

# The Watchman's Legacy: A Bedtime Story of a Small Island

by Cayden Chai

The rain drummed against the window of the HDB flat in Toa Payoh, a rhythmic hum that usually signaled sleep. But seven-year-old Ethan was wide awake. He tugged at his grandfather's sleeve—a man whose hands were mapped with the history and scars of a different Singapore.

"Gong Gong, tell me a story. Not the one about the dragons. Tell me the one about how we got here."

The old man chuckled, adjusting his spectacles. "Boy, you want to hear about history at 9:00 PM? You won't be able to sleep! It's not all fairy tales and lions, you know."

"I don't care," Ethan insisted. "I want to know why we are so small but so... loud."

"Fair enough," the grandfather sighed, leaning back into his armchair. "Then we start at the beginning. When the island was a heart without a body."

## Chapter I: The Tears of a Tiny Red Dot (1965)

"Imagine, Ethan, waking up and being told you no longer belong to your family. That was August 9, 1965. I remember watching the black-and-white TV. Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's voice cracked, and he wept. He didn't want us to be alone; we were expelled from Malaysia.

"We were a slum-ridden port back then. Seventy-five percent of us lived in shacks, and the 'Banana Money' from the war years had left our pockets empty. Our 'big brothers' in the region thought we would crawl back within years, begging for mercy because we had no farmland, no oil, and not even enough water to last a week. We call it 'The Existential Disruption.' We were a 'Little Red Dot'—a speck you could barely see on a map."

"But Gong Gong, didn't the British stay to protect us?"

"For a while. But then they decided to go home early—the 'East of Suez' withdrawal. It was like being a small chick in a forest full of hawks, and suddenly, your mother bird flies away. We had to learn to fly, or we'd be someone's dinner. Mr. Lee said we had to be a 'Poison Shrimp'—bitter to swallow and dangerous to touch. We had to make our survival everyone else's interest."

## Chapter II: The "Mexicans" and the Secret Shield (1967)

"But Gong Gong, how does a shrimp fight a hawk? It's too small!"

The grandfather lowered his voice, leaning in. "We needed an army fast, but no one would teach us. We asked the big countries, and they said 'no.' So, we secretly turned to a country just like us: small, surrounded, and tough. Israel. We called their advisors 'Mexicans' so our neighbors wouldn't get upset. They taught us the 'Fortress Singapore' mindset. We turned our highways into runways and made every man a soldier through National Service.

"We realized that for a small state, vulnerability is the only constant. Today, Ethan, we have one of the most advanced air forces in the world and more tanks than countries ten times our size. We evolved from a 'Poison Shrimp' to a 'Dolphin'—smart, agile, and capable of a deadly strike if provoked. We make sure that 'shrimp' stays very, very poisonous."

### Chapter III: The Pirates and the Principles (1974)

"A few years later, in 1974, some men tried to blow up the oil tanks at Pulau Bukom. They hijacked a ferry called the *Laju*. The whole world was watching to see if this 'tiny red dot' would crumble under pressure or turn into a chaotic war zone."

"Did we shoot them?" Ethan asked, his eyes wide.

"We were smarter. We negotiated. Our leaders, including Mr. S.R. Nathan, actually got on the plane with the terrorists to ensure the hostages were safe. We showed the world that Singapore follows the Rule of Law. We didn't just use muscles; we used our brains and diplomacy. We proved that even a speck on the map can handle global threats with dignity and calm. That was our first major test of Crisis Management."

### Chapter IV: The World's Gas Station (The Economic Miracle)

"Gong Gong, if we have no oil, why did they want to blow up oil tanks?"

"Because, boy, we became the world's gas station! Look at the map. Every ship traveling from China to India and Europe has to pass through the Strait of Malacca—a 3.5 trillion-dollar highway. We didn't have oil in the ground, so we built massive refineries on our islands to clean the 'sludge' from other people's ships and sell it back to them.

"We became the number one refueling port on the planet. We didn't just sit by the road; we built a 'toll booth' and a 'service station.' We used that 'oil money' to build your school, the MRT, and the Changi Airport you love. We made ourselves so relevant to global trade that if Singapore stops, the world's engine starts to smoke. That is how a small state gains Strategic Autonomy."

## Chapter V: The Ticking Clock of the Water (NEWater)

"But Gong Gong, you said we had no water. What if the neighbors turn off the tap?"

The grandfather pointed to the glass of water on the nightstand. "That was our biggest fear for fifty years. We had treaties with Malaysia, but treaties can be broken. We were living on borrowed time. So, our scientists did something incredible. They learned to 'recycle' water—every drop. We call it NEWater.

"We even learned to take the salt out of the sea. We turned our whole island into a giant sponge to catch every bit of rain. Today, water isn't our weakness anymore; it's our technology. We turned a 'death sentence' into a billion-dollar industry. We showed that in Singapore, necessity is the mother of invention. We don't wait for the tap to run dry; we build a new tap."

## Chapter VI: The Neighbors in the Shadows (2001)

The grandfather's face turned serious, the shadows in the room deepening. "The scariest part wasn't the armies outside, Ethan. It was when we found out some people living among us wanted to hurt us. In 2001, we discovered Jemaah Islamiyah. They wanted to turn our region into a place of hate."

"Were they our neighbors?"

"Some were. And that's why we created Total Defence. We realized a fence is useless if the people inside the house don't trust each other. We didn't just arrest them; we worked with religious leaders to heal the community through the Religious Rehabilitation Group. Our neighbors in Southeast Asia had more land to hide in, but we had to be tighter. Our social cohesion became our secret weapon. If we are not one people, we are no people at all."

## Chapter VII: The Invisible Monster (2003)

"Then came the 'Strategic Surprise.' Not a bomb, but a cough. SARS."

Ethan scrunched his nose. "Like COVID?"

"Exactly like COVID. It taught us that security isn't just about soldiers. It's about doctors, cleaners, and the 'Psychological Defence' of a nation. We had to trust our government and each other to stay home and stay safe. It was a disruption that changed how we look at the world. It proved that a small nation must be a network, not just a hierarchy."

## Chapter VIII: The Changi "Trap" and the Global Hub

"Gong Gong, why is Changi Airport so pretty? It has a waterfall!"

The grandfather chuckled. "That is part of the strategy, boy! We didn't just build an airport; we built a 'destination.' In 1981, when we opened Changi, we wanted people to want to be here. If the world's businessmen and travelers love your airport, they invest in your city. We turned a patch of swamp into the best airport in the world. It's a 'soft power' shield. People don't want to hurt a place they love to visit."

## Chapter IX: The Disrupted Age (2026)

"And now, boy, you live in 'The Disrupted Age.' People use AI to tell lies and computers to start wars. Our neighbors are growing fast—ASEAN is now the seventh-largest economy in the world—but that means the competition is even tougher. The 'Globalized City-State' model is being challenged by 'decoupling' and 'trade wars.'"

"Is it scarier than 1965, Gong Gong?"

The old man looked at his grandson's sleepy eyes. "It's different. But the lesson is the same. History is a cycle. Whether it's a pirate in 1974, a virus in 2003, or a hacker in 2026, the answer is always resilience. We are one of the most prepared small countries in history because we know how quickly things can vanish. We survive because we never assume we are safe."

"Gong Gong... you still haven't told me what happens next..."

"Boy, you still don't want to sleep? I've talked so much my throat is dry! Your mother will scold me for keeping you up."

"Just one more... will we be okay?"

"As long as your generation remembers the story, Ethan. As long as you don't think this city grew out of the ground by itself. It was built by hands that were trembling with fear but refused to let go."

## Epilogue: The Sleeping Sentinel

There was no response. The grandfather looked down. Ethan's head had finally rested against his arm, his breathing following a deep, even rhythm. He was sleeping soundly, probably dreaming of refinery towers, NEWater pipes, and digital shields.

The grandfather smiled, a warm feeling spreading through his chest. He tucked the blanket around the boy and looked out at the twinkling lights of the Singapore skyline. It

was a place that shouldn't be, and yet it stretched out before him, shining. The grandfather felt a deep sense of gratitude. He had completed the story. And for at least this night, the boy could sleep in safety—and that was no accident.

"Sleep well, little watchman," he whispered. "The future is yours to write now."

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