

KELONG KINGS

By

Wilson Raj Perumal

Alessandro Righi Emanuele Piano

PROLOGUE and CHAPTER I offered by www.invisible-dog.com

PROLOGUE

When they fixed me up in Finland, they thought it was just going to be a Wilson-Raj-send-him-back-to-Singapore story; locked up and out of the picture for five long years. They never realized that match-fixing was going to be uncovered; it never occurred to them that the police would check my mobile phone, my laptop and go through all of my belongings.

I had just landed in Vantaa airport, Helsinki, Finland, from the small arctic town of Rovaniemi, when they stopped me. Only me. So I immediately sensed that something was amiss. It wasn't really a random check; they were already after me, following my every move. Somehow they had missed me in Rovaniemi; perhaps they didn't expect me to take the first flight out at six o'clock in the morning. So when I showed up in Vantaa airport the police stopped me, checked my passport and escorted me down to the airport's Police holding bay. Then an officer came in.

"You're traveling under a false passport", he said.

The officer was holding a picture of me in his hand; a big picture. I couldn't recognize the T-shirt that I wore in the photo.

"Where the fuck did I get that T-shirt from", it looked like an old picture.

The officer examined the photo carefully, then began scrutinizing me.

"This is not the guy".

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Old photo.

He checked for a cut on my forehead; I have a little scar just below my hairline, but the officer couldn't spot it.

"No, no, no", he shook his head. "This is not the guy".

But the police in Rovaniemi insisted that they hold on to me, so there I was, sitting in the Vantaa Helsinki airport's holding bay.

On the previous day, the police had ambushed the wrong Indian guy in a Rovaniemi hotel.

"Hey, are you Wilson Raj Perumal?"

"I'm Perumal", the man said as he raised his hands over his head, "but I'm not Wilson Raj".

Someone had given the Finnish authorities all of my true details: Singaporean, Indian origin, my real name, my picture. The police had called all the hotels in town.

"When he checks in", they demanded, "please contact us immediately".

Somebody had been saving this old photo of me for this... But who?

The night before my arrest I had an argument by e-mail with a Singaporean guy from Macao called Benny.

"Maybe it was Benny", I thought, "he's quite influential".

Our discussion was over money that I owed him, 1.1 million Singapore dollars, roughly 900 thousand US dollars. I'd lost the amount while gambling on Premier League matches and had repaid Benny close to 800 thousand dollars.

"I'll settle the 300 thousand left, you just hang on", I wrote to Benny. "Just bear with me".

"No", he replied, "people are chasing me for this money".

"I paid you 800 thousand already", I wrote. "You think I'm not going to pay the remaining 300? Just give me a couple of months and I'll clear you".

"I know what name you're using", he threatened, "and what passport you're using: Raja Morgan Chelliah".

"Fuck you!" I answered. "You can do whatever you want".

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Now I was thinking: "It must be this mother-fucker".

But why would he want to do this? If I get arrested, he's not going to get his money back.



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CHAPTER I

Kampong boy

My name is Wilson Raj Perumal, I'm an Indian Tamil born in Singapore.

Singapore is a developed country today; it was not in 1965, when I was born. In that same year, Singapore broke away from Malaysia and obtained its independence. My father and mother were born Malaysians but, after the partition, they chose to live in Singapore and eventually became citizens of the newborn state. We kids were born Singaporeans.

I was the third of five children: I had an older brother and an older sister; a younger brother and a younger sister; I was exactly in the middle. As a child, I was a kampong boy; in Malaysian, the term 'kampong' means village. My family had a small strip of land in Chua Chu Kang, a rural area in western Singapore with large pig farms and cultivations. We didn't live very deep into the farmland; we were on the outskirts, closer to town, and right next-to the train track that goes from Malaysia to Tanjong Pagar, the heart of Singapore's Central Business District.

Ours was a below-average family. During my childhood, my father struggled to find a job, then became a contractor; he opened up his own company and would tender public contracts for streetlight painting, cable laying and such things. He was not into gambling; he was a straight man who did voluntary police work. Father was also a black belt in Judo and a martial arts instructor.

I also had plenty of relatives in Johor, Malaysia, across the Johor Strait. Most of them were rubber tappers who had worked for the British during colonial times. When Malaysia became independent in 1957, my relatives in Johor began serving the local government and lived in a rubber estate. They had rubber trees, plenty of them, and collected the latex that dripped out of the bark to sell. When school was out, I would travel to Malaysia and help them. Work started at four o'clock in the morning and ended at one o'clock in the afternoon. then we would all go home to rest for the remainder of the day.

During the 1970s, Singapore was an extremely underdeveloped country where people had to dispose of shit manually. The Chinese were entrusted with the vile task. You would be sitting in the restroom doing your business when the tray used to collect the excrement would suddenly disappear from underneath your ass.

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"Fuck. Where's the tray?"

Then some Chinese guy would slide a clean tray in and dispose of your shit manually.

There were cars but we had none for ourselves. We had electricity but no tap water in our home until 1975. When I was a young boy, my mother would travel five kilometers just to fetch clean water to drink. Fortunately, we owned a water well with a pulley just outside the house that we used for bathing and all other purposes.

As a young boy I attended the Teck Whye Primary school, which was within walking distance from my home. During school holidays, my mother would sometimes call me and say: "Wilson, why don't you go sell some coconuts?"

We owned a small garden with jackfruit - a large fruit with smooth thorns that you can cut in half and sell - rambutan, durian, coconut trees, plantains and other fruits. We also had curry trees and a long vegetable that goes by the Tamil name of 'murungai'. Indian women cook murungai because it's very good for erections. My mother would hire a guy specialized in climbing coconut trees and he would collect the coconuts for us. Then my brothers and I would spend the afternoons peeling them and I would go out into the neighborhood to sell the peeled coconuts and other fruits to my mother's friends for small amounts of money. School holidays were also the chance for me to look for small jobs in the industrial area near my home; I would use the extra money to buy school books or a new school uniform.

There was a lot of mud and a lot of water everywhere in Chua Chu Kang. Floods were very frequent, especially during the rainy season. During flooding, people would often die electrocuted by the short-circuiting wires from fallen lamp-posts. When I was seven years old, there was a flood that covered the entire neighborhood with a thick layer of mud. We kids went out onto the streets to help people push-start their vehicles and they paid us small change for the trouble.

Just beside my house was an old drainage basin that would overflow whenever there were heavy rains. On such days, my mother would not allow us to go outside, so I would sit in the kitchen with my legs stretched out onto the ledge of the window and watch the objects that floated by in the current. I observed the water's surface attentively, looking for balls or anything else worth keeping. There was a tiny wooden bridge that spanned across our property and over the drainage basin which people used as a short-cut to reach the other side of our neighborhood. The bridge was quite narrow and extremely risky to cross, especially when the drainage basin was overflowing. When I was 12 or 13, I saw an umbrella float by in the current; a new umbrella. It was turned upside down.

"Fuck" I thought as I made to get up from my seat. "That's a new umbrella".

Then I saw a head, a girl's head, pop up and go down again among the foamy ripples. I called my mother and together we ran outside and chased the umbrella to see if we could find the girl and help her but the current was just too strong. She must have slipped and fallen while crossing the little bridge. On the following day, her lifeless body was found in the Kranji Reservoir up north.

The train tracks next to my house were another fatal landmark. When I was a child, one of my mother's friends committed suicide by standing on the tracks before an oncoming train to escape the

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abuses of her violent husband. Young couples that were denied the possibility to marry by their respective families also took their lives on those deadly tracks, as did our German Shepherd when I was 17 years old.

In those years we didn't have a television set so we went to our neighbor's home to watch Tamil movies on TV. Father also liked to watch football matches, as many of his friends were top football referees in Singapore. One night, when I was about 11 years old, he woke me up in my bed.

"Come", he said, "sit next to me. Let's watch the football match".

It was the first football game that I ever watched; an FA Cup final. I cannot remember distinctly but I think that Manchester United lost the match 1-0. They attacked and attacked for 80 full minutes; one counter-attack and they lost. I became a United fan from that day onward; my whole family supported them. But my all-time favorite football player was Diego Armando Maradona, who then played for SSC Napoli. To me he will always be special; the greatest footballer living. I tried not to miss any of his matches. Save for the World Cup, there was no live football on TV in Singapore, so I would skip all of my other activities to watch Maradona's delayed games. He was my idol; a true football genius. I also admired other prominent footballers like Gheorghe Hagi, Johan Cruyff, Enzo Francescoli and Eder. I was really into sports when I was young; apart from footballers, my heroes were Sebastian Coe, Muhammad Ali and John McEnroe.

My English was very bad back then. I mean, although English was our first language in school - mathematics, history, science... all were taught in English - there was really no good command of the language around when we were young. We all spoke broken English and the Chinese were the worst at it. They were so unrefined that we called the boys 'Ah Beng' and the girls 'Ah Lian': The equivalent of 'rogue' and 'bimbo' in the local street dialect Hokkien. When we met outside school, we would blurt out: "Hey Ah Beng. Where you go, la?"

"Ho, hey".

"How are you, la?"

We also mixed other languages with English: Tamil, Chinese, Malay; sometimes within the span of a single sentence.

"Na bei chee-bye. What the fuck is this fellow doing? Lu ki ma".

Vulgarity was very common, especially among the Chinese. First thing in the morning, they would burst out "Na bei chee-bye", which literally means "your mother's pussy" in Hokkien. That was their way of wishing you a good morning.

In school, we all studied our mother tongues as second languages. It wasn't compulsory; an Indian guy could choose to study Mandarin and a Chinese could learn Tamil. Well, I've never actually met a Chinese guy in Singapore who studied Tamil but many Indians chose to study Mandarin. I studied Tamil as my second language but I can also speak Malaysian, a bit of Chinese and Sinhalese. I didn't bother to learn Filipino or Thai; most Singaporeans who know Filipino or Thai are either pimps - prostitution is legal in Singapore - or have a penchant for women from those countries.

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I placed my first bet at around the age of 13. I picked Manchester United to win in an FA Cup final against my neighbor, who was much older than me. He lost and refused to pay but I was too young to stand up to him and claim my money. At that time I also played cards with my friends and occasionally did some petty betting. Our favorite pastime was 'si ki phuay', a Chinese card game that resembles poker. Gambling was illegal in Singapore and our parents didn't let us play cards for money so we had to find secluded places around town to play our games. When I was 16, as we were playing cards behind our school, the police suddenly ambushed us. A friend and I took off in the same direction with a policeman giving chase after us. When we were out in the open, the officer aimed his gun in our direction and shouted: "The two of you. Stop or I'll shoot".

My friend slowed down and looked back, thinking of turning himself in, but I had a different plan.

"You asshole", I yelled at him, "he's not going to shoot you for playing cards. Just keep running".

We managed to get away and return home.

On a different occasion, two friends and I were arrested for playing cards on the staircases of a shopping center and were taken to the police station. Since there were no policemen of Indian origin in sight, I started speaking to my friends in Tamil.

"Look", I suggested, "when we record our statements, let's say that only two of us were gambling while the third person was simply watching".

"Who shall we say was watching?" they inquired.

"Me of course, you dumb fuckers", I replied. "I'm the one who came up with the idea".

I was not made for academic studies, I was an average student: neither too smart nor too dumb. The only time when I would really sit down and study were the final three weeks before exams, that was it. No one had ever taken the time to drill the importance of an education into me.

My real talent was in sports and, although I had a passion for football, I was persuaded to take up athletics by my school teachers. I had come in second at a cross-country race and one of the coaches of the school's athletics team recruited me. My school had a reputation for forging excellent runners dating back to the early 70's so athletics had precedence over any other discipline. I was not born a talented athlete, it took hard work; I would wake up at four o'clock in the morning and run 10 to 15 kilometers before heading to school. After school was finished, I would rest a bit and then head for the athletics' track for further training. I dreamed of winning the inter-school championship. I ran middle-distance, the 800 meters, in about 1 minute and 58 seconds and the 1500 meters in 4 minutes and 7 seconds; not too shabby for a school boy. I didn't have a proper trainer and lacked guidance in my diet but I trained among professional athletes who competed on longer distances. My coach at the time was a very nice man who sacrificed a good portion of his time and money on his pupils without getting anything in return. His name was Mr. Sivalingam and he allowed me to train with a group of national athletes belonging to a top club called Swift Athletes Association. Training was tough and exhausting; when our sessions were over, we would all go to a hawker center - an open-air food court - nearby to

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buy some food and drinks. My teenage life was focused on sports; nobody bothered to tell me that there was no future in what I was doing. Had I broken the world record, there would have been no special treatment to be expected; only much later did I realize that most of the friends with whom I used to train and compete either abandoned athletics after the end of school or went on to become Physical Education teachers.

While in school, my other extra-curricular activity was the boy-scouts. I can still recite our promise to God, to the Republic of Singapore and to Scout Law. As boy-scouts, we had access to the keys of certain locked premises on school campus, including the Audio-Visual Aid (AVA) room, that we tidied periodically to impress the headmaster. One day a friend and fellow boy-scout managed to copy the AVA room's keys so that we could spend the weekends there watching movies until late at night. During one of those evenings my friends and I decided to steal a VHS video recorder from the room then went downtown to sell it for five hundred Singapore dollars. We divided the booty equally among us. The year was 1984 and I was 18 years old; at that time, going downtown was a big thrill for us. With the five hundred dollars in our pockets, we went to watch a movie in the city; I can't remember what film it was. When the theft was discovered, the school filed a police report but no arrests were made. The Principal marveled as to how a VHS recorder had gone missing without a proper break-in.

After this incident, some of my friends continued to spend their nights inside the school; they brought outsiders with them and planned a massive break-in. By then, I had completed my secondary school and begun my Pre-University. I was attending Arts and Social Sciences; had I gone on to University and obtained my degree, I would probably be a teacher today, but fate had another path in mind for me.

During a weekend, my former schoolmates entered the school premises and stole every single electronic device in the AVA room. They then focused their attention to the school's canteen and took food and drinks to quell their hunger and thirst. One of my friends, whose name was Rajah, stole a pair of used football boots that had been stored in the canteen room. The idiot then wore them at an inter-class football competition and their original owner happened to see them on his feet.

"Hey", he shouted, "those are my boots".

We were all friends. Had I been present, I would have settled the matter with an apology and without any further consequences, but my friend Rajah was too stubborn to give in and return the ill-gotten gain.

"No", Rajah retorted, "these are my boots".

At which point, the owner of the boots, knowing that they were his, complained to the owner of the canteen, with whom he had left the boots for safekeeping. The canteen owner reported to the school Principal and the Principal called the police. Rajah was interrogated and claimed that he had bought the boots outside of the school's campus. The person who, in Rajah's version, had sold him the boots, another friend of mine named Maniam, was then picked up by the police and given the 'cold treatment' until he admitted his involvement in the break-in.

If you are wondering what the 'cold treatment' is, let me enlighten you as to how the Singapore police carried out its investigations in those days. If they had the slightest hint of your involvement in a

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crime and you happened to deny the wrongdoing or minimize your role, you would get the 'cold treatment'. This meant that you were forced to take a shower in the early hours of the day, say at four in the morning, then, while you were soaking wet, you were made to stand before an air-conditioner with the cold wind blowing against your bare skin while wearing nothing but your underwear. If that was not enough to convince you to talk, they would move on to the second stage: the police would beat you without leaving any external marks, something that they were well trained to do and, since you would undergo a medical examination before being taken to court, the doctors would turn a blind eye to any eventual bruises on your body.

After receiving the cold treatment, Maniam sang like a bird and the cat was out of the bag: football boots, VHS video recorder and all. While my schoolmates were being picked up left and right by the police, I was away in Malaysia to participate in an athletics event, the ASEAN Schools Athletics Competition. Upon returning to Singapore, I received an invitation to present myself at the police station, so my father accompanied me there. My friends had spilled the beans and had fingered me as their accomplice. We were all charged with burglary and I was put on probation. I was 18 years old then and, until that moment, my parents had thought that I was a goody two-shoes. My father tried to ignore the incident but my mother didn't: the moment I walked into the house she began throwing whatever she could get her hands on at me. To make things worse, having represented the Singapore schools in an international sports event, I made the local headlines.

"ASEAN school athlete charged with house breaking".

Fuck, how can you show your face in school after your name appears in the local paper for theft? Unlucky bastard. I was so humiliated that I decided to change school.

Upon completing my A-level examination at the end of Pre-University, I began my National Military Service. It was a two-and-a-half year mandatory service that every Singaporean citizen had to undergo. As an athlete, I attended special training sessions and could avoid serving in the military camp most of the time. During the first three months of service we underwent basic military training. It was tough but I enjoyed the new experience. We learned unarmed combat, how to handle an M-16 rifle and how to fire on moving targets. It was during this time that I tried to make my way into the school of midshipmen.

"I want to be a naval officer", I thought. "I want to sign up".

Some of my close friends were already in the Navy; wearing the white uniform and round hat of a naval officer was one of my dreams. I was among the best physical trainees they had; I had won all the awards that a school athlete could possibly win. Even among the servicemen, I was the fastest 2.4 km runner and the second fastest when it came to obstacles. When I applied, the Navy ran my ID through the system.

"You cannot sign up because of your criminal record", they said. "Sorry, but you cannot enlist".

I was shattered. It took me a couple of days to digest the news. Had I been able to enlist, I would have had a salary of about one thousand Singapore dollars per month; very good money at the time. Instead, I was left to wonder why I could be a national serviceman and handle an M-16 with my criminal record but not enlist to join the permanent staff. Life suddenly became aimless and all my

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aspirations to serve my country and become a responsible citizen simply vanished; that's when I started to fuck around with my national service.

I didn't take up gambling in a serious way until I was 19. One day my best friend and running mate from the school's athletics team, Kanan, came looking for me.

"Hey Wilson", he seemed excited, "I went to Jalan Besar Stadium to watch a football match and saw a bunch of old men who were gambling on football games; old Chinese men".

Jalan Besar was a very famous stadium located close to Singapore's Little India; it was the birthplace of Singaporean football. It housed the Singaporean Football Association and was like a museum for local footballers. Jalan Besar had a lot of sentimental value for both players and officials and was thus a very common site for them to hang out at. The national team used to train there before international fixtures and the pitch was always in pristine condition. During the 70's and 80's, the Singaporean national team was our joy and pride; they would easily glide past teams like the Philippines, with scores of 5-0. Fandi Ahmad was our greatest player back then, if not our all-time greatest. Ahmad was a very friendly and down-to-earth guy even though he could boast a successful international career; he had played in the Dutch club FC Groningen and had also scored a goal during a UEFA Cup match against International Milan. V. Sundramoorthy was another talented footballer from Singapore who had played in the Swiss club FC Basel. I have never seen anyone back-heel the ball the way Sundramoorthy could and did. Both Fandi and Sundram had started their international career in the Singaporean national team at the age of 16. These and other legends of Singaporean football had perfected their skills on the pitch of Jalan Besar, which made the stadium feel like the Maracanã stadium of Rio de Janeiro to any Singaporean that stepped on its green.

"Old Chinese men gambling on football at Jalan Besar", Kanan had said.

Kanan and I were persuaded that we had football knowledge and here were these old men; Chinese men. What did they know about football? I was sure that we would have been able to outsmart them quite easily.

"Fuck", I replied to Kanan, "let's go and check it out".

The old Chinese men sat in the bookies corner of Jalan Besar's regular Grand Stand. Although gambling was illegal in Singapore, everybody knew that there was a bookies corner in the stadium, even the police and the Football Association officials. It had been there ever since the 60's, before I was even born. No ordinary fan would occupy the 50-or-so seats where the old Chinese men sat, nor did any law enforcement officer ever attempt to give them any trouble. It was like a hobby for these Chinese men: they would get off work then spend the evening at the stadium where they would sit down, have a cup of tea and gamble on any of the teams that played. The early birds would usually begin the day with a conversation about the upcoming fixture. Most of the time no one had a clue as to whom the players on the pitch were, so the bookies would have to wait until several minutes into the match to figure out the standard of the teams and offer the adequate odds on handicap and total goals scored.

Red team would kick off against White team and then, about five minutes into the match, the bookies would shout, "Give you half-ball on Red", and open the gambling.

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Back then, there were the Singaporean Business House League, the Local National League and the Inter Constituency tournament; all of them were amateur competitions. The international fixtures that were played in Singapore were the South East Asian games, the Asian Games and so on. There was a guy called Tai Sun, whom we called HQ. Bookies and punters would call HQ's home to find out where the daily match was going to be played; there were several stadiums in Singapore and HQ was our control tower. How Tai Sun had become HQ is something that I had never bothered to ask but he always sounded very enthusiastic when he answered the telephone to dispatch bookies and punters to the respective venues.

"Today is Toa Payoh Stadium", he would announce.

"OK".

"7:30 p.m."

"I'll be there".

My friends and I would punt all kinds of bets, but only on football; I don't bet on anything else. I don't exactly know why, but football was always the number one sport in Singapore among Indians and Malaysians. Singaporeans could be seen playing football in parks, basketball courts or in the streets at any given time of the day. Singaporean Indians don't indulge in cricket; they will slap you if you even mention that sport. I still cannot understand cricket; a grown man throwing the ball then running back and forth. And the weirdest thing is that a match can continue until the following day. What kind of sport is that? Fortunately I'm from Singapore; if I were born in India, I'd probably be fixing cricket matches right now.

Very few Chinese Singaporeans play football; they prefer basketball. When you drive by their blocks in Singapore you will see basketball courts everywhere but, to this day, I have never seen a Chinese basketball player in Singapore slam dunk or even touch the rim. Usually, after the Chinese had finished playing basketball, the basket-posts would become our goals, the basketball court our pitch, and we would play five against five or four against four.

We also played a lot of seven-aside football in those days, especially during the weekends. Seven against seven; two reserves; a regular pitch; each half-time, five minutes. They don't play that kind of football in Europe and, trust me, it's very tiring; within five minutes you'll be dying. There could be anywhere from 50 to 100 teams participating in a single competition: three pitches, five minutes, the teams divided into four groups. We would sit down and wait for an hour, sometimes an hour and a half, between games and would pass the time by playing blackjack. I had my own team called 'Brazilian Boys', a team that still exists to this very day, and I organized seven-aside and eleven-aside tournaments. I met many of my friends and later associates during those matches but never fixed any of them.

During the weekdays, my national service was keeping me very busy. At one point I was even transferred to serve in the school of Combat Medics.

"What the fuck am I going to do with a combat medic certificate?" I asked myself. "I've got no interest in the medical field".

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Singapore has a defense force just for namesake: Who can we fight? A small, tiny island like this one. But the combat medic course was very tough because you had to carry a heavy bag and go through CPR and all kinds of other medical nonsense. Fuck. It was too much strain for the 150 dollars per month that they paid me. One of my friends was in the commando unit, three bars on his shoulder, red beret on his head.

"You can find a loophole", he suggested, "and get out of the combat medic unit".

"How?" I asked.

"Just pretend that you have epilepsy".

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sure. Pretend to have an epileptic attack. You fall on the ground shaking and they will discharge you from the course".

During a weekend leave I went home. My father had since sold our strip of land in rural Chua Chu Kang and we had moved into a flat in Woodlands, a newly-developed neighborhood situated further north, near the Johor Causeway to Malaysia. From Woodlands, I took a taxi to the Toa Payoh stadium to watch the football game, then phoned a friend.

"Call an ambulance", I told him.

I faked an epileptic attack, the ambulance arrived and I was given a three-day medical leave. On the following Monday, I went to see my camp's medical doctor.

"Here", he handed me a slip of paper. "Submit this certificate".

Next I knew, I was discharged from the course. I was left to water the plants, the only important task requested of me being my presence. Not three months went by and I was shoved into yet another course. I became a clerk and was posted to a unit near my home. I wanted a way out. There was an athletics competition that I was going to take part in as a representative of the Singapore Armed Forces so I went to see the army captain in charge of athletes and demanded more time for training.

"OK, you can attend camp half-day", he said and handed me a permit.

After completing my duties at camp, I was supposed to train, but didn't. I just did a bit of running here and there to keep fit. I was losing interest in athletics, nevertheless, we won the competition and became champions. My friend won the first tier and I won the second. We were 'ditched', which meant that we didn't have to attend camp for six months, and the entire staff was furious with me.

"How can this fucker get such treatment?" they complained.

No more stinking camouflage uniform; I could go back to gambling.

Hokkien was the gambling language in Jalan Besar stadium. The Chinese have many, many dialects; hundreds of them. I can't speak much Mandarin but I can speak Hokkien. It's a street language;

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many Singaporeans speak it. If the conversation is about football, I can definitely speak Hokkien. When I first began gambling, I couldn't understand Hokkien that well, nor could I understand the odds, but I picked up both along the way.

Half-ball, half-one, then it goes to one, then to one-and-a-half. If you ask a stranger on the street, he'll say: "What the fuck is one, one-and-a-half? What's 0.75? What's total goals? What's handicap?"

Unlike the United Kingdom, where odds are expressed in fractions, in Singapore the odds are measured in decimals. They start off even, at zero, then gradually increase to 0.25, 0.5, 0.75, 1, depending on the strength of the teams on the pitch. By multiplying the odds with the amount of money that you bet, you can calculate how much you are going to profit in case of a win. But I guess you need to be a gambler to fully grasp the meaning of the odds.

A lot of people don't know the difference between a bookmaker and a punter. A punter is a person that gambles his money on football, horse racing or whatever. A bookmaker is a person who collects and sells bets for a profit. I am not interested in being a bookmaker; I'm a punter. I counter the bookmaker's odds and give him better odds. Then, if he still wants to pick the same team that I chose, he'll have to counter me with better odds yet. We counter one another until I think it advantageous to accept his offer. For example: Brazil vs Italy.

"I take Brazil and give you half-ball", the bookmaker will say. "I win you even money".

And I'll counter: "I take Brazil, give you half, and I win you nine".

Whatever you counter is open to everybody else. Like in a marketplace, the others may choose to collect your bet or to counter your odds. We all sell at a certain price and buy at a certain price. When you're comfortable with the price, you buy. When the offer is closed, someone else may come to you and ask: "Do you have a bit of stock? I want to share with you".

And you better hand out a share or else they will curse you so badly that you will surely lose your bet.

Why did I start gambling? Take Tiger Woods, for instance. He had everything one could desire from life: a nice family, an enviable bank balance; but he sat in the casino all night at the blackjack table. Man's thinking power is always eclipsed by his libido and Tiger is no exception to this rule. John Terry wagers on greyhounds, Wayne Rooney bets on horses and so does Michael Owen; and when Rooney has to pay up, he tells the bookies that he cannot settle his debt and blames Owen for his gambling addiction. And the list goes on and on; these are all people who have money and fame but still look for thrills in the form of gambling.

Then there are those that gamble for the money alone, hoping to win. Money is essential for survival. People need thrills and people want money. Who doesn't want money? I want to drive a nice car, I want to live in a nice house.

Gamblers all have their secret winning formulas, although these formulas are seldom successful. A true punter never gives up, even if he is sinking deeper and deeper into debt. When you've

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scratched the bottom of the barrel, you are prepared to do anything to win; even cheat. Ben Johnson and Marion Jones were top athletes but when they couldn't make it on their own anymore, they used steroids. Politicians rig elections to get elected. The world is a filthy place to live in.

Until very recently, European betting was ancient, stone age, stupid gambling. Three hundred years ago people would gamble that way. Manchester United to win against Wigan Athletic FC: for every dollar you bet on Man Utd, you win 20 cents; 4 dollars for a draw and 12 dollars for Wigan's victory. Who the fuck wants 20 cents? No gambler in his right frame of mind should ever accept such a rotten deal. You can take Wigan but they will never beat United in a hundred years. How on earth can you bet that way? And why should I have to pick the right result among three possible choices: win, lose and draw? It's too difficult that way. It's a three-way gamble.

Asian betting is just two-way: 50-50 chance. Now that's how you're supposed to bet. They put a two-ball handicap on Wigan, meaning that Man Utd has to win by three goals to clear the handicap. So now: Manchester United or Wigan, what will you choose? If the match ends 2-0 for United, you don't win, you don't lose; you get your money back. If it's 3-nil for Man Utd, for every 100 dollars you bet, you win 95 dollars, with 5 dollars going to the betting company for their commission. And there are many other variables that you can gamble on: who's going to win the coin toss? Who's going to lead in the first half and at the end of the game? Who's going to win the next corner? How many goals? Your money is credited immediately into your account as we speak. Gambling for 20 cents is simply ridiculous. If there's an even chance to win, then there's a temptation. Unless you want to pick a 12-dollar team like Wigan and hope that they will win against Man Utd. Fuck, no 12-dollar team is ever going to beat United. Unless you fix the match.

After my six-months leave from the national service was over, I went back to my duties at camp. My chief clerk was not happy with the privileges that I had obtained as a runner and we ended up having a heated argument. She tried to push me around and then wanted to charge me for insubordination but my Commanding Officer provided her with a better alternative.

"Forget about charging Wilson", he suggested, "I'll take him with me".

My CO was an old man who had a liking for athletics. He wanted to run the marathon and asked me for advice on his training schedule.

"How many kilometers am I supposed to run?" he'd ask. "How many days per week? What's the right speed?"

I became the CO's personal assistant. There were two of us, myself and a friend, with practically nothing to do. I spent my days on the telephone. My CO would walk by, look at me and ask: "You're on the phone again, Wilson?"

Then he would just walk away. Again, our attendance was the only requirement. We had to show up on time or else we would end up in confinement. Guard duty was once a week and I would pay someone else to do it in my place. One hundred Singapore dollars well spent so that I could go to the football stadium and gamble.

In Singapore, we have many ethnic groups. If you say, "He's a Singaporean", you are not

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defining the person as a Chinese, Indian, or Malaysian. But if you say "Indian", it is a lot easier to identify someone, so people say, "He's an Indian", even though the person is a Singaporean national.

Usually Kanan and I would be the only Indians at the Jalan Besar stadium. There would be a couple of Malaysians and the remaining 30 or 40 people present were Chinese. The Chinese are inveterate gamblers; it is in their blood. You give them a box of match-sticks and they'll come up with a way to gamble on it; they are very ingenious when it comes to betting.

The Chinese bookies and punters at Jalan Besar stadium used to prey on newcomers and novices that didn't know how the odds worked; they were like a pack of wolves and Kanan and I initially lost most of our bets. The bookies immediately realized that we preferred to take the favorites and would team up against us and manipulate the odds. If we chose the White team, they would counter the odds and push the handicap up from half to half-one and then to one and would finally collect a good amount of cash. If we picked the Red team, they would say, "OK. 50 dollars on Red, that's it", and they would close the betting. But when we began to offer higher odds, they came to us like bees to honey. So one day, after a heavy loss, I said to myself: "OK, you mother-fuckers. You want to play this game with me?"

I decided to bring their game to their doorstep. I had taken up football at a very late stage so I never made it into the top league, but I occasionally played for some lower division teams and in the seven-aside tournaments. This meant that I had enough friends to assemble two squads. I booked the stadium from the local Sports Council two weeks prior to the game: 180 Singapore dollars and you could have the floodlights and the stadium all to yourself for two full hours. I invited 32 friends, split them into two teams and borrowed two sets of jerseys. Each player was promised 50 dollars for participating in the match.

Singapore was a small city, you know, if you called the local paper to inform them that a match was scheduled, they would print it in the 'Today's Events' column for free; and that's what I did. I made up a random name for a cup and advertised its grand final on the local paper. To make the bait more appealing, I said that the match was between two fast-food chains' teams. Saying that the match was a final meant that, given the importance of the fixture, more money could be wagered on the game. I also provided a referee; he was not an official referee, he was just a friend who was initially supposed to play, but he accepted to be the match official in exchange for 500 Singapore dollars. I bought him a black outfit; black, black, black, gave him a whistle and he became our referee.

On the next morning, Tai Sun read the paper as usual.

"Oh, look", he must have thought, "there is a game today".

HQ immediately proceeded to inform all the Chinese bookies and punters about the match and they flocked to the stadium. Before kick off, I made one team look better than the other and arranged for two friends to place bets on my behalf; I wanted to gradually increase the betting volume that we wagered without raising too many eyebrows. My friends began by offering odds for the underdogs but had to be careful and avoid jumping the gun. I also did my own gambling on the side to maximize my profits.

The referee blew the whistle. First half: the Reds attacked without intermission. They were the

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favorites and the first 45 minutes ended with them leading 3-0. Then, at half-time, when we insisted on offering odds for the White team, the bookies and punters all rushed to us and started pestering us, asking for more; only then did we gradually offer more bets. One thousand, two thousand, five thousand; before the second half-time had kicked off, we had accumulated wagers worth at least 15 thousand Singapore dollars, a huge amount for an amateur game. I switched the best players from one side to the other and instructed them and the referee on what the final outcome of the game would be. In the second half, the Whites attacked and the tables were turned. The final score was 4-3 for the White team. That's when the mother-fuckers realized that they had been duped.

"Oh, he just fucked us up nicely", I heard some of the bookies saying in Hokkien. "The fucker fixed the match".

After the game there was no retaliation nor any argument. They sensed that I had fucked them up but could not prove it. They had no evidence that the players were my friends. They lost and they paid, that's it. If they had started a fuss, they would have lost their face and people would have said to them: "Mother-fucker! You lose and you've got no money to pay up?"

Any delay in the payment of a loss would have damaged their credibility and none of them wanted to lose their reputation over a few thousand dollars.

"If you outsmart me then the fault is mine because I allowed you to do so", that is how we perceived a fixed match.

Fixing already existed in Singapore at a higher level and everybody knew about it; it's not like they had seen a rigged game for the first time. But until that day, no one had outsmarted the Chinese bookies and punters in Jalan Besar stadium. From that day onward, they stopped fucking around with me.

I played football and I gambled on football and, as my national serviceman days came to an end, a truly different life was about to begin for me. Due to my supposed medical condition, I was given a permanent discharge from any military training in the future, something that all servicemen were supposed to undergo once a year after completing their national service. At first, I tried to find a regular job. I was hired by a ship-building company called Far East Livingston that built ships and oil rigs in the Singapore shipyards. I worked for some time as an understudy for their piping department, trying to juggle the job with my gambling habit. I would give a portion of my salary to my mother and gamble the rest away. Then I lost interest in working for somebody eight-to-five, so I became a full-time punter. Spending the evenings at the stadium became a way of life for me. I was living day by day and did not have the mindset to plan ten years ahead or think about what I wanted to do in the future. And before I knew it, gambling had become more than just a way of life, it had become my line of business. Every evening we would go to the stadium and win or lose money. The matches kicked off at five thirty in the afternoon so, about an hour earlier, we would call HQ, take a taxi to the designated stadium, sit down, have a cup of coffee and start wagering. The second match of the day usually got underway at about seven thirty in the evening and, if it was played in a different venue from the first, we would bum a ride from someone, have a quick dinner and be busy gambling until ten or ten thirty at night. After that, a quick coffee, some food and we'd go play pool, billiards, at our regular meeting spot until about three o'clock in the morning. Then those of us who had jobs in the morning would head

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home, while the rest would have yet more coffee in Geylang, Singapore's red light district, in the popular night spots where foreigners came to pick up local women for company. Prostitution is legal in Singapore but, even though prostitutes walk the streets freely, soliciting is an offense. Watching these men pick up scantily dressed hookers and transvestites was a fun and popular pass-time for us, as were the occasional police raids that caused havoc and sent people running and screaming in every direction. The unlucky ones who were caught were usually jailed before being deported back to their countries of origin. At times we would play cards with a lady friend and her escorts in her office and, by the time we got home, it would be six o'clock in the morning. We would sleep until three in the afternoon and then we'd get up and start all over again. This was our life; this was the routine in the late 80's and early 90's.

When we got to the stadium, we either started some meaningless conversation or came up with something to gamble on. Any gambling would do: who can kick the ball the furthest, score from midfield in an unguarded goal or any other stupid football-related bets among ourselves; anything that served to kill time. We would place the ball in the center of the field.

"OK, it's a bet".

"It goes in", one guy would say.

"No, it's not going in", another guy would counter.

There were also other bets, like running the 400 meters against one-another. The older of the two competitors would usually get a 100-meter head-start. The bet would start between the two runners and would then spread to the rest of us. One day, the bookies at Jalan Besar were daring any of us to run ten laps of the athletics track surrounding the green in under 20 minutes. They didn't know that I was a runner so I immediately grabbed the gamble. I knew that I could easily make it in 15 minutes but pretended that I was not that confident. Confidence would have killed my chances of making money and my body language was such that I induced several punters to bet against me. The whistle blew, I ran my fastest and went home with five thousand Singapore dollars in my pocket: the easiest money that I have ever won without having to fix a match.

In those days I was fixing the Business Houses Football league and some other simple, small amateur leagues. I also arranged my own fake matches every time that I was broke; I must have done it a good 10-15 times. Winning money was always a thrill because success was not guaranteed: I didn't always have both teams on my payroll. The final score depended on the level of commitment of my players and on the strength of the team that was not part of the fix. As usual, I booked the stadium and would bring my friends to play the game. I would normally plan everything three or four hours before the match.

"OK, this is what's going to happen", I'd tell the players, informing them about the score that I needed and about their share of the cash.

There could be changes in my plans during the match. In amateur games there was no security in the stadiums so I could easily pass messages on to the players who were on the pitch or during half-time in the changing rooms. Friendly matches were a different story altogether because I would be watching the game from the bookies corner so, when there were changes in my plans, I would page my

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players at half-time from a payphone in a nearby cafeteria and they would call me back. Then I would instruct them on the number of goals that I needed. Done. The money was usually handed out after the match at the same cafeteria.

While I was fixing local amateur matches, I was betting on professional games: the English Premier League, the UEFA Champions League and so forth. Gambling is: you win, you lose, you win, you lose. The money I made from the fixes, I usually lost on Premier League matches.

Gamblers don't have the mindset to save, we just gamble everything away. It's like an addiction and, when you run out of money, you come up with all sorts of bullshit stories on potential business deals with friends or loan sharks just to borrow enough cash for your next bet; nobody will lend you money if they know that you're a punter. I fixed so many matches in those years that if I were not a gambler, I would be a multimillionaire today. But I'm not; I'm broke. I've never had a family of my own so it was just like: gamble right hand, you win, then the money moves on to your left hand. And then it just moves on.



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