

His Grandfather's House¹

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He'd heard that the house he grew up in was about to be demolished by his uncle. He couldn't be sure, though he was certain, however, that his uncle and family had moved to their Jalan Penimpin bungalow. So, it was just a matter of time before the house, the ancestral house, the house that his grandfather built, was pulled down.

When was the last time he lived in the house? Must be August 1966, the year he left for London to pursue his Master's studies. And it is 1986 this year, twenty years later! During that period he had always visited the house on many occasions – Sundays, the yearly Chinese New Year visits, to pay respects to his eldest aunt, now widowed who lived there – and stayed for a few hours only. But from birth to twenty-six it was the only home he knew.

It was a rambling two-storey bungalow made of wood and it stood on stilts about six feet high. Topped by a zinc roof. Once the roof consisted of attap leaves easily obtained from the attap factory behind the house. Workers would buy the attap leaves, dry them and then tie them up in strips before selling them. He could not remember when grandpa decided to switch to zinc. But the weight of all that wood and zinc on high, thin wooden stilts caused part of the house to sag, so that those parts were just over five and a half feet high, and you had to walk carefully in order not to knock your head. There were other hazards and one that always bothered him but no one else, apparently, was the fear of fire breaking out. As his uncle's family expanded, the power demand increased and new electrical wires were run and power points screwed in without considering whether the power load could be expanded indefinitely.

Up to 1966, one by one, essential items were added to the house. First, table fans. As a boy he didn't even enjoy a ceiling fan; perhaps they were difficult to fix as you had to get an electrician to climb up to the ceiling to fix it, but table fans were DIY affairs of pushing knobs into power points, switching on and adjusting velocity. Then, in May 1962, he began teaching in his old school, at St. Andrew's School, and within a couple of months he had installed a telephone in the house. When his father, an insurance chief clerk, found out, he remembered clearly the conversation that took place.

“What for?”

¹ This is an extract from Robert Yeo's forthcoming memoirs, *Routes 1940-75*, to be published by the Singapore University Press in late 2009.

² Robert Yeo, born in 1940, has published four books of poetry, one novel and staged five plays, including the political plays about Singapore called *The Singapore Trilogy* (published 2001). His selected poems, *Leaving Home, Mother*, was published in 1998. His memoirs *Routes 1940-1975* will be published by the Singapore University Press in 2009, and a libretto for a short, one-woman opera called *Kannaki* will be staged in September 2009. His full-length libretto called *Fences*, with music by John Sharpley, will have a world premiere in February 2010 in Singapore, produced by the new opera company called OperaViva.

“Convenience, Pa.”

“What convenience? You can make calls free-of-charge in your office.”

“But Pa, what happens when you’re not in the office?”

“How many calls do you make in a day?”

His father was not entirely convinced but had no reply to his reasons and he was paying the bill. He was surprised that his father should have asked at all. A few months later his father died of a heart attack and the telephone did not stop ringing.

Lastly, tv. Black and white TV. It came to Singapore in 1963 and what a novelty it was! He could not remember who paid for the box, probably it was shared between the two families, his father’s and his uncle’s, each with four children. After dinner, around 7.30pm the tv was on almost always without stop, until closing time around midnight. The favourite programmes included *McHale’s Navy* and *The Saint*. He drove down the slope of Valley Road and stopped his car just outside the remains of the old house. It never had a gate. The two rambutan trees had been chopped down. Of course, there were two of them, one to the right and the other to the left as you enter by the drive-way. He remembered what fun he had as a child and schoolboy, swinging from the branches of the two trees and often munching on rambutans on week-ends.

His eyes surveyed the remains of the house, flattened completely. Nothing was left standing. And suddenly he found himself asking why he had been impelled to come. Was he looking for memories or memorabilia?

“Papa, what are you looking for?”

It was his second daughter, En, who seemed to guess what her father was thinking of.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Something I left behind when I used to live here.”

“When did you live here, pa?”

“About twenty years ago.”

“Wah, so long ago! Sure you cannot find anything now.”

“Yes, echoed his wife. There’s nothing here.”

They picked their way to the kitchen area and the first thing he looked out for was the well. The well had served them well in the times of drought when water-rationing was imposed. The last threat of water rationing was in 1976 when his first daughter was born.

“Yes, there is, I am looking for a well, he said emphatically.”

“A well? You mean this house got well?” En asked.

“Yes.”

He saw the broken walls of the round well and treaded carefully towards it. Coming to the edge, he looked down and saw that it was filled up with old pails, pieces of wood, broken furniture, shoes, pails and other objects that the demolishers had carelessly thrown inside. There was still water in it though.

“See here, En. Have you seen a well?” She peered in.

“Eee, so dirty.”

“Yes, but when I used to live here it was very clean and I used to bathe using well-water. It was very cool during the hot season and we always had water.”

He looked away from the well and saw all kinds of furniture in disarray on the floor. Rummaging, he saw a rectangular table with beautiful, fluted legs sticking out. It was about 2 to 4 feet in dimension, a dark brown antique and he envisaged how beautiful it

would look with a marble on top. A few feet away was an antique chair, with a squarish seat and high back which bent slightly and had a floral design cut through the wood. The cane was damaged. There were three other such chairs in relatively good condition. Two picture frames came into view. He picked them up, dirty and dusty, and his eyes lit up: one was a coloured picture of the maternal grandmother he never knew and he recognised her from previous photographs and her likeness to his fourth aunt, with her round face, her hair pulled back and fastened with a pin. The other picture was, to his delighted discovery, a sepia photograph of her funeral, dominated by the hearse mounted on a lorry which contained her and a photograph which looked very much like the one he just looked at. What a pair! They must have hung together or were kept together in an obscure corner of the house because he had never seen them before. He picked them up carefully.

“Who are they?” His wife asked?

“My grandmother.”

And he held up the portrait.

“And the other one?” She asked again.

“A photo of her funeral.”

“When?”

“Dunno. In the thirties, maybe, before I was born.”

He left with the two framed pictures in his arms. He would have them restored and as for the antique furniture he would arrange for a pick-up van to get them the next day for restoration.

He could not help wondering though why his uncle did not value the pictures of his mother and her funeral cortege. Perhaps he had forgotten they existed because they had not been displayed for a long time or not at all. But he was there in the funeral photograph, among the mourners. How could he have forgotten? He, the youngest in the family.

He was in the photograph but the photograph was not in him.

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