

Rain in the Leaves¹

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Mr. Mah sat writing in the register. The afternoon was very warm, and his shirt-sleeves, rolled up and crumpled, marked the extreme discomfort he was feeling as he waited for his cold drink, wrote in the register and numbly suffered the glare of the sun as it lit the zinc roofs.

He was filling in the last column of the marks, the pen awkward from the wetness of his palms, when the girls came in and crowded around the counter. A few greeted him as they passed by, but the warmth of the conversation they brought with them remained undisturbed. Mr. Mah had only last month received his B.A. Honours. Three months ago, in the Singapore University Campus, he was a young gay red-blooded swain among the other young men; gay with hope and expectation of adventures, fame and a future that must surely come to the intellectual and aspiring and inspired. Mr. Mah personally had no taste for wild oats, but during his student days he had never once doubted that an all-absorbing future was his the moment he received his Honours Certificate and hired the gown and mortar-board from the tailors. He had not looked back until graduation, and graduation was disappointing. The speeches, the applause and heavy back-slapping were graduation and resolved nothing for him, and as he gathered his belongings from the Residence Hall (a gramophone, pop records, three cushions, two crates of books, old shoes, etc.) he knew all at once that this was the sum total of all he had achieved in three years.

After graduation, the vague knowledge that his future was to be on his own making, not on his degree or on his years of feverish studies, crystallised, and coldly he went about in search of a “cushy job.” He applied for teaching and was glad enough to be offered a post in a Kuala Lumpur school. He bewildered his parents who had always shared his belief in his own uniqueness and could not now renounce it. He had bewildered himself, which was worse, and now this sense of loss was all mixed up with the feeling of betrayal and of general apathy, suppressed under his duties and normal behaviour.

¹ This story was written by Shirley Lim in 1962, when she was only seventeen years old.

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Mr. Mah finished writing in the marks and sat very still to settle his stomach after drinking his tepid Schweppes too quickly. The girls were talking loudly and with much laughing insistence and hand-waving.

“But is it correct?” asked a tall thin girl, her face intense and pure.

“No, no, that has nothing to do with what he meant. He only wanted to ...” another one answered and suddenly broke into a loud giggle, throwing her head forward and scattering hair like wisps of mown grass.

The rest laughed with her, but another gave an anxious smile and said, “Really, you have no right to say that, he is perfectly all right, you know, really good. I can’t see how you....”

“Now, this is too much,” the tall girl interrupted, her tone very exasperated. “You are not going to give a lecture on morals now. And you are too bad, really you are. He should not have said that, the others were furious. But then, they have no right to be. After all, it’s all his jolly own funeral.”

“Yes, of course,” a girl with a vivid face spoke up. “Of course, we have no right to yell at him. But he is a stupid ass, and it is unbearable the way we have to listen to his sneaky comments. If he would only keep that stupid mouth shut....” The rest of the sentence ended in indignant dissent, laughter and clamorous agreements.

Mr. Mah listened absently. How odd it was to teach people of your own age, or almost. Odd too that the rest of the staff never referred to their pupils as “people.” Mr. Mah could not help viewing them as if one part of him belonged to them. The other half assumed to a gravity and dignity that wobbled precariously on his twenty-four years. Oh, the brightness and youthfulness that surrounded him. He was overcome with nostalgia. And yet he knew as much as he wanted his youth back again, he resisted this inconsequential gaiety around him, for he could never be young again, and indeed, he suspected, would hate it if he were. He rose up abruptly, surprising the girls who once again wished him “good afternoon.” Stowing the register under the seat, mounting the scooter and moving off, he thought with innocent cynicism of how a few months back, he would have dismissed a “scootering” teaching B.A. for an apathetic bourgeois.

As he came out of the school gates, unaccountably he turned to the other road leading away from town and passed through traffic lights in an abstraction of mood. Once again he contrasted his past ambitions and his drab reality. He revived his nearly forgotten desires to write, to be intellectually something. He thought of his campus companions, all brilliant, all ambitious, Paul, Kim Tok, Nasi, Swee, Low, all possessing the vitality and fervour the nation was supposed to need. Bitterness was easily roused, bitterness, futility and frustration. He speeded up, passing the suburbs and market gardens. His eyes watered from the sting of the wind, and with these tears of pain, his continual sense of loss gave way to freer self-pity and then self-anger. He went faster and faster, his heart

beating out his pain of self-debasement and futility along the stretch of wide empty road.

A drop of rain hit hard on his hand. He slowed down. The sky was grey with rainclouds, and suddenly he felt the absurdity of his situation, of the mawkish, melodramatic emotions he was deliberately rousing. Slowly his scooter travelled down the road, and the rain came in slow plops, splashing on the dry tarmac. The wind blew a veil of fine fast rain towards him. Instinctively, he veered off the road and stopped just as it reached him. He was wet, chilled and exhilarated. Then, in as quick an instance as he had once grasped the inadequateness of his university degree, he knew he had no course but to leave his youth and expectations behind him, and the security which he had sought and obtained only with bitterness and frustration. He could still challenge the future headlong, if he had the courage to give up the certainty of money and accept the uncertainty of success.

“What’s the fuss?” he thought happily, and as he rolled down his shirt-sleeves, he became aware of the rain in the leaves above him like the echo of the applause that acclaimed him long ago at a disappointing graduation.