

# My Father Was A Candle

The musings of a sexagenarian  
(in his dotage and ready for the glue factory)

Clem Kuek

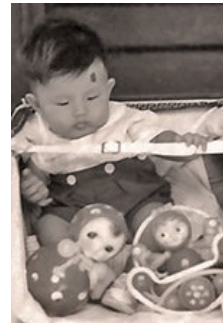
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## 1 Anno Domini 1955

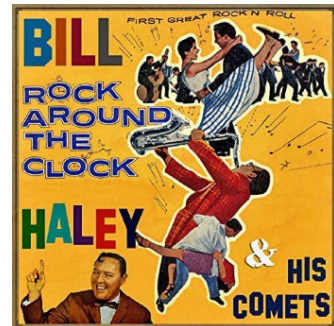
I was born in the mid-20th century in Kuching, Sarawak which is to be found to the north of the third largest island in the world, Borneo<sup>1</sup>. In 1955, the first post-Second World War Prime Minister of the UK, Mr Clement Atlee resigned as the leader of the British Labour Party. I have



no doubt that a spate of babies were named Clement around those post-war years. In the year of my birth, Queen Elizabeth II had been our queen (Sarawak was then a British colony [1946 – 1963]) for three years<sup>2</sup>, Dwight D. Eisenhower was US President; Disneyland in California was opened; and Ray Kroc started his first MacDonal'd's restaurant. I share my birth year with Rowan Atkinson (comedian), Bruce Willis (actor), Tim Berners-Lee (creator of the World Wide Web) and Bill Gates (philanthropist).



The top hit tune of 1955 was “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley and the Comets. In October that year, in a convocation speech at the University of Malaya, the Right Honourable Malcolm Macdonald, PC paraphrased American philosophical humourist Will Rogers, stating to those gathered, "It's great to be great but it's greater to be human". It was a philosophy which I have tried to practice in all my years (rather than the often tempting aphorism, "It is hard to soar like an eagle when you're surrounded by turkeys").



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<sup>1</sup> As it is not connected to any other body of land, Australia is technically an island. However, it is generally considered as a continental landmass. Thus, in decreasing order of land area, the three largest islands in the world are Greenland, New Guinea, and Borneo (748,168 square kilometres). Borneo has one of the oldest and most biodiverse rainforests in the world.

<sup>2</sup> Or alternatively worded “. . . Queen Elizabeth II had been on the throne for three years,” although in Aussie-speak this would mean she had a severe case of constipation and had been in the dunny, sitting on the potty for an inordinately long time.

On 20th June, a total solar eclipse lasting 7 minutes and 8 seconds and visible in South-East Asia occurred. It was the longest such event between the 11th and this century. In the last Millennium, only seven eclipses exceeded seven minutes of totality. It must have been a sinister harbinger of my birth later in the year. I think I was ten years old when I saw my first total eclipse. Along with other schoolmates we all looked up into the sun to see this celestial curiosity. Most of us wore spectacles later as a result. But, I learnt from my father after I got home from school that day just after the event, to smoke a piece of glass over a candle to use as eye protection to view the sun.



*Jonas Salk*

We do not hear about polio the disease these days. But it was a big major concern especially for children in the 50s. A famous victim of the disease was the 32nd President of the US, Franklin D. Roosevelt. In April 1955, Jonas Salk received full US Food and Drug Administration approval for his polio vaccine against the causal virus. This development plus an oral vaccine developed by Albert Sabin saw polio disappear as a disease. Since those days, vaccine doubters have gained followers such that it has become harder to curb diseases by inoculations, to wit SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19). The fact that both Salk and Sabin were Jews has

added fodder to the lie peddled by pseudo-scientists and self-proclaimed sages that vaccines are a conspiracy to dominate and to make money.

In the same year, a patent was granted to George de Mestral for the Velcro fabric hook-and-loop fastener which has become ubiquitous especially in outdoor gear. And the first domestic microwave oven was introduced in the US. The Tappan RL-1 retailed for USD1,295 and only 34 units were made that year. We now view the microwave oven (we somehow dropped the term “oven” in colloquial usage) as indispensable. We may feel that waiting around for something to come out of the microwave is an eternity, but the reality is that cooking used to take a whole lot longer in the “good old days” (see my observation later on).



*The Tappan RL-1 microwave oven*

Something which became a part of my work as a researcher scientist came about in 1955 - Eugene Garfield proposed the concept of citation indexing for scientific literature. This is the recording of the number of times a published scientific work is cited in subsequent research papers by other researchers. It is one of the ways in which the relevance or importance of a piece of scientific research can be estimated: the more the work is cited by others, the more relevant or important the work is construed to be. I have not been prolific in publications in

my career but sixteen scientific research papers of which I am an author, either singly or in a team have had about 1,120 citations as of mid-2023 (as recorded in the Web of Science maintained by Clarivate Analytics).

Under “Chronology of events” in the yearly Sarawak Government Almanac (2021 issue) only two events were noted for 1955 viz. “abolition of Sarawak Native Affairs” and “Sarawak Chinese Affairs” departments. I suppose that those Chinese and natives wanting dalliances had to proceed under their own initiatives after the departments’ closure. This is reminiscent of a university which I worked for having a humorously titled (at least to me) “Student Affairs” division. During meetings to review planning targets, I used to query its boss with mock seriousness, how many illicit liaisons her division had promoted amongst the students year-to-date.

In 1955, at the local markets in Sarawak,



*Farmers' market; Kuching, 1950*



*Chinese dacing*

you would be looking at these prices:

Item	Unit	Price (Sarawak dollar)	
Local rice; white milled	Gantang	2.00	One gantang is approx 2.4 kg
Sugar; Java white	kati	0.20	One Chinese kati is 500 g
Wheat flour	kati	0.30	
Fowl eggs	each	0.18	
Changkok manis	kati	0.39	
Ladies' fingers	kati	0.56	
Bombay onions	kati	0.30	
Tomatoes	kati	1.06	

## 2 The colour purple

Close your eyes. Better still close your eyes with your hands over them. What do you see? The colour purple<sup>3</sup>.



I do that remember when I was very young, whenever I was ill especially with fever, I would have this recurring dream/nightmare. I would feel very much alone; feel very uncomfortable and restricted. No matter how I tossed and turned, I could not get away from the tight uncomfortable feeling. I could not see anything in that nightmare. All I could see was the colour purple.

I stopped having those nightmares in late primary school. In my forties, when I recalled having that memory, I realized that there may be an explanation for what I was feeling when I had those dreams. I think I was recalling the time I was being born. Think about it: feeling tight and restricted; can't see anything; it's dark and you only see the colour purple. And that event was linked to very early childhood only - when I was closer to the event which triggered those memories. There are not many things we can remember from the days before we learnt to speak but I think something primordial for us such as being in the womb may be imprinted in our brain before we can make sense of it.

I remember having more fevers when I was younger than later in life (same with colds which I rarely have nowadays). These childhood fevers were often accompanied by a feeling of dread because I would have a recurring dream of being on a bicycle alone in the dark. In my feverish state, things would appear further away or distorted. That things may look further away when children have fevers has apparently been a subject of scientific

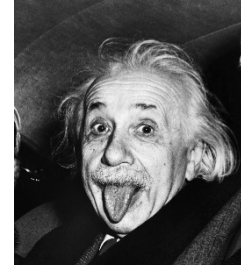
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<sup>3</sup> Purple is a colour associated with royalty going back to 1000 BC. This was because only the affluent in high society could afford the expensive textiles dyed with secretions from marine molluscs (*Murex* spp.) which contained 6,6'-dibromoindigo. So, if you see depictions of ancient royalty in paintings or in the movies wearing purple garments, then it is indeed correct. It was not until 1856, that the first synthetic textile dye was introduced (by William Perkin), also for the colour purple (or "mauve" as it was sold as). Mauve coloured clothing became a fashion statement. This opened up the textile dye industry such that now global production of synthetic dyes is around 500,000 tonnes annually.

research. It is part of what is referred to as the Alice in Wonderland Syndrome and things appearing further away has a name – teleopsia. So, I wasn't dreaming (pardon the pun) after all.

### 3 Relativity, theory, and immigrants

In 1905, Albert Einstein published his Special Theory of Relativity. This was Einstein's explanation of how speed affects mass, time and space. One of the things it says is that we cannot attain the speed of light because our weight would become so massive that there would not be enough energy to move that mass (look at his famous equation  $E = MC^2$  to see why). The faster we move, the larger will our mass be. This should mean that for all those who are watching their body weights – do not travel in a fast-moving vehicle (high speed trains? Jet planes?) or you will gain weight (albeit temporarily because the extra will be lost as your speed slows back down to come to a stop).

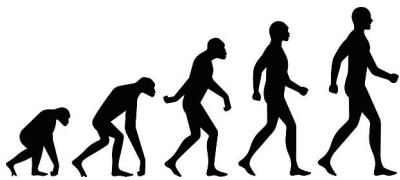


*Einstein at age 72  
in 1951*

Relativity is what I think explains why time feels shorter as we get older. When we are young time seems much longer and those who have lived many years remark that each chronological year seems to pass faster and faster. When we are ten years old, one year out of ten is relatively large portion compared to one year out of say fifty. These two ratios should tell you why a year when we are older seems much shorter than when we were young. There is no fix for this feeling and it can only get worse. The one real response which one can have is to make the most of each moment that we are in control of (those moments which we are under the direction of other people *i.e.* when under employment, are not really ours) really count – make the best use of it.

For me, relativity also explains why emotional events seem to loom so large (or larger) when we were younger. When we were young, we were more carefree, were weighed down with relatively fewer responsibilities, and therefore had less worries. Thus, when an emotional event happens to us when young, it is one event amongst only a few which we have experienced thus far. Therefore, that event would loom large. As we get through life, we experience and witness more and more emotional events. When another one happens, it becomes just one out of many. This then, makes a new emotional event less weighty, relatively speaking. Plus, with life's experiences, we probably cope better with an emotional event which means that their effect on us is potentially less traumatizing. So, when we look back at our lives and we remember how tremendously affected by certain events we were at the time, it may well be that the weight which we assigned to them at the time (and which we remember) was magnified by relativity.

You may call these musings Clem's Special Theory of Relativity. It is not as hairbrained as Clem's Hair Theory of Evolution (apologies to Charlie). In the late 1990s, one redhead populist female would-be politician went around Australia coaxing rednecks out of the woodwork. This was basically immigrant bashing/blaming especially the Asians. This redhead started a political party which was named "One Nation" which was the cuspidor for containing all their supremacist vitriol. At the time, I had just learnt how to write webpages and web publishing had just started to grow (who remembers personal web blogs?). The internet is truly wonderous as a font of information, but it must be said that it probably contains more dribble and drool than anything that is truly edifying. Count the contribution which I am about to relate as dribble.



In response to "One Nation" I decided to start a web page called "One Ation ("One Asian" geddit?). On that webpage, amongst all sorts of pokes at Caucasian supremacist ideology, I had one section which explained my "Hair Theory of Evolution". This theory states that it is fact that our cousins the apes are super hairy compared to our species the *Homo sapiens* which are much less hirsute. Now, it is also a well-known fact that Orientals generally lack body (or even facial) hair whereas Caucasians are hairy. Thus, my Hair Theory of Evolution maintains that Orientals are more evolved than Caucasians in the same way that apes are less evolved as evidenced by coverage of bodily hair. That webpage also had a tabulated timeline of the advancement of humankind through history. On one side of the tabulation was arrayed the fact that very early on in history, Asia had ancient civilizations, invented printing and gunpowder, made paper, used paper money, and so on. On the other side of the tabulation was the timeline for Europe, where it showed at the equivalent times in Asia, Europeans had grass huts as their predominant architecture, boated to foreign lands to rape and pillage, and had just discovered that daily bathing was both hygienic and soothing.

All this mental jousting may seem quite innocuous until you hear the story of a bunch of white supremacists in Perth in the mid-80s, who demonstrated the sum total of their capacity for intellectual discourse by going around town defacing bus stop shelters with grafitti which read "Asians go home". Their leader was a person who himself, had Indonesian blood in his ancestry and who was oblivious to the irony of that in connection to his cause. He of course, had a Hitler mustache. Innocuous his gang was not because it went on to set Chinese restaurants alight. Eventually, the gang killed one of its members who it had decided was a police informer. Most of the gang were sent to prison as a result. You can judge for yourself the mental prowess of this gang by the fact that after they were released from prison some years later, they went on to try and burn down the same Chinese restaurant they took a pyrolytic liking to before. And, they were put back in prison. If this is an example of being supreme then God help the rest of us.

Being the subject of discrimination is nothing new to the Chinese diaspora who being termed the “jews” of the east, spread forth from their homelands to gain better futures for their families. They were the subject of discriminatory laws of the lands where they settled, for example in the United States (“Anti-Coolie Act, 1862; Page Act, 1875; Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882), and in Australia (“Chinese Immigration Act”, 1855; “Influx of Chinese Restriction Act”, 1881). In Malaysia, despite more than 60 years of independence and political dominance by the Malays, some of the latter racial group continue to refer to Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent using the pejorative term “*pendatang*” (meaning “immigrant”) to imply that they do not have the same rights as the Malays. But, discrimination has been worse than that which has been visited upon the Chinese. The United States was founded upon a declaration of independence from British colonization and it is often called the “Land of the Free” (from the national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner”), which is totally silent on the fact that two of the main ideas of that declaration<sup>4</sup> are inconsistent with slavery which remained legal until it was ended through a bitter civil war (1861 – 1965).

The great irony of immigrant-bashing in Australia and other countries which are built upon the invasion of native lands and their peoples, is that the culprits are oblivious to the fact that they themselves can be considered the unwelcome immigrants by the original inhabitants in the manner that they say the later immigrants are. This is a case of one bunch of boat people telling later boat people to go home. In Australia, the obvious legal problem of invading another country and suppressing the original inhabitants was recognized early on by the British. The concept of *terra nullius* (Latin for “nobody’s land”) was invoked to cover themselves. *Terra nullius* was proclaimed by New South Wales Governor Richard Bourke in 1835, some 47 years after the First Fleet landed in Australia. At the heart of *terra nullius* is the Doctrine of Discovery put up by the Catholic church through Papal Bulls starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. It came to being to regulate squabbles between the Spanish and Portuguese explorers (read “colonial conquerors”) over newly “discovered” lands. In essence, the Doctrine stipulated that lands could be considered “vacant” as long as no Christians occupied it.

Since Australia was “vacant” at the time, the British could justifiably take it over (consider how different this legal argument might have been if the Europeans had sent out missionaries first to convert the heathen to Christians prior to any claim of over territory – the land would then have been occupied by Christians). *Terra nullius* in Australia was voided in 1992 when the Mabo case (Mabo v Queensland [No. 2]) overturned the concept. The High Court of Australia found that aboriginal people owned land prior to annexation by the British (I have expanded the original specificity from the *Mer* people and the Colony of Queensland in saying this). The Doctrine of Discovery still casts a long shadow as it was cited by the US Supreme Court as recently as 2005 when it denied the right of the Oneida

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<sup>4</sup> (a) People have certain inalienable rights including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; (b) All men are created equal.

Indian Nation of New York to regain its territory. The Vatican formally renounced the Doctrine in March 2023.

Blame the immigrant (or the truth in many cases, being numbers of itinerant workers rather than immigrant numbers) is the catch cry of many who hide behind flags and nationalism. Always be cautious of these people – we are only a couple of generations away from Adolph Hitler. There is little doubt that the popular vote to exit the United Kingdom from the



European Union (“Brexit”, a misnomer) was won on the back of stories peddled by Brexit advocates, of the claim that the UK was being swamped by uncontrolled immigration. They won their case, and Brexit became a reality in 2020. Accordingly, I hope that Britons and the Welsh enjoy their government led by offspring of colored immigrants and that they eat curry every day.

## 4 Childhood amusements



Marbles were a big thing in primary school in the sixties. We would have competitive marble games before and after school. This was a test of skill where we would aim at a row of marbles to dislodge them. The marbles would make a clack sound when hitting each other. Whatever we dislodged was ours to own from the pool which was collected at the start.

The big, white stone marbles (made of marble) were the ones used for this game. There was also another type of smaller glass marbles which had coloured inserts in them. A marble economy existed in school and they were a tradable commodity.



A wind-up toy could be made out of old cotton thread spools and a rubber band. With a long stick on one side to control spin, the rubber band was wound up and the spool put on the ground to scurry around. Grooves could be cut into the rim of the spool for better traction.



Boys would make their own catapults by cutting a “Y” fork from a small bush. A bunch of rubber bands would be linked together and attached to the wooden handle. It was also the time when I learnt from Iban friends in the neighborhood that green wood can be trained into a bent shape if it is gently heated over a fire.

At school a common quick catapult for skirmishes was the finger catapult. All one needed was a rubber band and a tightly folded paper pellet.



A popular past time again for the boys was the making and conduct of fighting kites. Kites were made of colored paper glued onto frames of carefully whittled bamboo made taut with a string frame. Shapes could be of all kinds but the diamond-shaped kite was most commonly used for fighting. The critical element to success as a kite warrior was the string which was strung out between the kite and the flyer. It was coated with powdered glass. Picture a home process devised by boys where they pounded glass to a suitable level of fineness, then hot-mixing it with a shop-bought glue extracted from cowhides (in the Hokkien dialect it was known as “cow leg hide” and they were sold as flat little brown pieces which had to be liquified by boiling with a bit of water). The glass-glue mixture was applied while still hot to the whole length of kite string. The glass-coated string would be ready after being strung out to dry in the sun (not a rainy day job). What passed for a good day’s job in kite string production would drive an occupational health and safety inspector bonkers. The boy artisans would wear no eye protection while pounding glass, no gloves for protecting the hands, no masks against inhalation of powders, and what is more, it was thought that fluorescent lamp tubes gave the best glass. These early fluorescent tubes were dangerous because they contained small amounts of mercury (for vaporization of the metal to effect efficient emission of visible light through the interaction of the UV light generated and the phosphor layer inside the tube).

A fighting event unfolds when a kite is seen flying nearby. One's own kite with its glass powder-coated string was sent aloft to accost the target kite. By appropriate maneuvering, one's kite is brought next to the challenger (or victim) kite such that the two strings to the respective kites would rub against each other. If the other kite only had plain string, the latter would be severed in no time and a cheer would sound from the winning team. If both kites have coatings glass on their strings, the fighting could last awhile and the kite with the better glass preparation would prevail and cut the opponent's string. If a kite so liberated were "captured" on the ground after a battle, it was booty. I do not hear about or see such kite fighting nowadays. Kids these days have too many other fun things to do besides attending the interminable parent-inflicted affliction: extra tuition.

