FAILING UP

A Professor's Odyssey of Flunking, Determination, and Hope

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There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.
Leonard Cohen

Part One

SPIRIT LEVEL

Chapter 1
FLATS

Home is one's birthplace, ratified by memory.
~ Henry Anatole Grunwald

"Wake up! Wake up NOW!"

"What, Mā? I was asleep," I pry open my eyelids in protest, "it's two in the morning."

"Get up!" Māma jerks Jennifer and Phillip from side to side.

I drag my sleepy feet into the kitchen and pretend to open my heavy eyes while Winston walks in the front door after his late shift at McDonald's.

"Your Bà didn't come home again," Māma laments. "He has gone off with another woman. I can't take this anymore! A leopard never changes its spots. I have had enough!"

I try to make sense of what Māma is getting at as she summons all of us to gather by the toilet door.

Crammed between my siblings, I can barely see what Māma is doing. When I finally squeeze through from underneath, I see a round tray with five cups of cloudy white liquid filled to the brim. Māma passes a cup to each of us. Mine is so full I spill some, but she doesn't yell at me.

"Drink it up, starting from the oldest. Right now!"

I inhale to see what the cups contain. Bleach. The smell of chlorine is so strong; now I'm awake.

"Yuck, I don't want to drink this," I push it away, but Māma gives that look.

"When your Bàba sees us all lying dead on the floor, he'll be sorry! Drink it up!"

Jennifer, who's a year older than me, releases a screeching cry in rebellion, as Winston, the eldest, shepherds us into the living room, ignoring Māma's hysterical bawling. I clumsily spill more liquid on the floor.

"Never mind, don't worry about it now," Winston says. "Just leave. Quick, hurry."

On the pale blue wall, covered with chipping paint, is a picture of Jesus. Māma hung it there to remind us that Jesus is watching over us, but I'm not sure she believes it herself. While Māma tries to cling to faith, her belief wavers whenever Bàba doesn't come home.

Unruffled, Winston grabs hold of Māma's arms and gestures at her to kneel with us.

"Mā, come. Let's pray. Bà will come home soon. Jesus is watching over him, right? You taught us that." Winston soothes Māma gently like a child until she falls asleep upon the floor.

"Now I'm awake," I yawn and take a deep breath, then catch myself pinching my nose again.

Winston looks at me and points at the floor. "Clean up that spill and pour the bleach back in the bottle."

Jennifer sits in a corner on the floor with her arms wrapped around her legs, nodding herself to sleep. Phillip

crawls back into the bunk bed as if this night is as normal as any other. Just another drill.

Whenever Māma gets this way, Winston, five years my senior, is the one who calms everyone and everything down. I have looked up to him as our protector for as long as I can remember.

Three or four nights later, Māma wakes us up again in the middle of the night. This time she has a pair of large black scissors, the extra-sharp kind that seamstresses use to cut fabric. She directs us to stab ourselves.

"If you stab in the heart," she says, "it'll be a quicker death."

Winston snatches the scissors by the blade, slicing two inches across his palm.

"I'll cut myself for the younger ones," he intercedes. "Don't do this to them, Mā, please don't."

Winston mediates on our behalf, and we're once again spared a mass suicide.

None of this is out of the norm. Māma often awakens us in the middle of the night, between two and four, if Bàba does not come home.

Two nights later, it happens again. This time Māma turns on the gas stove. I didn't even get out of bed. Fortunately, Phillip's sleep is disturbed by the pungent smell. He wakes up and finds Māma kneeling on the kitchen floor, distraught and sobbing.

Although I am only six, I understand that my family is unlike the others in the neighborhood. We are to bury everything within the four walls of our apartment; never to air our dirty laundry in public.

I never have a neighbor kid come over to the apartment because I don't want anyone to find out who I am and what my family is like.

In 1965, five years before I was born, Singapore achieved independence from Malaysia and was struggling to become self-sufficient. Due to land constraints, the government built flats to conserve space and to warehouse the increasing low-income population.

These heavily subsidized government flats still exist today, though they have been remodeled to look more urbanized and architecturally aesthetic. These days, even upper middle-class people reside in these flats because of their convenience, community-like living, proximity to public transportation, and schools. Each community even has its own playground, parking garage, and void deck to hold events.

The Toa Payoh area, where I grew up, was one of the first waves of newer flats completed by the Housing Development Board. To accommodate the masses, a brutalist architecture was chosen. The common height of ten storeys, with twelve units per floor, defines a block. These are simple rectangular slabs with flat roofs, straight walls, and all painted white—a landscape of the modern-day ghetto. A horizontal strip of concrete balconies marks the front of the flat while the back is smeared with bamboo flagpoles of wet laundry—trousers, bras, shirts, and bed sheets—a testament to the life teeming inside.

Sometimes, when the wind is strong, pieces of neighbors' clothes fall from the bamboo sticks because they're not properly secured with clothespins. Jennifer and I sheepishly swoop the stray laundry up from the ground, often soiled and still damp, and rush home to show it off to Māma, as if they're gifts from heaven.

I know we're stealing, but there is no way to return these clothes. We can't tell, from the hundreds of bamboo sticks, to which household they belong.

From the side, the buildings are narrow, a line of identical structures that stand in desolate rows. I suppose in the US these neighborhoods are called projects, like those

in New York City or South Chicago. Picture a plantation with rows of domino-like flats, narrow strips of concrete buildings lined with the occasional bit of greenery. The flooring in each apartment is a slab of gray cement. Ours is covered with two layers of linoleum—the bottom one looks dull, brown, and rotted by termites, while the top has a pink-and-blue floral design.

Our block gets hot water only when we're lucky. Most days the fluorescent lights in the stairwells work, but if they start flickering, it is only a matter of seconds before we hear a bulb burst, leaving the entire floor and stairway pitch dark. When this happens, an air of melancholy surrounds me, further deepening the emptiness and forlornness within me.

In some ways, the intrinsic emptiness of the flats covers up the chaotic lives of the people who live within—prostitutes, lounge singers, waiters, street sweepers, janitors, seamstresses, and construction workers—people who can't afford to live anywhere else.

While the adults in the apartment buildings bear no ill-will toward their children, although some do when they're drunk, they also hold no big dreams for their children. Each family aspires for nothing more than simply making it through another day.

The staircase leading to our fourth-floor apartment is littered with garbage, broken beer bottles, decomposing insects, and occasional human feces. On the off chance the elevator works, it reeks of urine and dead animals.

There's little in the way of sanitation, even less in the way of orderliness. We never eat as a family except on the Eve of Chinese New Year. Families make a point to gather for this special one-night festival. It's my favorite time of year, not so much for the dishes Māma worked all day to prepare, but for the nostalgic aura of being together like a normal family.

After the meal, we each get a red packet from Bàba with some cash inside, usually two dollars for the girls and ten dollars for the boys. This is like candy money; we can get anything we want from the stalls across our block.

Our two-room apartment is on the corner, so we have access to a small balcony area about two by three feet. The living room and the bedroom combined are 34 square meters or 366 square feet. A doorway leads from the living room to a bedroom on the right. The toilet is at the corner of an L-shaped kitchen. A large vertical sheet of heavy aluminum serves as its door. Māma must have scrounged it from the dumpster which is next to our flat. The problem is this door was unskillfully placed backward, so it stays ajar by more than a foot, allowing anyone to peer right in while you're doing your private business.

The kitchen has enough space for a single-burner gas stove, a two-foot-round, white marble table Māma inherited from her mother (the only thing she inherited from her) and two rusty metal stools. Squeezed in beside the table is a corroded three-and-a-half-foot refrigerator, another one of Māma's treasures from the dumpster. She mounted it on four unsteady cinder blocks to raise its height. This fridge has been clumsily painted over from a natural beige to cloudy white to a greenish blue and, now, an azure blue.

The only bedroom is half the size of the living room with a foot of space between the closet and the foot of the bed. We maneuver gingerly around the space to avoid stubbing our toes.

Mā's and Bà's pale sheets are worn thin with holes and unmatched patches beneath, but they feel soft. Māma reminds us the sheets were once embroidered with bright floral designs.

"Ah, expensive threads," Māma, a seasoned seamstress, rubs the silky fabric between her two fingers, "A wedding gift from so long ago."

If I squint, I can make out the faintest lines of orchid petals. They are worn to the quick from years of washing, sweating, and bodies turning, friction of both happy and sad times.

Māma caresses my back as I curl up next to her. I feel her coarse fingers stroking me gently even as she drifts off to sleep, like the way I caress Bàba's back when he's drunk. Her delicate but overworked hands prominently display a crisscrossing of thin blue veins that have surrendered to the years of heavy lifting, washing, carrying, and scrubbing. I've never seen Bàba put a plate into the sink, pick up a piece of trash from the floor, or even turn on the stove to boil water.

Soon, Māma's breathing slows down, and her hand falls off my side rib, but I'm still awake. I can hear the blaring snore, not from Māma but from Bàba. If he's really drunk, his snore is non-rhythmic, like a growling beast, oblivious to the world. However, if he's not too drunk, he sounds symphonic and gentle, like an infant falling asleep after a full meal, at least until tomorrow.

I like Bàba best when his eyes are closed. I look right into his tired ruffled face with its long eyelashes, thick nose, and exposed rotting teeth with his lips puffed and drooling. He smells like an open bottle of beer.

Why was I given this Bàba of all the bàbas in the world? Why was I born to this one? Do I look like him? Do I want to look like him? What if I became like him?

On most nights, I share a two- or three-inch, twin-size foam mattress with Winston. There are no sheets, and we rarely use blankets because of the tropical heat, and monsoon-rich humidity that is especially intense when night falls. Winston and I bruise ourselves constantly, butting knees or heads, as we fight in our sleep to get some cushion underneath our bodies.

"It's like sleeping with a twelve-legged octopus," Winston teases and hugs me.

I don't have a bed I can call my own, a personal space, or a pillow on which I can lay my head whenever I want. Each night, after some squabbles, Māma assigns someone to let me lie down with them. I don't know why no one wants to sleep with me. Maybe everyone feels grown up now. Maybe because Māma keeps calling me the *unwanted* child—I never asked her why. Maybe being the youngest I just have to earn my sleeping space.

Phillip has the top bunk bed while Jennifer has the bottom. Since Winston often works until midnight, he gets a mattress like me so he won't wake anyone up. When I wake from what sleep I can manage, I put my mattress back in the bedroom, leaning it vertically against the wall. That's the only way we have enough room to move bodies around that sordidly hot enclosure.

The best times are when I get to sleep with Jennifer. She never likes to share, but she gives in and lets me lie next to her as long as I am quiet. This is better than sleeping next to Winston, though perhaps not as good as curling up next to Māma. If Jennifer is in a pleasant mood, she holds my hand and asks me to hum along as she whispers some Chinese songs into my ears. This is our quiet way of fun so we don't wake up the sleeping dragon. We try to control our giggles, almost choking ourselves. We fall asleep, smiling, and grasping hands.

Jennifer is bold and speaks her mind. She's never too timid to fight for what's hers, even a bed. I wish I could be more like her. I'm always afraid of something or someone. I feel insecure, cowardly, and gutless. I dare not challenge anyone or anything. I give in all the time. At no time do I talk back, raise my voice, or defy authority. Māma says that's because I'm an obedient daughter. I don't ask for something that's contrary to what Māma or anyone says. Māma calls me the peacemaker, a good girl every mother wants. That's the ideal I live up to every time; I feel conflicted.

I wish I weren't this way.

I don't like me.

Being good willingly is one thing; being coerced into being good is quite another. I don't know who I am or what my personality is like. Why do I have to be the one who gives in all the time? I want to oppose. I want to say something. I want to win sometimes too. I don't want to be the one who gives in all the time.

As I continue to do poorly in school, I become angrier at myself. I'm done with being the peacemaker. It never pays off. Being bad at least gives me an avenue to get angry. I don't want to listen to anyone anymore, especially my stupid teachers.

When I'm not in school, the time I wake up depends on where I sleep the night before. If I sleep next to Māma, I wake up when she does, either because she's tugging on my hand to snip threads or I don't want to be alone in bed with Bàba. If I sleep next to Winston on the living room floor, I wake up to someone accidentally stepping on my hair, arms, or legs. If I sleep next to Jennifer in the lower bunk, I usually wake on my own by rolling over into the empty spot where she was. It's hard to sleep alone when I never have a bed.

On very hot nights, when even the walls sweat, Māma opens the front gate to let in some air while Jennifer and I take turns keeping the rats away from our bed. We swat them with the bamboo cane or broomsticks, but they're never afraid of us. Why should they be? Our place is almost a second home for them with all its clutter, stench, and mess clogged around every corner of the house. They have more of a permanent abode each night than I do, as if I'm the intruder and they're the hosts. Sometimes, when Jennifer curses at them, I silently thank these vermin for tolerating us in their dwelling.

Like many rural parts of Singapore, Toa Payoh has an infestation of stray cats that has spread like wildfire.

These felines never stop reproducing, and they never die. There are simply not enough vehicles to run them over either. I suspect there's a community conspiracy between these rats and the cats. Maybe the cats never prey on the rats, and the rats never get caught; instead, both wild animals have joined forces to feast off of the human provisions and to take over our dwellings come midnight.

I know cats all too well. The problem with stray cats in our block is notably excessive because of the large Malay population on the second floor. They have this esoteric fondness for felines, particularly the black, Siamese kind with the long fur coat. I don't even know if these are Siamese, but that's what Māma calls them. Each night, legions of them convene on our fourth-floor balcony, growling, trilling, yowling, and chattering, having a great night out. My hawk-eyed observation tells me they're conniving about which apartment to invade once the clock strikes midnight, and for some reason, it's always ours.

Our front door has a rusty blue gate covered in multiple layers of paint, the kind you see on an old elevator in Manhattan. The problem with our gate is that it's too crooked to close all the way, so the only thing we can do is leave it ajar, like our toilet door. When we do that, we're inviting anything lurking in the stairway to stroll right through our gate, and these Siamese cats almost always shoot straight for the toilet.

Lying half-asleep, I hear sounds from all around. As soon as we're still, the first Siamese makes its way through the gate. In a second, the rest of the gang slinks through the rickety aluminum windows and rusty gate like it's party time. If Winston or Jennifer is lying next to me, I cling to them and hold my breath for as long as I can. I shut my eyes and pretend to sleep, thinking maybe these felines have a sixth sense and they'll go about their business and leave me alone. I cover my ears so I won't hear their blood-curdling growls, battling over whatever is in the kitchen.

Make them go away! I pray with my eyes shut so tight that they hurt. *Make* them go! *Please God … please*!

I hear more wailing as one Siamese wolfs down something odious. I never call out for Māma, not even when a large, black Siamese that's missing an ear rakes me with its claws. When I awaken, the sheet is streaked with bloody stain.

"It wasn't me," I try explaining, but Māma is angry because now she has more to wash just to get rid of the bloody stain.

I never got over the hisses and yowls of cats. The way they whine and cry like a baby drives fear through my spine. My stomach churns. My heart pounds. Call me paranoid or an ailurophobe. I can appreciate a cat's grace and agile poise, but I prefer to stay away from them. We can never coexist. We should never get in each other's way.

Ironically, I deeply admire lions. My fixation came about when I accompanied Bàba to the coffee shop each morning for his dose of Guinness Stout. I slouched over the sticky uneven table to study the oval logo on the bottle, marveling at the untamed fringe of the long mane, swaying to the wind as he charges toward what he wants. He never hesitates or stalks. He never creeps or hides. His prey has no escape now, leaving merely a faint heartbeat to pure surrender. If only I could be as gallant and valiant as the king of the jungle. His audacious confidence to conquer are formidable. He will achieve his goal.

One Sunday morning, Māma finds out there's a seamstress in the neighborhood who needs help to watch her four-year-old daughter so she can go to work. Māma agrees to care for the child, thinking this is the answer to her prayer for some extra income.

The only nice thing about having a younger child in the house is that she has to regard me as her older sister, which puts me on a higher status now that I'm no longer the youngest. This is my first encounter with another child in my household. I'm not sure how Māma is going to treat her and me, but I finally have someone to play with.

Ah Cheng is a novelty. Everyone is excited to give her our attention. We want to hold her, cuddle her, and dote on her, but within a few months, Māma's agitation with Ah Cheng becomes apparent.

Māma is supposed to get twenty dollars each month for babysitting, but her mother never pays. The debts start to pile up. One month, then two, and then three. Māma may not be literate, but she manages to scribble some sloppy accounting on a small pink notebook for all of the back payments.

Over the next few months, the debts keep mounting, but Ah Cheng continues to be dropped off regardless. Sometimes, her mother doesn't even pick her up and she has to sleep over. Other times, we have to keep her over the weekend and even during public holidays. Soon, it becomes apparent that we are her foster family. Ah Cheng is never going to go home.

Māma is not pleased with this presumptive arrangement. Ah Cheng's mother is obviously taking advantage of us. Not only is there no additional income, but we now have another mouth to feed.

"I should have said no!" Māma regrets while lashing out at Ah Cheng. "Your mother is so manipulative and deceitful. Says she needs to work, but never pays me a single cent!"

I can't tell if Ah Cheng is embarrassed or guilty about this whole situation. She is only four or five years old. I squat in the corner of the living room, watching Māma badgering and slapping her, but I dare not do anything. I don't know if I should be on Māma's side or Ah Cheng's

side. Even though Ah Cheng never utters a word in retaliation, I know she feels responsible for her mother's debts. Maybe it's her way of letting Māma release her injustice.

"If you want to blame someone, then blame your own mother. She's the one who gave birth to you and then couldn't afford to raise you!"

With great tremor, Ah Cheng bows her head as low as her neck would go, sniffing and biting her lips while her tears bleed down her pinkish cheeks.

"Wipe up those tears," Māma yells. "Don't think for once I'm going to pity you. And mop up my floor."

I walk nimbly past the commotion and step outside onto the balcony, staring at the brown patch of dead grass, something I often do to tune myself out. I resent being such a coward. Why can't I stand up for something for once? But what would that be? If I choose justice, then who is going to protect Ah Cheng? If I choose mercy, then who is going to feed our family? Still a child myself, I am confused and torn.

Six years have passed, nothing much has changed except Ah Cheng has another sister. Once again, her mother begs Māma to take care of her newborn and promises to pay up this time. Māma reluctantly agrees, giving in to her inability to say *No*.

This new baby seems to be different. She has thick, black, long eyelashes; a feature Chinese parents find exceptionally delicate. My whole family grows so fond of her like she was part of us. I even named her Sharlynn. For me, Sharlynn is like a new doll, and she feels cuddly, unlike her sister.

Something is different. The baby has a black, circular half-millimeter birthmark on the right side of her forehead. It is a Chinese belief that if a birthmark is hidden, in this case under her hair, then it's an auspicious sign.

Māma has a skin-colored mole on the right side of her upper lip, but since it is not hidden, she resigns to her fate that life is never going to be blissful. She expects herself to be in a state of constant misfortune by almost seeking after it, like the Zen proverb, *"Man stands in his own shadow and wonders why it's dark."*

Even now, Māma refuses to allow herself a millisecond of enjoyment, whether it's dining out, buying a new outfit, getting a perm, or putting on makeup. She feels as if giving in to comfort and indulging in a little luxury will negate everything she has gone through and diminish her claim to have lived a hard life. She likes to remind us that no one will ever empathize with her hardship and suffering.

Day and night, I see Māma washing piles of cloth diapers and baby clothes, but still not getting paid. With the water bill increasing and stability diminishing, I grow angrier and angrier with this injustice.

Additional children in the home are hard on younger children by nature. Not only does Māma feed these girls, but she also has to clean them, do their laundry, and pay attention to their emotional needs.

Ah Cheng grows jealous of the attention Sharlynn is getting, and so do I. I want to be noticed too. I feel as if I'm doubly invisible now with these two girls in our family. Will I ever be Māma's baby again?

"I only nursed you once," Māma recalls as she caresses my back. "I was always busy doing this or that, sewing, cooking, cleaning. No help. You had the least nourishment of all the children. You were always by yourself. Very good girl. Hardly cried, except the time when you got burned."

Māma holds up my right hand to examine the scar, now wrinkly and less noticeable.

When I was about two, I crawled around the living room to track wherever Māma went. One time, after ironing, Māma had turned off the switch but left the

vertical-standing iron to cool. She proceeded to make dinner, forgetting that I would be tracing behind her. When I tugged on the cloth on the floor, the iron fell flat on my right hand.

The iron was heavy; I couldn't withdraw my hand from underneath, so I let it sit there and mumbled, not even crying. I'm not sure why, but perhaps the intense heat had killed the nerves.

Minutes passed, Māma was still cooking. I don't know how long my hand was pinned underneath the hot surface. When she finally turned around, it was too late.

She instinctively lifted the iron, but my stubborn infant skin would not unglue from the scorching surface. Māma impatiently waited for the iron to cool, staring in shock while meticulously peeling off the slimy flesh, like the thin layer of skin underneath a hard-boiled egg, willingly forgoing a few layers of the skin.

"You didn't cry loud enough; that's why I didn't hear you," Māma admits with a deflated sigh. "You just wailed and croaked, 'nnn … nnn … nnn' so no one paid attention. You didn't even have the strength to moan."

Mā beats herself up every time we talk about the mishap even though I don't recall an ounce of pain.

She presses me closer to her chest. "That was the first time I nursed you. The only time you ever had Māma's milk."

Each time I see the scar on my hand, I think only about Māma holding me close to her bosom, brushing my long black hair, kissing my forehead and right hand, to comfort me.

Māma is the sole breadwinner since Bàba drifts from job to job. The babysitting is not only depriving us of the additional income but has become a burden. No matter how Māma calculates it, we still end up being the doormat.

The mere sight of Ah Cheng agitates Māma so much that she does not allow us to play with her. Ah Cheng

gets all the heat in the house because she's the older sister and the start of a bad chain of debts. The babysitting arrangement changed Māma from being a benevolent soul to an unfeeling neighbor. The worst part is I mimic Māma's tone and mannerisms toward the girls.

Both Ah Cheng and Sharlynn are only a few years apart. We eat the same food, sleep under the same roof, and get our fair share of beating and scolding from Māma, yet, my contempt and hatred become more apparent each day. I don't know why. I take a quiet pleasure in tormenting Ah Cheng by ignoring her and shaming her so I can upset her day. I want someone to pay for my anger, for the money owed us, the suffering that my family has to go through because of her penniless, manipulative, and selfish mother.

My experiences with these girls are the beginning of my search for vindication. There's no such thing as kindness in the real world. It doesn't pay to pay it forward. It's like poker. I can bluff my way into winning. I can win by learning to be a liar and exonerate myself by begging for sympathy and forgiveness afterward. God doesn't care one bit since he allows us to be the victims. I can do whatever the hell I want. I get to play mercy or justice at my own discretion. I take things into my own hands and determine I will never again fall prey to manipulations.

I am cynical about everyone and everything. I see only the faults in others. I don't trust any gestures of humanity, kindness, or generosity. I reject affection. I become my own gatekeeper and guard against anyone who tries to pry into my emotions to get me to feel something.

Māma's anger at not getting paid inescapably bleeds deeper into me. My instinctive reaction to any mishandling is to preserve my own self-interest, even at the expense of others. I resent anyone who is wealthy or has it easy for them when it comes to making a living.

My survival mode kicks in, and I'm at war with everyone, even myself. Everyone is a suspect. Everyone is an enemy. If there are going to be winners and losers, then I must win. I gear up for a strong defense because I swear I'm not going to end up like Māma at the losing end.

I've no idea what fuels this indignation, but I take pleasure in seeing others get their share of bad luck. If people, even so-called friends, can treat my family this way, then why shouldn't I do the same? I don't want to be a bully, but I also don't want to be bullied. Every petty injustice provokes me. I just want to vindicate. I harbor such a perverse consciousness of misbehavior that I become a fugitive entrapped by my own snare.

I hate myself.

For more information, visit barbarahong.com or email contact@barbarahong.com.