

A vintage white sedan is parked on a dark street in front of a stone building with large, dark windows. Wisps of white smoke or steam rise from the top of the frame, partially obscuring the sky. The overall mood is mysterious and noir.

STEALING SMOKES

Some surprising short stories by
JOHN HANLON

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SOME SURPRISING
SHORT STORIES

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Sample Chapter

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THE SWIMMING LESSON

Colin's family wasn't rich. Back in New Zealand they'd lived in a small, two-bedroom home his father had built during weekends. Before that, home had been a shack made out of a Caterpillar bulldozer crate. So the privileged life they now enjoyed in Singapore was an aberration, but an enjoyable one. Now they had servants, a big shiny Chevrolet and a spacious apartment in one of the more sought after suburbs on the island. They had all these things because they now belonged to that pampered group of foreigners known as expatriates: people who, having been transported by fate or ambition to some far-flung colony populated by dusky races, are suddenly elevated to a social status and standard of living far beyond anything they've ever known before. In Singapore at the time of which I write, indulged by servants and a variety of gin-soaked 'Members Only' clubs (which meant, in essence,

‘No Natives!’), many ‘expats’ fell victim to delusions of superiority they were never able to shake off. The British, in particular, were guilty of this. Having been brought up under a class system at home, they naturally created a similar structure to suit their new environment. The result being that the natives were generally placed at the very bottom of the ladder, while even the most bumptious and uneducated English person was elevated to a position of importance. At least in their own minds.

Ironically, while those born to a privileged station in life often know how to treat the less fortunate with dignity and respect, those who have the trappings of privilege suddenly thrust upon them often do not.

The latter can be a very ugly type of person.

Thankfully, Colin’s family wasn’t guilty of this. His father, a New Zealander of Swedish/Irish/Scottish descent, encouraged a rather more egalitarian attitude. While he wouldn’t go so far as to say that all people were created equal — on the contrary, he maintained that some people were clearly fools from birth — he did believe that all people ought to be treated equally. It’s tempting to say that he passed this attitude on to his children; but the truth is children are born that way — they have no natural prejudices, they learn them. Consequently, until the time he was eight years old, Colin’s attitude to people was the same curious, open-minded one he was born with — simply because he’d never been taught otherwise.

Then he met the boy with the swimming pool.

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Even for those used to the climate, the day was punishingly hot. Colin was lying on his stomach on the cool concrete floor with his face only inches away from two large jars he'd placed side by side. Each jar contained a lone male Siamese fighting fish. They were glaring at each other through the glass, their long fins rippling gently, rainbow colours of rage pulsating along their bodies — great amusement for an eight-year-old boy.

He sipped his Coke. The ice rattled. He pressed the glass against his forehead and let the condensation run down his face. Overhead, a ceiling fan whirred valiantly, but his mother — who was lying exhausted on the couch — still fanned herself with a magazine that she had long since given up trying to read. The air moved around them like molasses.

They both looked up at the sound of excited children running up the stairs outside their front door. Colin was on his feet and had the door open before anyone had the chance to knock.

There, panting excitedly on the landing, was Shirley Rankin, her younger brother Kevin, and Colin's best friend, Martin Baistow — a mischievous Australian boy who lived in a bungalow across the valley.

'Wanna come swimming?' Martin said excitedly.

'Yeah! Yeah! Where?' Colin said in disbelief.

'Kev met a kid who's gotta pool. An' he's asked us down for a swim!'

‘Yes!’ said Kevin, importantly. ‘He said I could ask anyone I wanted.’

Without waiting for further details, Colin raced back inside to get his swimming togs.

‘Where are you going, mister?’ his mother said as he dashed past.

‘Kev’s met a kid who’s gotta pool an’ he’s invited us for a swim!’ he shouted from his bedroom.

‘What kid? I’ve never heard of anyone who’s got a pool around here. Are you sure?’

‘Sure, I’m sure. Ask Martin.’

‘Martin, is he telling the truth?’

‘Yes, Mrs Cameron,’ Martin yelled, far too loudly, from the door. ‘Kev said. Didn’tcha, Kev?’

Being of middle-class English stock, both Kevin and Shirley spoke in a far more adult and precise manner than either Martin or Colin.

‘Yes, Mrs Cameron, Shirley was with me,’ Kevin confirmed.

‘Shirley?’

‘It’s true, Mrs Cameron. The boy’s name is Steven and he lives in that big house the Canadians used to live in,’ Shirley said.

‘There, see!’ Colin said as he raced back into the room pulling up his togs.

‘Who’s going to watch over you kids? Are there any adults?’ his mother worried, following after him as he hurried for the door.

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‘Their driver will watch us,’ Shirley answered, seriously.
‘Steven said his mother insisted on it!’

‘I’ll be careful, Mum, I promise,’ Colin said.

She knew he would be. He was an excellent swimmer and really quite sensible despite his tender years. In fact, most of the children were good swimmers — one of the benefits of living in the tropics. She went to the door and looked down at her son’s excited face — the chance to go for a swim on a day like this must be like a dream come true, how could she refuse him?

Only ... she had never met these people and you never knew what they might be like.

‘Colin,’ she said, quietly.

Her tone made him look up at her curiously. ‘Yes, Mum?’

‘Do you know this boy?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure he will want you to come?’

‘Yes, yes, he will — truly!’ Shirley interrupted. ‘He said we could bring anyone we liked.’

Colin could see his mother was unconvinced. This called for desperate measures. ‘Pleeeeee, Mum, can I? Pleeeeee!!!’ he pleaded as he hugged her and adopted his cutest face.

It worked. To forbid him to go would break his heart; she couldn’t do that, even though she had serious reservations. ‘Okay,’ she agreed. ‘But you be careful. And

don't you go anywhere near that pool unless an adult is with you.'

'No, Mum, I promise!'

'Yeah, we promise,' Martin said, impatient to be on his way.

'Do all your mothers know about this?' she asked, attempting one last delaying tactic.

'Yes, Mrs Cameron. Mum rang Steven's mother and she said it was quite all right,' Shirley said.

Now Colin knew the way was clear. Shirley never lied — everyone knew that.

'All right then,' his mother said. 'But don't stay too long. And Colin — don't you forget to say thank you to Steven's mother!'

'No, Mum!'

'Bye, Mrs Cameron!'

'See ya, Mrs Cameron!'

Without a backward glance they were gone. With a sigh she closed the door and went back to her fanning and worrying.

By the time they reached the big house at the end of the long drive there were eight of them. They'd picked up the others along the way leaving a trail of bewildered, out-negotiated, but not quite convinced parents in their wake. Steven's mother had received a number of phone calls as a result. The effort must have worn her out because by the time they arrived, she was upstairs taking a nap.

Steven was a happy, peach-faced boy who welcomed

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them with a shy wave of his hand and a generous smile. A floppy wide-brimmed hat protected him from the sun. The almost blue colour of his skin told them he hadn't been in the country long.

Kevin did his best to introduce everyone but his attempts were lost in the excited babble.

Ahmad, the Malayan driver charged with watching over them, stood quietly in the background puffing on a clove-scented cigarette.

Steven introduced him. 'This is Ahmad, he's going to look after us.'

Ahmad nodded.

'Hi, Ahmad!' the children chorused, but they were far more interested in the pool than the lifesaver.

'Selamat hari,' said Colin.

'Selamat hari,' Ahmad smiled at him.

Steven was impressed. 'Golly, you speak like a native,' he said.

'You'll soon learn,' Colin said. It was no big deal — all the servants spoke Malay, it was easy enough to pick up.

'Oh, I do hope so,' Steven said. 'Come on then, let's go.'

Steven fell in at Colin's side and began chatting away happily as if he'd known him all his life. By the time they reached the pool, Colin knew that Steven was nine years old, had only arrived four days ago from somewhere near Manchester, his father was some bigwig in a petrol company, and his older sister was in boarding school in

England — where he, too, would be going when he was twelve.

Colin also knew — with a child's unerring instinct — that Steven was a kind-hearted kid who would make a good friend. Better than that, a good friend with a swimming pool!

'Last one in's a rotten egg!' shouted Shirley as she plunged into the deep end.

A few of the others jumped in after her yelling gleefully.

'Geez, I hope Shirl isn't gonna wanna play any of her dumb girls' games,' Martin moaned.

'What sort of games?' Steven asked quickly — he was already quite stricken with Shirley.

'Aw, Swiss Family Robinson or somethin' like that,' Colin said. 'She'll get us to build a hut out of chairs 'n' stuff, then she'll throw rocks 'n' things into the pool and say they're pearls or treasure or somethin', an' we'll have to dive in an' get them for her cos she'll be the princess or somethin' stupid like that.'

'There's no princess in Swiss family Robinson,' Steven said, quite correctly.

'Doesn't matter to her. I tol' you they were dumb games.'

'Yeah, an' sometimes Col 'n' me pretend to be sharks and we swim underwater and rip the princess's togs off so everyone can see her royal bum,' Martin lied.

Steven believed him, though. Now he was really interested. 'Hey, Shirley,' he shouted. 'Would you like to play Swiss family Robinson?'

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‘Ooooh yes — let’s!’ Shirley squealed.

Colin and Martin, moaning in unison, fell into the pool as though they’d been shot. The water was wonderful — cool, clear, heavenly. For this they would even play Shirley’s dumb games.

With help from Ahmad, they built Shirley a palace out of tables, towels and pool chairs, and she soon had all the boys diving for pebbles as Colin had predicted.

Steven was enjoying every minute of it, especially since Shirley had diplomatically made him the Prince.

On the whole, things were going fairly smoothly until Colin and Martin decided that they would form a raiding pirate party and steal the princess’s precious pearls.

Shirley’s screaming was enough to wake the dead.

It was certainly enough to wake Steven’s mother. The shutters of a window on the top floor flew open and a ruddy-faced woman leant out and squinted grumpily down at them. Sleep had creased her face and her angry red hair was matted to one side of her head by sweat.

‘Steven!’ she shouted shrilly. ‘What on earth is all that noise about?’ Her harsh northern English accent cut through the afternoon like nails across glass.

‘Sorry, Mum.’ Steven said, looking ludicrous in the crown of bougainvillea flowers Shirley had insisted he wear.

Colin sunk silently to the bottom of the pool. From there he could just make out Steven standing on the edge of the pool reasoning with his mother, while the others

stood nervously at the shallow end. Except for Martin who swam slowly across the pool until he was directly above Colin's head, then farted.

Colin exploded out of the water shrieking with laughter.

Steven's mother leaned back in horror. 'My God!' she gasped.

'What?' said Steven.

'Who is that?' she croaked on the point of apoplexy.

'Who?' said Steven.

'That boy! That boy there! That *Malayan* boy,' she screeched and pointed a shaking finger at the pool.

Martin and Colin were still giggling helplessly. The others looked to see whom she meant. She was pointing at Colin.

'You boy, get out of the pool this minute!'

Martin stopped laughing. 'She means you,' he said to Colin in disbelief.

'That's not a Malayan boy, that's Colin!' Shirley said, indignantly.

'He's my friend,' Steven added, valiantly.

'I don't care who he is, Steven,' she squawked. 'I've told you time and time again you're not to have native children in that pool. Play with them if you must, but they are not ever to swim in our pool. God knows what diseases they might be carrying.'

Colin understood what was happening — with his black hair and deep tan, he could quite easily be mistaken

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for local. In New Zealand, people often mistook him for a Maori. Steven's mother had made a simple error, that was all. 'I'm not a Malayan—' he began.

'Colin,' Ahmad interrupted in Malay. 'Go home, Colin. She does not want you here!'

'Why?' Col asked, also in Malay. 'I don't have any diseases — I'm not a native.'

'And I am, so I do?' Ahmad said, raising one eyebrow.

Steven's mother grew impatient with this private discussion in a heathen language. 'Boy! Boy!'

Colin ignored her.

She turned to Shirley. 'Does he understand English? Tell him I want him out of the pool and off this property, immediately!'

Some of the children had begun to cry.

Not Colin, though, he was angry, not sad. He swam to the side of the pool and climbed out.

Martin climbed out as well — much more slowly.

Shirley picked up her towel. 'I'm leaving, too,' she said, quite properly, between snuffles.

Martin nodded in agreement and tried to hide his tears with a towel as he followed Colin around the pool.

'You other children don't have to go,' the woman said, her voice softer — a pleasant contrast to the harridan-like tones she'd employed moments before. 'Stay. I'll have cook bring out orange pop and sausage rolls.'

Martin and Shirley slowed — orange pop and sausage rolls are powerful antidotes for a child's outrage and there

was a lot of swimming time left in the afternoon. It was a hard decision.

Colin made it for them. ‘You guys stay,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ll be okay,’ he added with more conviction than he felt. He felt little, only that his skin seemed to prickle inexplicably.

‘Are you sure?’ Shirley asked in her motherly way.

‘Yes,’ Colin said, curtly. Then he looked up at Steven’s mother and muttered in Malay, ‘A pox on you, shitface!’

‘What did he say, Ahmad? What did he say?’ she said — it was the first time she had acknowledged the quiet Malayan’s presence.

‘He said he is sorry, Mem,’ Ahmad replied, in English.

This seemed to please her; a sense of order had been restored. Everyone knew his or her place now. ‘Well, you tell him this time okay. But, he no come back, or I very angry,’ she said, as if bad English might be easier to translate.

‘Yes, Mem,’ Ahmad said calmly. Then, reverting once more to his native tongue, he said to Colin: ‘Shitface ... is that any way for a boy to talk to a whore?’

Colin chuckled delightedly.

The woman interpreted his laughter as a sign of relief — they were simple people, the natives; you had to be firm with them, though, they respect that.

‘All right, young man,’ she said expansively, ‘we’ll forget about it this time, but you not come here again, you understand?’

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‘Yes, Mem. Thank you, Mem,’ Colin said in Malay, while backing away humbly. He was smiling and acting cheerfully, but dying inside.

Martin and Shirley didn’t understand what was happening. Why was Colin speaking Malay? They watched him go but did not follow.

After rounding the corner of the house, he turned and walked up the long drive without looking back. Off in the distance, shimmering in the afternoon haze, he could see the block of apartments he called home. Suddenly, he needed to be there — away from this strange woman, her swimming pool and her angry voice.

He felt very alone.

Then he became aware that he wasn’t alone — he heard the unmistakable pad of bare feet coming up behind him.

It was Steven, still teary-eyed. ‘I’m sorry,’ he sniffled.

‘It’s not your fault.’

‘She’s my mother ...’

‘Yeah, but mums can be dumb sometimes.’

Steven glanced back at the house and lowered his voice. ‘She’ll go back to bed in a minute. You could sneak back in if you wanted.’

‘Nah — I have to go home now, anyway.’

‘Oh ...’ Steven studied his feet intently — fat feet on the end of soft downy legs. After a while he looked up at Colin with sad eyes. ‘Can we still be friends?’

Colin read the sincerity in the plump face — something important was happening, but he wasn’t sure what. He

wasn't sure what to say, either, so he answered with his heart. 'Okay, better not tell your mum, but.'

'I shan't, honestly,' Steven said, conspiratorially.

'Mates then, eh?' Colin smiled.

'Yes ... mates,' Steven agreed, uncertainly — not being familiar with this antipodean term of endearment.

There was nothing left to say.

Colin was first to recognise this. 'Well, see you 'round, I s'pose.'

'Yes, I'll see you around ... mate,' Steven said, awkwardly.

Colin turned and walked away.

When he reached the end of the drive he looked back, but Steven had disappeared.

A few minutes later, as Colin was nearing his apartment, he spied a Chinese woman kneeling in the garden by the steps. As he drew nearer he saw that she was picking red chillies off a small bush.

She looked up and smiled.

Colin frowned. 'They're Mrs Rankin's chillies!' he said, sternly.

'She said I could have some,' the woman explained as she stood and brushed a lock of thick black hair from her eyes. Beautiful by any measure, her kind features and gentle demeanour put him instantly at ease.

She regarded him curiously. 'Where are your friends?'

'Um ... oh, they wanted to stay and play one of Shirley's

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stupid games and I got sick of it and came home,' he said quietly, avoiding her eyes.

'Are you hungry?' she said.

'Yes.' He was always hungry.

'There's some bean curd in the fridge. The sweet one you like.'

'Neat!' Colin said and bounded away up the steps.

'Make sure you leave some for your father,' she called after him.

'Yes, Mum,' he said and was gone.

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