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Becoming a veteran ‘Waffler’

I had stumbled on *Waffles* - the best backpacker’s in Singapore – and after a few weeks graduated to a room with a scenic view of Bugis Mall. The place was a comfort zone after a hot day’s work, and the long-stay inmates became my family. They belonged to one of two clans: teachers or deep-sea divers. Each night teachers swapped stories of classroom mayhem, while divers weighed in with near escapes from the deep; always with their early-model mobiles close by, waiting for the call out, to some distant oil rig.

The post I landed at Central Training College (CTC) was tough. It was based on the thirteenth floor, above a somewhat dilapidated mall on Orchard Road, Singapore’s shopping paradise. I would either teach there, or at another school a short, sweaty walk away, then sometimes further afield, on location, in other office or shopping mall complexes. I taught all ages and lived by my wits, learning to some extent – and unbeknown to my employers - on the job.

In any one day my assigned work could range from kindergarten aged kids through school group classes, up to mature - and often very bored - wives of itinerant Asian businessmen. 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.

Waffles homestay was set above a 24-hour Indian eatery, the entrance being via a wooden flight of stairs, through the café, to the rear. From our kitchen and balcony-style dining area up above, it was possible to look down over the kitchen, onto an endless commotion of clattering metal dishes and animated talk from dark-haired Indian males. At times various assorted *Wafflers*, including me, would listen and look on in glee, as the tempo of argument between cooks and bottle-washers rose to a crescendo. As far as we knew no-one was ever murdered, but we waited in anticipation for the day when it might come to pass!

I loved to dine below on a dish known as *Roti-Canai*, not only because this chicken-based soup-curry and chappati-style bread was a glorious little feast, but also because it was incredibly cheap. For a recently arrived nomadic worker it was just about the best value in the universe and I liked nothing better in the early evening, than to sit at a table under the pillared veranda, eating this scrumptious soup, followed by a mug of Indian chai. After a hard day battling with pronouns and prepositions this was my relaxation time: watching and listening as people rushed home from the office and the big red, double-deckers pulled up to drop and pick commuters. What more could one want ... food, drink and entertainment all for about one dollar! Simply amazing!

In time, the job of running *Waffles* passed from Kim and Conrad to Angela and Malik, who brought with them a more relaxed style, which extended to regular parties at

various hawker centres around town, for us *long stayers*. Always, at these events the cost of beer overshadowed payments for food, even though we ate the finest of hawker fare. Each round might include eight or ten cans of beer, and with the high price of the amber juice in Singapore, this translated to a tidy sum for the one whose turn it was to pay. There were many small, outdoor eateries available, but our favourite was Newton Circus (pictured above), a few stations away on the *MRT* (the city's metro system). It was one massive food-fest with the widest range of eats - Chinese, Malay and Indian - and especially atmospheric in the early evening light.

Singapore proved to me that any destination is what you make it, and that place and circumstance can be a potent mix. That sterile, westernised Asian city, which many often see, was to my mind an enthralling place displaying a host of different characters and moods. *Waffles* was my hide-away where a range of friendships flourished, with mostly younger people. To them it was not age, but who you were and what you were doing, that was more important. Their outgoing attitude helped me enormously, to cope.

Living and working in Singapore turned out to be a two-edged sword: a rewarding experience, tinged with some serious thought about development and what it can bring. Before, I had flitted in and out, on route to or from Australia; but staying there gave a whole new meaning to the place. I remember being with a local Chinese youth discussing the underbelly of Singaporean life, which included poor pay and police harassment: an encounter unlikely to happen for a tourist.

I had worked on and off in India and Bangladesh - prior to this three-month long foray into South East Asia - and to some extent Singapore left me feeling guilty, for turning away from that real *grassroots* Asia, towards this more sanitized and highly developed island-city. Yet hidden behind the glitter, Singapore too has many problems. Probably because of its Chinese heritage, Singapore has developed more rapidly than most, but at the expense of what? Its own very unique multicultural history and heritage perhaps!

Just before leaving - and much to my amazement - I was offered a position as manager at one of CTC's schools. At the time I was committed to returning to the UK, but I have often wondered since then, what might have been, had I accepted.

A friendship recalled

Whilst there, I struck up a particularly close friendship with a young German woman named Miriam – perhaps the longest of the *stayers* at Waffles - and on days or evenings off, we would travel here and there: picnics in the park, Sentosa Island, evenings at the movies; it was all great fun. We were light years apart in age and quite some distance away in pursuits: she was a professional diver, while I could hardly swim! Yet somehow our characters matched. But it was very much a platonic relationship; the nearest I got to any raw emotion with Miriam was a brief goodbye kiss at Changi airport, as she left - customarily attired in black beret - for scuba-diving in Sulawesi. A few years later I wrote a poem about our friendship, which poses the question: What if?

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 couldn't see how close they had come
Till looking back through time,
From afar:
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.*

Written after leaving Singapore, 1996

A week from a Waffler's diary:

Sunday. Talking earlier with Malik (the Waffles manager) about a massive sculpture he was planning to make for City Hall. He has ambitions this guy (even though he is illegal here). Later with a semi-permanent resident from Thailand, accompanied by a million mosquitoes: par for the course at Waffles. Looking over the balcony rail, down into the kitchen of the 24/7 eatery below, we are both suddenly distracted by a resounding clatter of pots and pans, then one guy screaming at another in a high-pitched Hindi tongue. My new Thai friend smiles at me and we go back to our conversation on the merits of Singapore ... versus Bangkok.

Monday. Free for the day until class at five. Outdoor café near Chinatown. I ordered an English-style cup of tea. Must be homesick; hot tea does not go with this climate ... makes me perspire! The café reminds me of *Lodge Hotel*, a spot in KL that I adored a few years before: low profile and colonial style, surrounded by modern glass towers that reach the clouds. "*How long before this one suffers the wrecking ball?*" I ask myself. It rained heavily in the night. So today is relatively cool ... which perhaps explains the tea.

Tuesday. Sight-seeing up front on a red (London-style) double-decker. Rolling view of the sights on the way home from work. Viewed from the air-con of the bus, Orchard Road is not unlike Oxford Street: countless shops; even more countless people thronging the walkways, weighed down with designer-labelled bags. Back at base, I sit at a small table outside the Indian, with iced tea. Malik comes by with a big box of supplies and stops for a while to discuss his plans for the City Hall sculpture. I am struggling to decide if he is actually serious about this, or slightly deluded.

Wednesday. Brilliant night with Miriam (a young, blonde lady from Germany, who has been the resident cleaner at Waffles for longer than she wants to remember). An hour or so after dusk we walked down North Bridge Road, past Raffles, to see the Singapore Symphony Orchestra playing Mozart and Vivaldi. Classical music in Asia? I never even thought about this before. On the return journey we stopped at *Raffles Long Bar* for an ice-cold *Singapore Sling*, surrounded by a sea of peanut shells! An amazing evening: wonderful music and fantastic company!

Thursday. Early evening. I sit at a table on the sidewalk, outside the Indian café, enjoying my customary one-dollar *Roti Canai*, washed down with a spicy *chai*, followed by an after-work cigarette. People rushing for the buses, which constantly come and go, gliding in, then powering away. Later, I had planned to eat out in the relative cool of evening. Spoilt for choice, I can wander in any direction from *Waffles*. Often it's Bugis - across the road - where there's an array of foods and prices are good. Tonight I fancied *Woodlands*, in Little India. I sampled their Mumbai wares a few years back and wanted to see how Singapore compares. It was great ... and remarkably similar.

Friday. About ten of us decided to eat out at Newton Circus, a few stops away on the train. We're half and half, teachers and divers. I am relatively new, but those who've been here longer know the stalls that serve the most exotic dishes. Satay and popiah starters are amazing. Chilli crab as a main is quite something too! With the glow of lights all around and constant hubbub, the ambience is unbelievable. Then there is the downside ... when it's my turn to buy, I have to shell out over \$30 for beer!!

Saturday. Morning at work, but otherwise free. On the spur, decided to go with Miriam to visit *Pilau Ubin*, a tiny island off the coast of Singapore. A short ferry ride across the water, then we hire bikes to cycle the island. Like visiting the real Asia, on the back doorstep of Singapore. Hot and steamy. No cars and lots of green. Small thatched homes and roadside stalls with affordable fruits. We stopped for a cooling beer at a cute little bar ... with no customers. Great to get away from the glitz and glamour for one day.

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