

## **Sneak Peak of the Educating Karen Chen Book**

### **Chapter 21 – The bully**

Erna's mobile phone chimed. She glanced at the screen casually. It was Maggie. She tapped on "accept call" and brought the phone to her ear.

"Erna..." Maggie sounded a little flustered, "I hate doing this, but James has an emergency at the clinic and he can't come with me to the meet with Jemmy's Vice-Principal. I know it's a lot to ask at a moment's notice, but can you come?"

"Is this meeting about the bullying?" Erna leaned forward in her seat.

"Yes."

"Hasn't it been almost 7 months since you told us about it? And now, they give you an audience?" Erna asked in mild horror. "An entire school year has passed and she's got the P5 end-of-year exams coming up in a few weeks!"

"Well, it took some time. James and I wanted to see if we could help Jemmy stand up for herself. But the bullying is still there....so...can you come?"

"I'll meet you at the school gate. Give me...15 minutes." Erna said with determination in her voice.

"Where to Ma'am?" Erna's driver asked.

"Remember the school I sent you to last month? To drop the cake off to my friend Margaret?"

"Yes ma'am."

"We need to get there quickly." Erna, pulled out her makeup case and started preening herself to look the part.

Maggie looked at her phone. The meeting was to start in 15 minutes and Erna was still possibly 10 minutes away.

Maggie paced in front of the side gate of the school, trying to remember what she and James had spoken about – how to present their side of the story, anticipating the answers, raising pertinent questions in return. They had it all worked out. James had said to her that even if he wasn't there, Maggie knew exactly what to say - because they'd gone through it for nights, and because she'd handled very difficult patients at the clinic before.

But this was different. This wasn't her turf. She wasn't on home ground. She didn't know how the school functioned. Maggie kept her calm and went through what she wanted to say in her head as she paced in the warm 8am sunshine that beat down on this humid day. She glanced at her phone again. Barely 5 minutes had passed. She wanted Erna to be a witness, just in case things didn't go well. But she was determined to keep this a civil and amicable session. That's the way she did it at the clinic, and that's the way she'd do it here. She glanced at her phone again.

Then in the distance, Maggie heard the loud growl of the Porsche. And in what seemed like mere seconds, a dark menacing silhouette hurtled down the road. It began to take shape. What looked like a crouching panther ready to pounce drew closer, its ovoid eyes lit up and flashed.

Maggie waved almost frantically.

The glistening black Porsche SUV pulled up alongside Maggie, the door opened and a gush of cool air-conditioned air washed over Maggie like a baptism of deliverance.

Erna stepped out of the car looking every inch like the owner of a 5-star hotel.

"I'm here." Erna smiled confidently.

Erna was dressed top to toe in designer wear. A power suit.

"Do you dress like this every day?" Maggie asked as they walked briskly towards the school's main foyer.

"No. You're lucky I've got a meeting with the hotel's architects later this morning. I hadn't planned on going home to change after I'd dropped Sam at school...Anyway, you have me for 2 hours."

"Thank you so much for doing this." Maggie smiled a tentative smile.

"So, what's the plan?" Erna was ready battle.

Maggie's mind suddenly drew a blank.

"Mags?"

Maggie shook herself out of her sudden stupor. "Well...James and I have worked out what to say, what to ask and how to respond. I think we've anticipated most things. It's just that I'm not familiar with how the school works, so, I'm a little apprehensive. I need you to be my witness...just in case."

"Witness?"

"Sorry, clinic protocol. The doctor never sees a patient alone. Just in case the patient files a legal suit, there's a witness. I just need that reassurance."

"Stop." Erna halted. Maggie took 2 more steps forward, then turned and took a step back towards Erna. "Listen Maggie. Jemmy is the victim here. The school is obliged to do something about this bullying. You're not doing anything wrong and Jemmy will not be black marked after this."

"I know. I know. Just...can we just go?"

Erna and Maggie walked into the school's general office. Maggie looked at the clock hanging on the wall. They were on time. She heaved a sigh of relief, straightened up and smiled.

"We're here to see the Vice-Principal." Maggie said to the front office staff.

"Are you Mrs. Choo? Jemima Choo's mother?" Came the almost deadpan reply as the school's office staff got up from her seat.

“Yes.”

“Please come with me.” The invitation was as emotionless as the greeting. They were led to a large meeting room beside the school’s General Office.

It felt like winter in the room. The room was lit by cold white fluorescent lights. It had low false ceilings which made the 20 foot by 30 foot room look deceptively small. The room had no windows except for a single wall that was made up of wall-to-ceiling frosted glass held up by aluminium frames.

The tables were arranged in a U-shape, with the open end of the U facing the door.

Strewn along the sides of the tables were the same plastic chairs used in the classrooms.

The floors were tiled with greyish-green homogenous tiles and bore scuff marks. The room smelt a little musty.

Erna motioned for Maggie to sit down. They picked a spot and sat on one side of the “U”.

“Hmmm.” Remarked Erna as she surveyed her surroundings. “I could think of a dozen ways to spruce up this space.”

Maggie didn’t reply. Her mind was flooded with everything James and had discussed with her.

The door to the room flung open.

3 women and 1 man walked in, and proceeded to sit directly across from where Erna and Maggie were sitting.

It was obvious who the Vice-Principal was.

Ms. Lydia Koh was a petite middle aged Chinese woman wearing a white blouse with capped sleeves. She matched this with a tight knee length black skirt. Her hair was cropped and she had thick black plastic framed spectacles. Her skin was porcelain smooth and her features were sharp. She had intense almond shaped eyes and thin arched eyebrows, almost model like. Yet, everything about her screamed – no nonsense.

Flanking her on the right was a gentleman in his 20’s. He had chiselled features and an athletic build. He was dressed in PE attire.

To her left were 2 women. One who looked like she was no older than 30. The other, a woman in her late 50’s.

“Good morning!” The Vice-Principal beamed with a huge smile that revealed a perfect set of teeth.

“Good morning Ms. Koh.” Maggie proceeded to greet each of them and looked them in the eyes with steely determination. “My husband couldn’t make it, so I hope you don’t mind, but I brought--”

“Jemima’s godmother.” Erna stated calmly with a polite smile.

The Vice-Principal paused. Obviously recognising Erna. She smiled politely and continued. “Alright.

Mrs. Choo, I understand that you've filed a complaint about Jemima getting bullied?"

"Yes. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

"Before we start, let me introduce my colleagues. To my right is Mr David Ong. He's the discipline master. To my left, Mrs. Alice Tay, the school's counsellor. Mrs. Tay used to be a teacher with us for 30 years. She retired, went to Australia to do a graduate degree in child psychology and is now back with us as the school's counsellor. And beside her is Jemima's Chinese teacher Ms. Neo."

Erna and Maggie nodded to each in acknowledgement.

"I hope you don't mind, but Mrs. Tay will be taking notes and the minutes of this meeting. We'll send a copy to you as well." The Vice-Principal nodded to the school counsellor.

"Of course." Maggie replied.

"The school has done a preliminary investigation and we've taken the students concerned to task with a stern warning to the 2 girls who are bullying her." The Vice-Principal looked at her notes and then looked up and Maggie. Completely ignoring eye contact with Erna.

"You mean Valerie and Stephanie Yip? The twin sisters?"

"Yes. The school also found some others who joined them in taunting Jemima. We've also issued stern verbal warnings to them." The Vice-Principal replied.

"First of all..." Maggie began, "I'd like to thank you for taking the initiative. I just need to explain that the reason for my husband and I making the complaint was not to get those girls into trouble. We just wanted the bullying to stop." Maggie felt confidence rise within her. She had after all rehearsed this speech with her husband for days. "Jemima is a good girl. Granted, she is a little slow in her work. But other than that, she doesn't bother the other girls and she tries to be helpful."

"The issue, as I am led to understand, is this." Maggie continued, "When group work is done during Chinese class, Jemima tends to be a little slower. This usually holds her group back. As a result, her group doesn't win a merit point and get a prize. So, the faster, smarter girls in her group always pick on her, call her names, give her a label of being slow and are always blaming her for holding everyone back."

The teachers and Vice-principal looked at Maggie without a word. Maggie glanced at Erna from the corner of her eye. Erna nodded.

"I feel this had taken a toll on Jemima and affected her self-confidence. It has also gone so deep that on the schooldays when there are Chinese lessons on the timetable, she wakes up and breaks into a cold sweat and goes pale and cold, then develops a tummy ache. Jemima's father is a doctor, and from a medical standpoint, he reckons there's nothing physically wrong with her. Yet these physical symptoms that persist, he believes is a result of all this psychological stress that has resulted from bullying."

The Vice-Principal nodded, but kept silent.

Maggie took that as her cue to carry on. "Perhaps there is a way to stop these bullies and also

change the group work and rewards system.” Maggie paused, then turned her attention to the Chinese teacher. “Perhaps the teacher can also not pressure the girls to get their slower team members to catch up or label students like Jemima and taunt them as slow. Because the girls and bullies will take the cue from the teacher to think that it’s OK to label and taunt someone as \*slow\*. If the teacher does it, then the bullies actually feel empowered and even validated to think that it’s OK to lay blame on a weaker person for causing the team to lose out or perform badly.”

There was a quiet in the room. The Chinese teacher sat very still. The Vice-Principal scribbled some notes down. Then looked up at Maggie.

“What the school would like and what we suggest, is that Jemima be sent for counselling with Mrs. Tay.” The Vice-Principal paused.

Maggie was thrown off.

“Counselling?”

“Yes. Experience has taught us that girls sometimes get mean between P4 and secondary 2. It’s a phase. They bully in class, they cyber-bully, they form cliques and exclude those who may not fit in. At this school, we believe in holistic development. We all know even in adulthood, bullies abound. So, we want to equip Jemima with the resilience and skills she needs to stand up for herself, and work on her confidence as well.” The Vice-principal said pointedly.

“I understand.” Maggie said, unconvinced. “But I’d like to find out what will be done about the bullying? The bullies? This still has to stop.”

“I’ve highlighted earlier that we have pulled them aside, spoken to them, they have admitted their mistake and we have given them a stern verbal warning.”

“And that’s it?” Erna jumped in.

There was no answer or acknowledgement. The Vice-Principal brushed Erna’s comment aside.

“Mrs. Choo.” The Vice-Principal continued, “The school believes that all this has taken a toll on Jemima. Jemima’s inability to stand up for herself shows her lack of confidence. So, through counselling, we aim to help her with this very crucial life skill.”

“How long will she be in counselling for?” Maggie enquired.

“Possibly 7 months to 12months.” The school counsellor interjected. “That’s been our experience.”

“That will take her to P6?!” Erna remarked.

The counsellor’s voice tightened.

“That’s how long it will take to work on her self esteem. Because confidence also affects how she feels when dealing with academically challenging exercises and tests. And perhaps, her lack of confidence is the reason she is not doing well academically.” The counsellor went on.

“Then what is being done about the bullies? What message are you sending to the rest of the

students, if all the bullies get is a stern verbal warning in private?" Erna's tone was incisive.

"These girls are not easy to deal with." The Chinese teacher finally spoke. "They are very crafty. They know what to do and how to behave when the teacher is around. And they are very good in their work and their exam scores reflect that. They hand up their work on time and participate in class. So...it's hard to find fault--"

"Wait." Erna cut her off, "So, you're saying it's perfectly acceptable that a group of smarter girls pick on and bully a non-performer?"

"That is not what I meant." The Chinese teacher snapped in defence.

"In my son's school - and mind you, it is a branded school, they had a boy who was bullying other boys. The teachers could not touch him because he was top in the level. He was probably too advanced, bored and had ADHD." Erna bulldozed away.

The Vice-Principal interjected, "Mrs. Choo, let's focus on the real issue—"

Erna cut her off "My son's school spoke to the parents who were in denial and refused to do anything. So, the school installed security cameras in the class to gather photographic evidence."

"Mrs. Choo." The Vice-Principal sounded more firm now.

Erna fixed her gaze hard on the Vice-Principal. "I'm not finished. The school eventually collected enough to make a police report. Then and only then, did the parents take action. THAT, is what a proper, responsible school should do." Erna rattled off in pure fiery indignation.

Maggie raised her hand slightly to signal Erna to back down.

There was a tense silence.

"Mrs. Choo." Said the Vice-Principal calmly, ignoring Erna, "Rest assured the school is doing everything in its power to ensure Jemima is taken care of. I strongly suggest counselling. There are certain things where even our hands are tied when it comes to punishment. We too are bound by rules and regulations issued by our superiors."

"Unbelievable." Erna rolled her eyes and scoffed. "Do you know what Jemima's parents have risked by coming to the school? Jemima risks getting marked and dealt with by the bullies for getting them into trouble. Who will stand up for her? Obviously no one, because THE SCHOOL is sending the message out, that bullies get away with everything while the victim is the one who needs long-term counselling because of some dysfunction on her part."

The Vice-Principal finally turned and faced Erna. "Perhaps, Jemima's god-mother can wait outside while we have a private talk with Jemima's mother. May I trouble you to wait outside?" She turned to the school counsellor with a pleasant smile "Mrs. Tay, perhaps you can escort the godma to the canteen? We'll be done soon." The Vice-Principal turned to Maggie "I hope you're alright with this, need to discuss matters with parents only."

Maggie turned to Erna and nodded her head.

Erna, stood up and walked out without saying a word. The counsellor shuffled out behind her.

“The canteen is this way. Let me show you.” The counsellor offered meekly as the door to the room closed shut with a click.

“May I ask you a question?” Erna was careful to speak to the counsellor in a calm, genuine, sincere manner.

“Erm...sure.” The counsellor replied apprehensively.

“What’s the real issue? Why can’t the bullies be punished?” Erna enquired.

“Our hands are tied. That much is true. In the old days when I was in school, public caning, teachers used to use quite inhumane methods. But now, it’s all about counselling and reflection.”

“Then why does the victim get counselled and not the bullies? Surely, both parties need counselling?” Erna made a conscious effort to soften her tone even more.

“Aiya. You don’t know how difficult these children can be. I don’t know where they learn it from, but these P5 children are devious. They know how to act like angels in front of the teachers.” The counsellor suddenly gushed. “Furthermore, these girls are intelligent. So, we can’t pin them down for being disruptive or say they are faltering in academics.....The truth is, the other girls are afraid of them. So they don’t come forward as witnesses. Even in this case...I understand from Mrs. Choo that Jemima didn’t tell her for the longest time.”

“That’s right. But aren’t the school leaders concerned?” Erna stopped and looked at the counsellor.

The counsellor looked left and right, then leaned in a little closer, lowering her voice. “Honestly, when I was teaching here years ago, things were very different. The school principal then was an old girl. So she understood the heritage and respected the culture of the school. She ruled it with an iron fist but with compassion and love.....When she retired, we got all these ambitious young school leaders in. They are not alumni. This to them is a job. A stepping stone. They’re here to make a mark and then move on to be posted to the Ministry HQ or to be promoted. They do their best, but only if it’s beneficial to their career.”

“And you can’t speak up?” Erna furrowed her brows.

“I’m already retired. I’m here part-time. 4 days a week. I try to help the best I can. Beyond that, I’m on contract and I need the money. How much say do I have? And I have tried counselling the bullies. They know how to work the system. They know we have nothing that can be pinned on them. And they do well in counselling. They say the right things, act remorseful. Then apologise. And they are even more careful when and how they pick on Jemima. The best thing is, to fortify Jemima and help her be more resilient.....But, please keep this between us.” The counsellor said nervously.

Erna felt sick to the core. She knew exactly what the counsellor was talking about. It reminded her of when she fought and clawed her way up the corporate ladder in the early days of her career. Where bosses played favourites and turned a blind eye. Where did these children pick it all up from? TV? Their parents? Maybe. A bit of both? Erna had to do something about it. After bidding her goodbye’s to the school counsellor, Erna found a quiet spot in the canteen. Erna felt hot in the back of her neck. She was fuming. Undaunted, she pulled out her mobile phone and scrolled through the

contacts list. Moses Ooi. She tapped the dial button.

“Hello! Mrs. Chew! What a pleasant surprise” came the deep voice followed by a gregarious laugh.

“What can I do for you Erna?”

“Moses. Moses Moses. Tsk tsk tsk. What in the world makes you think that I’m calling for a favour?”

“Do you ever call me for any other reason?”

Erna laughed.

“How are your contacts in the Ministry of Edu.? Still warm since you quit from being a big wig there?”

“Correction Erna, I was but one of the big wigs. And yes, still warm contacts.”

“Lunch, Tuesday, 12.30, the hotel coffee house. My treat. Don’t be late.”

“For you my dear, I’ll be extra early. Don’t wear anything distracting.”

Erna laughed. “Don’t be late.”

“Erna?” It was Maggie.

Erna spun around in mild surprise. “So, what other standard boiler plate answers did they feed to you?”

“Well, that the best way forward is to make Jemmy more resilient, stressing that it’s a basic and essential life skill. They also emphasised P5 is the foundation for PSLE because in P6, it’s mainly revision, so, I’ve got to get Jemmy on track academically. That’s the main focus... And the VP assured me that we’re all here for the good of the child.”

“Hmmm...now where have I heard that before.” Erna said in disgust.

“Jemmy’s only got less than 12 months before the PSLE and after that she leaves this school. So, I’ll work on her. It breaks my heart that she kept silent and kept it all inside for so long. And I blame myself as a mother for not realising it sooner. I just want to make things right.”

“Now, not to get your hopes up, but I’ve a friend who owes me some favours. He used to be quite senior at the ministry and he’s now on his own running his own chain of tuition agencies. I’m speaking to him in a couple of days. Let me see what I can do.”

“Thanks Erna. But don’t trouble yourself too much.”

“No trouble at all. We’re Tigresses remember? Hear us roar.” Erna smiled.

Tuesday came quickly. The hotel lobby was decked out for the F1 party that weekend. They had a special buffet lunch all week. There was a festive atmosphere in the air. September was a time you could always smell Christmas round the corner and the 6 week school holidays.

“Moses, Moses, Moses!” Erna said in a loud voice. Everyone in the hotel lobby turned and stared.

Erna laughed as she walked up to the burly gentleman dressed in shirt and tie and smartly tailored pants and gave him a huge hug.

"It's been too long Erna." Moses looked down at her smiling face.

"You're still looking very good! Been working out?" Erna teased.

"Only for the last 5 days because I was going to meet you." Moses laughed a bellowing laugh.

"And look at your clothes? Hmmmmm...Not from a boutique, these lines and the cut...you've got a fine tailor." Erna was impressed.

"You're keeping abreast of men's fashion!"

"I shop and get things tailored for my husband." Erna said in mock indignation.

"I have this great tailor in Shanghai. And very cheap." Moses leaned in and whispered in her ear.

"Always the clever one eh? You should have married me." Erna teased.

"I was never good enough for you and you know it. You always had your eye on some tycoon's son remember?" Moses teased.

"Touche." Erna smiled. "Let's eat."

The waiter laid down the Crepe Suzette on the trolley beside the table and poured the Cointreau over it and lit it. It burst into a magnificent flame that lingered for 2 seconds before the alcohol evaporated. "Crepe flambe sir." The waiter gestured ceremoniously before serving the desert.

"I got the chef to specially make this for you. I still remember your favourite desert Moses."

"Those were the days eh? We were a crazy couple. Remember all the rubbish we did when were studying in Boston?"

Erna laughed. "Who can forget!.....Well.....You were more fun before you became a civil servant."

"Oh....Ok. Down to business so quickly. What do you need?" Moses chuckled.

"Listen, I have a very dear friend who's daughter is in P5 this year. Bright girl. I suspect, a late bloomer. Wouldn't hurt a fly. She's being bullied. The parents didn't know till much later. And it's affecting her schoolwork. The parents made an appointment to see the VP of the school, I went along with her. They fed us a bunch of standard boiler plate lines....." Erna paused to check if she was going too fast.

"I'm listening. Go on." Moses assured her.

"Well, essentially, they said without sufficient evidence, they can't do anything tangible to the bullies. They also said that the best thing would be for the victim, to be sent for long-term counselling to fortify her resilience and self-confidence. To me, that's wrong." Erna looked at Moses with steely determination. "The message they are sending out to the students, is that a clever bully can get away with anything. Now, the worst thing is, that the teacher involved is validating and even

empowering the bullies by labelling my friend's daughter in front of the entire class!" Erna gave Moses a look that showed just how incredulous she thought the entire situation was.

"How is the teacher empowering and validating the bullies?" Moses was puzzled.

"Well, you know how some teachers get the class to sit in groups?" Erna continued.

Moses nodded.

"Because my friend's daughter is slow, she pulls her group down. You know these groups are made to compete with each other right?"

Moses motioned for Erna to carry on.

"So, the teacher herself I suspect was the one that started labelling my friend's daughter and calling her \*Slow\*. And no action has been taken for the teacher's insensitivity and inappropriate behaviour! If the school management is doing this, I am sure your friends in the Ministry won't be too pleased." Erna finished her ramble with gusto.

Moses sat back in his chair and took a deep breath, then thought for a moment without saying a word.

"Weren't you a bully back in the day in Australia?" Moses finally broke the silence.

"What has that got to do with this?" Erna asked flatly. She wondered if Moses had even listened to a single word she said or thought through the case she just so passionately argued.

"The school didn't intervene because *you knew* what the practical limits were, and you were a top athlete and student right? You played the system and you got away with even getting that kid to leave school." Moses said quietly.

"I became a bully in self-defence. I made the choice. Because I was being bullied to begin with. That's entirely different. Different time, different culture." Erna replied defiantly.

"But it made you the woman you are today no?" Moses looked at her in the eyes.

He had a point, Erna thought. But that wasn't the point of this conversation.

Erna leaned forward to push her point. "But the school isn't doing anything tangible to help the victim. Surely the Ministry must do something about it?"

"The ministry is set up to deal with policy, strategy. That's their primary role. Syllabus development, initiatives. Top level stuff. That's why there are principals and a board of governors or advisors in each school. Even if a complaint goes up to the Minister, and even if the person who filters the hundreds of E-mails surfaces it up to him, it will be duly noted and then sent back down the chain through the district supervisor and then down to the principal." Moses pause to let it all sink in. "Now, how do you think the principal will feel that you've gone behind her back to make her look bad to her bosses? Don't forget these days, a lot of the school senior staff are young. Younger than ones we had in our day. These are high flyers Erna, career educators. Landscape's changed."

“So, what can be done? Moses?”

“You can send in a formal complaint, I can talk to the right people to lean on the school, sure. But then what? Your friend’s child is in P5. They’ll stall the matter, perhaps arrange another meeting, get the school counsellor to meet with you more regularly, submit E-mails on the progress and stall it some more till the parents are caught up in the PSLE preparation, and then Primary school is all over.”

“That’s not right.” Erna was visibly upset. “If this was a commercial outfit, I’d send them a lawyer’s letter.”

Moses laughed loud and hard. “Have you ever looked at the Board of Governors for these branded schools? Ever notice how there’s invariably a doctor and lawyer on the board? A lot of these branded schools are attended by children whose parents are fairly high net worth individuals and professionals.” Moses chuckled in amusement and shook his head. “Oh, you should hear the story of really nasty parents. Lawyer’s letters, threats about going to the press. The school management and board of these branded schools have seen it all. That’s why the board members with relevant skills will advise and even help draft replies. And you thought you owned the franchise to being tough and nasty. Erna, Erna, Erna.” Moses sunk deep into his armchair and chuckled even more.

Erna shook her head in disgust.

Moses looked at Erna with a straight face, “But you know what I mean don’t you? And the point I’m trying to make.”

“But my friend’s daughter has feelings. And this could affect her future.”

“Look, say...you’re a principal. You’ve got a million things on your plate, and bullying happens to one or two people in a cohort of 200 to 300 kids out of an entire school of 1000 or so.” Moses paused to let the image sink into Erna’s mind. “Unless there’s clear evidence like cyber-bullying where you can screen capture and trace the source, how much can the principal do? Even if you enforce harsh rules, these kids know how to play the system...You did! And kids today are much faster, much more exposed and much more sophisticated than you and I were in our day.”

“That, plus I’m sure they have a little help from parents who think they are above the system.” Erna scowled. “Maybe, we could go to the press.” Erna was determined.

“And what do you think that will achieve Erna? Publicity? And you hope that hundreds of other parents will come out and rally together to put pressure on the Ministry or the school? That could happen. But the reality is that people will rally – online. Hiding behind the safety of anonymity.” Moses grew serious. “No one wants to get targeted or attract so much publicity. You can try, you might just start a sea of change. But even then, it will take time for investigations, and you’d be stirring up a lot more than you can handle. Are you willing to get tied up and mixed up in all that? Do you have the time and the will to see this through? To take it all the way and run with it to change policy?” Moses paused and looked at Erna.

Erna silently shook her head and bit her lip.

Moses moved even closer to Erna and lowered his voice. “Now, I’m going to tell you something

about this school in strict confidence.”

That caught Erna’s attention.

“Some years ago, when I was still in the Ministry, my colleague, who was then the district superintendant for that school your friend’s daughter is in, told me about an incident in one of the P6 classes.”

“What incident?” Erna asked impatiently.

Moses continued, “Apparently, 3 weeks before the PSLE prelims, this girl got had a falling out with her clique of friends. I don’t know what her emotional and mental state was at the time, but I was told she brought a Kitchen Knife to school, pulled it out of her bag and then held it to the throat of the offending leader of the clique.”

“What?!!!” Erna was taken aback.

“The teacher stopped it in time. Police were called in, as were the parents. My colleague was also called in.” Moses slowed his pace.

“Then what happened?” Erna’s eyes were wide with anticipation.

“Well, everyone decided that it was in the best interest of the girl to not make it a police affair to avoid tainting the girl’s record and they kept the discipline in-house. She was watched like a hawk after that and they did punish the girl. But again, counselled the ones who were assaulted.”

“Oh my god.” Erna was in shock.

“Now please keep this confidential. I wasn’t even allowed to read the report.” Moses wanted to make sure Erna didn’t repeat the privileged information.

“So, it was covered up?” Erna asked.

“For the girl’s sake.” Moses replied.

“Yeah. The press would have had a field day with it.”

“And many lives ruined for life.” Moses remarked.

“Wow.” Erna slumped back into her leather armchair.

“So you see my dear Erna, nothing new with this school.” Moses broke into a smile. “When you told me about your friend’s daughter, it’s a very mild case.”

Much as she hated to admit it. She knew Moses was right. She had to break the news to Maggie gently.

The F1 weekend came and zoomed past like a cacophonous whirlwind.

It was another Tigress Tea Saturday.

Erna, Maggie and Karen brought their children who went to the pool with Elizabeth, Erna's eldest for a poolside lunch and swim.

The P5 end of year exams were around the corner for Samuel, Benjamin and Jemima.

"Hey Erna, isn't Liz taking her PSLE in a few weeks?" Karen asked in concern. "Shouldn't she be studying instead of babysitting?"

"She's not babysitting Ren. Liz is ok. She's pretty independent and does her own thing. And she sailed through her prelims. All \*A\* stars. With an estimated aggregate of 260. That will get her into all the top schools. Anyway, she's her grandmother's favourite, so granny takes her out and keeps an eye on her anyway."

"She's your daughter." Maggie interjected in disapproval.

"Never argue with a strong-willed mother-in-law." Erna said.

Maggie and Karen looked at each other and kept silent.

"Anyway Mags, I spoke to my friend..." Erna began.

"The one with tentacles into the Ministry?" Maggie put down her food.

"Yes, that one."

"The ex-boyfriend?" Karen jumped in.

"Yes. *That* one." Erna smiled mischievously.

"And?" Maggie asked in anticipation.

"Sorry Mags. Nothing can be done. It's really complicated. In essence, we're on the right track. If we surface it to the Ministry, it'd be bounced back to the school and we've been down that road." Erna was apologetic.

"It's OK Erna. Thanks for trying. Wasn't expecting anything different. Anyway, the focus is to ready Jemmy for the PSLE. After the P5 final exams in a few weeks, we're going full steam with tuition during the year-end holidays." Maggie had a new determination to her voice.

"Me too!" Karen added excitedly.

"What about Jemmy?" Erna asked in concern.

"Well, now that it's out in the open and she's undergoing counselling, James and I will make the best of it and rally around Jemmy and give her more time and support... and talk to her more...or rather listen more. As parents, I suppose it's all we can do. To just be there for her and give her our time, encouragement and guidance... and hopefully, this will build her resilience." Maggie rattled on, her voice tinged with guilt, as if trying to reassure herself.

"So, you're just going to leave it and not fight the system? And let those buffoons in the school

management get away with it?" Erna was really concerned now.

"No Erna. James and I are not walking away in defeat. We're just picking our battles and putting our energy to Jemmy and not to spend energy trying to solve Jemmy's problem by attempting to fix a system that isn't and probably will never be perfect." Maggie was more resolute now.

Erna calmed herself down and restrained her tongue. "Well...if you and James have decided that you're comfortable with that decision, then sure, I won't pursue it."

"Thanks Erna. Not that James and I don't appreciate what you've done and the lengths you have gone through. It's just what we think the best thing for Jemmy right now is to focus on her PSLE prep."

"OK." Erna said to close the subject.

"On that rather sensitive note, can I share something that may be a little sensitive? It's concerns Samuel." Maggie looked at Erna earnestly.

"Sure Mags."

"You know how you were sharing with us on-and-off that Sam's been having some issues with his school work, especially his Mandarin - since P3?" Maggie asked cautiously.

"Yes." Erna replied stoically.

"And we all put it down to boys being late bloomers?"

"What's your points Mags?" Erna grew serious.

"I was just having a discussion over dinner with one of James' other medical associates. Apparently, he has a daughter who also has a problem with Mandarin and similar issues to what Sam is experiencing in school. They got her examined medically and there was nothing wrong with her. But they sent her to a child psychologist, and after a slew of tests, they found out, she was dyslexic."

"Isn't dyslexia hereditary? Neither I or Marcus are dyslexic I'm sure. No. No. Sam can't be dyslexic. Look at Liz! She's not dyslexic." Erna was adamant. "It's ludicrous!"

"Erna. Erna, listen. It's not a disease or something fatal." Maggie assured. "The way the mind processes images and words and letters is just different. Albert Einstein was dyslexic. So is Tom Cruise. Winston Churchill...The greatest minds in history. The most talented people—"

"Yes. But Sam is NOT dyslexic. He can't be." Erna sounded a little ticked off.

Karen quickly jumped in, "Erna, Maggie is not saying Sam is. James is a doctor and this comes from a doctor. All she's saying is, explore the possibilities. There must be a reason.....I know you don't believe in tuition and so far, Sam's been ok with his other subjects, but his Mandarin is suffering. And with English, Math, Science and Mandarin all contributing to the total score for the PSLE exams, having a weak Mandarin score will pull down his aggregate score. That will in turn limit his secondary school options."

Maggie quickly added "When James' friend got his daughter diagnosed, he applied to the Ministry

for Mandarin exemption. And when she got the exemption, it was like a weight was lifted from her shoulders.”

Erna’s shoulders dropped and relaxed a little. Her posture less rigid. She didn’t say a word. But the tension in the air dissipated. Maggie looked at Karen and tilted her head a little. Karen mouthed the words “It’s OK.” Maggie cleared her throat and continued.

“Like I was saying, she dropped Mandarin as a subject and was able to focus on the English, Math and Science subjects. She took her PSLE last year and scored 240 for the aggregate score. That allowed her to get into one of the better secondary schools. If she had Mandarin added in, she might have ended up in a lesser secondary school.”

“It may not be a bad idea to get Sam tested.” Karen added.

Erna was deep in thought.

“OK.” She said calmly. Then looked at Maggie straight in the eyes, then at Karen. It was unnerving. “I’ll have a chat to Marcus.”

“Here.” Maggie pulled out a name card. “This is the private child psychologist whom I’m told is pretty good with children.....In fact, I’m probably going to get Jemmy checked up as well. If Jemmy has a learning issue, I’d like to know what it is so that James and I can find a fix to help her in her PSLE. There’s still a little bit of time.”

Erna felt a deep sense of peace she hadn’t felt in a long time. It was almost as if the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle were finally coming together. The thing is, she didn’t even realise till this moment that, at the back of her mind, she was always questioning Sam’s academic performance and that she had unconsciously been trying to figure things out, but met with dead ends. Deep down, she had suspected that Sam might have learning issues. But it was easier to put it down to plain laziness, being a late bloomer or just being saddled with bad teachers.

“Sorry, I got a little agitated. I think I’ve always suspected something like that. But no one likes to think there’s something wrong with their child’s brain.”

“That’s the thing Erna, it’s not brain damage.” Maggie shared, “It’s just a different way of processing information. That’s all. Our education system is standardised for the majority, there are no allowances for children who learn differently or process information differently. Doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with them. It just means they don’t necessarily fit well into the system. That’s it.”

Erna sighed. “The system.” She paused to shake her head, “People with special needs don’t have many options. Students at risk who fall behind get misunderstood, labelled by teachers who, by doing so, empower bullies. The bullies get away with it.” Erna turned to look at Maggie. “Then parents get \*managed\* by the school for trying to stand up for the children. And if we teach the children to become bigger bullies than the bullies, that’s wrong..... So, the onus falls back on the parents, to find ways to help the child cope and even thrive in a hostile environment.”

Maggie and Karen could empathise. But they too had no words to say. Erna looked at both of them and broke the silence.

“So...who’s the real bully?”

## Chapter 26 – Afford

“So...is it because we can’t afford the school bus anymore?” Ben asked Karen as their MPV was crawling forward in the morning vehicle queue that entered his school compound.

“No. That’s not the reason we’re getting you to take the public bus to school.” Karen replied as she sat up straight on the edge of her seat and extended her neck to see if the line of cars was really moving. It was a good thing she was driving home after dropping Ben at school, because her head was now “mopping” the ceiling of the car and getting her hair messed up. She couldn’t go to work looking like that.

“And why can’t you drop me at school every morning?” Ben persisted.

“Does my hair look like a mop?” Karen stuck her head in front of the rear view mirror and tried to get a good look at herself.

“You know mummy, there are very few boys from my school who take the public bus to school. Their parents always send them in the mornings.”

Karen stopped, leaned back into her seat, shifted a little to get comfortable, looked at Ben then asked “I can’t afford the time Ben. You know I’ve got to rush home, get ready, then send daddy to work and get to my workplace on time. I’d be cutting it really close if I sent you to school every day.”

“How do the other parents do it then?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know. Seriously, I don’t Ben. But, don’t you enjoy taking the bus? I mean, there must be lots of girls to look at right? I’m sure at your age, that’d be the highlight of the day. I know looking at boys on the bus used to be mine.” Karen chuckled at the thought.

“Er...No.” Ben hesitated, a little grossed out that his mother would share her teenage fantasies with him.

“Aha! So, you’ve been noticing!” Karen reached over and ruffled his hair.

“Mummy! Tsk. Now I’ve got to straighten my hair out again.”

“Ooooh. Sorry. Sorry. I keep forgetting you’re not in kindy anymore. You’ve really grown up so quickly.” Karen sighed. “Anyway, taking the bus gives you a degree of independence doesn’t it?”

“Well...” Ben paused to form his thoughts, “I don’t mind taking the bus home.”

“So that you can stop and grab a burger or a sandwich along the way home yes?” Karen teased.

Ben was a little embarrassed “Well...yeah. But taking the bus in the mornings means I have to wake earlier and walk all the way out to the main road. And if it rains—”

“Daddy always drives you to school you anyway - If it rains.” Karen interrupted. “Ah! There ya go, finally moving again. Some of these inconsiderate parents. Seriously, stopping their cars in the drop-off points and then saying their long goodbyes to their children. Completely oblivious to the fact that there are dozens of other cars waiting in line. Tsk.”

It was a good 10 minutes before they reached the school’s drop-off point.

“Bye mummy.” Ben said as he reached for the door handle.

“Wait! What time will you be home? I’ll get the maid to prepare lunch if you want. Or if later, maybe I can pick you up on the way home? Why don’t you text me when you’re done?”

“OK Mummy.” Ben nodded as he opened the door and exited the car.

Karen gazed at him as he walked to the foyer, secretly waiting for him to turn back, wave and smile.

Ben didn’t.

“Teenagers.” Karen muttered to herself.

HONK!

“Alright! Alright! Crazy impatient drivers!” Karen gestured angrily with her hand in the rear view mirror.

By the afternoon, Karen started to feel worn down. “All this rushing around, sending Ben to school, rushing home, then rushing to send Michael to work and then rush to work on time really is very tiring!” Karen thought to herself. It was the mid-afternoon and Karen sat in the large meeting room trying to keep herself awake. It didn’t help that she had a heavy lunch. She was blinking and pinching herself in the pinky to keep herself awake.

Suddenly, Karen’s mobile phone rang.

The entire meeting room turned and stared at her. The chairman of the meeting, who thankfully wasn’t her boss, gave her an icy cold look.

“Er...excuse me. Forgot to set it to silent.” Karen fumbled with the handset as she wrestled her way out of her seat and made a brisk dash for the door and out to the very quiet corridor. She glanced at the screen. 3pm. Erna’s number came up as the caller. Karen picked the call up and brought it to her ear.

“Hello?” Karen whispered.

“Ren!!! Unbelievable!!!” Erna’s voice blared through the tiny speaker on the phone.

“Can you stop yelling in my ear?” Karen was irritated. “Is there something important? I’m in the middle of a meeting.”

“I’m picking Sam up from school.” Erna completely missed what Karen had just said. “And you know there’s always this long line of cars that spill over onto the main road right? The main road has 3 lanes. And there’s this guy in a yellow sports car that’s parked right next to the entrance of the gate.

He's refusing to move, so now, all the cars have to go around him."

"Wait. You're calling me to tell me there's a traffic jam on the main road outside Sam's school because of some guy who's double parked and refuses to move in the queue?" Karen was fuming.

"Yeah Ren. Unbelievable!"

"So, no one's in an accident? You're ok? Marcus, Sam and Liz are ok?" Karen asked in irritation.

"Nope. Everyone's except for this idiot who obviously has a vacuum where his brain is supposed to sit."

"Erna, I'm in a middle of a meeting. I'll call you back." Karen ended the annoying call. "Such an inconsiderate woman." Karen thought to herself, "And like I'd care. I've got better things to do than to be a lady of leisure with enough time to get chauffeured to pick my son up from school every day at 3pm!" Karen muttered under her breath as she straightened herself up. She took several deep breaths, paused, then opened the meeting room door and walked back in.

"Geez. Someone's bitchy today." Erna stared at the phone and couldn't believe Karen had just hung up on her without even saying goodbye. "I mean how am I supposed to know she was in a meeting?" Erna said to herself. There was a loud honk from the row of cars in front of her SUV. Erna's attention was brought back to the problem at hand. "Salleh. You wait here." Erna instructed her driver.

Erna got out of the car and walked past several cars towards the traffic offender. To the uninitiated, dismissal time at this International school looked like a parade of supercars and high-end SUVs.

Mr. Yellow sports car was standing on the pavement under a tree, beside his gleaming pride and joy. The car's engine was burbling happily and emitting a low aggressive purr. Mr Yellow sports car was dressed in very expensive tailored shirt and pants. He wore a pair of vintage reptile skin shoes and on his wrist an Audemars Piguet Chronograph.

Erna rolled her eyes. "Excuse me." Erna was curt, "Are you picking your son up?"

Mr. Yellow sports car turned and looked at the vision of beauty standing there in the hot sun, not breaking a sweat.

"I've never been asked a question like that ever by an attractive woman. And the answer is yes. I am picking my son up. Care to join me in the shade?" Mr. Yellow sports car was arrogantly playful.

Erna didn't hide the fact that she was unimpressed. "Do you realise you're holding up traffic by double parking? If you mean to drive in to pick your son up from the lobby, why aren't you moving?"

"Do you pick your child up every day?" Mr. Yellow sports car smiled as he surveyed Erna from top to toe.

"Yes. And I don't cause a traffic jam." Erna replied bluntly.

"Well then, you know that if I drive into the school, I'd be in very slow moving traffic going in and coming out. It's an almost 800 meter drive inside and another 800 meter drive back out to the main road. So, my son gets some exercise by walking out here, and I drive off quickly, because I'm already on the main road. Unlike you, I have to drop my son back home, then, head back to work." Mr.

Yellow sports car put his hands in his pockets and leaned against his car.

“But you do know you’re now jamming up the main road. Look!” Erna raised her arm and motioned to the huge jam that was now starting to build and back up along the main road, just before the school’s entrance. Erna was starting to attract several curious glances from inside some of the cars.

“Look Miss.” His tone became a little aggressive. “I’m not blocking the entrance to the school. I’m still facilitating the flow of traffic. And it’s 3pm – non-peak. And I get here at 3pm, my son comes out at 3.08 and I drive off. 8 mins in a small jam is nothing. Besides, one lane of the main road is still clear. Traffic is just slower. That’s all.”

At that moment, two white motor scooters with uniformed traffic wardens pulled up. One dismounted and started directing traffic. The other, armed with an electronic handheld device, walked over to where Erna was.

Erna smiled triumphantly and pointed the traffic warden towards Mr. Yellow sports car.

“Excuse me sir.” Said the traffic warden. “But you are obstructing traffic. Kindly remove your vehicle.”

Mr. Yellow sports looked at his chunky and overtly loud Audemars Piguet diver’s watch. It was 3.06pm. “Just give me 2 minutes.” He said arrogantly, not even looking at the traffic warden.

“Sir, we need you to remove the vehicle now. You are obstructing traffic and parking on a double yellow line.” The traffic warden’s voice became audibly more emphatic.

“And I will remove my vehicle. Just give me 2 minutes.” Came the irritable reply.

“Sir, please remove the vehicle, otherwise w—“

“Otherwise what? Are you threatening me?” Mr Yellow Sports car stood up straight and puffed his chest up.

“No sir, we are just doing our job. Please do not make it difficult. You are obstructing traffic with your car. Please remove your vehicle. Otherwise, we will have to issue you a ticket. And it’s not cheap. You are parking illegally and obstructing traffic. That’s \$150 sir.” The traffic warden attempted to sound stern.

“Well, you do what you have to do. I’ve already said give me 2 minutes.” Mr. Yellow sports car turned his back towards the traffic warden.

Shaking his head in disapproval, the traffic warden walked to the rear of the yellow sports car and keyed the license plate number into the handheld device. Seconds later, the handheld device spat out a fine ticket.

“Hey Dad!” A plump boy was jogging towards the Yellow car. Mr. Yellow sports car turned and waved at his son who sprinted to the car.

“See this son?” Mr. Yellow sports car pointed dismissively at the traffic warden.

“Ya?”

Mr. Yellow sports car lunged forward at the traffic warden, but stopped short of any physical contact.

The traffic warden, caught by surprise, stumbled backwards. Erna, caught him by the arm.

Mr. Yellow sports car laughed. So did his son. He snatched the traffic fine from the hand of the traffic warden and looked at it, then looked up at Erna and the traffic Warden. “\$150?” He scoffed “Yeah. I can afford this a thousand times over. Come here tomorrow and fine me again. It’s spare change.” He then looked at his son, nodded and motioned for his son to get into the car.

The son glared at both Erna and the traffic warden, fixing a murderous look on the traffic warden as he got into the low slung automobile. The engine roared and the car shot out onto the main road with reckless abandon as it hurtled down the road over the speed limit, prompting honks from the drivers who had to jam their brakes.

“Are you ok ma’am?” The traffic warden asked in concern.

“Yes. I am. Very upset, but OK.”

“Thank you for catching me.”

“No worries. At least no one got hurt.”

“Sometimes, these rich people.....” The traffic warden sighed and shook his head.

Erna kept silent, nodded and walked back to her car.

That night, in Chew Mansion, Marcus, Elizabeth, Samuel and Erna sat at the dining table.

It was sweltering that night, and Erna had shut all the glass panels that led to the pool and turned on the air-conditioning.

A beetroot salad with Rosemary roasted chicken that Erna had marinated herself were the dishes served that night.

“OMG Mummy. This is the most delicious chicken ever!” Elizabeth gushed, with food still in her mouth.

“Don’t speak with your mouth full Lizzy!” Erna snapped.

“Ooooooh. Someone’s in a foul mood.” Marcus teased.

“That she is daddy. That she is.” Samuel chimed in with a chuckle.

“What happened?” Marcus put his utensils down and gave Erna his full attention.

Erna sped through the afternoon’s events with so much righteous conviction that Marcus and the children felt like they were sitting in the front row of an evangelistic rally.

“Has to be new money.” Marcus sneered. “People from old money are usually a lot more giving and

considerate.”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, he needs to be taught a lesson.” Erna was still seething.

“Sweetheart, let it be. He’ll get his own. And it’s not proper for you to be exacting the terms of his punishment, nor is it for you to bring him to justice. Sure, write a letter into the traffic police and get proper patrol cars there to help control traffic, with proper policemen who are empowered to make arrests, but do not get involved. With social media being what it is today, you really don’t want our company or our family to be in the media for the wrong reasons.”

“Ya mummy! Why didn’t you use your phone camera to film him!” Elizabeth blurted out excitedly. “I could’ve help you post it on Youtube then share it on Intstagram and Twitter!”

“I could have subtitled it!” Samuel jumped in.

“Well, some people just let money get to their heads, that’s all. And they think they own everything and everyone.” Marcus said solemnly.

“Speaking of the rich doing crazy things, can I share something really crazy that happened at school?” Samuel’s eyes lit up.

“Gossip!!!” Elizabeth shrieked.

“Lizzy! My ears!” Erna protested.

“Go on son.”

“Well, remember that guy from India in my orientation group – Manmohan Goud?”

“Goud?” Marcus said thoughtfully. “Is his father the owner of the Goud group of companies?”

“Not sure. I don’t ask. All I know is, his father does trading. Whatever that means.” Samuel replied.

“Is he the same Goud that supplies the hotel?” Erna asked Marcus.

“Sounds like it.” Marcus was intrigued. “Does his dad have a private jet?”

“Ya!!!!!!” Samuel’s eyes were wide open and filled with excitement that he almost leapt off his chair.

“Same one.” Marcus chipped in. “So, you ‘re friends with the son. I’m impressed.”

“Oh no no. Here’s what’s crazy.” Samuel gushed.

“He has a zoo in his home?” Liz offered.

“NO!” Sam narrowed his eyes and leered at her. “He has tuition----“

“And they promised that at an International school, there was no need for tuition and they didn’t believe in it!” Erna slapped her hands on the dining table then threw her hands up in the air.

“Calm down sweetie.” Marcus patted Erna on the shoulder.

“No no!!!” Samuel was still bright eyed and excited.

“There’s more?” Elizabeth gasped.

“Manmohan’s father, flies in tutors from Mumbai in Math and Chemistry and Physics on the weekdays, and then flies them back on the weekends – on his private jet!!!!” Samuel was so excited he almost choked on his words.

“No-freaking-way!” Liz almost swore.

“Are you sure?” Erna made a face and jerked her head back.

“Well, he can afford it.” Marcus said calmly before stuffing some salad into his mouth.

The week went past quickly, and the weekend even quicker.

Benjamin was lying in bed watching Youtube videos on his phone.

“Don’t sleep too late.” Karen said, as she popped her head into his room.

“OK. Night mummy.”

His phone buzzed.

Ben flicked the video away and opened up the group chat.

JemGem: My new school is nuts.

Bee: Tell me about it.

JemGem: Got invited to a birthday party yesterday.

Bee: Sounds cool.

JemGem: It was. But, I made a card and did some craft as a birthday present.

Bee: And...

JemGem: Everyone bought gifts for the birthday girl!

Bee: Like toys?

JemGem: Ear studs, nail polish, one even bought a Smiggles bag and her best friend bought her a branded phonecase. Even my mum doesn’t buy such expensive phonecases!

Bee: Shite. And I thought my school was bad.

Bee: Like, I was asking my mum why I had to take public tpt to school every morning.

JemGem: I take public transport.

Bee: But 70% of my school get sent to school in cars.

Chewy: Hey guys!

Bee: Sup.

JemGem: Sam!!!!

Chewy: What U talking about?

JemGem: Crazy stuff at school.

Chewy: OK. Just read.

JemGem: Crazy right?

Chewy: You wanna hear crazy? One of my schoolmates dad has a private jet.

Bee: No way.

JemGem: Whut.

Chewy: Here is the crazy part.

JemGem: Wat?

Chewy: The father flies in tutors from India to Singapore to tutor my friend and flies them back on weekends. I saw them coming into school to speak to our teachers. And I asked my friend Manmohan. He confirmed it!!!

Bee: WTH.

Chewy: LOL.

JemGem: Kidding right?

Bee: BS.

Chewy: True story. Ask your mum to ask mine.

“Yeah. Crazy isn’t it?!!!” Erna gushed.

“Who would fly in tutors?!!!” Karen still could not believe what Erna had told her Maggie and her over tea in the last 5 minutes.

“Well, he’s obviously *THAT* rich.” Maggie remarked.

Karen sighed. “What I would give to be that rich.....”

“Different set of issues Ren.” Erna cautioned.

“Ya, everyone has their own problems.” Maggie added.

“Well, my problem is now, from 4 subjects, I’ve got to increase Ben’s tuition to 6 subjects. Just to give him the boost he needs in Secondary 1. So that he can get good enough results to get into the Express stream in Secondary 2 and then work hard to stay there and do his “O” Levels in 4 years instead of 5.” Karen lamented.

“Isn’t that going to increase the cost?” Maggie asked in concern.

“Yes.” Karen shook her head. I really need to give Ben that edge.”

“But Ren, can you afford to do this?”

Karen paused, then looked at Maggie and Erna. “You know, both of you have children who are doing well. Ben can, but he’s not realising his potential. I just don’t want him to regret.” Karen paused, “As a mother, I will do everything in my power. And maybe I’ve done it all wrong in primary school. Maybe I’ve made tuition such a crutch that he just doesn’t know how to study independently anymore.” Karen took a deep breath. “But with so much at stake, I think the real question is, spending more on tuition for him; it’s not whether I can afford to do this. It’s whether Ben can afford to do *without* it.”

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