

CHAPTER 1 – “SILVER BRACELETS”

"Wake up! So late already still sleeping! You think this is hotel ah!!"...

My Mum's dreadful chastisement rudely woke me up from slumber. 10 in the morning was awfully early for a weekend wake up call. I was pissed.

"Wah lau!! Why can't a guy get some precious sleep? Don't you dare talk to me like that!!!" I yelled with my eyes half closed. I quickly got myself out of bed with a fit of rage and walked into the living room. I looked at my mum with anger and searched the room for something to vent my anger on. There was my mum's favourite fine porcelain on our precious teak table staring directly at me. I grabbed the fine porcelain vase and it rocketed itself from my launching hands towards my parents' precious living room mirror. The broken fragments splintered throughout the room, echoing the ongoing household war. Property damage after all is not the exclusive act of notorious vandals. It does have its lower end domestic versions too. And I was every bit its epitome.

"Glenn Lim, how dare you behave like a rogue!" my mum was irritably helpless in her screaming.

"Yah la! I'm daring. Got problem, is it?! Want some more? Take this!"

It was February 1987 and the World Cup had just ended a few months ago. But now, football furniture began as I kicked the dining table. The delicate crockery set came crashing down, made useless by my anger. My moment of rage had made my parents a few thousand dollars poorer in value. I felt truly powerful.

At times like these, even God's personal presence would not have been enough to appease me. I was young and turbulent. I was a rebel and was proud of it. I just wanted to take it out on my parents. The whole place was in a mess. Dad and brother were staring at me. It was obvious that to them, I was a violent animal unleashed.

I was totally unbothered about their ratings of me. My stubbornness was my glory. I continued hurling curses at my parents. Yet, there was a worry in me that I was not about to stop at that. Perhaps, a more vicious action was on the way. It seemed to everyone, including me, that I was losing control.

My fury was just then halted in its tracks by the police siren. It was a rather unfamiliar strangeness. The posh and serene neighbourhood of Seletar Hills was unaccustomed to the loud siren of the police car. Maybe, a burglary attempt was on at one of my filthy rich neighbours' homes. Ignoring that, I carried on feuding with my parents. I lay my hands on a piece of Malaccan silverware, its intended target, the big TV screen in front of me.

Car doors slammed. The siren stopped nearby. It was much too close for comfort. I could see men in blue hastily arriving at the front. My dad quickly rushed towards them. He seemed worried. After a few exchanges, the police left. I was bemused. Why did they come and leave so soon? Anyway it was not my business. I guessed they had come to the wrong house. I resumed shouting at my family. Seconds later, the mild screech of a halting car was heard. This time, it came from the back of my house. Peering towards my backdoor, I saw the men in blue yet again. They were walking towards my home! It dawned on me just then that I was the target of their rare intrusion into the neighbourhood.

My worst fears were realised. My parents had set me up. I placed my silverware 'missile' back on the table and calmed myself. This was probably my parents' latest attempt at new scare tactics. I

looked at them scornfully, indicating with a sly grin that they would be in for double trouble should I be arrested and locked up. I was confused as the “blues” dutifully approached my home. It was like a movie in slow motion and I felt like a victim. I knew I was naughty and rebellious like most teens but I had not considered the possibility of an arrest for such actions. My parents had too much pride to admit their wrong. I was firmly convinced that the infamous “demon” in me was created by them.

What was going to be my fate? My ‘O’ levels were a few months away and I was confident of escaping the cell. Although I felt that this was all a part of the new intimidation tactics used by my folks, something in me was alerting that this was for real. My family were in conversation with the policemen. Their almost silent discussion aroused my anxious curiosity. Were my parents in this together or were they trying to save their son from trouble?

“Glenn Lim, you are required to follow us to the police station,” said one of the lanky police officers. I was taken aback for a moment. My world came to a standstill. I wanted to reason out with the officer but words failed me when I opened my mouth. My vocal chords felt trapped and unable to act. I was very sure that I had not committed any serious crime. It certainly could not have been for the breaking of the stupid mirror! Was this meant to correct me? Well if it was, it seemed to be working pretty well thus far. The most embarrassing possibility dawned on me. My parents could have chickened out of directly facing me on the “battle ground”. They were now using the law to tie me down. I was probably too wild for them. Was condemning me to confinement their last resort in trying to control me? Maybe they had given up on me. My parents had lost faith in their son?! My head was bloated with so many conflicting thoughts.

I gave one hard cold stare at my family members and soon the silver bracelets were strapped around my hands. I felt victimised. I felt like a criminal. Was I? I did not think of myself as such, but then everything around me made me feel that way. I was sternly ushered into the police car. My heart sank as I slowly turned and looked around. As the patrol car drove away, my family and house slowly disappeared from my sight. I wished I was never born to such parents in the first place.

Upon arriving at the Paya Lebar Police Station, the Investigation Officer (IO) interviewed me. He did not appear too stern but his firmness proved his position. He served me dinner. He was not as scary as I would have actually imagined. I was so hungry but could not make myself eat that night as frustration overwhelmed me. I did not know why my parents had done this and what was going to happen to me. I just shoved the packet of food the IO brought aside, without even knowing what it was. I was feeling sick of everything. The IO then informed me with a straight face that I was bound for a new destination that night.

“Glenn Lim, we’d be sending you to a teenage hostel tonight. Hopefully, that should shape you up.”

“Teenage what?!” I exclaimed, with a helplessly questioning shock reflecting on my wry face.

“HOSTEL, but only for boys!!” he retorted.

“I’m sure you teenage boys want to mingle freely with girls and try your stunts there but I’m sorry to inform you that it’s an all boys’ institution,” he gave me a sarcastic grin and left.

I sat down in solitude and stared blankly at the ceiling. The stark grimly lit lockup was a far cry from my brightly well-furnished room at home. I was not in the least comfortable. But, what the heck! I preferred the deep blue sea to the Devil! It felt good just being away from my “hell hole”. Anywhere was great so long as it was a “million miles” away from my parents. Besides home, all

else was paradise. Even if I were sleeping on a dirty pavement lying on top of an old torn newspaper and braving the fickle weather, I would have gladly accepted it.

What was it going to be like in the Teenage Hostel? I had heard that places like these would be tough to be in. Not that I was not tough, but, such a place was often notoriously publicised for frequent fist-fights and rowdy bashes followed by isolation and “cold turkey” treatment. The “newbies” on board are often ordered to perform nasty “heroics” as part of their initiation rites to please the seniors. The transition was going to be tough for me. Coming from my background, I was hoping to be pampered by my new peers. But then, who was I to demand that my prayers be answered? Even my parents had let me down. Their pride was more a priority to them than their son, so much so that the police were told to come and get me through the backdoor for fear of the family losing face. The entire neighbourhood looked up to my family. To my family, honour was probably the most important thing. Everything else, including me, was secondary. Pride and prestige were more important than people, including their own children. This was one of the causes for my disgust.

I chuckled mockingly at my situation. In reality, I ran the risk of being an outcaste even amongst outcastes. Could I stand up against the bigger boys? Did I have the self-control to perform lowly tasks? Embarrassing thoughts flooded my mind. Bullying scenes from prison-based movies flashed in front of me. My stomach churned in worry. I was not the kind to take movies too seriously. But I could not help it then. I did not feel good at all.

The sound of footsteps began to gain momentum. They got louder with each second. Could there be more “outstanding” individuals like me being escorted to this “pleasant” chamber? Or could it be that the time had arrived for me to leave for the dreaded Teenage Hostel?

“Oiii! Get up!” a mean voice rang out. I slowly lifted my tucked head from my arms and rose to my feet. I saw two men standing outside the cell looking at me. I was reminded of two lions waiting to pounce on a weak prey.

“We are taking you to another place,” one of the “lions” remarked. With a big mole on his wrinkled face, he looked like a pirate I had encountered in the fables from my childhood reading days. The only missing feature was the eye patch.

“Huh? Where ah?” I asked him rather curiously.

“Somewhere and don’t ask too many questions ok!” he replied bluntly.

He was definitely not in the best of moods. But this was no Christmas to deserve a Santa Claus. I was not going to the Ritz Carlton. Why would anyone smile and roll out the red carpet for me? I was a delinquent, not a diplomat. I could not expect royal hospitality from these guys. I just hoped they would not shove me around. I honestly told myself that I had my limits for allowing myself to be abused. Was I triggering the best of my personal control? I was clearly confused.

Seated in a small white van, it felt good to leave the cell at the end of that very same day. It was already 9 pm. I was quite enthusiastic when I got into the van. Boy was I glad to leave the station! It was such a bore. I had seemed an exciting exhibit for the police personnel there, a living example of a teenage life gone off-road. The two “lions” had arrived rather abruptly into my atmosphere and had not sufficiently introduced themselves. I decided to probe further for details of their identity and driving destination. Not that these were circus lions meant for my entertainment but I just could not remain quiet in their uneasily silent mobile “den”. I wanted to be prepared for the conditions to follow as part of the next chapter of my destiny. And these men were the only ones who could give me information.

“Sorry Sir, but could I know which hostel the both of you are taking me to?” I asked rather too politely for my own natural comfort, knowing well that being courteous could well get me into their good books.

“Teen Challenge,” one of them retorted.

“What?” I asked quite surprised. I did not actually know what it meant. Was he telling me the destination or was he just being sarcastic? He did not speak further and just kept mum throughout the drive. I felt like a prisoner condemned to the gallows for murder. It was silent throughout and the night was chilly as the windows had been wound down. The cold breeze seemed to aggravate the situation. Where was I going? What was going to happen to me? I felt tormented. Was my stubborn nature the cause of my problems? I was not viewing my experience with relish. Although I felt fearless in almost all trials and tribulations, I had the hunches that life at my destination was not going to be rosy.

While peeping out of the window, with the chilly breeze caressing my face, I suddenly noticed something fairly large lying on the road. Although it was dark and I could not initially figure out what it was, as the van got closer, I realised that it was a dead fox terrier. It had been run over by a vehicle. It was a ghastly sight. The poor dog’s blood-drenched dead body lay miserably with its organs splattered all over the road. It had died a horrible death. An ounce of sympathy ran through my veins.

I leaned back on the heavily cushioned seat, closed the window and looked away in disgust. Sign of things to come? Again my mind started darting about the incidents that were at the background of my journey. Was my life about to end like the fox terrier’s? Yes, I had outfoxed many teachers and even my parents. I was labelled “A Smart Rascal”. What else to expect?! I had scored 4 A-stars for my PSLE. But was this sly fox reaching the end of its exploits? I hoped not, well at least not in a tragic way like the condemned carcass I had just seen.

“Honkkkk!!!” The car horn blared as the driver abruptly downed his gear. Hopefully it was not another dog running across the street “inviting” drivers to knock it down.

“We are here!” said the driver, quite relieved to end the boredom of his long uneventful drive. The van proceeded into Rochester Park and passed a big arrowed signboard, the details of which missed my eyes.

“Huh? We are where?” I queried, very much anxious to confirm the worst.

“Teen Challenge, my dear young man,” he said with a pleasant smile on his face. His smile came as a momentary relief for me. This was the first time he had even smiled! He was probably relieved to soon get rid of me. Well, the feeling was considerably mutual actually.

Finally, they had shown me my “Paradise”. I saw the board outside. It read ‘TEEN CHALLENGE’. So, it was the name of the Teenage Hostel and not a sarcastic remark after all. There were two big buildings. I felt a slight churn in my stomach yet again. It was quite queasy. I was certainly not welcoming of the whole Teen Challenge idea. But I was prepared to stay away from home, wherever it may be.

The song ‘Hotel California’ by ‘The Eagles’, came into my recollection when the van drove through the gates of Teen Challenge. It was one of my favourite songs. The lyrics came to my mind immediately.

“You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave!”

Well I hoped that "Hotel" Teen Challenge would not resemble or portray those lyrics at all. I wanted to not just check out but also leave anytime. Somehow, I started disliking the song from that moment on. I hoped it was not "Hotel California"! I kept my fingers crossed.

-----END OF CHAPTER ONE-----

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