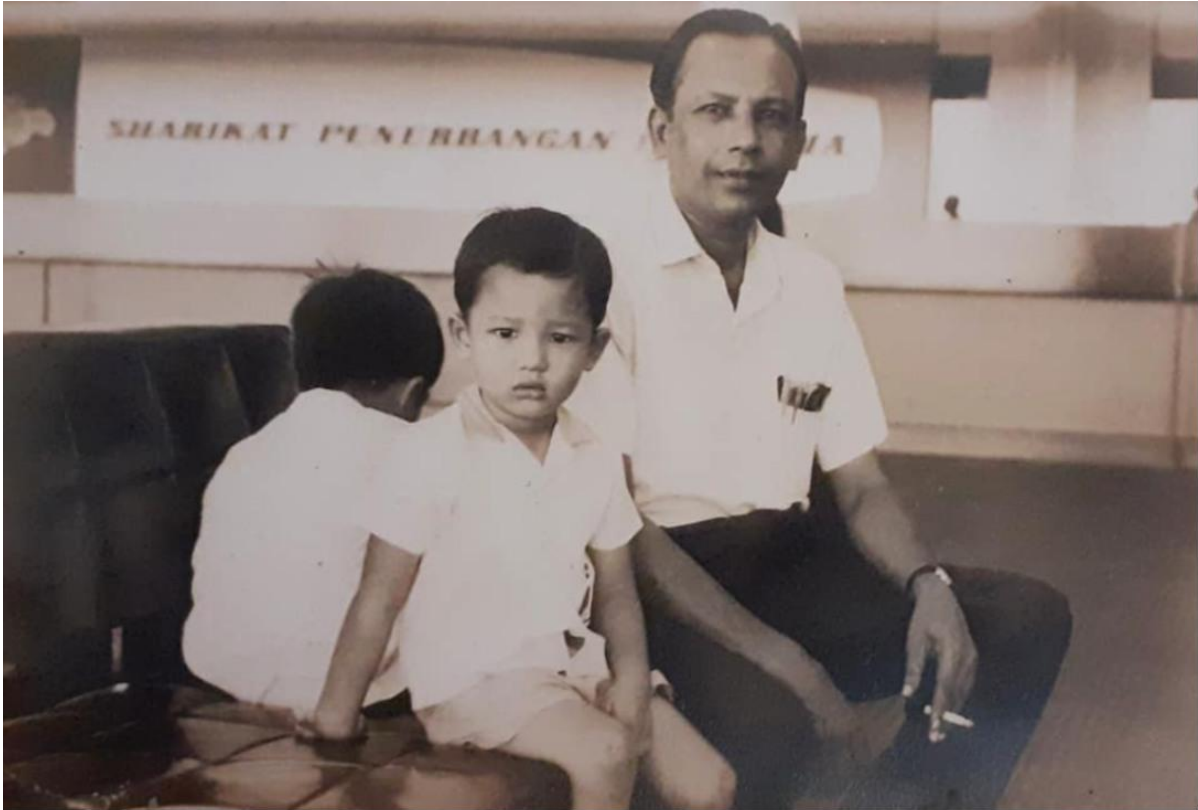


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## He Did It His Way



The writer and his father

In my family, my father was the pioneer of social distancing, long before the term became common currency today.

"Bird flu! bird flu!" he would exclaim every time a family member reached out to hug him. Instead, he would proffer a limp hand to shake. He was never one for hugging, not even his own children.

This was around the late 1990s, when the avian flu outbreak first struck poultry and later infected humans fatally in Hong Kong.

Perhaps, this was his way of maintaining the faux British, stiff-upper-lip persona he had adopted throughout his adult life — even though he was a first-generation Malayan whose parents migrated from Ceylon.

My father spoke the Queen's English, insisted on immaculately ironed shirts, polished his shoes until they shone like new, and often ate only with cutlery.

He had beautiful, cursive penmanship that even my schoolteachers were impressed with every time he wrote a letter of excuse for my absence from school.

He studied under British mentors and adopted their mannerisms and style, and also indulged in their habit of the after-work tipples. When they were phased out of government, post-Independence, my father often spoke of their work-ethic and administrative skills with high regard.

My mother, of course, was not buying any of it. To her, he was just another Tamilian man, who she derided for enjoying his drinks too much, and being too generous with his paycheques to everyone but his own family. And yet, she adored and doted on him, and like most marriages of that time, stood by him through thick and thin.

In his late 80s, my father was long-retired and had stopped his two vices, drinking and smoking. Occasionally, just to flavour my filial visits, I would bring along unsuspecting, first-time guests to the family home. "Unsuspecting" because they had mistakenly thought they had come for a "quiet dinner with the old folks".

You see my father kept himself busy all day awash with news by watching TV and reading all three newspapers daily. He was the living BBC, ready to unload when anyone showed up.

Guests were assailed with the latest news headlines told in rapid-fire, staccato style, covering everything from the dire to the weird. He read every page, watched every news bulletin and would give you the gist whether you wanted it or not.

As a guest, you may try to contribute an opinion, but then he would flit from topic to topic, like a frenzied bee on the clock, and before you could squeeze in a word or two, he was onto the next one.

For example, unprompted, he would share his opinions on the conspiracy theory behind Princess Diana's death, the El Nino influence on weather changes, Tyson biting Holyfield's ear off, Pathfinder landing on Mars or the cloning of Dolly, the sheep.

If you insisted on cornering him on his view, he would deftly switch gears and veer into his years in England, just to throw you off his scent.

He had been in Britain for only two or three years, on the Malayan Governor's scholarship to become a surveyor, but you would think the anglophile had lived there for decades.

He would speak of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, shopping at Piccadilly Circus, exploring Kew Gardens, or having proper English breakfasts and fish and chips, as if he had only been there yesterday -- even though 40 years had passed.

His rheumy eyes would drift off reminiscing on the "good old days" and perhaps recalling silently a memory of an old flame. By this time, my mother would get in on the conversation -- yes, they were a two-person act -- and noting your slightest befuddlement, would make another quick topic change.

They would speak of the infamous Matthews' Funny-tales™ that were standard fare at all our family gatherings. Although, we children, siblings and cousins, had heard the same stories numerous times at birthdays, anniversaries, every Easter and

Christmas and sometimes even after funerals, we would sigh, "Here we go again," and still laugh at the "new" telling.

My mother would often get the story going first, cackling so hard in her inimitable way long before the punchline, that sometimes my father had to take over.

One memorable tale sees my father picking up my mum at the wet market and loading up the Morris Minor with all her grocery shopping for the week.

There were many mouths to feed back home: six of us children and, sometimes, several cousins too staying over during holidays.

So the car was packed with fish, meats, all kinds of vegetables, potatoes, onions, herbs, curry mixes and fruits, all wrapped in old newspapers and rubber bands, and slotted in the boot, in the backseat, on the floorboards, hanging off raffia strings on door knobs — everywhere in that vehicle. This was much to my father's annoyance — the clutter and smells defiling his beloved, spotless car.

As the story goes, my father was driving back when my mother sensed something amiss. He was rooting around in his seat, this way and that.

At this stage, my mother would then jump up and mime the action to guests. If you can picture a tiny Chinese woman, no more than five feet tall, enigmatically dressed in a saree and pottu, her eyes just slits already tearing from laughter, spouting in Tamil, and getting up to wiggle her bum like a duck, that would be my mum.

Then, my father would blurt out the big reveal: he was sitting on half a watermelon throughout the journey back!

In the rush, he had inadvertently left it on his seat.

As a guest, you would be rollicking in laughter along with the rest of us, imagining how flat and squished that watermelon was.

If that story was not entertainment enough, my father would then break into song.

He had a melodious tenor voice akin to the crooners of his younger days like Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Andy Williams, Dean Martin, Nat King Cole and that ilk.

He would expound on how the songs of his day were so meaningful; how the lyrics were sung with such articulation you could hear and understand every word.

Then he would demonstrate with Sinatra's My Way:

"And now, the end is near, and so I face the final curtain... But more, much more than this I did it MY WAY..."

And guests would sit there, enraptured by his tone and musicality, and then he would pause, rise up and say: "But today's songs go like this: WHO LET THE DOGS OUT? WOOF, WOOF, WOOF! WHO LET DOGS OUT, WOOF, WOOF, WOOF, WOFFFF!"

And you would die right there. You would laugh so hard your sides would ache. And in that very moment you knew he gotcha and you would repeat this memory of him barking like a dog over and over again whenever his name came up.

My father loved company and company loved dad.

And, if after the onslaught of his gregarious personality and generous helpings of infectious humour, you thought the exchange was so homely, so welcoming, so entertaining, that you could just reach out and hug him like your own — it wasn't happening.

Dad never hugged. In fact, I never saw him openly cuddle my mum ever, at least not in my company.

This year marks the 11th year of his passing at age 91.

I know, even if he had lived on to be a 100 throughout this pandemic, the champion of social distancing would have still found some way, from behind his mask, and from a safe distance of two metres, to make us laugh.

My dad may have never hugged us, but he embraced us through stories, mirth and song.

The measure of the man then was not whether he hugged, but how he made you feel inside and somehow we were all — family, friends and guests alike — richer for it.