

ALVIN AND ME

BY CHRIS TSE

A week before Alvin arrived, I got summoned to the principal's office. I was a good kid. I never got into trouble. I was sure I'd done nothing wrong. But still, I couldn't help worrying ...

Mr Tyson explained that there was a new boy starting. He needed a friend – someone to show him round, to help settle him in.

“You speak Cantonese, don't you, Chris?” Mr Tyson asked.

I did, but only at home. Never at school. Speaking another language only drew attention. I didn't want that.

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New students weren't uncommon at my school, but they came from other parts of New Zealand – never Hong Kong. My entire class was buzzing, but on the morning Alvin was introduced, he didn't say a word. He played with his shirt cuff and stared at his shoes, avoiding eye contact. He looked like he might burst into tears at any second.

Mrs Harrison showed Alvin to the empty desk next to me. She explained to the class that I was going to be his buddy but we were all to make him welcome. Alvin looked relieved to see a Chinese face. I told him my name and said that I could speak Cantonese – if I had to.

“Thank you,” Alvin said. He spoke so quietly that, at first, I wasn't sure he'd said anything at all.

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My parents owned a Chinese takeaway and grocery shop. When we had shared lunches at school, my mum would deliver crispy prawn crackers and golden wontons, sticky with sweet-and-sour sauce. They were devoured. When I was old enough, I worked at the shop after school and on weekends, doing my homework in between serving customers and bagging rice.

As I grew older, I was given more responsibilities: the banking, opening and closing the shop, taking orders. I had a very different childhood from all the other kids I knew. I wished I could hang out more, like my friends, but working in the shop was a way to help my parents. Like I said, I was a good kid.

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I wasn't much help to Alvin. He barely spoke a word that first week, although he seemed to be coping OK. Occasionally, Mrs Harrison came over to check. She commended me for being a good buddy. Obviously the fact Alvin wasn't in tears or hadn't run away was seen as success.

Alvin did ask some questions. He especially wanted to know about my family. He struggled to understand when I spoke in English, which meant I reluctantly had to switch to Cantonese.

"What do you two talk about?" Tom asked one lunchtime.

"Nothing," I said, shrugging off his question. "Schoolwork."

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Alvin sat on our bench by the jungle gym every lunchtime. He was so quiet we sometimes forgot he was there, but he always listened and watched intently. He was like a person studying for an exam. Sometimes Alvin laughed when we laughed. One day, he finally said something. We were talking about our favourite cartoon, the *Transformers*. In the middle of a debate about the coolest robot, Alvin spoke.

"What's 'cool'?" he asked.

"Cool means cool," said Johnny helpfully.

"It means something is really, *really* good. It's cool," offered Tom.

Alvin thought about this, but he remained uncertain.

"Cool," he kept repeating. "The transformer robot is cold?"



I tried to explain in Cantonese, but I found myself becoming as confused as Alvin. I could tell that it amused the others to hear me speaking another language, and embarrassment washed over me. I told Alvin that if he didn't understand by now, he never would. He lowered his face and returned to his quiet self. I felt awful. I was meant to be his buddy. I worried that one of the boys would tell Mrs Harrison I'd been unkind to Alvin – or, worse, they'd tell Mr Tyson.

Later that day, after the final bell had gone, Alvin asked me if it felt strange to be different. The question surprised me. I told him that I wasn't different. I'd known most of these kids since my first day of school. Sometimes I got teased, but I tried not to let it bother me. The fact that I looked Chinese made me an easy target, but it was no different from teasing Tom about his curls or Johnny for being short.

Alvin studied my face. His sad brown eyes said that something was bothering him.

"I look different, like you, but I *feel* different, too."

I didn't know what to say.

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I thought about our conversation for days. I especially thought about it when my parents spoke to me in Cantonese. How *were* Alvin and I different: from everyone else ... but also from each other? Looking at the two of us, how would a person know which boy was from New Zealand and which boy was from Hong Kong? We were both Chinese on the outside – but I'd been born in Lower Hutt, the same as my mum. Her father had moved to New Zealand as a young boy from Canton. I grew up spending a lot of time with my mum's parents – they looked after me while my parents worked. My dad's family also came from China. When my brother was born, my other grandmother moved to New Zealand to help out, too. So yes, I looked Chinese – like Alvin – but I hardly ever *felt* Chinese. Actually, I didn't know how I felt. Different from other kids, sometimes ... but mostly the same.

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Alvin's first days became weeks, then months. Soon enough, it felt as though he'd always been at our school. His English improved. He began to open up and talk about his old life. He would point to the sky, saying that some of the buildings in Hong Kong were so tall you couldn't see the top. None of us had seen a city like that. We loved hearing those stories.

Alvin eventually drifted into his own circle of friends. After that, the only time I really spoke to him was on a Saturday. His parents sometimes came to our shop to buy sheets of dried bean curd and shrimp paste. Alvin would come, too, and we'd sit behind the counter, talking. To be precise, Alvin did most of the talking. He seemed so relaxed now – nothing like the timid boy I'd first met. He even teased me about my Cantonese. According to Alvin, it wasn't that good, but he'd never liked to say.

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It's been years since I've seen Alvin. Sometimes, when I hear the word "cool", I think about him. Looking back, I see that even though I was meant to help Alvin, he actually helped me. He made me realise that I wasn't the same as everyone else. More than that, I finally understood that there's no such thing as "the same". We all have different stories.

It's because of Alvin that I began to learn about my family history. I found out why my grandfather started a new life in New Zealand. I also researched where my ancestors came from – where I came from. Alvin helped me to become the person I hadn't known how to be. Now, I'm no longer afraid to speak Cantonese in public. I can probably thank Alvin for that too. He was right. I need the practice!



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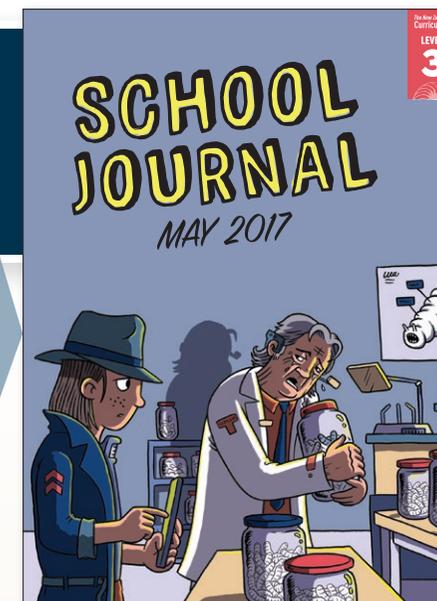
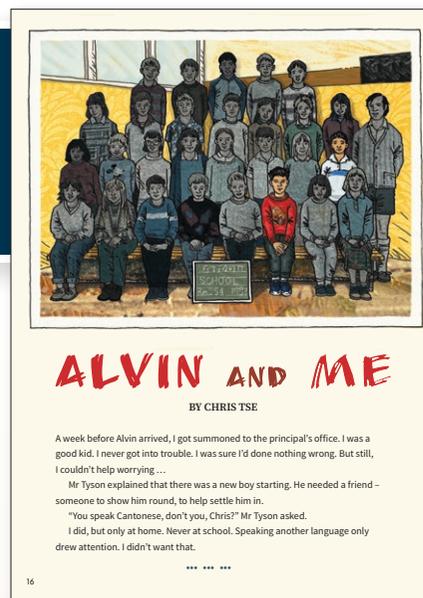
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