The School Building Fund

Chuah Guat Eng

You sit in your twenty-year-old Proton and wait. You watch your granddaughter as she walks to the school gate. You want to make sure she is safely in the school compound before you start your car and drive off. You can't be too careful these days. Wasn't it here, on this very road that a little boy was abducted right in front of his kindergarten a few months ago? They said it was a kidnapping for ransom, but to this day, the boy has not been returned to his parents. You almost hope that the boy has died because you can't bear to think of the things far worse than death that can happen to abducted children.

And wasn't it only last Wednesday that two women in your yoga class had warned you about parking your car in underground car parks? They had heard from their children, who had learned from their friends through email, that women were being robbed and even raped in the car parks of some of the most prestigious office and shopping complexes in the city centre. Then there was that young woman, new to the class, who added her own horror story – of how even men were being robbed in their cars, in the middle of busy traffic, in broad daylight. It seems the robbers calmly open your car door and get into your car just as the lights turn green so that you have no choice but to drive on. Then they rob you at knifepoint. It seems some of them even apologize and carry on a friendly conversation with you after that. At the next traffic lights they get out, smiling and saluting apologetically to the drivers behind you, it seems. *"That's how bold they are. So make sure you keep your car doors locked all the time,"* this young woman had said. And you all agreed that such things happen when people in power are greedy and corrupt, when the whole economic system goes to the dogs, when people are forced to rob and steal in order to survive.

Why, you yourself were right there in the Lucky Garden market yesterday morning, buying bananas, when the general hubbub suddenly scurried into tight little pools of hushed, fearful murmuring. The fishmonger later told you that two men on a motorbike had snatched a woman's sling-bag right off her shoulder and zoomed off with it before she knew what was happening. Apparently, no one actually saw it happen. Everyone was too busy worrying about the rising price of fresh food and what to feed the family that day. Anyway, it was all over in the

twinkling of an eye, as the saying goes. But the fishmonger had said with quiet conviction that the snatch thieves were illegal immigrants. He could be right. What with the economic downturn and all, there must be lots of jobless illegal immigrants these days wandering around and up to no good.

You watch your granddaughter walk through the gate. She walks slowly, bent almost double by the weight of her schoolbooks in her backpack. Is it your imagination or is she more bowed down this morning, walking more slowly than usual? Have you been too hard on her? Maybe you should have just given her the thirty ringgit for her school T-shirt instead of making such a fuss. Because now that shy twelve-year-old will have to face a class teacher irritated and impatient because she still cannot close her record of sales or whatever—all because you won't give the girl the thirty ringgit. Sure, it's a lot to pay for a child's T-shirt, but it isn't as if you can't afford it.

Still. It's the principle of the thing, isn't it? Why, only a month ago some parents had protested against the practice in some schools of making schoolchildren buy nametags at one ringgit each, complaining that it was an unnecessary burden on poorer families. The afternoon tabloid had carried the story on their front page for nearly a week, and the whole thing became such an issue that the Minister of Education was forced to make a public statement claiming his Ministry had nothing to do with the practice and ticking off the schools involved. Now, so soon after all that fuss over a one-ringgit nametag, your granddaughter's school is forcing the children to buy thirty-ringgit T-shirts.

"But all my classmates will be buying, and we must wear the shirt for our next co-curriculum day," your granddaughter had tearfully insisted. Co-curriculum – another one of those new ideas imposed on schoolchildren every time a new Minister of Education takes over. Apparently, every child now has to stay back in school one day a week to take part in at least one sport activity and one society activity. And your granddaughter's school has decided that this new idea requires a new uniform in the form of a specially printed T-shirt. The ordinary school uniform will no longer do.

"Well, if you must, then it's compulsory. In that case, you must ask your teacher to give me a letter."

And so the conversation had ended.

Your granddaughter had been quiet after that, all of yesterday evening and this morning. You know in your heart of hearts that it's hard on the poor child, but what are you to do? How can you explain to her the kind of racket that goes on behind things like one-ringgit nametags and thirty-ringgit co-curriculum T-shirts? That someone or some people are making money from the ruling. Isn't that the way it works? Every time there's a new regulation or legislation regarding something

affecting a large enough number of people, someone will come up with an idea to make money out of it. Sometimes it's the other way around. Someone will come up with an idea, and the right people will then be persuaded to pass a law that will ensure the commercial success of that idea. You're right, of course. These engines of greed have to be stopped, and maybe school is the first and best place to apply the brakes. The parents who protested against the one-ringgit nametags were right. For poor families it's an unnecessary burden, especially if they have more than one child in school. You should know. You've been there yourself. Only in your case, it wasn't a nametag or a T-shirt. They didn't have things like that in your time. In your time, it was the School Building Fund.

The school you went to as a child was a ramshackle affair, even by the standards of the time. The roof was thatched with dried *atap* palm fronds. Wooden planks formed the bottom half of the walls, and chicken-coop wire fencing formed the top half. The wire fencing let the light in, but also the rain during the monsoon seasons when the winds were particularly strong. The only concrete building in the school compound was a row of six classrooms for the older girls. On your first day at school, you learned that in addition to the monthly school fees of two dollars fifty, each girl had to pay fifty cents towards a fund for a new secondary school building to be constructed on the vacant land adjacent to the playing field.

"What school building fund? Fifty cents a month on top of school fees, books and uniform. Three of you in school, how can we afford that? They think your father is printing money? I'm not going to pay!" your mother had raged.

In fact, only your school, a mission school for girls, exacted a building fund. Your two elder brothers went to a government boys' school, which could depend on public funds for all its buildings and facilities. The extra burden on the family was a mere fifty cents a month; but your father was a casual labourer working for daily wages. On some days, he barely made enough to buy a meal for two adults, three school-going children, and a toddler. Your mother was the one who made a steady income by cleaning houses and doing the laundry for three or four well-to-do families nearby. Fifty cents meant a great deal to your family, especially at the beginning of the month, because that was when the rent and utility bills had to be paid. During the first few months of your school life, your mother usually managed to come up with the money in the second or third week; but that was invariably too late for your class teacher – let's call her Mrs. A – whose only desire was to close the class School Building Fund account by the end of the first week.

So for the first two or three weeks of the first few months of your school life, you spent every morning standing in front of the class, the place of shame, together with the other girls who had yet to pay their fifty cents to the School Building Fund. Looking back through a time tunnel of sixty-odd years, you feel you can understand why Mrs. A was particularly hard on you. Standing in a line of girls dressed in a

shabby assortment of hand-me-down school uniforms, shoes or even slippers, you must have stood out like a bright marble among gravel stones. You couldn't have looked as if you came from a family too poor to afford fifty cents a month. Thanks to your mother, your uniform, which she had sewn herself on a sewing machine borrowed from a neighbour, was always clean, well starched and pressed. Your shoes and socks were always white; and your hair always short, neat, and free from lice. And you must have struck Mrs A as being unusually intelligent because thanks to your elder brothers, you understood and spoke English better than the other girls. It must have seemed to Mrs A that since you were to all appearances neither poor nor stupid, there could be only two possible reasons for your repeated failure to bring her the fifty cents she needed to close her account. One was that you were forgetful, in itself a punishable lapse. But since no one could be that forgetful, as Mrs. A must have reasoned, the real reason must be that you were defiant. Recalcitrant, she might have said if the word had occurred to her. And that deserved no less a punishment than to be sent to The Principal's office.

Until that morning, you had only ever seen The Principal – let's call her Mrs. B – from a distance. Mrs. B was hard to miss, even from a distance. She was the roundest person you had ever set eyes on. She was not very tall, but she was almost as wide around the middle as she was tall. Her arms were like the legs of your chubby three-year-old brother, and when she waved them to direct the singing of hymns at Chapel on Friday mornings, the wobbling of her upper arms was a sight to behold. Like most fat people you had seen, Mrs. B exuded an air of bustling jollity. But your heart was filled with fear as you stood at the open door of her office with the note from Mrs. A in your hand.

As it turned out, there was nothing to fear. True, Mrs. B did not smile as she read Mrs. A's note, but when she looked up, her eyes were sad rather than angry. Then she proceeded to show you a way out of your predicament.

"How much pocket money do you bring to school every day?" she had asked.

"Ten cents," you had said, "for ice-water."

"From now on don't drink ice-water from the tuck-shop. But don't drink the water from the school tap because that will make you sick. Bring water from home in a bottle, and keep the ten cents for the School Building Fund. Wait."

You waited while she opened her drawers one by one, as if searching for something. Finally, she looked up. "Here. You can keep your money in this," and she reached across her table to hand you a little box. The box was made of thin cardboard. On the lid were a picture of a thumbtack and the words "Drawing Pins".

"This," Mrs. B said, "is your own School Building Fund box. If you put ten cents in every day, in one week you will have fifty cents." She then smiled, stood up, walked around the desk, put an arm surprisingly light for all its bulk around your shoulders, and bustled you out of her office. "Now you can go back to class."

Mrs. B was fair; she didn't ask for more than the fifty cents a month. So for three weeks out of each month you could still afford to buy the sweet, pink drink that the tuck-shop woman ladled into a small glass out of a white basin with a big block of ice floating in it. Later, you learned from one of the older girls that once you had used up your exercise book, you could give it to the *kacang putih* man, who would cut the pages into half-pages to roll into cones for his roasted, boiled, or fried chickpeas. In exchange, he would give you a five-cent cone of the peas of your choice.

And so the six years of your primary school life passed. On the whole, it wasn't such a bad experience. You learned from your deprivation the mechanics of saving and the value of recycling. In fact, you became so good at saving that you were soon saving the rest of your daily pocket money for the monthly fifty cents required to join the town public library. But best of all, you had the personal satisfaction of knowing you were contributing to the new school building rising before your eyes on the land next to the playing field. It would be completed, so you had heard, just in time for when you and your classmates were ready to go to Form 1. You looked forward to secondary school because it meant the end of the School Building Fund. It also meant, so you thought, the end of Mrs. B because the secondary school had always had its own Headmistress.

But none of your expectations came to pass. When you went to the secondary school, so did Mrs. B, as Headmistress. Following her like a black cloud was the School Building Fund—now called the School Hall Building Fund – and a stepping up of fund-raising activities. On top of the fifty cents a month, the school held annual fun fairs to raise funds. Every year you were made to buy two books of fun fair coupons, each book worth one dollar. You could use them yourself for the fun fair, or you could sell them to relatives and family friends. Since you knew no relative or family friend who could see the point of spending good money on such frivolities, you had to buy and use the coupons yourself. You hated those fun fairs, because they meant that for two months out of every year you couldn't afford the public library fees and were forced to beg your classmates to lend you the books they had borrowed.

The only girl who lent her books generously and without question was the girl – let's call her C – who sat next to you. Maybe C felt obliged to be generous because you helped her with Geometry and Algebra. Maybe she was generous because she could afford to be. Her family was wealthy, and she was driven to school by a uniformed chauffeur in a huge blue and cream American car. But

maybe she was generous because she genuinely liked you. Once, in an essay she read out in front of the class, she had named you as her best friend. Whatever the reason, she's the only friend you remember from your schooldays.

Still and all, whatever your difficulties, just as in your primary school days, you derived some comfort from the thought that you were putting in your bit for the proposed School Hall, although it wasn't until you were in Form 3 that the foundation work began. For a good part of that year, school life was filled with the thump-thump-thump of the piling work going on in the plot of land between the school gate and the school building. When the thumping stopped, the noise of the cement mixer took over and a few pillars wrapped in plank casings began to appear on the building site. But as the year wore on, the construction work began to slow down. Then it stopped altogether. Right through your years in Forms 3 and 4, the pillars stood neglected, many still in their plank casings. Bits of wood and timber lay everywhere. Puddles of water collected around them during the rainy seasons.

The only thing that did not come to a halt was the School Hall Building Fund. Every Friday at Chapel, Mrs. B spoke at length about the need to raise more money. To the monthly fifty cents and the annual fun fair was now added a new scheme.

One week before school closed at the end of your fourth year, every girl was given a white card. On the card was the outline of a simple house divided into ten rectangles. Each rectangle, the class teacher explained, represented five dollars. You were to sell these rectangles to your parents, relatives, family friends and neighbours; and they were to sign on a rectangle for every five dollars they paid. You were expected to return from the holidays with your card filled with signatures, and fifty dollars in cash.

Fifty dollars. The amount was beyond your experience. Perhaps even your parents had never seen so much money all at once in their lives.

That night, for the first time, you prayed to a god you did not understand but had heard talked about every Friday in Chapel. According to Mrs. B, He (for this god was a He) was all knowing, all-powerful, and all loving, and you could always turn to Him for help. That night, you poured out all your problems to Him and asked for His help. You didn't know if it would work because you and your family were not baptized, and did not go to His church. Nevertheless, you found it a strangely comforting experience, and you prayed hard every day for the rest of the week. Then, lo and behold, at the end of that week came the answer to your prayers.

On the last day of school, C surprised you by inviting you to a party. Her father had been summoned by her grandfather to return to Singapore to look after the family business, and she was giving a party to say farewell to her friends. You had never been to a party before. A part of you wanted to go, but another part

held back. You knew from your reading that you couldn't attend the farewell party without a party dress and a farewell gift for C.

"I live too far away," you said, "I don't think my parents will let me come."

"I'll send the driver to pick you up and send you home. I'll be very hurt if you don't come. You know you're my best friend!"

Transport was the least of your problems, but, as you had often heard Mrs B say in Chapel, when God answers prayers, He answers them in full. Your mother solved the problem of the party dress and your second brother solved the problem of the farewell gift. The afternoon of the day before the party, your mother came home with the most beautiful dress you had ever seen. It was white taffeta and tulle, with lace frills on the shoulders, sleeves and hem. It came with a long, broad piece of satin, which folded into a thick sash, with enough left for a large bow at the back. Your mother explained that it was from the Eurasian lady she cleaned and washed for. The dress had been her daughter's confirmation dress. Her daughter had died young, while studying in Raffles College in Singapore, from lung complications due to a hole in the heart, which at that time no one knew how to deal with. She had kept the dress carefully wrapped in soft tissue for years, but had finally decided it was time to let go of the memory and the pain, and had given it to you with her blessings. The dress needed some slight alterations. But the neighbour with the sewing machine was happy as usual to oblige, and your mother went to work on it that evening after dinner.

You yourself were busy with the farewell gift, a pencil sketch of C, copied from a photo she had given you. It was your brother's idea, and you thought it was a good suggestion because drawing and sketching had always come easily to you. When the sketch was done, he glued it on the plywood backing of a frame he had made from pieces of balsam wood filched from his school woodworking class. Your mother wrapped it in the soft tissue that had been used to wrap the party dress, and from somewhere found a piece of ribbon to tie around it. You felt like Cinderella transformed by her fairy godmother as you waited for C's driver to pick you up the next day.

The purse lay on the plush blue carpet under the front passenger seat. It was of soft red leather, and it had a gold clasp. You guessed that it belonged to C's mother, and that she must have dropped it when she went to the market earlier; or more likely Cold Storage. That was where Europeans and well-to-do locals like C's family went to buy imported frozen and canned food. Food that you had never eaten, and had only heard about from C or read about in Enid Blyton stories. The purse lay so close to your right foot that if you had moved that foot a little bit more to the right after you got into the car, you would have kicked it, or perhaps even trodden on it by accident. You glanced at the driver. The rear view mirror was

turned away from you. He could not possibly see you. In any case, his eyes were fixed firmly on the road ahead.

You raised your right foot on its heel, swivelled it to the right, and pressed gently down on the purse. Through the rubber soles of your shoes, you could tell that it was bulky. Could there possibly be as much as fifty dollars in it? Could this be the answer to your prayers? You dropped your gift for C on the floor next to the purse, bent down, picked up the purse together with the gift, and while straightening up, tucked the purse securely in the thick folds of the white satin sash. The movement was swift, sure, over in a moment. When you looked at the driver again, he was still looking steadily ahead. He had not noticed anything. But your heart was pounding, and your palms were damp with sweat as you sat back, turned towards the window and looked up to the blue sky and fluffy white clouds that seemed to be watching you.

Dear God, you said to the blue sky and fluffy white clouds, *this money is not for me. It's for the school building fund, and the school belongs to Your church. Mrs B is a member of Your church. Nearly all the teachers are members of Your church. Many of the girls go to Your church. Even though I don't go to Your church, I have been singing Your praises every Friday at Chapel since I started school. And since last Friday, I have been praying to You. Now I beseech You, please don't let anyone find out about this. And I promise You, I'll go faithfully every Sunday to Your church from now on. And when I'm grown up I'll become a Christian and dedicate my life in Your service.*

That evening, you knew the family would be waiting to hear about the party. So you changed quickly into your home clothes and transferred the purse to your skirt pocket. Then you joined your family at the one table where meals are served, ironing is done, homework is completed, and family conversations are held. You sat at a corner where the light from the kerosene lamp on the centre of the table did not reach. The purse in your skirt pocket sat heavy on your lap as you answered their eager questions. You knew you had to put it away somewhere safe before your mother made you change into your sleeping clothes and bundled your day clothes away to be soaked for tomorrow's wash. In that two-room house, there was nowhere you could check how much money was in the purse. There was only one thing you could do.

You stood up and announced you had to go to the outhouse. You walked to the shelf above the smoke-blackened firewood stove and took a stub of candle down. You walked back to the table and, picking up a spill from the old cigarette tin next to the kerosene lamp, you lit the candle. You headed for the backdoor. Your mother looked up from her sewing and asked if you wanted her to accompany you. No, you said, there was a full moon out and you were not afraid.

Once in the smelly outhouse which before this you would need a dire emergency to visit at night, you placed the candle carefully on the wooden ledge formed by the horizontal strut holding the rough planks of the structure in place. Standing astride the hole, because there was nowhere else you could stand, you took the purse out, holding it tight so that it wouldn't fall into the pail that stood below in line with the hole. Opening the purse, you saw with a leap of the heart an assortment of notes roughly folded and thrust any old how into the purse. There were also some coins. No wonder the purse felt so heavy. You knew that if you tried to pull out the notes, the coins might fall out.

So you squatted over the hole, spreading your skirt out over your knees to form a surface for the coins to land. Carefully you eased out the bundle of notes, shaking back any stray coin that threatened to come out with the notes. Leaving the purse open, you carefully counted the notes – twenty, thirty, forty, fifty – fifty-eight dollars altogether in notes. Carefully you closed the purse with a click of the gold clasp, and holding the purse in one hand and the notes in the other, you stood up. Carefully you pushed the notes deep into your right-hand skirt pocket. Then, purse in hand, you looked around for a place in the outhouse where you could hide it. Maybe, you thought, you should just throw it into the bushes outside.

It was a nice purse, and it was still heavy with coins. You wondered how much money there was in coins. Carefully you opened the purse again, and carefully you transferred the coins, small handful by small handful, into your left-hand skirt pocket. Those coins would come in handy when more appeals for the School Building Fund cropped up, as you were sure they would. When the last coin was safely deposited in the pocket, you reached for the candle, which was beginning to flicker from all your movements, and unbolted the door.

It was a relief to be out in the fresh, clean air.

Walking back to the house, you were struck by a brilliant idea. Right next to the backdoor was the pile of clothes people had brought for your mother's attention. Later that night, you knew, your mother would put them in the tub for soaking. Quickly you slid the empty red purse under some clothes. Your mother would find it, and she would think the purse had come by accident with someone's dirty laundry.

Back in the house, your brothers were in the sleeping room changing into their sleeping clothes. Your mother was at the stove, and your father was bolting the front door. No one paid any attention to you as you sat at the table, your sweaty hands in your skirt pockets, planning what to do next. Then it was your turn to change and you had a few minutes of privacy in the sleeping room. Working quickly but carefully, you took out all the books from the rectangular rattan basket that was your schoolbag. You tore out two double pages from the middle of an

exercise book. You wrapped the notes in one and the coins in the other. You placed the packets at the bottom of the basket and replaced the books. You changed. You took out the School Building Fund card that had been the focus of your prayers that whole week. You took it to your father and asked him to sign his name on each of the rectangles.

"What for?" he asked, immediately fearful of the consequences of putting his name in writing on anything.

"It's for the school," you said. "Teacher wants you to sign, that's all."

"Asking for money again, is it?" asked your mother, busy cleaning the stove.

"Yes, but Teacher said since we have no money we don't need to pay anything. She said, just sign the empty spaces and return the card. It's just to prove to her that I have shown the card to you. That's all."

Your father shook his head as if in wonderment at the ways of mission schools. He asked for a pen and painstakingly wrote his name as he had been taught at the vernacular school he had attended for two years as a child.

The deed was done. That night you slept well for the first time that week. The next day, which was a Sunday, you kept your vow. You took the public bus to the church near your school and sat through the service in a spirit of thanksgiving. And you haven't missed a single Sunday since. Because there was a great deal more to be thankful for.

When you went back to school the following year, Mrs. B was gone and with her, the School Building Fund. The new headmistress was Mrs D, a younger woman from the mission head office based in Singapore. She showed no interest at all in the School Building Fund. No one asked for the white card with your father's signatures and the fifty dollars that you had stashed away under your books in the schoolbag. Just the same, work resumed on the school hall, and within six months or so, it was up and ready for Assembly, not Chapel, on Friday mornings. There was no more hymn singing; the Muslim girls had to attend; and Mrs D did not talk about God. Instead, she talked about the girls; and how they all had to aim high and work hard, so that the school could establish a reputation for excellence in sports and academic achievement.

It wasn't until some years later, when you met C again at University, that you learned the truth about Mrs. B and the School Building Fund. C was two years ahead of you because you had gone to work for two years after school to help finance your second brother's university education. The deal was that once he had graduated, he would get a job and help support your studies. C remembered you and was happy to renew her friendship with you. That was when she told you

why her father had decided to take her out of that school. It wasn't because he had to look after the family business in Singapore. It was because he had found out somehow that Mrs B had been regularly pocketing money from the School Building Fund to finance her own little housing development project on a piece of land she happened to own not far from her house. Mrs B didn't just pocket the fifty cents from every student's monthly pocket money; she also pocketed large annual donations from well-to-do parents like C's father. C's father, who might or might not have been a Christian – what has religion got to do with it, after all? – was so incensed when he found out that he decided to take C out of the school. Not only that, once in Singapore, he went to the church mission's head office and lodged an official complaint, complete with official receipts signed by Mrs B for donations he and others had made over the years.

You turn to me, your story told, your eyes shining with renewed faith, and I already know what you're going to say. Yes. God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. Yes. Indeed. And that's why you must go to church every Sunday, to pray: "Our Father Who art in Heaven...lead us not into temptation ...."