



## South-East Asian Interlude

**I lay in bed on that first night, wondering how on Earth I was going to resume acquaintance with the backpacking lifestyle left behind a decade or two before. Now, I had a young family faraway in Australia, and here was I closeted alone, cheek-by-jowl with people half my age ... or less! After my first encounter with one Singaporean hostel that seemed to pack five or ten people into each dimly lit, incredibly stifling room, I quickly moved on to find a place that offered single rooms; no window admittedly, but at least I had my own space: manna from heaven!**

There was a mid-point in my life where I opted out. Approaching middle age and drained by running a philanthropic one-man-band show, on miniscule funds, I tossed in the towel and went looking for something with a regular salary, plus time off when the working day was over. What turned up was TEFL - Teaching English as a Foreign Language - something which graduates do in their Gap Year, not almost 50-year-olds as a lifesaver. And it ended up (as described above) with lodgings in a windowless room that was not much bigger than the bed, in downtown Asia.

Was this some sort of mid-life menopause? If so, it was spurred on by serious health concerns - thyroid cancer to be exact – causing a critical re-evaluation, of myself and the world around my being. Emerging from surgery, those trees outside seemed to hold

new meaning. Until that point, I had not given even fleeting consideration that my body might be subject to invasion from negative forces. I was impervious to such things. And I guess many of us live with similar degrees of delusion, until a major intrusion happens.

But TEFL was right for me at that time, taking me into a new world which sometimes was terrifying, but on other occasions lifted my spirits to the skies. I was not an orthodox teacher, tending to spurn the accepted TEFL format, learnt during training, opting instead for more unconventional methods. And as long as the supervisor of the moment wasn't looking over my shoulder, I was always trying out new games and songs: anything that worked to make language learning easier.

At the time I was surprised to score a teaching post back at the Government-run school in Adelaide, where I had received my initial training. Certainly, I had not passed with flying colours, as had other vibrant souls much younger than me. *'Maybe they preferred the more mature and measured approach,'* was the answer I pampered myself with. But in truth, my background of working with schools, and - in parallel with the TEFL course - completing a graduate diploma in education at the nearby university, probably stood me in good stead. *'This was a person who was serious about TEFL,'* they said; not knowing I would hightail it off to another field, after only a few years.

That first job was working with newly arrived migrants to Australia, the most recent - after the fall of the *Iron Curtain* - coming from Russia and Eastern Europe. I soon realized that the easy ones to teach were those somewhere in between raw beginners at one end and advance language students at the other. These were the ones who knew enough to have fun with, but not too much to make life difficult, with involved questions about past participles, etc. (of which I had remarkably scant knowledge). But looking back, those that were most rewarding to teach were those fresh off the plane, who hardly knew how to say *'g'day'*. How on Earth do you teach them, without resorting to their native language? Well of course, the answer is you use photos and gestures, and small situation plays, which could also be a whole lot of fun; the hilarity often rebounding

on the teacher, with minor offences regarding their culture. So after a while, it was only those advanced and inquisitive learners who remained to haunt my dreams.

Alongside the Government job, I secured a position with a private language college, attached to a Catholic school. For this I had to conceal my rapidly increasing dislike of all things religious, but at least early morning prayers and catechism did not extend to the language classroom. Fortunately for me though, what did extend to my class, was the evaluation process for the education diploma that I was in the process of completing at university. Thus, because my mentors had agreed to a practice teaching pass for earlier work with schools, and now had consented to a second-stage evaluation of my teaching skills at the language school, it meant I would not have to be assigned to teach in a secondary school. This suited me just fine; I hated the thought of having to deal with belligerent teenagers (so god only knows why I was doing the course!), but from the university end it did seem rather ludicrous, that when they presented me with my esteemed *Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education*, I had not even set foot in a secondary school classroom, under their watch, for even one minute!

The language college brought a new challenge, because of the age-range of students. Here, children were mixed in with adults, which according to most theorists cannot work, as they require decidedly different teaching techniques. I worked around this by sub-dividing the class related to age, teaching them accordingly. The students in these classes were from Asia – mostly South Korea and Hong Kong – and in general they responded well to my laissez-faire teaching method, though there was one notable exception who made enough noise to almost get me sacked. In the end, she went instead, and my off-beat methods were vindicated.

After this, it was on to Asia itself, where I now return to that first night in Singapore:

My arms strained under the load of two overweight packs. The muscles rippled on the sturdy young guy, some years my junior, striding out by my side. He looked as if he could carry my bags and a couple besides, while eating a triple ice cream.

*"Is it much further?"* I asked.

*"No mate, just 'round the corner over there."* He replied with a sideways grin.

*"You're Australian!?"* Half statement, half question; my voice tinged with relief at finding a kindred spirit in this brash new, tropical world.

*"Sure am mate. Look, it'll be easier for us to go the back way"* he said, turning into a tiny lane and stopping in front of a green-painted wooden door, set into a high concrete wall. After a little fumbling to find the right key in the dim light, we entered and began clambering up an extremely narrow, green-coloured, spiral staircase.

He turned back, looking down towards me, offering a hand. *"Let me carry one of your packs, otherwise you will never get them up these stairs. It's a pretty tight squeeze"*.

I passed up the smaller of the two bags: I had no intentions of losing face to this Italian-extracted ball of Australian muscle ...and certainly not at this early juncture.

Straining at the top of the spiral (but trying hard not to show it) I followed my guide through a small kitchen-cum-eatery, to a wider space which seemed to be the reception area. He dumped the smaller of my bags inside the open doorway of an adjoining room. I dropped the larger bag next to the smaller one and peered into the room, just as he flicked on the fluorescent tube light. My spirits sagged - no window; just a box with bunk beds and like the back door and stairwell, all done out in a bright shade of lime green. Someone obviously new a paint bargain when they saw one!

With time, the experience of this place I had stumbled on - *Waffles Homestay* - grew on me. I guess the youthful atmosphere took me back to my youth; with real backpackers there is little regard for age difference; it's how you approach life that counts.

On my second day there I got a job teaching classes from kindergarten through to corporate wives, at venues which ranged over three city-based colleges, to one in a sky-high company board room. It was hard work, it was sweaty, but it was so amazingly invigorating. Living and working in a city which I'd previously only seen as a tourist; walking to work in the morning, teaching above a shopping mall in the afternoon, catching the *MRT* across town for a class with a corporate couple in the evening: as a whole it was intoxicating! Many rate Singapore as a poor excuse for an Asian city, but as

far as I was concerned it was a hot, tropical and dynamic island metropolis that was going places: an exciting urban setting to live and work in.

Out of all this, the time I loved most was my twice-weekly excursion to the twenty-first floor of a triangular, sharp-edged skyscraper, to teach two Japanese office workers, after their fellow countrymen and women had left for the day. It was only after the first two weeks closeted away in the boardroom, that I discovered the pair were in fact married. This seemed a bit strange, because I knew that Japanese companies did not allow their employees to fraternise with each other, let alone marry! In this case it was even more unusual, as the man was some fifteen years younger than the woman. Nobody else in Singapore, except me, knew they were married, thus - as we tussled with the tenses - they swore me to absolute secrecy.

Towards the end of my stay in the island city, I was offered the position of managing one of the teaching colleges (which just goes to show there can still be some advantages from scaling the age ladder). I considered, then declined. But I often think about how much life might have changed if I had accepted that offer. My immediate family would have joined from Australia, but our lives could have been changed beyond recognition. Whether a positive or negative change is of course impossible to say, but most likely a bit of both: the ups and downs of being would continue, whatever the setting.

My Singapore sojourn had enabled me to re-invent myself after losing a position of long-term employment, in tandem with being threatened by a potentially fatal illness. Viewed from the starting point, it was very much a temporary measure, but by the time my family came to join me three months later, en route to Britain, I was having some regrets about leaving the place. It was not that I loved my partner and our children any less than before, but just that I had found a new way forward, where once again I was able to stand tall, on my own two feet.

So that in truth, was why I had given serious thought to the offer of a management position, at the language college in Singapore. My partner was a Librarian and failing that, could probably teach English much better than I could; work would not have been too much of a problem. But there were more things at stake, mainly to do with the UK. A

work exchange with Australia including accommodation, plus school enrolment for the kids had been pre-arranged. To break all that, would have meant some degree of egg-on-one's-face, which I was prepared to endure; but my partner and children had more to lose than me, so to stay on in Singapore, became only a fleeting consideration, before we got on with the job as planned, and after a few days in the sun, flew on to London.

During my time at *Waffles* I struck up a friendship with Miriam, a young, typically blonde German in her twenties, who seemed to be almost part of the furniture there. We were a long way apart, not just in age or language, she was a professional diver while I could hardly swim. So no-one was more surprised than me, when our friendship blossomed in such a short time. We came to doing picnics in the park and bike rides here and there, with numerous cafes and concerts, whenever we were free. But it was a platonic affair: our only embrace was a farewell kiss at Changi Airport, as she was leaving for Sulawesi. It was an unwritten connection, something at soul level, which is to be found with only a few people we ever chance to meet: we adored the *Singapore Symphony* and revelled in *Fassbinder* films: our cheese and wine picnics near the summit of Fort Canning Park are a joy to remember. Later I wrote a poem based on our friendship, but in essence it could also refer to my dalliance with the island city of Singapore:

### *Harmony worth holding*

*Over, almost before it began:  
Missed opportunities squandered.  
But then,  
They found with each other  
A common chord,  
As fish glide in unison  
Through fragments of time:  
This way and that,  
Linked then dispersed.  
A moment together,  
Then lost to this Earth.*

*They could not see how close they had come  
Till looking back from afar  
They saw:  
Their days spent together,  
A wondrous thing.  
Walking and talking,  
Feeling often as one:  
Grasping the moment,  
But afraid to prolong.  
Two beings in time:  
A chord, not a song.*

Singapore 1996

.....