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# The boy that once nobody wanted: An orphan finds his true family

*By Ruth Smalley*

13-16 minutes

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SINGAPORE: Memories of his childhood are fuzzy now, but one still stands out. Lin Fo Xin, 21, recalls a time when he was five, living in Fu'an China "in a big house with eight storeys". Often left alone and neglected, he was once shut up in a room when it started to rain, and water spilled in through a hole in the roof.

It seemed like hours, and the room had begun to flood, before someone finally remembered him and came to carry him out. "I was drenched," he recollected softly, head bowed with the weight of the memory.

Being forgotten and unwanted was a leitmotif in his life for a long time.

As an infant, he was abandoned by his birth parents in a plastic bag, so he believes. They left him on a street in Fu'an, China.

When he was a toddler, he was adopted by a Singaporean woman. Even then, he lived for several years in two orphanages and a foster home in China, before he was finally brought over to Singapore at age six.

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That was just the start of another tumultuous chapter.

“I didn’t go to school for one year,” recalled Mr Lin, who was named Fo Xin – meaning Buddha’s heart – by his adoptive mum. He was kept at home all day and not allowed out, “probably because she didn’t want something bad to happen to me,” he shrugged.

But home was no refuge either.

### **‘WHY ME?’**

A single woman, Mr Lin’s adoptive mother beat him regularly when she thought he was misbehaving. Sometimes she would use broomsticks or umbrellas, he said.

The slightest misdemeanor would trigger beatings. Once, she bit him on his buttock just for dragging his chair when he got up from the dining table. Hurting and upset, he asked himself: “Why is my life like this? Why me?”

*Fo Xin with his adoptive family in China, before he moved to Singapore.  
(Photo: Lin Fo Xin)*

In Primary 1, he struggled with English. Up until that point, he had only ever spoken Mandarin. “I didn’t understand what the teachers were saying.” And so, instead of paying attention, he would draw on the pages of his textbooks.

Those early sketches of Pokemons not only helped to while the time away; he also sold them to his classmates for 50 cents to a dollar each. This extra cash came in handy on days when his adoptive mother didn’t give him any lunch money.

One day, he turned up in school with open wounds on his arms. His teachers raised the alarm and that very day, Child Protective Service officers came to take him away.

He landed up in the Singapore Children’s Society Sunbeam Place. At 10, he was once again parent-less. “I still remember I

was crying when I got there,” he said.

*His watercolour of these bleeding eyes represent how he once saw the world.*

He lived there for almost two years before being transferred to his first foster home, where he lasted for just a year before being packed off to a second foster home, and finally ended up at The Salvation Army Haven Children’s Home.

By the age of 14, Mr Lin had lived in eight different homes, and felt at home in none of them.

## **ANGRY AND VIOLENT**

Full of distrust and rebellion, the teenager walled himself off from the world. He spent long hours in the solitude of his room with his PlayStation and sketching. In the company of others, he’d lash out. He recalled:

Something would trigger me, and the anger would come out. I hit things. I hit the other children.

One year, the home’s children were preparing for their annual Thanksgiving concert, and to his dismay and resentment, he was asked to perform. “I was so shocked. Like, I need to go on stage?”

In a tantrum, he broke a door and worse, threatened to hit a staff member.

Deemed as out of control, the teenager found himself on the verge of being sent to the Boy’s Home. But the Haven’s manager decided to give him another chance – and it was then that he came to the attention of a woman who would change his life.

When Edna Leong, a residential care associate with Haven Children’s Home, first met Mr Lin for a long chat, she saw an

angry and hurting 16-year-old who hated the world and hated people.

“He flipped tables, he flipped chairs, he punched the doors. How many doors? I don’t know how many he’s punched already... We would keep away our forks, because we were so worried he would use them,” Mdm Leong, now 51, recalled.

“I did ask him once, ‘why were you like that last time in Haven? So violent, scaring everybody, like you can kill people’.

‘I pretend only’, he’d said, ‘because I don’t want to be bullied again. I’ve been moving from place to place, and I built this image like, ‘you cannot touch me, man’.

To Mdm Leong, Mr Lin was the worst-off case she’d seen - most of the other children at the home had parents, or at least some family in Singapore. This boy, an orphan, was completely alone.

“in my heart I knew that this boy was crying for help,” she said.

*“in my heart I know that this boy was crying for help,” said Edna Leong.*

## **A SLOW BLOSSOMING**

Determined to gain his trust and help him however she could, Mdm Leong noticed for instance how appalling his vocabulary was. He would get the words ‘to’, ‘two’ and ‘too’ mixed up, she said.

And so, she coached him in English every day after school, and offered constant push and encouragement. “Aunty always believes in you, that you can do better. I believe that you will change,” she’d tell him.

Or, she’d say: “If you’re number 3, aim for number 2. If you’re number 2, aim for number 1.”

Her words and the sincerity of her concern had their effect.

Slowly, the solitary teenager opened up and began confiding in her about his problems.

***WATCH: An orphan's journey (5:55)***

Life was opening up in another way for him, too. Art was his outlet, the best way he knew to express everything bottled up inside. As he worked to hone his skills – by watching video tutorials online, for instance – he drew the attention of Kelvin Lee, then a relief teacher at Clementi Woods Secondary.

“I noticed Fo Xin drawing in class and I gave him advice,” Mr Lee recalled. “He’s an intelligent guy, and I could see he had a passion for art.” He would give the boy tips on techniques like cross hatching, and how to attach cotton wool to the back of a pencil as a blending tool when sketching.

“For his age, he could sketch very well. And more important than skill is passion,” said Mr Lee, who now owns a tattoo studio.

At 15, the budding young artist took part in a mooncake festival art competition and won first prize. It was a confidence boost for the reticent and soft-spoken youth, who even now rarely meets one’s eyes when he speaks.

With both Mdm Leong and art giving him a sense of purpose, Mr Lin buckled down and focused in school.

He did well for his N levels, scoring 7 points. He went on to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), where he studied product design and graduated among the top 5 per cent of his cohort in 2016.

These days, he’s studying Experience and Product Design at Singapore Polytechnic – to improve his theoretical understanding of design, he says. His dream is to become a full-time artist.

*His graduation as one of the top 5% of ITE students was a proud day for*

*all.*

For now, he works at the The Salvation Army's Praisehaven Retreat Centre as a receptionist, showing guests around the rooms and helping to turn down beds. He makes S\$1,300 a month on a six-day week, and gets to live in one of the rooms for S\$100 a month in rent.

Finances have become less of a burden since he applied to the Income OrangeAid Future Development Programme. It helps to defray most of his school fees – meaning that he can set aside more of his wages for savings and art supplies. "He has a little extra now to pursue his love for painting and drawing," said Shannen Fong, NTUC Income's head of strategic communications.

*His room at Praisehaven where he works.*

## **THE MEANING OF FAMILY, THEN AND NOW**

But more than a good education and a job, Mr Lin seems, along the line, to have also acquired himself a family.

Every Mother's Day, he celebrates with Mdm Leong, who is "Aunt Edna" to him and yet, also, the mum he never truly had. (She nags at him to behave, and he called her for approval before spending on a new iPhone X.)

Christmas Eve is doubly significant because it is also her birthday, to be celebrated with those considered her family – which includes a few former children's home residents like Tan Jun Hao, who calls Mr Lin "brother".

*Tan Jun Hao, a close friend who calls Fo Xin "brother".*

"The first time I met him, he gave me a black eye," Mr Tan said of their meeting 10 years ago. Laughing, Mr Lin explained: "He was very big sized, and I didn't really like that, so I hit him!"

It was Mr Tan who, like a protective brother, egged him on to speak to CNA Insider. "He is so shy, I want him to open up and I thought doing this interview would help him gain confidence."

At least once a week, the boys and Mdm Leong try to meet up for a meal or a movie. Aunt Edna always falls asleep, claims Ebenezer Lim jokingly – "she has only stayed awake for Ah Boys To Men".

Mdm Leong's husband is "Uncle Eddie" to all. Mr Lin recalls being driven around by him when he needed help to transport things; in turn, he helps the 72-year-old around the house.

"Uncle Eddie, he's quite old already, it's a bit hard for him to climb up and clean the aircon. So I'll go down to help. And if anything needs to be fixed, I'll fix for him," said Mr Lin who has the keys and free access to their flat.

Mr Lin used to think "home" was a family with father, mother and siblings – something he could long for but never have. Now, he has learnt otherwise.

Family is like, you get to know each other... any problems, I will help you out.

***With Aunt Edna on his 21st birthday, and the waterfall that Fo Xin painted for her and Uncle Eddie. (Photo: Lin Fo Xin)***

## **LETTING GO OF THE PAST, AND FACING THE FUTURE**

Still, surely some part of him must be that little orphan boy still thinking about the parents who let him down, and asking, "why me"?

Mr Lin tells the story of how his adoptive mother used to make him kneel on washboards in front of a statue of Buddha until his knees were raw. One particular session lasted a few hours, but as

he stared at the Buddha, “I felt a connection,” he said, and suddenly he didn’t feel the pain in his knees any more.

It’s why the Buddha’s image features prominently in many of his art pieces today – a reminder to himself that while life is filled with troubles, he must try to forgive.

What others did to me, I can let go quite fast... I forgive my adoptive mum. At least she brought me to Singapore, that’s one good thing.

Asked if he’d like to find his birth parents, he said no. “Because I’m so scared. It might change what is now.”

*The Buddha’s image has a special place in Fo Xin’s art. He submitted this piece for the 2015 UOB Painting of the Year.*

Indeed, it’s not the ghosts of the past but the promise of the future that beckons him.

“When I was younger, I did wonder what I was going to do in the future,” he said. Now he knows. “I want to live in the mountains and teach kids to draw. I want them to see the value of art, how it changed my life.”

In the more immediate term, he is aiming to take part in the upcoming UOB Painting Of The Year competition. He’d first entered in 2015 but “I didn’t win”, Mr Lin laughed sheepishly. “I needed more time.”

This time, he will be doing a sketch of Mdm Leong’s eyes. The reason? He feels that she has literally watched over him all these years, and he wants to pay tribute to that.

As the woman who is his surrogate mother will tell you: “Family is not just about the same blood, same surname or even staying in the same house.

“An outsider can be family, if there is sincere love there, and



respect and care.”

*Happy Mother's Day to Aunt Edna. (Photo: Lin Fo Xin)*