The Carpenter's Shophouse
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From zero to hero, Papa has been the strongest man I have ever known and during my darkest moments, he is my caregiver, listening ear, adviser, teacher and a verbal discipline master. He has instilled in me righteous moral values to live by daily. He lets me experience life by learning through trials and errors. I want to thank my Daddy God in Heaven for blessing me with such a wonderful Papa. I am dedicating this memoir to Papa to leave a legacy for him. In future, I hope to pay it forward by blessing lives and delighting hearts.

The Carpenter's Shophouse

116 01-69 1438 may seem just like a set of numbers to you. To me, they are almost as important as my birth coordinates. Not exactly the same thing, but close enough. The place where I grew up in, the familiar neighbourhood with all the familiar faces and food—all these have been so deeply etched in my heart that it seems I have never moved away at all.

My father's shophouse was located at Block 116, Aljunied Avenue 2, #01-69, Singapore 1438. Papa, a self-made carpenter, had chosen to start his career from scratch in order to raise our family. Founded in 1977, my father's company, Hong Yee Trading Co., a furniture shop, was named after him. 鸿艺贸易公司 signified 'the Art of Hong' because he valued carpentry as a work of art. He was not educated but he picked up the craft by learning from others. As I spent more time with Papa in the later years, he recounted story after story which clearly reflected his moral values and principles in life. All these have made a big impact in my life as I followed his footsteps and became an entrepreneur at the age of 23. His perseverance and diligence totally earned my respect.

Hailing from Swatow, China, Papa arrived in Nanyang (a.k.a. Singapore) in 1954 on a ship with his father and younger brother. Life during those early

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years was hard. He started out as a hawker and pushed his cart around selling 10-cent bottled drinks to patrons of Chinese wayang shows. As soon as he learnt that selling birds' nest drinks was more lucrative, he changed his strategy and he was soon selling his homemade birds' nest drinks for 40 cents per bottle. His profits quadrupled because of his quick-witted business acumen. Through diligence and perseverance, Papa saved up every cent for years before he had enough to rent a shophouse from the government. As he was a foreigner, the government advised him to become a Singaporean citizen before they allowed him to buy the property. Thus, #01-69 became the carpenter's shophouse where my precious childhood memories were formed.

In that same year the business was birthed, so was my brother. To welcome his firstborn, a prized son, Papa set up the shophouse and got ready for business. That year, his venture boomed and he attributed it to the good fortune brought forth by his son. The subsequent year, I was born. According to Mummy, his business suffered a small loss in that year, so I became the daughter less favoured by him. He was a traditional Chinese man with conservative thinking so he always thought lesser of the females in the family. He would compare me to my brother who happened to ace his studies all the time. Because he considered me to be dumber, I felt that I always had to work harder to gain his approval and to show him I was not any lesser than my brother.

Upon chatting with Papa, I discovered that Mummy's thinking was warped. I was actually the blessed daughter who brought him luck and his business boomed that year and he went on to take on hawker stall design and installations!

What was Mummy thinking? I was really puzzled.

The Shop

The carpenter's shophouse was nestled in a quaint corner of Aljunied. The two-storey building was surrounded by neighbourhood shops like NTUC Supermarket, a coffee shop, the hawker centre and wet market, Geylang East Swimming Complex, United Overseas Bank (UOB), Garden Pastry Shop and many others.

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A set of blue metal foldable doors secured the entrance of the shop on the ground floor. Every single day from Monday to Saturday, the doors would open at 9.30 a.m. sharp and close at 9.30 p.m. sharp. The shop had an exceptionally high ceiling, close to one-and-a-half stories high. Wooden furniture dotted almost every inch of the raw concrete flooring, leaving only two narrow aisles for customers to enter and leave the shop. Space was limited in the small shop and had to be maximised to display more pieces of the furniture designed and crafted by the carpenter and churned out at his factory. It was the only furniture shop in the neighbourhood on this side of the town. Therefore, Papa made all kinds of furniture to suit his customers' needs. The Chinese proverb '**麻雀虽小，五脏俱全**' meant that the sparrow may be tiny but all its vital organs are there, which accurately portrayed what the shop entailed.

Two wooden platforms were built against the walls on both sides of the shop and on these, mattresses and baby walkers were displayed prominently. Whenever a customer picked out an item on top of the wooden platform, Papa would use his customised long wooden pole with one pointed end to poke the item and let it fall down into his wide-open arms. It was a fairly smart idea in those days without having to use a ladder.

A huge wooden desk which served as the carpenter's design workstation and cashier's counter was placed in the centre at the back of the shop. To get his creative juices flowing, Papa sat on a high-back black leather swivelled armchair by his desk. Here was where he racked his brains night after night and created drawings of new furniture and inventions.

One of his clever inventions was a wooden dining table with a section hidden in the centre that could be pulled out to extend the table. We commonly see such extendable dining tables in most furniture stores nowadays. Back then, I was caught by surprise when Papa told me he thought of this design himself and crafted the table. How mind-blowing to think that he was one of the earliest creators of such a useful item! He was neither educated nor formally trained in furniture/architectural design and yet he could achieve such a feat.

Another unique and useful invention that testified to his braininess stood proudly on the desk, serving as a telephone stand. Cut from a thick marble slab,

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this turntable allowed you to answer the telephone, either seated in the chair or standing on the other side of the table. As a child, I loved to sit in my father's seat and swivel around as I handled his telephone calls like a secretary. It made me feel like a big boss too!

The rear of the shophouse contained three features: a back door, a toilet that customers could access, and a staircase that led to our home on the second floor. The back door opened out to the backyard and a public carpark behind the shophouse. In this rear space, Papa would perform his art of sawing, knocking, sanding and varnishing, turning every block of wood into a work of art.

Under his tutelage, I learnt to knock a nail or two, saw through pieces of wood and sand them smooth. Sometimes out of pure fun, I would try my hands at varnishing the raw wood, applying swift strokes taught by the Chief Carpenter himself. Then, standing back to admire my handiwork, I would smile with satisfaction before running up the narrow dark wooden stairway to where my closely-knit family of four lived above the shop. Why was the stairway narrow? Well, long planks of unused wood were tied neatly on one side of the stairway, making our ascent and descent an extremely nimble affair—definitely another art of maximising space in this compact shophouse.

The House

A small metal gate at the top of the stairway greeted me with a creak as I pushed it apart to enter our home. By the windows on the left was situated the long and narrow living room where we always watched television. Given the tiny breadth of slightly more than two metres, my brother and I ended up having short-sightedness and astigmatism at the tender age of eight as the optician concluded that we were seated too near to the old CRT television that radiated harmful rays.

The main hall in front of the stairway was more like a big square with the two bedrooms across each other dotting the perimeter. Two giant-sized wardrobes, which Papa measured and fitted exactly into the back of the squarish living room from floor to ceiling, was his wedding gift for Mummy, together with a

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queen-sized bed that had a ruby-red velvety headboard, as well as a dresser with a gigantic round mirror sitting on top of many drawers and storage space at the bottom. I would not think of Papa as a romantic but when I thought of him designing a full suite of furniture for Mummy, I was deeply touched.

From the living rooms to the bedrooms, the floor was dressed simply in a dark orange, flexible but resilient vinyl which covered up the ugly raw cement underneath. The shophouse was practically in its original form as Papa didn't believe in spending unnecessarily to renovate the house, which was an idea contrary to his venture into interior design, an extension of his business.

At one end of the squarish hall, next to a dividing wall, there was a little concave space with a ledge, fairly well hidden from sight behind unused wooden planks that were merely standing there awaiting the day they could prove their worth. One day, my brother and I were up to mischief. We discovered that we were small enough to squeeze in between the wooden planks and the concave ledge, so we used this little secret haunt to play with matches. My brother smuggled a box of matches from Papa's drawer in his shop and brought it up to me. We took turns to strike a match against the rough brown strip at the side of the matchbox. How amazing to hear the sizzling sound, watch the flying sparks and dancing flame as the match burnt to its death! Gleefully, we struck match after match and soon a stack of charred sticks laid wasted on the ledge. The fun was over before we knew it. We thought that if we threw away those burnt matches, we would surely get caught. So, we just left them there. Alas, we got caught anyway when Mummy was tidying up. The aftermath of her anger upon that discovery was terrible. It was a good thing we did not burn up the house.

Subsequently, we were up to more mischief in the living room, our main play area. Once, we tried our hands at setting up a casino and smoking cigarettes like adults. It was all just for fun and we did not even get addicted to smoking, unlike Papa who smoked for forty years before he quit. We performed our imitation so well that we even had an ashtray filled with water in which we could snuff out our cigarettes when we finished smoking. There was a moment when I thought a cigarette was still a little too long to be thrown away, so I

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took it up, lit it and took a puff. Alas, I sucked in and swallowed a mouthful of the awful-tasting water as well! It fouled my taste buds so badly that I vowed not to smoke again!

Our sleeping quarters were a rectangular space equipped with a bathroom. My parents' queen-sized bed filled half the room with space just barely enough for my brother's and my mattress on the floor. When we grew up a little more, my brother and I decided that we had to get our own bedroom. So, eyeing the other bedroom, we gingerly tiptoed in and checked out the place. Being unoccupied and used as a storeroom for Papa's unsold furniture, spider webs and mosquitoes were aplenty. We risked being their targets if we were to sleep there. Nonetheless, Mummy persuaded Papa to let us use the room, so he shifted out the furniture and cleaned up the room for us. However, after just one night of discomfort and suffering at the mercy of the mosquitoes, we missed our cosy space at the foot of my parents' bed. That ended the episode of getting our own bedroom.

The long and spacious kitchen, Mummy's territory, had little square light blue floor tiles that felt cool to our feet whenever we walked around. All the furniture in the kitchen was made by Papa. Tantalising smells drifted from here to other parts of the house during meal times. Mummy was a great cook and years and years of birthday party meals were created solely by her.

There was a fun moment I enjoyed every week during car wash time. I would get to spray water from a hose (linked to the bathroom located next to the kitchen) at my father's lorry and sports car parked behind the shophouse's public carpark. My brother would sponge the vehicles with soap water while I waited excitedly to blast the nozzle in the shape of a water gun. The distance covered by those powerful jets of water was at least five metres!

The Neighbourhood

Living in a shophouse meant we were right in the heart of a town centre. Geylang East Community Library, just a stone's throw away, was my favourite hangout during the weekends. My brother was my best reading buddy and we hung out there nearly every Saturday afternoon browsing and reading books in

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the children's section before borrowing the maximum number of books home to last us for a week. The library served the neighbourhood and therefore it was not too crowded most of the time, except on Sundays. On the ground floor was the children's section where storytelling sessions took place regularly. My brother and I would often register for those sessions and sit on the soft carpeted floor, listening attentively to the lady telling interesting stories. As I moved onto secondary school, I also moved up the building. The adult's section was located on the second floor of the library. It was a little more complicated to search for books of choice. I learnt to use the library catalogue on a public computer placed in front of the stairs. This was also the first time I was using a computer because I did not have one at home. A typical search would end up with a set of numbers and letters like 9726002.1 SCA. I would go in and out of the aisles between metallic shelves to look for my book. When I could not find it, I would engage the help of a friendly librarian.

Here's an interesting secret. One day, my mother brought me to UOB (United Overseas Bank). Not many people were there. When it was our turn, we were led into a secret vault full of boxes that looked like letterboxes. The manager used his key, and together with my mother's key, they opened up this box that sort of belonged to my mother. Within were stored some gold jewellery and important documents. I thought we were so privileged to have such special treatment! But later when I grew up, I learnt that she actually paid a monthly fee to use the bank's safe deposit box to keep all her valuables. It's funny how things appeared more special when ignorance was bliss.

The most famous cake shop in Aljunied was the Garden Pastry Shop sitting just across our shophouse. I love cakes! I still fondly remember silently relishing the taste of morsel after morsel as I indulged in my favourite cakes from this shop: one was the signature Black Forest cake and the other was a cute small round chocolate cake with a solid chocolate centrepiece on top. Every year, my birthday cake had to be Black Forest cake and nothing else. I didn't know why. Perhaps I had fallen in love with the name itself.

Ever Since the Shophouse Was Sold

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All my memories retreated to a deep corner of my heart on the day we moved out of the carpenter's shophouse. Papa had secretly sold the shophouse in 1990 to a persistent goldsmith who kept persuading him to sell him the property, thereby marking the end of Hong Yee Trading Co.

Papa, who was then in his prime at forty-two years old, made a major decision to return to his hometown in Swatow to continue building his career. There, he bought a piece of land and built a factory. For the five years that followed, he diligently shuffled between the two countries, spending at least six months at a stretch in China and one month in Singapore. Thus, I hardly got to see him around our new home, a four-room HDB flat in Sims Drive. During most of my teenage years while Papa was away, Mummy worked at Hotel Phoenix as a chambermaid and managed the household at the same time, cooking our meals and taking care of our daily needs.

Time flew past in the twinkling of an eye. One day when I was a polytechnic student, Papa stopped travelling and was back in Singapore for good. He had handed his business to a relative and decided to retire.

Ever since we moved away from Aljunied, whenever I missed the shophouse, I would occasionally go back to the hawker centre for my favourite fish soup (the stall was designed and built by Papa) and pop by the old shophouse to steal a glance. To this day, the goldsmith shop is still going strong. Sometimes, I have a strange thought in my mind, "Perhaps I will buy over the shophouse one day when I am rich enough."

One particular night, I had a dream about the carpenter's shophouse. In my dream, I was standing outside the shop. As I walked in, brown modern walls greeted me. I thought it resembled an art gallery. Ornaments were placed on both sides of the shop. As I turned to walk away, the carpenter's shophouse stood solemnly, silently beckoning me to take one last glance at her. Deep in my heart, I knew I would be back someday.

The End

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