

Memories from my childhood

Dr Chung shares four snapshots from different moments in her life in Canada and Borneo.

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Landing in Canada with wobbly legs

It snowed on 15 March 1981, the day we landed in Vancouver. There were eight of us on the Cathay Pacific flight. Walking through Vancouver International Airport, my legs were still wobbly after being in the air for 14 hours. It had taken 6 days to get here after a 3-day layover in Hong Kong to pick up quilted coats. I also needed glasses, but there was too much else to do, so I continued to squint for 2 more years.

I was carrying a vomit bag in one hand and a plastic bag full of all my worldly possessions in the other. I held my head high,



Dr Chung at Sir Wilfred Grenfell Elementary in Vancouver, her first school in Canada. The burgundy velour sweater was another of the family's purchases in Hong Kong.

Dr Chung is a family physician in Kamloops who is hoping to write more stories in her upcoming retirement.

This article has been peer reviewed.

and my posture was militant. At 8 years old, I knew this was not a family vacation, as my father had told us. There had been too much civil unrest and tension in our little seaside Malay town. It was time to go. This was no vacation and was certainly not the time to show weakness.

That's why I was disappointed when my body betrayed its weakness when the wheels of the 747 touched the ground. My 50-pound body lurched forward; I swallowed, then hurled into a waxed lunch bag as we taxied to the gate, breathing re-circulated air and smelling the stench of well-used toilets. My siblings looked at me with disgust. My parents didn't know, and I didn't dare tell them that my body broke.

At the terminal, I wondered if anyone else knew what I had done, as I carried my vomit bag as if it were my lunch. Eventually I left my bagged weakness on a ledge after waiting to be processed. I was too scared to ask how to dispose of it.

We used the escalator to leave the airport, and it was my first time using one. I watched each step go from flat to stair-shaped, holding up the line, too afraid to step forward. My siblings all took the leap of faith and left me behind at the escalator's edge. Then I felt a hand in mine, and a stranger helped me onto the first moving step. For the second time that day, my legs wobbled. I was disgusted by my body's betrayal, and I didn't know how to say thank you in English.

As I ran up the stairs to catch up with my group, I realized it was like the stair game I played with my friends back home. We rolled up an elastic band and tossed it onto the stairs. The goal was to hop up and down the stairs but avoid the one the elastic band was on. At the top of the escalator, I



Dr Chung, 15 March 1981, the day she arrived in Vancouver.

imagined there was an elastic band on the step that was flattening. I took a deep breath and hopped off. My legs didn't wobble.

Conversations at the bank

I went to a segregated public primary school in Borneo. On 5-year-old legs, it took 45 minutes to walk there. Chinese kids attended school in the mornings, and Malay kids in the afternoons. I had to leave our apartment by 6:10 a.m. to get to school on time. I usually walked with my friend, Heng Mian Chu.

Because of the heat when it was time to walk home, she and I would detour through the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, where we would sit in the plastic lobby chairs and wait for the air conditioner to unstick our white-and-blue polyester uniforms from our backs. It took the same amount of time for us to share a packet of dried ramen noodles as it took for our uniforms to peel away from our sweaty bodies. We both had to be home by 12:30 p.m. She had to help take care of her little brother, and

I had to help in my father's shop. Sometimes it was a rush to get home, because I was also the class captain and had to stay after class to supervise the sweeping of the classroom and cleaning of the chalkboards by my classmates.

In the comfort of the air-conditioned bank, Heng Mian Chu revealed to me her secret dream. She wanted to go to Singapore to attend college to become a teacher. She wanted her own apartment and a bank account in her own name. She told me that she would invite me, and, if I wanted, I could stay with her and I could go to college too. She was a 6-year-old with the weight of family duty and cultural norms on her little shoulders. Two years later, her mother had another baby, and Heng Mian Chu no longer had time to sit in the bank. At the same time, my father was preparing us for immigration to Canada. I told my friend that my father was taking us on a family vacation. She was thrilled, and we couldn't wait until I returned so I could tell her of the world beyond Borneo.

It was 4 years later when I returned. I was 12. I spoke fluent English. I couldn't wait to tell my friend about the outside world. Her dream of being a teacher was achievable, and I was going to help her. I went to look for Heng Mian Chu and found out from neighbors that my friend had moved, because her mother had another baby and they needed a bigger apartment. I tracked down her father, who told me that Heng Mian Chu could no longer be my friend. She had family responsibilities and no time to waste thinking about college. The ideas about careers and dreams I had written to her about were simply too threatening for her family. Heartbroken and desperate, I returned to Vancouver and wrote letters to Heng Mian Chu fervently for 2 more years, until I was in grade 9 and preoccupied with high school and hormones.

I have found myself typing her name into Google and coming up with nothing. It is as if she and her dreams fell off the face of the Earth.

I often wonder what happened to my friend. During quiet moments, I have found myself typing her name into Google and coming up with nothing. It is as if she and her dreams fell off the face of the Earth.

Marketplace by the sea

When I was a little girl, my mother would take me to the *besar* (Malay for *market*) by the sea. We would go early in the morning, where we would get bean sprouts in puffed-up bags, eat yummy little pastries stuck on banana leaves, look down at crouched Malay women shucking coconuts, and watch a chicken get exsanguinated after we picked out the lucky sacrificial lamb. We would go by the stinky fish market, where fresh crabs threatened to crawl out of wicker baskets and I would watch fishmongers haul their goods in from the sea. The fish would be dumped from their nets onto newspaper-lined floors. The whole place was putrid from the wet of the sea, with little fish parts floating beneath our sandals.

Those fish were so fresh that their little gills would puff away, sucking for air, their stomachs moving paradoxically, striving for oxygen to keep their slimy bodies alive, until at last their breathing waned, they gulped their final breaths, and they were picked up by someone to be cooked for supper that night. It occurred to me that in the final moments of my mother's life, while I held her cold, blue hands, her last breaths were like those of the fish just hauled in from the sea. Oddly, I was wearing sandals that night at Villa Cathay Care Home in Vancouver. I looked down, fully expecting to see the wet of the sea and little fish parts floating beneath my sandals.

Sriracha sauce with the rooster

I was on my way to the till, my body leaning sideways because I had again put too many things in the basket. I was supposed to get



Dr Chung's mom outside her nursing home around 2009, along with their now super geriatric pooch.

only potpies, but fries, bacon, and chicken were on sale.

He was an elderly fellow wearing a turban, his mask tucked under his nose. I wondered how effective it was during the seventh wave of the pandemic as his bushy beard pushed out in all directions. He pointed down the aisle and mumbled something. I didn't hear him initially, unsure who he was talking to. Again he pointed down the aisle and repeated his request.

"Do you need help with something?" I asked.

"Hot sauce," he said, pointing down the aisle with the Asian foods.

"Yes, down this aisle," I said, and continued on my way to the till. Then something stopped me and I looked back at him.

"Rooster," he said.

Suddenly, I saw my mom. She moved to Vancouver in her 70s after her husband died. She moved to a foreign land with a foreign language. She couldn't read. She never learned. But she knew numbers and a few letters. This allowed her to take the 22 Knight bus to Chinatown to buy sriracha sauce with the rooster on it. That was how she lived her entire 87 years. She looked at pictures and navigated the world of cuisine by roosters, diamonds, and little red letters. In the same way, she traveled from

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After completing her residency, she moved to Kamloops, where she spent her entire medical career caring for children and their families. As head of the department of pediatrics, she was instrumental in starting a neonatal intensive care program at Royal Inland Hospital.

In her early years, Judith was a competitive swimmer. She lived for her dogs, and over the years she enjoyed the company of many female black Labrador retrievers. She was always interested in everything to do with her homeland.

She loved the outdoors. In her spare time she enjoyed cross-country skiing, hiking, fishing, and grouse hunting. Her favorite vacation was an annual getaway to the Chilcotin to camp and hunt grouse.

At her request, there will be no service. In lieu of flowers, donations to one of the following organizations in memory of Judith Naylor would be appreciated: BC SPCA, a local food bank, or the Royal Inland Hospital Foundation.

—Susan Endersby
Kamloops
—Sharon Frissell
Kamloops

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Malaysia to Vancouver on her own to visit us, the diaspora. To this day, I still have no idea how she completed her point-of-entry airport card.

“Yes, I know that brand. It is the rooster brand. Sriracha sauce,” I said. I could tell he was smiling.

“It should be here.” But it was not. I gestured for him to wait while I asked. It turned out they had none because of a supply chain issue and spoilage of chili peppers in California. He wanted to know if it would be another few days before the sauce arrived. “No. Many weeks. They cannot make more at the factory!”

I suggested alternatives—garlic chili paste, sweet Thai chili, Jamaican Tabasco sauce? He shook his head at every option.

“I like rooster. It is the only one,” he said, and wandered off with a bag of bananas.

At the till, the cashier was smiling. She had watched the exchange and now joined in on the discussion. “There is no substitute! The others are too sweet. We cannot use that on our food. We are Indians! We need spice. Our mouths need to burn!”

I had come in to get potpies. Instead, I was given a sweet memory of my mother.

In the parking lot, the guy beside me looked over, probably wondering why a middle-aged woman was laughing by herself in her hot car on a super hot Kamloops summer afternoon. I was thinking of my mom in heaven and how she doesn't need to go by the picture of the rooster anymore because she can finally read. ■



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