

The gate creaked as I open it. It always creaks. This is an old apartment after all, and I've been living here ever since I was born. It's one of those HDB rental flats that only families which have monthly household incomes of below \$1,500 can apply for.

Yes, I'm from a poor family. My Pa works at the Tanjong Pagar docks. He cleans mechanical parts. Half of his income goes to the rental of this tiny one bedroom flat. My Ma? She's a housewife with no education. No one will employ her.

At least the house is clean. Ma always made sure of that. Then again, there's hardly any furniture to clean in the living room: a small dining table with two plastic stools, two shelves and a small study table.

'What did you get from Sheng Siong?', Ma asks.

'I only bought a bunch of bananas, Hup Seng biscuits, some cotton buds and a tissue pack. That's all I could get with the money you gave me.' I replied, as I took out each item and placed them on the rickety table.

'The doctor gave me these, but Pa's meds and antibiotic cream haven't arrived yet. Guardian got sell ... but I need to wait until my next month's allowance then I can buy.'

I tried to sound hopeful, but I guess I wasn't too successful. This month has been especially difficult for all of us. Pa's diabetes has gotten worse and the ulcers have erupted. He can't work for the moment because he cannot walk and is on a wheelchair. His mood has changed for the worse too. He's always grumpy, always unhappy, always dissatisfied and always complaining about something. Even as Ma cleans the purplish wound on his reddened ankle, he grumbles about how painful it is. Often, I wonder where Ma finds such patience to tolerate Pa's unceasing pessimism.

'Ma, the ah beng shop looking for part-timers. I think I can work there and earn a little bit of extra money.'

'Aiyah. No lah ... You focus on your studies ok?' You must concentrate on your studies, alright? This year O-Levels some more. Don't work!' There was hesitance in Ma's voice. It was as though she wasn't convinced by what she was saying. Maybe she knew how badly we needed money but was torn between my future and the family's needs.

'It's ok lah, Mummy. I can manage. Please ...'

'No lah, please ah. I really need you to focus on your studies. You don't worry. God will provide for us. Okay? You don't work.' She made the sign of the cross while saying this, perhaps this was her desperate way of coping with misery - believing that miracles can happen still and that a divine being would intervene to end all our suffering.

I was less certain about that. I have only known suffering – from hunger, from poverty, from embarrassment, from shame. I'm ashamed of hiding during recess so I don't have to tell my friends I don't have money for food; I'm ashamed of using the same bag for the last 10 years; I'm ashamed of using donated items; I'm ashamed of where I live; I'm ashamed of my parents; I'm ashamed of myself.

We learn in social studies about poverty in India and Ethiopia, but no one ever talks about poverty here in Singapore. It's as though no one believes Singaporeans can be poor. I've never told the truth to anyone about where I live or what my father does for a living. I just try to blend in by lying. When my

classmates talk about 'Mean Girls' or 'Stranger Things', I smile and laugh along as though I too had watched the latest episode. I try to keep dignified, to stay confident, but it is often difficult especially in school where I am surrounded by classmates from above average or well-to-do households. My schoolmates don't think there are poor people in Singapore.

In my darkest moments, I ask God why I was not born into Miley's family. Miley is the most popular girl in my class, 4C. She's rich, she's pretty and she's well-liked. I, on the other hand, must use a rubber band to tie up my hair...

'What God? simi God? When I was your age, I was already working at the docks okay? Until I met this bloody accident. You hear me [in Hokkien], nobody is too young to start working! Look at me now! I'm old and useless.'

Pa speaks in a mix of Singlish and Hokkien. Like Ma, he's never had a proper education and had to leave school to work and provide for his family then. Considering the odds, Pa thinks he's done okay and doesn't see why I shouldn't work and study at the same time. Ma, however, hopes I will study hard and never have to follow in their footsteps.

'Aiyah you don't be so ungrateful canor not? At least you are not dead yet, you know. I mean, you see, you even got Sarah and me to care for you. You are not dead right?' Ma implores as impatience mingled with sadness grows in her tone of voice.

'What die? Die, die, what do you mean die? You want me to die is it huh?!'

'No, I don't mean that. I just mean that ...'

'I'm already in a wheelchair! See my leg! You see my leg!'

'But you're alive right?'

'Aiyah you quiet lah you! Just do my leg lah!'

I feel helpless when they fight. Often, the fights are of trivial matters, but I know it stems from the anxiety, fear and hopelessness they feel, perhaps even guilt for not being able to provide a better life for me.

The squabble is interrupted by someone calling my name loudly. I turn around and Miley, the most popular girl in class, is standing outside my gate, asking for me. We don't close our front door because the house gets too warm and so passersby frequently peer into our small but tidy apartment. Like all other days, I hadn't thought to shut the door but unlike all other days, I wasn't expecting the object of my envy to drop by. What could possibly be worse than to have her see where I live, to see the really old printer and laptop given to me for free by a charity, to see the cheap stools we sit on, the ancient desk fan, the dirtied white walls, the cheap biscuits and ... my Parents ...

'Sarah? Sarah! is this your...house? What's with the gate? Why can't I open it?', Miley grumbles.

Even when she's casually dressed, Miley looks wealthy. She's in a purple checkered shirt, her hair is neat and straight as always. She peers into the house and shame envelops me. There is surprise, astonishment and scorn in her eyes even though she tries to be polite.

'Hi Miley, how did you find this place? This ... erm ... this is my friend's house.'

'Your friend's house?' Clearly, Miley wasn't convinced.

'Sorry, I wasn't able to come to school today. I thought we were supposed to meet at the guardhouse opposite?'

'Good thing I saw your address on the consent form on Ms. Georges' table. Otherwise I would have gone to the condo opposite where you told me you lived!'

I could see the sarcasm dripping from Miley's tongue and the delight she took in saying those words. Miley speaks in crisp, clear Received Pronunciation. Her English is impeccable. She articulates all her consonants and pronounces each word carefully *and* she doesn't use Singlish. There is a hint of a British accent even though she's never lived overseas. It must be from all the speech and drama classes she has taken.

'Next time, text me the day before if you are not coming to school. The assignment is due tomorrow for god's sake, and we are not failing. Seems as though you are a failure enough.'

I wish then that I could run and hide or simply disappear into nothingness. Her expression of disgust and her sneering broke my façade of dignity. I wanted to cry but I held back my tears.

'I'm sorry Miley. I'm sorry to Make you come all the way here. I'm really sorry.'

'Wow! That's a lot of Hup Seng biscuits.'

I could tell Miley almost felt embarrassed saying those words when she saw the pack of biscuits I had just bought. I just couldn't tell if she was genuinely embarrassed. Just then, Pa's groans interject the increasingly awkward conversation that I so desperately want to end.

'Eh, who's that? Who's that? You help your mother. Give me the saline. My ulcer damn Pain you know! Just do lah, down there. Quick lah! Faster do lah you', Pa yells as Ma sighs in resignation.

Miley looks on the squabble with surprise but then regains her composure and looks at me with false gleefulness.

'I know that you are busy but next time don't wait until your prepaid card runs out of money before you text me. Hup Seng biscuits can't Pay for your card. You do know that, right?'

'Yup, anyways, I gotta go. Bye Miley.'

'Oh wait. By the way, this is a book that I borrowed for you. The whole cohort really wanted this book for the class project but here it is, for you. So, you are so lucky you have me.' Accompanied by a grin and pout, her words were like acid burning with disdain and derision.

'Thank you, bye!'

I shut the gates quickly. It was the only dignified thing I could do.

'Your friend is it?' Ma asks.

'Yah.' I didn't think she was my friend but ... who wants to befriend a poor person anyway?

'Eh! Bring me the banana.' Pa requests.

'No, don't eat banana. Keep for later lah. Eat biscuit can?' Ma retorts in exasperation.

'Biscuit! Aiyah. Might as well die like that! Must enjoy food!'

'We need the banana for later. It's for dinner!'

As Pa and Ma find another reason to squabble, I pick up my phone to investigate an offer I read about earlier in the day. Perhaps my only constant comfort is my smart phone, a second-hand iPhone X that, once again, a social charity had donated to us.

I've always known that social escort services were common in Western countries but I wasn't aware there were such services here too. On this webpage, 'SG VIP Escorts,' there are many profiles of beautiful women dressed in expensive-looking dresses. It must be nice to own these pretty gowns. The agency's write-up shows they're currently recruiting young, pretty girls. 'Specializing in local SG girls ... SG VIP Escorts provides the best social escort services you can ever wish for.' This sounds like premium escort service and I'm sure the rich clients would really well. I wonder how much I will be able to earn if I become one! It shouldn't be too difficult a job right? I mean, it's just ... getting in bed with a man. I've been taught somehow that such jobs are wrong, but the money would surely help the family.

'Bring me the banana lah! FASTER!', Pa demands again.

I give up and hand the bunch of bananas to him much to the Ma's displeasure.

'Don't give it to him! No, not the banana lah. Told you it's for dinner.'

'Na na na ... just give them to me now!'

'No, no, no, don't eat the banana now lah! I said for dinner!'

'You quiet lah you!' Pa wins this round. He pulls a banana off, peels it and sinks his teeth into the yellow-white flesh. There is an expression of pleasure on his face, one that I rarely see nowadays.

Ma mutters under her breath something about Pa always being stubborn as she returns to cleaning his wound. Even as he enjoys his banana, Pa finds reason to complain and hurry Ma.

'Finish cleaning or not?' Pa interrogates with his mouth stuffed with banana.

'Yah, yah, yah. Finish already.'

The gauzes she was using rapidly soaked up the puss and blood, and there were many pieces. I decide to help Ma clear them. Pa asks for a drink and I hand him a glass of water.

'Only water ah? Why no soft drink?'

I didn't know how to respond to that because the truth is, we could not afford to spend on such luxuries. I keep silent and pick up my phone to find out more about social escort services. Maybe if I become a social escort, Pa and Ma can have soft drinks ... and so much more.

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