EVERY STORY

A LIFE, IN HER OWN WORDS

A Life of Little Wonders



The memories of Mei Lin Tan

Mei Lin Tan

Their voice. Your family story.

FOR THE PEOPLE WHO CARRY IT ON

A note for the family

For Lily, Daniel, and the little hands that will carry our stories on.

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This is a demonstration book. Chapter one is a literary adaptation inspired by a real Singapore memory, with imagined scenes and reflections. Its recording is an edited excerpt of Low Lay Hong's original voice, credited to Montfort Care. Other chapters and photographs are fictional examples, with synthetic demo recordings. Scan or click the QR code on any chapter page to play its recording.

The home that held us

Singapore · Childhood memories

LITERARY DEMO ADAPTATION



An imagined Singapore childhood · Illustrative photo

The first home I remember was small enough for everyone’s movements to be heard. A cup touching a saucer, a chair scraping the floor, footsteps coming in from the street. Before I could tell the time, I knew the hour by the sounds of people returning.

I liked the moment just before dinner. A schoolbag could be put down, the day’s little troubles could wait, and there would be a place for me at the table. As a child, I never thought of that as something somebody had made. Home simply seemed to be there, ready whenever I needed it.

My mother was usually in the middle of a task. If I wanted her attention, I followed her from one thing to the next, telling my story in pieces. She could listen while her hands kept working. Sometimes I had finished speaking before she answered. I would think she had not heard me, and then discover that she had heard everything.

There were ordinary days when the world felt as small as our doorway. Rain began on the roof, softly at first, then loudly enough to stop a conversation. A shirt needed mending. A bowl needed washing. We waited for the rain to ease, and somebody found another small job for me to do.

But I also remember being frightened. In Singapore, the radio announced curfew hours. From our window, I could see policemen carrying batons. I did not understand the racial riots or why a familiar street could suddenly feel different.

Hear her original voice

Low Lay Hong · Mandarin excerpt

I asked my mother what was happening. The advice I remember from her was to come home early.

At that age, I understood the instruction more easily than the reason. Coming home was something I knew how to do. I could turn away from the street and find the person who would be waiting for me. The larger questions belonged to the grown-ups.

Looking back, I imagine the worry behind such a simple piece of advice. A mother still has dinner to prepare and a household to look after, even when she is afraid. Perhaps keeping ordinary things going is one way of telling a child that they are not alone.

I did not understand those childhood memories fully until secondary school, when I read the newspapers. I began to appreciate why racial harmony matters. An experience I had carried as a child became something I could think about, and something I wanted the next generation to understand.

Growing older also changes the way you remember your parents. My mother was once simply Mother: the person who knew where things were and what should happen next. Later, I began to think of her as a woman with her own tiredness, her own worries, and a life I had only seen a small part of.

If we could sit at that table again, I would ask different questions. What had her childhood been like? Who had waited for her to come home? What had she hoped for us while she went about all those ordinary tasks? There are questions you only learn to ask after the chance has passed.

Now I share this childhood memory with my grandchildren. They play with friends of different races so naturally. I hope they cherish those friendships and the peace they have grown up with. Caring for one another is something every generation has to practise.

I picture a child listening at the family table, then interrupting to ask for more rice. I would not mind. That, too, is part of being together. A story can be passed on between the serving and the washing up, with life still going on around it.

The home that held us lives on in small habits. We notice who has not arrived. We set another place. We listen a little longer. And when someone comes through the door, we let them know they were expected.

Inspired by Low Lay Hong’s Mandarin recording (Montfort Care, 2025). Scene-setting and reflections are fictional demo additions, not a transcript or verified biography. The photograph is illustrative.

Hear her original voice

Low Lay Hong · Mandarin excerpt

A girl with a borrowed book

1950–1958



Mei Lin with a borrowed schoolbook, c. 1952. Imagined for this memoir.

“A book was a small window I could carry home.”

I began school at [school name to confirm] carrying a cloth bag my mother had sewn from an old dress. I liked the smell of pencils and the clean square of a new exercise book. My handwriting was careful because paper was something we did not waste.

One teacher noticed that I stayed behind to look at the books. She lent me one about a girl who travelled by train. I had never been on a train, but I read it so many times that I thought I knew how the wheels would sound. A book was a small window I could carry home.

I read aloud to my younger brother in the evenings. If I did not know a word, I invented a meaning and hoped he would not notice. He usually noticed. Years later he still liked to remind me of those mistakes, especially when I tried to give him advice.

I did not have the chance to study for as long as I wanted. That disappointment stayed with me, but it did not make me stop learning. When my children began bringing homework home, I sat beside them. Sometimes they explained the lesson to me. I think that is one of the nicest things a family can do: let the person who knows a little more share it.

Hear the chapter recording

AI-generated grandmother voice

The rhythm of the market

1958–1963



Learning the rhythm of a Singapore provision market, c. 1960. Imagined for this memoir.

“You learn a great deal when your job is to pay attention.”

My mother took me to the market before the sun became fierce. She could judge a pineapple with one look and knew which stallholder would put an extra spring onion into the bag. I carried the basket and tried to remember everything.

Later, I helped at a small provision shop. My first job was sorting the shelves and wrapping purchases in paper. I learned to count change quickly, but the more useful lesson was remembering people. Who needed a lighter bag. Who was buying an extra tin because a relative was visiting. Who had come mainly to talk.

On payday I kept a little money and handed the rest to my mother. The first thing I bought for myself was a pair of shoes. I wore them around the house before I dared wear them outside. My sister laughed at me, and then asked if she could borrow them.

I did not call any of this a career at the time. It was work, and work helped the family. But I still use what those mornings taught me. Count carefully. Do what you said you would do. Notice the quiet person. You learn a great deal when your job is to pay attention.

Hear the chapter recording

AI-generated grandmother voice

The man with the umbrella

1963–1967



An imagined photograph of Mei Lin and Jun Wei at their wedding meal, 1967.

“He was either very kind or very foolish. It turned out he was both.”

I met Jun Wei outside [bakery detail to confirm]. I had gone to buy bread, and the sky opened before I could get home. He offered me his umbrella and then walked away in the rain himself. I had to call him back because it seemed a ridiculous arrangement.

He was quiet at first. I did most of the talking, which my grandchildren will tell you has not changed. He worked with his hands and always had a small mark or cut somewhere. I began to recognise his bicycle before I could see his face.

Our early outings were ordinary. We walked, shared something to eat and tried to avoid being spotted by too many people who knew our parents. Once he brought me flowers wrapped in newspaper. I kept the newspaper because he had written a note in the corner.

I told my sister that he was either a very kind man or a very foolish one. It turned out he was both. We married in 1967 with a small meal and more advice than either of us had asked for. The photographs show how young we were. What they cannot show is that I already felt less afraid of the future when he was standing beside me.

Hear the chapter recording

Synthetic voice demo

A key to our own front door

1968–1975



Mei Lin and Jun Wei at their first front door, 1968. Imagined for this memoir.

“The rooms were empty, but the key felt wonderfully heavy.”

Moving into our first flat felt like stepping into someone else's idea of the future. There were proper walls and a tap we did not have to share with the whole lane. I was grateful. I also missed being able to see who was passing the house.

We had almost no furniture. Jun Wei borrowed a cart to move our things, and I carried the cooking pot on my lap as if it were a child. The rooms were empty, but the key felt wonderfully heavy. I put it on a ribbon so I would not lose it.

It took time to learn the sounds of that building. A neighbour dragging a chair. Children running along the corridor. Someone calling to a friend several floors below. We started leaving our door open when we were home. Slowly, the corridor became another kind of courtyard.

I planted things in old tins and lined them near the window. Jun Wei complained that there was nowhere to put his tools, then brought me a better shelf. That was how we made many decisions: I began something, he said it was impractical, and then he helped me finish it.

Hear the chapter recording

Synthetic voice demo

The night I became a mother

1971–1984



Mei Lin holding baby Lily, 1971. Imagined for this memoir.

“I was frightened, and then there she was.”

Before Lily was born, everyone told me what motherhood would be like. They described the tiredness, the joy, the things I must do and the things I must never do. None of it explained how strange it would feel to meet a person I already loved.

That first night I kept checking whether she was breathing. Jun Wei said I should sleep. Then I noticed he was checking too. We were both pretending to be calmer than we were. I was frightened, and then there she was, and being frightened no longer seemed the most important thing.

Daniel arrived three years later. Lily wanted to know whether we could send him back if he cried too much. Soon she was the first person to run to him. The days became a procession of washing, meals, school bags and small emergencies. Sometimes I wished for quiet. Now I would give a great deal to hear those little feet again.

I was not a perfect mother. I was impatient when I was tired, and I worried too loudly. If my children remember only one thing, I hope it is that I was always on their side, even when I had not found the right way to say it.

Hear the chapter recording

Synthetic voice demo

The recipe was never the whole story

1975–today



An imagined afternoon making ondeh-ondeh with her granddaughter.

“We always eat the imperfect ones first. That is our reward for helping.”

My grandchildren think the secret to ondeh-ondeh is the recipe. I tell them it is patience. The dough has to feel right in your hands. Each little ball has to close properly, otherwise the gula melaka escapes into the water and everyone looks disappointed.

My mother taught me without measuring much. A little more pandan. Enough water. Not too much filling. When Lily asked me to write it down, I realised how many things I knew only because my fingers remembered them. We spent an afternoon measuring, making a mess and arguing gently about what counted as a spoonful.

Now the grandchildren help. I give them the forgiving jobs first: washing leaves, rolling balls, spreading the coconut. There is always one with a hole in it and one that is twice the size of the others. We eat those first. That is our reward for helping.

If you keep this recipe, please make it with someone. Tell them whose hands taught yours. A sweet can be gone in one bite, but an afternoon together lasts much longer. That is the part of the recipe I would most hate to lose.

Hear the chapter recording

Synthetic voice demo

When the table grew longer

1985–2000



A celebration with room for everyone, c. 1990. Imagined for this memoir.

“A celebration is knowing who will be glad to see you.”

Every celebration began with the same question: how many people are coming? The answer changed until the moment we began serving. There was always someone's cousin, an unexpected friend, or a neighbour whose own family was far away.

We borrowed chairs. The children sat where they could, and Jun Wei moved things that I had just carefully arranged. I used to worry that there would not be enough food. Somehow there was. I suspect people remember the noisy table more clearly than anything we cooked.

Some years were easier than others. We could not always give the presents the children wanted, and there were relatives we missed. But we kept the little rituals. New clothes laid out the night before. A clean house. Something sweet saved for the person arriving last.

As the children grew up, they brought their own ideas. New dishes appeared beside the old ones. I learned to let a tradition stretch without believing it had broken. A celebration is not doing everything exactly as it was done before. It is knowing who will be glad to see you when you walk through the door.

Hear the chapter recording

Synthetic voice demo

A song to carry home

A lifetime



A familiar song shared with the next generation. Imagined for this memoir.

“Sometimes a tune remembers what words have forgotten.”

My mother hummed while she worked. She did not announce that she was going to sing. A tune simply appeared between the washing and the cooking, as if it had been waiting for a quiet moment.

The one I carried into my own home was [family song title to confirm]. I sang it when the children were small, although I never remembered every verse. When I reached a part I had forgotten, I hummed. The children never seemed to mind.

Years later, Lily told me that hearing the tune made her feel as if someone had turned the kitchen light on. I had not known it meant anything to her. We do so many small things without imagining they will be remembered.

My voice is not what it was, and I do not sing for an audience. But I would like the family to keep a recording, mistakes and all. Sometimes a tune remembers what words have forgotten. If the grandchildren hum it one day while they are busy with something else, I will have travelled a little further with them.

Hear the chapter recording

AI-generated fictional lullaby

Learning to begin again

2001–2015



A quiet afternoon and the next cup of tea. Imagined for this memoir.

“Some days, courage is simply making the next cup of tea.”

Life does not ask whether you are ready before it changes. There were years when Jun Wei's work was uncertain, and years when people we loved became unwell. I will not pretend I handled every difficulty gracefully. Sometimes I was angry. Sometimes I was just tired.

What helped was rarely a grand speech. Someone brought dinner. A neighbour kept an eye on the children. My sister sat beside me without trying to improve my mood. Those kindnesses gave me somewhere to put down the weight for a little while.

I learned to accept help, which did not come naturally. I had spent so long being useful that I thought needing someone might make me less useful. Of course it did not. It made our friendships more honest.

If one of you is reading this during a hard season, you do not have to make it into a lesson immediately. You can be sad. You can ask for company. Some days, courage is simply making the next cup of tea, opening the curtains, and letting the morning find you.

Hear the chapter recording

Synthetic voice demo

The next pair of little hands

2016–today



Mei Lin in the garden with her grandchildren, 2026. Imagined for this memoir.

“They call me Ah Ma. It is my favourite name.”

When my first grandchild called me Ah Ma, I felt as if someone had given me a new name for a part of myself that had been waiting. I had forgotten how seriously a small child takes the world, and how funny that can be.

They ask questions their parents never asked. Why does the dough turn green? Did the lift exist when you were little? Was everything really black and white? I tell them the photographs were black and white, not the whole world. They are not entirely convinced.

They teach me things too. How to answer a video call. Where the photographs on my phone have gone. Why a message does not need quite so many full stops. I like that we can take turns being the person who knows.

I try to be present in the things they will remember: the bus ride, the snack after school, the patient afternoon making something with our hands. Grandmotherhood has made time feel both faster and more precious. They call me Ah Ma. It is my favourite name.

Hear the chapter recording

Synthetic voice demo

What I hope you remember

For all the years ahead



A letter for the family, 2026. Imagined for this memoir.

“Keep eating together. Ask each other proper questions.”

What I want my family to remember is not that I did anything extraordinary. I loved the people in front of me, and I tried again when things were hard. That is the whole story, although it took a lifetime to live it.

Keep eating together when you can. Ask each other proper questions, and wait for the answers. Do not assume that because someone is familiar, there is nothing new to learn about them. I have told you things in these conversations that I had never thought to put into words before.

Please take photographs with yourself in them. Mothers are always taking the picture. I wish I had more photographs of my own mother laughing, with her hands still wet from the washing. Let the people who love you have more than the things you organised.

This book is not the end of our conversations. There are memories I will think of tomorrow, and details you will remember differently. Leave some room for them. Tell the children your own stories too. A family is not one person's life preserved under glass. It is many lives, still touching each other.

With love,
Ah Ma

Hear the chapter recording

Synthetic voice demo

There is more to every story.

Leave room for the memories still to come.

EVERY STORY