"Finally, a prominent media insider lifts the lid
on the day-to-day existential struggle in the newsroom
to maintain some semblance of journalistic independence.
PN Balji, who edited three Singapore dailies,
reveals what it was like to teeter on the tightrope."

Sonny Yap
former *Straits Times* journalist and co-author of
Men in White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party

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These are the unpublished stories about the stories that you may have read in Singapore newspapers over the years. Above all, they are Singapore media stories as experienced first-hand by a veteran journalist who had to be persuaded to become editor of a leading newspaper.

PN Balji was an active participant in mainstream journalism, having spent nearly 40 years working in five newsrooms. He was part of a hardy generation of newspaper editors who wrestled with editorial issues and made tough decisions, sometimes against the will of authority. He also had a ringside view of his colleagues' tussles and confrontations with the government.

In this book, Balji weaves a compelling narrative, with anecdotes, of an alternative story of how some editors of his generation managed to hold the ground in challenging times. He brings back the drama, mostly played behind the scenes, and attempts to answer the question: What made the editors of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s act the way they did? It was a life lived dangerously; some lost their jobs, some had to leave the country, and some decided to give in and lived to fight another day.

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PN BALJI

RELUCTANT EDITOR

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THE SINGAPORE MEDIA AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF A VETERAN NEWSPAPER JOURNALIST

PN BALJI

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Reluctant Editor is NOT a memoir and doesn't pretend to be one. It takes the reader through the five newspapers where I worked and highlights the challenges and successes I experienced, especially in the last two. I started my career at the *Malay Mail* in 1970 and progressed through *New Nation*, *The Straits Times*, *The New Paper* and *TODAY*.

The New Paper became my university of life, forcing my introverted self to break out of the cocoon to take risks that have the ability, even years later, to make me shudder each time I think about them. *TODAY* was an insurgent that dared to steal a crumb of *The Straits Times*' lunch. It compelled me to roll up my sleeves and, audaciously perhaps, take on the might of the print giant. Both papers broke new ground in Singapore media history: *The New Paper* as the only afternoon newspaper ever to top 50,000 in daily sales; and *TODAY* for unlocking *The Straits Times*' stranglehold on the morning newspaper market.

The other theme that runs through the book is how a group of editors, suckered by the rambunctious Fleet Street culture of England's newspapers, stood their ground when their principles would not let them give in to everything that Lee Kuan Yew wanted. One should not forget that Singapore's founding prime minister was at his rogue best at that time. How and why did they do things differently? I try to answer that question in the final chapter, "Last of the Mohicans".

There are NO photographs in this book. Sourcing for them would be a difficult task, as I realised when sounding out my former colleagues. Hardly anyone kept relevant photographs. I decided not to approach Singapore Press Holdings and Mediacorp as I felt there might be more to-ing and fro-ing than I cared for, and the cost would likely be prohibitive. Deep into my retirement, this was the last thing I wanted.

Reluctant Editor is NOT a comprehensive study of the Singapore media. This is a story, some aspects of which I was involved in. And in others I was a front-row witness.

I have organised *Reluctant Editor* thematically, NOT chronologically. This is deliberate as I felt that most readers will not have the time to plough through the important highs and lows and fit them into the two themes mentioned earlier. I sought to keep each chapter to about 4,000 words. Sometimes I got carried away and a few chapters busted the word count. My favourite chapters are "Toh Chin Chye Affair" and "Last of the Mohicans".

The saddest point in my career was to see a crisis envelope *The New Paper* newsroom, leading to a great reporter being told to leave and two smart editors being demoted. It was the most horrible sin to happen in a newspaper. It took us a while

to recover and get back on our feet. Years later, as I recollect the sad episode, I do it with some pride. The reporter has gone on to become a significant member in the commodities industry while the two editors have shown great resilience to move on to important jobs in Singapore Press Holdings. This episode is related in Chapter 5.

I write about the three print giants of modern Singapore in the final chapter, "Last of the Mohicans": Peter Lim, Cheong Yip Seng and Leslie Fong. Watching how they operated was like sitting through tutorials on a running story on Singapore journalism. I pay my deep respect to them. To Peter, I say "thank you" for showing me how to be a good human being and how to withstand the pressures of government; to Cheong, for displaying how a story can be acutely angled; and to Leslie, for displaying a grit to stay the course in the fight to achieve meaningful journalism despite the great obstacles.

The three women in my life, one wife and two daughters, were very patient as I went silent and grumpy while writing the book. They tolerated a lot of my nonsense and their patience and understanding helped me to complete the book.

One of the first pieces of advice came from a former CNN journalist, Marc Lourdes, who said, after reading my draft of the first chapter: "This is not a journalism article; it is a book, it needs bells and whistles." I never looked back after that.

Ken Jalleh Jr pushed me all the way to rethink some of the chapters. In one case, he was so angry after reading a chapter that he let fly: "Why do you need to bring this incident up after so many years?" I rewrote that chapter substantially and, I must admit, it turned out to be a much better and purposeful chapter. Ken will notice the difference in the "Toh Chin Chye Affair" chapter.

Irene Hoe, my editor, made me rethink words and phrases, pressed me to get my dates and events right and, most importantly, did not flinch to tell me to my face if she did not like what she read. Such editors are rare; we must celebrate them.

And, of course, a "thank you" to Professor Tommy Koh for agreeing to write in his simple, yet inimitable, prose the Foreword on what he felt about the book and the profession called journalism.

Finally, my gratitude to a good friend who went out of his way to help in the research, sometimes at very short notice. There are many more to thank. I appreciate all the words of encouragement, advice and criticisms of the draft chapters. *Reluctant Editor* is richer because of you.

CHAPTER 1

My Father's Son

The chapter I didn't want to write

My father, Poravankara Narayanan Nair, was a poet, actor and trade unionist all in one. Our home at Block 9 Room 8, Delhi Road, in the former British Naval Base, doubled as a meeting place and watering hole for my father and his friends to get together to read poetry, discuss the next play to be staged and talk about workers' rights. The discussions were robust, with points and counter-points being argued but seldom reaching a consensus. Still, there was hardly any rancour or bitterness as my father's friends stumbled home. I was a teenager then, barely able to make sense of what prompted these men to debate so animatedly and sometimes wondering if they were just men who were wasting their time drinking and talking about inconsequential things.

Some 60 years later, as I reflect on those days, reality strikes: oh my goodness, how could I have failed to realise that my father's passion for writing, socialism, drama, righteousness, rights of the underdog and his ability to keep going day in day out had rubbed off on me? How I wish that he were alive today! I would have a whisky with him and tell him: "Acha, you made me the man I am today. Thank you very much."

As I was planning the contents of this book, I was adamant

that I would not write about my childhood days. Who would care about my growing-up days in the former British Naval Base in Sembawang? Where would people have the time to read about my poverty-stricken early life as my mother struggled daily to put food on the table? In a world where the reader's attention span is shrinking by the day, such chapters are normally given a miss. I have done that many times. My thinking changed as I began working on this book and asked myself: how did I get into journalism? How did I develop a deep interest in Malayalam movies? Where did I get my values from? How did I develop an interest in people from all walks of life? How did I get to writing commentaries that a former Cabinet minister labelled anti-government? How did the hidden empathy for the underdog come out into the open and consume me? I now have the answer: my father's latent influence has played a major part in all of this even without my realisation.

His convictions were powerful and he did not hesitate to express them. Once, my primary school form teacher, Haridass, added the word Nair to my name in my report card. I was registered in school as PN Balji, without the Nair tag. Being a staunch socialist, my father was dead against descriptions like Nair and Menon, which many Malayalees used to show off their class and creed. My father was so pissed off that he stormed into the teachers' room and told Haridass: "Let this caste system end with me. I don't want my children to carry the Nair tag to show that they are from the upper crust of society." Much later, at my engagement ceremony in Singapore in 1974, my father put his foot down with a classy response when asked what kind of dowry he was expecting from the family of my wife-to-be, Uma. "Is this a fish market?" he asked, mocking the practice that was

prevalent in Indian society. My father-in-law was speechless and no dowry was paid. Struggling to make ends meet, I was upset that my father did not accept the dowry offer. Years later, I was very proud that he did what he did. Now I can say proudly that every dollar and cent that I have has come from my own hard work and from my wife's genius for making good investments.

Somehow, in some way, my father's imprint can be found on many of the decisions I made as editor of *The New Paper*, and then as editor-in-chief of *TODAY* and CEO of Mediacorp Press, which publishes *TODAY*. I didn't realise it at that time; his hidden influence played a part in a high-wire moment when I was the acting editor of the *New Nation* and crossed swords with Lee Kuan Yew over the publication of an article in the paper. Lee Kuan Yew was furious. James Fu, Lee's press secretary, relayed the prime minister's anger to Peter Lim, *The Straits Times* chief editor, in this way: Who is that practising western-style journalism? I was worried that, at best, my progress in the newspaper would be stymied or, at worse, I would lose my job. Nothing happened as Peter managed to pacify Lee. More importantly, I went on to edit *The New Paper* for ten years, and later *TODAY*, for an initial three years and, later on, for another two years. There were many other attempts to walk that tightrope of Singapore journalism, which you can read about in the following pages.

My father's biggest personal disappointment was a month-long strike that he had organised as president of the Naval Base Labour Union. It failed miserably. Years later, when I got my job in the *Malay Mail*, he told me: "Don't ever become a union official." It was advice I have followed religiously. Just as indelible as those words is an image of him that I have carried with me from the early 1980s, when I was about to leave for the US to

have an angioplasty done. As I was leaving his home, he pointed a finger at me and said: "Don't forget you have two young girls and a wife to take care of."

My journalism journey also began with my father, long before I became a reporter at the *Malay Mail* on 1 April 1970. He was an avid reader of *The Straits Times*. My brother and I were also hooked on it and so, first thing every morning, there was a race to get to the paper. My father had to step in to restore the peace – the first to rise will get to read the paper first. As always, he would be the first to get up.

We didn't speak much. He was busy with his work and extra-curricular activities. I was busy studying or poaching fruit from the rambutan trees in the backyard of the black and white houses of the British Navy expats.

One day in 1970, he broke the bad news: he was retiring from his job as a storehouse man. My three sisters were married. I had just finished my Higher School Certificate (today's "A" Levels) and my brother was still in secondary school. I had to go out and work to feed the family. I applied for two jobs advertised in *The Straits Times*, one for a reporter in the *Malay Mail*, the other for a special investigator in the Criminal Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). Both the *Malay Mail* and the CPIB asked me to attend interviews. Wee Kim Wee, then managing editor of The Straits Times Press, in whose stable the *Malay Mail* was parked, headed the interview panel, and the human resource person made me an offer almost immediately. The salary was S$250 with a transport allowance of S$50. The CPIB called me a few days later asking me to join them, but with my dream job in hand, the CPIB was the last thing on my mind. I walked into Times House in Kim Seng Road (where a condominium now stands in place of Times

House) with a swagger in my gait and confidence in my head – only for both the swagger and confidence to be punctured a few days later.

The cause was my news editor, Jackie Sam, who revelled in being a tyrant. He made life hell for me and many others. Jackie brought to life the caricatures of editors made famous by Hollywood: smoking endlessly, trying to look for something on his table hidden by piles of files with paper chucked all over, barking orders to journalists … Jackie epitomised this kind of behaviour. Once, he sent me to interview a Big Walk participant in a kampong in Bukit Timah. I wrote up the interview, he had a quick look at my report and asked me to go back and talk to the subject again. Nothing was said about what was missing in the story or the extra questions I needed to ask. I went back and back and back … 12 times. He must have decided then that the punishment was enough and he finally rewrote the story for publication. No explanations, no suggestions, no empathy. It was a far better story than what I had written. It was crisp, short and flowed smoothly. That whole episode was intended as an exercise in humiliation and it worked. Enough was enough. I threw in my letter of resignation. It landed on the chief reporter's desk because Jackie happened to be off that day and a veteran newsman, PM Raman, was in charge. He called me at home and said: "I am chucking your letter into the bin. Come back to work." Raman was like a father figure in the *Malay Mail* newsroom, offering a shoulder to cry on for those who got a verbal lashing from Jackie or one of his cold, piercing trademark stares. I couldn't go against the advice of the avuncular Raman.

Together with police inspector-turned-reporter Wee Beng Huat, I was made to do a punishing shift from 11pm to 8am,

followed by a week on the 3am to 11am shift. Beng Huat and I would make regular visits to the Singapore General Hospital mortuary, meet officers of the Fire Brigade and talk to his police contacts. It was at around this time that the *Singapore Herald*, anchored by media stalwarts such as Francis Wong and Ambrose Khaw, came on the scene. The *Herald* began putting pressure on *The Straits Times* from the word go. *Herald* exclusives and stories that angered the government made many sit up. I remember a picture that was used across a full page inside the paper with this cheeky headline: "The picture the government doesn't want you to see." Below it was a picture of a military contingent practising its National Day marchpast on a public road. The government had ordered the media not to use the picture as they felt that it would dilute the people's enjoyment of the actual parade.

The *Herald*'s Harold Soh, another police officer turned crime reporter, was getting stories which we could not even smell. Then we found out he was rewarding those who manned the telephone lines of the Fire Brigade, the first people to receive 999 calls. Our relationship with the telephone operators had cooled and the tip-offs dried up. Not wanting the *Herald* team to beat us to the crime stories, we also started rewarding the 999 operators and our relationship returned to "normal", until one day when we were meeting them in a coffee shop in Chinatown, CPIB officers barged in and arrested all of us. We were packed off to the CPIB office in Stamford Road, isolated in separate cold rooms and interrogated for nearly 20 hours. It was a totally numbing experience. On one level, I was thinking of my job, whether I would still be able to continue in journalism. On another level, I was thinking of how I was going to face my parents and society. Beng Huat and I spent a lot of time at MacRitchie Reservoir,

crying on each other's shoulders. A few months later, we both pleaded guilty to corruption and were fined $1,000 each. The telephone operators were all sacked. That incident never left me, piercing at my conscience every time I think about it. We didn't lose our jobs, but the telephone operators did.

This is it, I told myself. I didn't want to do reporting any more. Fortunately, I got moved to the sub-editor's desk. That was where I found my true calling.

CHAPTER 2

Accidental Sub-editor, Reluctant Editor

In a world of tabloids

Most of my 35 years in mainstream journalism was lived in the world of the media underdog. Except for a five-year spell (1982–1988) in *The Straits Times* (ST), I worked for tabloids that had to kick and punch to stay above water. Success was never a sure thing. Every day was a battle of wits, reporting and shaping news stories, knowing full well that the mighty ST almost always commanded first bite, leaving the minnows like us to fight over the crumbs. ST was like a towering banyan tree in whose suffocating shade lesser plants might sometimes steal enough sunlight to survive, but never enough to overshadow the big banyan. The four tabloids I worked for – *Malay Mail*, *New Nation*, *The New Paper* and *TODAY* – had to rely on their reporters' intuitive ability and agility to deliver exclusives, and on their editors' creative presentation of stories to whet readers' appetites to buy the newspapers day after day. The journalists' survival instincts were tested every publishing day.

At *The New Paper*, one of the several consultants who had come from US News & World Report was the avuncular Don Reeder, who worked with reporters to make their stories meaningful and reader friendly. One day, I asked Don what he made of the paper. He said:

> I go back home every evening not knowing what the paper is going to look like. The next morning, I am surprised to see a well-edited, well-designed and lively paper. I don't know how you all pull it off. Obviously, there is a central intelligence running through the newsroom and the paper. Keep doing whatever you are doing.

My turning point in tabloid journalism came in the 1970s, when I was a crime reporter with the *New Nation*. Colleague Wee Beng Huat and I were caught and fined for bribing the Fire Brigade's telephone operators to get tip-offs on crime stories. I have wondered many times how my career would have turned out if not for that episode. The conviction in a court of law was so traumatic that I wanted to quit reporting immediately. When the management agreed to move me to sub-editing, I took to the new role with great enthusiasm and relish. The desk-bound job of sub-editing and laying out pages for the newspaper suited my introverted nature. No longer did I have to station myself at the Singapore General Hospital mortuary every working night to interview grieving relatives and hang around hospitals to see ambulances bringing in blood-stained victims of accidents and murders.

My move to the sub-editor's desk at the *New Nation* coincided with the arrival of a Sri Lankan, Maurice Perera. His professionalism, meticulousness, commitment, perseverance and sheer appetite for hard work struck me immediately. Watching him in action was like looking at an artist adding a stroke here and a shade there. He worked with hardly a complaint. I decided that he was the journalist I wanted to emulate. At our paper, which was targeted to reach the streets by noon, sub-editors generally arrived by 5am and would leave by lunch time. Maurice would

go home only when he was satisfied with the final version of the pages he had laid out. Most days, that meant he would be in the office until 6pm. I was fortunate that he took a liking to me. As my unofficial mentor, he taught me the finer points of sub-editing and page layout. It was his habit to collect some of the most effective layouts he came across in British newspapers. He would meticulously file them under such headings as murder, politics and personality interviews, and refer to them regularly, adapting the ideas in those tear sheets to his own layouts. I followed his lead and kept my own collection on topics of interest for many years.

Khoo Teng Soon was at one time Singapore's best page designer. In the industry, he was better known as TS Khoo, and "The Fastest Pen In The East" for the pace at which he could turn out great pages. He was group editor of The Straits Times Press (1975) Ltd throughout most of the 1970s. One day, I fished out of the newsroom bin his working layouts for the next day's front page of ST. I put them side by side on a table to see how that final Page One had evolved. Like an instruction manual, they provided useful insights into his thinking and the principles he applied. It was like learning at the feet of a silent sage, trying to make sense of the transformation of the front page from its inception, through the preliminary layouts and into the masterful final.

It would be impossible not to mention David Kraal, the editor of *New Nation*. He was the very antithesis of the Brahmin editors of that era, the high priests of the printed page, who lorded it over the newsrooms as if they were God's gift to journalism. That aside, they were true professionals, masters of their trade. Whether laying out pages, writing headlines or turning around

complex stories on difficult issues to make them digestible, they were a joy to observe, study and emulate. David had all those skills. Unlike them, though, he was approachable, always there, constantly listening to his staff and trying to help them professionally and personally. He threw some difficult and exciting pages at me, this accidental sub-editor. I discussed them with Maurice and began to realise that this was what I wanted to do in journalism. Sitting quietly in one corner of the newsroom, stroking my beard, going out for a walk when I needed to clear my mind … this job suited me to a T.

I rose up the editorial ladder and became acting editor in 1981, a year before we had to give up the *New Nation* title and break up our newsroom. The layoffs that followed were especially difficult and bitter because it was not only the group and ST that were very profitable at the time, but even our *New Nation* was just beginning to turn in a small profit.

Fate, this time by the name of Lee Kuan Yew (LKY), intervened in an unthinkable way to turn my life, and those of many, upside down. LKY had initiated the creation of a rival to ST, so as to challenge the paper to up its game and to provide what he saw as the waning Chinese-language newspaper industry with an English-language lifeline to the future. However, the newbie, the *Singapore Monitor*, was taking way too long to get off the starting blocks because of disagreements between its editorial and corporate bosses. LKY stepped in to broker a corporate deal, by getting the *New Nation* to hand over its masthead to the *Monitor* in 1982. All the advertising contracts that the *New Nation* had secured were passed over to the *Monitor*. LKY sweetened the deal by letting *New Nation*'s owner, The Straits Times Press, take a stake in the Chinese-language *Shin Min Daily News*. With

that behind-the-scenes manoeuvre, a new paper to rival ST was born and a sacrificial lamb dispatched. This move by LKY would have been unthinkable anywhere else in the industry but it fitted into his grand scheme to make sure that ST remained relevant and the dominant player in Singapore's media scene. That move became a prelude to the merger of the country's newspapers into Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) in 1984.

To LKY, ST was like a porcelain vase that had to be protected and nurtured at all costs. That was what he famously told SR Nathan, when he asked Nathan, the career public servant, to become executive chairman of SPH. LKY knew the value of ST as his propaganda machine, but he was also sensitive to the paper's need to get Singaporeans to read and support it. He made sure it had no competition, allowing the paper to make lots of money, but he realised that the downside of a lack of competition was a possible slide in standards and a loss of readership, and so the *Monitor* was finally born.

In anticipation of what was to come, ST went into a take-no-prisoners battle mode, signing exclusive arrangements with international media organisations to use their materials, even their comics. The publishing giant's circulation and advertising departments made sure that the *Monitor* would run up against huge and never-ending hurdles. One ST tactic was to send its circulation staff to newsagents and pile copies of ST on top of those of the *Monitor*, tricking would-be buyers into thinking that the tabloid was not available.

The newbie struggled. It lacked an experienced and crafty CEO who understood how the Singapore market worked. It was not long before the red ink began to colour the balance sheets and the new venture began staring into an abyss of deepening

losses and feeble circulation gains. Its financial backer, United Overseas Bank, realising that there was no prospect of a quick turnaround, pulled the plug in 1985, a scant three years after its birth.

Editorially, the *Monitor* had been a breath of fresh air in what some may have considered a staid, even stale, media scene in Singapore. When the *Monitor*'s death was announced, a group of students from the National University of Singapore wanted to gather support for a new newspaper to rival ST. The president of the Students' Political Association, Tan Tnng Nuan, said at that time: "We are concerned about the closure of the *Monitor*. The closure has led to a vacuum, with one newspaper and one opinion."

The demise of the original *New Nation* on 30 June 1982, one year after I became acting editor, was a sad day for the staff. The paper was respected for its reports, analyses and commentaries as they were well received by many readers. Some of its writers became talking points in a Singapore where journalists were unlikely candidates for celebrity status. Ismail Kassim's reports and analyses from Malaysia were closely followed on both sides of the Causeway, with his keen observations of Dr Mahathir Mohamad's controversial decisions communicated by fax machine to readers up north. Education correspondent Teresa Ooi's commentaries and exclusives always got the attention of teachers – and almost as often got on the nerves of the Education Ministry. Never far from controversy, sports writer Jeffrey Low's Malaysia Cup analyses often became the subject of intense lunch-time debate and Tan Bah Bah's editorials were scrutinised by the government with a fine toothcomb. Said Bah Bah:

> Despite the presence of Big Brother, we at *New Nation* pounded away producing stories that many government agencies didn't like. Press freedom was practised except that none of us was carrying placards.

Working behind the scenes in planning and shaping the reports were stalwarts like Sonny Yap, who went about his work as features editor calmly and methodically, without any high jinks. He spoke of what he got from working in *New Nation*:

> Immeasurable. A grounding in journalism which is unreplicable in today's newsrooms; exposure to the gritty Singapore of the 1970s; lessons from editors and seniors which stay with me to this day. Then there were the myriad training programmes and overseas sabbaticals which made up for my lack of higher education. Not to mention the career breaks and opportunities which enabled me to grow in my job.

A gritty Singapore indeed. Still reeling from a shock exit in 1965 from Malaysia, just two years after a ground-breaking merger, Singapore was struck by a second thunderbolt – the withdrawal of British troops east of Suez in 1971. The economic and political fallout of these events was huge, especially for a newly-independent Singapore. The troops were a £70-million annual burden on the British economy which the then Labour government decided it could no longer bear. To Singapore, the British bases were a boon, contributing 20 per cent to the GDP. The quickie divorce from Malay-dominated Malaysia was the result of an intractable divide over race, and came in the wake of public sparring between leaders north and south of the Causeway. It sparked fears of a revival of the 1964 racial riots. Those events gave LKY the perfect opportunity to use the

Internal Security Act to arrest certain opposition politicians, including union leaders, without trial. With the opposition neutralised, the country embarked on rapid industrialisation, changed labour laws to attract foreign investments and tripled military spending. Nearly everything we see in today's Singapore – whether it is the glittering prosperity of the city state or the paucity of political space – has its roots in how LKY and his lieutenants dealt with that double whammy.

ST was a huge beneficiary of the dazzling economic growth. As the country prospered, so did ST. Strict media licensing laws and the government-enforced closure of its rivals, *Eastern Sun* and the *Singapore Herald*, also helped ST and its parent company to become runaway economic successes. They paid back the favour by supporting the government unabashedly, sometimes even if it meant disregarding the most important stakeholder – the reader. LKY's strategy for ensuring ST's loyalty worked well for both parties from the late 1970s.

Lyn Holloway and Peter Lim used the opportunity to launch the golden era for Singapore journalists. Both the CEO and editor-in-chief came up with plans to upgrade journalists' professional, leadership and intellectual skills. The icing on the cake was the initiative to give senior editors a two-week sabbatical of their choice to anywhere every year. Even their wives' flight tickets were paid for. I asked Peter why the company was so generous. He reasoned: our senior editors work long hours, this was our small way of saying "thank you" to the wives. He was disappointed that he couldn't convince the board to extend it to the husbands of female editors. Peter and Lyn also made it a point to send flowers on the wedding anniversaries of the senior editors and their spouses. Peter intervened personally to get the

company to grant me a housing loan (the company had no such loan scheme). He also got the company to underwrite my travel expenses and medical bills when I had an angioplasty done in San Francisco in 1986, although SPH's executive chairman at the time, SR Nathan, had not been in favour of it since the procedure was already available in Singapore.

The Lyn Holloway-Peter Lim tango effectively skirted the barrier between the corporate and editorial departments and I have not seen that partnership repeated since. Peter knew he had to get the buy-in of the CEO to retain and attract talent, and Lyn had the foresight to realise that editorial excellence would boost readership and advertising revenue. Like all good things, this arrangement didn't last. Soon after, ex-Cabinet minister Lim Kim San replaced SR Nathan as SPH's executive chairman in 1988; he slashed executives' perks, unceremoniously ending the golden era.

Most of the *New Nation*'s staff moved to ST after our newspaper was gifted to the *Singapore Monitor* in 1982. My five years in ST, beginning in 1982, were difficult. I held important roles, including those of night editor and news editor, but found it hard to adjust to a newsroom so radically different from the ones I had known. ST was much more hierarchical and disciplined. I was a fish out of water trying to swim through a labyrinth of rules. ST had little choice but to keep a tight rein on the newsroom, with an ever-watchful and ever-suspicious officialdom scrutinising its reports; one misjudgement might lead to an internal inquiry, a rap on the knuckles and perhaps force the company to move certain journalists to other departments. So when SPH management announced that a new paper would be launched in 1988, I jumped at the chance of a transfer. Editor-in-chief Cheong Yip Seng agreed and I was made deputy to the chief editor, Peter

Lim, who had to resign as editor-in-chief in charge of the English and Malay newspapers under SPH.

The working title was Project 459, supposedly representing the first three digits of telephone numbers in Toa Payoh, a neighbourhood whose metrics matched those of our target audience. To reach these readers, our stories would be short and snappy, and its photographs and illustrations would be in colour – a big deal then as colour tended to be reserved for National Day and other special occasions. Each edition would feature a glossary, giving the meanings of certain words that appeared in the stories. Mock-ups were shown to potential advertisers and readers.

The marketplace buzz and much of the feedback were supportive, but when the first copies of *The New Paper* (TNP) rolled off the presses on 26 July 1988, the reaction was just the opposite. Clearly, Singapore was not ready for a paper that treated news in a catchy and fun way. Giordano showed its displeasure by cancelling its advertising contract and the paper's sales sank below 50,000 copies a day, much below expectations. Peter acted quickly. The paper went downmarket, with sensational Page One headlines. One year after the launch, TNP ran a series of stories on a prostitute in the UK who counted among her clients famous newspaper editors and British MPs. The series became an instant hit and Pamella Bordes – nicknamed Papadum Pam because of her Indian origins – became a talking point because of the treatment of the story, revealing salacious details of her life story. Other stories followed in a similar vein and the paper's circulation began to breach the 50,000 figure. Like an experienced pilot, Peter was readying the paper for take-off after a false start.

However, SPH executive chairman Lim Kim San was not happy. He reckoned that our staff costs were too high because

of the highly-paid western journalists in the TNP newsroom. Peter's own pay and perks were a constant source of irritation for the chairman. He hounded Peter often. In 1990, two years after the launch, Peter decided to leave. He asked me if I would take over as editor, but I was reluctant as I was worried about my health. I had only recently returned to work after an angioplasty procedure in the US and believed that taking on the top job would be too much for my heart. Peter took me to lunch in a small and charming restaurant called Checkers in Orchard Road to persuade me. I left the decision to my wife, Uma, as it would mean I would have even less time to spend at home. She took three days to make up her mind and told me to go ahead and accept the job.

I did, and my ten years as editor of TNP turned out to be the best experience that I had in my career. The paper hit new highs in circulation, helped mainly by breaking news from Operation Desert Shield, the build-up to the first Gulf War which was launched in August 1990, and the outbreak of the war itself in January 1991. The 1990 World Cup in Italy was another rocket booster as most of the football matches during that miracle month in June and July were played early in the morning, Singapore time. TNP became the Singapore newspaper to get the first bite of the news from Italia 90. Readers began to lap up the breaking news, analyses and action graphics, and the paper's sales began to soar, hitting a daily peak of 150,000.

TNP became my university of life, with my personality seeing a transformation. I had always been an impossible introvert, speaking very little and seldom socialising with colleagues. During meetings, I was mostly silent, speaking only when spoken to. My ten-year editorship of TNP changed all that. I forced myself to

go out and mingle with people. I accepted invitations to speak at public functions, and I regularly convened newsroom-wide meetings. Bit by bit, I began to break out of my cocoon. TNP's success made the transformation easier. Editor-in-chief, Cheong Yip Seng, became a catalyst. He believed in TNP, attended nearly every Tuesday meeting with the editors, praised the paper publicly and endorsed it many times. All this gave me the much-needed confidence to break out of my introverted, shy and even reticent personality. Many times, I swung to the other extreme, becoming very talkative (too talkative, says my wife, Uma).

TNP gave me a rich understanding of various aspects of publishing. SPH's chief operating officer, Denis Tay, took a special interest in the paper, chairing a weekly meeting of the heads of the editorial, marketing and circulation departments. Those meetings, where all the departments had to present reports on TNP's progress and follow-up plans, were instructive as they plucked me out of my narrow editorial concerns and made me acknowledge and understand that the success of a newspaper depended on all three departments coming together regularly to share information on what the market wanted. It was from the circulation briefings that I learnt the most. Its staff was out there on the streets, mingling with readers and newspaper vendors informally. They had the pulse of the reader; they knew what readers looked for in an afternoon newspaper, why some editions sold well, why others didn't. Their briefings were more art than science; I learnt not to ask them questions because they saw that as editorial arrogance and shied away from being open and candid. Our relationship grew; they had no inhibitions about telling me whether an edition would sell well just by looking at the headlines and pictures on Page One. They never sugar-

coated their judgements, and most times, they were spot on. The newsroom would fax the Page One layouts to them daily.

Meanwhile, I had to deal with a strongman executive chairman who repeatedly threatened to shut us down if we didn't show him we were committed to reducing the red ink on our balance sheet. To show him that we were on the right track, when journalists resigned, we simply reallocated the work and did not replace them. Soon, Lim Kim San got off our backs and that removed a big obstacle to our take-off.

My TNP life was my most rewarding newspaper experience, not just because it became the only afternoon daily to hit a daily sales figure of more than 100,000 copies a day, but also because of the talented team of editors, sub-editors, reporters, artists and administrative staff I worked with. They thrived in an open newsroom environment that was not straight-jacketed. It spawned a crazy and wild bunch who played and worked hard and helped make TNP a talking point. I must make a special mention of editorial artists such as Cel Gulapa, Lee Hup Kheng and Simon Ang; writers and editors, including T Ramakrishan, R Jegathesan, Ken Jalleh Jr, Ng Whay Hock, Joe Nathan Lourdes, Pradeep Paul, Suresh Nair, Yaw Yan Chong, Pauline Loh, Irene Ng and Rosnah Ahmad; photographers like Philip Lim, Simon Ker and Jonathan Choo, and admin staff, including Zainah Omar and R Nirmala. It was a dream team of world-class professionals – some of them are still making waves in their new roles both inside and outside the newsroom.