

On Which I Tread

‘Tanggal 31, bulan 8, 57. Merdeka, Merdeka’ At the school compound, we gather, all holding the mini national flags which were distributed to us by our class teacher. As we sing this song while waving the flag, I thought:

“How boring.”

I was never much of a patriotic kid. I never understood what the fuss was Independence Day about – why do we do this every year? All we do is hold flags, pretend to wave it enthusiastically, and sing lyrics we memorized, never caring about what it really meant. I know my friends feel the same way. My Malay classmates would be at the back of the compound, stacking the mini flags on top of each other to see how long they could make it before it inevitably snaps and collapses. My Indian best friend would still be talking about the football match between Real Madrid versus Barcelona from last month while waving his flag. As for me, I could not wait for school to be over.

I walked home that day as usual. Hailing from SMK Methodist ACS Ipoh, the path I took home was never short of historical and cultural monuments and buildings. There was the Ipoh Town Hall, a majestic, white colonial building; the Old Town buildings that looked in desperate need of maintenance, but still somehow managed to stand strong as relics of the past; the Ipoh Railway Station, dubbed “Taj Mahal of Ipoh” for its resemblance to the original. But what caught my eye that day were none of those. It was an old man in a wheelchair.

The Ipoh War Memorial was in front of Ipoh Railway Station, which was on my way back home, and there the old man was, staring at it. I walked beside the man, and upon closer inspection, saw that he had no legs. Curiosity got the best of me, so I asked him what he was doing.

“Just honoring some of my old friends.” He said, while trying his best to trace his worn fingers down the engraved words on the plaque. “I ate with them, fought with them, shared a prison with them – and here I am now, still alive and barely kicking, while all they had to their name was a memorial. At least I get to witness how the country is like today in their place.”

There were no names engraved on the plaque for the fallen, only a collective mention for all that died during the war, the Death Railway, the Malayan Emergency, the Indonesian Confrontation, and the Re-insurgency Period. I did not know any of them, but there was something in the tone of the old man. It told me untold stories of the people that gave their unlive lives for the reality I live in today, the education, the food, the shelter and security that I now realise I took for granted.

I said my goodbyes to the old man and walked on ahead, with a renewed love for the land on which I tread, and a newfound gratitude for the people who I will never get to know.