

## **Man's Last Song**

**SIX**

## SLIPPERY STIFFS

Stiffs are tricky to handle because they are stiff for only a short time.

They soon become stinky, sloppy, and slippery, fouling up the whole neighbourhood. Nothing smells remotely as bad. After a close encounter with the rotten kind, the aftertaste of death would cling to the nose, clothes, hair, skin for days. Ma's nasal irrigation is helpless against the morbid odour that has penetrated the moist lining of his own throat, lungs and guts.

For a while, most bodily remains were disposed of by family members, next door neighbours, or friends, in a timely fashion. Gradually, deaths have become more lonely. The first such forlorn body, or what was left of it, was discovered by Song. He was scrounging for provisions in an apartment block half way up the Peak. Just something to do, like shopping to pass time. Led by the unmistakable odour, he found the bloated old lady seeping into a fine sofa with beautiful floral appliqués. The sight of her mucous drips crawling down a piece of furniture was gruesome. Yet he was neither sickened or upset. He surprised himself.

He left her undisturbed, and reported back to the tribal elders.

"What stage is she at," asked John. There was a hint of excitement in his voice.

"Stage?"

"Yeah. A corpse decomposes in stages. In the beginning, it's a little puffy and bluish. You might see maggots crawling underneath the skin already. Then the guts become bloated. The tongue sticks out, and the eyes may start dribbling down the face. It'd be covered in maggots by now. You can hear them munch if it's quiet. Sounds like someone masticating oatmeal with their mouth open. Then –"

"You're making this up."

"No! I know my dead bodies, Ma. I was a soldier."

"Sure. You guys only shot at people from a kilometre away."

"What are the other stages?" Song's curious.

"Ah, the next stage would be final. I think it's called putrefaction or liquefaction, something like that. We called it the frothing finale. As the technical term suggests, the body becomes kind of liquid. Brain juice leaks through the nose and ears and eye sockets."

"I don't think she's that advanced, but she seems to be dripping a bit. I'm not sure."

"Then we'd better hurry. It doesn't take long to get there in this climate. Two to three weeks max from the last breath is my guess." John regarded everyone. They stared back at him, silently electing him leader of the task force.

"Bub?" Song turned to his father, who had been listening silently with a grimace.

"Sure."

"You don't have to, old man. There's enough of us." John smiled to Huan.

"No, I'll come."

"Okay then. Bring lots of towels. We'll need them."

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She turned out to be a Stage Two according to John's assessment. After examining her from a respectful distance, they held an emergency meeting outside in the parking lot.

Whew!

Huan supposed that there would be more of "these" in the future so why not find a dedicated spot where they can stock up firewood for cremation. A neighbourhood crematorium.

"Good idea!"

"But wait, the problem is transportation. Stiffs aren't stiff for long. They become soft and slippery like an overripe tomato. If you grip hard, your fingers will go through them."

"Get out of here!"

"What about burning right where we find them. Carrying firewood would be easier than moving a slippery corpse?"

"Good idea, engineer!"

"What if there are others in the building?"

"In that case, we'd better leave the task to whoever is living there who can't smell."

"They could be immobile."

"And alive? Come on. Fine, we'll first check for others in the building just in case."

"What if the fire gets out of hand?"

"We can make sure it doesn't. What do you say, engineer?"

"Sure can."

"If it does?"

"Big deal."

So, the committee decided on in situ cremation. Move a few pieces of flammable furniture next to the body. Cover her (it?) with cloths and blankets, add starting fluid, then...

"Should we give her some kind of ceremony?"

"What ceremony?"

"A prayer, farewell speech, incantation, any rite of passage you know."

"I think a three-minute silence would do."

"What about one-minute?"

"Yeah one minute should do. We hardly know her. Just a gesture. She stinks."

"Come on! Be respectful."

After observing a one-minute silence, they said "be on your way," ceremoniously, struck a match – wham! – and left.

They hung around outside for a while. Black smoke billowed from the windows. It looked oily, and smelled like cooking bacon.

On the way back, John shared a little more of his expertise, to break the silence. "You know what's the most gripping experience in handling corpses?" he asked, pun intended. Nobody seemed interested. "The hands," he said. "The hands," he repeated.

Song looked at him inquisitively.

"Soldiers, doctors, and people in death-related professions can carry a severed head, swing it by the hair, toss it around for fun. It takes getting used to of course, but cruelty helps to objectify. Kicking it like a football makes the job easier."

Ma raised an eyebrow at John. Huan looked ahead, intensely pensive, apparently not listening.

"But you can't grab its hand as if you're shaking it." John nodded earnestly at Ma. "The icy fingers send a chill through the spine of even callous soldiers. I'm not kidding you."

"Unless she's someone you love," Huan said. He had been listening.

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The old lady did not just turn into smoke and ash.

She visited Song Huan that night, and invited him back to the apartment for tea. She served green tea, plainer than water, at room temperature – the temperature of a cold room.

"Would you like some biscuits?"

Before he could reply, she had already offered him one on a small dish. A cool and pinkish biscuit, like raw pig skin from the fridge, was pushed under his nose. Huan was too polite to decline. She was pleased.

The biscuit started to melt in his mouth. The starchy dollop started to slither, wriggling, struggling, drowning in his saliva.

Maggots!

He closed his eyes, and swallowed quickly, just managed not to gag. The frail lady seemed the sensitive type; she would have been saddened or offended if he had spat it out. She smiled, looking happy and kind, as if pleased that he had passed a crucial test. She reached forward to grab his hand. Hers was cold, like Sari's in the hospital, but much skinnier. It had no flesh, just shrunken bones in frozen skin, like his Mum's favourite chicken feet pickled in white vinegar. There was always a jar in the fridge.

Her grip sent a sharp chill up his spine. John was right.

Her eyes started to run, drooling down her cheeks. She wiped it with the back of her hand, apologising in a bubbling voice. Her throat was dissolving. "Please don't mind Mr Song. It's just the way things are. Don't mind... "

Huan woke in a cold sweat. He could taste the biscuit at the back of his throat. He dreamily mumbled the first thing that came to mind. "I don't want Song to see me dead. Don't touch my body," then fell asleep again.

He woke up decided. He would die alone when the day came, if possible.

**LETTER TO SON**

Sung,

I've revised this letter so many times it tires me to look at it now. My eyes can hardly cope with the copying, and my fingers hate it. I write slowly, as you know. What bothers me most is that repetition eats away my feelings. Feelings are precious to an old man, you see. I've only discovered that in the past few years. Sadness has become numb; so numb that it makes me grumpy, scared, and pained, rather than sad. And, believe it or not, a good laugh is the only thing that brings tears to old eyes. Funny, eh?

Some feeling is lost with each revision. Something that meant a lot to me a few months ago no longer matters. It's like that something has died ahead of me in the time that has passed. Perhaps I should have kept the first draft. It might have been jumbled and confused, but raw and real, with one more year of life in it. But that would not be me would it? I had to edit, edit, and re-edit, until, finally, here it is, lying exhausted in front of me. Yet, it's not done. I must give it this one last round.

Last year, I started this letter with "Sung, I don't know where to begin," and got stuck. I now know where to begin, but have no idea how it might end. I originally planned to depart eighteen months ago, but kept postponing. I told myself I needed to prepare you better, better and better, for a life without me. I'm finally running out of excuses, and tired of lying to myself.

When you were born, I was about your age now. What a surprise. I believed in statistics and predictability. I detested surprises. As an engineer, my job was to identify variables, pin them down for management. Miracles don't exist. But somehow they do. You were born.

You can't imagine how much you brought us. You enriched our lives with laughter and innocence while everyone sat and waited to age and die. You added a whole new dimension to my life; a dimension I had never imagined.

Yet, sometimes I wish I had used a condom. It hurt me to watch you growing up without friends, dreams, or aspirations. The future that awaits you is static, terminal. But how could I have known that we weren't sterile? Your Äiti never let herself be examined; but I had been sperm-counted twice for fun and charity, and been duly certified "low and phlegmatic" on both occasions, like everyone else. That said, had we known we weren't barren, we'd probably have tried harder. The end result would have been the same.

Fortunately, you were an exceptional kid, even in your teenage years. But that pained me more. Can't ever win can we?

When you were four-and-a-half, eager to grow up, everyone was at some age and a half older than you. I was forty-and-a-half; Äiti was thirty-four-and-a-half; your friend Johnny was nine-and-a-half. You were puzzled why he was older, but with a birthday *after* yours, in November. He was a rare Generation-Zeder, unspoiled. A pity that he succumbed to the plague so young.

When you turned five, I asked teasingly what you wanted to be when you grow up, now that you were *already* five. You said, "I want to turn six first." Yes, one step at a time; that's what we had been trying to teach you, but you were evidently more talented than I thought.

Your silly little moments still make me smile. Remember your first candy? We withheld candies until you turned five. Not easy; the whole world was eager to pamper you with everything at its disposal. On your fifth birthday, I had the honour to present you with your first candy. A liquorice drop from Finland. I can still see your face. It made your Äiti sob. You were a lucky boy. Most kids had long lost the privilege of being excited by candies at a much younger age.

I'm babbling, but these memories are all that I've got left. They give me strength, and a purpose in the past tense.

Your fever at ten worried us even more than your first year. Your temperature hovered above 103. Your throat swelled so much you had no neck. I could tell the doctors had no idea. They put you in a glass room, like an exhibit in a mausoleum, and wiped you with alcohol every hour. We watched. Your Äiti prayed to God, whom she never believed in. She offered to trade her life for yours. Good thing God wasn't doing any trading that week. Not yet anyway. On the eighth day, you woke up with normal temperature, shivering. By the

afternoon, you were normal again, as if woken up from a good rest. Nobody knew why.

Now, I'm not supposed to get stuck in the past. Let's focus on the future instead. You have many challenging years ahead. I might have a few of my own left. Increasingly, our problems will diverge, and I don't want mine to become yours as well. That is the main reason why I must leave. However, while preparing for it, I've come to realise something else. I need to set myself free, unchain the ghost inside, before I die. I can only do that alone, as soon as possible.

I like things predictable, don't mind them being boring as long as they don't change. I probably got that from my Dad, or developed it from his early death. But fate has been most perverse. We live in a dramatic epoch, to say the least, and we are right in the epicentre because of you. Nevertheless, for years, I tried to maintain an orderly life in an unravelling world. I've been a dutiful sailor on a sinking ship, doing my utmost to stay the course, adhering to the operation manual amidst great chaos. I've been being myself, I guess.

When your Āiti died, everything died. But I hung on. In the hospital, I didn't feel sad, just exhausted, thoroughly exhausted, too exhausted to let go. I was so blank and calm, it scared me. I wished hopelessly to wake from a bad dream. She'll wake soon, I told myself, or I'll wake to see her making breakfast. But I had no vision of the kind. I was no good in fooling myself. She was dead. I could not pretend otherwise.

I didn't cry. When I left the hospital, I went for a very long walk. Perhaps I would cry when alone, I thought. But I didn't. I don't know how long I walked. I suddenly noticed I was dead tired and hungry. I came home with a roast goose, remember? You had cried, for me too, I knew. I was almost envious.

For weeks I lived in a daze. I was intently undisturbed; as if carrying primed explosive. I didn't cry at the funeral either.

All these years, I have not dreamt of your Āiti, not even once, until a few months ago. We didn't talk, just being comfortably silent together. She made me porridge. I woke before eating it, and cried. It felt really good.

Maybe my heart has finally come out of a coma. Now I want it to live. I want myself to live, to drift, for once, without any anchor, before too late. What have I got to lose? You might think I'm too old



for this self-searching game. I certainly thought so. But I have a clear realisation that I might have lived my whole life according to my conception of others' expectations. I'm suddenly desperate to find out if Song Huan has been my true self, whatever that means. Do I sound like a teenager? The difference is a teenager has time, I don't.

Sung, I'm neither scared nor sad, just ready, eager to go, in a positive spirit. We've been much more than father and son. We've been best friends and companions as well. Nonetheless, we must part one day soon. Rather than letting it take us by surprise, or torment us with a protracted farewell, let's make it happen by design. I assure you this is the most sensible way; I've given it a lot of thought in the past two years. The heart will hurt, yes, but it will heal. You're not an emotional coward like me. You're more like your mother. You know how to let things out, leave them behind, and move on. You've always been a truer person than me.

How I wish you had a woman, a mate, in this lonesome world. It's a pity the few girls who came and went were all impossible. Remember that pretty little thing from Chongqing the government tried to pair you up with? What a nightmare! A typical Generation-Zeder. A bit too old for you too, wasn't she? Unfortunately, my generation not only ruined the physical world for you kids, we also spoiled you rotten, poisoned your spirits. What thorough destruction... Well, we tried to raise you "normal" in a world that was anything but. I sometimes questioned whether we did the right thing, making you the odd one out in a tiny crowd.

I wonder where the other Generation-Zeders are. Did they all commit suicide? Move away? Anyway, I hope you'll find a woman you can go through the coming years with, even a bitch! Maybe you should move to the mainland, where there must surely be more people left. Do I sound like a father nagging his son to get married?

Know what, son? That's enough. I can go on like this forever. I've done that many times. But this one's for real. I must get going. So should you. Our journeys can't wait.

Don't worry about me. I have a good plan (as usual, ha ha). I know exactly where to go, where there's good food and safe shelter. I may feel lonely sometimes, but getting old is a lonely experience anyway, even surrounded by people. When I'm out of here, I'll do whatever the moment calls for. I'll be free. I'll cry when I should, not years later. I've

been too serious, so I'll try to develop a sense of humour too. (Was that funny?)

Thanks again, Son. Thanks for making my life complete. The rest is up to me now. Thanks for being you. I love you; you know that. Remember what I said last week? You'll always find me and Äiti in you. You will.

Bub

\* \* \*

Huan puts the letter under the Ming Dynasty jade qilin, and heads for the door. His bike and backpacks are waiting.

Fifteen minutes later, he is back. He sits at the desk, takes out another piece of paper, and hurriedly scribbles:

*Sung,*

It's time to leave. I've been preparing you for two years so don't say you haven't been warned! I have to go one way or the other. This is the best way to go, and the time is now. We must live according to the circumstances. We're survivors, right? I'll be fine. I'll be happy. You too.

Nothing can separate this family. Look inward, and you'll find me and your mum, always.

*Bub*

He folds the original letter twice, and inserts it into his back pocket. He places the note under the qilin, and looks around the room one more time.

"Bye," he says, then turns to leave.

## CROSSING NEVERLAND

Having finally loaded the two backpacks into the sampan, Huan's hands and legs were trembling mildly.

For a nice sunny day, the sea was unexpectedly choppy at the Sheung Wan Public Pier west of Central. Underneath a deep blue sky, frivolous whitecaps in the harbour aggregated into ferocious surf by the time they reached the jetty, thrashing the small boat against barnacle-covered steps, making it groan like an irritated bull. He had moored it there two weeks ago.

He sucked at the cut wound on his palm. The blood tasted salty. Barnacles had cut his knees and hands but without them, the mossy steps would have been impossibly slippery. Lowering two camper-size backpacks and one lightweight mountain bike onto a bobbing vessel had turned out to be too much for his creaking knees. He felt old – much older than an hour ago when he left home.

He considered quitting. Come back next week, even tomorrow, better prepared. He could still get home and unpack before Song returned but... "Come on, I'm not a quitter." No. Not before, not now. Not this time. This was a one way trip. Stop looking for excuses. "Oh well, I've never been a water person. All will be fine, once I've reached the other side."

He looked over at Kowloon, avoiding the water in between. How he wished the tunnels were open, so he could bike underneath the harbour. But the tubes were flooded within a few weeks after power generation had ceased. Many were surprised. "If they'd divided the volume of the tunnels by the daily amount of water sucked out by the drainage pumps, they'd have expected it. It's that simple," he had told his son.

This little boat would do just fine.

After a century of reclamation, Kowloon should be half an hour away max, with the agile sampan. He untied the stern, held the line in his hand, and stepped in. He landed a bit too hard with stiff knees. The little boat rocked petulantly in response. He extended his arms to balance like a tightrope walker before squatting down, very slowly, to wait for it to calm.

"Happier now?" He talked to its pointy nose, as if it also had ears.

He pulled the bow-line loose, felt the oars in his hands, then told himself encouragingly, "Yep. Here we go!"

Away from the pier, the water was less rough. There was nothing for it to bounce and re-bounce against. The boat suddenly seemed willing. It sloshed assuringly, as if purring to its new owner. Puffs of white clouds hung fluffily above, giving perspective to the flat blue sky, listlessly watching the lone sampan bobbling. The once hectic and magnificent Victoria Harbour looked petite and rustic, like an unexplored lagoon. "Neverland!" he exclaimed – a contrived attempt to cheer his faltering spirits with a childhood memory half forgotten. "Where did Neverland come from?" He could not recall. A beautiful place anyway. A fairy tale.

He rowed backward, facing Hong Kong. Everything looked impossibly clustered. How did it fit in so many people? The anxiety that had gripped his stomach all morning had eased. He was feeling better, quite good actually, on the surface. Inside, he was hollow. In the centre, his heart hung heavy, dense and cold, hardly beating.

He directed his mind back to the journey ahead, and remembered his mantra for Song. "Look ahead. Keep moving. Don't think." He had just started his first unplanned adventure, not that he thought a planned one would make any sense. A new life, new excitement, new chapter – the final one? – awaited him. Just row on. He took a deep breath, and sighed. "Yippee. . ."

He rowed north-east towards Tsim Sha Tsui, back-tracking slightly. The jetty there should be more spacious and in better condition, he hoped, trying to remember what Kowloon had looked like.

In barely twenty minutes, he had crossed the harbour, heading for the quay. The water turned wild again, worse than before. The vertical seawalls bounced the waves back and forth, compounding their strength with each cycle. The boat squeaked and rocked like a fearful animal.

"Woh, woh, cool. It's okay."

He approached the western steps. Compared with Hong Kong side, the platform there was much higher, the steps thick with algae. He couldn't jump on. He considered swimming the last twenty metres with the boat in tow. It might have been the safest way, but he would be wet and defeated. No, not so soon. He had just started his adventure.

"Come on, fishermen my age used to hop on and off like grasshoppers. Don't be chicken." As he was convincing himself, a big wave slapped the sampan sideways. He gripped the gunwales by reflex, and let one oar slip through its lock.

"Shit!"

Struggling with one oar, it took him another twenty minutes to get hold of one of the timber dolphins that guard the side of a pier against the ships. He tied a rope around it, and half crawled half dived onto the slippery steps, the other line in hand. He saw his nervous fingers in front of his face, clawing desperately for purchase. He ended up soaked anyway. Slowly, he stood up on the landing, trying not to tremble, unsure of what next. The peaceful mood that had accompanied him across Neverland had vanished.

He only noticed the line in his hand when the boat tried to jerk it from him. He tied it to the handrail, and bent down to grab the backpacks. *Don't be stupid, you can hurt your back this way.* A long pole with a rusty hook at the end lay not far away. Sailors had used it to catch ropes thrown from the ferries. Fishing the heavy backpacks up turned out to be more difficult than expected. Everything had turned out to be more difficult than expected so far. One of those days.

Now, the bike.

The pole was useless for that. Gingerly, he lay down on his stomach, prostrating on a slimy step. Wet algae squished against his chest. He felt a sharp pain in his right knee. He extended both arms, trying to reach. Suddenly, the boat attacked – *Slosh! Bang!* – It jumped up at him.

He got up to tighten the rope, taking up as much slack as he could, and got back down again. He grabbed the front wheel with one hand at last, and started lifting. At that instant, a surge of waves rushed in, like besieging bandits. The boat, propelled by the frothing waves, thrust at the bike, knocking it against the side, splashing Huan with oyster-smelling water. The wheel turned, pushing the spokes against the fork, catching his fingers in between.

*Ouch!*

He let go in time.

The bike crashed down on the prow. Huan did not hear it bang. It hung there for a brief moment, as if in suspension, then tumbled off.

Not much of a splash either.

Huan watched his favourite bike sink, dispersing fish on its descent. It touched the bottom after a few long seconds, then settled as if it had always been there. The bike had reached its final resting place ahead of him.

Having done its job, the boat quieted down, undulating gently, innocently. Huan got up painfully slowly. He towered over the boat, staring at it venomously, eyes narrowed into slits full of hate, then spat at it.

"*Fuck you!*" he hissed, then slung the backpacks onto his shoulders, and turned towards Nathan Road.

## DOGS

Huan was pushing a wheelbarrow down Nathan Road. The damp backpacks sat weightily in it.

Once a main thoroughfare of the Tsim Sha Tsui tourist district, lined with shops, shops, and shops, the boulevard had become a long line of ruins. He headed north, keeping to the centre to avoid falling objects just in case. Everything above him, except the sky, was rusty. A neon sign or air-conditioner or window hanging from its last screw might let go any moment.

The area was deserted. Without a fresh water source, surrounded by tumbledown buildings, everyone had left, leaving behind a panoply of dangling signs – relics of their civilisation.

Nude Dancers All Day – FREE DRINKS!

Jesus Saves!

XXXX-Movies

Darling Escort Service (satisfaction guaranteed)

Praise the Lord! (Cantonese Bible Studies 6B, ALL welcome)

Horny Housewife (escalator press 6E)

Believe in God – Get Eternal Life!

This was a final battle ground for God's soldiers and their depraved counterparts. Like antagonists in the last century's classic, *Star Wars*, they fought Armageddon with fluorescent tubes, competing for human souls.

\* \* \*

Not a single soul left.

A dog or two watched guardedly from a distance. A lone cat lurked above. Occasional birds flitted past the strip of deserted sky trapped

between skyscrapers. Devoid of urban trash, the birds had migrated to the hills or the seaside. Even the rats had disappeared. Huan had envisioned a world taken over by rats and cockroaches. He was wrong. While there appeared to be more cockroaches, rats had become less common. The sneaky rodents had become dependent on human communities. People hated them but were no good at catching or killing them. Rats were much smarter than man in things that matter, such as self preservation. By hiding in the dark damp corners of the human underworld, they were safe from most natural predators except fat house cats and occasional dogs.

Now that their unwitting protectors and food source had disappeared, all kinds of predators had returned with an appetite. The lazy fat cats had lost weight, pursuing them as if it was a matter of life and death rather than plain old sadistic fun.

\* \* \*

Huan had been looking for a bike all afternoon. When he had no need for one, they were all over. In abandoned shops, balcony apartments, street corners. Now that he desperately needed one, there was none – none that worked anyway. *Where did they sell bikes in this part of town!* He spotted a telephone directory in a collapsed booth. *Ah, great, Yellow Pages. Remember?* These antiquated things still existed in tourist districts for decoration rather than function. But the phone book had been digested beyond legibility by something that found paper tasty.

Finally, a whole row of them. He could see a line of bikes through a crack in the corroded shutter, next to shelves of colourful accessories. The owner evidently did not want to abandon his merchandise. He had locked up the store after his last visit, probably planning to resume business one day soon. Optimist. Miser. Jerk. Must have been a miserable man.

He expected the rusty gate to crumble like potato chips with a few kicks. But no. In spite of the thick oxide, it held up stubbornly. He threw everything he could find at it, and pried with anything he could get a grip on. Still no.

He was tired, frustrated, hungry.

If Song were here, we would break this in no time.

But Song was not there.

He found an old wheelbarrow instead.



Half a day into his self-discovery adventure, he was only three kilometres from Song on the other side of the water. It felt like a whole lifetime away.

\* \* \*

He wandered into Kowloon Park, met by the vigilant eyes of a few dogs. They gave the impression of a runt pack in half-hearted formation. They kept a respectful distance, trying to figure out where this intruder stood in their section of the food chain. Inter-species encounters in the post-modern primal world once again hinged upon who eats who. The way they stared would have freaked his son right out. Huan smiled.

Dogs are dogs. Having lived like dogs for centuries, they could still sense who was boss by instinct, an instinct that had been hard-coded into their blood. "If you appear confident and dominant, they'd leave you alone," he had told Song, who would not believe his father on this one. Huan wondered where Song's canine phobia came from.

He spread out his backpacks to dry on a bench, and prepared his bed on another, calmly whistling. They watched. One tested a growl tentatively, then quieted down when no one else joined in. He ate a preserved chicken thigh and tossed them the bone. They fought over it noisily.

"See what I mean? Treat them like dogs, and they'll behave accordingly. Come, Doggie, come!" he snapped his fingers. They raised their ears, and reacted to his friendly gesture with suspicion. They were too young to know humans intimately, and refused to take a chance on Huan.

Dogs are hardcore racists.

Once released from human domestication, big dogs hung out only with big dogs, preferably of a similar breed. Small ones got eaten.

Hong Kong had been pooch haven. Their squeaky yelps could be heard in every apartment block. Some poodles were taken out for walks in prams, to be let out at their favourite lampposts. The owners collected their turds in plastic bags, or wrapped them in newspaper like fish and chips, to avoid getting fined. Some would wipe their canine asses with sanitising tissues before returning them to the prams. When it was coolish outside, the dogs wore coats. When it rained, some had rubber boots on all four feet. Most had forgotten they were

dogs, just like their owners had forgotten they were members of Homo sapiens.

Huan was right about dogs still being wary of people, but the bigger breeds reverted to their atavistic instincts more readily than the annoying and inferior members of their own species. It became a dog-eat-dog world the day after the humans.

He witnessed a terrier rushing straight up to a German Shepherd. Its judgement had evidently been fatally warped by generations of ladi-da breeding. *Yap Yap Yap! Stay off my pee you stupid dog! Yap!* The big guy was ominously silent. Then, snap! It happened so fast the next thing Huan saw was the terrier twitching and withering in its captor's mouth, silent for the first and last time.

The German Shepherd regarded Huan, as if out of courtesy. *Not yours? Mind if I eat it?* Sensing no objection, it carried the little one away for private consumption. It had calmed down, limp; probably it had fainted from the sight of its own blood.

Watching hungry dogs consume a human corpse was more troubling. His son was devastated although he agreed that canine burial is not a bad way to get rid of rotten neighbours.

Huan, Song Sung, and John were tracing the stench of a neighbour to an apartment, expecting to give someone an incendiary funeral. As soon as they entered the sizeable flat, they heard dogs gorging and wolfing at the far end. Song turned to run but John signalled him to stay. He grabbed a chopper from the kitchen, and wrapped a big towel around the other forearm. He sidled along the corridor, towards the feasting party. The Songs equipped themselves similarly and inched along behind him.

Here they were: three german-shepherds shoving their muzzles into the bowel of an ex-human. A cloud of flies buzzed impatiently above. The dogs looked up to regard John at the head of the party, but continued to eat, yanking out tissues and organs with powerful jaws.

"Move to one side, back against the wall to give them room." The old soldier ventriloquised the command. Song reacted with funny gurgling noises from his throat. When everyone was in position, John charged with a war cry, brandishing the chopper. They fled, viscid intestines flapping in their blood-soaked mouths, leaving a trail of dark blood.

The flies immediately resumed.



## FIRST STOP

Song Huan summons up what seems to be his last calorie with a deep breath, and props his swollen feet up on the window sill to reduce the throbbing.

Under his chair, a mosquito coil incenses the air. The intoxicating scent of pyrethrum powder gives him a sense of power over his lifetime antagonist. He imagines dazed skeeters bumbling in the dark, dreamily crashing into walls, and dying – yes! – leaving behind tiny, despicable smudges of stolen blood.

But the burning incense is also another tick in his countdown to a depleting future. When they have run out, he might not find replenishment out here. If he is not yet dead, he will have to lie back and let them draw blood. They would be the final victors. Humans, in the long run, are no match for mosquitoes in the survival game. The thought disgusts him.

For many years, he was allergic to mosquitoes. They gave him giant bumps the size of fried eggs, sunny-side-up, and he would itch for weeks. They were warm to the touch, and throbbed indistinctly yet persistently. The urge to scratch had been irresistible and maddening; but the harder he scratched, the itchier they got. Any attempt to tamper with their course of torture was punished with sadistic vengeance.

Huan hates mosquitoes, loathes the phantom monsters. Look at them. Sneaky hair's-breadth legs; surreptitious, filmy wings; a filthy stylet finer than most human instruments, and a tummy for blood. How can there be room for anything else? But there is. They can detect the faintest signal of danger, and pull out just in time, taking off at impossibly obscure angles.

Spooky.

Once, when a teenager, he was driven to submerging himself in a bathtub of ice and water after a particularly buggy camping trip. Numb

the body down; freeze the bites to death. It worked for a little while. After a painful acclimatisation, the first thing he felt was a flush. Then – *beep, beep, beep. Oh shit!* – one by one, the bites would return, thudding stealthily under the ice like Arctic submarines on manoeuvres, getting into position, ready to attack, to itch.

Fortunately, his allergy had calmed with age. Bug bites no longer irritated. One advantage of getting old – there are very few of them – was losing his itch. He had expected ageing to take away his teeth, appetite, sex-drive, ability to sleep well, agility, and so on. But itchiness? What a pleasant surprise. Nothing itches now. Bug bites don't even swell up. His epidermic nerve fibres must have wilted. His skin has deflated and shrivelled up like an old balloon's. Due to whatever biochemical excuse, his body has stopped reacting to insect bites. It feels numb instead.

Without the natural selection exercised by swatting human hands and insecticides, mosquitoes had become less alert and easier to hit, but much more populous. Nevertheless, he had three dozen coils in his runaway luggage. His number one foe must be checked, for as long as he can manage. It is not so much their exasperating bites that he fears now, but malaria and dengue fever. Although he has come out to die, he does not want it triggered by a skeeter. Anything but the damn skeeters. He cannot let them have the last bite. No way. Furthermore, his instincts are still intact and headstrong, driving him to live on, and on, for as long as possible.

Every day counts.

\* \* \*

Yuen Long. Song Huan had planned this to be the first stopover, at the end of Day One of his new life. He would rest for a day or two, then cross the border into the mainland. From there on, let's see.

It had now taken him nearly a week to get here.

It was a rural town near the border with mainland China. A few tiny villages had for centuries miraculously resisted the encroaching city. They carried on farming in the midst of sprawling junkyards, makeshift recycling factories and clusters of randomly oriented, square and ugly townhouses. For generations, they snubbed progress, disregarded time.

Huan had expected to find a few surviving farmers here. But when he arrived in the late afternoon, limping from tiredness, aching joints,

and bubbly blisters, all he could find were dogs, monkeys, herds of impassive cows, and the odd snakes. Not a single human in sight. Finally, it took extinction to break this tenacious community.

Wild hemp-vine was the new dominant species. They were not indigenous. The warming climate had made Hong Kong hospitable to them not long ago. Without the weeding hands of humans, they had gone rampant, strangling the native plants in their advance.

A brook ran through the fallow fields. It probably once served as a two-in-one irrigation channel and open sewer. Huan sat down on a flat rock to rest. He took his shoes off, and soaked his feet in the cool water. Jumping mud carp and Chinese perch squeezed by, but he was too exhausted to take out his net. He had planned to rely in the future on gathering and netting rather than farming. Tomorrow. The fish can wait. There're so many of them.

He looked up, and noticed a bungalow on a knoll a few hundred metres to the left. "Nice spot." Without pumping out the water, this low-lying country would frequently get inundated. A house on the small hill would be quite safe from the floods. "Doesn't matter, anyway. I'll move on in a few days." He was too tired to pay attention to his own half-stupefied soliloquy, not to say judge its sincerity.

"Well, let's check it out." He reached for his socks, and put them back on in slow motion.

\* \* \*

Huan stares at his feet, supported by the wooden window frame, projecting outside. They are now thankfully numb rather than painful. He can hardly make out their swollen outline. No moon. No stars. Just a one-dimensional pitch darkness. The tip of the incense glows like a lone star, burning faintly from a depthless distance. He suddenly realises he can bask in darkness, just like in sunshine, but less hot and sticky.

Is he going to settle here for a day or two as planned? Or the rest of his life? Who knows? "I'll find out. Quit planning," he reminds himself. He desperately needs rest, but is too exhausted to sleep.

The hut overlooks the creek and clumps of abandoned vegetable fields. It is nearly free of hemp-vine up here. Perhaps the owner left only recently. Where did he go? There might be some goodies left under the soil. He will check it out tomorrow, before setting up the fish net. "Hey, what's that? Planning again!"

This is a sturdy bungalow, made of big chunks of granite held together by cement mortar. It looks hand-built, probably by some old man and his wife and half a dozen kids, in the last century. The wooden beams and door frame are rotting, but should outlast Huan. The roof is made of traditional clay tiles. The bed is assuringly dry, also wooden, primitively plain. He sprayed it with insecticide, hoping to get rid of any resident bugs.

Right outside is a tidy row of fruit trees. Might have been a mini orchard in the past. A few dead papayas had been taken over by adjacent mangoes and guavas. The mangoes probably taste awful, but might be fine cooked. The gentle slope leading down to the field is lined with lychee and old peach trees.

At nightfall, the frogs come alive, filling the air with deafening croaks. In his next life, which may not be far away, he would like to be a frog, since being a human is no longer an option. He will eat mosquitoes all night. But before then, they would have to become him. Steamed frog is one of his favourite dishes.

He wonders what had become of Sari...

He rocks back on the old wooden chair, wriggling his feet, trying to get some feeling back. A soft breeze passes freely through the empty frame. Two giant blisters hang from his big toes.

"Hey skeeters, suck that," he says to the unseen mosquitoes around him, visualising them taking mistaken bites at the blisters, and chuckles impishly.

His can feel the circulation in his feet again – they hurt.

His heart has been the sole source of an overbearing pain in the past week. One good thing about heartache is, that it masks all other pains. Nothing else matters when the heart is immersed in deep grief. Now that time has eased the emotional twinge, a myriad sorenesses are trickling back, bit by bit, like musicians straggling onto the stage before a concert starts, fiddling with their instruments, waiting for the maestro.

In this symphony of agony, his feet are doing a solo while the rest of him hums a variety of discomforts. His head hurts. That's nothing new; but a dying tooth and slightly infected jaw are highlighting his familiar headache with added complexity. Most of his joints creak.

*Fine. Go ahead. Torture me. Time's on my side.*

Pain, however loathsome and fierce, can only attenuate with time. The nerves will get used to it, or, even better, snap. The body will

learn to ignore it. If the worst comes to the worst, he will die and leave pain behind without a host. *Ha! There you go.* Huan expects death to be an imminent prospect. A few months? A few years? Let's say ten very unlikely years – a blink of the eye.

He is seventy-two, only seventy-two, and not a hypochondriac. He does not think so anyway. He would still be a long way from death according to his original projection made years ago. Seventy-two was a relatively young age. Not too long ago, people in their seventies were working full-time to help postpone the collapse of the pension system, expecting salary reviews and promotions. Otherwise, they might starve.

Huan is largely healthy, except for mildly high blood pressure, and a multitude of muscular and arthritic pains that come and go. Nothing that he cannot get used to. Besides, when he was young, there was no awareness, not to say enjoyment, of a perfect body. It was taken for granted. What a waste. Now, in the odd days that he wakes up painless, he would feel fantastic, and spend the rest of the day enjoying a trouble-free body, appreciating every minute of it. Well, he thinks, that's another good thing about getting old, besides thumbing his nose at mosquito bites with neurological indifference. But in the primitive post-modern world, even minor accidents can be life-threatening...

He nods forward with a start, breaking into a cold sweat. He has nearly dozed off. He takes his feet down and sits up. A fall can mean hell. One can't be too careful at this age, under the circumstances.

*Wait!*

Something is missing in his dreary inventory of bodily pains. That zinging in his chest, neck and temple has, for the first time in a long while, nearly disappeared. No. Not nearly. It has been totally absent for perhaps a day or two. That would be ironic wouldn't it? It was mainly that exasperating zing that told him, in louder and louder thuds, it's time to leave.

*Thud. Thud. Thud.*

*Time to go Huan.*

*Start packing.*

But it's all quiet now. Now that he's on the dentist's chair, the tooth hurts no more. Maybe he is after all not dying of a burst artery anytime soon, as he had been expecting for months? Maybe it was just a figment of his imagination to start with? Maybe the long march



from Tsim Sha Tsui fixed it? Maybe something had burst, temporarily relieving the pressure in his system until...?

Until whatever. Cannot plan now. Just let it be.

He is a meticulous planner. He puts everything on a blueprint, then follows it up step by step in a particular sequence, covering contingencies as much as possible. No surprises; surprises are for the incompetent. This one-way trip is different. He has planned it to be different. He has decided to let go, to follow the flow for once, while he can.

From here on, no more plans. Come what may. He has planned no more plans.

For the first time, Song Huan willingly lets surprises take over, leading him to the end. "Surprise me."

So far, as he has always suspected, the surprises have been unpleasant.

## REMINISCENCES

Has it been five days? Six? Not more than seven, he is sure, almost sure.

It's not senility, Song Huan assures himself. It's the stress of walking zombie-like for days, pushing a wobbly wheelbarrow through rubble, giant blisters squishing inside his shoes. He did not have a clear destination in mind or the entire journey fully charted out in advance. He was trying to enjoy the empty feeling of aimlessly following the flow.

During the slow slog north, haphazard daydreams piled upon each other like fallen leaves. One day slipped into the other, mixing a jumbled past with a vacant future. The constant daze was broken occasionally by unpleasant surprises. A twinge or cramp, or the startled escape of hidden animals.

The past few days were the culmination of a journey that began two years ago, soon after he had updated his projection of life expectancy, and concluded that his time was up. Ma had a good laugh. "How can a serious and rational man like you do such a goofy thing?" he asked.

Perhaps Ma was right; but the goofy thing highlighted something sobering. What will his death mean to Sung? And what if he dies slowly, painfully slowly...

He had asked himself that question before, without answering. He was facing Death down at the time, sleeping beside it in the hospital, taking in its sickly breath, challenging it to take him along with Sari, or instead of Sari. "What would happen to Sung if I die?" The thought came, and went; came, and went. He just watched.

Death eventually retreated, taking Sari with it. The question vanished with her. He became numb, not feeling the nauseating worry.

He had worried enough about his son living or dying since the minute they left the delivery room. As euphoria calmed, the portentous statistics returned to centre stage. Two out of two in five years. Both died. That's a hundred percent. Would Baby Song live to celebrate his first birthday?

Finally, he did. The statistics were wrong that time.

Humanity continued with its protracted demise, more or less the way Huan had projected. His forecast could not be wrong every time.

Two years ago, he revised his projection manually, updating the parameters. Just something to do. His new estimate showed a starkly reduced life expectancy of just under seventy-one. He was seventy at the time, therefore due to die soon according to his calculation. The question returned, stern and sober this time. "What will happen to Sung when I die? And if I die slowly."

But expectancy is merely a forecast isn't it? A forecast is a forecast. Reality is reality. They don't always agree. Didn't his own son sleep, eat, poo and smile through the most confidently sinister forecasts?

Ma was right. Projecting his own life-span was goofy; the results meant nothing.

Then the rotten corpse came along, followed by the nightmares. He did not believe in omens but was good at taking a hint, even one from his own subconscious. He started to plan, and prepare Sung for the last time. Then he procrastinated, until recently, when his head started to zing. Not much time left. Let's start packing, old man.

Ironically, the zing that drove him packing is now gone. When did it stop? He hadn't noticed. Can't recall. Oh well, it doesn't matter anymore. What matters now is the end, not the beginning. The end has been mobilised, set in motion. It's no longer a threat that lurks, troubling everyone. It's now his own business, a private matter for Song Huan, the only thing left that has a future.

Looking back, the long-march of life has taken very little time. He can see fragments of the past with uncanny clarity. Just like yesterday, like they say. As he approaches the present, strangely, focus and memories become fuzzy. It is as if he's staring back in time without his reading glasses. The closer it gets, the blurrier it becomes.

When did it start being like this? It must be recent, for he has absolutely no idea.

\* \* \*

One of his earliest memories was a monk sending phone messages under the table. It was his father's funeral.

His parents were diligent accountants with their own small practice in partnership with an old friend. "We sort beans according to size, then count them," was how Mum described her work. When Huan was about to turn six, his father was killed in a traffic accident. He was coming home unusually late one night, after a professional function. According to the police surveillance camera, he spent one minute and seven seconds waiting for the pedestrian signal to turn green, displaying a patience which the officer unthinkingly called *incredible*. There was not a single car on the road all that time.

Huan's father was law-abiding to the extreme. Waiting for the green light was a matter of principle. "If everyone makes their own judgement, it'd be chaotic. We all judge differently, and very poorly when in a hurry," he had told Huan when he was way too young to understand issues of principle.

When the red man turned green and striding, he exercised his right of way, not noticing the 5.2-litre V-10 engine under a red composite body spinning drunkenly around the corner at 120 kph. It must have made a hell of a roar that time of the night, but the traffic signal was indisputably in favour of the pedestrian. Perhaps his father was drunk too but the police said he showed no outward sign of intoxication in the video. He stood attentively, looking straight ahead all that time.

He died on the spot – a spot less than two hundred metres from home. Mother was informed four hours later.

That was Huan's first exposure to death.

He was not quite old enough yet to grasp its tragic nature. The only thing he remembered years later was the funeral. It was a Daoist ceremony. As the only son, he played a central role in sombre costume. It was like being a swordsman in a Cantonese opera; but he was aware enough to know nothing was supposed to be amusing that day.

Loud and clanky music dominated by a blaring deeda trumpet overwhelmed the mournful occasion; perhaps that was the intention. Mercenary monks, beating wooden fishes, gongs and drums, chanted in mesmerising unison. From a child's vantage point, he saw a dextrous monk sending phone messages under the table with his free hand. Huan was fascinated by telephones at the time.

The eclectic monks could also do Buddhist ceremonies, Christian memorials (for a surcharge), and Islamic Janazah (for a yet higher surcharge). It was all up to the clients. To customers without a preference, such as the Songs, they would recommend Daoist or Buddhist; rites they knew best. Since Buddha and Laozi had no taste for pomp and circumstance, the authenticity of their elaborate new-age show could never be challenged. They danced and swung a sword to break the Gate of Hell and scattered rice to bribe the equine and bovine guards.

Mum told him Dad had gone to a faraway land. He was not convinced even then, but nodded to show understanding. In the following year, Mum sold the family's shares to her and her late husband's partner, and joined a large accounting firm as junior director. "Life's more stable that way," she said, mainly to herself. He wondered what a more stable life would be like.

As it turned out, losing his father had very little impact on his daily life. Their maid Rose continued to take care of his needs. Mum continued to be mum when not working. In addition, she encompassed whatever paternal attributes Dad might or might not have had. His parents were similar – nearly identical – in each and every way. The redundancy only became obvious after one had been accidentally removed. The family became more efficient. His parents had been merged, eating and spending as one, in perfect harmony.

Huan grew up in this steady and harmonious environment.

\* \* \*

Song Huan was pragmatic and useful by nature, full of *nous*, and brought up to be even more so. Instead of a mind, he proudly proclaimed that a processor had developed between his ears. It took seventy years and a dramatic change in circumstances to show him there might be something else hidden in the folds, which he had avoided exploring.

After secondary school, he studied engineering in Canada. He returned to Hong Kong in 2035 and joined a Finnish company as trainee. He was a good worker. Young and steady, enjoying challenging tasks, indifferent to tedious ones. He never asked irrelevant questions. He was aiming to be an engineer, a specialist, and happy to leave the rest to others. The company loved him.

Five years later, he was promoted to senior engineer. During a year-long secondment to the Shanghai office, he met Sari.

"God I forgot everything about women all these years!" he told himself.

Sure, sure. But what he told himself was not the whole truth.

He had not forgotten everything about women all these years, though romance had indeed been a marginal affair. He was more absorbed in building a career with nuts and bolts and electrodes. A few girls showed interest. He was a handsome dude with a sound education, good job and concrete career plan. But he found most Hong Kong girls – the ones attracted to him anyway – giggly. Giggles confused him. He did not know how to read them, not to say react with charm.

"Why do girls giggle?" he asked a buddy over a beer, sharing his confusion.

"Cos it's cute, I think," suggested his taciturn friend, a thoughtful young man with deeply furrowed brows that tightened as he gave the subject thought.

"I took Lucy out for Japanese last night. I told her I liked sushi more than sashimi when we looked at the menu, and she giggled."

"Hmm..." The furrow gaped like a toothless mouth.

"It was a comment, an empty remark, a bland statement to fill an odd moment. Not meant to be funny."

"It wasn't."

"That's right. It wasn't meant to be. So I told her, maybe too bluntly, that it wasn't meant to be funny."

"What'd she say?"

"She giggled at a higher pitch. This time, unstoppable!"

"Hmm..." The furrow withdrew so tightly it closed up. "Maybe she found you funny, not what you said."

"Know what? I think that's possible. They all do."

They were his first dates. Typically, after twenty minutes of awkward conversation, he would be calculating, assessing if she would make a good partner for life. Would she be sensible and understanding while he paved his career path brick by brick? Would she be supportive at times of crisis? There was supposedly a fertility crisis out there. Did she look fecund with those tiny hips? Would she be a loving mother? Grandmother? Would she be luscious in bed, for the next forty years? He would be half a century ahead before they

finished aperitif. All the irrelevant thoughts he smothered at work would come out in social situations, and flare.

None of them came close to passing his objective evaluation. These girls were all too shallow, too deep, too loud, too timid, too serious, too easy, too fat, too thin, too smart, too dumb, too tall, too short, too this, or too that.

Too much hassle. Too much commitment. Not worth it.

Huan was a serious young man, an earnest techie. The kind of women attracted to him were from similar stock and in their early twenties, the kind he did not like. They were looking for a textbook husband to show off to old school friends, and to share a lifetime mortgage. Time was running out so let's get on with the check-list. Degree? Professional membership? What do you do at work? Do you have any dream of promotion? You've started saving for an apartment already? How commendable! "What? In Tung Chung?" One girl could not hide her distaste. She told him, jokingly of course, *ha ha*, she fancied bank managers because of preferential mortgage rates. Or expatriates who were provided with quarters in Island South or the Peak. Well, not Tung Chung anyway.

No wonder Hong Kong was a city of bachelors and old maids. Social researchers had studied the phenomenon. Some said the price of real estate was responsible. It had made young people desperate. Having one's own property had become *the* social selection force. Others said those who grew up in a virtual environment of video games were uncomfortable with real humans. Yet others said it had been like that since the invention of free love. In any event, dating had apparently become a lost art among urban professionals.

## ONE NIGHT STAND

Memory has a mischievous mind of its own.

Important information sternly committed to memory is inexplicably lost when urgently needed. On the other hand, reckless moments that are best forgotten might stick for life, secretly embarrassing.

Song Huan analysed everything. He believed there was a reason for everything, but could not find one to explain his unremitting recollection of a one-night stand half a century ago. He could smell her sour skin and cigarette breath. Perhaps the experience was so unlike him that it had left a lasting impression. But when planning his runaway, other possibilities emerged. Strange possibilities, rather disturbing thoughts, especially for an old man.

Could the aberrant derailment from his disciplined life be a rare glimpse of his other side, a side that had been muffled all his life? Did that mean the way he had been for seventy years was just as equally unlike him? Maybe his spontaneous affair released something in him, and inadvertently prepared him for Sari? But that must be stretching things too far. Sari was a love from past lives, he was sure. How else could it click just like that for both? And Sari was beautiful. She, whatever her name was, was ugly. God, was she ever. But irrepressibly memorable.

\* \* \*

He was heading home after a party at a colleague's. A beautiful place that would have cost a successful engineer half a century of salary before tax, food, transportation and shelter. It was his parents' house on Island South. There was a lavish barbecue table and two competing karaoke machines. He had planned to leave early but, after a few beers, ended up being one of the last to leave.



When his taxi passed through the old Suzie Wong district of Wan Chai, he made an impulsive stop at a late-night watering hole. He relished these occasional indulgences, watching weirdoes doing their normal things. Nothing too adventurous, just a taste of an alien atmosphere, and to savour the feeling of not being himself, brewed by a few drinks in the bloodstream. He would suspend his responsible normal self for a few hours, for as long as he knew he was not really overstepping any mark.

The subdued attention of other customers – people who ate breakfast in the evening – gave him secret satisfaction. He was a conspicuous geek in a smoky joint, like someone with a full frontal dragon tattoo in the Royal Golf and Country Club's change room. Everyone wanted to stare, but pretended not to.

Most of them smoked. No one in their right mind there would observe smoking or underage drinking regulations; and no government inspectors in their right mind would visit during these hours. One world closed at five; another one took over.

The regulars chatted insouciantly, competing to be more cool.

Hey, you know, I don't give a fucking shit.

Fuck, no! Me neither.

Ha, ha, ha. No shit, man!

Every now and then, they would throw a nonchalant sideways glance at Huan, betraying suppressed curiosity.

Who's that fucking geek there? What's he doing here?

A corpulent figure smelling like mosquito repellent approached.

Hello Darling! Her bubbly voice had a background crackle, like static.

Hi...

Bright red lips, heavily waxed, glinted psychedelically in the dim light. They parted lazily, all kissing muscles at ease. A slim cigarette dangled jizzily from the bottom lip by adhesion. She let out an unrestrained laugh, propelled from the diaphragm, or lower. She did not giggle. Phlegm bubbles burst in her throat when she laughed. About what, though? Did she just sit down and laugh? The hearty guffaw was no less puzzling than girlie giggles to Huan, just more forceful.

Her deep and thunderous voice rumbled over the background music as if it had a private niche in the frequency band. The pendulous fag threw off smoke, synchronised with her speech like pulses on an

oscilloscope. Huan missed most of what she said; he was thinking about her laugh. Behind the vibration was a certain disregard, a contemptuous defiance of the next arriving moment which fate had lined up. Come on darling, just come along.

Huan felt small and anal. Anal? Now he felt insulted by himself, although he was for the moment not supposed to be himself. He was all of a sudden self-conscious of being uptight and pretentious among a bunch of low-lifers. This can't be true! But nothing seemed true right then.

"What're you laughing at?" He screamed through the music. "You find me ridiculous?"

She laughed so hard she had tears in her eyes, dissolving the lashes. He ordered drinks for both. His irritation had ebbed. In its place was adoration for the enormous presence and palpable confidence of this stranger. She filled the moment, completely. So free of... everything!

Another few drinks later, she had become oddly seductive.

There she went again – talking and laughing simultaneously as if she had parallel voice-boxes. "Aaah, ha, ha, ha! Don't worry. Most people are like that. Don't feel like that about yourself darling. Aaah, ha, ha! Oh, you're so sweet darling; what's your name?" Her laugh triggered a micro-landslide on her heavily powdered face.

"Hey it wasn't meant to be funny! What the fuck are you laughing about!" He was offended by her reaction to his confidences although he could not remember what he had just told her.

Another blast of penetrating and fearless laughter arrived at his face like pressure wave. Residual smoke escaped from her smouldering mouth, accompanied by a sour odour sweetened by volatile lipstick. It paused for a brief second, then blended into the anoxic ambience. Even her smoke rings were unfettered. They drifted off, just like that. Supernova. No waffling. No calculations or sentimental dithering.

"Another beer?"

"Of course. Two more!"

Huan's vision shifted between focal planes like a wobbly time machine. She looked like a mosquito coil as well as smelling like one, but strangely sexy in a bizarre way.

"Could I have one of your cigarettes please?"

"Please?! " She laughed her head off again. "Yes please!"

"Hey, what's so funny? Tell me, really. Darling." He leaned closer, and thought he saw powder sloughing off her face.

He screamed, "Avalanche!" and broke into a guffaw, an unrestrained roar. She joined in at full force.

She had made him laugh just like her, no speed bumps, from deep within, for no reason. Is this freedom? So dumb. But he was in the company of a happy and sweaty person – a real person who was afraid of nothing, expecting nothing. She fucked tomorrow precociously, rather than planning for it. Funny. He laughed, and couldn't stop.

He had an idea. He wanted to bury his face in her immense cleavage.

\* \* \*

He woke up smelling like an empty beer barrel someone had vomited into.

Darling was snoring next to him, one arm over his head, covering his crown with her armpit. Her other arm rested on his thigh. They were facing each other. They might have passed out in the middle of an euphoric embrace. Her right breast, slippery with sweat, pressed against his face. Her weary nipple and bumpy areola appeared unreal from up close. It reminded him of ferrous atoms under an electronic microscope. Branching out from the areolate cluster was a network of purplish and faintly bulgy veins. Half of them disappeared down the mammalian gorge into which he had buried his face.

Her skin had a unique funk. Sour. Huan involuntarily gave it another intrigued sniff, not expecting the odour to stick in his memory for life.

Late morning light charged into the room through bare windows. Her sizeable breasts threw dark shadows over her chest. At the bottom end of her cleavage, a birthmark the size of a pancake dribbled towards the stomach. It looked like Velcro with bristles. Huan suppressed the urge to touch. As she laboured subconsciously to force air into tar-coated lungs, the pelt of Velcro heaved like oil spill, shifting rhythmically.

His head hurt badly. He felt sick.

Some details trickled back.

Oh dear. Oh fuck. Oh no.

He got up quietly, went to the toilet to empty his bladder, put on his clothes and tiptoed to the front door.

"Thanks darling. You were lovely," she said without opening her eyes, then pulled a pillow over her head.

"Thanks. See you," Huan mumbled with one hand on the handle, then got out at a canter. He had not brushed his teeth. Mum had left a dozen messages on his phone. He was still living with her. Rents in the city were out of reach for a young engineer. He sent her a reply instead of calling. "Stayed at friend's last night. Forgot to call. Sorry. Don't worry," then turned it off again. He bought a cheap T-shirt, then went for a long shower and massage at a nearby spa, then a medical check-up.

He did not imagine a one-night stand could be so unsettling. It left a bad taste in the mouth, then compunction for having that bad taste. "I'm disgusted because she's fat and ugly. Not fair," he confessed to himself. He tried pretending that an internal moral code or issue of principle had been violated, hence the regret, but failed.

What's-her-name was not an alcoholic illusion. She was real, vivid, too goddamn real. She walked up and read him as if he had been dissected and laid open with surgical pins. Then she laughed. So humiliating. Ugh! More than humiliation. Something in him had changed, something had become fundamentally different, but he could not put his finger on it.

## SONG

The one-night stand left Song Huan with an emotional clarity that seemed disoriented.

He did his damndest to forget – just one of those drunken escapades at his age. These things happened. But the close-up image of her breast would pop up, staring him blank in the face whenever his mind drifted off, even during work meetings. He was infuriated by how much he thought of her. Giggling girls became more insufferable, now that he had seen a powerful alternative which was not really an alternative. He impetuously devoted himself to bachelorhood.

He did not confuse bachelorhood with celibacy. To balance yin and yang, he would pay occasional visits to girlie bars. Just a pragmatic compromise, he was aware, as long as it's done with clinical discipline, restraint, and sanitation. He used their service responsibly like the emergency in hospitals. To buddies with imminent marriage plans, he would defensively jest with borrowed wit. "Why keep a cow if all you want is a glass of milk every now and then?" Half meaning it; half sour grapes.

"I don't think I have passion. Don't think I want to experience it. Passion is for poets," he told his laconic buddy.

"You've got the genes of two accountants in you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hmm..."

The arrangement worked. He was content, if not exactly happy, devoted to work, buying affordably packaged comfort from womankind whenever he felt his yin and yang losing equilibrium. Everything was under control. Neat, tidy, predictable.

Until he met Sari in Shanghai.

Sari did not giggle. Finns never did. When she smiled or laughed, it would be for reasons that Huan could understand. Suddenly, he was

tormented by passion. Song Huan the romance paraplegic got up and walked, as if commanded by Christ. More, he got up and flew. He seized every opportunity to go to Finland for training or a meeting. He started to write love letters, romantic e-mails, even a poem so overrun by passion it made no sense, and forgot to rhyme.

But Sari loved it.

\* \* \*

Song Huan did not need love, and fell madly in love.

Then he did not want kids. The Fertility Crisis suited him just fine. Sari wanted a baby or two. *Or two!* Yes, a girl, followed by a boy. "Wouldn't that be perfect?" Huan did not bother to disagree. "Sure," he said, knowing the chance of pregnancy to be near zero. He believed in statistics. "In the long run, nobody escapes the dictatorial grip of statistics; not the average guy anyway," he had said. "People want to know what God's like, how he handles things? Forget the Bible. Study stats."

Statistics could be sardonic like God though. Against all odds, Sari was pregnant. A new life was being expected in a big way. To his surprise, pregnancy was not all about life. Sari became compulsively morbid, preoccupied with death. Death was not Huan's favourite topic but Sari's new obsession got him thinking, analysing. What comes after life? He attempted a few conjectures to satisfy his wife.

But they never discussed their most obvious death concern; the death of their baby.

In Hong Kong, the only two births in the previous three years ended in massive funerals. Sari did not raise this with Huan, who did not raise it with her. He pretended not to notice her researching this eerie phenomenon. Privately, he could not help expecting their baby to be stillborn, or to die soon after birth. He tried positive thinking but it felt like insulting his own intelligence. He mentally prepared himself for the likely outcome, and secretly rehearsed staying cool, composed and supportive when that happened – no! no! no! – if and when that happened.

Song turned out to be a healthy little thing. He was born alive, right into a delivery-room party with champagne and hope, plenty of hope, effusive hope, overflowing.

Song started his lifelong job to live on.

Day one, lived. Day two, lived. Day three...

Soon, he outlived the attention span of the journalists camping outside their home, awaiting patiently for Song Sung to die, competing to be the first to report it. – Exclusive! – Day by day, Song gained strength, adding a miraculous sense of life to Sari and Huan's existence. They kept him in their room until he turned two. In the beginning, they got up every half hour to check his breath with a small mirror – a trick the doctor casually suggested would show whether their son was still "alive and breathing", as if the two could happen independently.

"Okay?" one of them would whisper, heart pounding.

A smile from an exhausted face. A nod that jiggled wonton-size bags under the eyes.

After six weeks, night feeding stopped. Huan started to sleep for hours in one stretch. Sari had grown accustomed to not sleeping at all. Motherhood could indeed make a woman remarkably irregular.

Huan wished that Sung were ugly, nasty and colicky so that when he died, it would hurt less. Instead, he was wonderful and adorable, a perfect baby. "When he dies, our hearts will burst." He wanted to say this to his wife, but did not. Anxiety mounted as Song's first birthday approached. Every morning, Huan had to summon up his courage before opening his eyes to scan the room first for Sari (to make sure she was not sitting on the floor at one corner, sobbing noiselessly), then his son. Is he breathing? What's his colour? Not blue please...

He was given one year's paternity leave. It was extended to two with the support of the government. They were two tense and enjoyable years which passed slowly.

\* \* \*

*Miracle! Song Sung turned one!* This or something similar was the headline of the day.

There was overt excitement, genuine jubilation, with an undertone of bathos that verged on disappointment. The suspense was over. Heck, nothing happened. Journalists did not make a living reporting "everything okay as usual." At long last, they admitted openly, though indirectly, that they had been waiting for Baby Song to die. Not that anyone really wished him harm. That would be very far from the truth. They all adored him. Had Song died, the world would have wept for days and weeks, and held candlelit-vigil anniversaries. But the subconscious anticipation of a social tragedy – a tragedy that belonged

to society, not just the Songs – was equally compelling and irresistible. People shed tears for Romeo and Juliet. But if the lovers did not commit suicide, and walked off-stage to live happily ever after instead, the audience would be disappointed. Bathos. Boo.

Sari was euphoric, proud, and triumphant for the family. Yes! They had prevailed.

Huan was euphoric, relieved, and secretly ashamed. While Sari maintained a single-minded faith in Song's viability every second of the past year, he had cowardly crouched over the other side – dark and negative. Was he just being faithful to probability? Was he preserving himself, preparing for the worst? A bit of both? He did not wish to think further. Let it pass. It no longer mattered. For once, he did not analyse.

Logic told Huan his son's anniversary was an entirely arbitrary milestone; but was nonetheless relieved that the psychological threshold had been crossed. His son had become viable, endorsed by statistics. Huan had had enough of death worries by then. Death! What an unexpected acquaintance he had made during this lively period. It could now come out in the open.

He once regarded death as an abstract threat best left unspoken. Then he gave it some perfunctory thought to please Sari, and came up with nothing. Life and death remained utterly inexplicable. The only conclusion he drew was that once life has happened, death is inevitable.

Why fret over something inevitable? Accepting the inevitable calmed him. Realising there was no escape allowed him to plan and pace life more sensibly. Death gives life dimension, makes it complete, with a beginning and an end. Life – the flurry of activities in between – is a bit like a school exam. To do well, he must note how much time has been given to tackle how many problems, and pace himself accordingly.

So he looked at how much time had been given. He assumed he would live till ninety like the average male, and die the day before his birthday in 2102. What should he do in the interim? And in what sequence? He started to lay things out on a spreadsheet, adapting a template designed for construction programmes.

When he scrolled into the future, it dawned on him how different the world would become. On a spreadsheet, it became starkly obvious



that Song would have to survive in a dramatically different world. There had been a mind-boggling denial of what the future held. Everyone still pretended it would be business as usual, forever.

For the sake of the next generation – Song specifically – Huan realised they must stop pretending. The world needed proper shutting down, decommissioning, before too late.



## PLAGUE

Ring around the roses  
A pocketful of posies  
Ashes, ashes  
We all fall down... .

Bugs in your tummy  
Eating you up yummy  
Pus here, pus there  
We all get drowned... .

"I like the song Mama."  
"I knew you would."  
"What does it say Mama?"  
"Just people dying Sweetie."  
"Why do they die?"  
"Germs eat them."  
"But germs are so tiny, and we're so big!"  
"They nibble until we're soft like jelly, then drink us drop by drop.  
And they are many!"  
"Will they eat us?"  
"Probably not."  
"Are they full?"  
"Maybe. Maybe we no longer taste good."  
"Maybe we're dead!"  
"We're not dead. No! No! We're not dead! No! Never! Don't ever, ever,  
ever, say stuff like that!"  
"Sorry, Mama."  
"It's okay Sweetie. Sorry I yelled at you, Sweetie. Come, give Mama a  
hug."

\* \* \*

It happened. It had always happened. They said, on average, three times per century.

That was in the past. Since the twenty-first century, epidemics and pandemics had been striking once or twice every decade, depending on how it was defined, and whether the press was preoccupied with other calamities. Some plagues were alarming, but with so few deaths in the end it mortified those who sounded the alarm. Then, when all seemed well and everyone grew weary of neurotic warnings, a deadly one would hit mercilessly out of the blue.

It was like the viruses had a war plan.

"Now, you take H1N6 to create a panic in Brazil and Japan, confuse them with the unlikely geographic link; make it sensational, but take it easy on lives. Then you birds distract them with an outbreak of H5N1 in the wild. Make it visible okay? I want hundreds of thousands of carcasses piled up for the photo session, maybe somewhere in Alaska. Still, don't bother with the humans yet; tire them out, keeping their guard up continuously.

"You Pigs – *hey wake up!* – work on a nasty mutation in the meantime, better be good this time. Sneak in through Eastern Europe, Central America and Western China simultaneously. Make sure you go for the body count before they develop a vaccine. Questions?"

"Nope."

"Okay. Let's go bugs. Good luck!"

\* \* \*

Some were deadly, but localised.

The Simian-flu pandemic of 2020 killed thirty million in nine months, mostly in Africa. The rest of the world watched dumbfounded, shivering and shrieking. They beefed up the quarantine mechanism. International relief efforts were confounded by the cost of vaccines. Some accused the manufacturers of rip-off margins. Others explained they were a business, not charity.

The *International Community* exchanged impassioned pleas and indignant accusations, urging each other to do something. Before a philosophical consensus on international justice was reached, the virus had retreated, disappeared, probably never to return again before putting on a new coat of genetic make-up. Another patented drug for

the archive. *See? See? We only have a small window of opportunity to recover research investments, not to say making a profit.*

Other plagues affected practically every country with a paltry death toll. The H5N8 of 2033, for example, killed only twenty thousand. Just a dozen or so per country after China contributed eight thousand. It came and went like a hurricane, posturing to wipe out humanity according to prime time news in over one hundred countries.

Then there were the economic consequences.

The deadly Simian-flu was relatively negligible in economic terms. Even the price of precious metals – a key concern for many – remained stable during that tragic year for Africa. Thanks to resolute management policies, strong governments and a hungry populace, most mines stayed open. Once over, people soon referred to it as endemic, inching it out of collective memory. It was just another internal turmoil of Africa's.

The H5N8 thirteen years later was a different story. It raged for five months, with casualties hardly worth mentioning. But air traffic was down by sixty-eight percent, retail down by twenty-two, restaurants and entertainment a staggering eighty percent down. Global GDP slipped fifteen percent, enough to send the world tumbling down another recession. It was devastating for the global economy, a pandemic for sure.

The ranking of plagues depended on priority and politics. Nonetheless, people generally agreed why epidemics had become more fierce and frequent. Climate change, high density livestock husbandry, population density, frequent international travelling, et cetera, et cetera. Same old reasons. These things would not change, and no one could change them.

Conspiracy theorists offered more exciting reasons. Laboratories all over the planet were working round the clock, playing with the genes of bacteria and viruses. They worked overtime to tinker with the deadly unknown under microscopes, cutting and splicing the DNA and RNA of microbial Frankensteins, wondering what might happen to the Company's stock price if this hemagglutinin is surgically mated with that neuraminidase.

One stupid mistake, one inadvertent lapse in safety procedure, one leak for whatever reason, theft.... Terrible thoughts.

\* \* \*

To Song Huan, only one plague mattered. The one of 2066. On the league table, it was neither here nor there – mediocre.

Deaths: about forty thousand. Sad, medium sad.

Duration: twenty-two weeks. So, so.

Affected countries: Nine.

Economic impact: fifty billion DEY (the International Currency Unit introduced in 2032, initially at one to three thousand US Dollars). Not insignificant, but affordable.

A few places were hit harder than others. Hong Kong was one of them, with a final body count of 11,753. Had it been 11,752, Huan wondered, would Sari have been spared by a one-in-eleven-thousand-seven-hundred-fifty-three chance?

Possibly. But it was 11,753, not 11,752.

Swine-flu, they said. How could that be? Pigs were practically extinct in Hong Kong outside frozen meat counters. Huan was neither a conspiracy theorist nor one who would question the professional findings of virologists. Nonetheless, he was puzzled.

So, the pigs killed Sari, or, rather, the mutant of a virus that killed pigs killed Sari. The Swine Flu first invaded Thailand, then mainland China, followed by Canada and a few European countries before making a U-turn to catch Hong Kong by surprise. Within twenty-one days of first occurrence, Hong Kong was at the top of the score board, with the highest number of deaths.

Sari did not make breakfast for her family that day, as was her habit. "Breakfast's the most important meal," she often said. "Nothing's more important than eating together first thing every morning." She felt lazy that day, with a sore throat. Father and son made toast, oatmeal, and soft-boiled eggs themselves. She had an orange, a third of one, then went back to bed. "Mum never goes back to bed after breakfast," Song noted. "Yes she does sometimes." Huan said, unsure. She had been home during most of the past week, it could not possibly be the Pig Flu, he figured.

By the evening, she was in hospital. Ten days later, she was dead.

Huan spent her last three days by her side, watching her slipping away, giving up. The only thing she could utter was, "Go, go, don't let Sung come." Sung did pay a brief visit, and Huan did not leave. Each visit was followed by a heavily drugged quarantine.

He knew the bugs might take him too; but the prospect felt like a relief at the time. The alternative of being left behind was more stressful.

For three days, he sat next to Sari, nodding off continuously. He had to wear a mask, looking like a pig himself. Sari sank deeper into delirium in spite of increasingly strong and experimental drugs. Huan held her hand during the final hours, stroking her hair, not knowing what else to do. The transition was unstoppable. Anyone could see that.

He waited for her to die, thinking nothing, hoping nothing, saying nothing. The room stank of disinfectants and drugs, mixed with urine and faeces. If odour can pass through the mask, why can't the bugs? he wondered. Maybe that was why the doctors and nurses had bigger masks. They came and went, changing the drips, trying new drugs, changing diapers, measuring temperature, imperceptibly shaking their heads.

Only the medics' activities marked the passage of time. Otherwise, life had come to a standstill.

Suddenly, she opened her eyes, as if remembering something that she had meant to tell Huan. Then blink! everything was extinguished.

Ten interminable days consolidated into half a blink, a one-way blink that did not light up again.

Huan sat there, holding her hand, gazing glassily at her pale and peaceful face. He tried to grasp this farewell moment. When exactly did it happen? He closed his eyes to conjure snapshots of their lives together. Maybe Sari could take them with her, wherever she was going. But he was clamped by a total blankness. Not a single moment of their years together would come to mind.

Everything was lost.

Sari, the only person, the only thing he had ever loved with unreserved passion, was dead.

The hospital staff would normally have pulled him away but they themselves were dazed by death and fatigue. They had become very understanding, readily willing to ignore rules and protocols, but not sentimental. They were numbed by bereavement.

"She's gone, Mr Song," a nurse said. Huan did not hear.

"She's gone, Mr Song. Take care of yourself." Was it the same nurse?

Finally, he let go of her icy hand, and drew a deep breath through the mask. Has it been half an hour? Two? More?

"Would you like the week-long quarantine? Or the twenty-four-hour discharge, Mr Song?"

"The quick one, please."

"You know the additional medication, side effects and charges, I suppose?"

Huan nodded. Sari's face appeared soft, but her lips had parted slightly, making her look dead now.

"Just take a rest in the quarantine quarter. My colleagues will guide you through the discharge as well as ash handling and delivery," the nurse said, yanking at tubes, expertly unplugging Sari from the system. Now that Sari was a cadaver, she could do it more efficiently, like taking down laundry from the line. Song Huan cringed.

Cremation would be handled directly by the hospital. The ashes would be sent to the family later for funeral.

The nurse had run out of commiserative words. Thirty-two medical workers had died. The living ones had permanently quarantined themselves in the hospitals, staying away from their families. They simply could not afford emotional support for the relatives of equally unfortunate patients.

Everyone was following their destiny like a zombie.

Huan removed his mask and kissed Sari on the forehead. He intended to kiss her on the lips like he always did, but could not. Not because he was afraid of the bugs. They did not seem to like him anyway. But he felt he could not kiss a dead person in the mouth no matter how much he loved her. A few hours ago, he could. Even one minute before she died, he could; but no longer. It all changed from one minute to the next, he realised, but did not bother to analyse why.



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