

WAI-CHEW SIM

Reverse Bungee Jump

It started from a conversation in the staff canteen.

He was seated at a nearby table with his back to the speakers but he recognised their voices. They were a party of five from Marcom including the new guy who had just joined the company—a regular lunch set. The canteen was crowded at the time and he was busy with his calculations, but something made him listen when they started talking about their holiday experiences. They mentioned Desaru and Tioman, and then the new guy said something interesting. With an embarrassed edge to his voice he said that a year ago in Bali he had gone for a bungee jump.

“Bungee jump? how was it? how was it?” everyone asked.

The new guy seemed reluctant to talk. It was nothing, nothing, he said. No big deal.

“But you *must* tell us!” one of the girls said. “How can you share something like that and then expect us to just sit back? Come on—tell us what happened!”

“Yes! tell us!” another girl said. “How was it?”

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 going amuck far away across a lake or a deep gully. Then you realise that the scream comes from you. You’re the one making the animal scream.”

There was a shocked, uncomprehending silence, then everyone broke in: What about the dangers reported in the press? Didn’t you read about it? You get brain hemorrhage, right, if something goes wrong? You end up bleeding from the eyes, right?

I read about people getting spinal cord injuries. Weren’t you scared?

What about your parents? What if something happens to you!

“No, no, listen, there’s more. I haven’t finished yet!” the new guy said.

They settled down again.

“I want to share this with you *before* you decide to jump, since you asked about it, so that you know exactly what to expect—because after the jump it becomes an option, you see. It’s always there at the back of the mind because you went through a full-dress rehearsal. Every time you go somewhere high off the ground and look down, let’s say you go to a shopping centre and from the fourth floor you’re looking down at the atrium, you will realise that all it takes is three or four seconds of animal scream.

“Three or four seconds of animal scream,” he repeated, “then it’s over.”

At that point Thian Beng turned and saw the horror on their faces.

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 a look at himself in the rear-view mirror. Then he strapped himself in and drove about an hour to the village located at Changi.

Part of the drive took him past a stretch of the seashore landscaped with coconut trees and giant fan palms. He passed compact chalets, rest-huts and freshly-painted barbeque pits. The beach glinted silver and gold and the waves shone a soft majestic blue but Thian Beng noticed none of it. He kept his eyes fixed on the road. At one point he got tired of the Mandopop blaring from the car stereo and reached out to shut it off. As he drove he thought about the soldiers incarcerated at Changi during the war; he wondered how they had survived the deprivations.

When he reached the village, he parked, got out of his car and locked it. He crossed the village centre with its jumble of food stalls and souvenir stands and made his way to the jetty. At the head of the jetty, he found an empty seat in the covered waiting area and sat down to wait for the ferry.

Four other persons were waiting in the queue to cross over to the island—two boys and two girls aged about sixteen. They wore loose T-shirts, shorts, and heavy hiking shoes. Bulky backpacks sat on the floor next to each of them, and as they took turns studying a large laminated map they would point out now and then some feature that had caught their attention, something to watch out for. After ten minutes, a gnarled old man walked up with an umbrella in one hand and a basket of vegetables in the other. The moment he sat down, he whipped out a mobile

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 Winston Churchill, Donald Duck, and Adolf Rommel, and their captors had not been any the wiser.

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 turns with a bush knife, they 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 entire area beyond was blocked by a heap of sand, broken branches and construction debris. They had made it out of bounds.

The sight filled Thian Beng with disquiet. What had they done to his island? How could they do this!

Then he realised that he should have seen it coming. Along the way he should have noticed the changes, understood them.

For one thing the roads were different. In the past they had to dance around potholes and bumps. Now the roads were surfaced, the craters were filled, the contusions levelled. Crash barriers set off the roads from the surrounding farmland, fetid mudpools, and thin scratchy jungle. Stone markers handed out

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, brusque and indifferent, bisected by clear lapping water at the shoreline. With a quick jerk of the handlebars he veered away from the water, and when he reached the rocks he tossed his bicycle aside. He rested a moment to catch his breath. It had been years since he climbed the rock-face, he realised, too many years. For a while he studied its chiselled features, plotting his course. Then he went to the foot of the outcrop and began his ascent.

Soon he was far off the ground. He had to step carefully round the ferns and lichen-covered rocks in order not to lose his footing. His breath came in quick, sharp gasps. Sweat poured off his brows and ran into his eyes—stinging them. His jersey clung to his skin and when the wind blew he shivered. At times he had to get down on all fours to make headway but he hardly noticed the exertion. He understood only his limbs flexing one after the other, the dark clouds overhead, the need to find footholds that held and the surface of the water gleaming a fine pure blue far below.

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 different ways fretted over Thian Beng even if they didn't know him. People who

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 medium-sized logistics company located near X wished to fill a mid-level executive position, the advert said. The vacancy was an urgent, *sudden* development, and applicants should ideally possess the following qualifications, spelt out in bullet-point form. Ideally, they should have this, this, and this, and also this, this and this.

This part of the ending was simple and straightforward. It was congruent with the laws of the system and with the writ of HR and Marcom—in some ways it was as clear as daylight.