

Man's Last Song

FIVE

BATTLEFIELDS

John Johnson ingests a mouthful of soya milk, circumventing the left molar, then gingerly sucks at the cavity to clear phantom drops that he knows may not be there.

Ma and Song watch with an empathetic grimace. John's misfortune is no laughing matter. It reminds them of the vulnerability of their own mouths. They subconsciously tighten their lips, as if to guard the teeth closer. Ma sucks at his own teeth in solidarity.

After telling Ma his encounter with the old man, Song is now eager to hear John's story. So far, all he hears is the slippery sound of an empty tooth, and Ma's sympathetic echoes.

The filling came out about two weeks ago, provoked by nothing more than gentle breathing according to John. He felt a grain in the mouth, and picked it out with his fingers. A teeny bit of tired alloy, stained and ugly; but the hole it left behind felt disproportionately huge. "Ha," he said to Ma, tonguing it for the first time. "I think I've got Tycho in my mouth," referring to the lunar crater. Ha, that was the last time he joked about it.

A moment later, his tongue returned to Tycho of its own accord. Since then, it has not stopped. It has become obsessive-compulsive – thrusting and dabbing all day and, John suspects, all night in his dreams as well. Whatever he eats seems to end up in Tycho, and gets stuck there as if it had extra gravity. His tongue would poke it involuntarily, attempting to dislodge it, but would end up jamming whatever it is further in. He would then revert to suction. Gentle, desperate, luring, noisy, disgusting suction.

While the urge to suck is unstoppable, John knows how precarious the operation is. There may be only a papyrus-thin layer of enamel guarding a raw nerve-fibre directly linked to the part of the brain responsible for unbearable pain. Like a land-mine, it waits to be triggered into a tragedy. Only a matter of time, an unwitting step, a trip. What if he does that in a dream, sucking it with undue force? The premonition makes him cringe.

John Johnson's been through a hell of a lot. His life's been a continual transfer from one battlefield to another. He escaped his

parents' failing home to become a soldier in a brutal war; survived a spiritual struggle with God; and emerged unscathed from the cannibalistic savagery of the corporate world. He'd lived through financial tsunamis and epidemics, and has been coping with the slow death of humanity without losing hope or composure. He is a man of mettle, a tough guy. He never could have imagined that a tiny cavity would drive him to such humiliating despair.

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John grew up in Fort Lumber, Kansas, population 8,377, usually rounded off to ten thousand by the residents. Remarkably, the little town held three Guinness records, including the most McDonald's cheesy quarter-pounders eaten in three minutes. His parents' home on the outskirts was a happy one. A buttress of rock-solid family values; a down-to-earth version of the American dream.

His father was operation chief of a small security company, the largest one in town, in charge of six guards and three armoured vehicles. The guards, each with a bushy moustache and friendly potbelly, waddling with affected vigilance, looked identical in uniform. The armoured vehicles were similarly alike. Grey, metallic, angular. From family pictures on the mantle-piece, he could see they were Dad's favourite backdrops. Here's happy days against the Ford Aurora circa 2026. Here's the three of them beaming next to a newly painted Great Wall Carapace-X.

A vehicle was behind each and every photo on display. A men-only photo was taken in front of Uncle Wally's truck. It was John's first hunting trip. He was clutching a second-hand 12-gauge shotgun Dad had bought in an internet auction for his 13th birthday, his initiation into manhood. From the way he held it, you could tell he was tense about appearing relaxed, and deferred to the more experienced weapon. It had done more, been more, taken life before. John hadn't. Not yet.

Mum worked at the animal clinic, maintaining records, sending bills, counting money and depositing cheques for the vets. The family spent Sundays at church where everyone from "their neck of the woods" was. They shared innocuous jokes and updated each other on gossip if any was in circulation. Life followed the hypnotising pace of inertia. Fort Lumberans complained about the lack of excitement, but counted it a blessing in the same breath. Every now and then, there

would be something real to gossip about, like the medical progress of a cancerous neighbour. Most of the time, they'd just get entwined with ready-made drama in TV soap operas. Occasionally, they would mix the two.

After service, they took turns to set up a barbecue at the park next to the church. Everyone brought hot dogs, burgers and salads. Most of them were fat and jolly, addressing each other as hey big guy or hey big gal. Someone would be on a diet, eating only pretzels. Light beer in coolers waited in the car trunks while the big guys worshipped. Later on they would be drunk straight from the cans slipped inside styrofoam sheaths imprinted with a beer logo. The kids played video games or threw balls or kissed behind the bush. Even the teenagers did not mind being with their parents on Sundays. They were nice people, one big family in a small community that John loved dearly. If he had one ambition, it was for things to stay that way forever.

He was unexpectedly good at school. Unexpected because neither Mum nor Dad were remotely academic, and in all fairness did not expect their son to be. "Now that's evolution," Dad concluded, proud of John. "The Grace of God," Mum corrected him, frowning lovingly at him for mentioning the controversial E-word. Undeterred by good grades, John wanted to join Dad's security firm one day, to be just like him. Failing that, he wanted to pilot the local sightseeing plane which sprayed insecticides when there were no tourists, or be a preacher. Any of these options would have made him a happy man. But life followed its own path. Suppressing ambition was no guarantee of success.

Out of the blue, their happy home was incensed by unrequited love. Dad had been having an affair with the receptionist at the company, a Nancy whom Mum renamed "The Fat Slut" after she had flung shit at the fan. Oh well, men have momentary lapses but *Christ!* it wasn't a momentary lapse. It had been going on for five years although Dad insisted it was only four and a half. Nancy finally got fed up with Dad not agreeing to divorce Mum, an intention which he had never had and, to be fair, never declared unequivocally. Anyway, Nancy decided it was time to make things ugly. "Enough's enough. Fair's fair. I have my principles," she said.

Mum was crying at the top of her voice, screeching to breaking-point. "You fooled me five fucking years for God's sake! You have the fucking nerve to come home and kiss me after you suck that obese

cheesy cunt for five fucking years for God's sake! What kind of fucking animal are you, for God's sake!"

Dad was whimpering, hardly audible. "It's not what you think, Hon. I'm sorry, Hon. Won't happen again, Hon."

John had never heard his Mum swear before. She was a good hymn singer. (So was Nancy. They were in the same choir.) She had a sweet and delicate voice. For someone who never swore, he thought, she had got the hang of it rather spontaneously, with remarkable facility. As fluent as if possessed by the devil. He found it sad and scary.

John was also disappointed in his father, but kept quiet about it. He could tell Dad was deeply sorry. Being a young man himself, he kinda understood Dad was in a way a victim of this man thing. But Nancy? *Oh dear*. Mum was ten times nicer. And five years? He couldn't quite get it. Maybe Dad was actually a coward? He didn't want to think any more about this. In any event, he didn't know how to explain this *man thing* to Mum. She also wanted to forgive after a while, but did not know how. Every time she discussed it, she would unknowingly make it harder for herself to get out.

"Why don't you give him another chance, Honey. Let him come home and start over, like pressing the reset button on a computer." John heard Mum's good friend Pat saying.

"What? No, Pat. No. I can't. He betrayed me. Betrayed my love."

"C'mon, you know he loves you. Men are just weak. He probably didn't mean it. Why can't you just forget and forgive in God's name."

"No. I can't. It's a matter of principle."

"What principle Wil?"

"Fairness! Love! Loyalty! We're Christians, Pat."

He was seventeen. For the first time, he wanted to go away.

He joined the Marines the following year, shortly after the terrorist attack of September 2044. Some fundamentalists tried to launch forty-one simultaneous attacks as a crude commemoration of the occupation of Iraq forty-one years ago. Why forty-one? God knows. Out of forty-one suicide bombs, only two were successfully damaging. The rest were just gross. Nonetheless, the sad reality that these things don't just go away and be forgotten was disturbing. They said ancient peoples have long memories; but everyone was ageing, becoming ancient, haunted by memories and principles.

"We'll return a hundred fists for each and every assault at freedom and democracy. God be our witness!" The President vowed, his

approval rating doubled from 18% overnight. The gods were again out in full force, taking their respective sides. Oil had become even more critical than forty-one years ago. Conflict was unavoidable.

"Think positive, Mum. I'm gonna be a warrior. Someone's got to defend the country against these lunatics, right?" he explained after everything had been decided. She wept, looking much older than a year ago.

Dad had moved to a shabby bachelor suite downtown. John told him over the phone. "I feel bad son. You'll understand one day. Be cool kid." Then he said, "Love you son," and choked up.

"Hey Dad, I'll be fine. Just give Mum time." He wanted to cry too but held back. It didn't feel right. He was his own man now, soon a warrior. The idea was becoming more real by the minute, now that there was no turning back. He was heading for boot camp – scared, sad, and excited.

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Being a warrior was nothing like what John Johnson had in mind. It was a brutal transformation, kind of basic. He was first broken down into raw components – sweat and muscles – then rebuilt with push-ups and duck walks. He marched about in sand and dirt, and proved himself man by taking psychological assaults and juvenile abuse from his officer like a dog.

Sergeant Murray had a permanent glint of venom in his eyes. His front teeth protruded like a cow catcher on an old-fashioned steam locomotive, pushing his upper lip out so much it cast a noon shadow on his chin. His engine hissed maliciously when he bawled at his grunts, his "pussies and faggots." Occasionally, he would call John "fruitcake", a puzzling insult reserved for him alone. That little sinister aberration, with John spotlighted, deeply troubled him. He would have a nightmare every time after Murray had called him fruitcake.

John the fruitcake had to holler back "Yes Sir! Thank you Sir!" while Murray sprayed a lukewarm aerosol of spittle at his face.

John felt he had failed as a warrior. Every warrior he had seen in movies had pride and honour. He had lost both since becoming a soldier. Warriors have formidable enemies and heroic fights. He had neither. Soon after arriving at the battlefield, he even lost sight of who the enemies were. After three years in the Middle East, he also lost his smile. He still laughed, even wildly sometimes, but never smiled.

He had learned hatred in its pure form. It sizzled in his chest, and spread to every cell. He loathed Murray, but was afraid of him. He dreamt of chiselling his teeth out, one every other day. He hated everyone and everything in the Middle East. The underground resistance who planted roadside bombs, martyrs who blew themselves up to save their country, or go to heaven, making a mess. He hated their men and women, their boisterous markets that wouldn't take a break to let the war happen, their food which tasted good but... even a piece of naan bread filled him with disgust and horror. He hated their kids who stared contemptuously at his convoy with sad eyes. He hated their cute little babies who would grow up into contemptuous little kids, then men and women. Every thing was poisoned, yet it was his job to add more. He hated his fellow soldiers; he hated himself and the way hatred was consuming him.

After returning to the States, he visited his divorced parents briefly. He told them he needed to find God, and was going to Florida to do Religious Study. He hadn't really planned it. It just came out like that, and instantly became a decision. Getting out of his military contract was not easy but he succeeded. His had a convincing religious conviction.

It felt like God's will at work.

* * *

God might have willed John to move to Florida, but He wasn't there Himself to receive him.

John gradually cured himself of hatred, and started to smile again, but his loneliness intensified. Unlike his hometown church, or the military, something human was conspicuously absent in religious academia. Soldiers had esprits de corps, and they knew how to make fun of even the most tragic circumstances. In theology, a dense pall of anxious faith blanketed everything.

Most of his fellow God seekers were baffled by the sinfulness of society, pained by human weaknesses, and overwrought by undefined yearnings. How can humans, originally handmade by God, be so remote from perfection? They wondered, but dare not ask. They were disappointed with people, secretly including themselves. *What a lousy design!* But they could not criticise the Architect. They contrived to love His defective creatures nonetheless.

Compressing human nature into an unquestioning faith pumped them up like pressure vessels, threatening to blow any minute. Everywhere he turned, he saw ecclesiastical suicide bombers. Blind, self-righteous, remorseful, rapturous, aggressive, lost, sad.

He became depressed.

During darker moments in the Middle East, he would pray, and see light ahead. Now that he was in a God circle, he had lost his ability to pray. He did not know what to pray for. Gradually, he did not know who to pray to.

One Sunday after Church, he sat down to write. The sermon earlier was about faith and love, again, given by a maniac. On the way home, he questioned himself about where human judgement, inadequate as it was, entered the picture of faith. Where should one draw the line between insanity and religious conviction? Why would the freedom to worship be a noble principle if it made no sense whatsoever?

I better put it down in writing, he thought. I'm too upset and confused to think. Writing things down gave him the distance to be objective. After an hour, the sheet remained blank but for a single sentence he had doodled over and over. "Would Jesus be Christian if he was alive now?"

His answer filled six pages.

For the first time, he focused on the human side of Jesus. What a remarkable human he was: A rebellious and revolutionary thinker in a corrupt and brutal world. He was full of imagination; probably inherited that from his mother. What about the religions founded in his name? If Christ had stayed on Earth after the Resurrection, and lived on with his people, would he have donned a tiara (assuming the Vatican would elect him Pope rather than crucifying him again)? Would he have sanctioned the Witch-hunt? Crusades? Inquisitions? The persecution of Galileo and many others? Would Jesus go on air now, more than two thousand years old, wearing makeup, joining hands aloft with Superstar Evangelists to praise the Lord and ask for a donation?

His answers were no, no, no, no, no. No way.

Jesus was not that kind. Not to John anyway. Was that faith? Or the opposite? He wasn't sure, but sensed Jesus' approval.

Jeez, if Christ himself wouldn't be Christian these days, why should I, John Johnson?

He switched to marketing.

It was a desperate and unplanned move. His pragmatic nature told him to accomplish something, now that he was on campus. Unexpectedly, he enjoyed business school. It was steady, predictable, and promising – everything he had been missing. He also met his future wife, Sue, in Marketing 101.

At the nadir of his life, he started to climb.

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John graduated in 2053, at the age of twenty-five, and joined a large oil company as executive trainee. A few years later, he was sent to Beijing on a promotional transfer. He was living with Sue at the time, and suggested that they might as well get married so that she could come with him on company expense. She agreed.

John enjoyed expatriate life in China. He believed in working hard. For the first time, something he believed in smiled back. He started his days early, and worked most weekends from home. He travelled frequently – at first all over China, later on back and forth to the States as headquarters started to notice him.

To kill lonely time, Sue tried to learn Chinese but it's so alien. She went wine-tasting with other expatriate wives who couldn't tell Coca Cola from Burgundy. She learnt yoga, twisted her back, and had to walk with a cane for three months. She explored China by herself and fell into an open sewer in the unlit countryside of Guizhou late one evening, when John was in Houston.

Finally, she tried leaving him, and succeeded.

It worked out well for both. They were instantly relieved and happier. Sue found a new man and new life back home within a year. John focused on working. No hard feelings.

In 2068, John moved to Hong Kong to take up the post of Manager – Regional Strategy at the Asian Headquarters. He liked his new home right away, but never expected to spend the rest of his life there.

EXTINCTION

John jogs along the Eastern Corridor from Central to North Point most mornings. At sixty-two, his knees are still strong and bouncy, the one good thing he got out of boot camp.

He picks the harbour-front freeway mainly because of safety. Most inner roads are hollow underneath, and have caved into underground chambers and pipes, creating giant pot-holes. Their surfaces are covered with fallen debris from looming buildings which continue to let go of windows and air-conditioners without warning. Being next to the water, the freeway is well drained, periodically flushed by typhoons. The concrete is badly eroded, but strong enough to support the negligible weight of a human for a long time to come. Long enough for me anyway, John thinks.

He turns around at North Point with military precision. He looks at his platinum Rolex Oyster Perpetual to check the time. He does not like its look, but was impressed by the price tag of more than half a million. "Wow. No way." He tried it on in the abandoned shop, and has been wearing it since.

Twenty-eight minutes later, he's back at Central, sitting on his cast iron bollard at Queen's Pier, drinking from a water bottle. He's an animal of habit. If it's up to him, he would keep everything the same, in good predictable order, forever.

The osseous skeleton of Kowloon's vacant skyline sits on the other side of the harbour. What went wrong? How did a vibrant community disappear just like that? And what next? There's always something next, isn't there? Good or bad, always. He refuses to roll over and accept *this is it*. No. Never. Not him. John Johnson does not surrender; he always finds a way out. Every last human is now a warrior, with a duty to keep trying regardless of the odds, to the last minute. He mentally gives himself a pep talk.

But keep trying to do what? Repopulate the planet? Men and women are now fewer and farther between, and old. Besides, he hasn't the slightest clue why everyone is sterile. Being totally clueless bugs him. Ma doesn't care. That bugs him ever more. "So," he would say, sarcastic and apathetic as usual, deriding John for agonising over an impenetrable mystery that's none of his business. "Genesis II – Return of the Consumers – produced and directed by John Johnson. Don't waste time!"

"So I can join you in productive meditation?"

No. He would not give up; he should not. He must try to understand. To try to understand is the most remarkable quality of the human spirit; it deserves respect and protection, not derision. Once we understand, then we might find a way out; we just might.

He and Ma have gone through it enough times. Sure, on the grand scale of things, extinction is inevitable. John understands that. Out of a thousand living things that ever roamed the planet, nine hundred and ninety-nine are long gone – thoroughly dead. This is a spooky place. Death Valley on the Milky Way. Fine, mankind has been around for only a little more than one pitiful minute, if the age of Earth is put into a twenty-four-hour time-scale. He has heard all that before. We're downright negligible, okay, and extinction seems unavoidable, natural, even expected. Certainly not surprising. But wait! No. Not okay. Maybe we're not negligible! Human consciousness is evidently unique. He knows what Ma would say. "But we know nothing about consciousness. And what's unique? What isn't negligible in the grand scheme of things?" That's why there is no point debating semantics with Dao Master Ma. It kills time, though.

What John can't dig – that's how he put it to Ma – is the way in which we are disappearing. So damn puzzling. So helpless. And dragging on for so unbearably long. No Armageddon. No mutually annihilating nuclear wars or collision with a pulverising meteor. No divine floods that submerge the Himalayas. No invading aliens surfing on UFOs. No resisting heroes from Earth. No warriors. No final judgement. "You mean no retrieval of fetid good souls from decomposed bodies to restore justice?" Ma smirked.

No. Nothing like that. Just no more babies; cut off from the future. Human production terminated, like a dated model. Obsolete. *Sorry Sir; we don't make this anymore.*

Homo sapiens – Sons and master Species of Planet Earth, left to die like a beached jellyfish. Isn't it pathetic? Except flies and maggots, nothing else notices – not to say cares – about the death of mankind. We are sorely not missed. If anything, other earthly life-forms appear pleased by our departure. How humiliating. Unfair. Pathetic.

Ma thinks humans had squeezed the environment too hard for too long. Indeed we might have. But what has that got to do with fertility? We had no choice! We were stuck in a closed system. All living things eat and shit; so why are humans the only ones to bear the consequence? And didn't we try to make amends? To restore balance? Didn't we try harder than all the other animals put together?

Looking back, it does seem naive of us to have hollered "Save the Planet! Save Mother Earth!" In the end, Mother Earth is indifferent. She spins and glides regardless, tripping round the sun, oblivious to the absence of her human passengers. She never needed any rescuing. Mankind, on the other hand, is suffering a dreary extinction. One at a time, we are leaving a planet that was once ours. Somewhere along the line, we must have misplaced ourselves in the big picture. We were the ones who needed rescuing.

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Normally, ageing prepares us for death. Today, a tooth gone. Tomorrow, one ear blocked forever. Then the legs go wobbly, kidneys turn gummy, friends become dead, mind goes blank, and the heart stutters. Bit by bit, things go kaput. Then we die.

Sardonically, the human race is approaching death in reverse.

Long-lost beauties are trickling back to tease us with a wonderful tomorrow that we might not see. The air is fresh, the water sweet; the sky is starry and the sea crystalline, teeming with life. No more round-the-clock news on murders, wars, rapes, elections, bankruptcies, corruption, economic chaos, plagues and famines. Earth is becoming lovelier by the day. Even humans are benefiting from the disappearance of their own race. What a wicked design. For the first time in decades, John wonders if God actually exists, with a personality as described in the Bible.

The most ironic rediscovery is people themselves. People can no longer help one another the way organised societies did. That's a pity. But when they do, it is more personal and rational. Difficult circumstances have brought them closer in an honest and open way.

His small circle, for instance, would not have come together in the old days. He and Ma, he suspects, would have despised each other based on their equally fixed but opposing principles. Previously unbridgeable gaps between people like them have closed and disappeared.

Fundamentally, people remain who they are. Looming extinction has not changed their beliefs, values, personalities, preferences, loves and detestations overnight. Obstinacy is a durable human quality. But the situations that engendered disagreements have all but vanished, leaving them holding on to their principles like commandments cast in ice tablets, melting into irrelevance. Have they ever been relevant?

As the hyperactive world dies down to prehistoric quietude, humans become likeable, even to humans. Villains are extinct, or purged from the hearts of the beholders.

HOLE DIGGING ECONOMY

Being Manager (Regional Strategy) of the world's second largest oil company made John feel purposeful and privileged.

The rental value of his office alone, in prime Central, was so ridiculously expensive he could brag about it at cocktail parties. "Can you believe our office rent has gone up to \$260 per square foot? – Per month, not year!" How could anyone not be awestruck by spending power like this?

When he was not eating business lunches, he would take a sandwich to Queen's Pier. It was only a couple hundred metres away, but it would take him nearly ten minutes to walk, pushing and elbowing through the human traffic jam.

He would always sit on the same bollard, at the edge of a gushing stream of people. Anxious boats and impatient ferries criss-crossed at above speed-limit, blaring maritime profanity at each other. All that filled him with raw energy. Sometimes, his favourite bollard would have been taken by a fishing goon. It would annoy and puzzle him. He liked fishing, but the harbour had nothing but minnows, bugs and plastic bags to offer, all smelling of diesel-oil and sewage. In spite of this, some spent their day-off dipping a line into the murky water. "Caught anything?" he once asked. "Na." Just as he expected. Is this some form of Oriental mysticism? he wondered. Zen Buddhism? Undercover cops?

He would leave the mystic alone, and return to his tuna or roast-beef sandwich. For lubrication, he would drink pop zero. It tasted foul, and made his tongue brown, but it contained no energy. Zero. He could have drunk one after another and not got fat.

Lunch-hour was not necessarily unproductive. Scurrying pedestrians made deals over the phone with food in their mouths, catching up with objectives, swallowing, agreeing. John liked that

most about Hong Kong. It worked rather than whined. Hongkongers were always planning and working on something, any something, to make money, or just to feel busy. Given a choice, John realised, however, they preferred luck over effort. The city was obsessed with lucky and unlucky numbers, from car license plates to telephones. Four was inauspicious because it sounded like "death, or fail" in Cantonese. Floors containing the ominous number sold slower. So developers skipped them all, along with the 13th floor, with due respect to European preference, making all buildings sound taller than they actually were. One could actually live on the 50th floor of a thirty-five-storey building after the numbering had been adjusted to avoid having floors with the number four or thirteen. After the third floor came the fifth. One floor above the twelfth was the fifteenth and so on. But the Chinese had learned from experience that good fortune was unreliable, so they backed it up with hard work just in case. A sagacious bunch.

Honest to goodness work ethic. That was what made his old country tick, before con men jammed the clockwork with greed and deceit, and fiat money. . . Oh well, that was capitalism. Not perfect, obviously, but the best system we knew. It was intrinsically fair. Be good, work hard and take risks; capitalism gives you a chance. The higher the risk, the harder you worked, the higher the reward – all fair and square. John agreed wholeheartedly the first time he heard of it in business school.

Expectedly, his buddy Ma Yili thought otherwise. "Capitalism was the most feudalistic and unfair system in human history," he proclaimed, probably just to bug John.

Unfair? Perhaps. All systems are unfair to losers. But feudalistic? John's jaw dropped.

"Yeah." Ma swirled the claret in his goblet, observing the legs. "You know what this is? Long-chain fatty alcohol and esters."

"You have a wonderful way to make everything sound disgusting, Ma."

"Now, enlighten me. What's wrong with hereditary aristocracy?"

"Well," John started cautiously. He knew that every Ma question came with a snare. "Feudal lords passed on their title, wealth and privilege to heirs who often were imbeciles. They had done nothing to deserve the service and loyalty of the men and women who served him. I'm sure you have no problem seeing the injustice in that."

"No, I don't. But I also fail to see how it was different from an imbecile who'd inherited share certificates from Tycoon Daddy, who had done nothing to deserve the wealth, privilege, and a deciding influence on the career and livelihood of thousands of employees. Samie same lah. No?"

John screwed his face into a dramatic grimace, trying to think of a counter argument.

"Actually," Ma continued. "Capitalists were way worse. Feudal lords maintained their own thugs to fend off hungry peasants and devious rivals. Modern lords were protected by the State and its communal force, funded by the tax-paying middle-class whom they ripped off. The modern system was much more unfair and exploitative if you ask me."

"That's why I'm not asking, Ma."

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"Work's everyone's primary contribution to the common good of a society. Work's a fundamental measurement of one's ethic and competence against his fellow men," John stated, ignoring the *déjà vu*. He must have said something similar numerous times, in one of their recurrent debates. Tweedledum and Tweedledee had deliberated everything below and above heaven to pass time. Fine wine and old age had raised their tolerance for repetition, and fortified passion over issues that had long become irrelevant.

"What?" Ma was incredulous as usual. He detested civilised jobs. Mere drudgeries for the sake of maintaining hyper-activities in an overpopulated world. Just a way to chain superfluous humans down to a stupefying routine. "There's only one reason to work: to make a living. Assigning moral value to it is absurd. Is a tiger which follows a longer route to find prey, or kills more than it needs, more ethical than others?"

Work was a sensitive topic. John had been a workaholic, deriving near-spiritual fulfilment from his job. Ma had been a phenomenal work dodger – a "parasite" was the kindest word John could come up with. "Lean back, suck blood, enjoy your cleverness, then laugh at your host." Actually, Ma was worse. Parasites did not laugh at their victims. Ma took pride and pleasure instead of guilt at having fooled the system. "You're a swindler," John said, pointing a finger at his best friend.

After Oxford, Ma spent three years in Singapore working for a medical equipment manufacturer, first as Product Development Scientist, then Senior Scientist. He was subsequently transferred to Shanghai to head their Research and Development Department. With two promotions in five years, he was rising like a corporate balloon when he resigned, ostensibly to become a freelance consultant. To consult in what? He could not say. To some, he would say he needed to find his own space. Most of his business trips were visits to Daoist historical sites or famous kung fu teachers.

In 2056 he ran out of money, and returned to Hong Kong. He found a job with the Environmental Protection Department. It happened to be the first positive response to his prestigious degrees and glamorised CV. His destiny took another erratic turn; Ma Yili became an officer of the environment.

A job's a job; career was not on his private agenda. He had kept a cool distance from his parents since Oxford, and needed an income. Once inside the bureaucracy, Ma had disappeared like a mouse set free in a warehouse. His ambition was clear and simple: to minimise work, and avoid attention. He wore comfy Clarks loafers like everyone else, and slipped them off noiselessly under the meeting-table like everyone else.

According to the official record, his single biggest mark – he left none other – was being Team Leader of a project entitled, "Zero Waste in Ten Years", an initiative of The Hon. David Dib Fu. The Hon. Fu was an elected councillor who suffered from seborrhoeic dermatitis. On a bad day, he would be covered in dandruff, looking like an apparition in the middle of a snow storm. He was unstable in the head in both a dermatological and a psychiatric sense. Nobody wanted the job. They knew it would go nowhere more erratically than other projects that were heading nowhere according to plan.

Ma volunteered.

A long-term assignment with an impossible goal. No imaginable contingencies or tangible yardstick to measure elusive progress. Lots of categorical failures in other international cities to copy from, then benchmark against. *Perfecto!* The memo delegating him the project arrived much sooner than normal. Ma whistled, and tittered like a bad guy in Batman.

Loads of papers from other governments around the world were readily available for cut-and-paste confection. Ma would sprinkle a touch of local flavour himself. "This is the MSG, the most delicate ingredient," he explained to his deputy Peter, whom he handpicked for a general lack of intelligence and initiative. "Too much, and you'd spoil the dish. Too little, you can't cover the original flavour. After MSG, we'd top it off with a few sensational keywords that are controversial and easy to pronounce. Some Councillors would sniff them out, and start an interminable debate. The longer it is, the wilder the derailment, the better."

"Really?" Peter looked painfully puzzled.

"Really. Peter. It works every time."

"Really?"

Time flies, really. Ten years had elapsed. Ma had unblocked his Ren-Du Meridians in the meantime. The Hon. Fu had become bald, making his dermatological troubles more exposed. Strangely, his pathetic appearance had made him more popular with niche voters. When the project team prepared for a small tenth anniversary party, Ma realised that the numbers were catching up with them. To avoid embarrassing queries from amateurs, he suggested changing the project name to "Zero Waste in Hong Kong – A Long-term Goal in Sustainable Development". The steering committee thought it brilliant, and adopted it immediately, without public announcement. "It's a small technicality," the Chairman decided. "Let's not make a fuss."

Since the project's inception, urban trash had increased by six percent after discounting a higher moisture content. Ma's team reported to the Council Environmental Committee thirty-two times, produced twenty-two working papers, six voluminous reports, three city-wide campaigns and eight workshops. According to Ma's private tally, their activities had generated twenty-four dry-tonnes of garbage. "Not bad," he showed Peter. "Could have been a lot more right?"

"Really?"

* * *

Ma recounted how he recycled and reused overseas reports year after year, exaggerating for John's sake.

"They would have made me Departmental Employee of the Year had I been willing to betray my principle of invisibility, and bothered

to fill out the tedious application," he bragged. "I understood the grading system better than most."

"How was that different from" – John paused to find a diplomatic word – "theft?"

"Each and every way," Ma replied insouciantly.

"The Government, your employer, the taxpayers – shit, I was one big one – paid you to do a job. You didn't. You deliberately didn't! but continued to get paid ..."

"Plus an assortment of rightful benefits." Ma interrupted.

"Yeah. You got paid, with benefits, but failed to provide the service society expected. You also infringed copyrights. If that wasn't theft, what is?" John thought about his tax money.

"Don't you worry about copyrights. I always rearranged my reference material to reflect a local context, and acknowledged everyone in the bibliographies." Ma winked. "And hey, society didn't know what to expect. At least that's what it said to me through its elected representative. You can't accuse someone of stealing something if you have no idea what that something is can you?"

"What?!"

"Come on!" Ma was more sincere. "Do you think I, a nobody, could have changed the system? Fu had the popular mandate. When he wanted something done, no matter how ludicrous, we had to do it, or appear to be doing it. The majority of voters didn't think. Zero waste, no more garbage, good idea, let's go, they said. My project, in the hands of an unthinking and hardworking bureaucrat, would have consumed a hundred times more resources, and produced much more garbage. Luckily, I was there to contain damage. I took the project to its inevitable endpoint with minimum consumption and wastage. I did Mother Earth a true favour by reducing unnecessary work, as was my sacred duty as an officer of the environment. Remember the Three-R Principle? Reduce, Recycle, Reuse. That's what I was doing!

"And what's the alternative? To wholeheartedly work my ass off on some idiotic sound bite that was impossible to achieve? To nullify gravity and invalidate mass balance in accordance with Hong Kong Government procedure and policy? To loyally do my official part in the perpetration of stupidity and hypocrisy, and help it grow? Would that be better for society, and make me more noble in your eyes?" Ma raised his eyebrow, then relaxed his face into a wide grin.

"That's oxymoronic polemic man," John mumbled, shaking his head. He went through the rationale again, in search of weaknesses or fallacies. Something had been cleverly twisted, he was sure. It was not the first time he saw Ma attacking unquestionable principles with ridiculous notions put in reasonable words.

"So, Mr Ma ..."

"Don't call me Mister because you don't agree."

"OK, shit-head," John smiled.

"That's sounds much more like you, John."

"So, there were no meaningful jobs in this world? What do you suppose would have happened if everyone sat on his ass picking his nose all day like you?"

"Uh, I didn't pick my nose all day." Ma paused for thought. "Jobs are neither meaningful nor meaningless, although I know what you mean. Small-scale farming? Education? Basic medical services? They are kind of necessary in my subjective view." He then raised his glass. "And the making of this stuff, of course."

"That I couldn't argue with you." John returned a toast.

* * *

Ma got up to replenish their glasses with more *Louis XIII*. They toasted each other again. "Can I give you an illustration?"

"Oh, I've got room for one more."

"Imagine, some nut with a few bucks decides to dig a hole in the middle of a field because, well, he's nuts. Then someone equally compulsive fills it back up. The Hole Digger's pissed off. He hires more hands, creating employment and a following. They research, develop, innovate, and use machines to dig bigger and deeper holes faster. The Hole Filler in response hires engineers to develop machines that back-fill at a matching pace. While this obsessive behaviour flourishes and technology progresses, we have an emerging economy, with dedicated facilities producing increasingly sophisticated machines for Digger Inc. and Filler Inc. Two more lunatic tycoons are in the making.

"These facilities need technicians, labourers, engineers, financiers, quality controllers, marketing people to persuade others to dig and fill, accountants, package designers, insurance agents and logistics backup. They all need food, housing, clothing, education for their children,

entertainment and so on. The government hires more people to hover around and watch.

"Meanwhile, farmers are short of labour; young people prefer the more challenging and fulfilling jobs offered by Digger and Filler. More efficient farming is needed to feed the expanding middle-class. Now, put Digger Inc. and Filler Inc. on the stock-market as conceptual growth stocks and presto! Watch these cylinders fire, driving a vibrant economy teeming with ambitious and stressed-out people holding meaningful jobs. All that, for a part-time hole in the ground, financed by the market. *Ha, haha!*"

"You're so full of shit," John laughed heartily. "I give up. I've had enough of your fallacy for one night. This Louis *EX*-something makes my head spin anti-clockwise. I'm gonna dig a hole now. Goodnight pal."

"Goodnight John."

ABOUT GOD

John was wandering in the neighbourhood when he first saw Ma and the gang working on the hanging garden.

"What are you guys doing?"

Song Huan explained they were diverting the rooftop drainpipe to a storage tank. "Good idea." John introduced himself and volunteered to help. By then, it was again okay to be friendly and helpful to strangers, even in Hong Kong.

John liked Huan right away – an old-fashioned gentleman, his kind of guy. Song's relative youthfulness was refreshing. Ma was witty and amusing, but a bit overbearing in a paradoxically insouciant manner. Their acquaintance felt awkward at first, even slightly tense at times. But they had no one else of similar age and pigheadedness to talk to. Gradually, they became best friends, but continued to suspect a hidden mutual contempt temporarily misplaced.

* * *

They were having after-dinner coffee and cognac to celebrate the first harvest of Ma's hanging garden. It was autumn, but the temperature was still up in the low thirties, and the bugs were cocky. It felt like midsummer except for the occasional spell of dry northerly wind. Autumn's arrival was yet uncommitted. After some enterprising discussions of how they might, encouraged by their anticipated success, expand the hanging garden, Huan started to yawn. Song left with his father. John and Ma chatted on.

"Old Song said you did a lot of work overseas?" Ma was serving John his *first* one-for-the-road.

"Almost everything." John then gave a quick summary of his career, from foot soldier to executive. "After all that, I'm now retired without a pension."

"But you own half of Robinson Road." Ma gestured panoramically with his hands. John followed them to regard the neighbourhood and smiled. "True. All that prime property, without a market."

"That sergeant of yours sounded nasty."

"Oh, he was the biggest asshole I've ever met. The way he treated the Ali Babas was... unspeakable."

"What'd he do?" Ma asked too quickly, then realised he really did not want to know.

"I'd prefer not to talk about it. Unspeakable." John's tone had darkened. "Perhaps his loudmouthed moralisation made him more creepy. Infinitely more creepy."

Ma nodded without commenting. They fell silent for a moment, then John said, "Looking back, Murray wasn't all bad. He made me determined to get out. Without him, I might have stayed. I didn't know what to do next. My life would have been very different if I had stayed in the Marines. It's strange how one thing leads to another."

"Life's like that isn't it, a series of connected unknowns."

"At the time, it felt like stumbling from one disillusionment to another. Whatever I believed in always turned out to be different, something disappointing."

"Don't you think that can be relieving?"

"What do you mean?"

"Disillusionment. Losing faith in templates. Destroying expectations. Doesn't it feel kinda good with a big sigh?"

"Easy to say now. But I was brought up to have faith. Beliefs were my headlights on a dark highway. Losing them one after another was scary."

"You still believe?"

"Yeah," John said without hesitation. "I still believe in God although I ceased associating Him with the holy books long ago. Someone has to create and regulate this vast and strange universe out there."

Ma smiled politely.

John continued: "And – I know it might sound crazy – I believe the Fertility Crisis will somehow come to an end. I think humans are here for a purpose; God wouldn't dump us just like that."

"Mmm," Ma grunted. He wanted to keep his mouth shut but failed. "You surely must have thought about who created and manages God, and who created God's creator."

"Sure, I have."

"So who are they? One at a time please!"

"What's a muffin made of?" John sat up and asked.

"Pardon me?"

"Just tell me what muffins are made of!"

"John, I don't eat that crap. Why? Sawdust and pig fat?"

"Close enough. What if I tell you they're made of flour, eggs, sugar, water and other items. Would you be happy with that answer?"

"Sure...", Ma responded dubiously.

"Why don't you ask what flour, eggs, sugar and water are made of?"

"Because ..." Ma was going to say because he *knows* what these things are made of, but quickly realised it would lead to endless layers of the same question; an infinite onion.

"So, you know what I mean." John winked, pleased like a prosecutor who had successfully trapped his victim in cross-examination. "Big or small questions, we have to stop somewhere. Correct me if I'm wrong Ma; in Daoism, don't you stop just as arbitrarily and accept that whatever is beyond is unknowable, so you leave it unnamed? Dao can't be named, period. Fine, very sensible.

"I'm doing the same. Only I call it God because that's the name I grew up with. *My* God is just as unknowable and omnipresent. Perhaps the only difference is that God cares and Dao doesn't. I want my God to care, so He does!"

"So you have God at your command."

"You said that. I didn't." John theatrically crossed himself.

"But as you said, God has been institutionalised; and a lot of damage has been done in His name."

"True, but that isn't my God. Those weren't God's problems – just human follies you see. All good ideas are eventually corrupted by man. That's why I decided Jesus Himself wouldn't be Christian. Look at all the sorcery and superstitions that've grown out of Daoism and Buddhism. Although they weren't fanatical or organised, do you think Mr Laozi and Gautama would have recognised their own teachings in practice?"

"Good point," Ma conceded. "But there's still one fundamental difference."

"Which is?"

"Daoism and Buddhism recognise an infinite mystery lying beyond the limits of human cognisance. An absolute deity, on the other hand, blocks our way forward. God's a dead end. That's why theistic superstitions tend to be fanatical. Other than that, I fully agree with you."

John was pleased. This supercilious Ma fully agrees with me? He used the opportunity to shift the focus on Ma instead. "I suppose you've never believed in a god?"

"Oh I have. Very much so, in fact. I was extremely God-fearing in my younger days; the same God as yours, before He changed His will as to my faith."

* * *

Ma's parents, like most Chinese, were religiously pragmatic. The gods can be good and powerful and all that, but why bother worshipping them unless it brings some potential benefit such as money and health in return? Isn't that the fundamental reason for having a filial relationship with godheads?

Most of the cultural rites they knew were purportedly Buddhist or Daoist, or eclectically both, all funeral or festivity related. Put three sticks of incense in an urn, bow, ask for a blessing – two if they're simple – ceremony concluded. Eat the offerings, and hope for a favourable miracle.

Each of them had been to different brands of Christian services, mainly weddings. Some girls became Catholics so they could have a romantic church wedding rather than one officiated over by a monotone civil servant with bad breath, wearing a polyester tie. In church, Yong and Janice Ma would rise and kneel with an anticipatory instinct sharpened by years of speculating in the market, and chat merrily through the sermon as befitting a happy occasion.

Had someone told them Buddhism and Daoism were atheistic philosophies, they would have been baffled. "What's atheistic?"

They knew Islam was another major religion from the Middle East, all the time fighting with Christianity. That was the extent of their religious knowledge.

Nonetheless, they shared a number of attributes with the pious. Humility was one. They were humble before god, any god. "God rules the universe. We are powerless and at his mercy so just pay respect!" Charity was another. When requested, they would donate at the going

rate whether to a church, temple or mosque, provided it was tax-deductible. "All religions teach people to be good. To support with a few dollars is good for karma." Then they had hope – the linchpin of any faith. They hoped for big wealth, good health, and enhanced karma in return for the donation.

Whether god was male or female, Jewish or Greek, Indian or Chinese, temperamental or dotingly loving, was irrelevant. "What does it matter? Not up to us to decide or change so why waste brain juice?"

"Treat gods like emperors. Show respect and keep a safe distance, especially when so many claim to be the one-and-only, and you're not sure who'll win," his mother advised on a subject she preferred not to discuss. She was worried by her son's recent religious fervour. "Be open-minded. Don't put all eggs in same basket. What if you pick the wrong god? You get punished! What for huh?" It dawned on Ma that open-mindedness was more than a virtue. It was also a hedging strategy when it came to betting on an unknowable Divine.

Like many religiously indifferent parents in Hong Kong, they had sent Yili to a Catholic school. The Catholics' grip on the education system had been established in the colonial days. The British were not Catholics, but after a terrible storm wrecked Macau, in the second half of the 19th century, the Macanese flocked to Hong Kong, which then became well-stocked with nuns and priests.

Ma's school was operated by the Salesian Brothers. Attached to the school was an urban monastery fenced off from the depraved world by rusty chicken-wire. Everything was old and dark, mysteriously other-worldly. The green opaque windows, permanently closed, captured young Yili's imagination. A reinforced concrete crucifix – the sacred icon that puzzled Ma later, when he had become sceptical ("Why do we worship the torture gizmo that killed Christ?" he would eventually ask Father da Silva who taught him science) – loomed above a low marquee, overlooking a dusty courtyard and a traffic jam six feet on the other side.

Ma wanted to be inside one day, to be privy to Divine Secrets, studying arcane scriptures behind closed windows, chatting with God. He decided to join the priesthood as soon as he could.

In the meantime, he felt the burden of Original Sin. Alien guilt tormented him. He could not sleep. He would stay up, kneeling by the bed, mumbling "Hell Mary, full of gwace..." (it was only much later,

with better English, that he realised his inadvertent blasphemy), slipping a plastic rosary through growing fingers. Bead by bead, he discharged his abstract guilt, petrified and insomniac.

He wanted to get baptised; it might help him sleep.

Mum was worried. "Have you noticed the dark circles around his eyes? What if he becomes a priest and lives in temple? Then we have no grandchildren," she told her husband. "You better talk to him."

"Don't worry lah. Leave it to me," Ma Yong promised, looking confident and cheeky.

"OK to baptise of course," he told his son later. "But not before you get your Dwiver's License."

"Huh?" Ma Yili was confused by his father as usual.

"Say pahdon. Not huh!"

"Pahdon?"

"Religion is deep." Ma Yong paused to nod contemplatively. "Deeper than dwiving. If you can't dwive, you're too young to pick a god. Huh?"

"But ... "

"No BUT lah, only a few years. Twy weading my car magazines first, okay?"

Time passed slowly in those young and graceless days. Meanwhile, Ma was corrupted by the Church's historical adversaries: science and girls, *inter alia*. Irrelevant questions bubbled devilishly in his mind.

After Father da Silva's lecture on Newton's Laws of Motion, Ma merged his newly acquired scientific knowledge with biblical scenes. What would be the velocity of the Ascension? He mused. Did Jesus take off like a rocket? Or majestically like a king? His quick calculation showed that the dignified approach would have taken many hours for Jesus to disappear from sight. Did any of the Apostles leave halfway? It would have been rather tedious watching the Lord rising for a whole day wouldn't it?

On the other hand, Christ taking off like a rocket would be so unthinkable....

Ma was becoming annoying – as teenagers are prone to be – to his Catholic mentors. His soul was drifting further from salvation. The drift soon turned into a flight.

* * *

"Where I came from, you'd be shot for that!" John laughed. "You can't take the Bible literally. I loved my church; all my friends were there. They were good folks, genuine, much more Christian than the ecclesiastical crackpots I later met in theology." He paused to bask in the nostalgia of his childhood community. "So you got rid of God, and replaced Him with Science?"

"It wasn't quite that sophisticated. I was just going through a smart-ass phase. You know what it's like." John felt like saying "You mean you're past that?" but kept his mouth shut on a straight face. They didn't know each other well enough yet.

Ma continued, "Perhaps, for a little while, science was my new God. But I soon realised the more I learned, the more questions I faced. The mystery wasn't resolved; it got deeper instead. I had kicked the church out, but only pressed the reset button on God."

"I know what you mean. I did the same. I saved God in my heart and chucked the rest. So what happened when you pressed reset?"

"I felt empty, unfulfilled, and horny."

"Horny?"

"Yes. God was toying me with puberty at the same time. I had to manage pimples and girl fantasies while going through a spiritual crisis. Imagine."

John chuckled.

"Anyway, science did not become my new God. My old God was multi-functional. He gave me a blind sense of purpose, which was a lot more reassuring than a clear sense of no purpose. But now that my eyes were open, I couldn't go back. I was stuck."

"So what happened?" John urged like a kid.

"Gradually, I invented my own prayers. I needed them. I was too used to them. Hooked you might say. So I concocted my own spiritual methadone."

John laughed again. "Did it taste like orange juice?"

"I re-established my spiritual bearings with a mixture of science and exercise. Cycling and swimming were my early meditations. Eventually, when in Britain, of all places, I learnt Tai-chi and *Qigong*, and discovered Buddhism and Daoism from my Scottish landlady. Know what, before then, I thought Buddha was one of the Indian gods.

"Slowly I found a renewed sense of awe, a wondrous sense of peaceful awe that keeps me in perspective, humbled but not depressed.

I quelled anxieties without stopping to reason or search. I now have a personal understanding of God that's magical, intelligent, peaceful, and beautiful rather than dogmatic, ridiculous, tempestuous, and scary. I finally had God tailored to suit my nature."

"Interesting," John said contemplatively.

"And, you know what?"

"What?"

"Lately, when I look in the mirror, I can see a halo around my head."

"Don't worry. Just senile cataract. Try Vitamin B12 or reincarnation."

QUEEN'S PIER

Fishes have a memory of only a few seconds; John could not remember where he had read that.

"Bullshit," he thought, as he watched the flurry of activities around the sunken barge. The supposedly forgetful creature evidently recognised his looming silhouette, and associated it with a tiny shower of ancient crumbs. They were warming up their fins and jaws for the imminent contest.

John was sitting on his bollard at Queen's Pier. He came here each morning after the run to read, feed the fish, then drop a line when lunchtime neared. When he did not feel like fishing, he would daydream, or give the bollard a coat of paint. It was the only object in all of Central that still gleamed with artificial vanity.

Fifty metres away was City Hall, a few ugly square blocks from the 1960s. It escaped redevelopment because by the time conservation had become belatedly fashionable in Hong Kong, most old buildings had been dumped into the harbour to make land. Having survived the process of elimination, the City Hall became a classic by default. Dead things have fates too. John now stored his fishing tackle at the reception hall.

The harbour, once a receiving body of millions of toilets, was crispy blue, teeming with wide-eyed and unsuspecting life. A colourful fish called Green Coats was John's favourite. It had a parrot-like beak adapted to crack sea urchins, and silky smooth flesh under flamboyant turquoise scales. Post-modern fish may not be forgetful, but they sure were dumb, ready to bite at anything. A piece of yarn or a strip of plastic would make good baits. Like the trawlers that used to scrape the harbour's barren floor a few times daily, fish had become similarly plentiful, desperate, and stupid. There was after all an advantage in being an endangered species yourself while other edible ones thrived.

He dropped the last handful of crumbs and rubbed his hands. The fish leapt for them, making slippery flip-flop sounds. They reminded John of the stock-exchange floor, with brokers bumping around like pinballs. John found the submarine bustle hypnotic, like campfire. He could watch for hours.

A giant shadow flitted past. The barge fish vanished instantly as if by magic, then reappeared just as fast. So fast, that John was unsure if anything had happened at all. A giant fish? Momentary blackout? Shadow of a huge bird? He looked up. A few kites glided haughtily by, looking down at the world, searching for rats. None of these. He looked out towards the sea, and caught a blinding reflection of the morning sun.

Then the shadows returned. This time, they surfaced, and splashed.
"Ooooh..."

A pod of dolphins leapt about thirty metres ahead, Chinese White Dolphins, pink in colour. Before he recovered from the shock, they had circled back. Five, perhaps six, seven? They jumped and dived in perfect synchronisation, clicking, squealing.

"They're so happy...", he murmured.

* * *

"It wasn't an accident," John concludes, still visibly euphoric. Tycho has been momentarily forgotten. "They spotted me and turned to check. It was deliberate."

Ma wants to remind him of Tycho just for fun, but decides against it. John needs a break from that empty molar. "Wow," he says instead. "Dolphins in Victoria Harbour – our world-class confluence of sewage and injected chlorine. Don't know what to say. Too bad the Environmental Protection Department isn't here to claim credit."

"That's right." Song seems more excited than John. The dying old man's eyes have finally been purged. "They're super smart. They must have recognised that you're human, a long lost friend or... enemy, whatever. So they jumped to say 'hi'."

"Or to squeal *catch me if you can*," Ma added.

"That's exactly what I thought," says John. "You've heard me grumbling about human extinction before. To me, human consciousness makes us unique. Unlike the gazillions of beings that went before us, we deserve special consideration. When I saw the dolphins this morning, it dawned on me that we might not be so

unique after all. They seem to know something we don't. I wish we understood their language. We could have learnt something that'd make a difference."

"John, if they knew something that we don't, and we understood their language, we still wouldn't have listened to a bunch of fish. Otherwise, we'd not be human."

"They're not fish," Song corrects Ma, who returns a *duh* face.

John continues. "Like a simple and wise guy with a big heart, they're not holding grudges against us for what we did to them and the oceans. They probably pity us instead, and leapt to say 'hi' for old-times' sake."

"Hello?" Ma waves both hands in front of John's face.

"I know I sound like a sentimental fool now but, it was... it was... awesome. If you were there, you'd be the same. I guarantee."

"It's experiential Shi Fu, your favourite explanation for everything. Understand?" Song turns back to John. "So what did you do?"

"What could I do? I waved after them like a dumbfounded kid at the Ocean Park, refusing to leave after the show. I felt like weeping but couldn't. Don't ask me why."

"Why?" Ma asked.

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