

BLESSED BY THE TIES THAT BIND.

In 1963 while I was in Form 6, and due to my involvement with the Four Holes, I was invited as a guest of the State. My father, realizing that any prospects I had had were greatly curtailed, decided to send me to Singapore. Through the intervention and recommendation of my pastor, David Nilsson, I had been slated to attend Trinity Theological College (more of that later).

Sending me to the ferry point, my father gave me RM 50 and a TITONI watch, saying sheepishly that that was all he could afford. He admonished me not to get into trouble again, gave me a pat on my back and sent me on the way to the Prai railway station.

Reaching Singapore, I walked from Tanjong Pagar Railway station to Chin Chew Street where my mother had arranged for me to stay with my uncle.

The next day I went to call on Pastor John Nelson at the Dukes' Road Lutheran Church. He took me to Trinity College on Mount Sophia and enrolled me. However, a few months later, when the semester started, I did not report as I felt I did not have the calling and it would not be fair to the Lord to take up the place and deprive the Lord of a more committed servant were I to take up place. I thus did not commence my studies. After a few weeks of interaction, Pastor Nelson, impressed with my command of the English language, offered me a position as supervisor of the Lutheran church kindergarten at Queenstown at \$60/= a month plus the servants quarter to stay in.

IN THE BEGINNING

There being no classes on Saturdays, I had a lot of free time and started missing school life, especially detention class where I was a constant attendee. I had brought a copy of the 1962 School Annual with me and glancing through it, I saw a letter from Mr. Lim Thean Soo addressed to the school, under the auspices of the Old Frees Association, Singapore. The address given was No.13 Jalan Belankas. I decided to pay him a visit to see if he could connect me to the other Old Frees. Reaching No.13 Jalan Belankas, I rang the gate bell and instantly a boy came to the gate and asked me what I wanted. He replied in the positive when I asked if Mr. Lim Thean Soo lived here. I continued by telling him I am from the Penang Free School and was looking for the Secretary of the Old Frees association. He said he understood and asked me to wait. Returning to the house, he came back with a sheet of paper. It was a cyclostyled list of members of the Old Frees Association of Singapore. Thanking him profusely, I took my leave. On the way back, I studied the lists, rating names like Ernest Clark, Kok Weng On, both of Frasers and Neave, Dr. G.K Lim, T.Q Lim, Dr Chan Kong Thoe and Woo Kam Seng (Shell). I had a hankering to better my station in life and thought that the Old Frees might be able to help me and might have opening where I could fit in.

MAH KAM SENG

That Saturday morning I reserved the office telephone for my use. At about 10.00am I rang Woo Kam Seng. The reply was "Tadak, tadak, tadak Woo Kam Seng." Thinking that I might have dialled a wrong number, I asked if this was Shell's office. The reply was "Ya, ini Shell, Batul." I reiterated "Mr Woo Kam Seng, Sales Director, please" to which the reply was "Tadak Woo Kam Seng, Ada Makan Singh." I then realized that Shell works 5 days a week and the phone must have been transferred to the watchman or jaga whose name must have been Makam Singh.

H3 double

Still thinking of a higher pay than \$60/=, I looked again at the list but by this time I had met one of my classmates, Lim Weng Yoke, who was working in Singapore. I invited him to join me on a visit to Heah Hock Heng since he was in our class. The address was at Cluny Road. Dropping off the bus at the junction of Farrer and Bukit Timah, we made our way to Cluny road. Cluny road was very long and after thirty minutes we came to the house. We rang the door bell and a stout gentleman of about 30+ opened the door and we asked whether Heah Hock Heng lived here. He replied that he is Heah Hock Heng. Weng Yoke and I were stunned as he was not the Heah Hock Heng of our year. We apologized profusely and explained that we thought he was the Heah Hock Heng, one of our classmates from the Penang Free School. He said he is an Old Free. We were only too happy to meet him and we chatted for an hour about the school. He asked us for our contact numbers and promised that the OFA, Singapore will contact us. With that, we took our leave and left for lunch.

MAIDEN ATTENDANCE AT OFA PICNIC

At the end of March 1967, I received an invitation and application form to join the OFA, Singapore. Accompanying the form was an invitation to attend a picnic in one of the colonial bungalows. When Weng Yoke and myself reached the venue, a goodly number of members had turned up. We were welcomed by Mr. Heah Hock Heng who introduced us around, especially to a Mr. Wee Chong Jin who was Chief Justice then. Both of us were in awe of him but also proud to be Old Frees. Mr. Wee sat on an armchair on the porch and watched the members and their families frolicking in the sea and on the shore. A repast had been prepared and everybody had a good time.

In early October 1967 I received a notice to attend an AGM at the Kelong Restaurant, Cathay building. Payment was \$30. I sent back my returns declining since attendance would have meant 50% of my pay.

MAIDEN ATTENDANCE AT AGM

For the rest of 1967 and half of 1968, I worked at various odd jobs on top of my supervisory job and managed to accumulate 100\$/=, so when I received the notice towards the end of September, I was prepared to attend the AGM, again to be held at the Kelong Restaurant at Cathay Building. When I reached it, I found it to be a small cozy restaurant. I felt at home immediately with the crowd using Penang patois which could be distinguished among the bubble. When the AGM was called to order, I found myself seated next to member Kok Wheng On who introduced himself to me. He told me his father was also a customs officer when he heard I was staying in the customs village, Bukit Glugor, a friendship developed between us and which has been cemented with time. I immediately had a feeling of euphoria enveloped me. The friendship formed that day, has withstood the test of time and has in fact grown stronger.

When the meeting concluded, I made a promise to attend every meeting which I did without fail until 1975 when someone made a serious mistake and proposed me for the post of secretary. Well and good. Remembering the first picnic I attended, I hankered for another. So the first function I organized was a picnic, not at the seaside but at Mitsukoshi gardens in Jurong. My wife had learnt to cook Penang laksa, probably from my kaypoh cousin of Siam Road, so she provided the laksa for the picnic. No doubt the venue had no salt tainted air but all in all we had a good time.

OLD FREES ARE NEVER TARDY

Over my many terms of office, two incidents remained clear in my mind. The first was Dr G.K. Lim or to give his full name, Dr. Lim Geok Khooi. I remember him telling me Somerset Maugham was a personal friend. Somerset Maugham was the author of "Pygmalion" later made into the film "My Fair Lady". GK graduated from the Hong Kong Medical College, joined the British Army and was the first Asian doctor of the Royal Medical Corps. He took over Rommel's troops of the German Africa Corps in North Africa on the surrender of Germany. After he was demobbed, the Military Administration rewarded him with any residence of his choosing. GK chose NO.37 Stevens Road. Perhaps he smoked "Abdulla 37?" Who knows?

I had made it my task to fetch GK to and from the committee meetings. On one occasion, I was 5 minutes late from our appointed time. He was not waiting for me outside his gate, as was his wont. I called out to him. He opened the front door and told me he wasn't going to the meeting for virtue of my being late, he will be late and might be labeled as being tardy.

THE SPYROS INCIDENT

Sometime in early October 1978, the committee met at the Goodwill Restaurant in Hong Leong Building to finalise arrangements for 21st October AGM. After the agenda had been dealt with, the Committee sat down to dinner. In the midst of partaking the food, a committee member called Oh Kean Hock said, "I hope you guys do not mind of me bringing up an item out of the agenda. It can be itemized under any business."

Ernest Clark gave him the green light to proceed. Kean Hook then went on to state. "What is the OFA for? To eat, yak and hold useless meetings now and then? Let us do something useful and meaningful for once. I propose we do something to help the families of the 17 victims of the Spyros accident. Don't just yak and enjoy yourselves" GK Lim immediately sputtered with the food he was masticating while Ernest Clark stood up and begged to be excused from the meeting. GK then pronounced that he had never been so insulted in his life but he had best answer Oh Kean Hock.

"Kean Hock," Dr G.K. said, "please consider carefully before shooting off your mouth next time. Do you know that to do what you have suggested we would need to call for an EOGM, obtain the approval of the majority of the members before we can even collect one cent? We are on the committee not for our own glory but to plan activities and functions for our members, ex- students of the Penang Free School and also to remember and honour our school."

Kean Hook had no answer to that except to get up and follow Ernest Clarkes's lead and excuse himself from the meeting and leave.

ONE-UP ON ERNEST CLARKE

To my memory, the most hilarious committee meeting was during the tenure of Dato Ng Kong Yeam. Following the tradition of the OFA'S, whereby the newly elected President had to stand the committee to dinner at the first committee meeting, thus Dato Ng invited the committee to dinner at his Queen Bee Restaurant in Johor Baru, to be followed by drinks at his Queen Bee lounge to watch a strip-tease performance, not surprisingly the full committee turned up. In actuality, the Queen Bee was to give the "Merchinta Nightclub", a well established strip-tease club in JB, a run for its money.

Well and good, everyone did not eat but rather gobbled it down, eager to adjourn to the lounge for the show. Dato Ng took us over to the lounge as soon the plates had been cleared, was he eager also? The lounge manager met us at the door and Dato instructed him to close the doors for a private show.

The manager complied (which manager would not at the behest of his boss) and the music started. Presently a gossamer clad girl sashayed out from behind the curtain, Ernest Clark exclaimed "wow" before moving his chair to the edge of the catwalk to get a closer look (at what?). The dancer went through her moves, moving closer and closer to Ernest Clark (who must have been on cloud nine by now) and before he could realized it, the dancer had plucked his spectacles from his face, did a pirouette and dropped his spectacles down the front of her G-string. She performed another number, edging closer

to Ernest again, took the spectacles out of her G-string and gave it back to Ernest. The spectacles were all fogged up with the dancer's body heat. Asking for a piece of tissue paper to wipe his glasses clear, I quipped him "Careful Ernest, she may be infected with VD."

Ernest rejoined angrily "Shut up, stupid, wearing the glasses won't affect a person with VD." All this time the committee members were in stitches at Ernest's discomfort. To console him, I said, "Ernest, I do not mean Venereal Disease, I meant Visual Diarrhoea." Ernest harrumphed and came back to our table, receiving hearty claps on the back for his bravery.

APPRECIATION AND THANKS

In all my years as an office bearer of the OFA'S Singapore, I had tremendous support from the following co-committee members, who were unstinting in their support, never missing a meeting, unless more important things cropped up. They include Moey Sek Pan Chin Pak Kim, Goh Khok Sian and the following members who gave their moral and vocal support, chief of whom were Hwang Tiaw Hoe, Hwang Tiaw Sooi, Wee Chong Lim, Tan Ban Hoe, Lim Chong Hock, Teng Lye Hock, Loh Peng Chee, Oh Siew Leong, Professor Chan Kong Thoe, Gory Yeang, Khoo Boo Aik, Yam Mow Lam and the happy-go-lucky Larry Lim Yam Hum.

Oh, before I forget, my thanks to each and every member who has encouraged and bolstered my passion for the OFA in their own individual way.

OLD FREES ARE COMPASSIONATE

The title of this caption has been chosen with care and after much thought for it encaptures the heart and soul of the Old Frees. I say this with conviction because of two incidents where the old frees truly and unstintingly demonstrated their compassion.

One evening, I received a call for Mrs. Yip Mun Kong imploring help from Lee Seng Teik to attend to her son, who had just suffered from a deep cut on his cheek, she was frantic, afraid that her son would be saddled with with an ugly scar on his face for the rest of his life. On reflection, it could be that Mrs. Yip was afraid that no girl would marry her son depriving her of grandsons or granddaughters. I thus called Lee Seng Teik who was at dinner, when he heard my request on behalf of another Old Free, he left his dinner there and then, and rushed to the general hospital. The last I heard, Mem Kong's son has a scar but a very faint one.

WAH SENG'S MAGNANIMITY

Another incident , which strengthens my passion for the OFA Singapore. In 1996, I needed an X-ray report for my employer and my thoughts turned to Chin Wah Seng. Proceeding to his clinic, I registered myself and waited for my turn. When my turn came, I was pleasantly surprised when Weh Seng himself walked up to me and conducted me to his laboratory. Strapping me to large machine himself and switched it on. The machine rotated for a few minutes and stopped, Wah Seng told me to put on my shirt and I dressed up .

Stopping at the registration counter to make payment, I was taken aback when the receptionist told me that Dr. Chin had taken care of it. I did not leave but waited at the receptionist area to thank Wah Seng personally but the number of patients waiting made me leave after an hour so as so not to disrupt Wah Seng's schedule.

DIALYSIS MACHINE

I was diagnosed as diabetic in 1998 and was weak when I visited Yam Mow Lam. A few days later, I received a call to lunch with Ooi Teng San. Over lunch he enquired about my diabetic condition. After hearing about my details , he told me that should I have to be treated by dialysis, he is willingly to sponsor a dialysis machine so that I can self-treat by dialysis at home as treatment at dialysis centers is very expensive.

A word of caution to all readers Anybody who bad-mouths the old frees will have me to contend with.

I cannot recall when we started holding our AGM at Kings Hotel; perhaps when they launched the Penang Food Promotion but I remember when we changed venue for once in 1999 and held it at the Concord Hotel. At the registration desk, 3 young men approached me and, their spokesman told me they were from Free School and wanted to be members. Handing me their name cards, one name stuck out- Malcolm Tan Ban Hoe. He then asked how they could help out. Having matters under control, I thanked him and told him I will let him know later.

When the AGM started, the president thanked me for the years of accepting and discharging the duties of Hon. secretary through the years and since I was leaving to take up a post in China, the OFA would like to present me with a gift in appreciation. He then gave me a Samsonite briefcase by courtesy of Gary Yeang who was the Samsonite representative for South East Asia. As the office bearers had not been elected, I announced to the meeting that we are very fortunate that there are 3 young Old Frees hho have volunteered to help in any way and I suggested that such enthusiasm should be rewarded by being elected to the committee. They stood up and graciously accepted to be elected. Thus Malcolm Tan, Boo Aik and one other (the name which I am unable to recall) were elected.

AN ASIDE

During Chong Soon Khean's term of office as President, he narrated an incident that occurred just before he left for the meeting. He confessed he is very forgetful (Alzheimer's?) and many a time had to return home to retrieve items that he had forgotten. He told us that it will be a thing of the past from now onwards as he has formulated a system to overcome his memory lapse. He told us he has composed a ditty to remind himself each time he leaves the house and has pasted the ditty behind his door. The ditty goes like this

KEYS
WALLET
SPECTACLES
TESTICLES

He then recounted to us what transpired between Sue (Mrs.Chong) and himself as he left the house. He chanted the ditty and as he chanted, Sue said "Jimmy you can take the first three but leave the last at home" to which Soon Khean rejoined "cannot, lah, I will have no courage to do business if I leave them."

ADDENDUM- the Advent of OFA Singapore

When I first joined the OFA, I remembered Weng On telling me the OFA was born in 1962. My thanks to Mr. J. C Rajarao who corrected me on 15th November 2011 where he was my guest at the Committee meeting. He pronounced that he has a newspaper clipping and photo of the Committee taken in 1953 perhaps in tribute to Queen Elizabeth's Coronation.

Submitted by
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