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Alan Maley
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *Visiting time*

I am not frightened. No, not me. I'm terrified! I hate the smell of hospitals – that mixture of disinfectant and human waste and stale bodies – and fear. And I don't know what I'll find when I see her. My mother, I mean. Luckily, Auntie Swee Eng is with me. There's something comforting about her. She makes me feel safe, even when these terrible things are happening. Of course, she's old – but somehow that doesn't matter. I know that she'll help me to face whatever it is that waits for me behind that white door.

The nurse in her smart white uniform calls us over and pushes open the door to the private room. Auntie Swee Eng gives me her warm hand and together, hand in hand, we go into the room. Suddenly I think how strange it is – I'm only sixteen but I tower over the tiny figure of Auntie Swee Eng, who must be at least fifty years older than me. But, tall as I am, I'm still terrified. Thank goodness she's with me. She may be old and small, but she seems so strong. She's tough all right!

After the bright lights of the corridor outside, we find ourselves in the darkness of the room. It takes a few moments before I can see anything. Then, gradually, my eyes get used to the darkness, and objects start to come into focus – the bed and the bedside table with a glass on it; the plastic curtains open by the bed; the dark shape lying under the sheets with tubes coming out of its nose and arms, connected to the frame with a bottle hanging from it; the

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machine next to the bed with red and green lights; the small table with medicine bottles and metal trays on it; a chair by the bed; the temperature chart hanging on the end of the bed; the sink in the corner; the dark shape of a wardrobe next to the door. The dim outline of a window is visible, but the dark green curtains are closed, so it looks like a TV screen which has been switched off.

Auntie Swee Eng and I stand for a moment just inside the door. The shape on the bed doesn't move but we can hear the faint sound of breathing, and as our eyes get used to the darkness, we can see the sheets rising and falling. We move silently towards the bed. Auntie Swee Eng makes me sit on the chair. Is this my mother? All I can see is the pale outline of a face and the white hospital nightdress. Her eyes are closed. I can see a tube fastened to her arm and a tube which goes into her nose. I take her hand. Her skin feels like dry paper. There's no movement. It's like holding a child's doll, loose and lifeless. But, just as I'm about to let go, I feel her hand squeeze mine – a small movement but it's a sign of life. Yet her eyes are still closed. Her face still does not move. I feel as if she's on another planet, drifting away from me. Is this really my mother? Is this really happening?

How did this all happen? Why is she here, fighting for her life? Is it my fault? What did I do wrong? What did we all do wrong to come to this? I start to feel panic. I feel a mixture of sadness, hopelessness and anger. She must be very ill because she's in the intensive care unit. I feel sick and dizzy from thinking about it. I just cannot think straight. I cannot breathe. I need air. I can't stay here in this enclosed atmosphere any more. I have to get out.

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And everything has happened so fast. They only released me from the police station this morning. It was Auntie Swee Eng who came to collect me and take me here. Now I've seen Mum, I realise just how wrong I've been about so many things.

'Come on, Chee Seng, I think we'd better go now,' says Auntie Swee Eng softly. She seems to know and understand how I'm feeling. I take a last look at the dark shape of my mother on the hospital bed, then follow Auntie Swee Eng into the blinding light of the corridor.

The nurse takes us to a cool, quiet waiting room. She brings us some cold drinks. 'Don't worry,' says Auntie Swee Eng. 'The doctor will come to see us when he finishes with his other patients.'

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Chapter 2 *The best of times*

As I sit there in that impersonal, white waiting room, I start to think about our life together. My family, I mean. What happened to us? When did things start to go wrong?

Until about a year ago everything was perfect – or at least, that’s how it seemed to me. Dad was doing well in his job. They’d just promoted him to export manager at Intercorp, where he worked. At weekends we often went off somewhere together. We had a nice house in a green suburb of Kuala Lumpur called Subang Jaya. At weekends, Mum and Dad often had friends over for lunch or dinner or parties. My parents – Mr Sammy Yeo and Linda – were a popular couple. Whenever I think of our times together, they seem to be bathed in a golden light in my memory.

While I was growing up, Dad was really the centre of my world. He was a wonderful father and was always there for me.

Most days, after work, he would take me up to the park at the top of our street to play football or help me practise my basketball skills. He was always around to help me with my homework, especially maths. He was a wizard at maths, no wonder he’d been promoted. Most nights he would read to me in bed before I went to sleep. Once he read me the whole of *The Lord of the Rings* – it took him months to finish it! He taught me to swim too and arranged tennis lessons. Everything I remember about him glows with that warm, golden light. Even now, after everything that’s happened.

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So when did it all start? I think back to my last birthday. I was sixteen and Mum and Dad had organised a big party for me. Mum came from a large family and so did Dad, so the house was filled with uncles and aunts and cousins from all over the place. And that wasn't all, because both Mum and Dad had loads of friends too; who I called 'Uncle' and 'Auntie', even though they weren't really. Of course, Auntie Veena and Uncle Krish were there. They were Mum and Dad's closest friends.

Then there were my best friends from school – Dev, Faisal and Ka Choon. Dev, short for Devinder, was Indian-Malaysian. He lived just up the same street in Subang Jaya. Dev was a great sportsman, especially at hockey. Faisal lived just round the corner from us. He came from a Malay family. And Ka Choon was Chinese-Malaysian. He lived miles away in a very expensive neighbourhood. We were all very different, but that didn't stop us from being the best of friends.

Mum was a great cook and so were all her friends, so there were all sorts of special dishes that they'd brought to the party. Our Indian friends came round with *samosas*¹ and curries of all descriptions. Malay friends arrived with *satay*² and peanut sauce, and spicy beef *rendang*³. Chinese friends and relatives brought along Hainan chicken rice, spicy Szechuan tofu⁴ and Peking duck served with paper-thin pancakes. Our Straits Chinese relatives, Auntie Swee Eng and Auntie Rosie, brought Peranakan dishes like *asam laksa*⁵ – that was one of my real favourites, with its sour tamarind⁶ taste and spicy fish soup. And to top it all, Mum brought in an enormous birthday cake with sixteen candles.

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Yet, though everything was perfect, something didn't feel quite right. Once or twice I caught Mum looking strangely at Auntie Veena. Auntie Veena was Indian-Malaysian. She was really beautiful. When she was younger she'd been chosen as Beauty Queen of Selangor⁷ State, and you could see why. On my birthday she was wearing a dark red silk sari⁸ with a gold border, with white jasmine flowers in her hair. Mum was good-looking too, but not in the same way. Uncle Krishnan was quite the opposite. He had a bald head and a big fat stomach. Sometimes I wondered why Auntie Veena had married him. But he was a lot of fun and he was Dad's best friend from school and university. Mum and Auntie Veena got on well too, always laughing and joking as they did things together. Before Mum married Dad, she'd worked in the company owned by Veena's father. That's when they first became friends. The four of them spent a lot of time together, especially at weekends. And that's why Veena and Krishnan were there at my party.

Then I remembered something else too. After we'd had the wonderful food and cut the cake, I went off to my room with my friends to play the video games they'd brought me as presents. All the adults settled down to relax and chat on the terrace outside and in the lounge. Some of them fell asleep in their chairs. It was that sleepy time after a heavy meal.

After a while, I decided to go downstairs to get some cool drinks for my friends. As I came out of my room, I saw Dad and Auntie Veena on the stairs. They were looking at each other in a way I'd never seen before, and Dad had his hand on her bare arm. He quickly took it away when he saw me. They looked embarrassed, and Dad went upstairs mumbling something to me as he passed. Auntie Veena hurried downstairs again.

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We went back to our games and I didn't think much about what I'd seen. And I forgot about it completely when Dad came in later carrying a big basket. I heard a scratching sound inside, and when he opened it, there was the little black and white dog I'd wanted for so long.

'What shall we call him?' Dad asked.

'Let's call him Raj,' I answered.

Everyone clapped as Raj barked his agreement. It was a perfect day. And from then on, Raj was my best and most faithful friend.

But now, as I sit here in the hospital, waiting for the doctor and thinking about Dad, that other strong image blacks out my brain. The bedroom, the cries, the bodies moving on my parents' bed. I am powerless to stop that image from coming back. It is burnt on my memory like the mark an iron leaves on a shirt. How did it all happen? Why did it all happen? Why couldn't we have gone on living in the best of times for ever? These black thoughts flood my mind again. I feel the tears in my eyes. Auntie Swee Eng can see how upset I am. She takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. I look up at the clock. When will the doctor come?

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Chapter 3 *The worst of times*

The hands on the clock move so slowly as I sit on that uncomfortable chair in the waiting room. I keep trying to remember how things changed after my birthday party. There wasn't one particular thing I remember, but just a lot of small things. Teenagers pick up a lot – from the atmosphere and from what goes on around them. Sometimes it's just a vague feeling of unease, a feeling that something is not quite right, a feeling that things have changed in a way you can't describe, yet it's a feeling that's real. And that's how it was for me, I think, in those months after my birthday. It was like a virus – something sick in the air, invisible but definitely there. It's only now, when I think back on everything, that I can see the pattern. At the time, it was no more than a vague, nervous feeling deep down in my stomach, a feeling of threat, of insecurity, that gradually replaced my feelings of innocent happiness.

I noticed that Dad started coming home later and later from the office. Mum made excuses for him but I could see she wasn't happy about it. Neither was I! It meant that he was never there to play football or basketball up in the park. In fact, I hardly ever saw him. He left early and came back after I'd gone to bed. It felt wrong somehow. I was so used to being with him. It left a big gap in my life now that he was too busy to think about me.

'He's got a big new product coming out next month,' Mum said when I asked her. But then the next month came, and the next, and he still came back late.

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One day I came back from school and Mum wasn't around to welcome me as she usually was. After a while, she came out of the bedroom. Her eyes were red and swollen, and I knew she'd been crying. 'What's up, Mum?' I asked.

'It's nothing,' she answered in a strange, tense voice. 'I just have a lot on my mind at the moment. It's OK, nothing for you to worry about.' She put on a brave smile. 'Now, let me make you some noodles⁹ with seafood sauce. Or would you like something else?'

She called Purissima, our Filipina maid, from the servant's room, and together they went to the kitchen. I liked Puri (that was her nickname; Purissima is too long to say all the time). She was small and neat, and always seemed to have a bright smile, especially for me. She spoiled me a lot – always making me my favourite dishes. I especially remember her voice. Her accent always made her Filipina English sound a bit American.

'What you want for your dinner?' she would ask, rolling the 'r' sounds in 'your' and 'dinner'. 'Today I make you something special for your dessert – from my home town. Made from *taro*¹⁰. Is very sweet. I think you like.' And I always did like it. Whatever it was!

But these days even Puri seemed to have changed. She was quieter and didn't smile as much as before. Sometimes she even looked worried.

'Is anything wrong?' I asked her one day.

But she just smiled and said, 'Oh no. I get some headache, make me feel not so good. Is OK. I make you some special spaghetti, or you want a pizza? I can make for you. Special one.'

But later on that day, when I came down from my room, she was on the phone to her Indonesian friend Henny, who

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worked for a family in the next street. ‘... now the boy, he also see something wrong. I don’ know how to do. What you think?’

There was a silence while her friend answered. Then she went on, ‘Oh no. Cannot. Is bad for him. But Madam, she cry every day. And Master, sometimes he comes so late. Then I hear fight starting...’

Suddenly, she noticed I was there. ‘Oh, I got to go now. I talk again later,’ she whispered, and put the phone down quickly. ‘OK, now I go make something nice for you, something special,’ she said with an embarrassed smile, and rushed off to the kitchen.

* * *

As the weeks went by, I noticed how quiet the house had become. There were no more parties, and Uncle Krish and Auntie Veena never came over now. We never seemed to go anywhere together at weekends either, like we had before. Sometimes Dad was out all day on Saturday or Sunday. Other times he stayed in his study room with the door closed. I was uneasy and confused about all this, so one day I decided to ask Mum. It was a difficult decision because I’d always been closer to Dad. But now she was the only one I could ask.

‘Mum, why can’t we go out somewhere on Saturday, like we used to? I don’t like to stay at home all the time.’

‘You’d better ask your father,’ she said angrily. I think that was the first time Mum had ever spoken to me like that. She made me feel as if I’d done something wrong by even asking that question.

‘But why can’t we?’

‘I told you. Ask your father. It’s got nothing to do with me.’