Part 1

Trapped in the Tropics

A Survivors Guide to Changi Prison

A Transformative Journey

Timothy Goldring

REVIEW COPY ONLY

For my mother and father who made me.

For my friend Francis who rode shot-gun on every word.

“Only great pain, the long, slow pain that takes its time... compels us to descend to our ultimate depths... I doubt that such pain makes us “better”; but I know it makes us more profound... In the end, lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe sickness, one returns new-born, having shed one’s skin... with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before.”

Friedrich Nietzsche – The Joyful Wisdom

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Writing this book has been a cathartic experience.

If it were not for constant support and encouragement from certain people who came into my life at exactly the right time, it would probably not have been possible.

To begin with, my most sincere thanks go to Francis Noon, my friend for over 40 years, who spent months cajoling and insisting I "write it all down".

His daughter Justine, who, as a media professional thought it might make an interesting T.V. series, suggested a simple timeline of events. What I thought would be a simple 4- or 5-page timeline, turned into 60 pages and finally this book. Francis read, reviewed and candidly critiqued each chapter. He also read it aloud to his father-in-law Leonard Proos, a stalwart, lifelong advocate for human rights. I was fortunate enough to meet this fine gentleman just before he sadly passed away aged 93 in October 2023. His enthusiasm, passion and recognition provided added inspiration for me to continue to completion. Francis also passed the early draft manuscript to a number of his acquaintances for feedback, among them Roger Park, who gave me further impetus to finish the job and whose cottage door I know is always open to me.

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Last but not least thanks to my family; each of you has your own story to tell. You have all suffered in so many ways, suffered the familial loss of 10 years' separation, the material loss of property and financial status, but mostly you have suffered for me, daily grieved in pain for what had to be endured. For the suffering I brought to bear on you, I lower my head in shame and say "I am

so very sorry"; your forgiveness means everything to me and perhaps if this and subsequent books are successful it may go some way towards making amends.

It is, however, a tribute to us as a family that the great chasms and voids caused by the events and circumstances that seemed to rend us apart were quickly filled with the love we have for each other and the irrepressible joy of living we share.

Finally, I acknowledge my father and mother:

My father for his lessons in honesty and honour, self-discipline, attention to detail and endurance.

My mother for teaching me to love my life and that happiness was a state of being; she also taught me to accept others and to share with them the best of what we have. Finally, she taught me to follow my heart, because love always knows what love loves best.

FOREWORD

Having known Tim Goldring for over 40 years, in the capacity of employer, colleague, friend and companion-adventurer, it's with an equal mix of pride and pleasure that I introduce this account of his trials, tribulations and adventures.

From his near-Utopian early life at the Royal Navy School in Singapore, to his incarceration in the dystopian surroundings of Changi Prison and all of his improbable, yet real adventures in between, his story will transport the reader on a rollercoaster ride of sadness, empathy, pity and sheer unadulterated joy.

His detailed account of his and his fellow inmates' inhumane treatment while incarcerated in Changi, one of the world's toughest prisons, shines a hitherto unseen light onto a regime whose single purpose is to punish. Little mercy and even less compassion are shown by those in authority to those serving their time. However, despite the executions, the canings, the solitary confinement, the lack of exercise and the lack of drinking water after lights out, Tim, after searching frantically, discovered his personal magic formula for survival. He shared it with his cellmates, and is now sharing it with us.

To his surprise, the hardened criminals he was surrounded by, most probably because they were unified in their quest to survive, treated him and each other with kindness, a kindness that he's found hard to find in his non-custodial life, apart from in his experiences with family and dearest friends.

Although this story is harrowing, it is peppered with wonderful adventures and recollections of his life outside of incarceration.

His beautifully described relationship with his parents, his early life as a post-colonial child in Singapore, his adolescence in Brighton and his extraordinary times in business provide the perfect escape from the grimmer parts of the narrative and enable us to marvel in incredulity and laugh out loud.

Francis Noon

PREFACE

Following my release from Changi Prison in February 2020, when I walked almost directly into the lockdown caused by the COVID pandemic, I seemed to be swapping one form of incarceration for another.

Rather than being rushed into a frenetic set of constant family reunions and facing the very real practical requirement of earning a living at the age of 68, I found myself, through various family circumstances "locked down" during this period in a very small studio apartment in the South of France, which I concede was many notches up from my cell in Changi.

I spent the next 18 months trying to understand and recover what I thought I had lost and, in doing so, discovered that, while I may have lost in some areas, both financial and personal, I had gained massively in other areas.

The early notes for this first book, which I have titled Trapped in the Tropics – A Survivors Guide to Changi Prison, started off as a therapeutic attempt to gain insight into what my experience in Changi taught me, how it had changed me and what further lessons could be learned to enhance my own personal development.

Later, at the insistence of my friend Francis and his daughter Justine, I produced a timeline of events.

It then occurred to me that, if written in a certain style, such writings may be of interest to an audience other than myself, since the story, as stories go, is true, authentic, interesting and, as those who have the read the draft have commented, compelling.

Within the story is a smorgasbord of self-discovered truths; wrung out of the experience of my incarceration; these include new types of awareness and modes of consciousness and what, for me, is new knowledge.

I felt there may be an audience who, while enjoying the story, might pick something off the smorgasbord that is to their personal benefit: perhaps a new idea, a different attitude or something that gives them pause to contemplate their own lives.

Have I achieved this?

I have no idea – only a wider reading public can determine whether, in some small way, this has been accomplished.

Timothy Goldring

December 2023

“*...For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set
And blew ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came’.*”

from “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”
by Robert Browning

CHAPTER 1

The Verdict

"SINGAPORE — The criminal prosecution against three directors of land banking firm Profitable Plots for cheating investors of about US $2.5 million (S $3.1 million) reached a juncture yesterday, with jail terms handed down to two of them, while the third was acquitted. Briton Timothy Nicholas Goldring, 61, was sentenced to seven years in prison ......"

The New Paper 14 June 2014

CHAPTER I

The Verdict

"Trapped in the tropics,
Marooned out East,
There are no exotics
In the Belly of the Beast."

11 June 2014: State Court of Singapore

"All rise."

I am seated in the "dock", a raised wooden enclosure in the well of the court, positioned in front of the judge, with the defence legal team to the left, prosecution to the right, and the public gallery behind.

The court rises and bows.

With his black robes billowing behind him, Judge Chay Yuen, whose inscrutable stare has pierced me for the last year, enters the court from a side door.

I have been through being raided by the Singapore police in August 2010, the freezing of all associated bank accounts, effectively paralysing the company, formal arrest in March 2012 for conspiracy to cheat 86 investors of US$2.4 million, which will later be reduced to cheating 18 investors of US$745,000, and a trial that's been ongoing for over a year.

Today the judge will deliver his verdict
for a crime that never happened.

Stepping up to his podium, he seats himself and the court follows suit. Arranging his papers, pausing, and surveying the courtroom, he nods to the clerk of the court.

"Will the defendants please stand".

Heart hammering, pulse beating like an anvil, I stand.

Up until this moment I had believed in the
infallibility of my own innocence:

"In the matter of the Public Prosecutor versus Goldring, Timothy Nicholas and Others for the offence of Conspiracy to Cheat under section 109 of the Criminal Procedure Code, I find Goldring, Timothy Nicholas guilty as charged and hereby sentence him to seven years' imprisonment.

Leave to appeal is granted pending application within 14 days and the posting of a further surety of SG$50,000 in cash"

I have heard the words, but I can't process their meaning.

Does he mean me?

He's looking straight at me and his mouth
is moving, so yes, he means me.

The realisation is an instant plunge from a high building.

I am in freefall through my own worst nightmares.

Numb with shock, I am dimly aware of the Deputy Public Prosecutor, who has immediately jumped to her feet.

An ex-Major of the US Army Legal Corp, she is an aggressive wannabe hotshot Singapore public prosecutor: a tall, skinny, stringy, hatchet-faced, washed-out-blonde. Her Mid-West nasal drawl is like two rusty metal plates rasping together.

I've listened to her grating voice for 12 months; picking apart the loose threads of testimony from timid witnesses, rearranging facts to suit her case, covering and evading truths, sneering at me when she returns to the prosecution table, high-fiving her colleague and, in a stage whisper, saying, "See, that's how it's done – prosecution 101!"

I remember her sly, knowing smile, when, on day one of the trial, the judge allowed the prosecution their opening statement but refused to allow the defence theirs.

The resulting, one-sided reports on the TV news channels and press headlines the next day signalled a sharp escalation in the vilification of the company and its directors.

Collectively and silently, the media of Singapore was mouthing, "GUILTY!"

The political leadership of Singapore is notoriously thin-skinned.

For years it has fostered a sophisticated press control regime that best suits their pragmatic "political" ideas.

It is a leadership that, over the last 50-odd years, has had no serious challenge, based on ideas that largely revolve around a belief in the superiority of their own executive leadership.

This has allowed it to control the media and limit freedom of speech and ideas.

She is passionately demanding, "Your honour, the State objects, in the interest of the public; the sentence is too low and should be 12 to 14 years!"

This is about public bloodletting, and the judge sees it for what it is.

In a neutral tone, he responds, “Leave to appeal sentencing and prepare new sentencing guidelines is granted to both parties.”

With the blood roaring in my ears, I close my eyes for five seconds; when I open them, the police are leading me out of the dock.

Numb with shock and robotically complicit, with my hands pulled behind my back, the painful bite of handcuffs gives me a brief jolt of cognizance.

After being escorted through a small side door, I am told to sit and wait.

Elapsed time: two minutes.

As I wait, my world implodes.

So many things are screaming for attention: wife, children, mother, money, houses, business, happiness, tomorrow, health, reputation.

Like falling timbers of a burning building collapsing into ruin, my life’s construct is being gutted.

I struggle to organise a semblance of control over my consciousness and find plan B.

But I can’t.

A million-year-old algorithm has kicked in.

Heart rate rising rapidly, muscles tensing, bowels churning, the feral instinct of fight or flight floods me with adrenaline and cortisol.

But there is nothing to fight.

There is nowhere to flee to.

Handcuffed and sitting motionless in a chair, my body begins to metabolise the fear and I freeze.

Somewhere, out of sight and out of mind, I am aware of the synthetic hiss of a sliding door, through which my life is passing, down an endless passageway that leads only to certainty of outcome.

This is the beginning of a level of stress and anxiety so deep, that over the next few months it almost kills me.

There is no plan B.

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I know this because I have been taken down to a lock-up below the courthouse.

At the shabby counter, the handcuffs are removed and, through the opening of a barred, Plexiglas window, a bored police officer asks for all my personal belongings.

I hand over my Apple iPhone, which is turned off with the SIM card removed, money clip with $170 in cash, credit card holder with bank card, UK driving license and Singapore employment pass.

They are catalogued, sealed in a large envelope with my name and case number, then endorsed with my inked thumbprint.

The lime green paint on the walls leading to the small, dilapidated cell to which I am being led is peeling.

The bars of the cell are worn smooth; in places abraded by the sweat and oil of thousands of pairs of helpless, grasping hands.

The door swings open and its standing room only.

Twenty other small, slight men regard me with curiosity; I notice the vacant, expressionless gaze from their wide-open eyes, the whites of which accentuate the darkness of their skin.

Having also been sentenced, they are, like me
waiting to be transported to Changi Prison.

Most of them are Indian and Bangladeshi workers
who have overstayed their work visa.

Later, I learn the penalty for overstaying can be a fine up to
$6,000, six months in prison and three strokes of the cane.

When they have served their sentence, if they are unable
to pay for their flight back home, they are sent to a
transit camp, "employed", typically by a construction
company, and allowed day release to work.

The employer garnishes their wages on behalf
of the Ministry of Home Affairs; only when the
garnished amount is equivalent to the cost of their
air ticket, are they released and deported.

There is a squat toilet in the corner with a
water bucket for hand cleaning; my bowels are
churning, and sphincter muscles pulsing, but
it's too dirty and too public for me to use.

Standing motionless by the door, the other prisoners
stare at me; there is no hostility: only idle curiosity.

The sight of one of the ancestors of their once
colonial governors, now humbled to the same status
as themselves, creates a benign spectator sport.

Later, I learn that, out of the 11,000 inmates housed
in Changi Prison, around 50 are Caucasian.

After an hour, we are taken from the lock-up;
one by one we are cuffed, with hand and ankle
combination restraints; in single file, in a comical
walk-shuffle, we awkwardly board the prison bus.

I have finally stepped too far over the white picket fence
of myself, and I am in freefall, toward a landscape where
an alliance of bewilderment and fear is producing a slow,

shocked, dazed, dumb awareness of the traumatic events that are unfolding, events which I am utterly powerless to prevent.

There is a mantra in my head: “O rose thou art sick…”

And I feel something in me start to die.

The bus, with its blacked-out windows, has picked up prisoners from other locations and is already half full.

Inside, we are seated on long plastic benches,
with a central chain threaded through each
inmate’s ankle cuffs, to secure us.

The contracted security staff have cuffed me wrongly
and too tightly, with my hands behind my back, and
palms together rather than palms facing outward.

The pain in my shoulders is excruciating.

As the doors are closing, I protest for relief:

“No talking, no talking on bus. Quiet!
No talking. Big trouble”.

And I am ignored.

I endure this for the slow, torturous, one-hour journey
to Changi Prison; shallow breathing relieves the pain by
preventing the rib cage from expanding and pulling the
shoulder sockets; this causes bouts of hyperventilation as,
desperate for oxygen, my lungs force deep bellyfuls of air.

The pain is immediate, electric and intense.

Every stop, start and bump in the road is
agonising and I almost black out.

Dimly aware, I see many of the prisoners on the
bus are cuffed hands in front, palms together.

Sitting relatively comfortably, cradling asthma
inhalers, they whisper to one another.

I have a vague memory that less than 10% of any population suffer from asthma – among this group of prison inmates, it's almost 60%.

I wonder at such a sickly group.

Later, I learn that these inmates are multi-timers who know the ropes; if they declare themselves as asthmatic (for which there is no medical test), they can have access to their inhalers, and their records are marked "FRONT CUFF ONLY".

I am casually advised by the comfortably cuffed multi-timer sitting opposite me to declare myself as asthmatic.

I am too proud and too principled to do this, although later, with much more style, I stage the mock recurrence of an "old shoulder injury", which I act out with Shakespearean drama.

The prison doctor is impressed; my diagnosis is a severely torn rotator cuff and he marks me "FRONT CUFF ONLY".

After a final series of stops and starts, the bus arrives, and the doors are opened. I am in so much pain, I need help to get down the steps of the bus, which has stopped in a large, covered garage, big enough to receive several buses.

We are led in single file through a side door into a large reception area three times the size of a school gym.

After we line up alongside a waist-high metal barrier, the handcuffs are removed; rubbing life back into blue, swollen wrists and hands, and sobbing with relief, I profusely thank the prison staffer, who looks at me blankly.

The sniffer dogs are released and they start their busy, enthusiastic search for drugs.

Dizzy with the respite from pain and with some feeling returning to my hands I am desperate for "normal"; I stoop to pet the lovely springer spaniel who is busily sniffing my shoes and clothing.

Mistake.

With a loud cry, in a heartbeat, I am pinned across the metal railing by two officers.

“Don’t touch dogs! Don’t touch dogs!” They shout.

Normal has gone forever.

There are two busloads of inmates ahead of us; the concrete floor is a checkerboard of painted yellow boxes in which inmates sit, silently awaiting prison induction.

It’s fully occupied.

After an hour, I am sitting in a yellow box.

The “no talking” rule and avoidance of any eye contact between inmates, generate a tense, wary atmosphere.

After two hours, my name is called.

“Goldring, Timothy Nicholas”

Question after question follows:

“Full name?

“Age.”

“Date of birth?”

“IC or passport number?”

“Nationality?”

“Ethnicity?”

“Religion?”

“Next of kin?”

“Father’s name?”

“Mother’s name?”

“Living or dead?”

“Brothers?”

“Sisters?”

“Names and ages?”

“Living or dead?”

“Marital status?”

“Spouse’s name and age?”

“Children?”

“Names and ages?”

“Your sexual orientation?”

“Communicable diseases?”

“Medical conditions?”

“Prescriptive medication?”

“Special dietary requirements?”

“Smoker or non-smoker?”

“Drug or substance dependency?”

“HIV or hepatitis?”

“Literacy – can I read and write?”

“Any disabilities?”

“History of mental illness in self or family?”

“Gang affiliations, past or present?”

“Scars or tattoos?”

“Shoe size?”

“Clothing size?”

Ink and electronic fingerprint.

My prison number is 10565/2014.

(This means that I am the 10,565th long-term prisoner, meaning I have more than a one-year sentence, since 2011)

I am told it's very important to remember this number.

"Move to one side.

"Strip to be searched."

With my eyes cast down, naked, hands cupped between legs and with four other men I am instructed to lift my armpits for inspection, bend forward to have my hair and ears searched, squat once, squat twice and cough, bend and spread my buttocks for anal cavity inspection, lift the soles of both feet, and spread and wiggle toes.

"Pick up your clothes, move to one side."

Still naked, carrying my clothes and feeling exposed, I am aware of several handlers with German Shepherd dogs on short tight leashes.

The dogs, impatient for the work for which they have been trained, scan the lines in unison with their handlers.

I look down at my genitals; they are shrunken small and retracted.

I look at the long canine incisor teeth, the wet, pink, lolling tongue of the nearest German Shepherd, and realise what its bite radius could do to my exposed area if it is set on me.

The blood roars in my ears again and I experience a gut level of fear and vulnerability I have never known, not even that time in Nigeria many years ago, on my way to a TV studio interview.

My mind strobes a series of flash images:

Driving around a suspiciously quiet ring road.

We are stopped at an army check point.

My driver jumps out and flees into the forest.

Opening the window to a scruffily dressed soldier:

"This is special toll road sir, you must pay," he demands. "It's $300 sir."

All I can see are the white teeth of his broad smile, the tribal scars on his cheeks and his mirror sunglasses reflecting my irritation.

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm not paying $300!" I snort.

Before I can work out what's happening, his pistol is at my lips, its cold black metal knocking my teeth, forcing my mouth open.

He raises his mirror sunglasses and says quietly, "It is a good idea sir pays."

I look in his eyes, the whites of which are red, pupils the size of a full stop and I know in an instant this drug-crazed soldier will shoot me.

Reaching for my wallet, shaking with fear and looking down at the front of my trousers, I realise my bladder has, of its own accord, emptied.

The skin tightens around my scrotum; I feel emasculated and ashamed of my fear.

I can't hear words through the roaring in my ears, I lip-read and follow the gesture to move on.

Instructions filter slowly through an echo chamber into my mind:

"Move forward for doctor, clothes on the table."

Imagining I can smell the hot, wet, iron breath of the German Shepherd dog, my sense of vulnerability heightens and I have a strong desire to urinate.

One by one, we step forward for an almost wordless medical examination conducted by a prison doctor and several male nurses (babas) in their pale blue tunics: body temperature, open mouth, spatula and pen torch, pull down eyes, peer into ears, stethoscope chest and back, stomach palpation, cough, genital examination, height and weight, check for needle track marks on fore-arms, legs and between toes, urine sample, blood pressure.

“BP is 145/95, mark for check-up within five days”.

X-ray.

“Move on!”

Check and photograph for any tattoos. (I have none)

Check and photograph body scars.

I hand my clothes to an inmate orderly, who catalogues, bags and seals them, before passing them to an officer who labels the bag with my name, prison number and the date.

“Move on!”

Prison wear is handed out by working inmates
under an officer’s supervision:

“Shorts, blue, size large – three in number.”

“T-shirts, white, size large -three in number.”

“Plastic flip-flop, size 8 – one in number.”

“Plastic drinking mug – one in number.”

“Five-litre plastic bucket and lid – one in number.”

“Washcloth, white – one in number.”

“Soap bar – one in number.”

“Plastic spoon – one in number.”

“Toothbrush and paste – one each in number.”

“Tikar mat – one in number.”

“Blankets – two in number.”

“Toilet roll – one in number.”

“Large white plastic box with lid – one in number.”

“Thumbprint here as received.”

“Get dressed.”

“Pack and pick up your box.”

“Move on.”

Photograph front face, left profile, right profile.

A blue plastic band is generated from a portable labelling machine and permanently fixed to my left wrist.

It shows my name, prison number and a barcode; I am told that this wristband must NEVER be removed.

I am given a small postcard-sized rectangle of paper.

This is my cell docket, on which is my photo, prison number, name, sentence term, ethnicity, nationality, religion, dietary restrictions (if any), commencement of sentence and allowing for a reduction for good behaviour, my earliest date of release or E.D.R.

Today is 11 June 2014.

Once again, I sense the smooth, invisible, silent turning of wheels, the synthetic hiss of sliding doors, which lead down the endless passageway through which my life is being siphoned; that certainty of outcome is now written in black and white.

My earliest date of release or E.D.R. reads: “11th March 2019”.

******

“Wait over by the wall.”

"This side of the yellow line."

"Squat down."

"No sitting on boxes."

"No leaning against the wall."

There are no clocks, so I don't know what the time is.

I glimpse an officer's watch and see that
it's ten past seven in the evening.

Over the last nine hours, my life has
changed beyond recognition.

Having been dislocated from the outside world,
there is a whole new dimension of fear and
unhappiness that I never knew existed.

I have arrived on a bleak and barren inner landscape;
the only sensory inputs are distant shafts of light on
the periphery of an abandoned consciousness.

My abandoned consciousness, like my life, no longer
has meaning; like a wheel-less rusting, jacked-up car
on cinderblocks, it is useless and has no purpose.

It just happens to be there; I just happen to be here.

An officer points to four of us to follow him.

We walk, carrying our box full of newly issued gear,
mat and pail for ten minutes; down long, wide, empty
concrete passageways, through numerous sliding,
electronic doors, past central monitoring and control
stations, dimly lit by multiple CCTV screens, through
a high, sliding, electronically controlled, barred gate
into an open-plan, two-storey, prison wing.

On the ground floor, there are rows of cells on the right-
and left-hand sides; a central metal staircase accesses the
next floor, which has a duplicate arrangement of cells.

The officer stops outside the second cell on the left, quietly speaks into the communicator on his lapel, and the cell door clicks open.

After being instructed to slide our cell dockets into the plastic frame outside, we enter the cell.

Since all inmates sleep on the floor, protocol demands flip-flops are always removed before entering.

My left foot feels wet and sticky; as I remove my flip-flops, I see it is bleeding badly.

The thong on the plastic flip-flops, which fits between the first two toes, has a sharp ridge from the cheap injection moulding tool used to produce them.

It has sliced into the tender ridge of skin between my toes.

Barefoot, and hobbling so as not to leave bloody footprints on the floor, I enter the cell with box and sleeping mat, followed by the other three inmates.

There is just enough room to allow four tikar sleeping mats to be unrolled and placed side by side, domino-style, giving each man a sleeping area of two meters by one meter with a small space between.

At the end of the cell, hidden by a waist-high modesty wall, is a squat toilet with a shower lip protruding at head height from the wall above it.

I hobble to the shower, wash the blood from my foot and clean the flip-flop. Then I stuff a piece of precious toilet tissue between the cleft of my toes to stem the bleeding.

Over the months it hardens into a thick callous.

Dinner was at five o’clock, and we have missed it.

Instead, we are given four slices of bread with margarine and a bottle of water.

I drink the water, but can’t eat.

I use the squat toilet; since the thin single-ply toilet roll is to last for two weeks, I opt to wet-clean with my left hand.

I shower under tepid water that dribbles from the shower lip, using soap that's a few steps up from rendered animal fat, and that doesn't produce any lather, then dry off with the impossibly small washcloth, which also passes as a towel.

I brush my teeth with a five-inch, short-stemmed toothbrush with a rubber handle (so the handle can't be fashioned into a weapon).

Copying the other inmates, I lay out my tikar mat on the concrete floor, place a blanket on top and roll up the other blanket to pillow my head.

Because there is no space, the four boxes are placed on top of each other in the corner by the door.

My fellow inmates are Singaporean nationals of Indian, Malay and Chinese ethnicity.

Each inmate is an unknown quantity to the other; introductions are cautious with exaggerated courtesy and deference.

Later I will learn that Changi Prison is secular, and C.I.M.O. (Chinese, Indian, Malay, and Other) is the preferred cell ratio, preventing one ethnicity from dominating a cell, and thus inhibiting bullying and promoting the positive Singapore idea of a multi-racial and harmonious society.

I give my bread to them.

They speak good English and want to know who I am, what I have done, and how long my sentence is.

Dumb with shock and fatigue, I have no interest in conversation and I mumble incoherently.

I feel ill.

They talk quietly among themselves.

The Chinese inmate is young and cocky. He has the beginnings of a montage of bright, garish, work-in-progress tattoos on his arms and shoulders.

At the moment his body looks more like an Ordnance Survey map, with its black lines, green blobs and blue dribbles.

Tuning in and out of their talk, I hear him say that he has a 12-month sentence and three strokes of the cane for "Ah Long'" or loansharking enforcement activities.

Later I learn how pervasive and brutal loansharking or unlicensed money lending actually is in Singapore.

There is a quite staggering amount of money out on the street, and it provides a steady stream of highly profitable income for the organised criminal gangs that operate it.

They lend money at extortionate levels of interest to families who don't qualify for bank loans, are gamblers or have substance abuse problems.

If the clients don't pay on time or renege, they send round an enforcer to persuade them of the wisdom of making correct and timely payments, through violence and intimidation.

I was approached late one night in Singapore's Chinatown by a seedy loan shark I met in a bar.

Was I interested investing in a "Family and Friends" loan scheme? For a minimum investment of SG$50,000, I would receive a monthly return of 5%, renewable every twelve months.

I am thankful I declined.

The Malay inmate has been caught smoking marijuana for the third time and sentenced to two years and five strokes of the cane.

The Indian has amassed over $16,000 in various fines, has been bankrupted and is serving a 16-month sentence.

I sit numbly and wordlessly waiting for lights
out, which I am told is 9:00 pm.

The evening cools, and entropy takes over. During
the day, heat is baked into the thick concrete walls
with their steel rebars, by the hot tropical sun.

Now, as it empties out, the room temperature
rises and I am sweating profusely.

As I lie down in my shorts on the concrete floor to sleep,
my body is weak and exhausted; desperate for healing,
it shuts itself down into a semblance of sleep.

I don't sleep, at least I don't think I do.

I am lost, wandering the colourless, dark, empty quarters
of my own mind, looking for a familiar landmark.

There is nothing there, only an alien voice that
turns my earlier mantra into a requiem:

O Rose thou art sick.

The invisible worm,

That flies in the night

In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed

Of crimson joy:

And his dark secret love

Does thy life destroy.

******

When the lights flare on at 6:00 am, it is
like waking up in the dentist's chair

I don’t know if I’ve slept. I have a
headache and feel exhausted.

Sleeping on a concrete floor is impossibly uncomfortable,
my back aches, my shoulders are painful, my
wrists are still bruised, bitten and swollen from the
handcuffs, and my left foot scabbed and swollen.

Having eaten nothing for almost 36 hours, I feel nauseous.

As I step around my seated and reclining cell mates
to shower, one of them points to my face.

As I wipe my nose there is blood on the back of my hand.

I have had a nosebleed during the night.

After showering, rolling up the tikar mat, retrieving
my box and placing my folded blankets on top,
I sit down and wait for the day to begin.

There is a long landscape window above the bathroom,
covered by a sheet of small diamond-patterned
steel mesh, with thick steel bars behind it.

An access corridor runs around the periphery of the cells
to form the outer wall of the prison block with high steel-
barred window openings onto the prison grounds.

It’s just getting light and I can tell by the slanting shadows
of the prison bars on the wall that we are facing southeast.

I feel a flood of gratitude at this simple deduction; realising
part of my mind at least is working, I am thankful for that.

The Malay inmate is a multi-timer who knows the drill.

He explains that at 7:15 am the muster bell rings for the
headcount, and we must be ready with our storage boxes
against the wall, the mug, spoon toothbrush, toothpaste laid
out on top of the lid in the prescribed manner, as shown on
the diagram pasted to the back of the cell door, and tikar mats

rolled up behind the box. Then we have to stand up in T-shirt and shorts, hands behind our back ready for headcount.

When the officer opens the small, head-high speakeasy door and looks through the glass, we should say in unison: “Good morning, sir” (or ma’am if it’s a female officer).

The three inmates sit cross-legged on the floor, talking quietly to each other, occasionally looking at me.

“You big cheating ang moh?” one of them asks.

I conclude it’s a question, rather than an accusation.

Ang moh is a term used in parts of Southeast Asia to describe a white person; depending on how it is used, it can be neutral or mildly derogatory. (It is derived from the Chinese Min Nan which means “person of Western descent”, or, literally, “red hair”.)

I look at them vacantly and give a shoulder shrug.

I don’t want to talk to anyone.

The muster bell rings; having arranged our boxes and put on our t-shirts (“Make sure you tuck in!” hisses the multi-timer) we stand up. The small speakeasy door opens:

“Good morning, sir!” they chant while I simply mouth the words – I can’t do it yet.

An officer gives a brief glance into the cell, closes the speakeasy door, and moves on

I’m loving this.

It’s my favourite thing ever.

The chant of “Good morning, sir”, echoes and attenuates through the prison wing with varying degrees of enthusiasm as the officer moves down the cell block.

Ten minutes later, the narrow food hatch at the very bottom of the door, which is wide enough to allow a food tray to pass in and out of the cell, slams open.

There is something demeaning and humiliating about being forced to kneel with your face almost on the floor to receive your food.

Later, I will realise it's one small cog in the subtle engine of intimidation that is part of everyday prison life.

Meals are served by the "prison cookies": inmates who work on the cell block.

Laying a plastic box lid by the food hatch, we pass out our mugs for tea –three-in-one instant tea with powdered milk and sugar.

A hand sheathed in a plastic catering glove, passes in four slices of white bread and jam for each inmate onto the box lid.

I eat a slice, taste the jam, and realise that, whatever fruit this is supposed to be, it's never been on a bush or a tree.

I hear the cookie excitedly calling "Ang moh, ang moh, big cheating ang moh" through the food hatch.

Later, I learn prison is a boring place full of gossip and speculation, and it's rare for a white man to be incarcerated.

The name of our business, Profitable Plots was well known in Singapore and Southeast Asia through our extensive TV advertising on the ESPN Sports Network which covered all of ASEAN, from Indonesia up to North Vietnam. Our infamous demise was equally well covered through TV and newspaper coverage; I will learn my case has been enthusiastically followed by many other inmates.

This was not through newspapers, which are heavily censored in Changi, but through word of mouth from family prison visitors.

It appears that my arrival had been eagerly anticipated in some quarters.

There is a healthy respect for a white man who appears to have cheated Singaporeans and other Asian citizens out of tens of millions of dollars, hidden the money, been caught for less than a million, and imprisoned for seven years (with a one-third reduction for good behaviour), and will then go back to Europe and enjoy what's been hidden away.

I will tell them that none of this is true, I have not cheated anyone, there is no hidden money, and I am innocent.

They will look at me, smile, nod wisely and say:

"Yes, we know, everyone in here is innocent."

I will get competing offers to go on the "plastic" when I am released and back in London.

The "plastic" means cloned credit cards, which are used once only to buy high-value (designer) items, usually to order, then resold at 50% below retail price. Upon delivery to a specified UK address, I would get 7% of the resale value as a commission.

Later, I will be approached in the prison yard by Charlie, a dapper Chinese man who, even though he is shirtless with his thin pigeon chest and blue baggy prison shorts, still looks like an accountant.

He tells me that, to start with, I will be given ten cards each week with credit limits of £15,000 each and provided with a list of items to purchase. Was I interested? A quick bit of mental arithmetic tells me that's a commission of over £5,000 a week.

This is the last thing I am interested in; I tell him I am not a criminal and am not interested.

"Ah," says Charlie smiling and showing his gold teeth:

"You clever ang moh! Okay; 10%."

But I am not there yet, this is day two; my life has been ripped apart. Mentally and emotionally, I am in a world of pain.

Physically I feel unwell.

The headache is still there, the fast twitch muscles around my eye are jumping, and the pulse in my neck is throbbing.

The lights go off at 9:00 am, there is little natural daylight, and we sit in the dim cell.

Looking around, it's like an abandoned school classroom: chipped paint, crude scratching, graffiti, and dirty finger marks on the wall. There is a damp unwashed smell of moisture leaching through concrete, and black mould growing around the walls and floor of the stainless-steel squat toilet.

An antiquated air duct intermittently puffs in tepid air, which heads straight for the meshed window above the bathroom.

Mid-morning, an officer opens the cell door and tells us that after lunch we will be moved to permanent cells.

He tells me it's forbidden to sit on the storage box.

At midday, the lights go on and the afternoon muster bell sounds; we stand for the headcount.

Same procedure as before.

"Good afternoon, sir."

I am still loving this.

Lunch arrives through the food hatch; four green, covered plastic trays and four apples.

A tray is passed to me; removing the lid, I see that one large compartment is filled with a great heap of white rice, the narrow one with two large cubes of plain, cold tofu and the two small compartments with boiled greens and chilli sauce.

It's not good; in fact, it's disgusting.

I eat the greens and the apple.

After lunch, after retrieving our cell dockets, and carrying our belongings in the box and with tikar mats, we leave the cell and are individually led away.

I am told I am going to block A2.

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Later, I learn that A1 and A2 are for long-term hardcore offenders.

Apparently, I am considered a hardcore offender.

I don't know whether to be proud or ashamed.

A1 also houses death-row inmates and whole-of-life sentences.

In A2, it is long-term, hardcore offenders.

A3 is the bakery, providing bread for the prison as well as a labour pool for outside contractors.

It also houses inmates with psychiatric problems.

A4 houses the inmate kitchen workers who prepare and cook food for the 11,000 inmates within the Changi Prison complex.

A5 houses laundry workers; there are over 3,000 of them.

It's the largest laundry in Southeast Asia, serving both prison inmates and fulfilling external contracts with Singapore's hospitals.

Tales abound of the occasional finding of Rolex watches and gold jewellery by prison laundry workers in the pockets of the white coats of doctors. Absent-minded as such wealthy professionals are, when they need to examine a patient or scrub up for surgery, they remove their $50,000 platinum Rolex or three-carat diamond ring, put them in the white coat pocket and forget about them.

When they make such a discovery, the honest, conscientious laundry worker, eager to show his feet are planted firmly on the path of reform, hands the valuable item to the duty officer for repatriation to its grateful owner and is rewarded with a can of Coca-Cola.

At least that's the story I am told later by laundry workers I meet.

A5 also houses Section 55 inmates. Section 55 was introduced in 1955 during the colonial era; intended to be a temporary measure, it allowed the British colonial government to hold suspected secret society members or those suspected of sedition without trial for up to 12 months.

It was renewed at the request of the Minister of Home Affairs through the Supreme Court, after Singapore's independence; at this point, the definition of secret societies also grew to include political organisations whose ideas were at odds with the incumbent government.

It is still in force today.

Later, I meet inmates who tell me they have been in prison for over four years without trial, visits from a lawyer or any form of legal recourse.

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After a ten-minute hand-cuffed bus ride within the prison complex and a further ten-minute walk down a maze of corridors, through numerous electronically controlled gates, we arrive at the central control for A2; I am escorted to the third floor and handed over to a resident officer.

There are five floors; each floor has three housing units (HU) known as HU 1, HU 2, and HU 3; each has up to 150 inmates, each floor 450 inmates, totalling 2,250 inmates in A2.

The officer leads me to HU 1, and opens a cell on the ground floor. After posting my cell docket and removing my flip-flops, I carry my gear in, and the door closes behind me.

There are two other inmates: one Indian, and one Chinese; it's after lunch and both are asleep.

Later I learn it's prohibited for two men to share a cell.

The prohibition comes from an old British colonial-era law, yet to repealed at the time, that prohibited sex between men.

As noiselessly as possible, I put down my box, unroll the tikar mat between the two others, take off my t-shirt and lie down.

I think perhaps I can sleep; I run my hand under my nose and see blood spots on the back of my hand.

"It must be dust," I think to myself.

I lie down and start to drift into sleep.

I am asleep for less than a few minutes, jolted awake I feel something on my crotch.

I look down at the Indian inmate next to me; seemingly asleep he has turned over onto his back and his hand is on my crotch.

My nervous system is wrapped tight as it is; with my blood boiling with adrenaline and cortisol, I have no control.

In an instant, I am up and on him, sitting across his chest, pinning down his arms, I put my teeth a few inches from his nose:

"Touch me again and l will bite your fucking nose off," I scream in his face.

His eyes, which are now wide open, fill with terror.

At the same time, the other inmate is up, has pressed the emergency intercom and is shouting:

"Fight, fight, fight!"

I stand up in shock, trembling from head to foot;
I am not a violent man – what am I doing?

The inmate is looking up at me in horror and I notice a wet patch on his shorts, liquid is seeping onto his tikar mat.

Out of fear, he has wet himself.

I am appalled and ashamed.

At the same time, the door flies open and three
officers with extended batons rush in, haul me
out of the cell, and push me down outside:

"Squat down, face the wall, hands behind
head, don't move, don't speak!" they shout,
towering over me, and hemming me in.

They handcuff me, none too gently. They drag me up and frogmarch me out of HU1 into HU3. There, they take me to the furthest cell; the door opens and I glimpse a very small space, with no windows, and a squat toilet; I am uncuffed, and commanded to step in, then the door slams behind me.

It's pitch black and I can see nothing.

A few minutes later, the door opens again, light spills in and my box, tikar mat, t-shirt, pail and flip-flops are passed to me. Then, like a waterproof bulkhead, the door slams shut.

Alone, sitting in the darkness, my eyes try to adjust.

I am shaking, and the pulse is throbbing in my
neck; from fear and self-loathing, I vomit.

The hot bile spills onto my lap, down my legs, onto the floor.

I am aware that I am blacking out; just
before I do the thought occurs to me:

Perhaps I am dying.