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Alan Maley
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Chapter 1 *Visiting time*

I am not frightened. No, not me. I'm terrified! I hate the smell of hospitals – that mixture of disinfectant and human waste and stale bodies – and fear. And I don't know what I'll find when I see her. My mother, I mean. Luckily, Auntie Swee Eng is with me. There's something comforting about her. She makes me feel safe, even when these terrible things are happening. Of course, she's old – but somehow that doesn't matter. I know that she'll help me to face whatever it is that waits for me behind that white door.

The nurse in her smart white uniform calls us over and pushes open the door to the private room. Auntie Swee Eng gives me her warm hand and together, hand in hand, we go into the room. Suddenly I think how strange it is – I'm only sixteen but I tower over the tiny figure of Auntie Swee Eng, who must be at least fifty years older than me. But, tall as I am, I'm still terrified. Thank goodness she's with me. She may be old and small, but she seems so strong. She's tough all right!

After the bright lights of the corridor outside, we find ourselves in the darkness of the room. It takes a few moments before I can see anything. Then, gradually, my eyes get used to the darkness, and objects start to come into focus – the bed and the bedside table with a glass on it; the plastic curtains open by the bed; the dark shape lying under the sheets with tubes coming out of its nose and arms, connected to the frame with a bottle hanging from it; the

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machine next to the bed with red and green lights; the small table with medicine bottles and metal trays on it; a chair by the bed; the temperature chart hanging on the end of the bed; the sink in the corner; the dark shape of a wardrobe next to the door. The dim outline of a window is visible, but the dark green curtains are closed, so it looks like a TV screen which has been switched off.

Auntie Swee Eng and I stand for a moment just inside the door. The shape on the bed doesn't move but we can hear the faint sound of breathing, and as our eyes get used to the darkness, we can see the sheets rising and falling. We move silently towards the bed. Auntie Swee Eng makes me sit on the chair. Is this my mother? All I can see is the pale outline of a face and the white hospital nightdress. Her eyes are closed. I can see a tube fastened to her arm and a tube which goes into her nose. I take her hand. Her skin feels like dry paper. There's no movement. It's like holding a child's doll, loose and lifeless. But, just as I'm about to let go, I feel her hand squeeze mine – a small movement but it's a sign of life. Yet her eyes are still closed. Her face still does not move. I feel as if she's on another planet, drifting away from me. Is this really my mother? Is this really happening?

How did this all happen? Why is she here, fighting for her life? Is it my fault? What did I do wrong? What did we all do wrong to come to this? I start to feel panic. I feel a mixture of sadness, hopelessness and anger. She must be very ill because she's in the intensive care unit. I feel sick and dizzy from thinking about it. I just cannot think straight. I cannot breathe. I need air. I can't stay here in this enclosed atmosphere any more. I have to get out.

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And everything has happened so fast. They only released me from the police station this morning. It was Auntie Swee Eng who came to collect me and take me here. Now I've seen Mum, I realise just how wrong I've been about so many things.

'Come on, Chee Seng, I think we'd better go now,' says Auntie Swee Eng softly. She seems to know and understand how I'm feeling. I take a last look at the dark shape of my mother on the hospital bed, then follow Auntie Swee Eng into the blinding light of the corridor.

The nurse takes us to a cool, quiet waiting room. She brings us some cold drinks. 'Don't worry,' says Auntie Swee Eng. 'The doctor will come to see us when he finishes with his other patients.'

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