

Sophia's Party

By Jeremy Tiang

From "Hook & Eye: Stories from the Margins"

Note: These are reflection notes, done by Teacher Jo (www.teacher-jo.com). You will find that there's a distinct lack of opinion. This is because this collection was put together with the intention that readers develop their own meaning based on their own life experiences.

How then should you use these notes to help yourself?

Reflect on and answer all the questions I have listed.

When attempting to answer these questions, be as open-minded and honest as possible. Where your opinion is needed, try to answer those questions in the PEEL format. Have evidence and reason, and elaborate as if trying to explain it to someone else who doesn't understand. Pretend to persuade someone else to accept your opinion.

Good luck!

Teacher Jo

Scene Summary	Analysis & Reflection
<p>The scene is set. It is National Day and a party is being prepared for. The narrator is a person called Nicholas. He is not allowed to help, so he watches as the scene unfolds and comments on the situation.</p> <p>He thinks about the weeks of preparation and feels that it is more than equal to the quality of the final event.</p>	<p>The story begins with a series of ironies.</p> <p>1) The amount of practice and preparation is compared with how anti-climactic the actual event is.</p> <p>2) Sophia, who is preparing for the event, is “pulling trays from the oven” whilst commenting about her mother’s involvement in a previous parade: “My god, every weekend for months she was in that field waving her yellow scarf.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The imagery is ridiculous. There’s no skill, no practice required to wave a scarf. All one needs to learn is to wave said scarf at the right time. Yet, months and months of weekends were dedicated to those few minutes of scarf waving. • The tone is almost mocking. • Yet, Sophia is pulling out TRAYS of food. She’s made such a big deal. Later, as the story unfolds, we find that it isn’t just trays of food that she’s been preparing. She has prepared all manner of finger foods from three different cookbooks for a party in which guests gather to watch something she mocks. <p>∴ Nicholas sees parallels between the effort put in to prepare for the National Day Parade and the effort that his wife puts in to organise her little party. Just as he finds the actual parade anti-climactic, it foreshadows how anti-climactic the party also promises to be.</p> <p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your thoughts about the National Day celebrations? Do you look forward to them or do you not care? Why?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you and/or your family celebrate National Day? Do the things that you do every National Day have anything to do with the significance behind the celebration or is it just an opportunity to do something else?
<p>At home, the preparations are in full-swing and is such an elaborate affair. Not only is there a lot of food prepared, they are even laid on the bed in the order in which they are to be served. The house is also well decorated.</p> <p>Nicholas reflects on this yearly affair – it is foreign to him. Friendly gatherings in his youth revolved around alcohol in pubs, but Sophia’s parties are always food-focused and at home.</p> <p>His friends aren’t invited because Sophia thinks they are too foreign to mingle with Singaporeans on what is essentially a Singaporean day. Nicholas agrees but considers how narrow-minded that perspective is.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We learn that Nicholas is a foreigner, because of how different his student years are from Sophia’s, and the fact that his friends are all foreigners. • The list of <i>ironies</i> and <i>hypocrisies</i> continue. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Singapore is supposed to be multi-everything; multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious. We are a cosmopolitan city and have to be in order to survive and succeed. Yet, on a very Singaporean day, Sophia rejects Nicholas’ friends because they are foreign. ○ “What do you expect, they have nothing in common.” ← She makes no room for assimilation. Gives the impression that for all that we need foreigners, we will always treat them as outsiders. ○ She also makes many critical comments about the National Day parade, yet she invests so much time and effort into it. ○ “She claimed it was all ironic...” ← that’s a convenient excuse but it doesn’t mean anything. ○ “...he found himself wondering whether Singapore’s famous monolithic education system hadn’t left its mark on her after all.” ← His perceptions as a foreigner on the education system in Singapore and its impact on Singaporeans.

<p>What Nicholas doesn't understand is the effort put into the party, especially as Sophia has so many critical opinions about National Day itself.</p>	<p>Reflect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why does Nicholas think Sophia's perspective is narrow-minded? • Why is it hypocritical to reject foreigners on National Day? • What do foreigners think about Singapore's education system and its impact on Singaporeans? • "...he found himself wondering whether Singapore's famous monolithic education system hadn't left its mark on her after all." How does this explain Sophia's actions?
<p>The television is switched on. The parade has not yet begun, but they want to watch the pre-show coverage.</p> <p>The programme is about the effort and preparations that went into organising the parade.</p> <p>As they watch, the girls talk about their college days. Nicholas imagines and fantasizes about college-age Sophia.</p>	<p>Reflect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose behind the pre-show coverage anyway? Who actually cares? • Why would we want to watch a show dedicated to documenting how patriotic people are? • Yet, Sophia and Huixin does. Why do you think this is the case?
<p>On the television, they show the enthusiasm of some of the performers as well as all the other departments involved and how devoted they were. Later, the ministers arrive at the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It seems strange and fake to Nicholas that a show slot would be dedicated to talking about how patriotic and loyal some people are. It comes across as pretence to him.

<p>stadium.</p> <p>Nicholas finds all this strange and artificial. He does not understand why people would attend such an event, much less bid for tickets and pay hundreds of dollars for them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is especially as the ministers' clothing is criticised by Sophia as being "tragic-casual". That doesn't feel very patriotic, but it must be – after all, she's putting in so much effort to celebrate this day. • HuiXin's cheering and waving of her flag → why might this be viewed as odd? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We cheer for celebrities, royalty, presidents. Is it normal to cheer ministers as well? <p><u>Reflect:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to imagine the last National Day parade from the perspective of a foreigner. Is it weird? Why? • How do other countries celebrate their version of National Day? In what ways are they different from our methods?
<p>The Red Lions begin their annual performance. This is when the guests arrive. It annoys Sophia, who wants to watch the Red Lions. Huixin points out that there's nothing to be excited about because it is the same performance every year.</p> <p>Sophia retorts that something might go wrong and that would be interesting to watch. Huixin retorts that nothing ever goes wrong. It'll always be perfect.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For someone who has so many criticisms about the National Day parade, it is ironic that Sophia should get so upset about potentially missing the Red Lion's performance, especially as it is the same performance every year. • Sophia's justification to her response is that she doesn't want to miss anything potentially going wrong. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ That's not a very patriotic thought – I'm watching it to see if someone messes up or gets hurt. ○ If we assume that Sophia actually does like the performance for whatever reason, it suggests that she is embarrassed by this.

- Which leads us to question – why would she choose to portray sadism and a lack of empathy to cover up for this embarrassment? How is this better?
- We can't help but perceive both Sophia's and Huixin's behaviour as being very strange.
 - They don't care for the National Day Parade yet spend so much effort preparing for a party that entails watching the parade.
 - They have so many criticisms about it yet cheer for the ministers and get upset about missing their favourite bits.
 - They clearly enjoy it yet try to hide this preference by pretending to be awful people.
 - Huixin even became defensive about how perfect the parade will always be and thinks highly of the Prime Minister's ugly clothing, comparing it to Michelle Obama's wardrobe.

Reflect:

- What is your favourite part of the National Day Parade? Why?
- It is true that the military section of the parade programme is executed in the same way every year, with different people. Why do we watch it then?
- What is something that you dislike about yourself that is very Singaporean? Why? How do you justify it?
- It is hypocritical that Huixin should mock Sophia's annoyance. Why?
- If Huixin and Sophia are representative of the Singaporean population, what do their behaviours tell you about Singaporeans?

The guests arrive. Sophia is upset that Nicholas is not familiar with one of them.

The guests seat whilst Huixin and Sophia goes back to preparing the finger foods. Nicholas comments that Sophia runs these parties with military precision.

- We keep seeing these **parallels** between the National Day Parade and Sophia's Party. Both are run with military precision, proper scheduling and planning. They are both very over-the-top. Both feel somewhat artificial or full of pretence.
 - This might explain why Sophia was upset that her guests do not all know each other – she probably had this mental image of how things are supposed to be when they meet, without even the smallest modicum of awkwardness.
 - That it isn't happening the way she planned might be perceived as a sort of failure.
- Sophia's response to an offer for help is "It's under control." This comes across as being a bit much. It's a party; what is there to "control"? This **choice of word** is a bit odd.
 - Normal response would be "Oh, don't worry. Have a seat and enjoy the parade. We'll be done in a moment!" or "We're almost ready!"
 - Also, they are making finger foods, but from three different cookbooks, two of which are foreign (which just emphasises the hypocrisy in her "nothing in common" comment). So, why is "control" necessary?
 - **Characterisation:** It gives us the impression that Sophia is someone who likes to control how people perceive her and her life. We see more of this later on.

Reflect:

- How do Singaporeans deal with failure, real or perceived?
- Would you say that Singapore, as a country, is quite over-the-top?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If Sophia's Party is representative of the National Day Parade, which entity is Sophia representative of? And what does that tell you about said entity?
<p>Nicholas and the guests watch the parade in relative silence. Nicholas dislikes this section of the parade because he perceives it as a form of propaganda. His European background and its pacifist culture also dislikes it, but he feels the perceived propaganda successfully working on him.</p> <p>He reflects on his disgust and realises that part of it has to do with his ill health and the failure that it seems to represent.</p> <p>The President inspects the parade and in response, the gunboats and rifles are fired. The audience responds with cheers but this makes Nicholas uncomfortable. He wonders how people can respond to gunfire so positively and without fear.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking at Diction / Choice of Words, we understand that Nicholas, who represents the rest of the world, does not think highly of the military portion of the National Day Parade. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “propaganda” and “show of force” tells us that he thinks the military portion is performed for the purpose of assuring Singaporeans whilst intimidating other countries and potential enemies. ○ By showing off how strong we are, we keep Singaporeans proud and loyal. At the same time, others will have to think twice or thrice before attacking Singapore. • His Feelings of discomfort are magnified when the audience at the parade cheered in response to the gunfire. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He doesn't understand the response – it is not normal to cheer over gunfire. Rather, we are suppose to feel fear, to want to run. Those are normal responses to the sound of a gun being fired. ○ Once again, as with the pre-show parade and everything else – nothing in Singapore feels real or normal. Everything comes across as being unnatural, artificial, or even detached from reality. • More irony when national anthem is sung and national pledge is said – nobody stood up with respect. If this is meant to be a show of patriotism, and if this event is so important to Sophia and the rest, why did they not do so?

	<p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do we not respond to danger in the normal way? • Do you agree with Nicholas' opinions?
<p>The military segment has ended, and another guest arrives. He is unpleasant, complains excessively and is disrespectful. Sophia invites him only because he is lonely and pitiful.</p> <p>The dance/song segment begins and the foodstuffs are served. The scale is impressive and the Singaporeans watching seem moved by the spectacle, including Sophia. To Nicholas, it just comes across as more propaganda to convert the masses.</p> <p>Once again, Huixin and Sophia talk about the event as if they were well aware and immune to its intentions. Nicholas joins in, but it is unappreciated by Calvin who makes a rude remark. However, instead of admonishing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characterisation: The new guest, Calvin, is moody, entitled, unpleasant and rude. He is also xenophobic. • Nicholas continues his critical narrative analysing how forced the entire thing seems. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To ensure that every race is satisfied, they are all properly represented, except for the other races that do not fall under the Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian categories. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This highlights how unrealistic this forced representation is, and how it is impossible to represent everyone. Yet, it is still done in this unnatural way as if to appease all who might be offended. • Whatever the intentions are of this segment, it clearly works in changing the mood. Even Nicholas finds himself drawn to it, despite his opinions that it is nothing but propaganda and conversion. • Ironically, he isn't the only one to think of it in that way. Huixin and Sophia pipe in all-knowingly, once again, about how it's nothing but advertising. Yet, when Nicholas agrees and jokes along with them, he is told to leave the country – a very xenophobic response, and everyone else apologise on Nicholas' behalf. This is hypocritical.

<p>Calvin, everyone makes apologies on Nicholas' behalf instead.</p> <p>Nicholas reflects on whether he'd ever be a part of this country.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a consistency in the discrimination – when Sophia believes that Nicholas' friends could never assimilate with Singaporeans, and when Nicholas is made the outsider in his own home. <p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you, intentionally or unintentionally, marginalise/discriminate foreigners just because they are different? That includes making assumptions about them or telling them that they should go away. • Why do you think we celebrate National Day in the way that we do?
<p>The parade continues, retelling the same old story based on all the things that makes Singapore special: our difficult history, our fight for independence, our multi-everything culture living together in peace and harmony.</p> <p>Sophia subtly reminds Nicholas to take his medications, a reminder that he is a failure.</p> <p>As the performance continues, Nicholas thinks about all the other families gathered in their living rooms and watching this, absorbing the messages. It surprises him that even those who have been educated abroad</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the story plays out, the Singaporeans continuously criticise the parade, pretending to be too smart to be lulled by its intended effects, yet lulled they are. • This surprises Nicholas. He understands that if one has grown up in Singapore without having experienced life overseas, then the pull is inevitable. However, these guests and his wife have studied and lived overseas but are just as susceptible to the effects of the parade as anyone else. <p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think you're susceptible to the messaging in National Day Parades, like Nicholas thinks Singaporeans are?

<p>are still easily swayed by the intentions behind the parade.</p>	
<p>An awkward interlude from the ever-inappropriate Calvin, who attempts to flirt with Huixin. However, he is drunk and does not realise that his attempts at subtlety were anything but discreet.</p> <p>The ladies excuse themselves, and Brian tries to comfort Calvin, who is now depressed about being unable to attract women because he is a nice guy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calvin is oblivious to how repulsive he is. He arrives at a party complaining. When others try to empathise with him, he retorts insisting that their problems are miniscule compared to his. He is xenophobic to the host – hypocritically so, since he was just complaining about the government making civil servants work on a public holiday (he chose a career as a civil servant; what did he expect to do on the country’s day??) – and does not accept the host making the same jokes as the other Singaporeans. He gets drunk and tries to flirt inappropriately – only because he’s drunk – and then blames his failures on women. • Yet, he does not see how any of that makes him unattractive. <p><u>Reflect:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If Calvin represents Singaporeans, what does that say about Singaporeans? • Would you say that, sometimes, you are like Calvin? If yes, how does that make you feel?
<p>The awkwardness is dispelled by the fireworks. They all rush out, cheering and enjoying the spectacle, all faults forgotten. Sophia hugs Nicholas.</p> <p>They return to the living room, and the dessert cart is wheeled out. They feast,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like a welcomed distraction for little kids, the fireworks has everyone forgetting the awkwardness created by Calvin. • It is such an effective distraction that Sophia “unexpectedly hugs Nicholas”. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The choice of word describing the hugs, and possibly even other expressions of affection, tells us that this is a rare occasion. A bit strange for a couple that has only been married for 3 years.

<p>watch the end of the parade, and by the end of the night, everyone is exhausted. Sophia brings out her new coffee machine.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As with everything else that evening, the Nespresso machine achieves an artificial effect instead of a real one. Nevertheless, as the rest of the Singaporeans were with the parade, Sophia is proud of her pointless machine. <p><u>Reflect:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the unexpectedness of Sophia’s hug make Nicholas’ concerns about his failures and weaknesses less of an exaggeration after all? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If Sophia represents Singaporeans, what does that say about Singaporeans?
<p>The conversation shifts to love stories, specifically, how romantic Nicholas’ and Sophia’s was. Except, the way they tell it is fabricated and a lot less romantic.</p> <p>Nicholas remembers the moment when he arrived in Singapore with his luggage, wondering if he might have made a mistake.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The list of artificial things or things put up for show continues, seeping even into their personal lives. • Yet, despite knowing that the story being told is fabricated, Nicholas finds his attitudes and mentalities shifting, becoming more grateful and proud of what he has. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Just a few pages ago, within the same few hours, he was complaining and critical. • When he arrived in Singapore, he was uncertain. Yet, Sophia’s welcoming arms is what made him certain. <p><u>Reflect:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose behind National Day? Especially, the way the National Day Parades are organised.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why do we lie to ourselves, telling ourselves stories that we then hold onto and believe in when we know they aren't true?• Nicholas is clearly unhappy. With his body, with the way Sophia treats him, with the fact that he'll never be completely accepted in Singapore, with how artificial things are in Singapore. Yet... all it takes is for a false retelling of his love life and he is grateful and satisfied again. Why doesn't he tell himself a new thing – a true thing, and then respond based on that? |
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