

# Roof-Top

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Ah Seng sat at edge of the roof-top of the block of flats, his feet dangling some twenty storeys above the ground. Behind him his wife of fifteen years was pleading in tears for him to get away from the edge, while his thirteen-year-old daughter stood next to her mother, crying and restrained by the police officers who had made their way up through the roof access maintenance door once they received word that a man was found sitting right at the roof top. Below him Ah Seng could see that a crowd of curious on-lookers had gathered, and were marshalled out of a police cordon that had been hastily set up. He was glad to find that the fire department hadn't made their way on to the scene with their ladders and safety trampoline—this meant that when he went, he truly could go and never return maimed.

Ignoring the ruckus behind him, Ah Seng took a cigarette out of his front shirt pocket. A Marlboro, something that had kept him company for the past thirty years of life. He held it with his lips as he whipped out a lighter from his trouser pocket, lighting it. It was windy at the top of the block of flats, but it seemed that even Providence was smiling upon him and had given him his last wish of a vice before he truly went.

Ah Seng didn't even bother to turn around to look behind him. The police had kept their distance, having learnt quickly that Ah Seng meant it when he said he would make the jump immediately had they closed in upon him. The police negotiator had arrived, and was trying to cajole him to speak, but Ah Seng knew better than to keep that person engaged in conversation—too many television shows had reminded him of how that led to distraction and ultimately a failure in the cause in the first place.

Ah Seng took a deep breath from his Marlboro and held the calming smoke in his lungs for a bit before exhaling it into a small cloud of smoke which drifted off in the direction of the breeze. Though a little past forty, Ah Seng had thinning hair, and the few strands that were left were now dancing along with the breeze as though they were rejoicing at the inevitability. In the past, he had been handsome, very attractive in fact, with a head full of hair, a face full of smile, and pockets full of cash from the civil engineering job that he got. Not many were in that line of work due to the experience and time commitment needed, but Ah Seng was in the right place at the right time, and his company was generous enough even to sponsor his education at the polytechnic so that he could rise through the profession and be an assistant engineer instead of the odd-job labourer that he originally began with. Life was good.

His wife had stopped talking by now and was just wailing gibberish and had to be held back by the police officers. It had to be, he figured, since there were no sounds of footsteps that would normally follow someone who had managed to make some forward progress. It was just as well—he really didn't want to deal with her, especially at a time like this. He took another deep breath from his Marlboro and felt the smoke seep deep into his alveoli. Of course he knew that smoking was bad for his lungs, but here he was sitting at the edge of the roof top of a block of flats—why would he care?

He opened his mouth into a pout and exhaled the smoke. Perfect smoke ring. Perhaps there was a God after all. But to Ah Seng, even if God existed, He would have made his presence too late; it was time to go, well after the cigarette. Ah Seng shifted his butt cheeks a little on the ledge and wished that his bawling wife would just shut the hell up and leave him alone; after all, she was the very reason why he was up there in the first place.

Ah Seng took another toke. She was one of the many flappers of that time when they first met. She thought he was cute, and he thought she was wife material. They got married at roughly the time he graduated from the polytechnic and was at his new assistant engineer post. She bore him a daughter and he was delighted, working hard every day to provide for his family. It was bliss.

Then she cheated on him once.

He forgave her after much pleading, mostly because she invoked the helplessness of their child. For a while, it was good, and everything seemed to be back to normal. Ah Seng felt blissful all over again and soon forgot about her past infidelity. Then one day, she started asking for more money and saying it was needed for the price increase in groceries as well as for their daughter's school-related miscellaneous fees. He gave it to her unquestioningly.

A week ago he realised that she was supporting a gigolo all these while, even after he had forgiven her for cheating on him. Ah Seng couldn't understand why she cuckolded him this way and wanted to leave. At first, she pleaded for forgiveness once more, saying that she had been weak. Then she became increasingly verbally abusive when she realised that Ah Seng was no longer paying much attention to her.

Truth was, Ah Seng loved her deeply. But she had torn his heart asunder, and hadn't the will to live any more. Even looking at his daughter reminded him of his love of her in the past, and it was something he just couldn't live with. That whole week, Ah Seng went about settling his business, resigning from his job, writing up and notarising his will and in general preparing for a journey that he wasn't coming back from.

And now here he was, sitting on the edge of the roof top of a block of flats, feet dangling some twenty storeys above the ground. His cigarette had been smoked to a stump now, and Ah Seng knew it was truly time. Flicking the butt away, he turned around one last time. His wife saw him turn around and was momentarily silenced.

"Stop making a scene you hussy—go back to that gigolo of yours and stop pretending that you give a damn."

With tears in his eyes, Ah Seng leaned forward and leapt off the building.

The breeze suddenly increased in intensity for a fleeting moment before calming back to what it was before.