

# Lunch with Mr Einstein



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Novelist

*Originally in a very early draft of A Different Sky, this unpublished chapter was excised as the writer decided to start the book in 1927 instead of 1922, which is the date Einstein visited Singapore. The novel covers the thirty years before Singapore achieved full independence. Beginning in the island's first communist riot in 1927, the novel follows the lives of three families caught up in tumultuous times. The names of the characters are intact and revealed here is a childhood glimpse of Mei Lan and Cynthia from A Different Sky.*

## Singapore, November 1922

The main thing to remember, Becky Cohen whispered, was that Mr Einstein had fiddled with time. He had reinvented it, slowing it down, speeding it up, even making it turn corners. The children were crouched behind the banisters at the top of the stairs, peering down into the room below where the great man was at lunch. Ceiling fans turned lazily above the guests, all there to meet Mr Einstein. Beyond the open windows a view of lush Singapore greenery was seen.

'How can time turn corners?' Cynthia asked, perplexed.

'My father says Mr Einstein thinks the past, the future and the present are like a lot of roads all running together.' Becky turned to give Cynthia a withering look. Cynthia bit her lip, she had not wanted to come to Becky's house, but her mother insisted an invitation from the Cohens' should not be refused.

'They are so rich they have electricity and toilets flushed by water,' her mother said. Cynthia knew she had only been invited as a token Eurasian. Becky's guest list had originally included representatives from all Singapore's ethnic communities, but in the end only three girls came to meet Mr Einstein: Cynthia, Beng Neo and Mei Lan.

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A table had been set up on a landing where the girls had eaten a light lunch. The clink of crystal and cutlery and the hum of adult conversation rose up to them from below. At one point they had been taken down to meet Mr Einstein, and said the things they had been instructed to say. The scientist's hand was clammy, sweat moistened his cheeks and his tie was knotted off centre. Yet, he bent towards them attentively, shaking their hands, as if they were grown women.

'Ah,' he smiled, his words thick with furry accent. 'Remember, you are modern women, the hope of a new world.' He did not give the feeling of being famous. His bushy hair stood on end, and bristles pushed out of his ears.

'My father says he is the most important man in the world today. You are lucky I chose you to meet him,' Becky informed them archly, when they returned to the landing.

Beng Neo had been late, and before she arrived Becky told them she had only invited the girl because her mother said her friends should not all be rich. Mr Cohen, who prided himself on his liberal views about racial mixing and had a circle of cosmopolitan friends, had suggested his daughter invite some classmates from school to meet the scientist. Even if they were only ten years old

and did not understand the importance of Mr Einstein, later in life they could say that they had met him. Becky fixed her gaze upon Cynthia.

'Papa says I must be kind to all communities and classes. You Eurasians look like Indians, except for your funny light eyes?' Becky commented. Cynthia could find no answer, and hung her head in shame.

'What about me?' Mei Lan asked with a secret smile. Her tone implied it must be awful to be as poor and pitied as Beng Neo, whose school fees were paid by the Salvation Army, or patronised like Eurasian Cynthia, whose blood was such a cocktail of parts she had no people to call her own. She knew Becky would not dare to speak with such insolence to someone whose house had seventeen windows on the road facing side. Her grandfather was the famous Kapitan China, Lim Hock An, with whom, even if he were a Chinese, the Governor sometimes conferred.

'Why sitting in sun? Wanting skin like dried fruit, *lah?* Like me, *lah?*' Ah Siew roused from a doze. The sun fell through the open window, heating up in a fiery patch on the landing. The *amah* pulled a bamboo chick over the window, and then padded across the floor to crouch down beside her charge. From there she smiled reassuringly at Cynthia, lips open upon her protruding teeth. Mei Lan never went anywhere without Ah Siew who had reared her from the day she was born. It was said that when she first started school, Ah Siew had sat in the classroom with Mei Lan until her fear of the place abated.

Outside the window a black myna bird perched in a frangipani tree, yellow beak and legs bright against the white blossoms. The sky above was blue. The world seemed as always, and the tick of the grandfather clock on the landing told Cynthia time moved just as before, in spite of Mr Einstein. She peered down again at the assembly below. The scientist was an insignificant man with a thick moustache and wild grey hair. He had already spilt soup on his tie and dabbed at it with a napkin dipped in a glass of water. He seemed out of place in his crumpled linen suit amongst the smartly dressed people about the table, heaped with crystal, flowers and silverware. There was a look of bemusement on his face.

'Why is he here in Singapore?' Cynthia managed to ask. Mei Lan and Becky seldom spoke to her in school, preferring to mix with their own kind. The strangeness of being so close to them now weighed upon Cynthia. Words formed on her tongue with difficulty; her dress appeared faded and she saw now the ribbing of her socks did not match.

'He has come to get money to build a Hebrew university in Jerusalem,' Becky replied, turning upon her in annoyance.

After lunch they would all proceed to the great house of Sir Manasseh Meyer, doyen of the Jewish community, who was giving a reception for Mr Einstein. All the best people in Singapore had been invited.

'Two hundred or more,' Becky confirmed as they continued to press their faces to the banisters, observing the party downstairs. 'But Papa says, the *hoi polloi* will not be there.'

Cynthia looked at Becky in alarm, afraid to ask the meaning of this strange word. Becky spoke like an adult. She knew words nobody else understood and used them at school to impress the teachers. Below them it appeared Mr Einstein was about to give a speech; he pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. As his English was poor the scientist was in need of an interpreter, and Mr Cohen had undertaken this task. His deep baritone echoed behind the words of the scientist whose voice was as uncontrollable as his hair, plunging up or down, sometimes trailing off in mid-sentence as if he found himself on a cliff edge.

'I can still remember the deep impression the magnetic compass made upon me. I was four years old, ill in bed, and my father brought this novelty to me for distraction. Here was a needle, isolated and unreachable, totally enclosed, yet caught in the grip of an invisible power that made it strive determinedly towards the north...'

Cynthia saw the compass in her mind, the needle like a man lost in a dark forest of tall trees, with only courage to guide him on the journey ahead. The image lay inside her, like

something important she had learned.

Yet, downstairs, the guests nodded politely as the scientist spoke, expressions bland, and

resumed their conversations the moment Mr Einstein sat down.

Whenever she could without it seeming too apparent Cynthia looked about Becky's house; she had never seen anywhere like it. Her own home housed only the most essential of comforts. The place was filled with her mother's many lodgers and an overwhelming smell of disinfectant. Here there was the scent of pink lilies filling bowls of silver or cut glass. Ornate furniture, paintings and rugs were everywhere.

Becky had showed them her bedroom with its kidney-shaped dressing table, on her bed sat a row of dolls with porcelain faces. Their rosebud mouths pursed in disapproval as Cynthia stood before them, and she backed away. A faint lavender scent filled the air. At home her room was bare but for a rickety bed, a tallboy and bookcase with a few battered books her mother had bought at second-hand bookshops. As she turned to leave she glimpsed herself in the mirror, a thin-faced, dark-skinned imp with green eyes.

'What is *hoi polloi*?' Beng Neo asked suddenly. From her strained tone it was obvious Beng Neo had taken all this while to pluck up courage to ask the question.

'People who are not select.' Becky looked critically at Beng Neo whose limp dress, worn and inadequately ironed, had obviously been washed at home like her school uniform.

Downstairs Mr Einstein's speech was over; people were already standing up to prepare for the short journey to Sir Manasseh Meyer's house. Becky's mother, in a silk gown with lace trim and a wide straw hat with white tulle flowers, came to the bottom of the stairs and called to the girls to come down.

'And don't forget to put on your hats.'

Becky's hat was of green straw and rosebuds, and Mei Lan wore a smart boater with pink ribbons. Beng Neo and Cynthia had no hats.

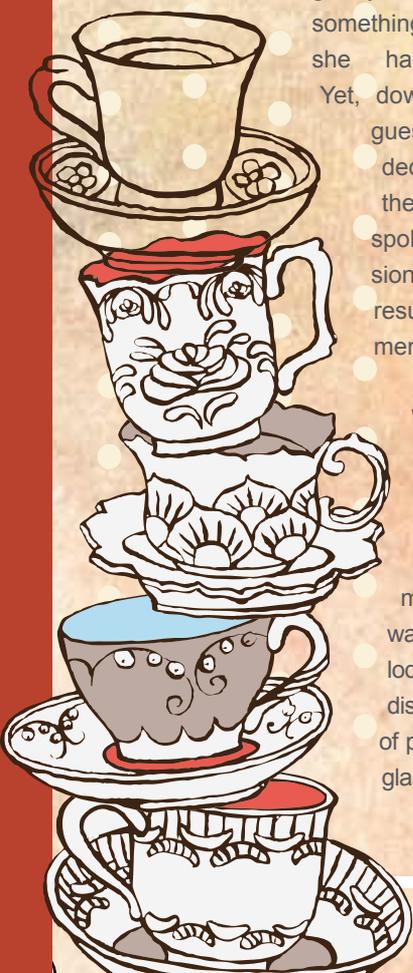


At last the convoy of cars and rickshaws reached Belle Vue, Sir Manasseh's great house on the hill. Although the adults were driven in cars, the children rode in rickshaws. The runners breathed heavily as they laboured up the slope, and past Sir Manasseh's private synagogue. By the time they reached their destination

Mr Einstein had already arrived and been welcomed by Sir Manasseh Meyer. The girls vacated their rickshaw at the gate, before which stood two uniformed watchmen. On entering the gardens of Belle Vue, they found Mr Cohen waiting to introduce them to their host.

The green of the garden lay before Cynthia in a close-cropped carpet of *lalang* grass. There was a fine view of the sea over the red rooftops of colonial bungalows and luxuriant banks of trees. Paths emblazoned with magenta bougainvillea bordered European statuary, while in the distance the deep natural harbour of Singapore was lavishly strewn with ships. Behind her Sir Manasseh's great house reared up, and on an adjacent hill at a higher level was Fort Canning, burial ground of Malay Kings, home to Sir Stamford Raffles and other long ago governors.

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Cynthia drew a breath in wonder, she had stepped into an unknown world and the power of the place reduced her.

Unlike Mr Einstein, Sir Manasseh Meyer, although immensely wealthy, was not much known in the world beyond the region of South East Asia. Yet he appeared to Cynthia to have the firmer sense of destiny. In spite of the heat he wore a dark serge suit and a firmly knotted tie beneath his grey pointed beard. A black skullcap sat upon his head. Although the sun glinted on his gold-rimmed spectacles, there was a guarded look to his thin shrewd face. He held himself upright and smiled without emotion. Mr Einstein, in his creased linen suit, stained tie and wild hair made a strange contrast, shambling over the lawn beside him. Sir Manasseh appeared the famous one, and Mr Einstein might be mistaken for a railway clerk, Cynthia decided.

Crossing the lawn behind the adults they passed a pond of carp. The fish swam languidly in the sunlit water, their skins like rich brocade. Deep down in their secret world they moved as if oblivious of the life above. Cynthia stared down at the sinuous circling bodies, and remembered a recent visit to the beach and the blissful freedom of her bare limbs as she swam in the warm ocean. Already, the garden was full of smartly dressed Europeans who stepped back respectfully as the scientist passed. All the women wore elaborate hats; a sea of tulle and silk flowers appeared to swirl through the garden. Cynthia stared down again into the water and wished she were a fish. Already, Becky walked purposely ahead with Mei Lan, her *amah* following closely behind, and Cynthia knew she would make no further effort to tolerate her or Beng Neo. She waited by the pond until Beng Neo caught up, and took her hand in encouragement as they trailed behind Becky, acutely aware of their miserable status. Beng Neo's attendance at school was irregular. Her mother frequently forbade her to go if the work at home was too much. Beng Neo had nine living brothers, although once there had been thirteen. As the eldest child and the only girl, it was her duty, she said, to look after her brothers. The only reason she was allowed in school was to keep an eye on smaller siblings.

'I am only a girl,' she insisted, hanging her head in wretchedness when teachers questioned her absence. During her days of non-attendance Beng Neo was always to be seen hovering about the school gate, one small brother strapped to her back with a winding cloth, another sucking his thumb and clasping her hand. She would ask everyone what work they had done that day. No one else was so bitten with learning.

Tables were set up in the garden with snacks of the different ethnic communities, as well as tea stalls with cakes, sandwiches and lemonade. At times it seemed more people were clustered about the tables than about the famous scientist. Few of the guests knew much about the life work of the scientist. They knew only that the small man in a crumpled suit, his tie off centre, a button now hanging loose on his waistcoat, was a world famous celebrity, and few European celebrities ventured as far from home as Singapore.

Because of the interest in the food tables the crowd about Mr Einstein had thinned. Only those who were truly interested in science had forgone their tea. In the heat Mr Einstein's smile had taken on a fixed appearance and he mopped his brow with a handkerchief. Beside him now Sir Manasseh frowned disapprovingly as he listened to one of the uniformed watchmen who had hurried up to him, and was pointing repeatedly towards the gate.

A thin bespectacled Indian waited anxiously there, his eyes fixed upon the scientist. At an exasperated nod from Sir Manasseh, the Indian was finally allowed to enter the garden and approach Mr Einstein. He moved forward self-consciously, a strange unkempt figure amongst the smart Europeans. His shabby jacket was tight at the shoulders and short in the sleeves, and incongruously worn over a muslin *dhoti* and open sandals. People turned to watch the dark skinned intruder, who walked as if he feared his left foot might entangle with his right and bring him down shamefully before the assembly.

When finally he stood before Mr Einstein, speech seemed to dry on his tongue. He hesitated and then unexpectedly prostrated himself at the scientist's feet, his hands gripping Mr Einstein's stout shoes. The knot of interested spectators about Mr Einstein gave a shocked gasp, the scientist stooped down in embarrassment, insisting the Indian get back on his feet. Upright once more, the man grasped Mr Einstein's hands in his own and shook them ceaselessly. A ripple of disapproval passed through the crowd.

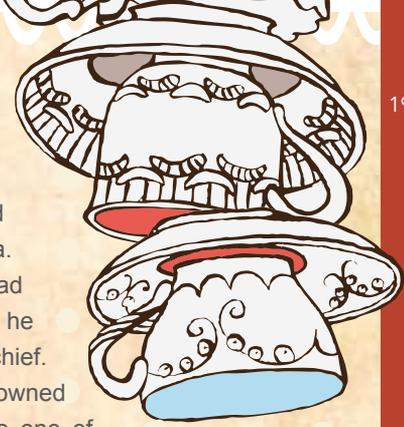
There was something about Mr Einstein that made Cynthia understand why the Indian might want to shake his hands so strenuously, although she could not say what this might be. The Indian was speaking rapidly and Mr Einstein was nodding and smiling. Cynthia moved nearer, and was amazed to see tears in the Indian's eyes. He still clasped the scientist's hands, and Mr Einstein was now explaining something about insects.

'...just as a beetle moving on a large globe does not realise it is actually moving on a curved trajectory, we too are unaware of the fact that the space we live in is curved.'

The Indian mumbled an answer and Mr Einstein nodded and chuckled as if at some private joke.

'You must be one of the few people here who has understood something of my theory,' Einstein's face creased in a smile, he patted the Indian's shoulder. Beside him Sir Manasseh Meyer was becoming impatient and Becky's father stepped forward to break up the strange conversation.

'Everyone is waiting for Mr Einstein,' Mr Cohen frowned.



The Indian drew back, nodding apologetically. Without further acknowledgement, the group of Europeans turned away. Only Mr Einstein passed the Indian a glance of humorous conspiracy, as if he would rather have stayed to talk with him than face Sir Manasseh Meyer's reception. Then, he too turned to accompany his host towards the great ballroom of the house. There, speeches would be made and questions could be asked of the scientist about his work.

Cynthia watched Mr Einstein walk away with a growing sense of desolation. There was no sign of Beng Neo who was now lost in the crowd. No sign either of Becky and Mei Lan who must already be consuming cake and lemonade somewhere in the house. Only the Indian still stood at the gate, his eyes fixed on the retreating form of the scientist. Cynthia wondered why, when Mr Einstein had so clearly taken to him, the Indian could not have joined the reception. People now jostled about her as they streamed towards the open French doors of Sir Manasseh Meyer's ballroom. Someone bumped against her, pushing her off balance, strange voices hummed around her. Looking up, she saw a wave of flowery hats rolling over her, high above. A ripple of panic rose through her; a cloying smell of perfume and perspiration hemmed her in. A man bent to pat her head as if she was a dog.

'What are you doing here, lassie?' he asked, bending down to her. Behind his stained teeth she saw his thick wet tongue. A woman beside him in a hat of pink feathers and mauve flowers gave an impatient laugh.

'One of the servant's children must have wandered out. Come along, she'll find her way back to the kitchen door.'

Eventually, the crowd passed by and Cynthia was left alone. The food she had eaten at lunch repeated on her, and her head ached. She wanted to go home and thought of her mother's soft dark skin, the elegant coil of her chignon, the lavender scent of her embrace and bit her lip so that the tears would not come; she could see nobody like her mother in the garden, nobody like herself, except the Indian man still standing at the gate.

The horrid things Becky had said washed about inside her. Everything that had seemed to fit so neatly within her only hours before seemed suddenly out of place. The sun high above speared the gold fish in the pond, but something seemed to oppress her. Her throat grew tight and tears pricked her eyes. In her head she heard Mr Einstein's voice again, speaking about the compass, 'Here was a needle, isolated and unreachable, totally enclosed, yet caught in the grip of an invisible power that made it strive determinedly towards the north...' Now, it was not a tall thin man in a forest she saw, but Mr Einstein, beset like Gulliver in a Lilliputian land, by people who underestimated him.

All at once she turned and began to run towards the gate where the Indian still waited, a group of nearby people looked at her askance. Then, someone came up behind her and caught her firmly by the arm.

'Now not time for going home. Lemonade and cake is waiting. No listen to things people say, *lah*. You always be you. Cannot change. Must make yourself strong, *lah*. Like me.' Old Ah Siew crouched down and put a stringy arm about Cynthia who turned into the *amah's* slack breast and wept.

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