

Man's Last Song

To the post-modern savages,
the future is not science fiction,
but a lonely journey of self-discovery
for themselves and mankind.

James Tam

In **MAN'S LAST SONG** the human race faces imminent extinction. The year is 2090. The global population has shrunk to less than half a million; median age about sixty. After forty years of near-universal sterility, humanity is vanishing while the rest of the planet makes a healthy comeback. A few survivors in Hong Kong face the challenge of adjusting to life as *post-modern savages*, rediscovering instincts that have long been suppressed by civilisation. To these post-modern cavemen and cavewomen dwelling in the concrete remains of an empty metropolis, life has become a lonely journey of self-discovery in which they reassess also mankind. Their relationships with nature, each other, and themselves have fundamentally changed. The dilemma, pain and pleasure of love, friendship, compassion, ageing, and loneliness have been heightened by pragmatic dictates. The unknowable – God, *Dao*, death, even reality – has assumed new and shifting dimensions in man's dying world. How did *Homo sapiens* reach this dire situation? Looking back with hindsight borrowed from the future, readers may join characters in this book in finding today's world absurd, even suicidal. Others may hang on tenaciously to one thing that has not changed: hope.

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Proverse Hong Kong

Man's Last Song.

By James Tam.

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ONE

FOG

Dogs can be heard barking in the distance. Song Sung finds that relatively reassuring; some have started to howl, especially on a full-moon night, to declare their return to nature, reversing centuries of fussy breeding. It gives him the creeps nonetheless. Now that there are no more dog biscuits with nutrient labels, they'd eat anything, including people. Preferably people?

Yes, they must find humans tasty, even rotten ones. The feasting faces of the German shepherds remain vivid in his mind after all these years. He can still hear their ravenous sounds; every slurp, snap, yank, squirt, and grunt. The stench had made the air viscous, keeping everything in suspension, trapping the flies in its space. Blood dripped in slow motion from slimy jaws, like molten plastic.

He shudders.

Man's best friend. Sure, when we manufactured dog food. Wolves. That's right. Wolves.

I'll end up wolf breakfast.

He wonders how thoroughly wolves kill before muzzling in. They're supposedly smart hunters, like humans; perhaps just as cruel. He sees himself pinioned by four big dogs. Canine teeth penetrate his flesh like ceramic nails, clamping the bones, pushing deeper into his guts. He writhes weakly, keeping his eyes closed, trying to relax, submitting. Entrails are being ripped out, but there's no pain, just a feeling of becoming lighter, being reduced... to dog food.

Stop it! He curses his silly imagination.

Why not turn back for a warm drink and more sleep then? No. Keep going. No backtracking. Call it pride, stupidity, whatever.

He clutches the walking staff tighter, and treads on.

Dense fog covers everything like a divine correction fluid, attempting to smother the creator's faulty designs.

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Why bother anymore? There's hardly anyone left.

He takes a deep breath; gummy air sinks inside damp lungs. The atmosphere seems anoxic. Can asphyxiation happen gradually, imperceptibly, like boiling frogs? Probably.

The misty world started out enchanting this morning. He even thought it romantic, and gaily pronounced it so. Then it turned insufferable without changing appearance, suddenly. Or is it me again? But at least it looked calm from the house. Suffocating, but calm. Out here, in the middle of the grey viscous air, he's flustered by the roiling turbulence. He opens his eyes wider, as if that would help him see further; but depth has been lost, compressed right against his face.

It's silent, eerily silent. How come? Where are the birds and their clamorous twittering? There should be hundreds of them about the big banyan. This time of the day? He's not sure...

Am I still alive? Do lost souls know they are dead?

Rhea's right; it's dumb to go downhill in this weather. Even dumber to take the footpath rather than the main road. "Dumb it is then," he mutters grumpily. Pushing the whiteness in front, he walks trancelike towards the overgrown Old Peak Path.

* * *

What's another day? It's just a few hours to wait out the fog, Rhea had urged gently. What's the hurry? Is everything OK? Yes, of course. Everything's OK, he assured her. Just can't stand this fog; got to go where there's air.

Where there's air... ? Right now?

Yeah, right now, sorry. I can't breathe. Fogs up here last forever, you know.

Sure. Whatever you say. She returned to the dishes.

She normally leaves the evening dishes for the next morning; cleaning up in candlelight is a pain. Scratching absentmindedly at a speck of food on the porcelain dish, she considered different approaches. A soft purring? Matter-of-fact announcement? A light-hearted "guess-what" surprise? One way or the other, it must come out, soon. He must be told, soon. Why not now? The secret that shouldn't be has been growing inside, like indigestion: burning, gurgling, refusing to go through, too chicken to come out.

Just turn around and say it. Speak! That's all it takes.

That's right; that simple. But she said nothing, and stared at her hands instead. How pampered they once were. How silky and diaphanous their skin used to be. And how impermeable and slack they now looked. The tiny furrows and creases seemed a touch more prominent, a bit more assertive then... the last time she checked? Just a bit, hardly noticeable, but she checked often. Ageing doesn't just happen does it? It creeps, steadily, stealthily, relentlessly, all over you, and stays.

The knuckles... look at them. One molecule at a time, they swell. One of these nights, while sleeping, unsuspecting, the last breaking molecule would be deposited; the final straw. She'll wake up to the arthritic pain of red, swollen knuckles – a trademark of old ladies. Time was undoing her. All quite subtle, but nothing escaped her unforgiving self-scrutiny. These hands, under a thin lace of suds, bluntly reminded her that she was forty-eight. So what, she thought, with a burst of positive energy. I'm still the youngest woman around.

Fine, but old enough to know not to confuse men at the wrong moment. When is the right moment though?

Not today. Not today anyway.

She could hardly believe the hesitation. Why do I need courage, as if guilty of some unforgivable wrongdoing? Oh well, be patient, time's ticking, slowly for once, on my side for once. Before long, I'll be able to sit back and let events take over. In the meantime, I can afford to dither. Can I?

Too late now anyway. Song was antsy, eager to get out, pausing at the door for a recognisable farewell – any sign to demonstrate her wholehearted acceptance of his sudden swing of mood and anxious departure. Rhea swallowed her brooding thoughts, but refused to lessen his unease. Such a petulant man sometimes. She scratched at the dish again. It squeaked; the speck of food had long gone.

Fog had sneaked through every crack and joint of the lavish mansion, creating big wet patches everywhere. Water droplets slithered down the walls as if they were melting. Everything smelled of mildew. A dull silence throbbed in Song's head, pouncing on him from within. Silence is supposed to be relaxing, but... He had to go. Now.

"Sure you don't want to come?"

"No. I've got lots to do here. You go."

"Should I get a few buckets first?" He saw the pails sitting in the living room, ready for their daily trip to the stream.

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"It's OK. I'll do that a bit later, when the fog has cleared."
Just a bit later, it would clear. Not forever my love. Do you hear?

GUJI

Living on the Peak used to mean many things. Whereabouts do you live? "The Peak," ostentatiously understated, nonchalant, would have commanded immediate respect, highlighted your position, and established instant credibility in Hong Kong.

Not anymore.

Now that it's free, only Rhea and a reclusive woman live there, and they don't talk to each other. Song nicknames her Guji – Lonesome. Who isn't though? Tiny Hong Kong has become huge, spreading thinly the few thousand elderly residents left. Stripped of its vanity value, and without transportation and dehumidifiers, nobody wants to live amidst the clouds with rheumatism.

When Rhea moved here two years ago, Guji was just down the road. In the first week, Rhea didn't know she had a neighbour. One morning, sitting by the bay window, daydreaming, watching tree shadows dancing and wrestling on the pavement, she saw Guji appearing around the corner, walking briskly in her direction. Tall and slim, in a flowing purple dress, she looked tenuous. But her strides were springy, loaded with intensity, ready to leap. Wavering in the breeze, she shimmered against the morning sun like a precariously tuned video. Her arms hung purposefully from the sides, as if holding two invisible buckets, careful not to spill their contents.

Is she talking to herself?

What a handsome old lady. So unearthly, so... the word ghostly sprang to mind. At that instance, as if prompted by sixth sense, Guji looked up to meet her straight in the eyes. The hair on Rhea's neck stood up. She sucked in a deep breath; it felt cold. She recovered quickly, waved and smiled.

Guji smiled back.

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No... she did not. The smile was already there, cast in her icy and delicate countenance. She just let it be seen, then walked on, pace slowed down somewhat. Cascading grey hair bounced against the small of her back. A few steps past the house, she paused, held out her hands as if to take stock of the fingers, then disappeared into the shifting light.

She returned late in the afternoon, staring straight ahead this time, arms swinging freely. She had dropped the invisible buckets. The smile was still there, crystalline and brittle. Her steps were lighter, determined. Rhea wanted to go and introduce herself right away. How exciting to have a neighbour. But... she was evidently avoiding looking Rhea's way.

It took a few days for her feet to warm up for a trip down the street. Aren't we all in a strange mood all the time these days, she told herself. Don't take it personally. She brought along half a dozen goodwill eggs.

What should I say? Why has it taken so long?

She didn't need to say anything. The house was empty. Guji had moved, leaving it in good shape: garbage taken out, floor swept, curtains tied into neat bundles, as if expecting a full refund of security deposit.

A week later, Rhea and Song went for a walk after breakfast. They strolled over the ravine to the west end, and there she was, engaged in an animated soliloquy. They gawked silently from a distance. All of a sudden, she froze. She must have sensed them without turning. She stood still with her back against them, waiting.

It was a quiet morning. They could hear sunbeams striking the leaves, making some curl, others uncurl.

They looked at each other. Let's leave, Song signalled with eyes. Shhhh, Rhea rounded her lips, exhaled silently. They turned in slow motion. The ground crackled underfoot.

From then on, partly out of pique and partly out of respect for the uncanny lady's privacy, they stayed clear of her territory marked with a poignant air of loneliness.

PATH

Song looks down as if to give his feet a final inspection before negotiating the banyan roots undulating across the footpath. How quickly the trees have taken over.

The flora and fauna used to know their place: stay out, or perish. Now they spread out with total disregard, chewing up the artificial pavement at an astonishing speed. Like a well-commissioned demolition team, they seem committed to the task. When a pioneer seed or wandering root has subdued a small crack, others take position to expand, propagate, and penetrate, fast.

When Song was a boy, gaggles of tourists crowded this same junction for a better view of one of the most photographed skylines in the world: in fact just huge blocks of concrete and glass stacked near the waterfront, against dusty hills. On a nice day, the city still looks almost the same, but somehow not quite. After staring at it for a few minutes, you can sense the absence of life even from this distance. It's creepy.

Tourism had been booming. There's a market in adventure, the analysts said. To most, it meant taking a plane ride, shopping and dining under foreign shop signs. Nonetheless, there was an urge to spend, and travelling was a convenient means. People used to save for old age, and to secure future generations' right to consume. When old age approached faster than expected as usual, childless couples panicked. They didn't want to die with a positive bank balance. "Your days are numbered," the TV goaded with subliminal messages, many times a day. "Book now; call this toll free number and get a plastic suitcase for free. Book now." So they did. The senescent world was poised for an economic boom grand finale.

Not everyone agreed.

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Those less adventurous and more conscientious were wary of the apocalyptic atmosphere. Look, they said, all the classical symptoms are here: denial, irresponsible spending, depression, improvidence, moral collapse, hysteria, paranoia, and so on. Has it not always been like that? Yeah, but it was now backed by statistics, tracked by indices, revealed by opinion polls, discussed on TV. The future was ending more blatantly than ever.

Others were rapturous. It turned out they had been requesting big time punishments from God, for and on behalf of humanity, for some time now. Finally, thank you Sir.

"Repent now! Drop everything. Join us in repentance. Immerse in pain while you still can feel."

To their indignation, hardly anyone listened. Imminent extinction didn't change people. After a brief stir, the same old pattern resumed. They worked, shopped, ate and played just as before, committing familiar sins. The options were to adapt or deny, or both. Either way, they had to live on. Very few knew how to live on differently. The ruck couldn't get out of the ruts.

* * *

Song's familiar footpath has become wild and assertive over the years, like a freed slave, having discarded its historical function. It is no longer there to serve. Now it is just there, to be, like everything else.

Song and his father used to walk the path nearly every morning. His mother would join half the time. It was his father's favourite strip of land on Earth. He even kept a dossier labelled "The Path", as if there were no others. In it were old photos he had collected, printouts of newspaper clippings, more recent news (such as Government proposing to build a high fence along the whole path to keep pedestrians from rolling off, something that had not happened for nearly two centuries), photos that he occasionally took, with related anecdote and his own comments. "Unlike most places in Hong Kong, it has escaped change for nearly two centuries," he wrote at the back of the front cover. Of course it'd changed in detail, but basically it had been the same since 1860.

It had been first cut by Governor Robinson in 1860, to allow the passage of sedan chairs. He did not seem to have any particular reason to access the peak, other than to spend a gorgeous day outdoors, being carried. His successor MacDonnell built the Mountain Lodge, an atypically overstated name for the first Governor's Summer Residence

at hilltop, in 1867. Other dignitaries swarmed in, to be near him. It became a prime location for those permitted.

To prevent moneyed Chinese doing the same later on, just in case, a Peak Reservation Ordinance was passed to make it unlawful to let such land or building or any part thereof for the purpose of residence by any but non-Chinese... above the 788 feet contour. Song's father kept a copy on file, passed by the Legislative Council and assented to by His Excellency the Officer Administrating the Government, the 29th day of April, 1904.

"Did people talk like that?" Song was at a questioning age.

"No. Nobody ever talked like that. They only wrote like this to let people know it's serious stuff. They still do."

"How high is 788 feet?"

"About 240 metres."

"Why 788 and not 790 or 800?"

"Good question. Don't know. Maybe it was a lucky number."

Above the 788-foot contour was the Hill District, exclusively for the felicitous domicile of the privileged from 1904 until 1930: opium drug lords with titles, bankers, policemen, missionaries, compradors, magistrates. All respectable neighbours; fellow expatriates privileged by law.

"What are expatriates?"

"People who live outside the country where they were born."

"Did they go home later?"

"Many did not. But they remained expatriates anyway. Any more questions?"

"Why didn't all of them go home?"

"How do I know. Too cold and wet back home? Lost their accent? Now, do you want me to show you the rest or not?"

Thanks to Robinson's rudimentary design, the footpath remained off-limit to cars throughout its life. In the nineteenth century, after the Peak District became residential, and until the Peak Tram was built, colonial gentlemen and their behatted ladies were carried up and down in sedan chairs. The dark skinned coolies, two per chair, looked impossibly skinny for such a heavy task.

"They don't look very strong."

"But yes they were. They had no choice."

The summer heat and the creaking of rattan came through the yellowish pictures – eek-aaek eek-aaek. Song imagined fleshy buttocks, slippery from sweat, wallowing to the squeaky cadence.

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Eeek – one step less.

Aaek – another step overcome.

Just one thousand more.... With each conquered step, their passenger must have felt heavier.

HUE! – one of them would bellow, punctuating the hypnotic drudgery, or hawked and spat piercingly, disgusting his starchy client. He would then return to a muted focus on the next step.

"It's hard work. Experienced coolies knew not to think beyond a single step, so as to keep going. Too much expectation could crumble the spirit, bad for survival. You know what I mean? One day, you'll need to be tough like them, to focus on your next step, one at a time." His father used every opportunity to offer him a bit of survival training.

"How do you know what they were thinking?"

"I read novels."

Be like them? Song took another look at the gaunt men in the printout. Big straw hats in hand, they stared back lifelessly. Their indifferent expressions conveyed neither expectation nor curiosity. There might be a trace of contempt for the photographer, who was probably making a lot of fussy demands, muttering incomprehensible complaints about the little Chinamen not knowing how to stay still for his camera. I don't want to be like them, thought young Song, but grunted in agreement, as always, with his father anyway.

At the top, the passenger would alight, temporarily relieving the burden on their shoulders. "But there's no muscle on them." Song's still staring at the gaunt figures. "Oh, you'll be surprised. These guys were strong, made of rice, lots of it, and a few pickles or fermented tofu."

The ladies and gentlemen were dressed as if they were in the Highlands: corset, waistcoat, jacket, tie, the whole lot. They must have sweated profusely in the sweltering heat. The coolies, being at the wrong side of the sedan chair, must have sweated more. Trailing behind them was a complex miasma of multicultural body odour that you could almost see, mixed with eau de cologne.

All that's history. The only thing young Song was supposed to learn from this piece of history was this: focus; keep going.

* * *

Song could jog up and down the short steep path in half an hour. The Friends of the Path – that's what the morning hikers called themselves

– were impressed. They were impressed by everything he did. He was the only youngster, a celebrity and great kid, dotingly adored.

The Friends of the Path were familiar strangers. They met each morning, knew each other's names and a few peculiarities, very little else. Protected by anonymity but emboldened by familiarity, they felt free to be themselves, often different from their daytime personas, with much wider latitude in weirdness.

For example, Wan Lao – Old Mister Wan – an otherwise conventional gentleman in his late seventies, walked backward. He claimed it helped to release stress accumulated over a lifetime, and improve balance. He actually attracted a dozen or so emulators. Walking in reverse became a common sight.

A lady in her fifties, invariably dressed in pink, sang O Sole Mio continuously, repeatedly, like a broken gramophone. "Good morning!" She would smile and wave back, performance uninterrupted. Song eventually learnt the lyrics by heart, and sang along sometimes to tease her. It made her sing louder. One day, she handed him a sheet with the Neapolitan lyrics on it, English translation on the side, all neatly hand written. Song thanked her, surprised. She smiled, singing. That was her only known contact with her morning buddies. Otherwise, she remained anonymous, friendly, and, no doubt, non compos mentis.

Even in this non-judgemental circle, there was gossip about her. The mistress of a government minister, someone said. Nearly seventy, five feet three and a bit in his shoes, a mouthful of crooked yellow teeth as if he was born in an earthquake, with artificially greasy hair. Yuck. But she loved him, deeply too! How do you explain it? She was from a rich home, and once pretty. Really! Must be those pink glasses don't you think? It ended badly anyway, like so and so, you know. Aiya, so cold-hearted, makes me sad just listening. Why? Politicians you know, they're all like that. Oh dear, no wonder she's short-circuited. Shhh. Poor girl. Things like that.

That was as much curiosity as was permitted on the Path.

They were each other's morning sun in an ageing city where everyone was negligibly one in ten million, competing for jobs, money, resources, time, recognition, water, air, space, space for their cars... everything.

O sole mio...

VICTORIA

Since Rhea moved to the Peak, Song's been taking the path regularly again, but he hardly knows it anymore. Everyday it looks different, more alien. His childhood playground has become strange and spookily mutable. He can no longer walk through it with eyes closed like he once could.

It's as if the guardian spirit, banished long ago by humans, has returned from the land of timeless myths. She talks to the trees, roves among the bushes on the back of butterflies. She wakes petrified fairies and little elves from their hideouts, coos them into taking possession of their woods again.

Hey, wake, liberation.
It's been so long, centuries...
Look, the humans are gone.
Yes. All gone.

All but a few, a very few.

Song now feels a trespasser, stared at suspiciously by the trees, bugs, birds, trolls, fairies, ghosts, dogs – damn dogs. Wherever he turns, there's a hush. Everything hushes and stares, making faces at his back.

He stops at the small clearing where the sky usually hangs. This morning, it has fallen, splashing greyness all over. A warm moist breeze rushes past him. He turns to see its faint eddies twirling up the peak. Reinforcement. The air is cool for mid-June, but humidity is high as usual. What about global warming? Didn't they say it'd take centuries to return to normal? This is only 2090. But... what's normal?

Central remains shrouded. Through the dense mist, a ghostly hum rises on the thermal of extinguished prosperity; Victoria drones at him unseen.

* * *

Nobody spoke of it as Victoria.

It was much better known by a less regal name: Central. Perhaps there were enough "Victoria"s in the vicinity. Tai Ping Shan itself, Peaceful Mountain, 552 metres high, was renamed Victoria Peak by the British. So was the adjacent gap, the harbour it drains into, the road that skirts west, the great park on the east side, the prison, barracks, school, pier... Her Majesty's popularity had evidently overwhelmed imagination.

Starting from the Peak, the footpath zigzags through a precious patch of subtropical forest, then straightens out precipitously after the clearing. It then plunges through the Botanical Garden at Mid-Levels – an upper-middle-class residential area in the past – where Song lives. Further downhill are streaks of narrow streets once packed with cars, wet markets, antique shops, and eateries. Lively, Bohemian, chaotic, noisy. The air changed hue below the 788-foot contour. The small streets cascade steeply towards the sea, following gravity, intersecting at obscure angles. City planners drank liberally in the good old days, and were prone to spontaneity.

The gradient falls abruptly before an unnatural expanse of flat land. Welcome to the City of Victoria, aka Central.

For decades in the 1900s, millions of tonnes of construction debris were dumped into the receding Victoria Harbour every year: a "one-stone-two-fish" solution. Garbage disappeared, new land sprung up, making room for new growth. With growth came new garbage, and the promise of more prime land. The coastline rolled on out. The majestic harbour shrank, becoming modest. One Victoria flourished; the other dwindled.

Song had lived just ten minutes above Central all his life, but had never quite known the area. He was too young to be part of its story. Some said it was there that East met West. "I'd say it's just another district," his father said. "Banks, bars, restaurants, shops; like everywhere else in Hong Kong. Air's bad."

His friend John Johnson worked there for years, and still misses it. "Central was unique, dynamic, different even from itself everyday. It was the last refuge of Capitalism," he had told Song. "The enterprising

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spirit failed elsewhere because of political contamination, but survived here. That's why Hong Kong had oomph, and most of it in Central. OK, the air was not as good as the Rockies, but electric, and moved with a sense of purpose, let me tell you."

Just walking through Central used to invigorate me, John Johnson had said. The tide of humanity made me feel part of a grand scheme. I know some – he raised his eyebrow; Song understood he meant Ma – would say, *Money money money; all about money, because of money. It stank*. He couldn't be more wrong, I tell you, full of shit. Wealth was just a thermometer testifying to a system's health. Central was healthy. Liberty had been upheld, gently guarded by reasonable discipline; not castrating intervention; not self-righteous and mindless constraints which choked the life out of my old country. Just sensible discipline that promoted orderly liberty and human ingenuity. Song thought John was going to stand up in reverence.

Song expected his Tai-chi guru to give a drastically different picture, and he did.

Garbage, Ma said. Pure garbage. Through and through, left, right and centre, on top and underneath. Underneath? Yes. Do you know what passed under that artificial landmass of junk? he asked. Shit, raw shit. He answered his own question. Excessive shit from people who over-ate but didn't want to wipe themselves even though they had the money, lots of it. To them, money was to be made, not spent on toilet water. They built giant pipes instead: took it out to sea for marine treatment. Fancy that term, *Marine treatment!* So assuring, almost organic. The smart ass must have giggled when he came up with the term. Nature swallowed anyway, gagged. A sanitary headache was resolved through this fish-eat-poo-man-eat-fish symbiosis. I suppose this is the kind of much-ado-about-nothing that John admires?

Yet what was happening above ground stank more, Ma said gravely, as if confiding a terrifying secret to Song. On top of consolidated waste, bankers crafted and traded investment instruments and derivatives, and derivatives of derivatives, making simple transactions impossibly complex for the general fool. All it took was simple arithmetic; easy. And greed; plenty of it. And lawyers; also plenty of them.

"Now," Ma asked his young friend. "Would you question the judgement of someone who wears a tie and jacket in this heat?"

"You probably would," Ma answered himself again. But people back then didn't. Ties were a sign of trustworthiness, steady like

anchor lines; don't ask me why. People trusted bankers, but bankers didn't trust them. Just in case, lawyers would make sure the derivatives and derivatives thereof could stand forthright and unassailable in front of the law. Firewalls were erected between bankers and losses. The two didn't mix. Investors took risks; bankers took returns, all legal of course. Hong Kong had inherited an unquestioning faith in the rule of law, administered by people who wore wigs, dressed like Mozart, spoke like Shakespeare.

And look who made the laws? Ma gestured expansively to Song who had no idea who made the laws. A bunch of boisterous opportunists in their air-conditioned Legislative Council, also founded on garbage. Have you noticed the titaness Themis anchored to the roof, bolted through her feet? A rather ridiculous thing isn't she? blindfolded while her job was to see things clearly. Most pedestrians at street level used a handkerchief to cover the nose instead, not eyes, to filter out traffic fumes. And don't you think coercing with a sword unseeingly is a bit ironic, if not outright dangerous? And the empty balance... that vacant gesture of justice. *Huh.*

In Ma's opinion, John loves his role in Capitalism à la Hong Kong because he was a lackey of the princes of economic freedom, on lavish expatriate terms. "I fail to see how being a capitalistic minion could have been fulfilling," he explained. "I knew the account clerks who crouched over transaction receipts all day, polyester neckties dangling forlorn over balance-sheets, searching for the missing penny. I had worked with sweaty techies who slaved overtime to maintain air-cons, so trustworthy folks could keep their jackets on."

Lunch hours in Central were particularly distasteful, Ma continued. I couldn't help but see the entire process. I was a professional you see. *Dong!* Lunch hour. Hungry people poured from office buildings, instantly sweating upon exposure to ambient temperature, spectacles fogged up, anxiously looking for something fast and cheap to eat. *Dong!* The hour's up, boys and girls. They'd carry poorly digested food back to the office in peristaltic intestines, and flush it down the harbour for marine treatment later.

Energetic for sure, like a nervous breakdown.

Do you know the vibrant economy was supposed to grow perpetually? Yes, rather exceptional compared with the rest of the universe isn't it? But hey, all these people needed to be occupied, or they would have caused trouble for themselves and others. How do you grow an economy? Easy. Print some money, then make a few

versatile data points, project strong growth. Done. The developers will take it from there, and turn it into a vision for the Government. Before you know, engineers would be pulling down old buildings for new ones, dumping them into the sea, taking another bite at the harbour. Giant sewer pipes would be made even larger and longer to catch up.

The engine had started, belching a sense of urgency into the air. Electric!

Couriers ran between offices, plastic envelopes bouncing inside satchels. *Urgent!* Ma stood up, moving his hands to the left, then right, then quickly left again to demonstrate frantic urgency. Garbage-men ran between buildings to collect the shredded remains of documents labelled "IMPORTANT AND CONFIDENTIAL – URGENT", and took them to the landfills. Buses and underground trains and garbage trucks and construction vehicles rushed in and out as fast as they could, nervous of the competition. Slowing down was detrimental. Stop, and you got swept away.

"Vibrant? Right, I'm still shaking."

The economy grew as projected, as ever, expanding, heating up, full of miracles. Let there be light! And there was light. Let there be cool air! And there was cold air. Somewhere, workers in boiler-suits generated electricity round the clock to keep the miracles going 99.999% of the time – a service pledge. Somewhere far away, someone dirty as hell was mining coal to feed the power plants. Somewhere else further away, soldiers tortured and blew up humans, whole families, entire nations, so SUVs back home could idle in a traffic jam.

But all that digging, pumping and burning could not last forever, right? That much, everyone knew, and in great detail. Log in for a transparent look. Everything was disclosed; more than enough information to make you gasp, boo, scream, panic, applaud, then go away for a drink. Remember the airlines? Ma asked Song. Of course you do, they sponsored your "lifetime" free tickets didn't they? But no you don't. You were much too young to know sustainability. It had become irrelevant by the time you could read; totally out of fashion. Yes, airlines competed to disclose mammoth carbon footprints on fancy websites. Then? Everyone flew away to attend conferences on sustainable development, collecting mileage. Disclosure made problems transparent; transparency made problems invisible, and disappear. Everyone disclosed.

So, Central – Victoria – started with nothing, thrived on garbage, ended in nothing. Ironic don't you think? Did John really call it the last refuge of capitalism?

* * *

Song wonders what exactly Capitalism was. It sounds familiar; something to do with money and expectations; one of those simple words covering big vague ideas. These words can still arouse passionate debates among his ageing friends, John and Ma, but mean nothing to him. These ideas belong to a thriving community rather than a dying one. What does it take to survive in a competitive economy? He can't even imagine, but would love to know.

He has heard Ma grumbling about the modern world often enough. It does seem dumb. Yet, if he has a choice, he would like to venture into such a world, and be stupidly busy for no reason, just for the experience. He is being stupidly *not* busy for no reason now, anyway. He would like to know what it's like to have a job, mortgage, family, kids, insurance, career, competition, ambition. He had seen all that from the distance of a kid. But as he grew into them, they disappeared like a mirage. Ma tells him he's lucky. John says it's a pity, but "Hey, don't give up, kiddo." His father smiled and sighed. "That's the way it was. We don't look back."

He doesn't.

Unlike the elders, he has nothing to look back to. He can't join them in reminiscences or debates. The past had always been ahead of him.

Right now, the ghost of Victoria, hiding behind the fog, has seized him. He stares at it like a stunned prey. The leaden sky shifts about like an extraterrestrial amoeba, engulfing him.

* * *

Song Sung's torn within himself again. He feels melancholy and restless, desperate for a sense of purpose that he sees no point having. Part of him is full of verve, confident, ruthless and free. Part of him is uncertain, sentimental and wretched. He loves Rhea dearly, yet doesn't know what love is. Lately, their lovely time together has been ticking away tentatively.

Last night was great. He enjoyed his quiet birthday party; just the two of them. The chicken was perfect, the wine unbeatable. Rhea

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seemed faraway at times but she insisted nothing was the matter, just tired. Was she? She came sensuously alive when they made love later.

Their love making was... yeah, wonderful.

But something feels uncertain these days. His head? Perhaps. It does seem more easily distracted. His heart? No. Hers? Hope not. His body? More precisely, his penis? That self-serving thing does seem more complacent. Age? Boredom? Itch? It's been seven years so...

This morning, they woke up nicely from a good sleep. He was refreshed, cheerful. He looked out of the windows and commented how beautiful it looked. "Kind of romantic isn't it?" he said. Rhea gave a big happy smile. Barely an hour later, out of the blue, he found it suffocating. He needed air, real air, right that minute, petulant like a kid.

What's wrong with me?

Don't know. Just don't know. Andropause?

"Come on," he reminds himself. "I just turned forty-two, probably the youngest man alive."

In fact, Song is the youngest person alive.

SWEEP

Song Sung turns away from the hypnotic mist. He takes a deep breath to regain focus. "Here. Here. Move on." Repeating the simple mantra helps to rescue him from these recurrent doldrums.

Gingerly, he descends the steep slope, leaning on his staff. The pavement is a mosaic of dead leaves on slimy mulch. A Burmese python greeted him here last year. It must have been three? five? metres long, growing steadily in recollection. Startled, he slipped and fell. Luckily, it glided away in gracious fright rather than trying to swallow and digest him over the next few days.

It reminds him of Chung. He swept the path for decades, and was Song's favourite man because he never called him Baby Song.

"Chung Bak seems so steadily content and happy without trying don't you think?" So his mother once remarked to his father. Everyone called him Chung Bak, Uncle Chung. "He has such a positive vibe. Why can't everyone be like him?"

"Because he's not from this planet," said his father.

"Now, be nice. He's lovely."

Chung was lovely, of course, but also out of proportion for an earthling. His ears were far too big for his tiny head. On a windy day, you couldn't help expecting them to flap. His eyes were two mere dots above a brass knob nose so taut in shiny skin you could see yourself reflected upside down, talking to him. His mouth stretched like a hammock, supported from ear to ear, more cartoony than a yellow smiley face. His short legs terminated in very long feet. Gumboots stuck out under the furrows of his grossly oversized pants like kayaks chased by a tsunami.

Garbage-men, like diplomats, were regularly rotated; but Chung had never moved from the Peak Path. It was a hardship post, full of gravity, heat and bugs, especially on sultry summer days. Rich folks in the neighbourhood also had high standards, quick to complain as a

matter of principle. His streetwise supervisor understood all that. Since Chung liked the path, and had never requested a transfer, he stayed.

After his department dissolved, he continued to get paid through automatic transfer, and to sweep. Then the banks stopped. Not a big deal; money didn't mean much by then anyway. A rudimentary barter system had emerged. There was an abundance of leftovers, but what everyone wanted most was fresh food. People would offer their Nintendo, even a Ferrari, for a bag of carrots. The economy had moved in reverse; supply and demand had been rearranged. Many private farms sprung up; most produced nothing. "These people can hardly sprout beans," his father noted. "Imagine, descendants of the largest agrarian civilisation, farming with a manual in one hand."

With or without pay, Chung continued to sweep. It was his life, meant to be. He was fascinated with leaves in an oddly romantic manner, often admiring how beautiful they looked. Song's father once tried to explain photosynthesis to him, thought he might find it interesting. Chung laughed incredulously. "You make it sound so complicated Mr Song."

"Listen to this." He worked his giant bamboo broom like a musical instrument especially for Song, scratching the pavement. "It once had leaves of it's own," he murmured, referring to his broom. "Doesn't it sound great?"

"It does, kind of meditative." Song agreed diplomatically, borrowing his Mum's favourite description of anything repetitious. He thought it sounded just like someone sweeping. "Why are you still working, Chung Bak?"

"Because it makes me happy." His face shifted happily. He then resumed sweeping, watching every leaf as he did. "Leaves must return to their roots you know. We say that about people in Chinese. Has your father never told you?"

"No. But he has a book called Returning to the Roots."

"See." He herded a pile of leaves over the side slope, spreading them over tree roots. "I can listen to this all day."

But not forever.

Years ago, he stopped. Song can't recall when.

He can't pinpoint when the government shut down either. It was a gradual process, kind of sneaky, in traditional low profile. Department after department would declare itself indispensable, committed to

service, then vanish the next day. It was to avoid panic, someone explained. No one cared.

The power stations were an exception.

As a privately owned utility, they switched off in style. The Songs were invited to the closing ceremony. Song Huan, with his son's future safety in mind, had lobbied for the methodical decommissioning of hazardous facilities. "Power plants, petrol stations, and a few surviving factories must be properly shut down before too late," he explained, pleaded. They finally agreed.

Song went along. Cocktails were served. A stage was set up outdoors. It was a blustery day. Soon, light and air-conditioning would be off. The indoors would become a trap. Speeches were made. "There's hope," the VIP said. A steady wind picked up a carefully arranged wisp of hair across his crown, twirling it distractingly. It looked as if the whole strand might uproot itself and fly off any moment. "This is only temporary and precautionary, I assure you." That was the giveaway. On his assurance, everyone knew that was it.

Three, two, one. Off.

Many, including Song Huan, had tears in their eyes.

Song might have been the only one who felt a twinge of excitement, anticipating something that he was not supposed to. A new life, one that he had been prepared for since birth, had commenced. A new era had begun at 14.00h, 2nd July 2075, a Tuesday. The PA system went dead. The audience remained silent and motionless, almost incredulous, until someone on stage waved. Some turned around and shook hands with their neighbours, like Catholics exchanging blessings during mass, wishing each other luck.

A few dumb ones applauded.

The Songs could have kept the fridge and light at home going with a generator, but decided against it. No point hanging on noisily for a few more months. Better get on with the new world now rather than later.

Song's father also proposed culling potentially dangerous zoo animals but failed to gain enough support. Even Song thought it unnecessarily cruel. After the python – evidently a retiree from the Botanical Garden Zoo – he now agrees with his father's foresight. Come to think of it, they should have culled all the dogs as well. Well, too late.

Nothing pleased the Songs more than the "temporary" closure of the Education Department in 2062. "About time," they cheered, after

having resisted the government's offer to provide private tuition to their son. Song's parents preferred him to learn wilderness survival rather than urban renewal. But infertility was officially temporary so it had to be business as usual as far as the government was concerned, and that included their archaic syllabus. "The crisis will soon pass. Everything will return to normal, with a new baby boom." Good governments were universally delirious back then, so nobody took any notice.

The median age in Hong Kong reached an all-time high of seventy-something in the early 2070s, nearly half a century after the fertility plunge had started. The average age then dropped paradoxically, as the population became older. The apex of the demographic curve had sloughed off. Life expectancy plummeted the minute the power supply was turned off, pulling the plug on medical services. No more deaths postponed by electricity at the expense of the patient. No more questionable lives kept dangling with silicon tubes, pulsating to electromagnetic signals.

This is 2090. Song wonders what the current population profile is. Everyone he knows, except Rhea and himself, is in their sixties. What does it matter though? The dots that make up the demographic curve – the data points that give statistics authority and manipulative power – have all but vanished.

A SAMARITAN DILEMMA

Half way down, the fog has thinned into a light mist. Song's head seems to have cleared with it.

Birds trill and jump in bushes; Song smiles to himself. No canine skirmishes. No hungry embrace from the big snake, just like all the other times. He feels a strange anti-climax, but relieved.

Coming out of the forest, to his right lies a desolate estate. Air-conditioners and sprawling fig-vines hang side by side on fractured walls – one ready to let go, the other to spread. Wild plants overflow from opulent lobbies, as if seeking fresh air. Awnings dangle above collapsed Porsches and Mercedes half-buried in yellow sand. From caved-in sewers, saplings emerge as if to survey a promising new world.

So full of life. So dead.

At the acute bend ahead, a huge boulder had settled after a big storm last year. Soil and branches have since piled up behind. He climbs up, following his own step marks from previous trips. Just as he comes down and around the corner, he notices a dark object at the bottom of the slope.

Dog?

Too big. A lone dog would have turned and fled. They don't usually hunt alone.

Visibility is better now, but anxiety is undermining his vision. He squints, and sees it leaning closer against the soil bank. But was it real? He feels beastly eyes watching behind dense fur. It just moved again! This time he is sure.

The thing is now perfectly still, blended into the bank. Ready to attack? Song assesses his situation. Climbing back up the boulder and running uphill away from a four-legged animal is not a good idea. No short-cut through the overgrown bank either.

Shit. His heartbeat gathers pace.

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Without taking his eyes off the thing, he checks his grip on the staff, squeezing and relaxing it subconsciously. His palms feel moist against the wood.

* * *

Wild boar? Bear? This climate must surely be too warm for the furry beast; but then there were quite a few bears and pandas in the zoo weren't there? He feels damp air warming up against his face, as if someone has just splashed the rocks in a sauna. All kinds of animals were freed by ageing zoo keepers. God knows what creatures are out there trying to establish their rightful position on a brave new food-chain right now. He wonders where humans fit in. Bub was right; they should have closed the zoos down properly, with a slaughter.

It's moving again, swaying slightly.

What the...

No eyes. No visible features at all. Just fur.

It's stopped.

Song senses the penetrating gaze of unseen eyes, the warm stench of measured breath. Better get on with it. Even tigers and wolves are wary of humans who aren't afraid; especially if the animals have spent time in a zoo... He inches forward, sidling along the far edge, training his stick on the thing. The pole feels heavier than usual, loaded with anxiety and aggression, or fear. He gingerly approaches the... Oh no...

A man... It's a man.

* * *

An old man kneels with his shoulder against the side slope, curled up like a giant rodent. His hands are under the chest. His face is pressing against the ground. Every now and then, he shudders as if jolted by a deep spasm, and rocks sideways, releasing a barely audible moan; an eery sough; a ghostly whine.

Clumps of long grey hair have fused with his grimy fur coat – forming a pointillist crust of human sludge across his back. He and the mink had merged. Fur coats had been popular in Hong Kong. Rich women used to wear them with antiperspirants. On the old man, it looks bizarrely suitable even in June.

Hair, hair, everywhere.

* * *

Song studies the stranger from the far side, unaware that he's still training the pole on him.

"You OK?"

No response.

"Hello?"

He takes a step back uphill to give himself distance, to think. He stands the pole up, towering like Moses over a repentant soul. The profile of the man's sunken face lies just downhill from Song's shoes. Poor guy. He needs help. But how to help him? The question feels half-hearted. He's aware of a shameful reluctance bubbling inside. I can't help. I don't need this. I can't help.

A foul stench rises to greet him, leaving an aftertaste in the throat. He feels nauseous.

Hot air rises.

He comes down a little along the far edge. A shaft of diffused light finally makes it through the canopy, falling on the man's back. A plume of stink can be seen leaving, like a skunk's tail in cartoons.

He's disgusting.

He needs help.

He's half dead – half man half ghost already.

Is this the odour of putrescent flesh, or just bad hygiene?

Can people decompose alive?

Song's nose tells him the man has been peeing and pooing inside his fur coat. His father used to remind himself it's a blessing not to die in a hospital, without a big sloppy diaper between the legs, tubes coming out or going in every orifice. The stranger, however, seems to highlight the need to wear diapers during one's final moment.

Song is experienced in corpses, but has never witnessed death-in-progress. It's disconcerting, repulsive and disgusting. He feels ashamed of these heartless reactions. Must one feel bad for reactions that are honest and beyond control? He leans forward a few inches to compensate for the callous thoughts anyway.

"Do you need help?" He sounds hollow to himself. What a stupid question.

Unexpectedly, the old man moves a little in response. Then, in suspended motion, he turns his head askew, as if adjusting for maximum discomfort. He's now facing Song's feet from the side, his visible eye barely open. His lips are parted heavily, spread sideways on the ground, exposing a mouthful of dried mucous. No teeth. The nose is bruised, badly swollen. Song can hear a laboured and irregular

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wheeze through his mouth. He bends over to check – What a whiff! – and nearly vomits over the man.

* * *

With his breakfast quivering at the top of his throat, Song struggles to find his emotional bearing. He can't just walk away.

But why?

Indeed. Why?

He can't think of a reason. He doesn't know this man who is at most days – more likely hours – from death. He can't possibly take care of him. Whatever he does would be futile under the circumstances. He wants to have nothing to do with this. He curses the encounter under his breath; he curses this whole damned morning. Why couldn't you be properly dead by the time I got here? I could have given you a decent disposal.

He regrets not staying another day at Rhea's.

It's difficult to tell the stranger's age given his condition. What difference does it make though? His life is pointless now, whenever it commenced.

Just walk on!

Yet... he can't. Now that he has bumped into this hapless situation, he feels compelled to do something, whatever, in the name of... what? Human fellowship? Come on!

The old man stares vacantly at Song's shoes. He let out another muffled moan – all that he's got left. All that he's been, all that he's done, everything converged into a half-moan at this pathetic moment. He presses his face into the ground, and sways his shoulders weakly, as if trying to burrow.

It suddenly occurs to Song that he might have crawled out here to die alone, in solitude, with dignity, or like elephants, at least according to his father.

Did Bub end up this way?

His eyes redden at the thought. He smacks his lips, and swallows hard. Well, in that case, he might have interrupted a solemn occasion, a grave and private moment.

Go away quickly then...

He starts a few steps downhill, then stops and turns to face the raised rear end of the man. *Now that I've interrupted, why not speed things up to reduce his suffering?* One good whack over the neck. All would be over in a second, in the name of humanity. No, not with his

favourite staff. He'd find another one. Ah, a rock would be better wouldn't it? It leaves the hand before the, uh, execution. No physical contact at the moment of death. It somehow seems less distressing.

He leans his staff against a tree, and gathers three boulders. Just in case. Can't do it halfway. Three would do. He places them about a meter above their target.

One. Two. Three.

They look nearly identical, about ten kilos each. Cold; mercenary; they suddenly seem loaded with a sense of purpose. A strange thought strays into his mind. When was the last time a human was stoned to death? The old man has maintained a lifeless gaze at the spot where Song's feet were.

He'll drop them from uphill, for obvious reasons.

Uneasily, he takes position. Should he signal something? All departing souls deserve some form of ritualistic farewell. He and his friends have been affording funeral rites even to liquefied corpses. Should he explain that this is an act of quietus for the old man's sake, to lessen his pain?

Cut that crap. Just do it. Or walk on.

Be on your way brother.

If you have a god, go to him.

May you reunite with loved ones lost to death.

Don't reincarnate though; nobody's around.

We'll soon follow.

Or just, *Bye now, good luck.* Good luck?

He finally decides on, "Be on your way, rest in peace."

Hang on, his head should be covered – for respect? Or to spare himself the mess and gore? Whatever. There's a fountain palm nearby.

When he returns with a few leafy fans, the old man has managed to tilt his head a bit further uphill by bending his neck further.

He's looking. Staring, actually, blankly.

For the first time, Song sees his full face, and the netherworld gleaming darkly behind opaque eyes.

GOODBYE HOUSE

"Where're we moving to Mama?"

"The other side of the ravine, Sweetie."

"Why?"

"Some strangers have moved to the house down the street. I don't want them to see you. They may hurt or take you from me. Lots of bad people out there."

"Is it the lady who waved?"

"I told you not to mention her again. Have you forgotten?"

"Sorry, Mama."

"Promise you'll never, ever, ever, ever, do that again OK!"

"I'll never, ever, ever, ever, do that again."

"That's my good girl. I didn't mean to yell. Don't cry. I worry about you because I love you so much Sweetie. You two are everything I have."

"I know Mama."

"Where's Tommy?"

"Right behind you Mama."

"Tommy you scared me! Never, ever, ever, ever, do that again OK?"

"Tommy never says anything Mama."

"I know. But he's a good boy. Have you got your teddy bear?"

"Yes, and my purse with all the cards, so I can introduce myself to people."

"But not to strangers remember?"

"Only to you and Tommy. When I see strangers, I disappear!"

"That's my girl! Now, was it you who tied up the curtains? Such neat and tidy bundles!"

James Tam

"You like that Mama?"

"Excellent! Good job, Sweetie! I'll take the garbage out now. You take Tommy's hand. Say good-bye to the house, say good-bye to the piano."

"Good-bye, house. Good-bye, piano."