

WAI-CHEW SIM

Reverse Bungee Jump

It started from a conversation in the staff canteen.

At length the new guy agreed. “It’s over in a flash,” he said. “They tie your legs together in a special harness with the rope attached to it. The boom of the crane goes up. You need to look straight out to sea because if you look down you might not do it. Then when you reach the top....”

A diffident tone came into his voice.

“What? what happens next?” someone asked.

“You reach the top. Naturally they tell you to jump and okay you jump—he gave a little giggle—and then all at once you hear this high-pitched shriek. It sounds muffled and obscure. For one or two seconds it sounds like some animal

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- going amuck far away across a lake or a deep gully. The

About a month after that Thian Beng had a day off from work. He didn't have anything planned after breakfast so he decided to go take a look at his childhood and teenage haunts. He changed into his shorts and favourite football jersey; he grabbed his waist pouch with his wallet and keys inside and got into his car. Before reversing out of the lot he sneaked

phone and called someone; in a loud booming voice he placed a bet on the winning numbers for the weekend lottery.

A woman in her thirties joined the queue next with a young child in tow. The child, a toddler, shrieked and screamed as he gambolled about the waiting area. After a few minutes he seemed to tire out and stopped running. He stared at the teenagers in the queue, then he waddled over to a corner and squatted on his haunches over a crack in the concrete floor. He studied the crack for a moment.

Suddenly he gave a loud yelp and began to cackle. He stuck out his lips and rocked himself to and fro with glee. What looked like a crack was actually a row of ants meandering across the floor of the pier. Again and again he looked up from the ants at his mother, giggling and rocking. Wonder fought with disbelief on his face and it was difficult to say which exerted a greater impression.

One of the hikers saw this and alerted the others, and soon everyone was laughing at the little boy. But Thian Beng watched everything with an abstracted, solemn air and kept himself apart. He seemed faraway, tuned in to another order of world altogether. Again he wondered about the POWs. He remembered a story he had heard about the Australian soldiers held at Salarang Camp only a stone's throw away from the jetty. The story went that after an unsuccessful escape attempt by several of the soldiers, the Japanese commandant ordered everyone to assemble in the quadrangle. Under a fierce noonday sun, the recalcitrant individuals were whipped to within an inch of their lives, then the commandant made everyone sign a document promising not to make another escape. After the war the incident was forgotten, but years later when the document re-surfaced it quickly became notorious, for the soldiers had signed it with names such as
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Now as he recalled the story, the trace of a smile appeared on Thian Beng's broad, square face. For a moment his heart filled with mirth. He was happy.

When the number of people in the ferry queue reached ten, a small wiry man appeared out of nowhere. He grunted a command and they filed down a flight of stone steps into the waiting bumboat. The broad-beamed boat rocked a moment as each passenger stepped from land onto the tiny stern deck and into the cabin. Soon the seats were filled.

After collecting the fare, the boatman untied the vessel from its moorings and shoved off from the pier. He started the inboard engine, gunned it for half a minute and eased it into a low throttle. With great care he manoeuvred the boat out between two giant sandbars crowding the jetty and pulled into the narrow channel. From there it was a matter of minutes. One dollar, Thian Beng thought, one hundred cents. After so many years the fare was still only one dollar.

Everything had changed and nothing had changed.

As a boy he had loved the outdoor life. He'd spend hours swimming and hiking on the island with friends. Every school holiday began with a camping trip there, and the routine was always the same. Once over, they rushed to the rental shops to get their bicycles. After that they headed for the provisions stores to get food and drinks, this usually taking a while because they liked to haggle over the prices, to wrangle and to quibble. Then they'd cycle single file up the main roadway past the vegetable gardens and fruit farms in the middle of the island. If they got tired they took a break at the refreshment stands near the Buddhist temple. When they reached the lake they set up camp.

Their camp site was discovered by accident. Usually they avoided the heavily wooded eastern bank of the lake, which was formed from an abandoned granite quarry that had filled up with rainwater. One day however they decided to go hunting there for hornets' nests. They wanted to prod the nest with a stick and

see who was the first to run, whether it was Thian Beng or Hisham or Anita or Saygun, or even Nat. This way they would expose the coward in their group, they told each other with taunting smiles. Taking their knives with a bush knife hacked a way past the skein of trees and tangled scrub, and then, to their surprise, the undergrowth started to thin out. The vegetation became reedy and meagre, the trees mean and stunted. Almost before they knew it they found themselves in a small clearing right at the water's edge, the whole area shielded by an outcrop of rock from prying eyes—they had found the ideal camp site even if they didn't find any hornet's nests.

And in truth it was a piece of great good fortune. For after that they could explore far afield without being afraid for their tents and things. They had the peace of mind that everything would be there when they returned.

So it happened that, for Thian Beng, the school holidays *really* started when they turned off the island's main roadway onto the dirt track leading to the quarry. This was the true *official* opening of the holidays, like a starter gun going off at the race track.

But when he reached the fork in the road this time he was greeted by a sign that said in English and Mandarin, "Quarry closed. Entry prohibited." The

distances in kilometres and miles. Rest-huts beckoned to hikers at the larger junctions, and even the creaky bridges spanning the streams and rivulets had been replaced by sturdy concrete culverts. The most surprising amendments, however, were the mirrors, the large circular mirrors erected on iron pickets at sharp turns in the roads, put up so that cyclists and hikers could spot oncoming traffic and steer clear of trouble.

So orderly, Thian Beng thought, so well-planned.

He began to climb.

Up over the sand and the debris he scrambled, pulling his bicycle behind him. Once over he jumped onto the bicycle and shot down the narrow track. Mud splattered over the back of his thighs and his calves, and trailing branches tore into his face but he ignored them. At the end of the track he banked sharply, and suddenly in front of him the quarry-face was rising sheer from the ground,

At the summit a slab of grey-green granite protruding from the rock-face formed an overhang about two metres across—the highest point on the island and also the best lookout. It was towards this that he fought, and when he reached it he took only a while to draw breath before straightening up to survey his island.

He saw to the north a squadron of bulldozers erecting a series of earthworks facing Malaysia. To the east, a land reclamation project was in progress, with giant dredgers dredging away, which meant that the fish farms there would soon have to close. To the south, near the temple, a muddle of low-lying structures caught Thian Beng's attention. He made out a sleek glass and steel building surrounded by clusters of half-built clapboard cabins, lush landscaping, a large free-form swimming pool, several tennis courts and a climbing wall outfitted with ropes and colour-coded footholds. A jogging track snaked around the cabins and hugged the perimeter of the compound, and this was in turn enclosed by a chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire.

Somebody was building an outdoor adventure resort, Thian Beng thought, and perhaps there was a time when he might have sneered at the idea, at the contradiction and paradox, although now it didn't matter. Instead he clenched his teeth and steadied himself. He drew close to the lip of the overhang and peered over. Four seconds of animal screams stared back at him from the jagged rocks at the water's edge. He took a deep breath, raised his head and scanned the terrain again. Then he fixed his eyes on the horizon and cleared his mind of everything except the spot where the sky kissed the ocean. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and face. He made a fist with his left hand, brought it up to his lips and dropped it back to his side.

All at once his attention was caught by a break in the rock-face beyond which he could see a piece of clear ground carved from the lalang fields east of the lake. An excavator and a lorry sat idling nearby on a ribbon of track—another construction project, a small one. A moment of doubt assailed Thian Beng as he

recalled a story he had once read, something by Lu Hsun, back when reading gave him pleasure, when it seemed important that he strive to be a man of letters. For several minutes he tried to remember the details of the story. It was something about roads and how they are there but also not there, how they exist and also don't exist. For several minutes Thian Beng racked his brain about the story but got nowhere.

He gave up. Never mind, he muttered under his breath. Never mind, he said again, his soft words lost in the winds buffeting the hill-top.

A resigned aspect came into his bearing. He shuffled to the edge of the overhang and stared at the water lapping the rocks below.

His face relaxed and became thoughtful.

The next day the incident appeared in all the newspapers, together with scattered pieces of information about Thian Beng, surname, Lim. For a week people all over the country talked about it, scratching their heads. They didn't know that he had once gone hunting near the quarry lake for hornet's nests, that as a boy he had loved the outdoor life. They didn't know that one time they went hunting for a hornet's nest, they found instead a small camp site providing deep shelter from the world. They didn't know that he first kissed a girl on that island right after the GCE O-level exams when they went over with a group of friends to celebrate. They didn't know that in his twenties he started to rear discus and freshwater angel fish in separate tanks in the living room of his housing-board flat, that all his life he wanted to settle down and start a family but that after Anita got married—and died two years later in the train crash—he withdrew into himself and his hobbies.

Still, there was enough to shock and to titillate, and people in their

read his story and felt that the bell tolled for them established a tie that kept them human—because it kept alive the dream of social solidarity.

This part of the ending was not amenable to cogent explanation or analysis. It was a mystery and a tragedy. It remains a tragedy to this day.

Two weeks later an advertisement ran in some of the larger newspapers, in the classifieds section. A mI]TJ n-1(iv m)]TJ2.75 0 Td (-)Tj 0.012 Tc -0.001 Tw 0..3 0 Td [(if)-1zsl