ring you up from the booth. Next time, I'll take more coins with me. Darling I won't be able to sleep in peace until you say yes. Please don't think I am trying to rush you. I know it would be better this way. The sooner we get married the better.

I am so afraid of what is going to happen in the next few days. All my uncles are coming to Penang around the 21st or 22nd and I am going to have a rough time with them. I feel like running away from here. I just can't stay at home. I wish I could come to Ipoh as soon as possible but I've told Puru that I'll pick him up from Butterworth on the 29th morning. If it were not for that, I would leave as soon as I get my salary.

By the way, when will you be moving your things to your sister's house in Canning Gardens? Please tell me so that I may know how to contact you when I come to Ipoh. If I can get in touch with Puru, I'll leave Penang earlier. I'll have to do some shopping for myself after I get my salary. Most of my trousers are

torn. I'll also have to get my car thoroughly checked so that we won't have any trouble on the way. We must leave Ipoh as early as possible. If we could leave Ipoh by 6.00 a.m. then we might reach Pasir Puteh by seven or eight by driving 60 mph most of the way. As I've already booked the house in P.P, I'll go and get the keys from the owner as soon as we get there, so that at least we'll have a place to spend the night in. I've asked him to place some furniture there until school re-opens, then I can get the furniture from this friend of mine.

Darling I could go on and on but I must stop now before the letter becomes too heavy. But before I stop, I want to ask you again, please, let's get married as soon as we go to Kelantan. It would be the best this way. It would solve a lot of problems. I'll ring the school tomorrow and try to get in touch with the H.M and see what he has done. In fact, I am going to write to the Deputy C.E.O and ask him to send you to Pasir Puteh. We need a Maths teacher there as the only Maths teacher there is being transferred to another school. I'll write the letter through this friend. Personally, I'll go and see him tomorrow morning and if possible, will try to ring him up.

Darling, I must go now. Please write a nice letter to me soon. Bye love. I love you and need you darling.

Yours ever,  
 Surinder

23.12.66

Jane darling,

It was so nice of you to ring me up last night. I was feeling very upset after I rang up the other day. I received your letter yesterday and after reading it I am still not convinced by your reasoning. Darling, please don't misunderstand me. I am not trying to rush you, if that's what you feel. My father told me that if we are going to get married then why wait. Even my sisters and my friends are asking the same question. I've told them over and over again the reason that you gave (that you must wait till your results), but they say that is not enough a good reason or excuse. Anyway, if that is the excuse, why do you ask me to wait till the end of the second or third term? If there is any other excuse, please give it to me straight darling. Please do not keep me 'dangling on a string'. If it were finances, then as I have said earlier, it would be cheaper to stay together than separately. Darling, I love you deeply. I don't want anything to happen now and spoil everything.

There is another thing I am afraid of darling. It's that chap who has been trying to ring you from Kelantan while you were in College. I don't want him to start bothering you again if he finds out that you are in Kota Bharu. I've written to the Deputy C.E.O appealing to have you transferred to Pasir Puteh, the reason being that you will be getting married soon. My friend (his name is Muthu, by the way) has written to the H.M explaining to him our situation and asking him to try again by seeing the Deputy C.E.O. If it still doesn't work, then I'll have to accept it as it is now. I know of a house just opposite the Zainab School where I was staying when I was first posted to Kelantan. The owner is an old Malay woman, the wife of the C.P.O of Kelantan. They charged me \$80 per month for food and lodging (the food includes breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner) and it is excellent. They provide a fully furnished

room (with a big bed and mosquito net, a dressing table, wardrobe and bathroom attached). You can take your meals at any time and since it is so close to school, it will only take you minutes to walk there. The only difficulty is that the town is more than a mile away and the trishaw fare is 50 cents for each trip to town. I hope they still have rooms vacant. They have two double rooms and a single room. I was staying in a double room with another college mate of mine. The owner is very nice and does not bother you. You can even have the house key and come back at any time. You are also allowed to entertain friends in a sitting room upstairs. (All the rooms to let are upstairs). That is the best place I can think of at present. You can't get a better deal in the whole of Kelantan. Only the lucky ones who go first are able to get it. The food is excellent. The old lady's daughter does the cooking. They have a phone at the house, so I can ring you up any time.

Below is a plan of your school and its surroundings. The area is quite nice and it will be very convenient for me too as it is on the way to Pasir Puteh. As soon as you reach K.B I'll go to the house and see if I can get you a room there. Will it be all right with you?

I'll be coming to Ipoh at about lunchtime on the 29th, but I won't be able to see you until the evening, as my brother will be coming from K.L at about the same time. He'll be leaving to Penang together with my sister in the evening. So we'll have the evening together. I'll be writing to Peng San telling him that I'll pick him up at 5.30 p.m. on the 30th.

First I'll pick you up at 5.15 a.m. at your sister's place. By the way, since you'll be staying at somebody's house for at least a month, do you want to bring your dog along? I'm willing to take care of it in Pasir Puteh if she's not able to stay with you.

I'll also write to Poon and tell him that we'll pick him up from the Kampar Bus Station at about 6.30 a.m. The earlier we leave the better, because we'll have to stop in Kuala Kubu Bharu

for a short while. My brother has had another motorcycle accident even though he hadn't fully recovered from the previous one and so far he hasn't written to us about how serious it is. According to him, the scooter is a complete wreck but didn't say anything about himself. Then we'll have to stop in Kuantan for lunch and in Kuala Terengganu for tea. I hope we can drop Puru and Peng San there, as it would be troublesome if they were to come to Kota Bharu with us.

I've booked the house in P.P and we can get the key from the owner as soon as we reach there and at least have a place to sleep in for the night. It will probably be about 7.00 to 8.00 p.m. by the time we reach P.P and there would be no point in proceeding to K.B as it would be difficult to find a place there, other than a hotel or the government rest house.

Puru wrote to me and says that he has been posted to a good school in Kuala Terengganu. It's one of the best schools there and he should go straight to the school and try to look for a place to stay. I hope Peng San is also posted to the same place. Ragavan was also teaching in that school last year. I have not heard any news from Poon yet.

Yesterday I met Leong Wah and Geok Lan at the bank and they may come to Ipoh with me as they are going to K.L. Leong Wah has asked for a mutual transfer to Negeri Sembilan so as to be close to Geok Lan, but I don't know whether it is confirmed yet. They were hoping to come to K.L with us, but I told them our car will be packed and so I can only take them to Ipoh. Anyway, we will not be passing through K.L.

I've got the car serviced this morning and now it is in perfect condition. (It cost me \$261.) I also got the luggage rack for the roof (\$40) and I've also got another letter of the beauty course for you. I wanted to buy a Bible but I've only got \$60 left to go to Kelantan. But I hope to collect \$25 each from Peng San and Puru

and \$30 from Poon (that will make \$80. So with my \$60 I should have enough to last me until the next payday. I also got myself a pair of shoes, two trousers and a sports singlet).

Better stop now before the letter gets too heavy. Last night my uncle from Parit arrived at 12.30 a.m. when we were all asleep and they were discussing us till late into the night. He says that he can still try to stop me from marrying you. That is why darling, I'm trying to hurry you, before they can create any trouble.

Darling, that is the main reason why I am afraid. Please understand me love. I love you and will never let you down. Please promise me that you will marry me as soon as possible.

I love you Jane.

Yours forever,  
Surinder xxx

P.S. I'm going to hold you and kiss you for a long time on the night of the 29th. I'm looking forward to our trip to Kelantan. I'll ring you up on Sunday night around the usual time.

Love,  
Surin

Kamil Secondary School  
Pasir Puteh  
31.1.67

Darling,

After I left you last night I stopped at a coffee shop to buy some aspirin. I drove very slowly all the way back and I reached P.P at 9.30 p.m. Darling I miss you so much. I couldn't sleep the whole night. This morning the cold is better but I am having tonsils now. I went to the clinic just now and was given 1 day's medical leave. So I am going to have a good rest today.

I spoke to H.M about your coming to P.P and he has no objections to our staying together as long as Daljit is with us. Since the town people think we are already married, he says to let them do so. In fact it would be better that way. If they know that we are not married, then they would talk. But since they think we are already married, then they will not talk.

So darling, I'll come to K.B on Thursday immediately after lunch and you get all your things ready. We'll move to P.P on Thursday night. I also spoke to Wan Hassan as he says that he can arrange for a taxi to come and pick you up from the house at about 10 minutes to 2.00 p.m. and also after school. So, it'll be all right. Please don't change your mind now darling.

I've just finished writing a letter to my father and after this I'm going to write one to Che Yasin. When I spoke to H.M. about us this morning he said that we should be married as soon as possible and if possible before the holidays. Darling, when you go home for Chinese New Year please speak to your father and make a final decision. If your parents are prepared to accept me, I'll do everything I can to make them come to love me as their son-in-law. If I could afford it I would very much like to meet them during Chinese New Year, but during the April holidays, I must see them

and talk to them. Even if they don't accept me now, I'm sure they will slowly realise how much we love each other and then they will accept me. So darling, do your best to try and persuade them.

After settling all the bills, I have only \$430 left to last till the end of the month. As such, I am unable to put anything aside in the bank for the time being. This month I had intended to get a writing table and a chair, but that will have to wait until next month. We'll try to manage with what we have for the time being, ok?

It has been raining the whole night and it is now 11.00 p.m. and it is still raining. Daljit will be eating in town from today and I'll have to cook for myself alone now, until you come here.

Bye darling, I'll see you on Thursday at 2.30 p.m.

Think of me darling, I miss you so much.

Yours forever  
B. Surinder



BERNICE CHAULY

(Gen. 41)

N<sup>o</sup> 104281

FEDERATION OF MALAYA

CERTIFIED TRUE COPY OF AN ENTRY IN A MARRIAGE REGISTER BOOK (Form C)  
(WIFE'S COPY)

The Christian Marriage Ordinance, 1936 [Section 20 (1): Rule 4]

No. 1142

DISTRICT OF KUTA MAMU STATE, DIST. LIBERTY OF ...

Names of Parties		Age	Marital Status	Rank or Profession	Residence at the Time of Marriage	Father's Name in Full	Marginal Notes
Christian Name	Surname						
<u>JANE LOH SIEW YOK</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	
<u>BERNARD SURINDER CHAULY</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	<u>...</u>	

Married in the ... at ... on the ... day of April  
in the year 1947 by ...

in the presence of ...

CERTIFIED TRUE COPY



(top) Marriage certificate for Jane Loh Siew Yoke and Bernard Surinder Chauly;  
(bottom) The wedding picture

GROWING UP WITH GHOSTS



Clockwise, from top – exchanging marriage vows, Father Tavenec is on the far right;  
a year later, Jane is pregnant with Bernice in this picture taken at the beach in  
Kota Bharu, Kelantan; Mr & Mrs Bernard Chauly after the wedding



*Bernard and Jane are married at the Church of Our Lady of Fatima of the Holy Rosary on 27 April 1967 in Kota Bharu, Kelantan. Surinder Singh has become Bernard Surinder Chauly. He takes his clan name from the Punjab as his surname. Jane is now Mrs Bernard Chauly. The wedding is small, intimate. Few friends come and even fewer family members attend. The Lohs forbid their children to attend the wedding in Kota Bharu, but Pek Yoke, Mee Yoke and Yew Dong arrive. Devinder is the only sibling who braves the journey to the East Coast. Bernard and Jane are married by Father Jean Tavennec, the French parish priest who was already Bernard's friend in Penang.*

*Bernard and Jane continue to live in the house across Sekolah Menengah Kamil in Pasir Puteh. It is a small wooden house on stilts. It is also blue. In December, Jane discovers that she is pregnant. In the middle of August 1968, she flies to Georgetown to give birth. I enter the world at 2:59 p.m. on 23 August 1968. It is the year of the earth monkey.*

*Before my mouth is guided to my mother's breast, my grandfather Bapuji gives me 'cherda doda' or curdled tiger's milk found deep in the jungles of Kedah. He puts a little in my mouth and whispers in my ear. 'Keesi To Deeri Na, Sheer Vengu Rei' 'Don't be afraid of anyone, live like a tiger'.*

*My birth has finally brought peace to my family.*

2.9.68

Darling,

I miss you so much. How are you and the baby? Please kiss and hug the baby for me. I'm so tired and sleepy now and yet I have to be in school today.

I started writing this letter in school but have to continue now at 9.00 p.m.

By the time I started from Butterworth it was noon. There was no problem at the Customs. I reached Ipoh in heavy rain at 2.15 p.m. and went straight to your house. Everybody was at home except Mother and Mei Yoke and I had lunch there while waiting for the rain to stop. Dolly was so happy to see me that she started licking me all over. When I came down to the car she ran after me. I was so sorry to leave her behind.

Father asked me to send him a copy of my application for transfer. He says that he knows somebody in the Ministry who can get me back to Penang next year. So today I got the application form from H.M and I have filled it in. But I'll have to wait till you return so that you can sign your form.

I left Ipoh at 3.00 p.m. and just outside the town I picked up two European hitchhikers. But near Gopeng I met Ajit who was returning to Ipoh to buy a new tyre because he had a puncture. He had left Shan, his mother, brother and sister-in-law in Kampar and squeezed half their luggage and their brother and sister-in-law into my car which was already full with all your things from Ipoh and the two huge ruck-sacks belonging to the two hitch-hikers. I had to drop the couple at the girl's house in Sungkai, which is a few miles after Bidor but more than a mile off the main road, along a horrible bumpy road. I was forced to stop there for a cup of tea because the girl's mother is my father's sister.

Then I proceeded to K.K.B and reached there at 6.00 p.m. in heavy rain. Devinder had just got up from his afternoon nap and found that his bed sheet, blanket, pillow, mattress and camp bed were soaked in the rain because he had put them out to sun. By the time Ajit and the others arrived, it was past 8.00 p.m. and since it was still raining they all decided to stay there for the night. Fortunately, they had brought along their own food so we all shared it. After dinner, Devinder and I, Ajit and his brother went to the Police Mess to have a few drinks after which I went to the club to play billiards. By the time we came back we found everybody sleeping on the floor and there was no place for me. So I had to sleep in the car. But I slept so soundly that Devinder had to wake me up at 8.00 a.m. After a quick breakfast I left at 8.30 a.m. By the time I reached Temerloh, I was feeling very tired so I went to the rest house and had a cold orange squash, had a wash and rested for half an hour. I left Temerloh at 12.00 and arrived in Kuantan at 1.30 p.m. had lunch and left at 2.00 p.m. I arrived in Kuala Terengganu at 4.15 p.m., had tea and left at 4.30 p.m. and arrived in Pasir Puteh at 6.00 p.m.

The house was in such a mess that I had to cleanup a bit before I could unpack and have a bath. I asked Peng to come home but she preferred to stay with Muthu. She also had her dinner there, while George and I went to town to eat. By the time I came back from dinner and rang you up, it was already 10.00 p.m. After that I went straight to bed and slept soundly till 7.00 a.m. this morning. I didn't have anything to cook for breakfast so I had to eat in the canteen.

Peng had her lunch with Muthu while I went to K.B to cash the cheque and had my lunch there. I have saved \$50 for each of us and started an account for Bernice with \$20. I still have \$110 left but have to settle the electricity and water bills and pay the servant \$30. I fetched her servant at 3.30 p.m. and then went to

the market. She came along with me. She has helped me to clean up the house and I had to call Peng to sleep with the servant who was afraid to stay with me alone. She cooked our dinner but it wasn't very nice because all I could get was some vegetables and fish. After dinner I went for my F.E.C and now am writing this letter. I'll be going to bed as soon as I finish. I am sending Father \$350 of which \$100 is to repay what I borrowed from him, \$100 for the usual monthly money I send him, \$50 to buy your air ticket, \$30 for Mother and \$20 for you in case you need it.

Please ask Father to book your air ticket for this Saturday the 7th September. Saturday is better than Friday so that Father Tavenec can send you to the airport and maybe Mother and Surjit can come along to see you off. If it were Friday then only Mother or Surjit could come to see you off. Please ask one of the girls to go and tell Father Tavenec as soon as Father has made your booking. Let me know of the date and time when I ring you up on Thursday night.

Please take care of yourself and Bernice. I miss you both so much. This week is going to seem like ages. If you have time please write to me and tell me about yourself and Bernice. Has your bleeding stopped yet? And how is your backache? How is Bernice growing? Does she wake in the middle of the night and does she drink enough? I would so much like to be with you so that I can help you look after Bernice. Please come back quickly to me. I love you so much. I cried all the way from Penang to Ipoh. I've never cried so much before. Please kiss and hug Bernice for me. I hope you are happy staying there. Please try to feel at home there. My people all love you and Bernice very much. So please be nice to them darling. I must stop now as I still have to write to Father.

Your loving husband  
Surinder

P.S. Darling, the baby has already brought us good luck. I am one of the lucky ones to receive a Swiss watch worth \$41 from Lucas Battery Co. for buying a new car battery. Every tenth person who buys their battery receives the watch. I may also be lucky with the lottery ticket which I bought on the day the baby was born but haven't had time to check the numbers. If you can, please send me the cutting of the winning numbers from the newspapers as I can't get a copy here. I also wanted to buy the 3-digit numbers on the day Bernice was born but the Turf Club office was closed when I went there. I don't know whether any of the numbers came out or not as I haven't read the papers for the past week. I don't want to look up the papers because I don't want to curse myself for not buying the numbers if any of them came out.

Surinder



Jane holding baby Bernice in a trishaw, Kota Bharu; Kelantan

OF LOVE

VALENTINE'S DAY CARD

My darling Jane

*The Life that I have  
Is all that I have  
And the life that I have  
Is yours  
The love that I have  
The life that I have  
Is yours, and yours  
And yours  
A sleep I shall have  
A rest I shall have  
Yet death will be but a pause  
For the peace of my years  
In the long green grass  
Will be yours,  
and yours  
And yours.*

Your loving husband  
Surinder



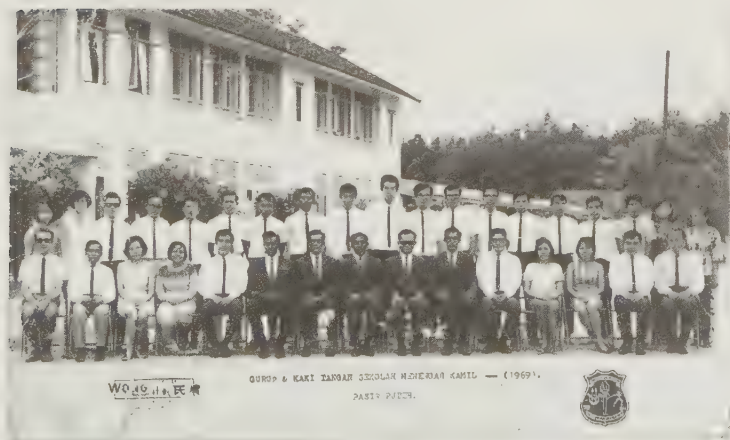
**SURINDER. PASIR PUTEH. 14 MAY 1969**

We heard of the riots yesterday. Many were butchered in the streets. A lot of killings are in Kuala Lumpur. The teachers were talking about it in the staffroom yesterday. It is very worrying. Mr Chin said that it was a bloodbath, there was blood on the streets, the blood of the Chinese. His friend had called from the city and said that it was chaos. He vowed he would never ever return. Kelantan was the safest place in the country to be in.

I came home and told Jane about it. We were both thankful that we were here, such things would never happen here. The Malays here are the most peaceful in the whole country. They would never hurt us.

I look at baby Bernice, and I cannot imagine anything happening to her. My mother is here, feeding her from the bottle. Jane is doing some marking and I am here, at my desk, studying for my Masters.

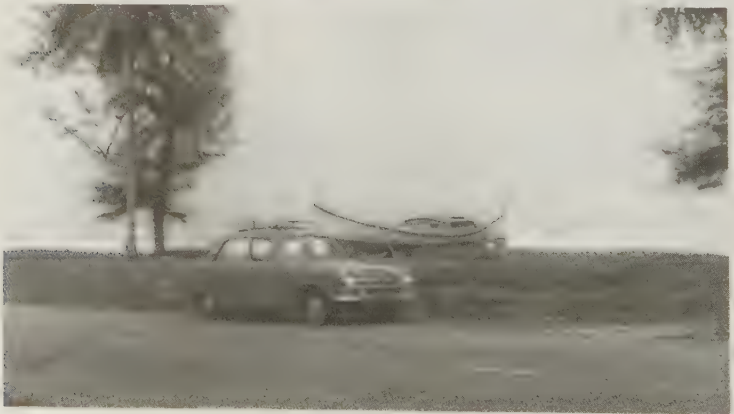
God has been good to us. I am truly happy. I never thought I could be this happy.



Group picture of teaching and administration staff at Sekolah Menengah Kamil, Pasir Puteh, Kelantan in 1969

1972

*For three years, I grow up on the East Coast, in the blue house, opposite Kamil Secondary School. I have a Chinese nanny, I call her Ah Mek. She is my amah for the first three years of my life. She feeds me, nurtures me, cradles me to sleep, wakes me up, bathes me, feeds me and sings to me. She wears a white samfu top and loose black pants, like Chinese amahs everywhere. She is small and wiry, like a monkey. Her hair is always tied into a tight bun. She loves to take me for rides on the trishaw. She does not like taxis. The first time she enters a taxi, she removes her shoes and politely leaves them on the road. When we get off, my father notices her bare feet. Kasut di mana? Where are your shoes? She just smiles and says, Sudah lupa di sana. I left them there. And so we lived, a happy family with a mummy, papa and baby in the blue house in Pasir Puteh, Kelantan. By the wide, windy stretches of paddy fields, of buffaloes and white herons perched upon muddy grazing backs, of men plowing the fields in wide hats, of clear blue skies, kampung houses on stilts and women walking in sarongs. My father paints these landscapes, he paints them in oils on canvas. I remember this. I remember the light from the wooden shutters of our house as he glides his brush over the canvas. I remember this.*



The blue Ford Cortina by the beach in Kelantan



Papa and Bernice, Kelantan





PART IV





## OF DEATH

### TAIPING. 1973

My memories of Kelantan come to an end when my parents are posted to the town of Taiping in Perak. My sister Janice is born in January 1972 at the Taiping Maternity Hospital. My father teaches at St. George's Institution and forms the school's first rugby team. My mother teaches at Convent Kota. I am four. We have a servant girl, Ah Kiau, and together we live at 25 Jalan Merpati in Kamunting Gardens.

Taiping, which means "the town of everlasting peace", is built on greed, lust and power. This is the town that tin built. The Larut Wars are quelled by the British after the signing of the Pangkor Treaty in 1874, and the warring Chinese are split into the Hakka and the Cantonese factions, the Hai San and the Ghee Hin. The Hakka are given the town of Taiping, the Cantonese, Kamunting.

Taiping is a historical town, its wide tree-lined avenues house beautiful wooden bungalows, with one in particular that I frequent. My first piano teacher Miss Simpson lives in one of these houses - an aging Eurasian spinster who wears her thin, grey hair in a bun, squints through pointy glasses and wears calico dresses. She hits my small fingers with a narrow rattan cane if I play a wrong note and she makes me cry. Her house is of green and white wood, raised on stone stilts, lush with white and yellow frangipani and purple-pink bougainvillea. I have names for all the buildings in Taiping, the railway station is the "wee-wee station", the prison is the "cream-cracker building", my mother's school is "the white squirrel building". I remember my father taking me to these places. He carries me high on his shoulders and tickles me. He buys me small packets of nutmeg from the wee-wee station, he picks me up

when I fall off my tricycle, and kisses the scars which are still there, he takes me to the Cathay cinema where we watch *Bobby* and my mother cries, wetting her brown and orange polyester blouse. We drive in the blue Ford Cortina, I sit in between my parents, I close my eyes and count the street lights as we weave in and out of the tree-lined avenues of Taiping and into the white house on the street named after the dove, on Jalan Merpati.

How I used to imagine that I was an explorer, my face pressed to the glass in the Perak Museum, the glass eyes of the stuffed animals staring back at me. The high ceilings of the museum had an air of mould and mystery. There were ancient things here, things from all over the world, things that came from the past in locked, secret rooms. It smelled of history. And the cool winds from Maxwell Hill would come down in the evenings and Taiping would be bathed in a lyrical light. One could still imagine the clutter of opium dens and the exhausted Chinese coolies sipping tea and slipping into oblivion, the proud Sikh guards and policemen patrolling the town, and in the distance, the cackle of night birds, cicadas and monkeys. This is Taiping. I am half Sikh, half Chinese. I am a child of peace.

**JASWANT SINGH (BAPUJI). GEORGETOWN**

**6 JANUARY 1973**

I wanted to return early today. I sit here, on all days, under this tree and I wait with my typewriter. And then I write for them, for all of them. For the lawyers who can write and the chettiers who can't. I will write for them.

My son, my son. My beloved of all my sons. You will come today and I will welcome you to my house. The house that was once full of grief, but will now be full of the sounds of your children.

And then she was born,  
your child was born, the little  
girl brought peace to my heart.  
I was there when she was born  
and I gave her the milk of the  
tiger so she would be strong,  
like you, my son.

I was at work when you  
died, when the sea claimed you.  
I was under the tree and I felt  
stillness in the air. As if the dead  
had walked past me. I knew  
something was wrong.

When they came to get  
me, I could not walk, I could not rise up.

My son, my son. Beloved of all my sons.

God put me on top of the mountain, and then he cast  
me down below.



Jaswant Singh in his 40s

#### OF THE SEA

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who lost her father.  
One minute he was there and the next minute he was gone.

*Papa, Papa, where are you? Where are you? Are we playing a game?*

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who went for a picnic with her mother and father on the beach. It was a lovely day and they sat on the beach and had some sandwiches, chocolate biscuits and some orange squash. But the little girl went into the water with her father and she had a wonderful time playing and swimming with him. He tickled her toes, carried her on his shoulders, as they splashed and kicked around in the water. She stood in the water while he swam around her and tickled her toes again and again. Then the little girl's mother called out to her. The



little girl walked out from the water and waved to her father as he dove into the shallow waves. The little girl sat with her mother for a while and nibbled on a chocolate biscuit. They sat like this for a while, mother and daughter.

She did not know how long it was but when her mother started to worry, she knew something was wrong. Her father was still in the water, but they could not see him. He had been there for a very long time and her mother was starting to worry.

*Where is he? I can't see him at all.*

Her mother then got very worried and called the lifeguards. They went into the water. Then they came out with him, her father's body. He was dead. There was water and sand coming out of his mouth. He was dead.

*I want my Papa! I want my Papa!*

*Where are you going, Papa? Please don't leave me.*

*Who will play with me?*

Why are they putting him in the ground? If they bury him, he won't be able to come out. How is he going to come out?

Sat Nam Sat Nam Sat Nam Ji, Vaheguru Vaheguru Vaheguru Ji.

What are they putting on you, Papa? It looks like butter from a tin. Oh I see, now they will put the fire on your head and you will burn. And your body will turn to ash. And they will put you in the blue and white bottle.

Manji, Bapuji, saag, nehi.

Manji, Bapuji, saag, nehi.

My great-grandmother was a witch. She reared snakes in the mountains. White cobras.

All the men in her family died. One by one, her husband, her son, her father, then her brothers. One by one, they all died. So they cursed her from the village. They cursed her and with that, they cursed her away. So she went and lived in the mountains. With her snakes.

12.4.73

My darling,

I have decided to write to you.

I miss you so much, so very much.

But, I have to live and go on  
for the sake of the children.

Oh, darling, my darling...

This morning, one of the tyres of  
the car was punctured. I had to stand  
for a man from the Esso station to  
fix it. He was very helpful.

Late, I wanted to take Bianca  
to the Dental Clinic. But, it was  
closed.

We went to see a film home  
for a while.

Came home to cook porridge for  
James. He is still having a cough.

My darling, it's so painful to  
go on. But, I must live & love the

LETTERS TO THE DEAD

JANE. TAIPING

12 APRIL 1973

My darling husband,

I have decided to write to you. I miss you so much, so very much. But I have to live and go on for the sake of the children. Why my darling, why did you have to go so soon?

This morning, one of the tyres of the car was punctured. I had to send for a man from the Esso station to fix it. He was very helpful. Later, I wanted to take Bernice to the Dental Clinic but it was closed. Then, I came home to make porridge for Janice, she is still having a cough.

My darling, it is so painful to go on. But I must live and love the children as you have always loved us. I love you my darling, I love you more now. Please look after us, my love. I must go on living as long as I can. Please help me, please go on loving me,

Yours,

Jane.

27 APRIL 1973

My darling husband,

Today is our 6th wedding anniversary. I bought six carnations for you as you would have bought for me. Remember the day six years ago when I became your wife? I am still very much your wife waiting to go home to you.

My darling, I still can't understand why you had to leave us so soon. If you were with me today, I would be the happiest woman in the world, bearing your third child and sharing the joy of our married life. My darling husband, it is your love for me, and my love for you that gives me the courage to go on.

I love you so much. That is why I can go on. Without that I could die of loneliness.

Please be with me all the time. The baby inside is growing fast. I hope it is a boy who will be just like you. The baby will be called Surin.

I cry so much for you but I know that you are with God.

Please come to me in my dreams.

I love you.

Jane

### 7 MAY 1973

My darling husband, Bernice and Janice still have colds. They have not been well for a week. How I wish you were with me to watch them grow. Bernice is very well behaved according to the teachers in school. At home she tries to help me and tries to understand when I am depressed. My heart aches for her, for losing you so early in her life. By looking at her face I know that I have to live and go on.

### 17 MAY 1973

Bernice has been asking for you for two days now. She was very bored as there was no one to play with her. Remember how you two used to race around in the garden?

We went for a picnic today at the Lake Gardens. Bernice was very excited about it. But it was not the same without you.

How long can I last? The baby is growing more and more. I hope it is a boy. I always wanted to give you a boy.

I feel like I have been cheated by fate. Why did you have to leave me so soon?

Life is so mysterious. Why, why, why did you have to leave me so soon? I can't find an answer to this. I suppose I shall never be able to. God, you have been so unfair.

I love you so my darling. Please be with me always.

Yours, forever

Jane

*My mother used to sing this song and hum it. One day she taught us the words.*

### Oh My Papa

Oh my Papa, to me you were so wonderful

Oh my Papa, to me you were so good

No one could be, so gentle and so lovable

Oh, my Papa, he always understood.

Gone are the days when he could take me on his knee

And with a smile he'd change my tears to laughter

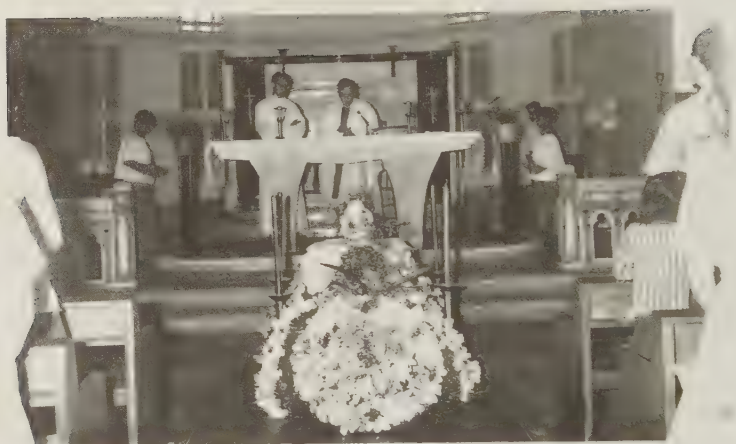
Oh, my Papa, so funny, so adorable

Always the clown so funny in his way

Oh, my Papa, to me he was so wonderful

Deep in my heart I miss him so today.

(From the original German song "O Mein Papa" written by Paul Burkhard in 1939 and translated into English by John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons. The song became a hit in 1954 with the rendition sung by Eddie Fisher.)



THE FUNERAL  
TAIPING, 1973

*Father Tavenne says the funeral mass. He married my parents seven years before and now he buries my father. The service is held at St Louis Church. It is full of my father's students, friends and colleagues. He was a popular teacher and was loved by all. Surinder Singh @ Bernard Chauly was cremated on a pyre in the gurdwara in Georgetown in the traditional Sikh manner and his ashes are now in a blue and white urn. He will be buried in the Christian cemetery in Taiping. There are hundreds of people at the church. Scouts and prefects in uniform, the nuns from the convent, Sister Cyril and Sister Claire are there. My aunts and uncles are there, their faces struck with grief. I am wearing a striped dress. I am told that when they began to throw the earth into the grave, I wanted to jump in. I wanted to be buried with my father.*

We are devastated. There are no words. My grandfather does not even tell his three daughters in England, Manjit, Surjit and Pami, of their brother's death. He sends them the article from the



*Straits Echo* instead. They scream and they faint when they open his letter. My mother finds out soon after that she is pregnant. She thinks of aborting her unborn child, unable to grasp the reality of raising three children on her own. Uncle Birinder, my father's second brother, convinces her not to, and promises to be there at the birth. Uncle Birinder is now a Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Malayan Armed Forces and is married to Gwen, an English woman. They live at the army barracks in Taiping. He is soon sent to Vietnam on a secret mission. He goes to My Lai after the massacre and tells me years later about the bodies of dead little girls who are slit from their throats to their vaginas. My mother continues to teach at Convent Kota Secondary School, and I attend Standard One and Two at the Convent's primary school. My father's death has affected many. There are no words. My sister Janice has no memory of my father. My brother Bernard is born in Taiping eight months after my father's death. My childhood with my father has ended, and a part of me is dead, along with him. The great love between my father and mother had come to an abrupt end.

Local Echo



ARROW shows the spot where Surinder was last seen. The life-guard post is at extreme left.

**CATHAY ORGANISATION**

TODAY 4 SHOWS  
1.00, 3.50, 6.30 & 8.50 P.M.

A FILMMAKER'S GENIUS IN PRODUCTION  
**ROD TAYLOR POWDERKEG**

Also starring DENNIS COLE

NEXT CHANGE

PEANG, Sun — A Taiping school teacher, Surinder Singh, 23, was found drowned at sea yesterday afternoon at Miami Beach — just 60 yards from the life-guard post which was unmanned.

It was a tragic end to a quiet afternoon swim for Surinder who had come to Penang with his family to visit his father and also to attend a wedding of a friend today.

Surinder was unconscious when pulled out of the sea at about 8.45 p.m. after a

# A swimmer drowns off Miami Beach



SURINDER SINGH

Earlier, Surinder — he is with the St. George's School in Taiping — had gone to Miami Beach with his wife and two children and daughter. They were accompanied by Devinder, Mrs. Devinder and their daughter.

## Went back

Surinder was swimming underwater. After having bathed his daughter and seeing her to the beach, he went back to the sea again, Devinder recalled.

"He swam, dove under-water and then got into difficulties. I cannot remember how long it was before I realised something was wrong as he was nowhere to be seen."

"I shouted for help and immediately tried to find him. I failed," he said.

"There were also a few pirates here and we quickly organised ourselves into a human chain and be-

gan combing the area. "A few yards away from me, I accidentally hit him with my legs. I got lifted high into the air and when we gave him the 'of-life'," he added.

Devinder said they were waiting for an ambulance with an ambulance. The tourist inside stopped rushed them to hospital. "I and the tourist tried to revive him with artificial respiration inside taxi but to no avail," he said.

"At the time of his appearance, there was a single life-guard on Miami Beach. The life-guard was empty," Devinder said.

Devinder, a clerk at the Butterworth Court said that his brother-in-law, who was swimming wherever he came out to Penang, was rescued at the Miami Beach. Surinder's body was found at the Miami Beach at Rawang Road yesterday afternoon.

Newspaper article of the drowning, *The Straits Echo*, 8 January 1973

We continue to live in the white house on Jalan Merpati. There are always visitors paying their sympathies, Ah Kiau has to look after two young children and my grandmothers, Manji and Poh Poh are always there to help. We go to Ipoh and Penang often to visit both families. These are the years of great sadness. In 1976, my mother decides to move to Ipoh, to be closer with her family. This marked the end of one childhood, my childhood with my father.

*There is this song that she sings all the time. There is this song on the radio in the white house in Taiping. The servant girl Ah Kiau, she does not speak English, but she knows this, she knows this song. And the girl who has lost her father sings it with her.*





Where's your papa gone?

Where's your papa gone?

Far Far away

Far Far away

Last night I heard my mama singing a song

Ooh ee, chirpy chirpy cheep cheep

Chirpy chirpy cheep cheep chirp

("Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep" was recorded in 1971 by its composer Larry Stott and made popular by Scottish band Middle of the Road in 1972. It became a hit and sold more than 10 million copies worldwide.)



We visit my father's grave every year, once a year for the next 15 years. We climb across the fence into the Christian cemetery, where young Allied soldiers are buried from the wars, their marked graves shaded by weeping willows at sunset, and we walk carefully across the other tombstones, reading the same headstones, year after year, looking at new plots and smacking our calves to shake off mosquitoes until we reach my father's grave. We pull weeds, scrub the marble headstone, light candles and put fresh flowers in the marble vase. And then my mother, my sister, my brother and I, we pray, we pray for our dead father and we say the Holy Rosary. After the Our Father, we take turns to say the Hail Mary and then we pray on our own. Silently, with eyes and hands pressed hard in prayer, I say:

*Dear Papa, please look after us, please keep us safe. We ask you to bless us, make us work hard in school and do as best as we can in our exams. We ask you to guide us, help Mummy in her work, keep her safe when she travels, and to continue looking after us. We love you and miss you very much. Please take care of us, Papa, we love you, we miss you. Come to us in our dreams. Amen.*

BERNICE CHAULY

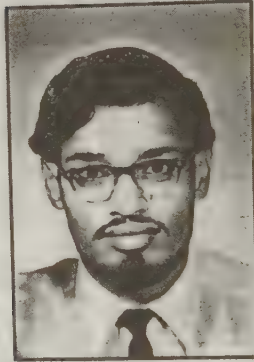
In Loving Memory  
of  
My beloved husband  
Bernard Chauly  
Born 31.12.1939  
Died 6.1.1973

Your love  
Your Care for me  
Remain  
My Tower of strength  
My Hope in life  
Until we meet again  
And part no more

Jane

# OBITUARY

## Mr. Bernard Chauly



January 7th. was indeed a day of sorrow for St. George's. We received news that Bernard had passed away the previous afternoon in Penang in a drowning mishap. The news came as a numbing shock to us. Many of us who heard the news that Sunday morning rushed to Penang to pay our last respects to a dear friend and colleague.

His remains were cremated in Penang and the ashes brought back to Taiping for burial. A large crowd of teachers and pupils from St. George's and the Convent attended the funeral service.

The late Mr. Bernard Chauly was born in Penang and educated at St. Xavier's Institution. After obtaining his Higher School Certificate, he went to England for his teacher-training. He served in Kelantan before coming to St. George's. At the time of his death he was studying for a London University external degree.

Bernard was a remarkable person. He was extraordinarily talented and excelled in art, music and sports. Games and athletics in St. George's received an added stimulus after he came to St. George's. Rugger was his passion. It was he who first introduced rugger to St. George's. His interest, enthusiasm and devotion have borne fruit. St. George's now boasts of a formidable rugger team with quite a few notable victories in the past two years.

Bernard's simplicity and sincerity endeared him to all. Unassuming and cheerful, he brought a vitality of purpose to everything he undertook. He gave his time and energy freely and ungrudgingly whenever needed. His untimely death has robbed St. George's of a great teacher. A man with such rare qualities of mind and character and as talented as Bernard is indeed

difficult to replace. Our sincere sympathy and condolence go to his bereaved wife and family.

Besides his interest in Games and Athletics, Mr. Chauly was also a warranted Scouter in the First Taiping Senior Troop. He has gone through progressive Scouting having risen from a Cub in S.X.I.(Pri.) to a Rover Scout in the Secondary. While in England he availed himself of the opportunity of being trained at Gilwell Park itself, the mecca of International Scouting. When he was posted to the East Coast he became a Scouter.

His knowledge of Scouting was so wide that he was always in great demand in our training camps. He had also one special session at most training camps and that was 'Character Formation in Scouting'.

A man who played the guitar well, he was popular with the Seniors and he used to teach them scout songs. As an artist he was called on to design scout gateways and school posters. Under his direction, the school Art Club flourished. He did not confine himself to the Art Room but took his boys on many 'field' trips. He had started a small Art Gallery and the Club took part in several exhibitions. Once they played host to St. Michael's Art Club.

It is a wonder how he found time to lead half a dozen extra-mural activities in school. He was also an active parishoner of St. Louis. He was connected with the Carols Group and was responsible for the setting up of the last Christmas crib in Church. A man of many talents, he had used them for the betterment of his fellowmen. Mr. Chauly would have earned this gospel tribute 'Well Done, thou good and faithful servant, I will make you Lord of many things.'

A. JOSEPH  
& J. SAW



PART V



## THE 80s

### AH KONG'S BREAKFAST

#### HO SIEW NGAN (POH POH)

Come here Benie, take your Ah Kong his breakfast. And if he complains again, I will ask him to eat at the coffee shop. Not salty enough – hah! How much salt does he want? He drinks and smokes so much, he cannot taste anything any more lah, that's why. He needs a new tongue. That's what he needs.

Cook for him also not good enough - Sek lah. Just eat. What more does he want?

I tell you ah Benie, I used to take my fourth daughter, your Auntie Lai, to all the brothels in town to look for him. All the men of his status at that time had mistresses. See how useless they are! Heh, at the Nam Hoi Wui Koon clan association, all these men will be so well behaved but when you see them at the brothels, you will feel like killing them. Such good actors they are!

Especially that man with the thick sunglasses, I tell you ah, he and your Ah Kong would be up to no good! He would write letters in English from London saying 'My dear Mooi Fatt, if only you could lend me another thousand ringgit, I will be sure to look at that piece of land as I have previously promised to you in exchange for my debts.' Who the hell does he think he is?



Poh Poh in her late 40s

I don't care what they do together but don't lend him all your money lah. You can go off and eat pork with him and buy him whiskey and drink all night. And then? You will lend him more money. Because he is a big-shot. You are so stupid! You think that man will send our children to England? No lah! *You* will have to send them to England, because you are their father, not that man who makes promises to you. Promises that he never keeps. That man with the sunglasses is not your friend, how can you not see that!

You are such a stupid businessman. All our land, our shophouses are gone. That one on Hume Street, Sun Yat Sen stayed there, you know? Your father died there, too. And the land in Chateau Park and the two houses? Where is everything? How could you lose it all? You are a fool! I cannot believe I married such a fool of a Chinaman! And you complain about my cooking! The next time you say anything, I will throw the bowl at you! If you don't want to eat, don't eat. Mow sek lah! I will give it to your pigs!

Benie, you poor thing. I know you miss your Papa. Surinder, he was so tall. So handsome. But when your mother told us about him, I was very angry. I said, how can you do this to your father? After everything he has done for you? This Indian man? How can you marry an Indian man? But he could play mah-jong very well. Benie, you must learn to play mah-jong, like your Papa.

Benie, come here. Take some money from my purse and go across the street to buy some coconut water. I know you like it. It is so hot today, the coconut water will cool us down. Come here, come here lah! Go and buy the coconut water and then you can go upstairs.

Haiya, why do you keep going to the third floor? The sam low is your favourite place, isn't it? What do you see up

there? It is full of junk, I don't understand why you like all this junk. So much dust, so much dust, haiya, the past is so full of dust.

*Poh Poh sinks into her planter's chair and sighs. The Rediffusion is on the Chinese Opera channel. Poh Poh closes her eyes.*

*I wait for my grandmother to doze off and I walk up the narrow dusty stairs to the attic.*

## 2 CANTON DRIVE, MANSION PARK, OFF KAMPAR ROAD, IPOH

This is the address of our house in Ipoh. My mother sells the white house on Jalan Merpati and we move to Ipoh to be closer to my mother's family. We pack my father's books, his bookshelves, the wedding furniture, his paintings, his HMV records, our clothes and books into a lorry that follows us all the way from Taiping to Ipoh. I enrol in the Main Convent on Brewster Road and my mother finds a teaching position at a small government school on Silibin Road. I am in Standard Three. My sister is four and my brother is three. They are not yet in school and they spend their days at the shophouse on 14 Leech Street. We begin to learn Cantonese because my Poh Poh does not speak English, and slowly, our tongues begin the unfamiliar swirl of new lilts and sounds of our mother tongue, of Cantonese. This marks the beginning of my second childhood, of becoming Chinese.



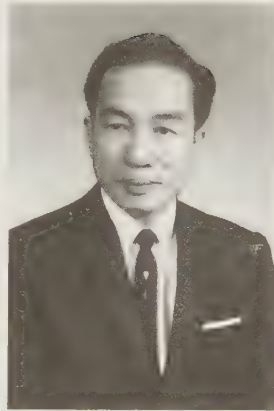
Chauly family portrait: left to right – Janice, Jane, Bernard and Bernice



#### 14 LEECH STREET

Ah Kong owned a butcher's shop on 14 Leech Street. in the old town of Ipoh. It was called Ying Woh.

At seven in the morning, my mother would drop off my sister, my brother and I at the shop, just in time to watch the day unfold. Ah Kong would already be up, puffing on his third or fourth cigarette. He was always dressed in his white Pagoda undershirt and white cotton shorts. He also wore heavy red wooden clogs. This was his only work attire for years.



Ah Kong in his late 40s

The only time he ever wore a shirt and trousers was when he went for Chinese dinners. He had a little closet underneath the musty stairs, and in it he kept his perfectly starched white Van Heusen shirts, pressed trousers, shiny black shoes and a pot of Yardley Lavender hair cream.

He would stand right in the middle of the shop while his two workers Ah San and Ah Ngow unloaded the slabs of pork from the lorry onto the thick wooden chopping blocks. Back and forth, back and forth they'd go, carrying half a pig carcass on their shoulders until it was all on the chopping blocks ready to be carved.

All this while, Ah Kong would stand there watching like a hawk over his purchased kill, puffing on his cigarette. He could smoke two packs of 555 cigarettes a day.

Ah San and Ah Ngow would sharpen their knives, which they made sure were truly sharp by cutting off a sliver of wood from the side of the chopping block.

The first assault was to cut off the head. With a few swift strokes, they severed the remaining skin and tendon from the

body. It all seemed so easy. The heads would be stuck on hooks, all in a row. Four heads every day. Four gaping mouths. Still beady eyes. Pink waxy ears.

Then they would pierce a hole in the skin, hook in their index fingers and slide the knife in slowly, easing it from left to right until the skin was separated from the fat. This part held the most fascination for me.

I would watch from the top of the stairs as customers started to trickle in for fresh meat. Ah Kong would retire to his desk with the glass top and the clicking of the abacus would start the day.

Ah Kong's accountant was an impeccable dresser. His white shirts were crisp, starched daily. He always wore black trousers and black shoes. He even had a pot of Kiwi Black Shoe Polish in his drawer. His name was Choy Foo and his hair was oiled and slicked back. He had the classical face of the Northern Chinese. My grandfather hated him but Choy Foo was loyal to him till the very end. I always wondered if he had a wife. He rode to work on a black bicycle. He seemed so lonely but so suave. He belonged in a 50s black-and-white film where he would play the role of the forgotten hero.

My grandmother Poh Poh would ask me to take Ah Kong's breakfast down to him every morning. It would be laid out on his tray, the round, iron and ceramic one with painted red and yellow flowers. Ah Kong had the same breakfast for over 30 years: a bowl of Quaker oats with Marmite topped with chopped green onions and a dash of white pepper, a soft boiled egg in a bowl with a sprinkling of kicap, a glass of Milo and last of all, a bowl of steaming hot Chinese tea.

I would take the tray down those narrow stairs, slide on a pair of wooden clogs and bring it to his desk. 'Ah Kong, your breakfast is ready.'

He would grunt a reply, stare at me out of those black, thick-rimmed glasses and continue puffing on his cigarette. Then I'd run out and get the Chinese newspapers that he read every day during breakfast. Sometimes he would let me keep the change.

Ah Kong used to spit a lot. Behind his desk was a large open window with wrought iron grates across it. After breakfast, he would stand in front of it and clear his lungs until the thick phlegm accumulated at the base of his throat. He'd stand back, lean forward and then swiftly expel it.

Most of the time, the phlegm would be caught around the metal bars and stick there. After a few days, it would dry out and form a hard, black, crusty skin around the bars. The entire window was covered in this crispy black skin, which would flake away after a while.

The shop had a reputation for selling fresh pork, the freshest in town. That was why the customers kept coming back. Ah Ngow was always charming to the customers. Ah San, in his shorts, tended to be a bit surly and gruff. His bare torso was dark, well muscled and always looked oiled. He would ask me to fill up the pot when the Chinese tea ran out. I was almost afraid of him.

The customers came from all walks of life; they were mostly servants from rich Chinese households, Indian women in saris, Eurasian ladies and fat, rich tai-tais in tight silk cheongsams weighed down in gold and jade.

Their fat ringed fingers would poke around the meat while the aroma of fresh pork filled our nostrils and rose into the air. The scent was dizzying, almost sickening, but something we all grew accustomed to.

'Are you sure this is lean? It doesn't look lean to me!'

'Only the best for you, Madam,' would be Ah Ngow's immediate reply.

Ah San would be on the antique wooden bench with his leg up and sipping on cups of tea.

Ah Kong would sit at his desk and smoke his 555 cigarettes. He kept all his accounts in long, brown books. Later we realised that he was a really bad businessman and that his debtors never paid him back.

Shortly after the noon meal, when the ceiling fans were straining to keep the heat of the day down, Ah Kong would call me from upstairs to go next door. 'Benie! Benie!'

Mr. Ng, the liquor merchant, would keep aside a crate of Remy Martin for my grandfather. I'd take him a bottle with a glass of lukewarm water. Sometimes he'd let me keep the change. Ah Kong drank a bottle of Remy Martin every day.

Twice a month he would go to the Nam Hoi Wui Koon or local Cantonese clan house to drink with his friends, finishing several bottles of Courvoisier and playing mah-jong all night.

Poh Poh was born in Canton in the year of the Monkey to the family of a fairly wealthy joss stick merchant. When she was 16 years old, she sailed from China with three trunks of clothes and her dowry of 16 gold ingots.

It was an arranged marriage and she had no say in the matter. Her arrival in Malaya marked the first day of the new moon in July 1936. The wedding ceremony took place two weeks later. She went on to bear 11 children, two of whom died during the Second World War.

Her life was a constant struggle to keep up with the demands placed on her. The primary focus was of course to bear as many children as possible while catering to the never-ending needs of her husband. She cooked, cleaned, shopped, washed, fed, waited on and slaved for 12 people.

To make things worse, Ah Kong was a womaniser in his younger days. It was not uncommon for wealthy Chinese businessmen to have mistresses then, and he had several. Coupled with his heavy drinking, Poh Poh was driven to her wit's end. To make things worse, he started criticising her cooking.

'What is this? How much salt did you put in this black bean sauce! The pork is so tough, it almost broke my tooth! Don't you know how to cook rice by now? What kind of wife are you? What is this! Useless!' he would scream from downstairs, not caring about the customers who would look on with interest.

Poh Poh tried many different dishes to halt her husband's growing resentment of her cooking. But one day, she had enough.

It was a particularly hot day and business was slow. Ah Kong was in a foul mood. Nothing had been going right. The orders had been mixed up and the meat was not very fresh. And he took it out on my grandmother.

'Are you trying to kill me? This food is not even fit for my pigs!'

That was the last straw. She hurried down from the stairs, waving her fists, shouting, 'Haiya, you are the most ungrateful man alive! It is you who is trying to kill me! I am not going to put up with you any longer!'

None of us had ever seen Poh Poh in such a rage. Uncle Chat and my mother had to restrain her from hurtling herself down the stairs. Ah Kong was struck dumb, but he continued eating his lunch.

Poh Poh suffered from high blood pressure ever since. She told me years later that if she had had a gun, she would have shot him right through his heart.

She loved the movies. It was her only outlet, her freedom. Every day after cooking lunch, she would tuck her purse under her arm and go off to the cinema. There were 13 cinema halls in Ipoh at the time, managed by Cathay and Shaw Brothers. She watched two movies a day, every day. The ticket sellers at Cathay, Lido,



With Ah Kong and Poh Poh at 14 Leech St, Ipoh; the door to Ah Kong's right was where he kept his white shirts and Lavender hair cream

Odeon, Sun, Grand, Oriental, Ruby, Rex, Majestic, Star, Jubilee, Hoover and Capitol all knew her. Sometimes, she would be the only person in the entire cinema hall. I know because once we were the only people in the hall. All I remember was the crunching of kuaci and the projectionist's snores. Hoover was her favourite cinema because it was the closest. She loved Chinese ghost stories, but most of all, she loved the films of Alfred Hitchcock.

My grandfather died peacefully. This was after his favourite son, my uncle Chat, or Warren as he was known (after Warren Beatty), was found dead in a shopping mall in Sydney. Ah Kong deteriorated after that.

My grandmother suffered a third stroke that left her entire left side paralysed. She became a shell, tired with sorrows that sagged her skin. This was the woman who bought me dumplings every morning and made her own wine with raisins from the

sundry shop next door. I remember her dyeing her hair with an old toothbrush every month. When she died, the family squabbled at the funeral. My uncle screamed at my aunt and asked her to leave. There were tears, other than for my grandmother.

The shophouse still stands but the façade is gone and concrete slabs support the front. It was sold when I was abroad in Canada. I was heartbroken when I found out. Now, TOTO screams across.

### THE BLUE TEAR

I am on a quest. To find my father's car. You see, when I was a child, we had the most amazing car in the world.

It was blue and it was wide and it had fins at the back. Well, not like the fins of a Thunderbird, it wasn't American-looking at all. It was a Ford Cortina.

I particularly loved being in the back. I could slide all over and crawl up and down and even squeeze up the space in the back between the windscreen.

Even the seats were blue. This pale sky-blue leather, which played off my childish imaginations – I often imagined I was tossed around waves, with the wind messing up my hair. It was big enough to be a boat, but small enough to be the inside of a spaceship.

We went everywhere in that car. Trips to the railway station. To the Lake Gardens and back. To my grandmother's house in Penang and back. To Ipoh and back.

My father kept his cigarettes in the glove compartment. My mother always had stacks of paper files and books at her feet. I felt safe in that car. It didn't matter if I'd fallen or scraped my knee at the playground, after my father picked me up and put me in the car, I'd be okay.

After he died, I started sitting in the front, next to my mother. It was different, even smelt different.

One day, I found a tear at the side of the seat. It was a little hole, the size of my finger. I picked at it. Stuck my finger in it and pushed in deeper. Felt the softness of the foam and picked even more. I picked at it every day, to school and from school. I wasn't sure of what I was looking for or when I would stop. I just had to keep picking.

It got bigger and bigger, I picked at the leather and pulled out bits of foam, which I kept in my uniform pocket.

I got found out eventually, the same day when I had picked my way into the springs of the seat. Needless to say, Mother got really upset. That was when she decided to sell it.

She came back one day with a blue Mazda. I cried for days. Ever since then, I have looked for that car, at traffic lights, at car sales, at parking lots from Penang to Taiping and the streets of Ipoh's old town. I saw it in a movie once. It was a mobster's getaway car. I am still looking.

A sky-blue Ford Cortina with the number plate PF 7024.

With a tear on the side of the seat.

### 23 CHEESEMAN ROAD

We called it Bapuji's house for as long as he lived, and after he died, we called it Manji's house. Driving up from Ipoh took ever so long, it was hours and hours, and as children, it always seemed longer. We did the drive in Mother's light blue Mazda with the number plate AU 466. We made the trip at least once a year because Mother wanted us to still feel a little Punjabi in us.

I loved Bapuji, he had a long beard and he was wise. He had twinkly eyes, and his teeth were slightly crooked. I loved to sneak in on him when he was up in the attic swishing the cow's tail when he was reading the Guru Granth Sahib. I remember when he would wash his hair, 'Come beta, come and see me comb my hair.' And he would oil his hair, with streaks of silver now, and



twist it into a bun. Then he would take the length of the turban and skilfully tie it around his head, all the while smiling at me. 'Ah beta, you like to watch me do this, don't you.'

Manji made chai all day long. She would heat fresh cow's milk in the faded yellow enamel pot with exposed rusty bits, stir in sugar and cardamom until there was a skin from the fat on the top. She added the tea leaves and let it sit. Then she strained the tea into small cups. I loved her chai, I could drink it all day.

We would play in the playground across the road, scream and shout and play with the neighbours' kids. We all slept in the same room. It smelt of Cuticura talcum powder and coconut oil. There was a picture of Guru Nanak in every room. Bapuji always slept on the charpoy outside the house. He never slept inside.

Manji was the best chapatti maker I ever knew. We always ate dinner outside on the porch, always late, around nine. We never ate dinner late at home, but at Bapuji's house, we ate late, and went to bed late. And dinner every night was chapatti. Sometimes we had rice.

Manji would first add water to the atta flour. Manji didn't speak much English, she would smile a lot, she had two gold teeth on either side, and she had grey eyes. Her arms were thick and the flesh on them was already flabby and dangled down like bits of pastry. Then she would fold the flour and water together and make it into a big mound of dough. She covered it with a damp cloth and it would sit for a while. Then she would start rolling them with her palms into little balls. A few swishes with her hands and there would be perfect little balls, ready to be rolled into chapattis.

She rolled them onto a round wooden board with heels. She was so fast, so clever, I could never ever get one perfectly round. Bapuji always ate mine, he knew they were mine, because they weren't perfect. The smell of ghee on hot chapatti is the best smell in the world. It is the smell of my father's home.

Manji's chicken curry was exceptional. She made it with Bapuji's secret masala mix. That is why it was so good. There was nothing better than a hot steaming chapatti to mop up the curry gravy. But the only *other* thing better than Manji's chicken curry is her saag. It looks like green mulch, but it is the most delicious thing in the world.

This is how she made it.

### Manji's saag recipe

Beta, first you go to the market and get four katis of three different kinds of bayam. Spinach, you know? You must wash nicely and cut very fine. Then use about one kati of pork, cut very, very fine. Don't mince it, but use your chopping knife and chop the meat a few times. Put the bayam in a big clay pot with water and salt and make sure everything is covered. Put the pork in with four large green chillies. Cook on a slow fire for about four hours, and add water if necessary. Mix some atta flour with water and then stir it into the pot very quickly. If you don't stir it quickly, it will become lumpy. Finally fry some onions, ginger, garlic and your Bapuji's secret masala mix with ghee and stir in.

Manji's saag, chapatti and chicken curry made us feel Punjabi. It reminded us, from time to time, that this is what my father ate. This was the food that he loved, too.

## OF FEASTS

Poh Poh was one of those cooks who could whip something up without much effort and it would always satisfy the most discerning of stomachs. We always had a supply of fresh pork and Poh Poh would

use up all parts of the animal. From the ears to the tail, intestines and trotters, nothing was spared from her culinary skill and prowess.

Her speciality was pig trotters cooked in rice wine and vinegar. It's an acquired taste as I discovered. The first time I tried it, my whole face winced at the sour, almost pungent taste of the aromatic brown sauce. I watched as my Uncle Chat sucked and slurped bits of meat from the bone, attacking the fat with vigour, then swallowing while scooping morsels of rice into his mouth rhythmically with chopsticks. Uncle Chat had been in Australia for years and he was making up for lost time. It was Chinese New Year and the year of the Pig.

The reunion dinner the night before the Chinese New Year was always a feast of spectacular proportions. I remember the reunion dinner of 1983. Most of my uncles and aunts were present, including Uncle Dong and Auntie Chuey who were both back from England, so it was an occasion that Poh Poh had been anticipating for years. We arrived early that evening, dressed in new crimson outfits recently tailored by my mother's seamstress in Pasir Pinji. My mother busied herself in the kitchen with Poh Poh as we sat in front of the TV, munching on groundnuts and kuaci while imagining the feast that lay ahead.

Poh Poh loved to play mah-jong and would disappear every Saturday morning faithfully to Westpool Park near Canning Gardens to play all day. She wore a samfu every day, and had them tailor-made to suit her small but wide frame. They came in a variety of designs and colours. I have a set that I keep in a special box with my mother's wedding gown. I brought it out the other day and as I unfolded it, I exclaimed as I realised how small it actually was.

She loved coconut sweets, the ones that come in clear green and red wrappers and kept them in an old Horlicks jar beside her planter's chair in the corner of the living room, beside the fridge and under the family portrait taken in 1956. I can picture

her black-rimmed reading glasses on top of the stack of Chinese newspapers and the jar of coconut sweets. She had a sweet tooth and allowed herself to indulge (once in a while) in flat kaya puffs, which she bought from Hong Tho, egg custard tarts, and fluffy yellow egg cakes shaped like flowers. Breakfast alternated between thick Hainanese bread or Jacob's cream crackers smeared with lashings of kaya, which she sometimes made herself and home-brewed kopi-o.

She cooked every day for my grandfather and us. He always got the best cuts of meat and fish. Lunches were simple but always delicious.

Here are some of her daily dishes:

- Chinese mushroom with phoenix claw or chicken's feet (this dish takes hours to make as the mushroom has to be cooked for four hours to be truly tender)
- Tripe soup with ginkgo nuts and barley (absolutely delicious!)
- Salted vegetables with minced pork
- Stir-fry of chopped long beans, groundnuts and tofu
- Steamed egg custard with minced pork, prawn and salted egg (the ultimate comfort food)
- Fried pork chops (she marinated these first in rice wine, and then coated them with beaten egg, flour and fried)
- Chicken braised in ginger and sesame oil (a must for women in confinement)
- Pork ribs with cucumber pickles, salted egg with pork, minced pork patties, pigs tail with groundnuts, dried roots and pickled vegetable, watercress soup with pork bones
- Lotus root with pork ribs and tongue with black fungus (my favourite soup of all time)

Her favourite accompaniment with every meal was crispy, fried salted fish.

She also loved Tongsan fish and I will always remember her picking through the tiny morsels and next to her bowl of rice, a visible mound of bones. There were other dishes, of course. One dish that she made occasionally was pig's brain omelette. This was my least favourite dish of all, I thought it the vilest thing on earth but she would say, 'Benie, this is good for your brain, sek lah, make you smarter still,' pop a morsel into her mouth and then smile her golden-toothed smile at me across the table. I consider myself adventurous enough with food. The Chinese have been known to eat almost every part of an animal, but I will refrain from only three – brains, eyes and genitals.

Poh Poh was the most unselfish person I have ever known. She knew that when she left her wealthy family, she would not have the same privileges in the new country. She suffered during the Japanese Occupation, lost two girls, and fed her nine other children tapioca and rice. She did allow herself certain treats, which also included the coconut sweets she loved. But this was of course after the war when food was plenty.

I always remember her saying, 'We were lucky to have rice. No one else had rice, but we did.'

Her other indulgence was wine that she made herself out of raisins. She did this about twice a year. I remember once going next door to the provision shop and asking for my grandmother's order. It came in a brown paper bag and it was two kilos of fat, golden California raisins. Upstairs in the kitchen, she would ready the brown glazed urn. All the raisins went in and then she filled the urn with bottles of rice wine and covered it with a wooden lid. This would sit for a few weeks. She would put bricks on top to stop the gases from escaping. Then she would scoop the scum off the top and taste it. It looked and smelled vile, but she would taste it in a Chinese teacup, swirl it around and sip it like a seasoned sommelier, 'It's not bad...hmmm... how yum

lah..oi see mow? Want to try, Benie?’ I would shake my head. This would last her a good six months. After the day ended, with the kitchen cleared and dishes washed, she would take her place at the planter’s chair, turn the television on and sip a teacup of her very own moonshine.

The only other place she sat at was in the dark hallway leading to the bedrooms. I loved that old pre-war shop house; it was a mysterious haven for a young imagination and fuelled many daydreams from hours of reading the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, my primary source of knowledge. Often when we arrived at Poh Poh’s house (as we used to call it), I would rush to the bookshelf and grab a book at random, open a page and start reading. My entire knowledge of sexual reproduction, world history and famous people came from pages of the encyclopaedia as well as knowledge on various diseases (the section on health and the human body with diagrams and illustrations of various diseases used to fascinate me to no end). I would read this to the lilting of Chinese opera emanating from the box on the wall. Poh Poh could not live without it. The Rediffusion box was as much as a part of our lives as the Chinese tea that we drank in copious amounts. Tales like *The Legend of the Purple Hairpin*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and the monkey tale *Journey to the West* were played over and over again. It was part and parcel of growing up there, as familiar as the smell of pork fat being fried in an enormous cast-iron wok downstairs. No part of the pig was ever wasted or thrown away. On Mondays, all the chunks of fat were put into the big, black wok. Ah San would light the charcoal fire and load all the fat into the wok. Hours later, all that was left was the most delicious crackling and lard, sold by bagfuls to the Chinese restaurants down the road. Poh Poh would scoop up all the liquid fat and store it in brown ceramic pots in the kitchen. Uncle Dong, when he was back from holidays from law school in London, would saunter

into the kitchen during mealtimes with a plate of steaming white rice and ladle a spoonful of the coagulated lard onto the rice and sprinkle soya sauce all over. Rice, lard and soya sauce. 'Best thing in the world!'

Ah Kong and Poh Poh shared a room at the end of that dark corridor. It was the only room with air conditioning. On hot muggy days, especially during the Chinese New Year when my sister, brother and I were stuffed to the gills with kueh kah pek and tsai and F&N orange, we would lie down on the floor next to the air con and cool down.

There were two single beds in that room. Ah Kong's was closer to the wooden shutters that overlooked the street and Poh Poh's was closer to the huge ornate dresser which had drawers filled with handbags, make-up and secrets. It was here that we spent hours looking through Poh Poh's collection of vintage handbags and experimenting with Max Factor make-up. The cherry red lipstick in the sleek gold canister was always the favourite. We would smear it all over our lips, our cheeks. Then Poh Poh would come into the room, find us jumping on her bed with bright red lips, like rosy-cheeked Chinese dolls and handbags strewn all over and scold us. But she would always smile with her eyes and we knew that she was joking. She never really got upset with us, the only person she ever got upset with was Ah Kong.

Ah Kong used to spit a lot during the day, but even more at night. He had a spittoon right next to his bed, the ceramic red and white one with flowers; yes, it matched his breakfast tray. In the night, Ah Kong would wake up and spit in the spittoon and urinate in it as well. It was Poh Poh's daily routine of waking up and carrying the spittoon into the kitchen to dump the contents. Once I peeked into it and will never forget what the combination of spit and urine looked like.

The attic or sam low (third floor) was the most mysterious part of the shophouse. Upstairs was the dusty attic where old trunks were kept, the four-poster bed upon which were piled boxes and boxes of junk and a generation's worth of dust and cobwebs. There were little wooden cabinets painted green, which had glass vials and antiquated books on science experiments inside. One day, I found a first edition of Enid Blyton's *Tales of the Enchanted Forest*, and whooped for joy. I read that book countless times and prided myself on such a find. Sadly, my mother, thinking that the book was too old and faded, gave it away many years later, much to my dismay. I discovered many things up there, old photos and remnants of my grandmother's early life in China. I once found a string of old beads, red and black beads, brittle with age, a purple silk cheongsam with tiny mandarin buttons, stacks of letters written on onionskin paper with the most delicate calligraphy.

I once asked my grandmother what happened to the other two children who had died during the war. She said, 'They fell ill and died.' I always thought they died tragically at the hands of the Japanese by execution or torture, but I later found out that they were given away to a convent. They were left at the doorstep of a convent and like many children of that generation, raised by nuns. My two dead aunts were raised by Catholic nuns. After the war, Poh Poh went to ask about them. She was told that they were gone. Were they dead? Or were they given away? We will never know.

It was time for the reunion dinner to begin. We sat down at the table, and started salivating at the mound of food in front of us. The older grandchildren sat at the main table and my younger cousins sat at the coffee table, sitting on poufs instead of chairs. Poh Poh had been cooking all day. Ah Kong sat at the head of the table with cigarette in one hand and a glass of Remy Martin in the other. Uncle Dong, Auntie Chuey, Uncle Chat, Auntie Peng, Uncle James, Auntie Mee, Auntie Lai and Mother toasted each other with



Remy Martin. We toasted with F&N orange and sarsi. Poh Poh brought in the last dish and she sat down.

**The Reunion Dinner Menu:**

- Whole steamed chicken, perfectly tender, cut into large bite sizes and served with chopped ginger and soya sauce. Served on yellow Made-in-England platter with chicken head at the side.
- Juicy Chinese pork and liver sausage and roast duck, served with boiled tubers. Served on glass plate with lettuce garnish.
- Stir-fried mixed vegetables of cauliflower, carrot, French beans, chicken liver and gizzard. Served on high ceramic platter; also Made-in-England.
- Soup with lotus root, pork ribs, black fungus and dried scallops. Boiled for at least half a day. Served in enormous Made-in-China soup tureen with pictures of fat Chinese children playing on the side.
- Steamed white pomfret with sliced ginger and seared garlic sauce. Steamed for 10 minutes exactly. Served on white platter with spring onion and coriander garnish.
- Chinese mushroom and sea cucumber with phoenix claw or chicken feet. Also cooked for half a day. Served on blue fish Made-in-China platter.

We ate, we talked, we laughed, and we ate some more. Chopsticks clicked away. Ah Kong chewed slowly; he had lost most of his teeth by then. He was quiet and seemed to be enjoying the food. Poh Poh sat by his side, picking at bones. 'Sek lah, Benie.' The rice cooker was empty. The platters were almost empty. Rice bowls were emptied thrice over. Even Ah Kong finished his rice. Poh Poh sat in her corner and smiled her golden smile at me.

## OF DURIANS

Whenever it was durian season especially in the months of June and July, we would be summoned to Poh Poh's house in the evenings for a durian feast. All the uncles and aunts would arrive, all at the same time, and park their cars in front of the quiet Leech Street in Ipoh's old town. Mother's ancient Mazda and Uncle Dong's white Ford and Auntie Peng's Mercedes would be lined up in a row. Then Poh Poh would come down the stairs, clatter on those wooden clogs and open the sliding metal gate for us.

'Ah, you are all here. Wait and see, I got some really good ones today,' she would say, beckoning us in. We would be clad in our pyjamas, as it would already be past our bedtimes. No one could ever refuse one of Poh Poh's durian feasts.

There were 10 durians on the cleaned chopping blocks, all lined in a row, ranging in quality from the passable to the superior. So we all crowded around, Uncle Dong taking the lead to pry open the first durian. He used the same knife that Ah San and Ah Ngow used in the mornings to carve out the meat. The smell of fresh meat was now sour, and the three ceiling fluorescent lights gave the shop a clinical air.

The first durian was opened. The flesh was crunchy, which it was not supposed to be, and the aroma was non-existent.

'Haiya, this one is terrible! Throw it away, let us open the next one. I am never buying durians from him again, he promised me it would be good!'

Poh Poh took the knife from Uncle Dong and proceeded to open the second one herself. We all looked on with interest. The shophouse at night had a different atmosphere altogether. There was no clicking of the abacus and there was no Choy Foo, it was like a movie set with its actors having retired for the day and we were its intruders. Poh Poh grabbed the fruit with a cloth and with her right hand pried open the fruit.

'Aaah, this one is good, come on, come on. Waah, how sek,' she said.

Uncle Dong was the first to agree; within seconds, he rolled his eyes and went 'Hmmmmmm ...' I waited until the other aunts and uncles had their share and then I took one. The soft segment was nestled cosily next to its twin. It was a creamy yellow, and as I took it in my fingers, I smelled the dizzying aroma of a truly great durian. In one mouthful, I could taste the sweet richness of it, the heady sensation on the tongue and the intoxicating warmth as it slithered down my throat. I licked my lips around the seed and lapped up all the bits that strayed on my fingers. There was enough for all. Poh Poh was thrilled. She opened all the other segments. There were six in all, two sets of neatly arranged triplets and they had the same creamy consistency. The durian seller did not disappoint after all. There were murmurs of anticipation all around as we hoped that the remaining durians would be even better.

The egg-like seeds were discarded into a plastic bag on the floor. We braced ourselves for the next one. Poh Poh did the honours again. There we were, lined in a row, waiting like sinners at a shrine. The third durian was even more spectacular than its predecessor. As I dipped my hand into one segment, I heard sighs. The flesh was lighter, more fluid and the consistency was like mottled cream. It was sweet, it was bitter, it was perfect.

Then, on to the fourth. The plastic bag on the floor was getting full. Uncle James took a break to have a cigarette. Auntie Peng decided to call a friend, and went to Ah Kong's desk to make a call. Poh Poh said, 'We have to finish it all tonight, it will taste terrible tomorrow.' My tongue was getting numb. Uncle Dong was trying to pry open the fruit, but was having some difficulty. Sometimes, when the durian is not ripe enough, opening the spiny outer shell can be quite a feat in itself. This one was proving to be

just that. Suddenly, it slid all over the chopping board and landed on the floor with a thud. We laughed.

Poh Poh and Mother tried this time. One on each side, bracing it, with Poh Poh manoeuvring the butcher's knife with a surgical precision into the heart of the durian. It still would not open. Then Uncle James, the biggest fattest uncle, came to the rescue. He grabbed with both hands and tried to pull it apart. He grimaced, huffing and puffing and with one last bellow, the durian opened gracefully. We clapped. Then we saw that it was full of worms.

'Worms! Worms!' Poh Poh screamed. 'He dared to sell me durian with worms! Wait till I see him tomorrow! Hah! I will throw the worms at him one by one.'

Poh Poh was getting really irate about the worm-infested durian. As she dumped the entire durian into the plastic bag, Uncle Dong said, 'Wait, at least let me try one.' I saw him gently pull out one segment from its worm-infested twin. The worm was pink, fat and sleepy. Uncle Dong put it in his mouth and said, 'This is the best one yet! Don't throw it away!' But Poh Poh said, 'There could be eggs in there and they will end up in your belly.' And that was that.

Number five and six were full, fleshy and very, very satisfying. I must have had at least 10 pieces already and was getting full. Mother asked me to drink some water. The Chinese believe that durian is a "heaty" food and has to be countered by drinking water from an empty durian segment to dispel the heatiness of the fruit. People have been known to have raging fevers after ingesting too much durian and this is the only way to counter it. So we did. We all drank water from an empty segment, passing it around. There were four more and Poh Poh was urging us on. Uncle James would eat more, Auntie Peng was already full and so was Mother. They sat on the bench and started reading the Chinese newspapers. Uncle Dong opened the seventh and eighth ones with little difficulty. These were perfectly ripe.

'You cannot drink alcohol and eat durian,' Uncle Dong said, looking at us. 'Otherwise, you will have a heart attack.'

Poh Poh agreed. Uncle James said that he knew someone who ate nothing but durian one night and downed it with Courvoisier. He died the next day. What an idiot. Then I thought, it's not as bad as getting impaled by a lorry full of durians. Or falling from a great height onto a heap of durians. The headlines would read "Death by durian".

The plastic bag was full so I took it out into the street and left it in the rubbish bin. The air outside was cool and fresh. The swallows had already gone to sleep perched on the power lines. There were thousands of them. The street was completely silent. There was a slight breeze and the smell of durian wafted over.

There were two more. We were all too full and my tongue felt completely numb. We had had some great durians that night. Poh Poh said, 'It's the King of the Fruit because it makes you feel like one.' It was time to go home. We said our thank-yous and goodnights. Poh Poh said she would take the other two back to the durian seller tomorrow and tell him about the worm infested one.

The chopping block was wiped clean and the durian shells spilled over the rubbish bin. We all piled back into our cars, Poh Poh drew the metal gate and clanked the heavy chain around it, clicked the iron padlock and closed the door.

Ah Kong was already asleep. He never ate durians.

## 10 JUNE 1981

We were at home having dinner when we got the phone call. It was Bapuji. He was in tears, 'Jane, Devinder has died. Please come for the funeral.' And so it was, another son had died, as suddenly and as mysteriously as the first. This is when I began to hear of the curse from the Punjab. 'The snake goddess is angry with us. This is why our brothers are dying.'

## OF HUMAN RIGHTS

My mother dealt with her grief in many ways. She embraced Catholicism with a fiery might and she also got involved in human rights; children's rights to be more precise. She was the Malaysian President for a uniformed group called the Joyful Vanguard, a Catholic-based school society, much like the Girl Guides, which encouraged teenage girls and boys to embrace the joys of service to others in the spirit of leadership and humanity. It was an integral part of my schooldays, and campfires with sing-song sessions, workshops on self-improvement and character formation were part and parcel of the society. Its international umbrella group I.M.A.C. (International Movement of Apostolate of Children) was based in Paris and had more far-reaching goals into South America and South East Asia where the target was always the prevention of the exploitation of children. Children who toiled in sweatshops making sneakers, footballs, sportswear which they could never afford, and those who tapped rubber when they should have been in school: these brought out my mother's passions. Her commitment to the rights of children took her to many seminars and conferences all over the world. And in her lifetime, she travelled to many places. Syria, Seychelles, Brazil, the Canary Islands, Mauritius and France. Our home in Ipoh became a hostel for international visitors and exposed us to many lively, dinner-table conversations, which revolved around human rights and politics.

I was further radicalised when my mother took me to a squatter's community called Kampung Tai Lee in Ipoh. I was 13. We drove past shoddy wooden shacks with zinc roofs in our little blue Mazda. It was an Indian squatter area and many inhabitants had been there for decades. We stopped outside a shack at the end of the road and got out. A small Indian boy clad in a grubby shirt came up to me and grabbed my hand. He had no pants on

and had a runny nose. He had a rash on his arm. I instinctively pulled my hand away, and saw that he had just done his business. There were flies already buzzing over the steaming pile. There was shit everywhere, at various stages of deposition on the narrow dirt road. I was horrified and wanted to get into the car, but my mother hissed, 'Don't be rude' and pulled me into the house.

I sat on the floor as my mother talked to a large Indian lady with no teeth wearing a dirty white blouse. She had five children ranging from three to 10 and none of them were in school. Her husband had left her and she was left to raise five children, with no means. She had lived in a rubber plantation all her life and had never been to the city. Her husband was lured by the prospect of work and a better life but had succumbed to the virtues of toddy, a cheap alcohol made from the lowly coconut, and heroin. He went out one night and never returned. She managed to work as a washerwoman in a house nearby, but her salary was so meagre that all she could afford was two sacks of rice, sugar and oil every month. More pressing was the fact that none of the children had birth certificates, as they were never registered. She had given birth to all of them in the plantation and had never made the trek to the city to register their births. As a result, they were stateless, nameless, identity-less. They did not exist. They could not go to school, and were entitled to nothing. My mother decided to help them. 'Tak payah, jangan risau. Saya akan cuba.' ('Don't worry. I will try.')

It would take months, almost a year before my mother managed to get all five children their birth certificates. There were countless visits to the Registration Department, countless letters and countless statutory declarations. But in the end, it was all done. My mother got those birth certificates and the children started going to school.

LETTERS TO MUMMY

22.12.81

Mrs. Jane Chauly  
c/o Miss Loh Chuey Yoke  
18A, St Cuthberts Rd,  
London NW2  
England.

Dearest Mummy,

We are very glad that you are coming home soon. It's nine more days and you will be home with us. We are all fine. I have just recovered from a high fever again and I also had terrible gastric. I had to see the doctor. He gave me the white liquid that you usually take. It was horrible! So far I have been to the doctor three times. How are you spending Christmas?

Roast turkey, pudding, potatoes! Auntie Shan rang us that day and said that she is being admitted to hospital. It seems that she got a fever and cough from Manjit and it got worse. She saw three doctors but still hasn't recovered yet. She went for a check-up at the hospital and they said there was something wrong with her and must be admitted.

By the way, I'm fine now and so are Boy and Jan. Please don't forget to buy things for us.

IMPORTANT.

Uncle Dong wants you to buy him a lawyer's gown from Lloyds. He'll pay you back when you get back. I hope you're enjoying yourself. We just can't find the Christmas lights. I've looked and looked but I still can't find them.

Auntie Rosalind sent a Christmas card saying that they have shifted to KL in August. Nigel is now studying at the University



of Ottawa. I also wrote back and told them that you had gone to London for Christmas.

Please excuse my bad terrible writing and untidiness in this letter. I'm not in the mood to write after just recovering.

Bye now.

Lots of love

Bernice

XXXXXXXXXX

2.12.82

Mrs Jane Chauly  
Encontro del Midac  
Siminario di Olinda  
Rau Bispo Continho  
s/n 53.000 Olinda – P.E  
Brazil

Darling Mummy,

We all hope that you are fine. We are also fine but I am very lonely in the house with only Boy and Jan. It is 29 more days until you come home. We miss you very, very much, especially me. I cook for them and clean the house every day. We are sticking to the timetables you set for us. Even though it is only the second day, we miss you very much already. There is so much to worry about but I hope that I can manage. Auntie Ng Foo's niece came to spend the first night with us. We pray every night that you will be fine. Don't worry about us for I am managing quite well. Please phone and write to us. We miss you very much.

Love,

Bernice

XXXXXXXXXX

Darling Mummy,

We are very sad. Please write to us often. We go to Aunty Tan Ping's house when kachea goes for badminton training. Kachea cooks the vegetables and I cook the rice. We are very, very sad for you are gone now. It is very hard for kachea to manage the house but I think it is better without the old lady. We miss you very much.

Love,  
Janice

Darling Mummy,

Please phone us from Brazil and Paris. We all cry every night. Is it cold in Paris? We are going to Aunty Tan Ping's house tomorrow. We miss you very much. We help kachea as much as we can. Please write to us.

Love,  
Bernard

*I told that horrible old lady to leave. She was so nasty and mean to us all. She would cook the rice and vegetables and then she would eat first and then let us eat. There was nothing left for us. And she was so messy. She did not even know how to use the iron properly. The clothes are still crumpled after she irons them. What kind of maid is she? I asked her to leave. She was so useless. And then Uncle Chat came and stayed with us for a few days. He was even worse. He drank all the time and would cook for us when he was drunk. He made an even bigger mess, which we would have to clean up. He was reading Bertrand Russell's "Why I am not a Christian" and would say horrible things about our faith. I think I may have to ask him to leave, too. If he stays drunk like this, I am going to lock the gate tonight. He won't be able to come in the house then. I am the eldest here, I have to look after the house. Mummy made me responsible for Boy and Jan. I am their kachea, I am the big sister. I have to look after them well.*

## OF THE CONVENT OF THE HOLY INFANT JESUS, IPOH

We all wore dark blue pinafores with white collared shirts, white shoes and socks. Our school uniforms were very plain and boring. Students who tried to be more creative with their uniforms were always penalised. Rules abounded within the convent. It is no wonder that so many of us rebelled in our later years.

We all had textbooks and exercise books for all the different subjects. It also meant that we had to carry the books to and from school every day. I used to develop callouses on my right hand from carrying all that weight in my rattan school bag.

My friends and I collected erasers, the ones that came in all sorts of shapes, sizes and smells. Sometimes we would just buy them for the scent. It was all the rage then. You'd see pre-pubescent schoolgirls at Mubarak's or Beauty lined up, sniffing erasers, deciding on which one to buy. I remember my favourite ones were shaped like fruits – strawberries, apples and grapes. There were of course, more fancy ones that came apart, resembling mini jigsaw puzzles. Only the rich girls could afford to buy those.



Catechism class with Sister Martha; Sagayamary is in the second row, second from the right, and I am standing second to her right

Pencil boxes were our most prized possessions. We could tell how rich you were from how many you had and what kind they were. The most expensive ones were the large "Made in Japan" ones, with multiple openings and compartments in two or three tiered manga madness. Blonde characters with luminous blue eyes, pink lips and tiny waists. Or more boyish ones with aircraft and Ultraman figures, or Snoopy or Charlie Brown. But nobody ever, ever had a *Star Wars* one.

Sagayamary a/p Arumugam sat right next to me. She was a skinny Indian girl with thick shoulder-length hair. She had mournful eyes and dry skin. Often, she came to school without breakfast, I could tell that she was hungry.

She didn't have a pencil box, so I gave her my old one. Her face lit up with an incredible smile as she thanked me. She had huge overlapping teeth covered in a thick layer of plaque. It made me want to scrape it off with my fingernail.

Once, the whole class had head lice and Sagayamary got blamed for it. I imagined all the lice jumping, leapfrogging gleefully from her head to mine, to Susan in front of us, onto Lilian and Firouz and Malini and Peggy and on and on. None of us realised until we all started scratching our heads. My head itched for days and when my mother pulled my hair back, she screamed and saw that there were hundreds and hundreds of tiny silver eggs tightly embedded in my hair. The only way to remove head lice then was to douse your head in kerosene and then wrap it in a rag or shower cap. I walked around in a rag and shower cap the whole day. The whole class had to have the same treatment, all because Sagayamary had given us kutu.

Sagayamary came to school one day with all her hair shaved off. She now looked like a skinny Indian boy. She looked even more mournful and I felt really sorry for her so I gave her an eraser, a strawberry with yellow spots. She sniffed it immediately and

smiled. Some girls started calling her the kutu-girl. It wasn't her fault, she was poor and had nothing to eat. She probably didn't even have shampoo or toothpaste.

The teachers picked on her a great deal and called her stupid all the time. She was the class scapegoat. Barely literate, she was in a hopeless situation. 'Sagayamary, why you so stupid wan. Cannot read, cannot write, might as well stay at home!' Poor Sagayamary. She was so skinny from malnutrition, she probably didn't have a proper toothbrush, she had scabs on her glossy dark arms and legs and now, she had lost her thick, black hair.

I liked Sagayamary, I think I was her only friend. She left school after Standard Five. I don't know what happened to her.

## OF 1984

My grandfather hears of unrest in India and he goes to read the newspapers at the Penang State Library. He is there almost every day and he devours the headlines. He memorises the words and recites them as he rides on his bicycle home. He repeats them to his wife. They eat in silence. He sleeps on the charpoy and he prays silently for a peaceful end.

## TIMELINE: INDIA

### *Times of India*

#### *5 May 1984*

*Nirankari shot at in Tarn Taran. 2 unidentified terrorists shot and wounded Taran Taran Nirankari Mandal Pramukh.*

#### *8 May 1984*

*21 extremists held in Haryana.*

**Chandigarh. 7 May**

Terrorists killed 2 persons and injured six in the last 24 hours in Punjab while in Haryana the police achieved a major breakthrough by arresting 21 alleged extremists from the Punjab wanted for involvement in a conspiracy to eliminate state VIPs. There was an exchange of fire between followers of Akali Dal president Sant Harchant Singh Longewal and militant Sikh leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale.

**9 May 1984**

**Chandigarh**

**7 most dangerous extremists held.**

Inspector General of Police, Mr P.S. Bhinder said 7 extremists were operating from the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

**10 May 1984**

**Violence in Punjab threat to Unity: PM**

"The situation has to be seen in the larger perspective. It is a complex one. We cannot allow any difficulty to stand in the way of action." Indira Gandhi

**11 May 1984**

**Ex-head priest of Akal Takhand shot.**

Giani Partap Singh shot in the head.

**12 May 1984**

**Big arms haul from truck at Amritsar.**

The arms haul from a truck driving into

Amritsar belongs to Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale. The arms seized included 3 rifles, one carbine, two sten guns, one revolver, 20 hand grenades and 700 cartridges.

14 May

Curfew in Amritsar, Patiala

Orders to shoot on sight in Jalandar.

2 June

10 die in exchange of fire near temple after an attempt to assassinate BJP Punjab party leader Saldar Prakash was foiled.

3 June

Army deployed in Punjab.

Restricted Area - bar on entry by aliens.

4 June

The Indian Army storms the Golden Temple. 500 killed, including Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

18 June

Army launches Phase 111 of Operation Blue Star aimed at flushing out terrorists.

Indian Express

25 July

Khalistan won't be allowed. Mrs Gandhi denied that she had addressed an election meeting in Punjab in which Bhindranwale was present.

**Indian Express**

**1 October Candigarh**

*Publication of the map of Khalistan demanded*

**2 October 1984**

**Bhindrawale Men Seize Akal Takht**

**Head Priests pushed out. Khalistan flag hoisted.**

*Security Forces have re-entered the Golden Temple Complex. 200 youths who forcibly occupied the Akal Takht have raised pro-Bhindranwale and pro-Khalistan flags.*

It is 1984, it is the year of George Orwell's dystopian novel. I am 16 and I am a student of literature. Brother Vincent Corkery, from County Cork, Ireland, teaches me the sanctity of the word. He lives in the quarters reserved for the brothers of the La Salle order in St Michael's Institution, Ipoh. I memorise the cadences of Richard the III, I read *Hamlet*, Virginia Woolf and Thomas Hardy. I am seduced by language. I climb the stairs away from boyish chatter and I find myself in the cool enclave of the brothers' quarters. I sit there face to face with Brother Vincent and we talk of literature and Shakespeare and I vow to be a student, forever enslaved to the written word. On the first day of November, I arrive late and he greets me when I ring the bell and says, 'They have shot her, they have shot her!'

**1 November**

*Nation plunged in sorrow.*

*Indira Gandhi assassinated by Sikh bodyguards Beant Singh and Sattwant Singh. 16 bullets were pumped into Mrs Gandhi.*



*5 days of press censorship issued by Union Territory Authorities to all newspapers. Government censors have been scrutinising and ordering deletions of and cuts in news stories despatches and editorials as they see fit.*

**JASWANT SINGH. PENANG. 1 NOVEMBER 1984**

I must speak now. I have been too silent. Indira Gandhi is dead. She created Bhindranwale, she created him to cause unrest in the Punjab and now, she is dead. He is also dead. Dead bodies, full of bullets. In the pool of nectar, the holiest of our holy shrines.

I have heard so many stories from the sardars in the gurdwara, I am now compelled to speak. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was born in 1947 in the Faridkot district of the Punjab. He was brought up a strict vegetarian by his father in the Damdami Taksal way. He was a farmer, and he was a scholar. He became a missionary and he asked many people to return to the path of the Khalsa. Give up sex, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, he said. He talked about amrit prachar, that we have been baptised by nectar, that modernity was evil. The only way was go back to the golden age of the Sikh empire.

He became too powerful. Indira Gandhi saw that. Congress supported him. Sanjay Gandhi supported him. He wanted a state for us called Khalistan. When I heard this, I did not know how to feel. Khalistan. Our very own country. I would like that, too. But how? Is it even possible?

Someone gave me a pamphlet with a picture of Bhindranwale, saying, 'We are not in favour of Khalistan, nor are we against it. We won't reject it, and we shall not repeat the mistakes of 1947.' What does he mean by this? How can there not be bloodshed?

Now they are all dead. And the Punjab is plunged into darkness once again.

I hear that they are killing Sikhs in Delhi. My friends are telling me this. We talk about it in the gurdwara. The young ones, they ask me about this. In Trilokpuri, Sikhs are being butchered by Hindus. Thousands and thousands of them. How many, we will never know. Bhindranwale said, 'Don't shed blood, shed hatred.' Now there is more blood and more hatred.

Operation Blue Star. Army tanks in the Golden Temple. Dead women and children in the Pool of Nectar. The Akal Takht has been destroyed. I hear Bhindranwale was captured alive and then tortured to death. Is he a martyr or a terrorist? I dare not say. I am afraid of my own thoughts.

He could be my son. My son the terrorist, my son the martyr. My son who fought for us all.

Khalistan. Khalistan.

I can go back. I can. The land is there. It is still in my father's name.

### THE THIRD MAN

There were no flush toilets in Ipoh's old town even until 1986 when I left for university in Canada. The pre-war shophouse at 14 Leech Street had one toilet downstairs, next to Ah Kong's bathroom. It was by the air well at the back, where Ah San would fry up all the bits of unused pig in a big black wok, the largest I'd ever seen. He would light a mountain of charcoal and stir around the bits of bone, fat and gristle until it became a crispy brown mass of edible meat, sold at a ringgit a bag.

Ah Kong's bathroom had dark green tiles, covered in moss. He only ever used the green Asepso soap, which he believed helped with the boils on his back. The bathtub was a waist-high,

concrete-tiled tub with water streaming from an open tap. I used to bathe in there sometimes. The water was icy-cold, straight from Gunung Cheroh, home of fairies and jinns. The bathroom was a mysterious cavern, inhabited by my grandfather who scrubbed his boils with a brown bristle brush, next to subterranean moss enriched by water from the realm of mystical creatures.

The squat toilet next to it however, was the nether realm of effuse. The tow see thung, or slop bucket man, would drive across the back alleys of Ipoh's old town in an open lorry two or three times a week and collect the waste from the thick rubber pails. So, on days when Ah Kong, Ah San, Ah Ngow and Choy Foo used the toilet more than once on any given day, the stink that emanated into the air well was enough to suffocate a pig. I used it from time to time, out of curiosity and sometimes out of necessity. I would open the wooden door with trepidation and sometimes a slew of fat greenbottle flies would circle around my head. I'd brush them off and hold my nose while I did my business. There'd be a roll of crusty cheap toilet paper hanging from a nail by the door. You'd have to be clever enough to manoeuvre one hand on your nose and the other hand on the toilet paper to not get a fly up your nose. There are no words for the stench. I guess if hell had a smell, it would be my grandfather's toilet. And if you were unlucky, the slop bucket man would be doing his rounds and you'd see his hands reach in from beneath your bottom and whisk away the pail. But he would replace it with a clean one and chances are, you'd have an easier time with your nose.

Aunty Chuey, the youngest of my mother's siblings, used to have nightmares that emanated from that toilet. As a child, she used to imagine that she was being pursued by a man from the sewers, a faceless man wearing a dark trench coat and a hat. Years later when she watched the film *The Third Man*, she was once again reminded of the Orson Welles-like figure that would appear and

reappear and pursue her in the most sinister of manners all around Ipoh, a figure that appeared, disappeared and then reappeared from the nether realms of my grandfather's toilet.

I remember it differently, it was not malefic or scary. It was the only toilet we had, shared by many, workers and family. You went into it full, and emerged lighter.

#### OF LEAVING IPOH

*The number of times I read the scrapbook, the number of times I wanted to leave Ipoh. I cannot remember how many dreams I had of leaving the town of my childhood. There is nothing here for me, I have dreams. I want to travel like you, Papa. I want to leave this place. I want to see the world.*

In 1986, after I finished my S.P.M exams, I was granted a scholarship by A.F.S (American Field Service), an international student exchange programme. I had applied based on my all-rounded abilities and used my strengths in elocution for the final interview as I was determined then to be a Shakespearean actor, I would rehearse lines in front of my bedroom mirror, I wanted to be on stage. I knew I could speak, write, read the language of the colonialists. I was good at it. And so I went to New Zealand and there I was in the land of horses, vineyards and apple orchards. I had my ticket to the world.

Blenheim was a small town, with a population of 20,000 or so. I stayed with the Hairs on Batty's Road. The Hairs were apple farmers, and Mr Hair was tall and gruff. Mrs Hair led a local hockey team on weekends and had short frizzy hair and overlapping teeth. She was a good cook and within weeks, I had gained several pounds. We had the freshest lamb every day, with buttery mashed potatoes and lashings of hokey-pokey ice-cream scooped on top of apricots from the garden. The Hairs had three children. Their

eldest daughter Philippa worked collecting bull's semen on a prize-winning stud farm in Australia. Their second daughter Niki was a year older than me, and their youngest son Matthew had lanky legs, piercing blue eyes and a crop of hair so blonde, it was almost white. I used to ride a bicycle into school, past the vineyard down the road, past the beautiful pastures with grazing sheep and cattle, onto the little bridge that led into town and onto the Marlborough Girls College, the best all-girls school in town. I was enrolled in the 6th Form and decided on five subjects - English, Biology, Classical Studies, Geography and History. I had all male teachers, and my favourite was Mr Barnsley who taught me English. Classes were like nothing I had ever experienced. The students were encouraged to argue and debate about topics that were virtually unknown to me, they were mature beyond their years, and I felt intimidated and uninteresting. Some of the girls wore make-up, and the common room was a hotbed of girl-talk: who-kissed-who, fashion, music and lots of gossip. I was shy at first, but then warmed up to some of the girls who embraced me into their circle of chatter and cheer. I began to love the flat orange and green landscape, the plum and apricot trees that dotted the roads, the changing hues in the leaves, and the cold, nippy air that greeted me in the mornings. I loved it there. My homesickness eased within a month and I felt very much at home.

Six months later, my mother called me, saying, 'Bernice, you have been offered a scholarship by the Malaysian government, you have to come back now.' I was torn, and did not want to leave. I had just been made head of the Wairau sports team, I had met a boy I liked, I was in the debating team and I had found a job at Bing's Chinese restaurant in town. I had been to a Maori marae, and was slowly exploring the culture of the Polynesian peoples there; I had been to Christchurch and heard the Wizard speak. I had plans to go to the Milford Sound, I wanted to fall in love. But I had to leave. And so I said my goodbyes: to the Hairs on Batty's

Road, and to the horses, sheep and cattle I passed every day, to the apple trees in the orchard, to the locusts in Wither Hills, to the teachers in school and to the Principal Mr Sophocles, to the best grades I ever had, to the Grahams and their holiday house in the Marlborough Sounds, to yummy pavlovas and to my friends Fiona Kinnaird, Angela Benseman, Lucy Ryan and Jane Sorenson.

I was miserable at the airport and bawled my eyes out. I said goodbye to Aotearoa, goodbye to the land of the long white cloud.

### MOONCAKE FESTIVAL

It was my last mooncake festival before I left for Canada. In the open kitchen upstairs, Poh Poh had put out all the special treats for the lady on the moon, Chang Er, who drank an elixir that not only made her immortal but also allowed her to float higher and higher until she ended up on the moon. On a table facing the open sky with the full moon in view, there are small boiled yams, several kinds of mooncakes: lotus paste with pumpkin seeds, red bean paste and duck egg, fluffy pink cakes, Poh Poh's home-made wine and deep-fried sesame balls. My brother and sister played with their lanterns - a dragon for Ah Boy and large goldfish for Jan - and my mother will once again tell us the story the Han Chinese leader who started an uprising to end the rule of the Mongols in China.

This is how she told it.

#### *The story of the mooncake festival*

*It is the 14th century in China. The Mongols have invaded from the north and taken over the Han dynasty. The Mongols were ruthless cruel people and made the Han Chinese suffer. Many did not have food to eat and they were always hungry. One day, a handsome rebel leader called Zhu Yuan Zhang decided to plan an uprising to get as many Chinese as he could*

*to bring down the Mongols. He came up with a plan. He decided to make mooncakes as a symbol of respect to the Mongol leaders. When he was asked 'Why are we giving mooncakes for free to the Chinese?' he said, 'It is a symbol of our veneration to our esteemed leaders.' And so the Mongols let him. But inside these mooncakes were secret messages about an uprising that was to happen on the 15th day of the eighth month. Yu and his followers made thousands and thousands of mooncakes and passed them to many towns and villages around the capital. So when people opened the mooncakes, they saw the message "Kill the Mongols on the 15th day of the 8th month" and when the time came, they went to the capital, and stormed the Mongols, thus ending their reign of fear in China. And this is why the Chinese continue to eat mooncakes till today, it is to remember the deeds of the Han Chinese, who fought to take their country back from the Mongols.*

#### OF BEING BRAINWASHED

I had returned to Ipoh. The scholarship that I had been offered was to study TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) in England. The four-year scholarship, a Bachelors in Education (B.Ed) was an offer from Malaysia's Ministry of Education. I had excelled in my English Language and English Literature courses in the SPM exams, played badminton at state and national levels, was a champion elocutor, so a possible scholarship had been imminent. As I was of Punjabi-Chinese descent, I had hoped for the slimmest of chances of getting a scholarship under the Indian category. I knew that there were no other chances of getting an overseas education, so I took it. The thrill of being in New Zealand had given me a glimpse of what life could be like; I wanted to explore more possibilities, I wanted to leave.

And so I began corresponding with the Ministry of Education's Scholarship Division. It later transpired that of all the students who had been selected, half would be sent to Canada, instead of just the UK. I was to be in this group and the university selected for me would be the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba. This full scholarship would cover tuition and living expenses on the condition that we returned to Malaysia to teach for the term of 10 years. Failure to do this would result in the penalty of 70,000 ringgit. I signed this contract, knowing full well that I had made a contract that would forever alter my life.

One of the requirements before we left was to attend a course at Wisma Belia in KL for three days. This meant that all 200 or so students who had been selected from all over Malaysia would meet and fraternise for three days before we left for our various universities in the UK and Canada.

I was one of 15 or so non-Malays who had been given the scholarship. This was most apparent when we all arrived. At this point in my life, I was a pretty liberal person, or so I thought. I had been brought up in a household that celebrated diversity, due to my mixed parentage. I spoke Cantonese fluently, had Punjabi grandparents whom I loved to visit in Penang, and had a formidable single mother who was not only a schoolteacher, but also a champion of human rights and children's rights, working with the poor in Ipoh's slums through the vestiges of a Catholic-based organisation which was headquartered in Paris. She travelled greatly and we had frequent visitors from far-flung places and were exposed to a great deal of human rights, and were politically and socially aware from a young age. I was beginning to form ideals: that there were rights and wrongs in the world and that justice and fairness had to prevail at all costs.

I remember long sessions at Wisma Belia, beginning early in the mornings and lasting till late at night, where we were reminded



time and time again of our Malaysian culture and to not be taken in and impressed by western values and lifestyles. We were told to stay away from drugs, Mat Sallehs, Islamic fundamentalists, political activities, protest marches and anti-government causes. There were strict penalties for anti-Malaysian sentiment and that our families would have to bear the brunt. We were told to "pray, study hard, don't get pregnant, don't get married, and that there were no hantus or ghosts in Canada". We had to write home regularly, stay in touch with our families and be proud to be Malaysian as we were serving as mini-ambassadors of our country. After all, we were hand-picked individuals, the best of the best of Malaysian students, ready to be sent into the world to master English and to then come back and impart our knowledge and be part of the bright future of this country.

On the third and final night, there was a session that I would never forget. The older distinguished gentleman was an army officer of high rank. He stood in front of us and talked for almost two hours. He talked only of race dynamics in Malaysia. That the British, the Chinese and the Indians had oppressed the Malays for centuries. That now, the Malays had to learn to claim what was rightfully theirs. That now, the Malays could finally have the opportunities that they had been previously denied. That now, the Indians and Chinese would have to be grateful for what they had and that we, the few Indians and Chinese who were selected, had to be grateful for the fact that we had the opportunity to be chosen for this scholarship. We had to be grateful to go abroad, to get a degree, to come back and teach. We had to be grateful we had been chosen, we had to be thankful that in spite of what we had done to the Malays, that we had not been forgotten.

He was a tremendously charismatic speaker, and his rhetoric stunned many of us, he was a brilliant orator, theatrical and compelling in his beliefs that as past "oppressors," the Chinese and

Indians of this country had finally been given what was due. That we had to be grateful, that we had to be thankful, that the Malays were a generous, forgiving people and that centuries of oppression were finally over. This was a new Malaysia, a new beginning that we were to be part of a new, bright vision of a country that would be a beacon of light to the rest of Asia and the world. For two hours, he spoke eloquently, with dignity and pride and compassion. I was spellbound. I wept. I felt conflicted. I felt I had to say something. He had moved me to my core.

I went to a microphone in the middle of the hall and I spoke. I said that I was sorry that we had oppressed the Malays, that they had not been given the rights they deserved, that I was sorry for the past, I was sorry for what we had done to them. I spoke with a newfound conviction in my voice, and with a few sobs I said thank you, thank you for giving me this opportunity after all we had done to you, that because I was Indian and Chinese, I could speak on behalf of both. I said I was sorry.

The clapping started, they clapped and clapped. And the man, the army officer, he stood there and smiled. He stared at us all and he was happy.

I cringe every time I remember this incident. I was 17, impressionable, naïve, gullible perhaps, but the fact of the matter remains. The brainwashing worked.

We arrived in August 1986 in Toronto and in the offices of the Malaysian Students Department, were told "there are no ghosts here, study hard, make your country proud". Our little fraternity was broken up, to Montreal, Kingston, Winnipeg, Toronto; we were scattered across the continent and we lived in the cold and the freeze. I was finally free.

LETTER FROM BAPUJI

Penang, 4th August, 1987

My dearest Bernice,

Thank you very much for your letter and its contents of which I have noted with great pleasure and satisfaction. May God bless you with every success in achieving your goals.

Now turning to our family history. The following is a small sketch as told by father i.e. your great-grandfather:-

We come from what used to be a small village named Verka about three miles north of Amritsar, the city of the Golden Temple of the Sikhs in the state of Punjab, India. Now this small village has joined Amritsar just as Menglembu is now joined to Ipoh. Verka is the first railway station from Amritsar on the line to Dehra Baba Nanak and Pathan-kot, two terminals on the border between Pakistan and the Punjab.

My grandfather was Bhag Singh (i.e. your great-great-grandfather). He owned about five acres of wheat land in Verka and it used to be ploughed with bullocks. My father Tehil Singh, had an elder brother named Surain Singh. After the death of my grandfather, the wheatland passed on to my father and his brother. Because they could not agree with each other, my father's brother mortgaged his half-share (i.e. 2 1/2 acres) and joined the Indian cavalry. My father gave his share on rent (i.e. the cultivator took half the produce and my father got the other half). After making this arrangement, he left my mother in the care of my grandmother and joined the Indian Army and served for five years in the frontier force. He was stationed at Gilgit, an army post on the border with Afghanistan near Peshawar. My father was born in 1880 and my mother in 1890.

## GROWING UP WITH GHOSTS

My dearest Derrine,

Thank you very much for your letter. The notes of which I have noted with great pleasure and satisfaction. May God bless you with success in achieving your goals.

Now turning to our family history the following is a small sketch as told by my father i.e. your great-grandfather:-

We come from what used to be a small village named Verka about three miles north of Amritsar the city of the Golden Temple of the Sikhs in the state of Punjab, India. My ~~xxxx~~ Now this small village has joined Amritsar just as Menglamu is now joined to Ipoh. Verka is the 1st railway station from Amritsar on the line to Dehra Dada, Narnaul and Pathankot, two terminals on the border between Pakistan and Punjab.

My grandfather was Bhag Singh (i.e. your great-grandfather). He owned about 5 acres of wheat land in Verka and it used to be ploughed with bullocks. My father Tehal Singh, had an elder brother named Surain Singh. After the death of my grand-father, the wheatland passed on to my father and his brother. Because they could not agree with each other, my father's brother mortgaged his half share (i.e. 2½ acres) and joined the Indian cavalry. My father gave his share on rent (i.e. the cultivator took half the produce and my father got the other half). After making this arrangement, he left my mother in the care of my grand-mother and joined the Indian Army and served for five years in the frontier force stationed at Gilgit an army post on the border with Afganistan near Peshawr. My father was born in 1880 and my mother in 1890.

My father was released from the army in 1907 and came back to the village and wanted to cultivate his wheat land himself. Unfortunately both his bullocks died and he had no means of buying new ones. So he also mortgaged his share of the land and came to Singapore in 1908 alone. Here he got the job of a tramway driver. In those days trams used to run on rails and powered by electricity with handbrakes overhead. One had to only press a button to put the tram in motion and apply the breaks to stop it. It was so easy as that. The fare was only two cents for each stage. The Chinese rickshaw-pullers who dominated in Singapore then, refused the trams to be operated and used to lie down across the rails to prevent the trams from moving. They were not afraid of anyone except the Sikhs. They dare not lie on the rails before a tram driven by a Sikh, hence my father being able to get the job and especially because of his military service. The salary was only \$12/- a month.

The fare from Amritsar to Calcutta was Rs.9/- and from Calcutta to Singapore or Penang \$15/- only. So he sent some money to my mother in 1911 after the death of my grandmother, and then my mother joined him in Singapore. I was born in Tanjong Katong in a ~~specific~~ where my father used to be a night-watchman, on 30.4.1915. I have 4 brothers and 5 sisters. Amongst the brothers is Harbans Singh, retired chief locomotive inspector now living in Penang. He has a daughter, graduate of M.U. having done a specialist course in English in London and is now a lecturer at the Malay Girls' College in K.Lumpur. A son, ~~xxxx~~ Singh, a graduate in commercial arts, now settled down in Edinburgh U.K.; another son, Gurmit Singh, an English school teacher at ~~xxxx~~, N.W.I. and the youngest Maninder Singh, also an ~~xxxx~~ commercial arts graduate settled down in the U.S.A.; my next brother Mahinder Singh retired as a Rly. Engine driver. He died in 1977. Has 5 sons and 3 daughters; the sons are doing ordinary works and the ~~girls~~ are not employed. The next brother was Joginder Singh, who was a station Engineer at the Perak Hydro-Electric Power station at Malim ~~xxxx~~. He died in 1983. Has 2 sons and 3 daughters. They are all doing

BERNICE CHAULY

Aunti f	"	"	"	"	"
"	"	"	"	"	"
(Your Papa)	Surjit	"	on	31.12.1939	(Died on 6.11.73)
Uncle	Bir	"	in	1942	
"	Devinder	"	on	25.12.1944	(Died on 10.6.81)
Aunti	Manjit	"	in	1948	
"	Surjit	"	"	1950	
"	Paramjit	"	"	1951	

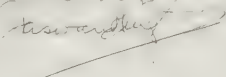
Before his death I sent my father to visit India on three occasions. I paid his debts and redeemed his wheat land (both his own share and his brother's share). He ~~xxx~~ had the pleasure of giving the fruits of his wheat land for about 10 years and gave it to his relatives on a rental ~~of~~ 600/- rupees a year, and came back to stay at Malin Nwar where he had lived since 1890 and died there. I have not got a cent from his land in India.

He came to this country due to poverty and extreme hardship. In this country too, he had to toil and sweat rearing cattle, selling milk, driving bullock carts, working as watchman at Lombongs and Tin mining dredges until I got employed in 1934 in Penang (incidentally I got married also in 1934 - on 1.4.1934) and helped him in his difficulties. He died a very happy man because all his children were well educated and holding good posts and his grand-children especially on my side, became more educated and better qualified than the parents.

When you come the next time and I am still living I shall give you my autobiography from which you will learn the details of my life and the various adventures of my life. I was awarded a scholarship to study at Kerky for two years and then at the M.U. at K.L. to do maths and science.

I hope from the above you will get some insight into my family history. I hope you will now. With love and care to you, Janice and Bernard,

Your loving Bapuji



My father was released from the army in 1907 and came back to the village and wanted to cultivate his wheatland himself. Unfortunately, both his bullocks died and he had no means of buying new ones. So, he also mortgaged his share of the land and went to Singapore in 1908 to seek a better life. There, he got the job of a tram driver. In those days, trams used to run on rails and were powered by electricity from overhead trolleys. One had only to press a button to get the tram moving and then simply apply the brakes to stop it. It was as easy as that. The fare was only two cents each stage. The Chinese rickshaw-pullers, who then dominated Singapore, refused the trams to be operated and used to lie down across the rails to prevent them from moving. They were not afraid of anyone except the Sikhs. They dared not lie on the rails before a tram driven by a Sikh as the Sikhs could most certainly drive over them. Hence, my father was an asset to his employers and this was not just because of his military service. His salary was \$12 a month.

The fare from Amritsar to Calcutta was Rs 9 and from Calcutta to Singapore was only \$15. So, he sent some money to my mother in 1911 after the death of my grandmother. My mother was then able to join him in Singapore. I was born on 30th April 1913, in Tanjong Katong in a seaside bungalow where my father used to be a night watchman. I had four brothers and five sisters. Amongst the brothers is Harbans Singh, a retired chief locomotive inspector now living in Penang. My next brother Mahinder Singh retired as a railway engine driver. He died in 1977. The next brother is Joginder Singh, who was the station engineer at the Perak hydroelectric power station at Malim Nawar. He died in 1983. Malaga Singh was also employed at the same power station but he was an amateur winder. I have one sister in Ipoh, one in Sungkai, one in Kajang and two in Singapore. I know very little about their families.

My father died in 1973 at the age of 93 years. I have eight children.

Aunty Ranjit – Born in 1936

Aunty Harcharan – Born in 1937

(Your Papa)Surinder – Born on 31.12.1939  
(died on 6.1.73)

Uncle Birinder – Born in 1942

Uncle Devinder – Born on 25.12.1944  
(died on 10.6.81)

Aunty Manjit – Born in 1948

Aunty Surjit – Born in 1950

Aunty Paramjit – Born in 1951

Before his death I sent my father to visit India on three occasions. I paid his debts and redeemed his wheat land (both his own share and his brother's share). He had the pleasure of enjoying the fruits of his land for about 10 years and then gave it to his relatives on a rental of Rs 600 a year and came back to stay in Malim Nawar where he had lived since 1926 and consequently died there. I have not got a cent from his land in India.

He came to this country due to poverty and extreme hardship. In this country too he had to toil and sweat rearing cattle, selling fresh cow's milk, driving bullock carts, working as a watchman at lombongs and tin mining dredges until I got employed in 1934 in Penang (incidentally I also got married that year – on 1.4.1934) and helped him in his difficulties. He died a very happy man because all his children were well educated and held good posts, and that his grandchildren, especially on my side, became more educated and better qualified than their parents.

When you come the next time and I am still living, I shall give you my autobiography from which you will learn the difficulties with which I had to bring up and educate my children,

especially during the Japanese occupation of Malaya. Your papa was my father's first grandson to go to the U.K. on a government scholarship to study at Kirkby for two years and then get into University Malaya in K.L. to do Maths and Science.

I hope from the above you can get some insight into my family history. That's all for now. With lots of love to you, Janice and Bernard.

Your loving Bapuji  
Jaswant Singh

*This letter changed my life. What began as a simple enquiry into our family inspired me to write, and write I did, the beginnings of this book.*



Standing outside the University of Winnipeg, Canada, winter 1986



LETTER TO AUNTY SHAN

10 August 1987

Dear Aunty Shan,

Greetings from Winterpeg! I hope Uncle Ajit, Manjit and you are well and in good health. I am a bit homesick and wish that I could be in hot, sunny Malaysian weather at the moment. Today's temperature is minus 10 Celsius with a wind-chill factor of 2000, which means that exposed skin will freeze in less than ten seconds. That basically means that I have to bundle up and get into a fully heated bus and then get out into the cold. University life is a lot of fun and I am meeting people from all over the world. The coursework is interesting and I am learning a lot of new and exciting things.

I love being here, although I so miss Ipoh food, especially the kuay teow and my mother's and Poh Poh's cooking. Strange how simple foods can warm your heart and soul. I have been to Chinatown many times and have found a lot of things from home -even though they are five times more expensive than home; but a pack of instant noodles with egg, bean curd and vegetables can be the best meal in the world when you are tired and homesick. I have even found sambal belacan here, which is such a treat!

You may be very surprised to receive this letter but I have decided that I need to ask you a few questions about my father. After his death, which traumatised me for many years, I have decided that I need to know more about our family and I know that you and him were quite close. What was he like? What kind of music did he like? Did he have friends? Did he have a sense of humour? What made him different from everybody else? What did he read? How old was he when he started painting and drawing? What did he like to eat? I know these are a lot of

questions that may seem mundane and uninteresting but I really want to know what he was like.

Did he tell you about my mother and how much he loved her? I have their letters and I know that he was very much in love with her. I hope none of this makes you uncomfortable and I hope that you will be able to help me understand the person that he was. Maybe I will write a book about their love story one day. I don't know yet.

If you are unsure about replying this letter I will understand. I know that there are certain sensitivities about the family and I hope I have not encroached upon any areas that you are unsure about. If you are, please let me know. If you would like to include any particular incidences that would be great. I hope you will be open to my requests. Anything you say will be deeply appreciated.

Once again, I wish you all the best and love to all.

Sincerely,  
Your loving niece,  
Bernice

LETTER TO BAPUJI

31 August 1987  
508 Dorchester Avenue  
Winnipeg, MB

Dear Bapuji,

I received your letter and read it over and over again. Finally, I have some idea of where your family came from. I have been thinking of my roots now for some time and you have given me a great start. After Papa's death, I always felt that we became more Chinese than Indian and it is time now for me to delve deeper into my Punjabi roots.

One of my fondest memories of spending time with the family in Penang is that of watching Manji make chapattis for dinner. Also, watching you ride off on your big, black bicycle and playing in the garden with all the other cousins are firmly etched in my memory. We spent so much time running around in the playground and exploring the house. It was wonderful because of all the nooks and corners that we could hide in and explore.

I have also written to Aunty Shan in Ipoh as I believe she was one of the siblings closest to Papa. She told me many wonderful stories of him and his adventures, especially of the times when he would sneak off into the botanical gardens and catch frogs and snakes for his "experiments". It used to upset you greatly I know but it just goes to show that Papa was one of those individuals that you could not restrain in any way. I know that my parents' marriage was greeted with great opposition from both families and that when I was born, both sets of grandparents forgot their animosity when they realized that they both had a grandchild.

It was a difficult childhood as Mother had to raise three of us. I was an angry child and I always felt that Papa had been wrenched away from me in the cruellest of ways. His death is still affecting me, fifteen years after it happened.

It is fall now and the leaves are turning a beautiful golden yellow. Canada is a beautiful country and is giving me a sense of freedom I have never felt before. It will get cold soon and winter will be upon us for months. Winnipeg can be the most inhospitable place on earth in the winter.

I hope that we can keep up our correspondence while I am here (which is for another three years) and I hope that you and Manji will continue to be well.

Please send my love to Mano and Varinder.

Thank you and best wishes.

Your loving granddaughter,  
Bernice

LETTER TO UNCLE BIRINDER

26 October 1987  
Apt 16-A, The Morden, Langside Street  
Winnipeg, MB

Dear Uncle Birinder,

I hope Aunty Gwen, Paul and Simon are well. Wishing you all an early Happy Halloween! It's a big thing here and all my roommates and I will be partying later but I thought I would write you this quick letter first.

I know it has been more than a year since I contacted you – actually, the last time I saw you was at the airport when you saw me off. Well, a lot has happened since then and I have had an interesting time here this last year. Let's just say that it has been a year of extremities. I have opened myself to a lot of weird and wonderful things and am having the time of my life. I am doing well in university and think that this kind of system of education is more suited to my kind of temperament.

I have met lots of wonderful people and am opening new doors to my consciousness. Yes, the drugs are helping but it's the people I have met who are really the key to this newfound existence.

The last time we were at Bapuji's house was particularly memorable for me as you told me many things that I had no idea of. Your life in the army is colourful as it has been horrific. Your experiences at My Lai after the massacre are etched in my memory. Sandhurst must have been quite something too.

I want to say this. After Papa's death you and Aunty Gwen have shown extreme kindness and generosity to Mother and the three of us and I will be eternally grateful for that. I never had a father figure after Papa's death and you are the closest person I ever had to a father. I know that it must have been difficult at times to worry about us and I hope that we were never much more trouble than normal. It was always a treat to come and visit you and our memories of you and the various army barrack houses were wonderful. I will always cherish that.

I have to go now. Have an essay to write.

Your loving niece,  
Bernice

## 27 OCTOBER 1987

I had started working as a staff writer on the University of Winnipeg's student newspaper, *The Uniter*, and I was happily enjoying the fraternity of some rather eccentric individuals. There was Michael, the editor, tousle-headed and gangly from Brandon, who breathed, ate, slept, shat, Canadian ice hockey. There was Lorne, large and unwashed, who wrote brilliantly about Canadian politics. There was Donne Flannagan in his spiffy suits, who dreamt of working for the IRA. And there was Mia, androgynous in her steel boots, tongue and lip piercings, purple Mohawk, black lipstick and frilly skirts. She hooked up with Lorne and they lived on Langside Street, notorious for its crime and murders, with their pet rat, Ithmus.

On that day, Michael said, 'Hey, Bernice, thought you might want to check this out. Just saw it off the office wire.' He handed me a sheet of paper, and I read the top headline. It was faint, but I saw *Malaysian Crackdown: Hundreds arrested*.

## JANE. OPERATION LALLANG

Dear Lord,

Please help us. This is a difficult time. Someone from N.O.H.D called me and said that Brother Rogers had been arrested. I was shocked. He was taken away an hour ago in a police van. They handcuffed him. He is not a criminal! He works for the poor, we all do. I looked at all the materials in my room and I got very scared. I have all the notes from the meetings in Brazil and Paris. They are calling us communists. I am scared. Bernice is in Canada. What if they take away her scholarship? What should I do, dear Lord, please tell me what to do? So I burned it all, I lit a fire in the garden and I burnt everything. I was afraid they would come after me, so I burnt it all.

The papers had pictures of all who were arrested. These are people I know, people who have devoted their lives to the Church, to helping people. Dear Lord, You know that this is my work. This is why I can keep going. After Surinder died, I served You. My faith in You has kept me strong. I have raised my children to be aware that there are problems in this world, the world is not a fair place. But we can help the oppressed, we can help the poor, we can give them voices so they can be heard.

I am a widow with three children. Would they come after me? Will they put me in Kamunting for years and years? But this is good work, we are helping children all over the world. Why would they put us in prison for this? Where is the justice in this?

I hope they will not torture him. I know that this is what they do in Kamunting. Detention without trial. Beatings. Torture. To confess things about their work.

Bernice called me and asked me if I was okay. She was very worried. She said she had heard about the news from the university news wire. I told her to be careful with her activities otherwise, they would also come after her. I told her that if she lost her scholarship, there would be no other options for her. I told her not to worry. She said she was going to write something about it in her university newspaper. She said this is why she does not want to come back home. Because people like us will be persecuted. I have to stay here. Where am I going to go?

Dear Lord, we do this to help the poor and to help the child workers, why can't they just let us do our work?

Dear Lord, please keep us safe. Please keep my children safe.

Watch over us, protect us. Amen.

## 1988

Summer. Indian summer. It was warm and golden and I wore long Made-in-India skirts, had dreadlocks and wore patchouli in my hair. I was turning into a hippie and I was happier than I'd ever been in my life. I had turned 20 and it was my second year as a student in Winnipeg. I was away from Malaysia, and I had absolutely no intention of returning home. Winnipeg was the black hole of Canada, smack in the middle of the prairies, so flat you could see the entire city upon landing at the airport, flayed out like a brown and green quilt of wheat fields. I loved it, I "found" myself there, in the Canadian heartlands, in the bitter cold and snow of the north and the summers of golden light.

I was living on Langside St, known as the murder street of Winnipeg. This is where vagrants lived and died, feckless bodies dragged out of gutters and garbage cans, stoned, drunk and dead, on the dark side of Canadian liberalism. I felt sorry for these



Native American Indians, displaced by history and circumstance, and felt a deep sense of revulsion when I saw cops dragging them off the streets or when they would come up to me, smelling of grain alcohol, crease-lined and faded, I felt sorry and angry all at once, but would side-step my way and mumble 'sorry, don't have change' and walk away.

One night, my flatmate Julia and I heard a terrible commotion, there was a crashing sound of heavy objects being flung about, screams and yells and swears. We looked out the back window and saw two women, one white, one native, beating the shit out of each other. The cops came soon after and the white woman was taken out in a stretcher, pulverised and bloody. The larger, native woman had to be held back by two burly policemen. We were stoned and a little drunk on the cheap Bulgarian wine that only cost six dollars. Julia had just come back from a polixsexual anarchist convention in Toronto, she came from Kent Island in Nova Scotia. She knew the singer Sarah McLachlan.

That summer changed my life. Julia and I decided to go to Toronto for the WOMAD music festival, started by Peter Gabriel in Reading, England several years before. The line-up was incredible: Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Billy Bragg, Buffy St. Marie, Spirit of the West, The Bhundu Boys, Remy Ongala and Orchestra Matimila, Jane Siberry and more. I had to go. And we did. With four hundred Canadian dollars between us, we decided to hitch-hike across the prairies, into the Laurentian Shield and onto the largest city in Canada.

## JOURNAL ENTRIES

## AUGUST 5TH

We stopped in Kenora after our third ride. Two truckers gave us rides two and three. It's really fun sitting up front with these truckers, you can really see the landscape from this height and it's warm inside. These guys decorate the dashboard like altars. Pictures of girlfriends, wives, pets, even their mums and dads. They drive non-stop, take breaks when they can, and swear like road-hogs. Julia and I are now having coffee at Ruby's Recorder, Lake of the Woods, Keewatin. We both ordered the same thing, and it was excellent! Two massive slices of French toast with real maple syrup and thick-cut French fries. All for \$2.80.

Horror of horrors! My crazy Iranian friend Mansur from university was ride number four. We squeezed into the front seat and we headed off. He talked non-stop, about Islam, politics and the



Hitch-hiking to Toronto, taken somewhere in Ontario, Canada

west, as usual. He has this table in the cafeteria in university and does this all day. Just talks and argues with people. He is quite a radical and prides himself as being an intellectual of sorts. I just think he's full of himself, but he's harmless. We arrived at Kakabeka Falls, and it was pouring. Julia and I set up tent, we cooked a meal and slept. Mansur slept in his car. We'd been on the road for 14 hours.

#### AUGUST 6TH

Woke early. It's stunning all around us, everything is in shades of green and blue. The falls are metres away from us, and we are hit by the spray. We had breakfast in style, with a view of the falls. Mansur said we had to hurry, so we got into the car and headed off. We got into Thunder Bay, it's a small town, spacious and pretty. Got some groceries and said goodbye to Mansur when he dropped us off at the Terry Fox Memorial around noon. Waited for about an hour, nobody stopped. In desperation, we started chanting. Niki tai tai tumerai, ho re neke, ho re neke, hey ah, hey ah no ah. It was in Iroquois, taught to me by my friend Shiela in the language of her tribe, Swampy Cree and it was a chant for good things to happen.

A van pulled up. I thought the driver was a priest, simply by the way he was dressed. He seemed rather jolly, until I realised that he was quite drunk. He had an open bottle of red wine by the side of his seat, and soon we were all quite pissed. He was a bible salesman, completely self-made and he was on his way to Quebec. He talked non-stop about 'playing with the system, you kids gotta know how to fuck with it and not get fucked'. He drove like a maniac for almost 18 hours with stops at Long Lake and Hearst. And the ever-present Husky stops, which sell everything from petrol to apple crumble. These small Canadian towns are so deserted, the only distinct sign in every town is a Husky stop. I am in lumberjack country. Finally, we arrive in Toronto and

our ride buys us breakfast at MacDonalds in Barrie. We all have egg MacMuffins and steaming cups of tasteless coffee. Our next stop is Toronto and we say good bye to our ride. His name was 'Ghislain Larouche, bible salesman'.

#### 7TH

We are at Tim and Stuart's apartment on Spadina. It's huge with floor to ceiling windows and we all crash on mattresses in the living room. We went to High Park to jam today. Marcos and Sunny are here too and they drove us in the VW van to the park. When we got there, we saw about 15 to 20 drummers and percussionists playing under a tree. There was a woman in a blue sari. She was bald and had striking blue designs on her face. She was oblivious to the others, dancing meditatively. Some of the musicians were fantastic. Then we went to Julia's old housing collective called Cathedral B. I finally met George, who was androgynous, wore eyeliner and was beautiful. Tracy was preaching anarchy. She had just come back from a poli-sexual-anarchist-feminist conference in San Francisco. Most of us just smoked and listened to her rant. Then we went for Caribbean food at Sylvian's. Rob said to come over to his party later, there were some very well-known artists there, and it was full of hip yuppies. We left early.

#### 8TH

Walked around Kensington Market, and got some fruit. Saw some amazing clothing stores. "Courage My Love" was probably my favourite. It had a mix of vintage and some off-beat designs. Really cool. Later, a bunch of us busked on Queen Street. I played the congas and sang, Julia and Frazer played percussion and Marcos played the dumbek. We actually made \$43! I love playing on the street. People started dancing and getting into the rhythms. It was great fun.

9 - 14<sup>TH</sup>

WOMAD was absolutely incredible. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was the opening act and there were at least 10,000 people at the Waterfront. I managed to squeeze my way to the very front and was literally a few feet away from the stage. When he started singing, I felt pangs of something familiar, something stirred in me, it was of home. I started weeping, and he sang, and then the entire row of seated musicians went into a trance-like state. Allahu Allahu Allahu Allahu, Allahu Allahu. His voice reached into people's hearts and pulled them out whole. The entire crowd was mesmerised. I was weeping for my dead father, I wept for joy. Here I was halfway across the world in a haze of pot, hash and cocaine, and I had heard the voice of God.

The music continued for four nights. We practically camped out, lying on mats, waiting for the music to come on. Many had come, like me, from all over, from across the border and some from as far as Vancouver. It was the summer of 88 and I was a drugged-out, music junkie, it was one of the best years of my life.

15<sup>TH</sup>

Stayed two nights with Mel Bone. Did up a sign for Montreal. Next stop. Quebec!



## 16TH

Julia and I took the train to as far as Oshawa. Got there late and had to spend the night in the park. Hassled by two drunk guys. I was freezing, and terrified. We found shelter in the park's amphitheatre and in the morning, we hit Tim Horton's Donuts to use the bathrooms. We attracted quite a few stares. Three rides later, we were in Montreal.

*That summer changed me. I travelled through Ontario to Toronto, onward to Montreal and into the mountains of Quebec, stayed with an artist Drago and his family in Joliette, crossed the American border into Michigan, hitch-hiked across Wisconsin and Minnesota and then north again to Manitoba. I had travelled over 4,000 kilometres and seen much of North America. I felt like I had somehow traced my father's journeys in Europe and England. I hitch-hiked, too, as he had, I did things which I never thought I was capable of. The music freed me, liberated me. I had come closer to myself, and I knew in my heart that I could not ever return to Malaysia.*



## OF MAH-JONG AND MOVIES

## POH POH. IPOH. 1989

My only happiness was the movies. I watched a movie every day for many years. After cooking lunch I would take my purse, my coconut sweets, my spectacles and go. Ghost stories were my favourite. All the ticket sellers in all the cinemas in Ipoh knew me. Especially the ones at Majestic, Ruby, and Hoover of course, because was the closest to the shophouse. Sometimes, I took Benie or Ah Boy along.

I was born in August 1920 in Canton. It was the year of the monkey. I came over to Malaya at 16 with a trunk of clothes, 16 gold ingots and a heavy heart. Mooi Fatt came from Malaya to accompany me on the boat. My bondmaid came with me too. She ended up in the room upstairs sworn to spinsterhood and she died, lonely.

My father sold joss sticks. We were well off enough. My mother was quite pretty. I had two brothers and a sister. My father was a merchant. My mother helped him, but she preferred to stay at home with us. We had a brick house. It was one of the first brick houses in the village.

I did not like Surinder at first. He was so tall. I said I wasn't going to go to the wedding. Three of them went, Dong, Lai and Pek. They were old enough to make up their minds. Chuey was too young. Yes, I was bitter, disappointed at first. We never married outside. It was all arranged, I don't know if I loved Mooi Fatt. I just did what I had to do. I loved my children yes, all of them. Even the ones I aborted.

Surinder could play mah-jong very well. He says he learnt it in Kelantan, where he was teaching. He learnt to speak a little Cantonese, which helped, I couldn't speak English at all. Mui Tow would translate for me.

The children all came so fast, one by one. By the time I was 20 I already had two children. I don't think I was a very good mother. I was only a child. I didn't know anything. They had to look after themselves when they were old enough. I think I tried my best. After 10 children, I had many abortions. The doctor told me that abortion was not a form of contraception. So five years after Dong, I had Chuey. She was my baby girl. When she was old enough, I took her everywhere. She would play with the other children whenever I played mah-jong. And she came with me to the movies, too.

Mooi Fatt inherited his father's business. He had a tin mine you know, and he was given concessions to mine. He was also a house developer. We had houses on Hume Street, Pasir Pinji and land in Chateau Garden. But of course, he lost everything. He really didn't have a head for business and all his friends were "yes" men. He was always buying the drinks, paying for dinners, even lending money to that man in sunglasses. He thought he was so important. Haiya, it got to his head.

I think it's because he was a kind man, he couldn't say no to anyone. He would get affectionate after a few drinks and he would be nice to me. I couldn't blame him for losing everything, he spent it on the children as well. He gave them the best that he could afford. Dong went to England, Chat went to Australia, Lai went to Taiwan, Mui Thow went to Melbourne, Pek went to England, too. So, out of nine, five went abroad. I don't want to think about the other two. It was the war, they were sick, we could barely feed ourselves. I left them at the convent. I don't know if they are alive. I don't want to know.

We also had that used-car dealership on Anderson Road. I used to drive then and I remember I used to take the children in the car for drives sometimes. I would sometimes pass the Park Hotel, that old colonial house that was converted into a bar? Well, he was there almost every day chatting to the same woman. All of them had mistresses, the yes-men. They were there every day with their mistresses, having drinks, chatting away like fools.

I always told my children. Be good, be better. Do good deeds, as your life is difficult as it is.

When Surinder died, I was very upset. It is our custom to not attend the funeral of someone younger than you. He was so young. I lost my mah-jong partner and Benie had lost her father. And Mui Tow found out she was pregnant. I know



she thought of an abortion. I would have aborted it. How can you have a child when there is no father? But then Ah Boy would not have been born. I cannot imagine that.

My mother died about 10 years after Surinder. I got the letter in the mail. It was from my sister, my stupid useless sister who was always getting married and divorced. If she wants to get married again, she can ask for money from someone else! I am tired of giving her money. I only went back once, and my father's house is still there. I went up to the roof and I hid all my mother's gold and jade up there, in the holes in the roof. I told my children that if they ever go to China to go to the roof in my house. They will find things there.

The Japanese captured my brother. I think I was 15 then, it was before I left for Malaya. He was in the army. I don't really know where he was, but my mother said that he had killed himself. The Japanese had tortured him, they had done all kinds of horrible things to him and then he killed himself.

I think I cried when my mother died. I can't remember. I just wish I had seen her again. I bought her a bicycle just before she died. And then I had to buy her coffin.

I think I am happiest when I play mah-jong and when I am at the movies. I don't have to think about anyone, whether they are happy or sad, or hungry or not, I just wish they would look after themselves and leave me alone.

I just want to sit down now and think. Now Mooi Fatt says we have to sell the shophouse. He has too many debts now. There is no one to help us. Last time he used to help all these people. Look at them now! Not one in sight.

Where will we live? Benie will be upset. Haiya, she will be very upset. I know her, my granddaughter who loves all these old things, she will be so very upset.

Go away. I just want to sit down and think now.

## THE 90s

My grandfather sold 14 Leech Street when I was still in Canada. He got very little for it. Heritage buildings weren't appreciated then and he just sold it for what he could. My family salvaged as many things as they physically could before they were thrown out or claimed by my uncles and aunts. Poh Poh's brass four-poster bed ended up with us, as did the glass cabinet by the dining table. There were the soup tureens, the Made-in-China platters and the tea set with the red dragons and gold trimmings. There were things that I wished I could have taken, but I was still away in Canada and was thinking of ways to stay on. My mother was deeply disappointed and even threatened to disown me. I could not imagine returning to Malaysia, and could not imagine teaching students in far-flung places like Sabak Bernam or, God forbid, Sarawak. I had seen the world, there were things I wanted to do. Great things. I wasn't sure how, but I knew I had start somewhere.

I was in the last year of university and I had loved the student teaching experience, I was an intern in the university's Writing Programme, I was working on my first collection of poems, I was playing music, I had friends who were artists, poets, writers, dancers, musicians, I was inspired. I was afraid that if I returned, there would be nothing.

I had a couple of months before I was due to return and I was hatching ideas with friends. My final exams were done, I had finished all assignments, papers were due, and so I started working at a New Age bookstore called Prairie Sky Books. It was a haven for occult and metaphysical books, crystals, dream-catchers, Buddhist and Hindu parchments, Tibetan thankas, runes, Tarot cards, handwoven ponchos from Guatemala, jewellery from Chile, it had everything

a curious, wannabe new-ager could ever want. I loved the smells of sandalwood and myrrh, native American music by Carlos Nakai, and the clink of chimes. It was a sanctuary. One day, we received a shipment of videotapes from an American distributor. One of the tapes caught my eye. It was called *The Ring of Fire, An Indonesian Odyssey*. Made by two brothers, Lorne and Lawrence Blair, it chronicled a 13-year sea voyage across the Indonesian archipelago. I decided to watch it during my lunch breaks. It was the episode set in Borneo called "The Dream Wanderers of Borneo" that would make a lasting impression. As the filmmakers travelled by longboat in search of the elusive and shy Penan, the last nomadic tribe of the great Bornean rainforests, I was moved by the two brothers' indomitable spirit, in spite of the swampy terrain and persistent leech bites, for when they finally arrived, the faces of these Penan would forever haunt me. The filmmakers were the first outsiders to set foot in this village, so remote it took days to trek into. But when the Penan, whose faces were so translucent and pure, and their village unspoiled and pristine by a magnificent waterfall, greeted them, I was filled with a sense of joy like no other, and there and then, resolved to return to my homeland. These gentle forest dwellers were in danger of losing their lands, to encroaching loggers and palm oil plantations, and I knew that I had work to do.

So I returned, albeit idealistic with romantic notions of working deep in the rainforests with the Penan. I began teaching in a small religious boarding school on the outskirts of Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. I came home.

Ipoh had changed and the roads were no longer the same. Leech Street was Jalan Bijeh Timah, Gopeng Road was Jalan Raja Nazrin Shah, Tiger Lane was Jalan Sultan Azlan Shah, Brewster Road was Jalan Sultan Idris Shah, Hugh Low Street was Jalan Sultan Iskandar. But the saddest thing of all was that the shophouse had gone. A massive Toto sign was where the wooden shutters

used to be. There was nothing left of my Chinese childhood. Poh Poh and Ah Kong were staying with Uncle Dong. Poh Poh had suffered another stroke and was weak, but managed a bright smile for me. Ah Kong could barely walk and stayed mostly in the back room, watching television.

I went to Penang to visit Bapuji, he too was ailing and weak from leukaemia. He could no longer eat chapattis like he used to, crunch onions like apples, and enjoy chicken curry from his own masala recipe. He said he was happy that I was interested in our family history and he would give me his autobiography the next time I visited him. I remember hugging him for a long time, he had tears in his eyes, 'Beta, your Papa would have been so proud of you.' Uncle Birinder was also back to visit Bapuji, taking great care to carry him back and forth from the charpoy and cooking soft meals of spiced rice and vegetables for him. Uncle Birinder took me to the officers' mess one night and we talked. He told me of his secret trip to Vietnam, his friendship with Saadam Hussein, and how they used to swig whiskey together in London and of his frustrations at not being promoted in the army. And I shared my time in Canada, and how I had changed and grown, and how my perspectives on the world had been forever transformed. It was January 1991 and it would be the last time I would see Uncle Birinder and Bapuji again.

On 6 March, my mother called me, weeping hysterically. Uncle Birinder had died in his sleep. I travelled to Penang on the bus. It took eight hours and I wept all the way. The third son had died. *All my sons have died. God put me on a mountain and he cast me down below.* Aunty Gwen was catatonic with grief, my teenage cousins Paul and Simon had to light the pyre. Their father Birinder was dead, and there he was on the dried stack of sandalwood, the priest dumped a tub of ghee on his head, and the pyre was lit. It was barbaric. Aunty Pami had flown in from Wales. Manji was beating her chest. Once again, the Chauly clan was bereft.

On 24 June, 12 weeks after burying his last son, my beloved grandfather, my Bapuji, Jaswant Singh, son of Tehil Singh, petition writer, priest, died. He had outlived all three sons. He had buried Surinder, Devinder and Birinder and it was his time to finally rest. All the men were gone now. I never spoke to him again, and his autobiography was never, ever found.



Two cremations in four months. And that was that. All the men were dead. My father, my uncles and then my Bapuji. Dead. No more stories, no more letters, no more.

I resigned from my teaching position that year and fled back to Canada, to a safer space, where I could be myself and mourn, and where death did not happen. Eighteen months later, I was back in Ipoh, weary and broken from a failed relationship.

It was never easy being my mother's daughter, she had lived her life principled and strong, and had ideas about who I was and who I had to be. And all this while, in the back of my mind, I wondered about this curse, I wondered if it was real. I kept writing vignettes about the shophouse in Ipoh. I continued to write stories my grandmother told me, and stories my mother told me.

## OF SNAKES AND DREAMS

*And so the snakes come into my dreams. I first dream of a giant green serpent, it enters my room through the open door and it slithers in mid-air, it has no head. I hear a sound and sit upright and see it hovering in the middle of my room. It leaves as quickly as it enters, and heralds the beginning of two decades of dreams with serpents.*

22.1.92

Dearest Bernice,

I just want to tell you that whatever has happened and will happen between us, you are always my daughter. As long as you and I live, the bond between us is forever there no matter where we are.

I still love you as a mother. I will continue to share your joys and sorrows and all of your struggles in life. I hope you will come to me not only with your successes but with your failures as well.

If we are to learn from our experiences (including our mistakes) then whatever happened to us in the past, should strengthen us in the present. Let us not concentrate and dwell on the past but accept it and then turn it into a driving force in our present life. If we allow it to limit us over and over again, when are we going to stop our pains? And, where is growth in our life now?

Now that you have chosen your own path for yourself, I wish you well. However, life is always full of ups and downs (even a monkey does fall off a tree). You will need a lot of inner strength and courage to go through life. This grace can only come from God. In order to receive God's grace, you need to submit – yourself and your life to Him. Then He will touch and guide you all the way.

At this very crucial stage of your life, I ask you to treasure the gift of your life from God who loves you. Please cherish and nourish it with care and prayer.

We will continue to pray for you with love and hope.

Lots of love  
Mum



Ah Kong died on 8 January 1994. He continued smoking 555 cigarettes until the end when his lungs failed him. He was 78.

Poh Poh died after a long illness served on by a stroke. She died on 31 August 1997, the same day Lady Diana lost her life. She was 76. I mourned her, I lit incense and candles and I thanked her for her gifts to me.

*Thank you, Poh Poh, for your wonderful food, for cooking for me, for taking me to the cinema, for letting me spend so much time in the attic. Thank you for giving me money to buy books and pencils and erasers and chocolates from Dayi. I will miss you, Poh Poh, thank you for your stories. Thank you for forcing me to speak Cantonese. Thank you for being the best Poh Poh anyone could ever wish for.*

I threw myself into journalism, delving into other people's lives, interviewing people who had AIDS, sex workers, writing plays and monologues, searching for stories and bringing them to light. I became an activist, fighting for the indigenous people's rights, going into the heart of Sarawakian rainforest to make an anti-government video against the building of a dam. I conceptualised, wrote, photographed, narrated a series on Kelantanese folk forms, reaching out to capture the last vestiges of craft and skill, embedded in the memory of practitioners who had been forgotten. I wrote other people's stories. I worked with refugees who had fled from Burma, Aceh, Somalia. I photographed them. I published my poems, my short stories. I could finally call myself a writer.



## OF ENDINGS

In July 2006, a week after her 66th birthday, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. What was thought to be a headache turned out to be a haemorrhage in the brain. The cancer had spread, it was too late.

*I went to Ipoh to visit you and you had rearranged the furniture. There were towels all over the chairs and the cushions were all in a line. I was afraid that the cancer had furrowed itself deeper into your brain. I was afraid of leaving you so you came and lived with me and we looked after you. Bernard cooked you herbal soups, steamed your favourite fish, fed you when you were too weak, carried you when you could not walk. Janice came to see you, too, we were together again as a family, your illness brought us together.*

*We prayed with you every night, Hail Mary, Our Father and the prayers of St. Theresa of Avila. We kissed you and hugged you and told you that we loved you. We forgave you and you forgave us. No more harsh words, only love. But you got weaker and weaker and thinner and thinner. There was no more hunger, only the morphine could comfort you now. I was afraid to sleep, afraid to lose you in the night.*

*Sumarni wakes me in the morning and says there is blood. Ibu! Ada darah banyak! Blood has come out of you. I rush out and get gloves, disinfectant, plastic sheets. There is the smell of blood in my hair. It is metallic, cancerous blood. I sit with you for hours. You twist and turn, eyes looking for something. What do you see? I press the rosary in your hand. I pray with you silently. I lie down next to you. I take you in my arms and breathe you in. Mother. You are leaving me. I know it will be soon. I am sorry, I am sorry. For ever hurting you. The aunts are summoned. Auntie Ping, Uncle James, Auntie Pek, all*



*the cousins come. We gather around, they chant Buddhist prayers and sutras, we say Hail Mary Full of Grace, the Lord is with thee, we pray and light incense to pave your way to the realm of the dead.*

*The Angel of Death is near. Azrael has been summoned. He is here. Your soul has left. It is just your body now. Blood and flesh mixed with morphine. Bernard and I sit by your side. We hold you in our hands. Your feet are getting cold. Your breath slows. My children have wept and are in bed, the maids say the Yasin. La ilaa ha illah. La ilaa ha illah. La ilaa ha illah.*

*There is a calm now. We sit still, holding you. Your breath slows. It stops. The body gives up. A sigh. No more. The angels are there with us in the room. Their wings are silent. They are all in the room.*

*And you are gone, into the ether. It is done. You gave us life. You gave us death.*

*We hugged you, and with eyes full of tears, you summoned the strength to say,*

*Goodbye, my beautiful children.*



*My mother died on 16 March 2007.*

*My father's death evicted me from the world. I started writing to find myself in it. My mother's death set me free. Death takes away, death gives. And now, I was ready to finish what I had started.*

*I had to go to India.*

*Bapuji said that the Gurdwara in Verka has a brick, where the name Tehil Singh is written in Gurmukhi. Ask the priest Gianiji and he will read it for you.*

## Jane Chauly — A woman of great humanity

The parish of St Michael's Church in Ipoh, mourned the death of its active parishioner, Jane Chauly, *pic*, who passed away recently due to illness.

Jane, a widow and former teacher of English and Mathematics, was 67 at the time of her passing. She was a BEC leader, Eucharistic Minister, and involved in the children's liturgy, as well as the national president of the Secular Order of the Discalced Carmelites.

Prior to her illness she attended daily evening Masses at SMC, where she was one of those who led the Divine Office everyday prayers for the congregation. When she learnt of her illness, she prepared the liturgical readings for her funeral, being the determined and faithful woman that she was, said SMC parish priest, Fr Michael Cheah, who conducted the funeral service. The service was held on Sunday, Mar 18 and was attended by her children Bernard, Bernice and Janice; members of the lay Carmelite order; Joyful Vanguard (in which she was also involved); parishioners; and friends.

Bro Vincent Corkery, La Sallian Brother, described Jane as a working mother, a single woman dedicated to young people such as the Joyful Vanguard.

"She was a person of great humanity, deeply spiritual, and in her difficulties found assurances in prayer. She agonised over difficult decisions during her illness, and came to a wise and sensible choice — to enter into the lives and realities of other people through her pain.

"Her greatest quality was that of her struggle as a single parent, as she lost her husband tragically. I remember when we were travelling home from Taiping, she



was met at the gate by her children who ran and hugged her. I realised I witnessed a moment of great love within that family.

"Her children today have grown and have shown originality in their careers, and this reflects on her parenting.

"Her favourite journey is to the Carmelite association for more prayer and reflection. Following the footsteps of St Teresa of Avila who said: 'The more holy we become, the more cordial we are.' This test was shown in her wonderful love and consideration of all people.

"She had a hope that they would go through the bitter valley (of pain) and find living springs of water, a place of new life in the Lord. Jane is alive and her presence lives on in our memory," he said.

Obituary in *The Herald*, Catholic newspaper, April 2007

## OF THE NAGAS

*The snakes visit me almost every night now. They are big black serpents and I wrestle with them. Sometimes they bite me, sometimes they leave me alone. Sometimes they lie in slumber, sometimes they are skinned, dead, hung to dry, sometimes they are tailless, headless, they are in colours black, green, yellow, with hoods that reach high. They speak to me in my sleep, and when I awake, I hear them still, rustling beneath me. I am not afraid, ever.*

*Once I dreamt I was on a vast green field. There was a huge black mound in the middle of it and when I went closer, I realised that the mound was made up of hundreds of black serpents. They were coiled together, heads and tails merging into one ebony mass. I stood by the side of the field, waiting. Then one by one, the snakes disengaged themselves, spilled over into slithering black streaks and one came towards me. It glided towards me, its width bigger than my torso, its head twice the size of mine, its eyes glimmering like ripe green melons, it came towards me and brushed against my arm. I wrestled with it, with all my brute strength, with all my might. I would not give in. Then it left, and another came. I wrestled with it again, turning my body this way and that, using my arms and legs to kick it away. It left, and another came. I wrestled with it again, finding strength I never knew, and suddenly, as if obeying a silent order, the snakes retreated, slithering away, and one last one came towards me, head raised, I saw its flickering tongue, I saw its raised head, ready to strike, I raised my arms to grapple it and then it vanished, along with all the others. I was alone on the field. I had wrestled with snakes. I had defeated them. I had won.*

*I had many more dreams after that. The snakes had found me, they followed me for many years. When I was happy, I had dreams with cobras; when I was sad, I had dreams with pythons; when I was ambivalent, I had dreams with snakes all manner of sizes and colours, big ones, small ones, ones that had unimaginable colours. They were my friends, never my enemies, I never killed one, I was never killed. They were signs, and I began to read them.*





PART VI



## Of JOURNEYS AND STORIES

IPOH. APRIL 2009

I drive to Ipoh to see Auntie Shan or Harcharan Kaur, who was closest to my father. I am late, by two hours, and I bring the gift of mangoes, four of them, yellow and succulent from the shop on Leech St. The one famous for its white coffee, the one that has hawkers selling carrot pancake, kuih-muih of all kinds and fruit in the front.

I bring you these mangoes, from Leech Street.

You have been waiting, I know, and I know your knees are tired, I can see from the way you hobble as you greet me on the street. But your eyes gleam when I enter the house, the house that used to have a crack in the middle of the top floor, close to the room where your son Manjit had on his walls, posters of players from Manchester United. And so we sat with a cup of Nescafe and curry puff in hand, whilst Uncle Ajit sat in his chair and listened, earnestly, for a while.

You began talking about the house in Prangin Estate and how it used to stink when the tide came in, how the Chinese fishermen used to dry their salted fish on racks by the beach, and how the flies used to come in by the thousands and how you asked Bapuji to get rid of them. Of how you wanted to move away from the salt and stink of the sea. That house by the sea, that muddy house lined with scattered shells on the floor, with two rooms only and two Punjabi beds in one and a platform in the other, for all of you, for all of you, who would sleep on mattresses day after day, night after night, chasing away flies and scents of the sea.

This is where you grew up, this is where you learnt to read and write, dear Papa, this is where you came and went from to your life in the West, this is where you came from. Those postcards

you sent from Europe, they were sent here, to this muddy house in Penang, by the jetty, by the Chinese clan houses, read by your mother who was illiterate, by her eyes who could see but could not read. This is where you came from.

Do you remember during the war when you were four or five when you had worms? Do you remember what you did?

She remembers it well. It was in Buntong, near Ipoh at Manji's house, there were no toilets then, and you had worms. You all had worms then, it was the war. You had been given worm medicine and you went to the outhouse in the back, but you had with you a sardine tin and so you defecated into the tin, you wanted to show them the worms in your belly, and you did, you tied a string through a hole in the sardine tin and you passed out your worms into the tin and you dragged it to them, you showed your worms to them and you said to them, 'This is what came out of me.'

*My beloved brother, remember when Father used to ride his old bicycle with us? When he used to ride from Kuala Kangsar to Ipoh? He would put me in the back seat and you would sit on the front, on the handles, we would ride by the railway track, all three of us, and when the trains came, we would stop, and get off and then we would continue again. All the way back to Ipoh.*

*There was once a cow, a female cow called Niki, remember how it used to chase people? Remember how we used to tie it to a piece of rope and then take it down to the river and bathe it? And you would milk the cow and the milk would spray onto your eyes and mouth? We would play with that cow in the afternoons, you would jump up on its back and pretend you were riding a horse. That cow gave us a lot of milk, but Father had to sell it, it was the war and the Japanese wanted meat. Remember when we took it to Ipoh? She knew she was leaving us, she had tears in her eyes when we said goodbye.*

I see you now, with him, he is a child with bright eyes, and jet-black hair. He is tall, lanky, and mischievous in his gait. He

wants to run and jump and dive into the river. And you stand there, looking at him, with upturned eyes. I am sure you were beautiful then. You still are, with your Marlene Dietrich lips. They were always ruby red, you reminded me of a Hollywood star. Your arched eyebrows and your cheekbones, you should have been an actress. I imagined you in a black-and-white movie, with head cocked to one side, gazing languorously into the distance. You are smoking a cigarette and you are so beautiful. But there you are with him, by the river in Kuala Kangsar, in your salwar kameez and your pigtails, you are both laughing and laughing. You are both happy.

*Bernice beta, I was the first to look at his body. His eyes were still open, my brother, my beloved brother. Devinder handed me his rosary and I put it on his body. I didn't get a phone call about his death. Father was just too upset to call anyone. Even the girls in England didn't get a call. He sent them the newspaper article of your Papa's death. Can you imagine the shock? Your mummy's elder sister's children came to find me. They were bicycling around my house and they called to me, Auntie Auntie, your brother Bernard ah, went swimming inside the sea and then never came out. Dia sudah mati. He is no more. I went to get Ajit and we immediately drove straightaway to Penang. And after the funeral, he appeared to me in a dream, he said, 'When I pinch your feet, you'll know I'm there.' He also came to Ajit and said, 'I will be reborn again.' My son Manjit reminds me so much of Surinder. None of us received a phone call. Father was just devastated.*

It was 1945 and almost the end of the war. You lived with your father and brother in Kuala Kangsar. Bapuji was the head clerk at the Japanese club. There was a Japanese couple that had loved you and they wanted to adopt you, to take you away. They had no children, they lived upstairs. But Bapuji said, no, nobody could take you away. Were you sad? Did you want to go with them?



*Surinder, you used to eat chapattis so fast. Remember when Ajit and I were staying on Ring Road, you used to come with Jane and park your car by the side. You used to cook together and make steamed fish, dhall, chapattis, chutney. You would eat so fast. I would tell you to slow down. Remember once, there was an eating competition, we were all around and you ate and ate, I remember you ate eight chapattis in a row.*

*You were already in Kirkby when you got the Colombo Plan, you had already been there for a year and then Father told you that the letter had come. You were so upset, you told me you wanted to commit suicide.*

Kirkby Teachers' Training College, Liverpool, the Colombo Plan, the Blue Funnel Line ship – you rattle off these names that were part and parcel of his life, like I know them. I do know them, but I do not know them as well as I should, perhaps, that I wish you would help me find out more. I need to ask you more questions. Will you let me ask you, more than what you are perhaps willing to say?

*Remember one night, Father had asked you to go out to buy something, you must have been about 10, you came back with the wrong thing, I don't even remember what it was you were asked to buy, but you came back with the wrong thing and Father was very upset. He said, 'Go and get it, you son of an owl!' Ulu da patha! And so you ran outside, and you ran so fast, you fell into a drain and you were covered in dirty water. When you came back, you told me that you saw a car on the road while you were running, and an owl flew out of the car. You said, 'I met the owl, I met the owl, I tried to catch it!'*

There was a black diary, Aunty Shan tells me that there is such a thing. That you said that all is happening the way it should, if 'I am alive, then there is no need, but I am dead, the diary will speak for itself.'

What does this mean, Papa? That you knew that there was a curse? That you knew you were going to die? Where is this diary?

*Bernice, your Papa loved you so much. He used to fit you onto his lap, from your head to your bum, he used to have you on his lap and he would study, remember he was doing his Masters then? He would change your nappy, too, he would burp you, your Papa loved you so much.*

I am tired now, tired by death. I wish death would leave us alone, but it is death that makes me write. If there was no death, I would not write this.

*Why did all my brothers die? Surinder at 33, Devinder at 36, Birinder at 48. I wanted some answers, I once went to the temple in Falim and I asked the priest, he was very young and handsome. I asked him why my brothers had died, he said that there was a curse in our family, that the snake goddess demands sacrifice. That the snake goddess controls all the males in our family. I said, forgive me, forgive me, please. No more deaths. We have cried enough. Then another time, the priest said that he had a dream, and I was going up the stairs, the snake goddess was at the top of the stairs, and I was asking the snake goddess what she wanted from me, the snake goddess replied, don't ask anything from me, you are going to cry more.*

I carry my father in me. He is my breath, eyes, tongue, cheek, skin - my grief, my despair. I have carried him since he died. Death has struck me and I am over-populated, like a nation without an army.

*I am telling you this because you are my brother's daughter, I have to tell you this because I am ready to tell you now, I cannot keep this anymore, but you must know, you must know what to write, what to keep in your heart, and what to keep in your mind.*

You sit there and I know you see him, right in front of you. He is there with us now. And you remember what he says about my mother.

*Jane, she has beautiful legs.*

## OF SNAKES AND CURSES

I was told that we had a family curse that dated back to the Punjab. Maybe that's why all the sons died, one by one, and then Bapuji died. All the men were gone and Bapuji had to outlive his sons. I always thought that we had the one curse, but Auntie Shan said there were two. *Not one, but two.*

Once upon a time, there was a family of children who lived by the sea. They lived in a house of two rooms, there were eight of them, three boys and five girls. The children grew up well and some went overseas. Then one by one, the sons died, first Surinder, then Devinder, finally Birinder and then their father died, and that was the end of the men.

*Once upon a time, there was a plague that came to a village in the Punjab, there was a woman and her brother, that woman is your great-grandmother. One by one, they started to die from the illness, one by one, her parents, children, uncles, aunts, cousins, they all died until the only one left was her and her brother. And so they cursed her, the villagers cursed her and her brother with the curse of old age – "buda" – so she lived till 102. They cursed her so the brother and sister would outlive everyone in their family. And so they came to Malaya, this brother and sister. They came to start a new life. And the woman's daughter, she is your grandmother.*

*Once upon a time, there was a woman who used to worship cobras. She was your Bapuji's grandmother, your great-grandmother, she used to go to the snake mound outside the village and she would go there every Friday with milk and eggs to feed the snakes. They would come out of the mound and she would feed this to them and she would watch them weave in and out of each other and she would watch in fascination. She would see their thick bodies slither in and out of each other's tresses and see their majestic hoods rise and fall. She did this every Friday, when the ground steamed and when it was wet with*

*the rains. She did this every day until she died and after she died, the tradition died.*

The priest in Falim says that the Naga Goddess is displeased and she wants the sacrifice to continue. The naga dosham, the snake curse, hangs over our family now, like a shroud. The snake curse hangs like a shadow over all of us. The priest says that we have to make offerings to the goddess with milk and eggs and manjel and kukkumun. We will have to feed the snakes once again, like my great-grandmother did.

The snakes are always at work, like death. Death never sleeps, and the snakes come to me. In dreams they come to me, headless sometimes, slumbering in their weight. They are big, black or white with red trimming around their hoods, sometimes they are dead or plastic or alive. They come to me when I need them. They have glowering red eyes. They speak to me and I understand, they do not bite me, they instruct me. The Naga Goddess instructs me like a voice from within, she tells me that I am strong, that I can wrestle with her, that she will not strike me, she gives me strength. Will the cobra strike me if I meet her in the dark? Will she set her fangs into my flesh and give me her poison? Or will she steel her gaze at me, mesmerise me with her eyes, like she did my father when he saw her at the Botanical Gardens at night? Or like when she slithered down the windows of my grandfather's house? Or when the big brown snake came to visit Manji? I dream of snakes, and one night, I dreamt of two snakes, both cobras, erect, one good, one evil. I waited to see which one would consume the other first, which snake would be eaten first. In the dream, I imagined these two snakes, one inside the other, two layers of skin and blood, one heart beating, one cold.

The snakes have always lived with us. And now I seek them as they seek me.

They have never harmed us, and we will not harm them.

SNAKE STORIES

SURINDER

It was early in the evening and I went to the Botanical Gardens again as usual to look for more frogs, which I have been dissecting on Mother's kitchen table. I went to my normal spot, quite close to the lake and followed the croaking of the frogs. It had been raining and I knew there would be some.

I shone my torch looking around and I had my bag ready. Then I saw it. I stopped. The cobra was raised, its hood open, right in front of me. It was big, brownish black. I was rooted to the ground, I did not move, I did not breathe. The snake stared at me, I stared back. We stared at each other. I kept staring at it. Its eyes unflinching, then it lowered its hood and slithered away. I stood there in shock, then I ran, almost falling, to my bicycle and cycled all the way home.

MANJI

It was in the afternoon, I was sitting on the porch. I was having a quick nap, and then I saw this big brown snake coming. I think it was a python. It was near the stairs. I knew it was Devinder. My son Devinder had come to see me. I know the snakes lived in our roof. I used to see them slide down the windows. No, they weren't cobras, they were vipers. I remember there was a pair of them. They were yellow and green with black stripes all around. I wasn't afraid of them. I knew they would never harm us.

BAPUJI

I know that they live in our roof, I hear them moving around sometimes. They try to be quiet. They are a family, too, and they like to live close to us. One afternoon, one

slithered down onto the window. My wife saw it, she was afraid, she asked me to kill it, I said no, don't get frightened. I spoke to the snake, I said, 'If you don't harm us, we won't harm you.' And that's how it was, they lived in the roof of my house for many years. I could not tell my children or my grandchildren, they would not understand, they would have been too afraid.

They say after all sons died, the handsome young priest from the gurdwara in Falim came to the house to exorcise it. My daughters believed there was a demon in the house and they wanted to get rid of it.

The priest found a photograph of my children, it was rolled up and tied with yellow and red thread. The faces of my three boys had been burnt out, the girls were fine and there were three pins stuck into it, like a charm.

## MANJI

There is a Punjabi belief that if a cobra sees a pregnant woman, it will go blind. The baby inside will make the cobra go blind. It was in Kangar. There was a big flood and the waters came up to my knees. I was pregnant with Birinder, and Surinder was up to no good. He was always up to mischief, that boy. He had the most devious tricks up his sleeve. I was in the kitchen and the water was high, and I saw a King Cobra swimming towards me. It saw my belly and it went blind. I grabbed it by the tail and smacked it against the wall. Its head was smashed into a pulp. Surinder picked up the snake and smiled gleefully. I knew he was up to something.

He went behind the house and cut some banana leaves. He wrapped the snake up carefully in the leaves and tied a string around it. It was going to be a gift for one of our neighbours.

Sani lived down the road, he was not a very nice man and he would sometimes make trouble for us. Surinder went to his gate and shouted out, 'Sani, ada daging, bapa saya sudah pulang. Ada daging.' ('My father has returned, there is meat for you...')

Sani went out to get masala spices for the meat. He thought it was wild boar. Surinder followed him while he went to the shop and then followed him home. Sani had started cooking when he finally unwrapped the banana leaves. When he saw the dead snake curled up in the leaves, he screamed so loud, the neighbours thought he was being butchered in his own home.

Surinder, Surinder, my son, my beloved son, came running home, bent over with laughter. He told me the story, and I started laughing, too.

#### **RUABON, WALES. APRIL 2009**

My journeys continue. My need to know more than what lies within the letters, journals and scrapbook takes me to England, where I know I must interview my father's other sisters - The Three Musketeers - Manjit, Surjit and Pami (or Paramjit). These three aunts moved away when I was still a child and they were told of my father's death in the mail. Bapuji was so devastated he sent them newspaper articles of my father's death. He could not bring himself to call them and tell them the news over the phone. When Pami received the newspaper clipping in the mail a week after his death, she fainted. Pami is the youngest, the baby of the family, the one who married a Welshman and settled in Wales. She has three children, my cousins Karam, Shaan and Gareth, two of whom I met for the first time.

My aunt Pami picks me up from Ruabon station in Wales after a four-hour train ride from London and she tells me this story.

*When I came back to Malaysia in 1974 to visit your Papa's grave, I remember we slept in your parents' room in the house in Taiping. You were five then. Bernard was still a baby and Janice was just over a year old. I was devastated when I arrived, and that night, I had a dream. Surinder came to me in the dream and said, 'Don't cry, Pami, don't cry, I will always be there for you. I will always come to you in the shape of a butterfly.' And I remember that there was a huge butterfly in my dream, it was the size of an entire wall. I never forgot that and over the years, I remember seeing butterflies in my house here (in Wales). When Gareth was a baby, I remember one night where he was colicky and crying all night, I finally managed to put him down in his cot, later I went to check on him and in the corner of the cot was a small white butterfly. Over the years, Gareth mentions having seen a butterfly in his room when he works late at nights. I even remember several times, in the middle of winter, when there was a butterfly in my kitchen. But what I wanted to tell you is this – when I came to pick you up today, I got into the car and I saw something fluttering around. It was a white butterfly.*

We spend the next few days talking and reminiscing about my father; my aunt shows me postcards that my father wrote home when he was all over England. She shows me the newspaper clipping that Bapuji sent her of my father's death. I break down when I see this, I had no idea it existed until now. Also, we decide to go to Kirkby, to retrace my father's steps when he was at the Malayan Teachers' Training College in Kirkby, Liverpool, from 1958 to 1960. She tells me that the college is no longer there but we could still go. I get to know my cousins, I chat with Uncle Arthur who has aged somewhat, his ginger hair now shorter and much faded, but his twinkly eyes still sparkle. Gareth reminds me of my father, he is tall, soft-spoken, lanky.



INTERVIEW WITH AUNTY PAMI

**Bernice:** Tell me about the Prangin Estate house in Penang.

**Pami:** It was in a fishing village, you get off from the ferry terminal and you go away from town. The house was on the left going into the sea, it's past the big monsoon drain, and then you walk into the estate. It was number 17. The houses were in a circle, ours was in the inner circle, the houses had the backs facing each other, they were concrete houses, not wooden as you think. I was born in that house, there were only two bedrooms there.

**Bernice:** What are some of your memories of that house?

**Pami:** Father built that house with his own hands, I remember there was always the smell of food coming from the kitchen. Mother was always in the kitchen doing something, cooking, washing, cleaning, always busy. Did you know that Father used to make his own masala? Coriander seed, cumin, cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, black pepper, yellow mustard seed, star anise, he would pick it, wash it and dry it out in the sun, turning it every few days. Then he would take it off to the mill and get it ground up. I think that's why Mother's curries were so good. It was because of the masala mix.

**Bernice:** You mention smells, what about the sea?

**Pami:** It was always fishy, it was a fishing village after all, mostly Chinese fishermen. We were the only Punjabi family there, Father was like the headman of sorts. They respected him, even the communists. He protected them sometimes. There was a sawmill nearby, too, you could hear the mill all the time. The fishermen would lay out the fish on straw mats to dry by the beach to be made into salted fish. If the sea swelled

up, the tide would sometimes come in and flood the houses. I remember the fishing junks, some were little sampans.

**Bernice:** Do you have a memory of childhood in that house? Something that you love and cherish?

**Pami:** Father was always the first up, he was a petition writer as you know, he was always up by 6:30 a.m. He would bathe and then pray and then he would wake everyone up...

**Bernice:** What would he say to you?

**Pami:** He would come to me and gently say, 'Pami, potu ottu.'

**Bernice:** Meaning?

**Pami:** Pami, my favourite child, wake up, darling child.

**Bernice:** That's beautiful.

**Pami:** (laughs) But then I would turn over and go back to sleep. Mother would be up making chai by then, the boys had bicycles, we walked, the school wasn't very far. It pays to be the youngest though, as when I got tired, Birinder would put me on the carrier. Father gave us money for lunch, it was 10 cents for a bowl of mee then. And after school, we would walk to the tree, he worked under that tree for years, and sometimes, I would eat his food.

We didn't have many toys, but we played lots of games like kari masak with pots and pans, we'd slice and dice flowers, and sneak in a few of Mother's spices. And when it was high tide, Surinder and Devinder would make paper boats and we'd put our dolls into them. Mother used to make clothes for our dolls.

**Bernice:** What was Bapuji like as a father?

**Pami:** It was a big responsibility with eight kids, he worked hard, he was a staunch Sikh but he didn't push religion on us, he never stopped us from doing things. He was well respected by everyone in the village, and many came to him for advice. He was like the headman of our village. The chettiers would come to him and the lawyers, of course. He was very well versed in legalese. Whatever he made was enough for us, we never had luxuries, no holidays. But whenever it was festival time, we celebrated it with everyone. If it was Chinese New Year, we joined in with crackers and if it was the lantern festival, we had kueh kah pek, red bean cake and mooncake.

**Bernice:** Which of the brothers were you closest to?

**Pami:** Birinder, he left home at 14 to join the army and then went to RMC (Royal Military College), I remember how upset I used to be when he had to leave again. Surinder and Devinder both went to St Xavier's. Your Papa was big with the scouts and he was very active all the time. They used to race on their bikes and Surinder would shout, 'Faster Thunder faster!' He always worked hard, he took his drawing very seriously, he was also good at maths and science. And I remember when they were doing biology in school, he used to go to the Botanical Gardens and look for frogs. I remember once watching him put the frog to sleep with chloroform, and he would peel off the skin until we could see the heart beating. He would draw the insides, stitch it back up and the frog would hop off.

**Bernice:** That's unbelievable! The frog lived?

**Pami:** Yes, I remember Manjit saw it outside the house once, she said she saw stitches on it. Must have been one of Surinder's frogs, she said. He had this set of surgical instruments, they were very precious to him, I remember him rolling them up in this brown cloth.

**Bernice:** Yes, I remember seeing those knives, there was a special drawer for them. I think we played with them when we were kids. They were really sharp.

**Pami:** He used to find insects, too, and pin them down on Mother's chopping board. After he finished his exams, he got a place in UM (University of Malaya) in KL. Birinder was also in KL so they were able to spend time together. He had lots of friends then and he didn't do well; after a year, he had to leave.

**Bernice:** What was he like, as a man, as a person, my father.

**Pami:** He was very soft-spoken, quiet, never raised his voice, you had to be perfectly quiet to listen to him, no, he never raised his voice. He would take a big breath and then speak. I remember he liked to sing. We used to have sing-songs. We learnt a few songs together.

**Bernice:** What were weekends like with the family?

**Pami:** There was always work to be done, we would help with the housework, cleaning, washing, and cooking. We would take turns to help her cook. We only ever ate Punjabi food really, chapatti, dhal, saag, curries.

**Bernice:** Yes, I remember Manji's chicken curry, I used to have extra helpings all the time.

**Pami:** Well, it was also Father's masala, too. That was the secret ingredient.

**Bernice:** When did the decision to move come? Why move out of the house?

**Pami:** Before we moved, there was a big wedding in the house. It was Uncle Thakar's daughter's wedding, our house became the bride's house. We put up a marquee, borrowed lots of Punjabi beds, it went on for days and the house was very full. I think it was Birinder who suggested we move. He used to bring his friends back from KL and he noticed the wear and tear on the house, it needed more repairs, there was also a lot of political unrest at the time, and he said to Father that maybe it was time to move. So he cycled around looking for houses and ended up in Cheeseman Road. It was Shan who knew of the contact at number 25 and she said that number 23 was for sale.

Birinder saw the house and fell in love with it. I remember he did all the negotiating, and we told Surinder over the telephone that we were moving into a new house, he was so excited, he shouted. It was like moving to heaven.

**Bernice:** This was in '59 or '60?

**Pami:** When Surinder came back, we were already in the house, so yes, it was 1960. He was in Kirkby for two years and when he came back, he was sent to Pasir Puteh for his placement. It would take him days to get there on his Vespa. He had this white Vespa and Mother would pile it up with pots and pans, bedding, clothes, it would all be hanging off the bike. And he would get soaked in the rain sometimes, but he always got there safely. He used to write home and say that he was teaching athletics, art and maths. There was apprehension at first, but he really enjoyed his time there. We didn't have much contact after that. But in 1966, that's when he came back and went to Glugor to the Malayan Teachers' Training College. That's the year he met your mum. I was in Form 5 then.

**Bernice:** Did you ever meet her then?

**Pami:** Surinder had told Mother and Father about her and I knew her name. I was at Light Street Convent at the time and a Miss Loh was doing her teaching practice there. So one day I went to find out if she was the one Surinder had been talking about. I found her as she was putting her books away and I asked her 'Are you Miss Loh? I am Surinder's sister.' She went "Ah" and put her hand to her mouth. She was so little, so tiny, petite. We shook hands and had a little chat.

**Bernice:** I read in Papa's letters that Bapuji and Manji were not happy about the relationship at all.

**Pami:** Well, Ranjit and Shan had arranged marriages so it was assumed that Surinder would have one, too. Father made lots of suggestions, there were many girls who were interested in him. Surinder mentioned a few names, too, yes, but when Father asked him for suggestions, he said that he had a Chinese girlfriend. Father was very upset. It was his firstborn son after all. It was unheard of at that time. Father was afraid of how that would tarnish the image of the family. He was a priest, a preacher of the Sikh faith. Marriage to someone out of the religion was simply not possible. They weren't happy about it, but in the end, they knew they couldn't stop it.

**Bernice:** Is this why nobody went to the wedding?

**Pami:** Devinder was the only one who could go. Birinder was in the army, none of the girls were allowed. It was a church wedding and then they stayed on in Pasir Puteh. But after Jane got pregnant was when we really got to know her. And after you were born, it was fine.

**Bernice:** I was the peacemaker?

**Pami:** Yes, you were premature, did you know that?

**Bernice:** Mother said that it was perhaps she flew in the airplane two weeks before I was due.

**Pami:** It is possible. Mother flew back with your mum on the plane. She was living in Pasir Puteh for a while then, wasn't she?

**Bernice:** Amazing, isn't it? How they came to accept the marriage.

**Pami:** Yes, and you were all so happy. After your birth, there was peace. You were the peacemaker.

### Sleepwalker

In the silence of ghosts  
stunned in the ardour of sleep  
in sarong and white singlet  
he climbed the roof long limbed

His perturbed sisters followed  
stared as he stood tall, hair  
flailing, they thought to ask  
'What are you doing Surinder?'  
With hands caressing the wind  
he answers in a still breath  
as a cloud choking  
the selfish moonlight - he says  
'I am hanging spoons.'

(from *The Book of Sins*, 2008)

*I dreamt of a great, big serpent. It fell from the sky, it had a red hood and eyes of steel. It came towards me. It hugged my chest and it said, 'I can hear the sea.'*

## OF INDIA

### DECEMBER 2009

I decide to go to India, to our village outside Amritsar to find the truth. To walk on the land of my ancestors, to touch my head to the ground, to give respect, to see and smell the land that made us. To finally get the answers I need.

I go to see Manji before I leave. I want, I need, her blessing. She is 91 years old now. She still lives in the house on Cheeseman Road. Her hands are gnarled, traversed by root-like veins. Her skin is cool, like her cheeks. She has cut her hair, it is now a grey bob. I wrap my arms around her and I feel the folds of skin around her arms and waist. She still wears a blouse with a sarong. She is unable to walk as briskly as before now, and her ears are weak. I have to raise my voice, and she smiles at me. She knows I want more stories. And so she speaks of snakes, of Bapuji and of the war. But we do not speak of her dead sons. She tells me that her grandmother used to feed the snakes. In Thata, the village of her ancestors. And yes, that Bapuji's mother fed the snakes too, and his father, and his father's father. I say I have to know, I want to know the truth. I have to break the curse. I say, 'Manji I am going to India.' She says, 'You are strong, Bernice. Bapuji gave you tiger's milk, remember. Don't be scared.'

I land in New Delhi airport and I am afraid. The chaos and bedlam confuse me. The taxi driver scolds me for short-changing him. This is a teeming multitude of humanity, people everywhere.



This is poverty and majesty rolled into one nation of a billion souls. History assails me. India is everywhere, it gets into your eyes, your nose, your hair. It gets under your skin. And I am here. I have finally come home to the land of my forefathers.

## DELHI

I spend five days in Delhi, I meet with friends who write and tell them of my trip. This is mythic, one says. Snakes? Good luck! says another. I immerse myself in the city. It is overwhelming, confrontational. I go to the monuments: the Qutb Mina, the Red Fort, India Gate, Masjid Jama, Humaydan's Tomb. On days when Delhi freezes, I walk along the streets; I see beggars in thin brown scarves, huddling by small street fires. By four, the evening fog dips low and long shadows move in stilted limbo. I sit in an auto and weave in and out of cars, bicycles, carts. I go to Gurgaon, Chadni Chowk, Connaught Place, Khan Market, Jangpura. The sharp air is nippy, the nights cold. I buy books and salwars, scarves and chapels. I sit in libraries and bookshops, I read Kushwant Singh, Nonica Datta, Urvaishi Butalia. I read about Partition, I read about the history of the Sikhs, I read postcolonial reason. At night, I retire to my simple room at the YMCA and I watch NDTV, old Hindi movies and interviews with the stars of Bollywood. I eat well. The café at the YMCA serves good Indian fare. Thick dhall and meat curries, fresh roti, fluffy white rice, mutton kurma, mango chutney and steaming flasks of chai. I am kept warm. I meet a dancer from Brazil, a student of the ancient dance form Odissi. We speak of journeys, of paths and karma.

There are no trains to Amritsar, the Shatabdi Express is full of Punjabis returning to Amritsar for the holidays. The tourist quota does not work, the train is completely full. I have no choice but to rent a car. It will cost 5,000 rupees and take 12 hours. I make a friend, his name is Vishal, he promises to drive me to Amritsar.

## AMRITSAR

We depart on Christmas Eve, and we drive out of Delhi at dawn. I say goodbye to familiar Delhi streets and we drive out in the small red Honda. I had asked for an Ambassador, but that would have cost more. In an Ambassador driving through India, how Satyajit Ray, I thought. We pass industrial townships and road signs that read Rohtak, Haryana and Jind. We stop at a Café Coffee Day and I have a cappuccino and a pastry. The landscape changes. It is flat, mostly wheat lands. The skies open out, and the roads widen. I see bullock carts and very old men. It is dry and cold. We drive for hours. I sleep and wake and talk to Vishal. He is in an unhappy marriage and does not know what to do. I tell him to be patient and to not make hasty decisions.

After 10 hours, we are close to Punjab, and I feel my anticipation growing. I see the sign, PUNJAB. I want to kiss the ground. There is a border crossing and then I see men in turbans, flagging us down. They give us milk and sweetmeats from pails. Punjab vich ji aiyen noon! Welcome to Punjab! I roll down my window and take some in my hand. I am here. I am home.

We drive into Patiala. I can see distinct differences in the people, they seem taller, grander, more confident. The Punjabis are a proud people. The women are beautiful, the men, warriors. I see women wearing salwars of all colours and designs, all the men are turbaned. We drive on and on. And then we are in Ludhiana. There is a traffic jam, I see rickshaws, bullock carts negotiating BMWs, the streets are dusty, even the leaves on the trees are covered in dust. There is a Santa Claus on the road, handing out sweets from a threadbare red bag. Next, I see Julundur, and Vishal says we are close to Amritsar. We have not eaten in hours but I am not hungry. Vishal says he will eat when he gets to Amritsar. It is dark, and we have been driving the whole day. I am exhausted. I want a clean bed and a hot shower. The roads become wider and wider, I see a massive flyover, and alongside it, carts bearing fruit,

bricks and sand. I see a street sign for the Harmandir Sahib, the Golden Temple of Amritsar, the sacred site of the Sikhs, and I say a short prayer of thanks.

My hotel is on Queens Road, a one-way street and full of traffic. I have never seen so many turbaned men in my life. It reassures me. I say goodbye to Vishal and thank him and I retire to my contemporary chic room and spend my first night in the land of the Sikhs. Waheguru Waheguru, thank you for bringing me safe home.

The next day, I am to meet my guide Manpreet Singh Sidhu. I speak very little Punjabi, he will be my guide and translator. He will take me to Verka to meet Bhagwant Singh, the last remaining relative left from Tehil Singh's family. I need to know if the snake curse is true, I need to know if the mound is there on the land. I need to see and I need to know.

Manpreet meets me in the lobby of my hotel at 10:00 a.m. He is a tall, lanky chap and very soft-spoken. I tell him of my family, of the Chauly clan and of the five acres of land belonging to my great-great-grandfather. I tell him that all I know is this, my grand uncle Bhagwant Singh and his family run a sweet shop in Verka called the Chawla Dairy. That is all I know.

In the car, a battered Suzuki Maruti, we drive out of Queens Road and onto Cooper Street. I had a good night's sleep and it is Christmas Day in Amritsar.

## VERKA

I see the town for the first time in the morning light. We pass turbaned rickshaw wallahs carrying women of all sizes in salwars and shawls. We pass fruit vendors selling oranges, mangoes and pomegranates. The dusty streets merge into the landscape, coloured by a veneer of dust and cold, reminding me of an elaborate jamovar, a tapestry of varying shades of brown.

We arrive in Verka, and Manpreet tells me that it is famous for its dairy products of milk, ghee and butter. A billboard with "Verka Butter" looms over the road, against a photo of two chubby children and their parents. Manpreet says, 'Verka butter is very good, you must try it.' I nod nervously, I do not speak the language, and much of the day will be determined by Manpreet. I have to trust him, he is my tongue for the day.



Bhagwant Singh Chawla, my grand uncle and oldest living relative in the Punjab

We stop outside a grocer on the main road. Manpreet says that he will ask if they know of the sweet shop. He comes back seconds later and says that we are in luck, it is right across the road. He swerves onto the road quickly, turning right, dodging cars and a large truck which says "Please Horn" on the back. We stop on the corner and I see the shop and an elderly man standing behind the counter. He is in a white kurta, with a flowing white beard and a white turban. I smile at Manpreet and say, 'That's him, that's my grand uncle Bhagwant Singh.'

I get out of the car. He smiles at me as I say Sat Sri Akal Bapuji.

He gestures me onto a narrow seat inside. The shop sells an assortment of Punjabi sweetmeats, I recognise ghulab jamun, jelebi and silver-leafed squares. Manpreet translates for me quickly, telling him who I am.

She is Jaswant Singh's granddaughter. She lives in Malaysia.

Yes, my aunt Pami came to see you about 15 months ago. She is fine. They are in Wales.

I ask him if he is descended from Surain Singh, he says no. His father was Sadhu Singh, and that Jaswant and his father were



With Uncle Jasbir, cousins and aunts in their home

cousins. Acha. I understand. He is my grandfather's cousin's son.

Manpreet asks him about the snakes. Bhagwant turns to me and says in Punjabi.

'I feel the snakes every day.'

At last, at long last. He speaks of the snakes. And I know that it is the truth.

He invites us to his home. He knows that I have questions. My heart is bursting. I am anxious now, I want to see, know everything. We leave the village children clamouring at the sweets, we leave the flies clamouring at our clothes and hair, we walk into the alley and I enter into the heart of the myth.

We enter a narrow pathway between a maze of houses which opens out, and pass women sitting on wooden platforms selling fried pakoras and paneer. We pass cloth merchants selling paisley pashminas and salwar sets, we pass sleepy cows, we pass children sunning on charpoys playing cards, we enter the labyrinth of alleys and we come to his Punjabi dwelling, a house painted blue. Welcome to Chawla House, it says.



Inside the Chawla Sweet Shop

Word has gotten out that a long-lost relative has arrived and we are ushered into a small compact bedroom. I am embraced by women, 'This is Inderjit, this is Sukhvinder, this is Loveleen Kaur, this is Bikramjit Kaur, this is Amandeep.' These are the Chawla women. The traditional dwelling has a small courtyard. The kitchen is inset, next to a bathroom, it is cave-like, tiled in blue. I see bottles of spices, fresh butter, a rolling board dressed with flour. I see a large room off to one side and this is where I am ushered into.

I sit on a chair; a massive bed, adorned with ceramic doves, fills the room. There is a glass cabinet above it, full of small framed pictures and cutlery for special occasions. There is a large picture of Guru Nanak on the wall. It is chilly in the room. Bhagwant is ushered to sit next to me. His second son, Jasbir, joins us. Manpreet begins to explain why I am there. The room is full of peering eyes; pigtailed girls with pubescent thighs over ballooning kameez, their mothers with hands smelling of onions, butter and flour and



New cousins from Verka

their turbaned father, all curious and ecstatic that a relative has returned. A small boy with a patka, a child's turban, starts jumping up and down on the springy mattress. He is shushed by his mother and then told to sit down.

I begin my interview.

How old are you?

I am 72.

Do you remember your parents?

My mother died when I was very young, she died in childbirth, along with my sister.

Do you remember Partition?

I was five, and I was born in this house. There were many Mussulmans around us. Many were killed. But because we are Sikhs, we were not affected.



Street on the way to Chawla House

How many children do you have?

Five, two sons and three daughters.

And they all live with you?

Yes, we all live here. In this compound.

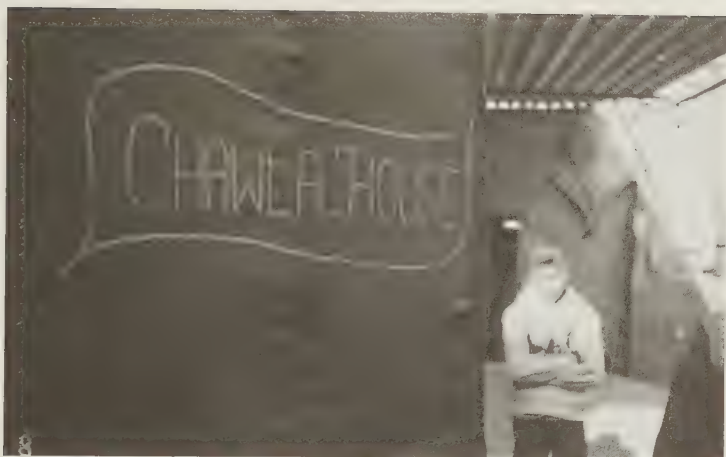
Do you know of a snake curse in my family?

I do not know of a snake curse, but I worship the snakes. I have been doing this for as long as I can remember. My father did it, and his father did it. And I know that your great-grandfather did as well. Our family has always worshipped the snakes.

Where are the snakes?

The snake mound is on the land. It has been there for generations. Your great-grandfather left and he said he was going to come back, but he never did. His mother continued to feed the snakes, but then she died and then no one continued. Perhaps that is why the gods are angry.





Chawla House

Manpreet translates swiftly. It is all true. Manji and Auntie Shan were speaking the truth. We are indeed snake worshippers. The snake mound is on the land, therefore it is sacred. We are guardians of the snakes.

*We go there after every wedding. We ask for blessings from the snakes. And they have blessed us. We give milk every day. This is what we have done as long as I can remember.*

My aunts bring in snacks; small plates of glimmering fried samosas and paneer spiced with delicious morsels of chilli and onion, delicate glass cups of sweetened milk are brought in laden on colourful plastic trays. I have to eat. I have to receive their blessings.

*Khana, Berniceji, Khana.*

*Eat, you must eat, your aunts say you must try everything.*

*Hanji, hanji. You must tell them this is a lot of food. Theeke.*

The bedroom is full now. All the grandchildren are there. The women smile at me, they touch me, curl my hair around their fingers, hug me, follow me as they show me their home. I am taken onto the roof, I see the village before me. I see the dirt road down below. Children flying kites, narrow streets, smiles all around.



On the way to the Chauly shrine

How my world has changed. I feel the sun on my face, I see the sky. I breathe in the air of my village.

I ask to be taken to the land. I need to see the mound. I want to give milk to the snakes.

We get into the car with my Uncle Jasbir and we are going to the mound. He has brought a plastic packet of fresh milk, an offering to the snakes. I know they are nocturnal and we will probably not see them, but I am hopeful.

We cross the railway track, and I remember my grandfather's letter, that Verka is the first railway station from Amritsar on the line to Dera Baba Nanak and Pathankot, between the border of Pakistan and India. I see cows foraging on the dusty track, and I imagine the trains heading into the Indian frontier.

We come to a stop and we get out. We walk a little way and enter a small neat compound. I am asked to wash my hands from an old well, and to take my shoes off. Manpreet says we are at the snake mound. Jasbir gestures to a doorway into a mud hut. I go



The Chauly family shrine

inside and it is dark and cool. And there it is. I see the mound. It is like an anthill. It is about two and a half feet tall, with large holes in the ground. Bhagwant is there, sitting next to a man in robes, a Hindu sadhu. There are two other men sitting next to him, one wears gold earrings. They are talking quietly. They smile when I come in and gesture me to sit down.

I sit on the straw scattered around. I stare at the mound and am overwhelmed.

To finally be confronted with the truth was all too much. Here I am face to face with my past. I think of all the dead, of my father, my uncles Devinder and Birinder, of my beloved Bapuji and wonder, could the snakes have done this? How? And why?

I pray for the dead, I pour milk into a metal bowl and leave it at the sadhu's feet. I sit down and I weep. I feel everything all at once. Grief. Sadness. Relief.

And there it is. All the empirical evidence I needed. And so we are. This. We are snake worshippers. The tradition has carried on.



Our ancestral land

Perhaps we abandoned it, perhaps we forgot. Perhaps we stopped believing.

*We are of the Naga people.*

*An ancient people, descended from the Dravidians. Descended from Harappa, from the conquests and battles of the Macedonians, the Turks and Mughals, for 6,000 years we have worshipped the Nagas, and here I am.*

*Here I am. And finally, finally, I understand.*

I am in awe. I am overjoyed. I want to weep and laugh all at once. I came from this land, and I have returned to it.

Manpreet sits and listens. There is no need to speak. The old men from the village, they listen. The sadhu speaks of karma; the snakes are part of this land, they are the ancient guardians, and we have to respect that. The land is everything to us, it gives birth to everything. Without the land, nothing is possible. We live and die from the land. I understand everything he says.



I put my head on the ground. And underneath, I can feel the snakes in slumber. They are large, and long, entwined within each other. They stir. They know I have returned. I am without speech, I am moved. The world has changed. I have been reborn. The myth has become real. The land is here. I see it, I walk upon it. I scoop up handfuls of it, I breathe it in. It is done.

I sit for a very long time and pray for a different future. I honour the snakes. The curse will end here and now. I will not forget. As I leave the mound, I realise that I am the first in four generations to return to it and I make a vow that I will keep.

Jasbir says, 'Wait, there is one more thing.' He takes us to a small outdoor shrine. It is white and on it are tiles of Guru Nanak and a headless horseman.

*This is the Chauly shrine. Long ago, there were at least 35 families in this area, the Chaulys are only from here. We are Chawlas, your most direct relatives, but now there are no Chaulys left. All have died, or moved away. Say a prayer here, and remember your ancestors.*



(left) My youngest relatives in Verka, (right) The entrance to the snake mound, with the mound on the left after you enter the door. I took pictures of the mound but they did not show up on the negatives

In the car, Manpreet says that he, too, has been moved. There are many stories of animal guardians in the Punjab, but he has not heard one like this. Not one where there have been deaths and sadness. I am silent and still. Something has happened to me. There is a mindshift, my universe has forever changed.

We go back to the blue house. We are once again ushered into the bedroom and we are served lunch. Thick corn chapattis, saag made from mustard stalks, curd with tomatoes and chillies, yoghurt, moons of butter ooze gently onto our plates. We are satiated beyond belief. I have been fed.

Before I leave, I press a wad of rupees into Bhagwant's hand.

'Please, Bapuji, pray for us every day. Give the snakes milk in our names. Bernice, Janice, Bernard. Anjuli, Maya, Tasnem, Leia.'

I will lift the curse, and I will ask the snakes to bless us.

And so, it is done.



By the Pool of Nectar, the Golden Temple, Amritsar

The rest of my time in India was fortuitous. I spent many days at the Golden Temple, and I was granted permission to enter the Sikh Archives located within the Golden Temple where I am brought reams of newspaper archives, carried on the shoulders of tall Sikh helpers. They bring me cup after cup of chai, and I read newspapers through the years, from 1946 to 1984. I am shown glass cabinets storing ancient volumes of the Granth Sahib, all being digitally archived. I go to the Wagah border, I go to Preet Nagar on the border of Pakistan, a stone's throw from Lahore, I drive around the countryside. I see miles of yellow mustard flowers in bloom against the low keekar trees and in the dusty light, I know that I will return.







Keekar trees on the way to the Wagah Border of India and Pakistan



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## GLOSSARY

- Acha – Hindi for “okay”  
Ah Kong – Cantonese for maternal grandfather  
Ah Ma – Cantonese for paternal grandmother  
Ah Yeh – Cantonese for paternal grandfather  
Allahu – Arabic for my God, my Lord  
Amah – Chinese female servant  
Amrit prachar – initiation rituals for inducting novitiates into Sikhism  
Ang pows – red packets filled with money usually given during Chinese New Year  
Atta – chickpea flour, used in making chapattis  
Auto – three-wheeler scooter taxis common in India



- Bapuji – Punjabi for grandfather  
Batik – a fabric that uses a wax-resist dye technique, found in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Indian sub-continent and Africa  
Beauty (shop) – Beauty Supermarket, a small department store in Ipoh; it is still there  
Beta – Punjabi term of affection for children

- Chai – Punjabi for tea  
Chapattis – Northern Indian flatbread  
Chapels – Indian leather sandals  
Charpoy – ubiquitous four-legged Indian daybed traditionally woven with rope

Cheongsam – body-hugging one-piece Chinese dress for women, created in the 1920s in Shanghai

Chettiar – a title used by people of South Indian origin, many of whom are traders

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Damdami Taksal – a 300-year-old educational organisation founded by the 10th Sikh master, Guru Gobind Singh, and brought to wider attention by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala and the Khalistan movement

Dhall – all variety of lentils, often made into lentil curry with other vegetables, and a staple of Indian vegetarian cuisine

Fatshan – a city in Guangdong province, China

Granth Sahib – the Holy Scripture of Sikhism

Granti – priest of the Sikh religion

Gurdwara – temple where Sikhs worship

Gurmukhi – the script used for writing the Punjabi language

Guru Nanak – the founder of Sikhism and the first of the 10 Sikh gurus

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Haiya – common Malaysian exclamation of dismay – “Oh No!”

Hakka – a subgroup of Han Chinese and their dialect

Hanji – Hindi for “yes, please!”

Hokkien mee – a prawn noodle soup dish from Penang; another version uses dark soya sauce and crispy lard bits

Hong Tho – famous Chinese restaurant on Leech Street; it is still there

Ikan bilis – Malay for anchovies

Jaga – Malay for watchman or security guard

Jalan – Malay for road

Jambu – guava fruit

Jamovar – handwoven wool shawl with intricate designs on both sides

Jats – an Aryan-Scythian people native to northern India, commonly known as the agricultural caste of the Punjabis

Jinns – or genies, supernatural beings in Arabic folklore

Juda – length of hair on pre-pubescent Sikh boys, often tied into a bun on top of the head

Kachea – Cantonese for big sister

Kameez – or salwar kameez, the traditional dress worn by men and women in northern India. It comprises a long shirt or tunic and loose pants tied at the waist

Kampung – Malay for village

Kari masak – or masak-masak, masak meaning “to cook”, a cooking game popular with small children

Kati – a measuring unit of Malay origin; one kati is equivalent to 500g

Kaya – coconut jam made with eggs, sugar and coconut milk

Keekar tree – part of the acacia family and native to India and Pakistan, in the Punjab it was grown by the Indian army as a quick and effective form of camouflage

Kempeitai – military police force of the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II

Khalsa – the collective term used to refer to all baptised Sikhs who are part of a military order of “saint-soldiers” as decreed by the 10th Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh. The Sikhs of the Khalsa are identified with the 5 Ks (kesh – uncut hair, kanga – wooden

comb, kara – iron bracelet, kachera – cotton underwear, kirpan – curved sword) and the given names Singh and Kaur

Khana – Hindi for “please eat”

Kicap – Malay for soya sauce; origin of “ketchup”

Kopi-o – Malay for black local coffee with sugar

Kuaci – dried black or brown melon seeds, which you have to crack with your teeth to get to the edible part

Kuay teow – thin, flat rice noodles used in Malaysian cuisine

Kueh kah pek – Chinese New Year cookie also known as “love letters”

Kuih-muih – generic Malay term for local cakes and desserts

Kukkumun – red vermillion powder, used in Hindu temple rituals

Kurta – loose tunic worn by men in the sub-Indian continent

Kutu – head lice

Lah – slang used by Malaysians and Singaporeans to compliment the end of any sentence in informal conversation

Lakh – a unit in the Indian numbering system numbering 100,000

Laksa – a spicy local soup made out of spices and coconut milk or fish and tamarind, often accompanying noodles

Lam Soy Chea – village in Fatshan, Guangdong province, China

Lombong – Malay for tin mine

Mah-jong – traditional Chinese game played by four players

Manjel – turmeric powder, bright yellow in colour

Manji – Punjabi for grandmother

Marae – traditional Maori ceremonial house

Masala – Indian spice mix

Mat Salleh – common Malaysian term for “white man”

Mien – noodles, variation of mee

Mubarak (shop) – bookshop in Ipoh; it is still there

Mui Tow – affectionate name for girl or “little head” of the family

Mussulmans – archaic word for Muslims

Naga – Sanskrit word for great serpent; also a tribe of people  
Negara Ku – national anthem of Malaysia, meaning “My Country”

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Pakora – fried vegetables in a spicy flour batter

Paneer – Indian cheese

Patka – Sikh head-covering used by pre-pubescent boys or adults, in preference to the turban

Pau – steamed Chinese rice flour bun with sweet or savoury filling

Penghulus – Malay for village headman

Poh Poh – Cantonese for maternal grandmother

Pomfret – a costly large white fish specifically cooked for Chinese celebrations

Popiah – local Malaysian spring roll made with steamed or fried rice paper

Puri – deep fried northern Indian bread

Rediffusion – inexpensive form of cable entertainment for urban households in Malaysia and Singapore from 1949 till the early 90s

Roti – generic Malaysian term for bread, or different kinds of Indian flatbreads

Saag – typical Punjabi dish made with spinach or mustard greens

Sadhu – Hindu holy man

Salwar kameez – traditional dress worn by men and women all over the Indian sub-continent

Sambal belacan – traditional Malaysian chilli condiment made with prawn paste, onions, garlic and dried or fresh chillies

Samfu – Chinese-style blouse with mandarin collar on the side and matching pants



Sampan – traditional Malay boat  
Sardani – honorific title given to a married Punjabi woman  
Sarsi – a local sarsaparilla or root beer drink  
Sek – Cantonese for “eat”  
Sepoy/Sipahi – Persian word for soldier

#### T

Tai-tai – colloquial Cantonese term for wealthy Chinese woman who does not need to work  
Theeke – Hindi for “fine”, “okay”  
Tongsan fish – a local freshwater fish with lots of bones  
Toto – one of Malaysia’s national lottery operators  
Towkay – word of Chinese origin to address a distinguished man; sir, master  
Tsai – vegetarian dish made for the first day of Chinese New Year

#### W

Waheguru – term in Sikhism to refer to God  
Wallah – a person in-charge-of, employed at: book wallah, tea wallah, taxi wallah

#### Y

Yasin – most frequently read Arabic verse from the Quran; commonly used in situations of great need



Bernice Chauly is a writer, poet, photographer, filmmaker and actor. She graduated with a B.Ed degree in TESL and English Literature from the University of Winnipeg, Canada and has worked extensively in the arts for over 20 years. She lives in Kuala Lumpur with her two daughters.





She is Chinese, he is Punjabi. It is 1966. Loh Siew Yoke and Surinder Singh fall in love and marry but face opposition from their families. Their first child brings peace, but tragedy soon strikes.

Haunted by the untimely death of her father, Malaysian writer Bernice Chauly embarks on a journey to unravel the mystery surrounding a curse that is thought to have plagued her family. She traces a hundred years of her family history to Fatshan, China and Verka, India to recount and relive her ancestors' lives against the histories of India, China, Singapore and Malaya. Through prose, letters and journals in different voices, the author creates a layered portrait of how two families traversed time to collide through love and death.

*Growing up with Ghosts* is a moving memoir of the author coming to terms with grief, history and bloodlines.

