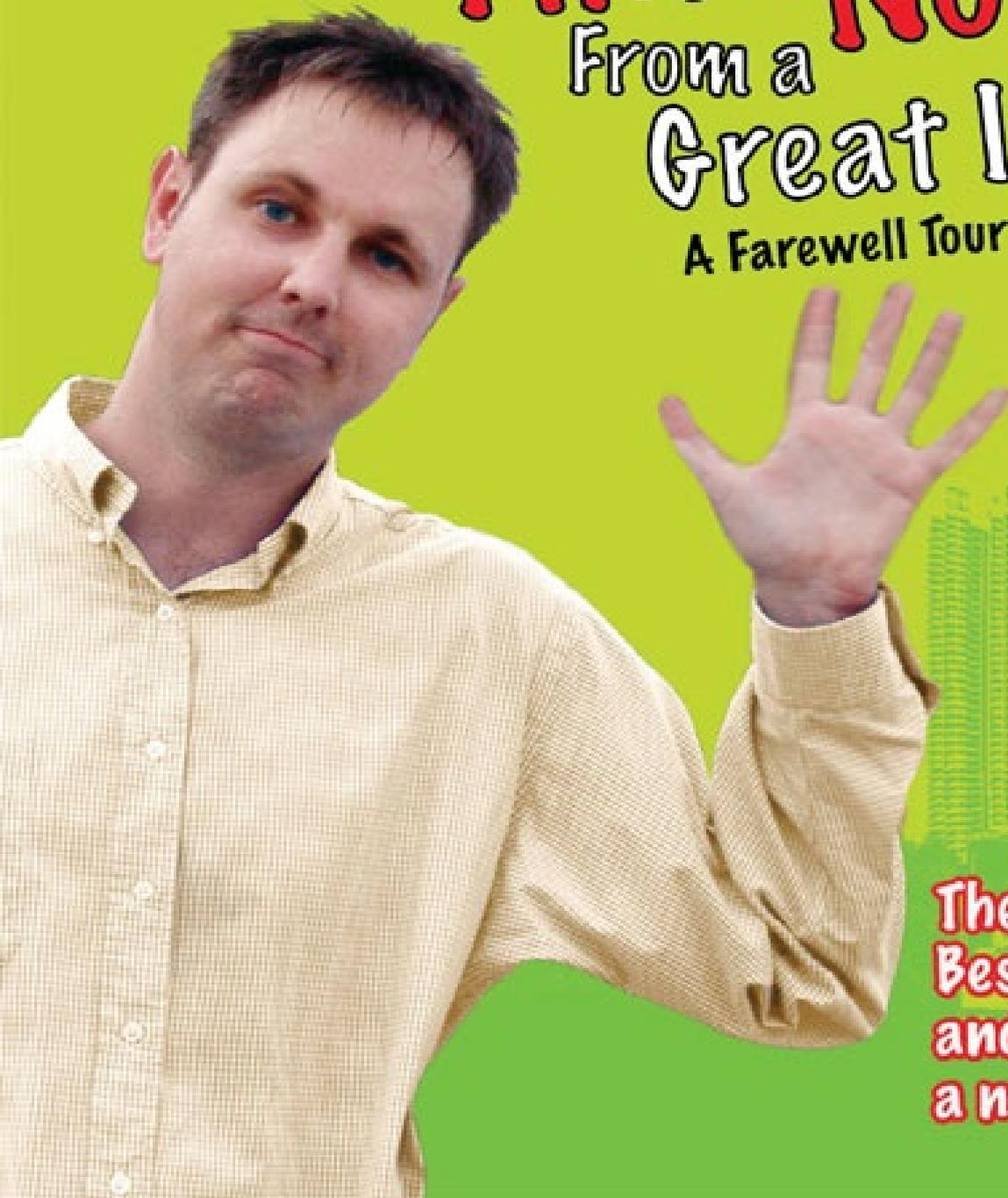


NETI HUMPHREYS

**SINGAPORE'S
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Final Notes
From a
Great Island
A Farewell Tour of Singapore



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NETIL HUMPHREYS



Final Notes
From a
Great Island
A Farewell Tour of Singapore

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A decade ago, my mother ordered me to "see a bit of the world". Scott accompanied me and David guided us to Toa Payoh for a short holiday. The incomparable people of Singapore did the rest and I am indebted to all of you.

But I dedicate this book to the wonderful woman who shared my Singapore story. Thanks, Tracy, for making it such an entertaining journey.

PROLOGUE

On 1 January 2006, my wife and I thought we were going to be arrested for loitering. We certainly looked like burglars. We were standing beside the rubbish chute on the 40th floor of the biggest Housing and Development Board (HDB) apartment block in Singapore when the shocked owner of the nearby flat appeared.

“Er, good evening and Happy New Year,” I mumbled to the middle-aged Chinese woman. “We’re hoping to see the fireworks.”

The startled woman digested this information slowly, clearly unsure whether to call the police or hit me with her full bag of soiled nappies.

“Oh, I see. The fireworks have already finished,” she replied warily. “About five minutes ago.”

“That’s a shame. We really wanted to see them. Okay then, we’ll go back home.”

“Yah. The view was great from up here. Could see everything. The fireworks were so bright and colourful. Went on for a long time, you know.”

Now she was just rubbing our noses in it. We stepped aside so she could throw the bag down the chute and then headed sheepishly towards the lift.

“Happy New Year,” the woman shouted after us, now reassured that we were not casing her property. “Have a good 2006.”

Her sincere words were most appreciated and timely. We needed all the good fortune we could get. We had welcomed in the New Year from the woman’s apartment block knowing that it would be our last in Singapore. The travel bug that brought us to Southeast Asia had gripped us again and we were now ready to head down under because we were convinced that we really needed to spend some time in a country that offered “roo poo”, several of the world’s most venomous snakes and Steve Irwin. The year 2006 marked our tenth here and it seemed appropriate to move on after enjoying an unforgettable decade in Singapore. That in itself was a remarkable achievement considering I only came to this sunny island for a Christmas holiday.

On 20 November 1996, I set foot on Singaporean soil for the first time. My reasons for visiting were extremely honourable: I wanted to see an exotic world beyond the red-bricked, monotonous council houses of Dagenham, England, and, more pertinently, my dear Singaporean friend David had offered free accommodation. I arrived with my old mate Scott, an architecture graduate from Yorkshire, ready to conquer the country. He planned to contribute to the soaring skyline around Raffles Place and I would ... Well, I would think of something.

Unfortunately, I did not. Scott received two tentative job offers within a fortnight. I, on the other hand, received lots of curt advice.

“I see you’ve got a good degree,” one stockbroker said during a very brief interview at her swanky Robinson Road office. “But what can you offer *us*? What can you actually *do* in Singapore?”

And the truth was, not a lot. A six-month stint at a London stockbroking firm got me that interview, but my degree was in history. That proved to be about as useful as a Singaporean concert pianist living in London. My chances of succeeding in this country were only marginally better than the political opposition. As we sat in the flat that belonged to David’s family in Lorong 8 Toa Payoh, Scott tried to be upbeat.

“You’ll get a job here, Neil. The economy’s booming,” he said encouragingly, while trying to batter a feisty gecko with a packet of curry noodles.

“Yeah, in bloody electronics, engineering and construction. What do they need me for? My degree is in modern history. The job market isn’t looking for someone to tell them who won the Crimean War.”

I found the irony deeply depressing. The Singaporean economy reached its ceiling in late 1996 as Toa Payoh residents waited greedily for their five-roomed flats to hit the half a million mark. Teenagers had never experienced a recession, no one had heard of SARS and the phrase “Asian Currency Crisis” sounded like a bizarre oxymoron. Newspapers even reported the phenomenon of negative unemployment. In some sectors of the economy, there were more jobs than people.

Imagine that.

And I still could not get a bloody job.

Imagine that.

But Singapore was a different country then, in every sense. The pound cost only S\$2.20, which meant a 50p bag of chips in England set me back just over a dollar. Today, every pound is almost 80 cents more expensive. And that bag of chips now costs Londoners £1. When I used to say I was from London, Singaporeans occasionally replied, “Ah, Nick Leeson.” Now, they say, “Wah, so expensive.”

In 1996, Singaporeans bought pirated VHS tapes from the Malaysian town of Johor Bahru on the other side of the Causeway for \$10 and hid them in their golf bags and glove compartments on the drive back. Today, Singaporeans buy DVDs for \$5 each and have them delivered to their homes. Failing that, a Chinese auntie turns up once a month to sell them from a rucksack, in an office broom cupboard. On the big screen in 1996, cinemas were showing some awful, low-budget film called *Army Daze*, which had grown men wetting themselves with laughter in auditoriums across the country. Not familiar with Singlish or local culture, I thought it was a terrible film. Now familiar with Singlish and local culture, I still think it is a terrible film.

On our first weekend here, Scott and I tried to find out the latest English Premiership scores, but there were no live matches. Indeed, English-language television appeared to be preoccupied with showing reruns of *Mr Bean*. Thank God that does not happen anymore. In the end, we found the BBC World Service on a crackling old radio in the apartment and sat on the floor in our sweaty boxer shorts waiting for intermittent sports updates. Today, you cannot flick through Singapore’s cable channels without finding a washed-up English footballer spouting meaningless clichés to bored Asian audiences.

On the other hand, locally produced English programmes were at the peak of their popularity then, with *Under One Roof* and *Growing Up* regarded as must-see TV, even

for foreigners like myself. The first was a comedy about a local family who spent most of their time arguing in a living room. The latter was a period drama about a local family who spent most of their time arguing in a living room. Both programmes are no longer on the air and Singaporeans now gather to watch a comedy about a building contractor named Phua Chu Kang, who wears yellow wellington boots, shouts at everybody in Singlish and picks his nose with a long fingernail. Oh, he is such a hoot.

Singlish was a bit of a mystery then, too. My initial inability to understand the nuances of the local dialect painted a terrifying picture of how children were disciplined here. In England, naughty children were “told off” by their parents. In Singapore, they were “scalded” by their parents. The Asian emphasis upon the hierarchical extended family is well-known, but chasing little Harry around the living room with a hot iron because he admonished the maid seemed a tad excessive. I soon discovered, of course, that Singaporeans were not saying “scalded”, but “scolded”, a quaint verb, last uttered in Britain by Queen Victoria in 1847 when she “scolded” Prince Albert for admonishing the maid.

The intricacies of Singlish were as confusing as they were entertaining. I was alarmed by how comfortable local men were discussing their reproductive organ. I can vividly recall David saying, “That guy likes to talk cock.” Does he now? The dirty old bastard. And I thought Singapore was a conservative society. Growing up in England, friends would discuss their erratic bowel movements before they would ever tackle the subject of their tackle. But everyone “talks cock” in Singapore now. There is a website devoted to that very pastime. There was even a movie, unoriginally called *Talking Cock, The Movie*, which I shamelessly mention only because I played Singapore’s founder Sir Stamford Raffles in the opening scene.

Other than its residents’ desire to still talk cock, little else remains from the Toa Payoh of 1996. My adopted hometown, one of Singapore’s oldest and proudest estates, was transformed in the ensuing decade. The hawker centre where I had ginger beef in oyster sauce on my first night was knocked down, along with the old bus interchange. Apartment blocks were upgraded and painted several times, new parks and gardens were landscaped and new public facilities were opened. The shops where I bought my first mobile phone, CD, VCD, DVD, badminton racquet, tennis racquet, polo shirt and some ill-fitting underpants all came and went. In Dagenham, my former hometown in England, a new shop could stop the traffic.

Even the swanky, 40-storey apartment block where my wife and I missed the firework display did not exist in 1996. Toa Payoh, like Singapore, is a different world now.

And I planned to explore that world one more time before I left. I did not want to say goodbye to a country standing beside a rubbish chute filled with dirty Pampers, staring up at an empty sky. Where is the fun in that? No, Australia could wait. I wanted to see Singapore as I had first seen the country 10 years ago: on foot and unaware. I would venture to places I knew well, places I was vaguely familiar with and places I had never heard of. I would embark upon a farewell tour of an island I fell in love with a decade ago when I called my mother and said, “Singapore’s all right, I suppose. But I’ll probably be back in England within three months.”



CHAPTER 1

Singapore was laid out on the map before me. The north offered Woodlands, the gateway to Malaysia and beyond, and Kranji, home to the only wild crocodiles left on the island. The west promised the Chinese Garden, where I make an annual pilgrimage on my birthday. The south boasted a vomiting lion-fish and the east had Fairy Point. Fairy Point? That caused a double take. I had never heard of the place and certainly did not know that there was a designated area for fairies tucked away in the northeastern corner of Changi. That was definitely on the must-see list.

So I closed the door behind me, took a deep breath and spent a few days walking around Toa Payoh. You do not want to overexert yourself on these things. My trip needed the royal stamp of approval as I intended to follow in the footsteps of my queen. In 1972, Queen Elizabeth II, her hubby Big Phil and daughter Anne visited Toa Payoh and toured the blocks of 53 and 54 in Lorong 5 and I thought that exact location would make an appropriate starting point. Not because I am a royalist, but because it is only a 10-minute walk from my apartment.

On the way, however, I was sidetracked by the biggest pair of pink knickers I had seen since my grandmother used to perform the cancan in her living room. I ambled past Block 99A and there they were in all their hypnotic glory. They caught my eye because they were one of three equally roomy, and equally pink, pairs, and they were not pegged to a bamboo pole, the traditional platform for breezy knickers, but hanging beneath a window. It was a cunning method because that side of the apartment block enjoyed direct sunlight. Every time the clouds parted, the pink frillies glowed, like a scene from the old TV programme *Highway to Heaven*. God obviously likes pink knickers.

Those glowing knickers brought my attention back to Queen Elizabeth II and her visit to the Big Swamp. In Chinese, *Toa* means “big” and *Payoh* is the Malay word for “swamp”. So the royal family popped by the Big Swamp. Marvellous. Apparently, there had been a number of letters to *The Straits Times* in the 1960s and 1970s demanding that such an uncouth name be changed to something more tasteful (and snobbish) like Orchid Avenue. Fortunately, common sense prevailed.

Toa Payoh was built on swampy ground and it was the largest housing estate in Singapore (rather like my native hometown of Dagenham curiously enough, which was once the biggest municipal housing estate on the planet and was built on Essex marshland beside the River Thames to the east of London), hence the name. The Big Swamp is both relevant and unique. Orchid Avenue belongs on a Monopoly board.

As I stood in front of Block 53, it was obvious why those wily government chaps of

the People's Action Party (PAP) had picked this particular block for the queen's inspection. It provided a microcosm not only of Toa Payoh, but of Singapore's public housing in general, encapsulating the success of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in sweeping away the decaying kampongs and creating a modern, urban metropolis in their place. Attempts to re-ignite the kampong spirit of community were evident at every turn. The block boasted an amphitheatre for grassroots events, a street soccer pitch, a basketball court, a decent playground, three barbecue pits (all numbered, naturally) and a fitness corner with pull-up bars, parallel bars and monkey bars.

The fitness corners are reasonably popular with the elderly across the country, but I have always viewed them as a touch Orwellian: a healthy nation is a fit nation is a happy nation and all that nonsense. But my cynicism probably was not helped by my attempt to try one pull-up. The blood rushed to my head, I felt faint and someone in a flat above giggled.

Block 53 had also been painted since I had last seen it. More aesthetically pleasing shades of peach, orange and white replaced the dark greens, blues and purples I recall of Toa Payoh when I first arrived. Indeed, gentler, more soothing pastel colours appear to have covered the harsh primary-coloured blocks that were once eyesores around the country and HDB deserves credit for that. There are also fewer blocks with their number painted down the side. I apologise if you happen to live in one of those apartment blocks, but they remind me of kindergarten drawings when a child paints "No. 15, Mummy and Daddy's House, Singapore, Asia, the Earth, the Universe" in the middle of it.

What were the town planners thinking? I think they were pissed. Sitting around the plans after a hearty lunch and a few Tigers in the midday sun, someone probably slurred, "We should paint the block numbers 50 feet high, in bright red paint, down the side of each block."

"Er, why?"

"Because red's a lucky colour."

"Yeah, but won't it be a bit dazzling for residents and passers-by, like the pilots of a commercial flight for instance?"

"Nah, it's perfect. Think about when you're pissed and you can't remember exactly where you live. You'll be able to tell the taxi driver to look out for a 50-foot-high block number ... Don't spill your beer on the plans."

Block 53 had a viewing gallery at the top when it was first opened to enable residents and visitors to watch Toa Payoh (and the other HDB estates in nearby Ang Mo Kio and Bishan) slowly rise up around them. There was no cable television in those days.

I was heading for the lift of Block 53 when a voice beckoned.

"Hey, you okay? You look lost?" A middle-aged Chinese chap, holding a bag of shopping, stood beside me, eyeing my notepad with a benign mixture of curiosity and concern.

"No, no. I'm an author. I mean, a writer. You know, a journalist."

My hang-ups have always made it ridiculously difficult for me to explain what I pretend to do for a living. An author is something well-spoken children from English counties like Berkshire or Hampshire say they want to be when they grow up and no

one in their family laughs. A writer is what teenagers assume they are when they have written four angst-ridden poems as a woefully inadequate substitute for sex. And a journalist is someone who stands bravely in front of a toppling statue of a murderous tyrant in Baghdad, explaining how much the locals appreciate a good, strong Bush. I, on the other hand, stood in Toa Payoh with a lovely man who was holding a bag full of Maggi noodles.

“So what are you doing here?” he asked warily.

“Well, I heard that the British queen once visited here back in 1972.”

“Yah, yah, the queen come here. She come to my block,” he said excitedly.

“And did you get to meet her?”

“No, I was out.”

I thought that was marvellous. Britain’s monarch, the queen of the Commonwealth and the former figurehead of the old empire, popped by for a glass of 7-Up and Mr Maggi Mee was out.

“No, no. I mean, I was out of Toa Payoh,” he corrected me. “I moved here later but my friends still remember her coming here.”

Like many of the town’s residents, Mr Maggi Mee was proud to live in Toa Payoh. He had lived in the block for many years, worked hard, put his son through a decent education and spoke with tremendous pride when detailing the academic record of his son, who taught at one of the country’s finest schools. It is a familiar story in Toa Payoh. The once working-class town (many of the residents now fall into the lower middle-class bracket) bears many similarities with Dagenham, with one major difference. A child’s education takes precedence over everything else, as Mr Maggi Mee pointed out: “You got children? ... No? ... When you do, make them study hard. When your son makes you proud, it’s the best. When your son is an idiot, it’s the worst. Don’t have a ‘half-past-six’ son.”

I adore that expression. A popular, and unique, Singlish turn of phrase, it loosely means “incompetent” or “screwed up”, but “half-past-six” is much more creative. Its origin is supposedly sexual and refers to the angle of the penis. Naturally, half-past-six is droopy, while midnight is impressive. Quarter-past-three needs urgent medical attention.

“No, lah,” Mr Maggi Mee continued. “Half-past-six son no good. Don’t want one who smokes, drinks or takes the ganja and that white powder. What’s it called?”

“Cocaine?”

“No, not that one. The other white powder. Heroin! That’s it. Don’t take that white powder heroin.”

He sounded like a government health campaign. I only asked if he had met the queen. But I shook his hand and said goodbye, promising not to have a half-past-six son, before heading up to the 19th and top floor. Those Singaporean urban planners of the 1960s were rather clever chaps, weren’t they? Toa Payoh lies pretty much in the middle of the diamond-shaped country, the municipal jewel in the centre. And Block 53 finds itself at the heart of the Big Swamp and provided both the perfect location for a royal visit and a viewing gallery.

The queen is still going strong, but the same cannot be said about the viewing gallery. I sneakily climbed a stairwell that was clearly off-limits on the 19th floor, only to find a door locked with the biggest padlock this side of Changi Prison. This happens

a lot here. The government builds something, then does not fully trust its populace to use it properly.

Even from the 19th floor, however, the view was spectacular. Providing almost complete and unblocked 360-degree panoramic views of the entire country, this was not an arresting vista. It was an IMAX experience. Seu Teck Sean Tong, the bright, exotic Buddhist temple of Toa Payoh, was below me, a building that has long provided an imperious entrance to Toa Payoh for those travelling in from the north, via Braddell Road. And spotting the housing estates of Ang Mo Kio and Bishan a little further north was easy enough. Walking around the corridor, I picked out the skyline of Raffles Place in the south, two of the floodlights of the National Stadium in the east and the green summit of Bukit Timah in the west before returning to my original vantage point, which was wedged between two plant pots that belonged to a resident whom I hoped would not pick that particular moment to water her miniature botanic garden. The clouds cleared a little and I spotted what could only be the Malaysian coastline of Johor. Hazy, a little blurred but clearly too distant, and too green, to be Singapore, Malaysian land was clearly ahoy beyond Selat Johor (the Johor Straits).

Pleased with my powers of observation, I left a happy man, albeit a slightly hurried one because one or two heads had begun to pop through the grilles of their front doors. Nevertheless, it was well worth the uneasy stares. While the coach parties and the backpackers hand over a small fortune for their minimum-charge drinks at plush rooftop bars and restaurants around Orchard Road and City Hall, similar views are free in Toa Payoh. But then, more tourists should come here anyway.

Although Queenstown came first, Toa Payoh was the first complete estate in Singapore. It is the HDB's crowning glory with polished gems on every corner. With the kampongs being bulldozed by the day, town planners built Singapore's "Dagenham" on the Big Swamp, throwing up homes for 200,000 people, one tenth of the entire country's population at that time. Missing the communal collectivism of the kampongs, not everyone was pleased to be moving to a concrete block, so developers moved quickly. Toa Payoh soon had everything: shopping centres, schools, clinics, a fine public swimming pool, sports halls and community centres, a cinema, gardens, playgrounds, a town park, hawker centres and a sports stadium. All of which were valiant attempts to foster a sense of community and belonging in a new, alien environment.

Over 90 years after the London County Council first conceived the housing estate where I would eventually be raised, Dagenham is still suffering from the short-sightedness of its architects. Social amenities and facilities never kept pace with the bricklayers throwing up the houses and my old estate increasingly resembles a ghost town, with boarded-up shops covered in graffiti and "to let" signs dotted around an estate that is in desperate need of some regeneration.

Toa Payoh has not made that mistake. As a social experiment, it was nigh on flawless. Singapore's public housing policy is undoubtedly one of its greatest success stories, epitomised by my adopted home. The oldest satellite town now looks like one of the newest, having had an extreme makeover in recent years. Boasting a new shopping hub and the country's only entirely air-conditioned bus interchange, Toa Payoh has upgraded just about everything since I first arrived, namely the apartment blocks, the swimming pool, the cinema, the central community centre, the schools, the

public library, the food courts and the town garden. Everything. Like many other housing estates across Singapore, nothing is permitted to stand still in Toa Payoh. There are even two private condominiums in the area now, which means other *ang mohs* are encroaching upon my Toa Payoh turf. Apparently, they kept coming across books and newspaper columns that told them what a great place it was.

Even the queen thinks so. In 2006, she returned to Toa Payoh to revisit the same family she enjoyed a 7-Up with all those years ago. The family still lived in Toa Payoh but had moved to a newer block. I hear that the queen still lives in the same house and that it is getting on a bit. But Her Majesty cannot seem to get enough of this place and who can blame her?

As I wandered along Toa Payoh's Lorong 5, I was reminded, yet again, how grateful I am that my dear friend David was not only Singaporean, but also lived in Toa Payoh. I recalled his kind invitation to visit his homeland as we sat in our room in Grosvenor Place, one of the better halls of residence for Manchester University students, while it inevitably pissed down outside. Scott and I were initially apprehensive. Scott was not sure if he would get work as an architect in such a competitive industry. I was undecided if I wanted to live in China.

If our Singapore story had begun in Yishun or Bedok it might have been equally exotic, but Toa Payoh became our first home. And the Big Swamp proved to be my only home for a decade. If it was good enough for the queen—twice—it was good enough for me. Extremely pleased with that thought, I headed over to the Lorong 8 hawker centre. I was hungry and it was getting late. It was almost half past six.

CHAPTER 2

It is not often that you are greeted by the sight of six arseholes. But there they were. Six photographs each depicting a pair of buttocks being pulled apart by a pair of hands.

Of course, these bottoms were no ordinary bottoms. Oh no. These bottoms suffered from acute piles. I am not a doctor, or any kind of anal specialist for that matter, but when the hands are pulling the cheeks so far apart that an MRT train could pass through, it is fairly obvious what is wrong. The photographs were mounted proudly on a sizeable piece of bright yellow card, which rested on an easel. On the off chance that the passer-by somehow missed the sore sphincters on display, a couple of colourful arrows had been drawn on the card with a disturbingly energetic marker pen to capture your attention. It was surreal. I had not seen so many arseholes in one place since a gang of drug addicts mugged me in a Dagenham park in 1996.

But this home-made board of bums was not pinned up on a wall of a doctor's surgery, but at a *pasar malam*, a night market, where I usually enjoyed a cup of sweetcorn. I threw the sweetcorn straight into the dustbin and cut out the middleman. The stall full of bottoms sold some ridiculous cream that promised to cure all of the terrifying ailments depicted in the gory photographs. Surprisingly, the remedy for piles sat proudly beside a stall selling pineapple tarts, the sausage-shaped ones, which looked remarkably similar to some of the symptoms displayed in the photographs. Not surprisingly, sales appeared slower than usual at the pineapple tart stall.

I had two queries regarding the piles cream. First, how brave do you have to be to approach the stall owner? Surely, pointing to one of the bottoms on the menu and saying "I've got that one there. How?" was not an option. Second, and more important, who were the lunatics who agreed to pose as the models? That is surely not a photo shoot to put on your résumé.

Obese people are often willing to pose for "before" and "after" shots for slimming campaigns, but would you get your arse out for a "before" and "after" piles campaign? The photographer must have barked out some bizarre requests at the shoot. "A little more to the left, that's it ... More cheek darling, more cheek ... Push them together, now pull them apart ... Beautiful, baby, beautiful. That's a wrap ... Fancy a cup of sweetcorn?" I can only hope the hands that pulled the cheeks apart in each photograph belonged to the owner of the bottom.

Pasar malams are fabulous though, aren't they? The night markets are one of the highlights of living in Singapore and I cannot comprehend why the Singapore Tourism Board does not do more to woo tourists away from Chinatown and Little India and

send them into the unique world of *pasar malams* around the HDB estates. Whenever I am preparing for a trip back to England, the following text message goes out to everyone I know: “Is a *pasar malam* in your town? Need fake branded purses and bags for mum and sister.” At *pasar malams*, I have seen handbags manufactured by “Pradha”, “Pada” and occasionally even “Prada”, which only adds to the fun.

Street markets have fascinated me ever since my mother dragged me around the Dagenham Sunday Market every, well, Sunday. I only went along because she always promised to buy me a “Dagenham Dog”, which was an enormous hotdog with greasy onions. When I got older, a “Dagenham Dog” ended up meaning something else entirely. But they were still just as greasy. On this occasion, the *pasar malam* was one of the larger ones that visit Toa Payoh Central just before Chinese New Year and occupied the space around the amphitheatre.

Selling everything from mobile phone covers and screwdrivers to pyjamas and cream for piles, *pasar malams* exude a warmth and cosiness rarely surpassed anywhere else on the island. My wife has followed the travelling markets all over the country, always checking with the stall owners where their next port of call will be. The byword of any *pasar malam* is cheap and their appeal is universal. Children look at the toys (including the first fake Monopoly board game I had ever seen), teenagers buy the latest CDs and jeans (both inexpensive and of dubious origin), women go for the purses and handbags (Gucci and his brothers “Guci” and “Gucii”), men hover around the DIY stalls and I buy Malaysia’s finest Ramly burgers.

The *pasar malam* was beside the Toa Payoh Community Library, which I popped into because it has the coolest air-conditioning and I needed to use the toilet after the Ramly burger. During my first year in Singapore, the library (which opened in 1974, the same year I was born) became something of a second home. Just before Christmas in 1996, my future wife joined me in Singapore and we rented a room from a tyrannical Indian landlady, who had a penchant for removing her clothes and baring her boobs to the world on laundry day. Her massive breasts could plug a sink. And as she leant over to do her washing, they almost did. So we were desperate to get out of the flat of the world’s oldest glamour model as often as possible.

My wife has always loved public libraries while a lovely lady called Juliet McCully had decided to give me a job at her speech and drama school on the proviso that I hit the textbooks and attained the relevant teaching diploma. So we spent many happy evenings together in the Toa Payoh Community Library.

Singapore really does boast one of the greatest public library systems in the world and, more impressively, the library is still considered a viable place to hang out by children and teenagers here. In contrast, libraries in Dagenham are frequented by senior citizens who borrow books about steam engines and Tupperware. At the age of four, I was thrown into the nearest library by my mother and ordered to read more. I subsequently spent many happy years at that library, looking up rude words in all the dictionaries and finding illicit passages detailing hot steamy sex in the romance novels. When I returned to Dagenham a couple of years ago, my old library resembled a prison. It was surrounded by high perimeter fencing topped off with ferocious-looking spikes to prevent climbing. The library itself had shrunk; there were fewer books available to take out thanks to a reduction in local government funding. Working-class children need well-stocked municipal libraries and parents must force

them, at gunpoint if necessary, to use them regularly. The public library is more than a source of entertainment; it is an escape route. Singaporeans should never take their magnificent library service for granted.

After rearranging my books in the Singapore section, I left the library and walked back through the first L-shaped shopping centre built here in the 1960s. With Chinese New Year approaching, the festive lights were coming on and the streets of Toa Payoh were packed with families. The relaxed mood is always convivial for shopping in the evenings. At dusk, the humidity relents a little and I often sit on one of the many benches the town council kindly provides as my wife dashes from one shoe shop to another. She is no Imelda Marcos; she just gets rather excited when she spots shoes going for less than \$5, something that seems to happen quite a lot in Toa Payoh. Why are tourists not flocking to this place?

The atmosphere is quite wonderful. Apart from an overriding sense of safety and security, there is always a communal feel to shopping in Toa Payoh. Customers and shop owners know each other and chat. Uncles sell ice cream or hot chestnuts from their bicycles. Aunties read palms for a few bucks and tell strangers their fortunes. Mothers stop in the packed street to gossip while their children play or browse around the toy shops. The mothers never have to worry where their children are. It is Pleasantville, Singapore-style, and it still exists in the 21st century. I see it every night in Toa Payoh.

This scene was repeated at Heathway, the nearest shopping parade to my Dagenham home, when I was young. I knew the butcher, the baker, the greengrocer and the fish and chip shop owner because my mother sent me on regular errands to all four. Alas, there was not a candlestick maker. Today, however, Dagenham children are thrown into the car, buckled to the backseat and driven to a nondescript, all-under-one-roof shopping monstrosity on the outskirts of town. It is a dull, retail behemoth where greasy teenagers earn £5 an hour to tell you that the product you want does not fall within their area of expertise so could you kindly get lost because a senior citizen has fallen into the cornflakes' display. Britain's concrete car parks and shopping blocks are uniform, impersonal and repetitive, but they are cheaper than neighbourhood shops and an inevitable consequence of globalisation, apparently.

If you want to sample that future of shopping in Toa Payoh, step away from the family-run businesses around the older parade and head for the ultra-modern HDB Hub. Opened in June 2002 at the costing of over \$380 million, the Hub has a shopping centre and a 33-storey office tower that now overshadows, literally and metaphorically, the neighbouring older mall.

It did bring about 5,000 office workers to the town centre, but they work mostly at the bland HDB headquarters, a skyscraping eyesore that towers above Toa Payoh. And yet its image is wiped from your memory as soon as you have passed it. It may have cost over \$380 million but it is instantly forgettable. Whichever way you look at it, that is quite an achievement. Of course, you will find everything you could possibly need for a healthy, balanced lifestyle there: a McDonald's, a Burger King, a Coffee Bean, a Mos Burger and a Kodak photo-developing shop. The trouble is, they are everywhere else too. Eventually, a shopping trip in Toa Payoh will be about as gripping as a shopping trip in Dagenham because the shops will be exactly the same.

Before it got too dark, I bought some *ikan bilis* (dried anchovies) and gladly left the

Hub hordes to have a quick peek around Toa Payoh Town Park. Although small and across the road from the choking fumes of the bus interchange, this green spot has always been a pleasant diversion with its stone bridges that surround its centrepiece—a 0.8-hectare carp pond that is also filled with turtles. When Scott and I first arrived, we often spent weekends at the park feeding the turtles after a Chinese uncle showed us how it was done. Okay, it was hardly a trip to Disneyland but we had not been in the country long and needed an afternoon attraction that cost less than \$2.

It started to drizzle as I peered into the pond but several plump turtles popped their heads out of the murky water and, in my eagerness to feed them, I inadvertently almost knocked their heads back into their shells with a handful of dead anchovies. At that moment, two urchins appeared from nowhere, looking like they had stepped out of a Charles Dickens novel and into Toa Payoh. The older Malay boy, about 11 years old and clearly the brains of the operation, pushed a bicycle along the edge of the pond while his younger brother, a tubby lad of about 7, leant over the water's edge and dropped in a toy boat. Then he began slapping the boat on the surface of the pond. All that frenzied thrashing caused the turtles to disappear.

“What are you doing, boys?” I asked, a tad annoyed.

“Fishing, lah,” said the tubby one, flashing a cheeky grin.

“Why are you banging that boat against the water?”

“So the fish will come over and see what I'm doing.” The logic was flawed but he was serious about the job at hand.

“If the fish do come, how will you catch them?” I enquired.

“With my hands, loh.” His contemptuous look suggested I had just asked the stupidest question he had ever heard.

“Do you think you'll need a fishing rod?”

“No need, lah. Aiyoh, just grab them.”

And he continued to thrash the boat around in the water like a deranged munchkin while his older brother shouted words of encouragement. Bidding a fond farewell to my fisherboy friends, I had a quick look at one of the strangest buildings in Singapore. Okay, one of the ugliest.

The Toa Payoh Viewing Tower stands at the end of the town garden and looks down upon the town centre. Built in the 1970s to complement the garden, the vertical tower stands at a height of 27 metres. It has a light green exterior with a dark green spiral staircase running through the middle. The top of the cylindrical building juts out on one side, something architects usually call a feature. This means, of course, that the “iconic” tower resembles a giant penis, complete with bulbous foreskin at its summit. Being green merely underscores its aesthetic shortcomings, suggesting that the penis has recently caught a venereal disease of some unsavoury description.

As part of the town park's recent upgrading, the tower was repainted and given a little moat with cute fountains spouting muddy water. There was even a small path leading up to the entrance of the tower, which was blocked by a green grille. Naturally. When are the authorities going to learn to trust their own people? For whatever reason, the viewing gallery over at Block 53 was locked, the empty shell of what used to be a restaurant overlooking the carp pond was locked (even though the second storey provides pleasant views of the park) and the Toa Payoh Tower was locked. The message was clear: Look but do not touch because you cannot be trusted. That is how

you speak to highly-strung grandchildren.

When I came to Singapore, the tower was still open and I climbed to the top to get a bird's eye view of Toa Payoh. There were used condoms all over the floor. Many couples once took their wedding photographs in Toa Payoh Town Garden. Even more couples used to have sex at the top of its tower. Combining two significant erections at least gave the tower a purpose. It is no coincidence that the government's preoccupation with falling birth rates has intensified since the town council closed the Toa Payoh Viewing Tower. To the people in power, might I make a humble suggestion: Reopen the green penis and the townsfolk will gladly shag for Singapore once again.