

# **MAN'S LAST SONG**

**T H R E E**

## QIGONG RHAPSODY

*Qi* rumbles through Ma Yili, flushing his meridian channels, warming the Dan Tian – an abdominal pocket behind the navel where his bladder and intestines are.

Most people do not normally feel the presence of internal organs unless something has gone badly wrong. To Ma, that's just another thing wrong with the normal person. He neglects the body for so long, taking it for granted, until the only connection left is the emergency alarm; he only feels the stomach when it aches, rather than sharing with it the pleasure of digesting something delicious and healthful.

He can actively direct *Qi* with his breathing, which is one of a few ambiguous meanings of the word *Qi*. What else could it be? Flux of neutrinos? Expression of other alpha beta gamma bits? he used to wonder. Gradually, he gave up intellectualising it with the same cleverness he once employed to study equally quirky entities sanctioned by modern physics.

"To understand these things, you can't think forcefully," his mentor Linda Scott once said.

In the end, be it *Qi* or some ephemeral subatomic phantom, it's all in the mind isn't it? A steel door is practically empty in atomic terms. Just a bunch of electrons buzzing between a matrix of nuclei. In spatial proportion, merely a few specks of dust zipping between raison-size clusters stuck at the corners of a grand ballroom. Should the electrons freeze – if the metaphoric dust should settle – everything would vanish.

Weird? That's science... or *Qi*...

There's nothing. A door is substantially *not there* according to science, so is the physicist, Ma reckons with due humility. Not there. Nothing. Zilch. Buddha was right wasn't he? But even the brightest or dumbest scientists don't attempt walking through doors. Neither did Buddha.

Understanding is one thing, believing is another, perception is yet something else. In the twilight zone of existence, reality slips, slides and teases. The great 20th century physicist Niels Bohr said "reality" does not exist independent of observation. His contemporary, Heisenberg, told us that the reality that can be put into words is never reality itself. Were they Daoists?

Perhaps *Qigong* reshapes reality with wayward bonds and psychedelic charges, as hallucinating drugs do? After practising for decades, Ma still has no idea. It took him years to clear the meridian channels, to make room for the free flow of *Qi*. Now that he has attained this wondrous sense of void, he can let in... in... and in. Something fundamental and omnipresent, older than the universe itself, seeps into him, waking his spine, electrifying his being. Or is it the other way round? Is he dissolving into the infinite background, like a fizzy tablet in water instead?

Yes, all in the mind.

The cosmos, so very big, is no bigger than a teeny-weeny singularity. Perhaps singularity could be reconstructed in the mind, tugged behind the bellybutton. Ridiculous; but why not? If something so incomprehensibly tiny could give birth to the universe... maybe the fathomless complexity of a physicist's macrocosm could also be condensed into elemental purity, back to nothing. "In a flat universe, all the energy adds up to zero." He learned that in Physics.

It started with nothing, and will end in nothing.

"I'm nothing," he lets the thought echo. "There's nothing out there."

What can be more peaceful than me, being nothing, worrying about nothing?

How long has it been? Minutes? Hours? Aeons?

Time bypasses Ma when he meditates. But somehow, part of him knows. Dozing bus passengers always wake before their stops.

*Qi* radiates out of his *Dan Tian*, caressing ageing vessels, massaging aching muscles, fortifying stiffened joints.

\* \* \*

Ma once speculated *Qi* to be the ultimate element he hoped to isolate in a giant accelerator. Ultimate – what an extreme state; a serious word used too lightly. The ultimate element must be absolutely basic. What can one say about something so elemental, other than it's the very first step from *there isn't* to *there is*? The fundamental essence of all things must be that simple; indivisible. It has to be omnipresent purity without mass, charge, spin, dimension, smell, flavour, beginning, or end...

It just is.

Shouldn't have a name. The *Dao* that can be described cannot be real... Laozi said that. Heisenberg said that. Anything with a

describable feature can't be truly and ultimately fundamental can it? It's indescribable, unnameable. We exist because of a transient disruption of the primary state of affairs.

The resultant existential stir, Ma thought, perhaps still thinks, could be *Qi*. The universe, the one that we see, the big wide expanding thing out there, is the result of a disturbance, a cosmic bruise. Call it the Big Bang, whatever. It's nothing more than a temporary divergence, unmitigated stress, of the fundamental state. Like a bruise, it will disperse and heal in the fullest of time – when it all ends.

We won't be there. Nothing we own will be there. Nothing we've ever fought for or believed in would survive the healing, when the cosmic bruise settles back into neutrality.

Meanwhile, everything that exists does so at an elevated stress level. *To be* is waiting to heal, to return to ultimate basics, to be again *not to be*.

That's why things are unstable. They are unstable the moment they came into being – the moment they *began* coming into being. Status quo at any instant is not sustainable.

To Ma the Daoist and physicist, *Qigong* Master and irreligious spiritualist, the concept became self-evident after years of contemplation. Then it became far-fetched and confusing, impossible to fathom, simply weird. Then it cleared up again.

Then it went away completely, and stopped to matter.

*If it is, it doesn't matter.  
If it isn't, it doesn't matter.*

## AWAITING DEATH

Whatever *Qi* may be, it seems to be losing umph lately, deflating Ma at times like a leaky old tyre. He has to work increasingly harder at getting it going, flowing as commanded. Nebulous aches – just minor, gnawing nags hiding dormant in every human body – seem to be waking from hibernation.

Perhaps he's just being oversensitive to his body, magnifying every minute change it inevitably goes through from time to time.

"Listening to your body isn't enough. Live it, Yili. Feel it from within. One day, you might find out where your body and soul meet, and through that discover a new dimension," Mary Scott had told him. He felt like saying, *Pardon me?* at the time, but didn't. He decided to keep an open mind, and give himself time to discover.

He has taken good care of his body and spirit, and they have responded well, so far. He will soon turn sixty-nine, but he's as fit as a thirty-year-old, though he can no longer remember exactly what being thirty was like. It makes no difference. He didn't feel old, period, until recently.

Sixty-nine is nothing for a *Qigong* master. Hadn't he woken his spine, mobilised the *Ren Mai* and *Du Mai* meridian channels years ago? Clearing these meridian channels, unclogging the gate points yogi called chakras, is the ultimate challenge in *Qigong*. The rare individuals who have achieved this can supposedly live on and on, up to hundreds of years if they don't get hit by a car.

"Sounds like Father Abraham was a *Qigong* master," Young Ma had commented with a straight face, meaning to be impish.

"Who's to say he wasn't? Or that he didn't live that long?" his teacher explained. "Life expectancy is exactly what its name says. An expectation. Infants' *Ren* and *Du Mai* are not yet blocked. Compared with adults, they're nearly indestructible. Their bodies carry very little pain, and heal miraculously well, like wild animals. That's our natural

state. Then we block them with anxieties, indulgences, drugs, bad food, improper walking, sitting and sleeping, and too many expectations. Abraham could have been one of those gifted individuals, like Laozi, who knew how to be in touch with his body."

"How long did Laozi live?"

"No one knows. His life and death were shrouded by myths and legends, probably intentionally. Chinese Daoists who had attained enlightenment invariably withdrew, disappearing into their own space."

Maybe Linda Scott is still alive, hiding in her own dimension? When Ma unblocked his *Ren* and *Du Mai*, she was still in touch. Her short response was, "Well done. You're born to see the way. Now forget about it. Let it be, and live well."

*That's right. First, forget.*

*So what am I fretting about now? Death?*

Can't be. Death means nothing to Ma. He had philosophically resolved the ultimate stage of life long ago. But these days, the possibility of getting stuck between life and death has started to disturb him. He would meditate and purge the thought. Done. Gone. But before long, it would creep back, mousy quiet, hook it self to a corner of the cerebrum waiting, watching, gaining weight. He doesn't fight it. *Let it sit for while, and leave.* But it doesn't. Day by day, it whispers *vulnerability* to him. "Hey, old man, life's precarious without medicare. A slip can cripple you. A burst appendix is fatal. A minor stroke? Huh, no such thing. All strokes are major. Even a bad cut can kill. You're not afraid of dying are you? But many things can make life unbearable, torturing slowly. Look, a broken tooth may hurt so much you'd have to yank it out with a pair of pliers without anaesthetic. Ouch! How do you deal with that philosophically? Another breathing exercise?"

*Nonsense! But...*

He wonders if he should leave this tiny community like Song Huan did seven years ago, to be alone, to wait for his own death in peace. Huan was seventy-two, only seventy-two. Old at the time to him, but no longer.

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Song Huan was the one who started these morbid contemplations. He obviously had nothing better to do than calculating and recalculating the doomsday scenario, to pass time.

"Look Ma, according to my model, life expectancy has dropped to just over seventy, like, for me, right now," he announced one day, pointing at his own nose. "If we die slowly, it might be lengthened slightly. But that'd be cheating statistics with a bit more unnecessary pain." Ma could see agony behind his brave face.

"Thanks for the cheerful thought, Mr Song."

Song Huan was a typical engineer. He calculated and scheduled everything, including death. When everyone else was busy with random extrapolation about the Infertility Crisis, he projected how the world might wind down using just a spreadsheet programme. Ma had seen the pile of printouts. As a hopeful gesture, he had allowed for a "recovery scenario" in case fertility resumed as unexpectedly as it had ended. This prospect was now remote, as people aged and contacts became scarce. Otherwise, given the huge number of variables and the simplistic approach, his predictions had been impressively accurate.

"Substantial societal meltdown by 2085: world population falls below critical mass," was one of the remarks on his printouts. He estimated a global critical mass of one hundred million. Hong Kong would be left with fewer than a hundred thousand inhabitants. It turned out the *meltdown point* was reached a full decade earlier. Perhaps the population had dropped faster, or the social institutions were less tenacious than he had assumed. Who knows? Censuses had long ceased by then. In retrospect, Song Huan also thought he had underestimated the devastating power of what he called *Batch Impacts*: pandemics, famines, mega-typhoons, floods, and so on.

In addition, when electricity was turned off, longevity nosedived. Without electricity, the world ballooned into unreachable distances. The extant humans, huddling in small isolated pockets, rediscovered what the meaning of life had been for millennia. Water, food, sex and shelter.

Nothing else matters. This time, not even sex.

Huan trained Song to be physically and mentally tough, to be ready for survival in a dying world. "Don't question. Survivors don't question. They just live," he told his son.

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Shortly after Huan's seventieth birthday, he brought it up with Song for the first time: "Sung, what would you do if I got sick?"

"Take care of you I suppose. Why? Are you okay, Bub?" Song was more puzzled than concerned.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine, just getting old; old people get sick differently. I might become sick all the time in the future, you know."

"You may or may not," Song shrugged. "You're fit like a bull, so why so morbid suddenly?"

"I'm not morbid, just realistic. I always try to see things a step ahead don't you know?" He smiled. "Without medicine and young nurses, you can't possibly take care of me when I'm really old. We must be sensible. Your survival depends on it." Huan paused to let Song register that it was a serious message. "Know what? I'm relieved I won't be dying in a hospital with tubes coming out of every hole, and a sloppy nappy between my legs."

"So what're you going to do?" Song asked, even more puzzled.

"I read somewhere that old elephants hide to die alone. I think it's a dignified idea."

"What?" Song gave his father a loving and condescending grin – the kind that parents give small kids, and big kids give old parents. "Bub, we're not elephants. They eat bananas with the peel on."

Huan regarded his son, returned a kinder version of the same smile, and sighed imperceptibly.

Over the next two years, Huan would bring the subject up every now and then. He would focus on pragmatic issues, and simulate scenarios – what if this and what if that. What if he had a stroke, or was crippled by a bad fall, or came down with diabetes? What could Song do? What would their lives become? Song could see the longwinded nightmare his father was conjuring up but they had to face many nightmarish hazards anyway, so why worry about what might or might not happen? People went to sleep and woke up in heaven all the time, neat and tidy.

The elephantine death ritual was cited often. When Song finally remembered to look it up in the library, he couldn't find any reference to it.

"I know you'll take care of me, but we must be sensible under the circumstances..."

"Okay okay.... With a father like you, how could I not to be sensible?"

"If I become bedridden, you'll have to check on me everyday, feed me, wash me, help me pee and pooh, wipe me after I've shit the bed."

"Isn't that what you guys did for me when I was a baby?"

"Yes but you got out of the habit sooner than we wished. Your mum actually cried the first time you wiped your own ass, performing proudly for us. Taking care of a baby fills you with hope and joy, you see. That's why people love them." Huan composed himself. "Old people can shit the bed for years."

Song didn't say anything.

"Besides, geriatric shit smells a lot worse. The sulphur content and acidity strengthen with age."

Song didn't find it funny, and didn't say anything.

"Think clearly, son. Don't force yourself to secretly wish me dead one day. It'd crush your heart, and leave a nasty scar forever."

Song didn't say anything.

After a while, he got used to these discussions, and understood the issue from his father's *sensible* point of view.

But...

\* \* \*

One day, two years later, Song and Ma returned from an overnight visit to Ma's wife at Repulse Bay. Huan was gone. He had left a note, weighted down by the jade unicorn.

Then Song vanished.

The neighbourhood became even quieter, and waited.

Song reappeared a week later in good spirits. He said he had gone camping, and met a girl. "Bub was right," he announced without elaborating. Ma thought the nonchalance was to mask his pain, but surprise surprise, Rhea appeared shortly afterwards.

Song loves his parents and talks about them often. They were the only people he grew up with. But he never speculates about the whereabouts of Huan. As far as Song's concerned, his father is gone.

\* \* \*

Well, Ma has no reason to worry about dying anytime soon. Of course Daoist longevity could be just a groundless myth, and *Qi* an airy hallucination; but he has a philosophical fallback. He has thoroughly contemplated the superficial distinction between life and death. Physics has also helped to dismantle the illusive boundary between these two states of being something, or nothing.

If there's a spirit, a soul, inside his body, his corpse-to-be – and he believes there is – than death releases it from deteriorating flesh and

bones. It is like being discharged from a rotting jail. At that point, one way or the other, the mystery of the universe will no longer be. That's quite an incentive isn't it? Almost something to look forward to.

Yeah yeah yeah, it is. But... old Huan's anxiety has somehow reincarnated in him. It must have been in gestation all along.

A Daoist hypochondriac – how embarrassing. Not cool. Perhaps his goal of seeing *nothing* in everything has backfired, turning the big void itself into *something* of a burden?

*Ah. Nonsense. Just a few bad weeks, a weak spell, or some bugs playing tricks on me, and here I am falling apart, moaning and groaning like a baby.*

Perhaps he is just being human, a living one. Living humans his age tend to fret about the big transition sometimes. Hopefully, it would come and go. Yes, it would come and go. Meanwhile, *Qi*, – subatomic or psychosomatic or imaginative – continues to revitalise his body and soul.

*Then, come what come may. Who cares.*

## THE DAOIST

The fog has disappeared at this elevation, reabsorbed into the air, but Song Sung feels its invisible presence in his hair, skin, and lungs.

The coolish morning has warmed quickly. It feels like June now. He sits on the stone retaining wall above Robinson Road, overlooking the footbridge, watching Ma meditating next to a patch of string beans. Song feels hungry. The eggs and potato pancakes from breakfast have been fully metabolised to cope with the eventful morning.

The covered footbridge once served as a concourse to disperse peak hour pedestrians regurgitated by one of the longest escalator systems in the world. Things were measured against each other to see which was the longest, fastest, tallest, biggest, or most expensive. Each morning, the longest escalator carried Mid-Level residents – middle-class and middle-aged – at high-performance rpm down to Central. In the evening – *clunk, clunk, clunk* – the mechanical drudgery would be reversed to haul them back up, fully stressed. Another day's work done. Prime time TV ahead.

The elevated concourse straddles the main artery, Robinson Road. Ma converted it into his home and vegetable garden nearly ten years ago. He keeps chicken in the penthouse of an adjacent building, and lives out here himself. It's open, but shielded by the stone wall and a few buildings positioned like protective giant screens.

There's a thick layer of natural deposits at street level; but the soil is too grainy and unstable. The road drains have either collapsed or clogged, turning Robinson Road into a mini river when there is a downpour. A garden at street level would be washed out before very long.

The hanging garden is also a welcome source of supplementary water. Hong Kong has been more tropical than sub-tropical for

decades. The late afternoons are drenched by predictable showers, brief but heavy. With the clever modifications Song's father designed before his disappearance, the roof drains serve to satisfy most of Ma's irrigation water needs.

The escalator carves a refreshing breezeway through the concrete jungle below. In deadly-still summer nights, sleep-inducing zephyrs from the sea would straggle up this urban fissure for a brief moment of turbulence, before vanishing into the windless night. A perfect location which blocks the wind when too strong, and channels it back when too weak. Good *feng shui*.

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Song enjoys watching his Tai-chi teacher, buddy, guru, tribal elder, neighbourhood farmer and bar-tender meditate. It calms him. With eyes closed, body neutral with life, Ma looks like a statue of Buddha. But Song knows he's not. Ma has declared that himself many times.

"Don't have enough compassion in me to qualify for Buddhahood. Just like I wasn't tall enough to play NBA. What can I do?" he told Song. "I don't even know what compassion is. Even without laws, most people wouldn't murder or rape. Are they compassionate? When a kite caught a little bunny, people cry, *oh poor little bunny*. When a kite dies from starvation, people cry, *oh poor kite*, and feel happy about themselves for being compassionate."

Ma always makes sense and nonsense to Song at the same time. "What about kindness and compassion among humans for now?" Song asked.

"Humans? What humans?" Ma looked around the deserted neighbourhood. "Young man, you grew up in a world that was wilting away, losing combative energy. Mine was nothing like that. It was full of righteousness. Saints everywhere talking about human rights, justice, humanity, and liberty, not how to live a better life and be better neighbours to each other. Those same talking saints also perpetrated the ugliest crimes against defenceless people. Zhuangzi was right. Evil would never cease unless sanctimonious people die off."

"So all mercy is hypocrisy in your eye?"

"It depends. I believe Buddha himself had nearly infinite mercy. But how many Buddhas have we produced in a few thousand years?

"Well, we are all born with a degree of compassion. We are naturally merciful to different things and people under different circumstances. Like intelligence, height, colour of the eyes, we're born

that way, not a moral choice, so nothing special to brag about." He adjusted his glasses; they were still smart-looking at the time. "If we listen to individuals like Buddha or Jesus, and work hard at it, we might improve humanity's compassion index. That would do ourselves some good, probably tremendous good, making us feel better inside, like taking a good dump."

"A what?"

"But like taking a good dump, it should be natural and private, not advertised, certainly not forcing others to do it with you."

Right now, Song doesn't want to advertise compassion. He needs to borrow Ma's rationalisation talents instead. He wants Ma to tell him that what he did this morning was sensible, inevitable, not cruel. He knows that would help to restore his balance, relieving him far more effectively than any metaphorical bodily function could.

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Ma seems so balanced to Song most of the time, as if nothing could upset his equilibrium. He comfortably navigates between an otherworldly wisdom that transcends this trivial existence, and a brute survival instinct that sustains this trivial existence. When in harmony, this healthy contradiction means balanced Yin and Yang, cool positive tension. But every now and then, Yin and Yang would get into fights, and the positive tension snaps. He would then retreat to mend his spiritual armour.

Song actually enjoys Ma's human weaknesses more than his uncanny strength and imperturbable detachedness which can verge on being cold. But Ma seems uncharacteristically troubled by ageing lately, just like Song's father, before disappearing. Song hopes it will pass. He cannot imagine losing Ma as well.

They are good friends despite the age difference, and not necessarily because of a lack of options. Song is a good Tai-chi student though rather indifferent to Ma's obscure philosophy. He is fascinated by *Qigong*, but does not have the talent or patience for it. He is yet to feel *Qi* happening.

"Are you sure *Qi*'s not just your imagination?" Frustrated, Song challenged his teacher.

"I'm sure it is."

"Then it's not real!"

"Real enough. Everything is just something in my imagination."

"Come on. You know what I mean."

Ma smiled, and continued picking his ear with his little finger.

"How does it feel, exactly."

"Itchy. Driving me nuts."

"I mean *Qi*, not your ear. How do I know I've got it?"

"Could you describe to me how wine tastes if I have never tasted it before?" Ma sniffs his finger absentmindedly.

Song saw that Ma was serious, not just teasing, and screamed "Ah..." while pretending to pull his hair out. Then they both chuckled like kids.

Song is used to his Shi Fu being mystically cryptic. Ma loves to share whatever he knows, and is very articulate. Yet he can't describe *Qi* in comprehensible terms. Perhaps some things are not meant for words, such as a glass of fermented, wet, inanimate grape juice being described as "fresh, dry, and lively". But Ma has devoted his life to court this entity which eludes the human vocabulary, foregoing precious career opportunities; he must surely believe in it. He doesn't like the word belief though, says he finds it creepy.

"I don't believe in anything."

"OK, belief or not, you're a Daoist right?"

"Probably, when I don't mean to be. Otherwise, I don't think so."

"Ah... ."

Daoist or not, Ma's a loyal follower of life's currents. He can actually let go and drift along happily. He doesn't whine about getting wet, fret over strong currents, or bitch about the temperature. – "Just life," he thinks – He doesn't question where the flow is heading either. "Why bother if I can't change the course, and don't want to?"

His silvery crew-cut, unpretentious and rugged, is Song's amateurish effort. From a distance, it suits him well. Below his peculiarly stylish haircut is a strong but accommodating forehead. His large round eyes, open and innocent, are at the same time inscrutable in the shadows of heavy lids. They are normally gentle and soft, "gazing from the back of the sockets," as he puts it. But occasionally, they engage with a vigour that pushes one into submission or rejection. In their depth lurks an urge to question, challenge, and provoke. An inquisitive intensity has been tamed by years of meditation and philosophical musing, but still there.

His enigmatic face is obscured by a pair of goofy spectacles – a trenchant reminder of the tedious demands of post-modern life.

He accidentally dropped his glasses off the hanging garden a year ago. He found suitable replacements – ready-ground spherical dishes about thirty millimetres in diameter – in an abandoned optical shop easily enough, but ended up spending a week trying to file a pair down to fit a frame similar to the one he broke.

For days, he neglected to meditate. He hardly ate. His eyes grew red, fierce with frustration as plate after plate of top quality lens got ruined in his hands. Song and John helped, but were no better at it.

*God, it seemed so easy... OK, last pair !*

*Oh shit ! Oh shit !! Shit shit shit!!!*

*One more. Just one more.*

*That's it.*

*That's fucking it.*

He finally accepted defeat ungraciously, and settled for an expedient solution that John had jocularly suggested at the onset. "Just glue the disks to the outside of this, and, done!" he had said, brandishing a huge pair of ugly black plastic frames.

"It actually looks OK. It does." John tried to be comforting when Ma first appeared with satellite dishes straddling his nose. Song gaped silently. It seemed amazing how a pair of glasses can change appearance so dramatically. From sage-like to deranged, just like that. John then offered a sensible suggestion. "Now that we're no longer in a stressful hurry to relieve your blindness, why not make a few proper spares at our leisure huh? Given time, we'll find an Italian designer frame that you'll like, and do a better job than, you know, this."

For a few seconds, Ma lost his humour. Instead of thanking John for his kind thought, he snapped drily. "What's wrong with this? No! Life has no spare."

"OK, OK. Just a thought."

All that futile filing was bad for him.

Amused by this reminiscence, Song attempts a little meditation while waiting for Ma. The morning has been racing through his mind involuntarily, repeatedly, like an instantly recurring nightmare. He sits in half-lotus, and swallows saliva to suppress a rumbling stomach.

As soon as he closes his eyes, he sees the old man's greyish and opaque eyes right against his. They're in him, insisting, pleading, in the dark. He can smell them, or their owner. The dead weight of his slimy, pungent body clings to his fingers. He wiggles them gently, trying to let go.

## OXFORD TAI-CHI

There wasn't any reason to take note of Ma Yili's birth in Hong Kong on 15 December 2022, near the historic summit of the population curve, just before it nosedived. Six hundred thousand other babies were born on that same average day, sharing his zodiac sign and ruling planet.

But his parents made a big deal out of it anyway.

His father Ma Yong even took the day off work to be with mother-to-be Janice at the hospital, ears red from pressing against the phone all morning. "Listen, I might be stuck here most of the day. They have tonnes of stupid wules. Text or leave message if my phone's off. I get back to you once I can. Yes lah yes lah. I low I low. But I do want to low wight away. Aiya, just do as I say lah. Okay man? Good good."

He relayed progress to Janice until her labour started. It was an important land deal. Timing of Ma's birth was bad in that sense but, oh well, it wasn't up to them. Perhaps he should have agreed with Janice and scheduled a caesarean at an auspicious hour picked by a prominent fortune-teller at a special price of five thousand dollars; but his Auntie who knew these things said that would have upset their son's natural karma.

Ma Yong was Founder and Life Chairman (his name-card title) of a profitable real estate agency. Janice was General Manager. They were madly in love with the way each other made deals in properties – commercial and residential alike. They communicated with eyeballs on the negotiation table even before they were married. In fact, that was probably why they eventually did get married.

At its pinnacle, the agency's shares traded at a price that would have taken investors more than a century to recover investment. Tangible assets included office furniture in sixty-eight sales offices. Grey metallic desks with rusty patches and rumbling drawers; squeaky revolving chairs upholstered in black plastic, laced with sharp

crackles; antiquated computers with hard-disks that sounded like industrial revolutions; photocopying machines; plastic hexagonal pens with the company's gilded logo; paper; three luxury cars for the Life Chairman and General Manager; and more than two thousand telephones. Everything else was intangible, grouped under goodwill in the books.

"Hi, how ARE you doing this morning? I'm calling from Goodluck Dragon Agency..."

"Hi, how ARE you this afternoon? Oh wonderful wonderful! My name's Don from Goodluck Dragon Agency..."

"Listen," Ma Yong habitually commanded the ears of his listener before explaining his business philosophy. "Our business depends on sales calls. The more the betta, huh? A percentage would hit. Use your bwain lah. It's quantity, not quality, that counts. People who say opposite are foos or lie-yas." His modus operandi was simple, effective, annoyingly honest.

Janice and Yong Ma decided to be loving and caring parents, but weren't quite sure how. Trying to determine what was good or not for their son was a tentative process, often involving outside advisors whom they did not trust. Their confusion turned out to be a fortuitous opportunity for Ma to grow up following his own nature, amidst continuous but ineffectual parental interference.

Ma was different from his parents in every respect. It might have been some recessive ancestral genes resurfacing, or mutation. From an early age, he was subtly countercultural without making statements. His parents never noticed his well-mannered rebellion against the values they had unmindfully embraced, although they did notice a few "behavioral oddities" which included an unbidden fascination with religion and apathy towards video games.

Ma Yili was sent to boarding school in Britain when he turned sixteen because two of his parents' close friends had just done that to their kids.

After two years in an expensive boarding school in London, he was admitted to Oxford to read physics. Mum and Dad were uncontrollably proud. Oxford and physics were the only things they talked about for days, although they knew nearly nothing about Oxford, and Mum worried about the employment prospects for physicists. They held a party to share their pride with friends and relatives, featuring Yili's video phone appearance. He appeared in

dirty pyjamas and scruffy hair. Nobody commented, just in case it was a trendy intellectual look that they weren't aware of.

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Ma was viewing a tiny basement flat next to a disused cemetery west of campus. Basement flats were not common in the old town. This one was probably converted from a medieval cellar, or some sort of crypt associated with the graveyard.

Inside, the temperature was a few degrees lower than outside. Near the ceiling, on the wall facing the cemetery, a single window the size of a ticket booth's admitted a stingy stream of light from ground level. A single bed, smaller than the one at boarding school, was parked underneath. He liked the cool damp air, diffused darkness, and the feeling of being half buried. He found it relaxing.

He was making his fifth panoramic turn in the middle of the not quite two hundred square feet studio. The wooden beam, barely a foot above, tousled his hair. The first word that came to his mind was ghost, followed by static. Ms. Mary Scott, the landlady, stood at the entrance to give him room to look around. He was obviously excited.

"Different isn't it?" She finally said, having decided he must have spun around enough times.

"Most certainly. Haven't seen anything like this all week." His mother would have whacked him on the head for not knowing how to position for a bargain.

"A bit dark, and you're using up the headroom," she pointed out, in case he hadn't noticed. They seemed to be bargaining on each other's behalf.

"Soft light helps concentration," Ma rationalised, mostly to himself. "Any more headroom than needed just goes to waste doesn't it?"

He had already fallen into the spell of this bijou box underground. He spun around again, as if driven by a timer. There was a dwarf-sized water-closet tucked into an alcove. Next to it was a small kitchen counter with a sink barely big enough for one dinner plate. The practical inconvenience of living with these toy-like utilities crossed his mind briefly and got dismissed, unwelcome. *Nah, nothing that I can't get used to.* He jovially added a positive note instead. "Plus there's a lovely garden outside."

"Oh, talking about that," Mary Scott said, raising a finger, "I spend a couple of hours *very* early in the morning doing Tai-chi out there."

She turned to regard the entrance briefly, then continued with the house rules in a gentle tone not open to negotiation. "I shouldn't disturb anyone, mind you. I'm very quiet in the morning and between eight to nine at night when I meditate upstairs. I turn the phone off. I know it can be kind of difficult for youngsters but... ." She left the "you take it or shake it" unspoken.

Young Ma had never met anyone who Tai-chi'd or meditated. He paused at the novel idea for a second. "Not at all. That's great. I love silence. Don't have a TV. Never wanted one. I listen to music on the computer rarely. When I do, I use a headphone. I'm not very musical." He grinned innocently.

"Really? You must be one in a thousand these days," she said, delighted.

"Wonderful exercise isn't it? Tai-chi. Very good for old folks you know." Young Ma commented in a British public school voice with Chinese characteristics. In the final term he had just begun to get the hang of speaking condescendingly.

"Do you practise yourself?" Ms. Scott enquired, looking amused, not judging.

"Oh a little. All Chinese eat rice, do Tai-chi and make babies, you see," he said, "Ha ha," beaming stupidly, regretting the remark right away. Too late. Two years of teenage communal life had also taught him to spill one wisecrack after another. Funny peer pressure.

Mary Scott smiled.

Not knowing how to recover, Ma sheepishly changed the subject. "Is this place haunted?"

"Yes. Indeed," the old lady answered, earnestly. "Just good-natured spirits. Gentle and quiet, with a disposition to help rather than disturb if you're respectful."

"Oh," Ma said. "In that case, I'll take it if okay with you, Ms Scott."

\* \* \*

He would eventually learn that the eighty-four-year-old landlady had lived in China for almost forty years, and was a widely respected Tai-chi and *Qigong* master internationally.

In 1990, she quit her job as kindergarten teacher to follow her husband to Shanghai. He was a handsome banker, marathon runner, devout Christian, and hobbyist missionary. He was transferred to Shanghai on a generous package to head the fast-growing investment

banking division there. His relative youth for the position deepened his faith in God and himself.

The distance from home put them in a drastically different light, an alien one. For the first time, she saw that they had very little in common. His irrepressible urge to spread the good news of investment, God, and democracy, once idealistic and boyishly exuberant, now seemed naive and trite, even bigoted. Things about him that had been amusing before now made her cringe.

It had been love at first sight not long ago.

They got married within three months of their first date. They threw a party for friends and relatives to celebrate a fairy-tale romance, and spent three years in a small but fashionable Notting Hill flat. Three years of exemplary felicity, yet Mary Scott could not recall a single memorable moment except the moving in. A pigeon had dropped a big one on her forehead when she was just outside the front door, a pile of dishes in arm. He didn't even laugh; just repeated "oh my God oh my God". Perhaps it was a bad omen.

After fourteen months in Shanghai, they parted amicably, and resumed their own journeys in opposite directions.

The marriage seemed a sidetrack at the time, but it took her to the end of the world. It was meant to be. In the next forty years, she studied under some top names in Tai-chi, and taught in highly regarded institutions. She became the first female foreigner retained by the Chinese army as a martial arts consultant.

She semi-retired back to Oxford at seventy-two, on invitation from the British Tai-chi Association to be their Chairperson, a position she kept for three years.

\* \* \*

Up in Mary Scott's living room, Ma signed a one-page rental agreement. She shared a few old photos from Hong Kong with him. The first one was taken at the Peak. She looked in her early forties, dressed in jeans and a plain T-shirt with the character harmony at the front. A pair of old-fashioned sunglasses perched on a nest of short and curly blond hair. She was not pretty pretty, but charming with a big frown. She was annoyed with the crowd around her, and did not hide her irritation for the camera. In the next one, she was officiating at some opening ceremony with the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. He was a whole head shorter, smiling toothily, peeling back only the

upper lip. The last one was taken during an interview by a local Hong Kong TV station which sponsored her visit.

"Do you know him?" She pointed to the interviewer. "He's supposed to be famous in your hometown."

Ma opted to be straight-forward this time. "No. I was still a grandfather at the time, getting ready to be reincarnated." Oh no! What a laugh a minute! His wisecracks had become uncontrollable. Mary Scott found it amusing this time.

"Of course, of course, young man," she smiled.

Young man Ma was enthralled by his octogenarian landlady. He had never met anyone so real before. Not in his parents' home; not in the prestigious boarding school he attended. She had an unassuming confidence that was captivating. It made him feel awkward and shallow, losing grip of the confidence that was the prerogative of young people, but at the same time excited and inspired. It was like being shown light for the first time. It hurt his eyes; but he intuitively knew that many interesting things would be revealed. In barely half an hour, she had shown his highly perceptive mind something he had been subconsciously searching for, without knowing what it was.

"Would you be kind enough to teach me the basics of Tai-chi, Ms. Scott? I'd pay for the lessons, of course."

"Let's see, Mister Ma. We can think about that later."

A month later, Mary Scott started to give him lessons in exchange for help in the garden. She soon discovered that the young man, underneath a clumsy elitist facade, was more talented than anyone she had ever taught. He often saw things from unorthodox angles, forcing her to examine perspectives that she had not considered before, or long forgotten. She had been too good at it for too long. Everything had become second nature, by-passing the brain.

In the beginning, Ma found Tai-chi phlegmatic, but soon realised that slowing-down heightened his awareness of his muscles and bones, which he had taken for granted all his life. Fibre by fibre, joint by joint, his youthful body was being introduced to him for the first time.

Mary Scott's uncanny strength kept Ma wondering, wanting to find out more. She normally walked with a stick, but could send him stumbling half way across the garden with a jolt that seemed frail and weak.

"Impossible! Can you do that again Ms. Scott? How did you manage? You have no muscle!"

"I have, just not as much as you. You swing ten pounds of gunpowder at me. I have only one pound but I know how to detonate."

"Ah! I see."

Her tiny garden yielded sufficient for her vegetarian diet during the summer. Ma learned many gardening tricks from her. The agnostic Mary Scott was a living encyclopaedia in Eastern and Western philosophies and religious history. Her hobby-horse was the witch-hunt. She told Ma gruesome stories about how hundreds of thousands of innocent women were humiliated and tortured at length by "God's Wicked Eunuchs on Earth" before being roasted alive. She always finished off with "So, hallelujah!"

"But the church did a lot of wicked things. Why are you particularly upset about witch-hunts?"

"Perhaps I can't help thinking a woman like me would have been roasted for sure. No doubt, in the name of God. Maybe I even was in a past life."

In addition to fluent French and a scholarly knowledge of Sanskrit, she spoke much better Putonghua – the official Chinese dialect – than Ma whose mother tongue was Cantonese. "Hong Kong Putonghua is the only accent that even the speaker can't understand. Quite a linguistic phenomenon," she teased. She was a great calligrapher and good cook, still teaching and writing part-time at her age, and regularly she contributed articles on Daoism to magazines. Through her, Ma's mind was opened to Laozi's transcendental wisdom and atheistic spirituality.

"I can't believe such ancient teachings are so consistent with modern science!" Ma was thrilled with his discovery.

"Why shouldn't they be? The world hasn't changed much, has it?"

To Mary Scott's delight, mentoring Ma over long pots of Pu Er tea soon became a stimulating exchange. She was enjoyably challenged by the young scientist over a subject which, like many things she once found stimulating, had lost vigour over time. His exasperating probing, sometimes innocent, often acute and incisive, forced her to revisit a lifelong erudition afresh, giving it modern relevance, making it more complete in her mind.

A timely exercise, she thought.

## ULTIMATE PARTICLE

After his Master's programme, all was set for Ma to continue with his doctorate. He would soon leave his fingerprints on the LHC – Large Hadron Collider – a twenty-five kilometre particle accelerator underneath the border of France and Switzerland.

It was the longest accelerator in the world, a breakthrough, but unfortunately rather too long for something so complex. Something was always wrong somewhere down the line.

When it was not being repaired or maintained, scientists would use the rare opportunity to bang subatomic particles head-on at fantastic speed. *Bang. Puff. Ziiiipp... Yes!* It was regarded as an exciting and privileged opportunity.

The sophisticated banging approach might have seemed brutal to some. But the underlying principle was simple and appealing. If particles collided hard enough, they would break down into ultimate particles that scientists called Higgs bosons; as good a name as any. To help the common mind, journalists nicknamed it the "God particle". God's name was again used to make things comprehensible to those who would never understand otherwise.

Ma was deemed good enough to manage some of these bangings. A renewable grant was in place. Everything was moving in his direction, except perhaps his subconscious.

One Sunday, after playing with some energy calculations in his den, he lay down sideways on his bed. The morning sun was dribbling in through the window. He stared at the uneven wall, a few inches from his nose, creating a humid spot with his breathing. That same spot must have been plastered and painted numerous times over past centuries, by people who were now dead. He wondered what its original stone texture looked like, and how it was built without machines and electricity. How was anything done without machines and electricity?

The wall appeared solid and terminal. It gave him a defined space, shielding him from the outside. But lying beyond it was more, much more. He was lulled into a reverie.

A hundred metres away lay a matrix of dilapidated coffins at about the same level as him. Once upon a time, the last dribbles of the interred had leached out of them, percolated through soil particles. After mixing with ground water, they seeped towards this house. They flowed around and underneath, heading for the river. In his mind, he followed the flow of diluted carrion juice, from the graves to the house, from the house to the river, to the sea. Along the way, some of it rose to the clouds, drifted off to faraway lands. "We see only what's in front of us," he heard his own voice in his head. "Beyond lies much more. Each of us is connected to everything else. Just look!"

He got up, went out to the garden, feeling drowsy, stumbling a little. Spring was in the air but the sweetness of the season was scrubbed out by an interminable drizzle. He had no idea how long he meditated. He experienced deep level *Ru Ding* – the trance-like state Mary Scott had told him about, for the first time.

*A bird gliding through timeless space...*

"It must feel awfully lonely," he had commented.

"You might find out one day," she had said.

Now that he was experiencing it for the first time, he was unaware of the outside world.

Mary Scott watched him from her window.

He emerged from his gliding trip drenched, and went straight to his notebook as if trying to put a caught fish into the bucket before it flips away.

He jotted down quickly:

"To find the ultimate particle by banging things harder is like trying to measure infinity with longer tapes. What's 25 km to nature? We're like ambitious ants carrying a 'giant' ten-inch branch to survey the Great Wall. An impressive, remarkable undertaking, but only to ourselves.

We won't catch the Higgs boson. Zhuangzi said "the universe is no bigger than the tip of a fine hair." That's science, modern science. The ultimate particle exists – yes AND no – everywhere, in everything, by the trillions and trillions, right at the tip of a down hair, forming a continuum through time and space.

To pursue the infinite with a finite life and limited intellect is futile, mad. That's it!"

He underlined "That's it!" twice. No, he would not spend the rest of his life arranging for tiny particles to crash.

He sensed nosy medieval ghosts jostling around him, trying to take a better look at what he had just written.

\* \* \*

Ma told Mary Scott, whom he called Shi Fu – teacher – the next day. If she was surprised, she didn't show it. She smiled gently, encouraging as usual. "Yili, I don't understand anything about what you do, although it sounds very exciting. But your decision sounds good, probably more interesting in the long run. I could see it coming."

For the first time, he noticed Shi Fu looking old, more easily tired than before. She was almost ninety. It saddened him; but he was too excited by the moment to be melancholy.

That afternoon, he was in his supervisor Doctor Roberts' office. A Nobel laureate who had stopped smoking for the sake of his lungs, but continued to suck on an empty pipe for his image. He always appeared absorbed in something far more important than whoever was speaking to him. Those who didn't know of his Nobel prize would have guessed by watching him think.

After listening to Ma, he put the wet pipe back into the pocket of his tweed jacket, and stared over Ma's shoulder into the distance. They were sitting opposite each other, separated by a mound of books and papers on the professor's desk. After a few odd minutes, Dr Robert said absently, nodding to himself, "Hmm. That's right. Yes. That's right."

Ma endured another minute of awkward silence, then mumbled, "Thanks Dr Roberts. I'll finish the paper in the next few months, before going." The professor carried on nodding. "Thanks," Ma repeated, then got up and left. As far as he was concerned, he had served notice.

"It's time to graduate," he explained in an e-mail home. His father's response was abbreviated and characteristically perplexing.

*Got ur msg son. What changed mind? Listen! Always think twice. We hv bn practise calling U Dr.! Mum and I golfed mainland last wk. V.*

*hot but wonderful. Called ur mobile but off as usual! Hv they cut line? We discussed with Auntie Pauline. She thinks what U want in the end is gd for U are independent. But I think dedication also important for young people. I tell this to salesmen every day. Listen! Give up is easy. Who cannot do? Letting go not so easy. U know what I mean? :D (a blinking yellowish smiley face) U hv 2 degrees fr Oxford. Mum says we break even – :D (another smiley face). Come home soon? Remember to think twice.*

*Luv U*

*M&D.*

*p.s. Topped up ur a/c. Ck. bank balance.*

*M&D* for his Mum and Dad, probably to save computer memory. So many things that he had not questioned before appeared increasingly surreal.

Later on, when he worked for big corporations and the government, he would write truncated and ambiguous e-mails himself. He had learnt that brevity reflected position in the corporate food-chain. Enigmatic messages also served to hide bad sentence structures, cover up spelling errors, and give the impression that he was busy with more important things. Always appear to be busy with something else more important was his first corporate enlightenment. His standard response would eventually become "noted. brg. ma," all in the lower case, with due respect. After he joined the government, it would shrink further to "noted", or pure bureaucratic silence.

He was happy that his account had been topped up though. Good boy, Father. Good boy.

Paul Jones, an American who shared a lab with him, was the only person who showed surprise. "Wow! Fuck me man," was Paul's exuberant response to every piece of news, including this one.

Six months later, Ma Yili started his job as Research Scientist with a medical equipment company in Singapore. He wanted to stay away from Hong Kong for the time being.

## CONFESSiON

Something's clucking in his head.

When emerging from meditation, Ma takes a minute or two to recognise his chickens' impatient rat-tats. He gives them water and lettuce each morning before dawn, but doesn't let them out to forage until he's done his morning routine. There are hungry dogs around. In the post-modern world, chickens are precious; they come before eggs, bringing fertiliser, then meat.

He rubs his palms, massages his face in their warmth, then takes his glasses out of the Ming dynasty redwood chest. It said circa 1500 CE on the display tag. He didn't pay attention to the price for he had no money, and the antique shop had no keeper. It was a treasure box of a plain design, hand-made to perfection. The airtight lid closed with a silent hiss, like a sigh. It must have kept many treasures and secrets over the centuries. Secrets tend to make one sigh. Ma has no secret to keep, just his glasses, keeping them from being pushed over the bridge by accident again.

He unfolds his legs, breathing into the creaking of his knees. He doesn't know how he comes out of meditation. One minute he would be suspended between time, oblivious of himself and his surroundings. The next moment his awareness creeps back, then he remembers the chickens.

He sees Song on top of the stone wall, eyes closed, shrouded in anxiety. Before he manages to sneak away, leaving the young man alone, Song opens his eyes. "Morning, Shi Fu."

"How's birthday boy?" Ma says warmly. "Hungry for bean salad and fresh soya milk? I picked some mushrooms yesterday." Food never fails to calm Song, Ma knows. He might become fat, very fat, if he stops running one day.

"Is it safe?"

"Just watch me eat if you're afraid."

"Oh heck. Won't be the first time. I'm famished. I only had three eggs and half a dozen potato pancakes for breakfast." He skips down the steps. "I need counselling and rationalisation, your expertise. But let's eat first." Then he remembers. "Rhea thanks you a million for the eggs and chicken."

"How's she doing?" Ma bends over to pick string beans and shallots.

"Fine." An imperceptible pause before helping with the beans. "Kinda moody lately. Like me. Maybe she's reached yet another milestone she's set for herself. Who wouldn't be moody though. That wretched mansion; it's like living inside blue cheese."

Ma gives Song a curious glance.

"What's that?" Song refers to the trumpet on the chair, something that he's not seen before. "Taking up music?"

"I spotted a few young monkeys snooping around the other day. Found that" – he points at the trumpet with his nose – "at one of the flats. Thought I'd use it to scare them off."

"You might need a gun to do that. The gibbons are probably expanding too fast at the Botanical Garden, so the young are seeking new turf."

"I know. It'd be a disaster if they got interested in mine. Can you let the chickens out and clean up the coop while I cook?"

\* \* \*

Song finishes giving Ma a graphic description of the old man. It sounded more horrible in his own words than in his memory. He holds the plate up with both hands to lick – a theatrical gesture to mask his unease. Ma's attention drifts to Song's pants for cerebrospinal fluids.

"I didn't get splashed if that's what you're looking for. I didn't do it." He puts the plate down. "Yum. Thanks. I couldn't. Not after he stared at me. He freaked me out."

"What happened then?"

"I don't really know, to be honest." Song clasps his hands before his nose, as if praying for better recollection. "I think I did something terrible."

"What do you mean? What could be worse than manslaughter?"

\* \* \*

Song changed his mind in the last minute.

Perhaps it was not really a change of mind. Maybe subconsciously he never intended to execute the euthanasia plan. The old man's stare jolted him out of his shock reaction. He did not have the stomach for it. Neither could he take his eyes off the old man's. Something had been nibbling at them. Flies? Beneath his decay was an earnest plea. Pathetic, powerful, captivating.

*I'll live. I will. Give me a chance.*

*Come closer, take a look.*

*Here, Sir. See? I can. Please ...*

He suddenly lost all strength, feeling deflated, wanting to collapse next to the man. Mercy-killing is not my kind of thing, he realised.

He found a piece of canvas canopy in the nearby parking lot, and dragged the old man off the road on it. The man was slippery and pungent. His fingers felt a gaunt man, just bones and rotten skin; but dead weight is heavy.

He then ran home, grabbed a bottle of water and a few tomatoes, and took them back to his patient who was by then fast asleep, or fainted, or dead. Song did not attempt diagnosis. He dragged him further behind the building, looking back at the path as he did so. When everything was in final position, he said, "You okay here?" Without waiting for an answer, he ran home again to wipe himself down and change.

Ma has listened with shallow breathing, appearing undisturbed. "You did what you could. So what's bothering you now?"

"My conscience," says Song. "Soon as I got home, I woke to the fact that my concern had been selfish – chillingly selfish. All I wanted was to get out of the situation, whatever it took! Oh how I wanted a long hot shower.

"It wasn't compassion that drove me to help. I only felt disgust at the time. I was annoyed at the shit luck of bumping into him. I don't think I did anything wrong, but I was a cold-blooded hypocrite. I feel horrible about myself."

"Come on," Ma says, sympathetic. "Why are you so freaked out by a dying man? You're an expert in corpses. We've seen some really messy ones. We've barbecued a few squishy ones that could no longer be picked up." It sickens him to recall the awful task. The repulsive smell stays in the hair, skin, nose, for up to a week, no matter how

much he shampoos and washes, and rinses his nostrils with his dainty neti pot nasal irrigator.

"But he wasn't dead." Song gets up to stretch. He picks a pod and eats the soya beans raw. This is early, he thinks. Maybe global warming is still with us. Raw beans taste absolutely foul but he habitually eats a few to get Ma going. It has become their ritual. "You'll end up with pancreatic tumour." The warning comes predictably.

"No one will find out if I do," Song points out. "I know I have no reason to feel guilty, and I don't, really, but do, kind of. Nobody could have helped him, and there's nothing left in his life except a desperate wish to hang on. But – "

"How do you know he wants to hang on?" Ma interrupts.

"I was going to say exactly that! I don't. Maybe he wants to die and I could have helped! But I chickened out. Worse, I prolonged his agony instead. Water. Tomatoes... , " he utters disdainfully.

Ma watches Song performing self-analysis and criticism, and lets him carry on after a reflective pause. "The water-and-tomato trick didn't do much for my conscience. I feel terrible, probably worse because of that. I've never felt myself a hypocrite before."

"Why not?" Then Ma notices that Song was not up to teasing. "OK. Be kind to yourself. You did what you could, and you were confused."

"Yes and no," Song says, reflexive. "When I dragged and dropped him to trash, I had a clear objective in mind."

"And that was?"

"To hide him from view, from the path. I kept looking back to make sure he'd be well hidden. I don't want to see him again. I don't want to find out what has happened to him the next time I go past. So I left him to die, slowly, although, I'm sure, it wasn't my intention at the time. I'm sure." Song trails off into a defensive mumble.

There is a self-conscious courage in people making confessions. Confessions are hard to start. Once underway, however, they tend to go on, and become melodramatic. Having finally let it out, Song feels better though still gloomy. He was eager for some form of pardon when he started, but no longer. He leans over the handrail, pops the last bean into his mouth, and drops the pod over the bridge. It falls weightily for a surprisingly long time, as if in suspension, before landing on the foraging chickens, startling them. A big hen realises that something good has fallen out of heaven, and taps it up with a swift peck.

## GENERATION ZED

Ma contemplates Song's brooding profile, trying to sort out his conflicting dispositions. Doesn't he always?

Part of his friend is made of sensitive genes passed down by some melancholic figure higher up the family tree; but most of his soft spots have been fortified by nurturing. He has been trained to be mentally and physically tough since a kid, brought up to be a ruthless survivor, a savage wannabe. "Always move on, son. Survive! If you stop to think, the will to survive dies." Sometimes, this polarity makes him more complete, a tough guy with a soft heart. At other times, like now, he is torn apart by the tension. Unlike an argument with others, internal conflicts do not work you up. They drag you down, quietly, making you empty, vulnerable. Whichever side wins, half of you loses.

Evidently, the incident this morning incited a civil war in him. Helplessness assaults his soft side, and hurts the pride of his hard one, provoking a barrage of emotions.

There is guilt. He feels bad about being so damn clear-headed when he dragged and dropped the man off to die unseen. He needs to digest the heartless victory of his acquired callousness.

He is also annoyed, even angry, pissed off at the bad luck of the encounter. Bad luck is portentous. It seldom travels alone. God knows what's next.

Then there's sadness. Sadness grips him deep, although he is good at not showing it. The stranger probably reminds him of his father. Is this the same fate Old Man Song faced? Faces? What about his own destiny? Was he to die alone, in a planet of one? Being healthy and the youngest, he might just outlive everyone. Is he old enough, now that he's forty-two, to be troubled by this desolate prospect?

What else could Song have done though? Ma tries to assess his friend's options. Take the man home to nurse him till death? Out of the

question! In the past, he would just have called an ambulance and gratified his conscience. "Yes, a stinky old guy's dying by the gutter of Old Peak Road near Tregunter Path. Uh, Okay. I'll wait, but please hurry. I have a meeting in an hour." No such neatly-packaged Samaritan convenience anymore. He had to evaluate, weigh, and decide, right there. He had to exercise compassion with cold-blooded clarity. Not easy. Whatever he decided would have created doubt afterwards.

This tall and handsome middle-aged man is trapped into being the kid of mankind forever. One day, he might double as the oldest man alive as well. If I had a kid, Ma thinks, he would be of similar age. *Good thing I haven't.* Raising the last human would be a heartbreaking task.

\* \* \*

Those born in the 2040s were called Generation-Zeders, ominously referring to the final letter in the English alphabet. The last trickles of humanity were made celebrities by birth, by a prosperous and troubled world run by hyperactive and sterile grown-ups. Everywhere Song went, he was swamped by doting folks willing to pay a million just to pinch his cheeks. Sari and Huan soon gave up taking him to the park.

Every day they received tonnes of presents. Money, flowers, toys, letters, chocolate castles.... People made bewildering offers for his hair, old clothes, blankets, toenails, and more bizarre articles such as used nappies and urine. According to widely circulated formulas, baby piss can be brewed into a magic potion to restore fertility in women, promising to solve half the infertility problem. When direct collections were not possible, extraction from nappies could be considered as substitute.

Try this. Take fifty millilitres of urine from an infant under one, mixed equally with infusions of red clover blossom and nettle leaves prepared overnight, finish with a squirt of lemon and a pinch of rock salt. Drink at room temperature once before breakfast, once after dinner, for at least five days before ovulation. Then, copulate, of course. After ejaculation, lift her bum high into a shoulder-stand to keep every drop in, and wait. Tick, tick, tick. Duration unspecified.

Did it work?

While the women drank lukewarm piss, their men waited with lifeless sperm (under a microscope, they looked like flood victims in aerial photographs), wondering how to avoid kissing when it came to

the copulation step. In any event, Sari and Song Huan never even considered selling a drop of Baby Song piss. All the products in the market that bore the Song label were counterfeit, but they did not bother to complain.

Hysteria and insane adulation eventually died down, but it took years before Song could blend into a much smaller world. He has never experienced "normal" life. He never will. The definition itself had long expired, and was changing every day.

For a Generation Zed-er, Song had an exceptional upbringing. His parents were painfully aware of the harm the loving world was eager to inflict, and did their best to fence him off. They brainstormed and simulated the future world, and prepared their son for the imminent change of reality.

Most other parents were intoxicated by their instant fame and fortune, unwittingly letting their families to collapse under exasperating privileges, ruining their precious kids. Many Generation Zed-ers committed suicide during their teens, often in a gruesome manner, as if to shock and take revenge on a world that they ended up loathing.

*Want to see me dead, right? Here, watch!*

Evolution from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century had taken thousands of years. The return trip has taken only a couple of decades. Within that period, Song had to part with all the things he had taken for granted from birth: airplanes, cars, telephones, internet, running water, flush toilets, ice-cream, chocolates, reading-lamps... and, finally, his parents, somewhat prematurely in different ways. Song grew up without peers. His parents were much more than Mum and Dad. They were everything to him.

His life has been a long line of losses. There is always something else next. Perhaps that is the nature of life, but in his, there is never replacement. Regardless, be tough. "Remember son, always move on. And don't ask why. Survivors don't ask existential questions." He wonders why.

Bountiful leftovers – sturdy shelters, warm clothes, tools, knowledge, imperishable food-like substances, and medicine with expiry dates brought forward by legal advisors and marketing managers – make physical survival in 2090 easier than in the Neolithic Age. But psychologically, sitting back to accept regression is much more agonising than struggling to make progress.

The Family Flintstone could derive strength from two sources no longer available to extant humans: the future and ignorance.

Mr Stone Age neither knew nor cared where his race was heading. The question was beyond him. Survival was a precarious game, demanding total concentration. He followed his instincts – raw, sharp, and fresh – down the chancy path of selection. He reproduced whenever he could – so what if someone's watching – and passed on these instincts. Posterity gave him additional willpower to go on. Just go on, naturally. When he felt helpless, he would cry and howl, pray to the sky, a strange rock, the silent moon, or wandering wolves. *Feeling better? Yes.* He stomped back into the brutal and hopeful unknown.

In 2090, primitive hope and an unquestioned future have been lost. Atavistic instincts have been conceitedly neglected for generations. Can they be rekindled still? Civilised humans had no use for instincts that gave humans survival advantage; instincts were barbaric, to be outlawed if possible.

When Song feels low, confused, sad, or endangered, he does not have a god to turn to. Knowledge has deprived him of this expedient comfort. He must get out of situations himself, all by himself. He is alone, moving on, like cosmic debris. He must not stop to wonder what for... it would sap his survival will, his father told him. Under the circumstances, it could be detrimental.

\* \* \*

Ma watches Song pinching bits off a leaf of *bak-choy*, tossing them absentmindedly to the fluttering birds below.

What about me? Ma wonders. How come I don't feel sorry for myself the way I take pity on him?

Perhaps because he had had enough of advanced civilisation, and welcomes a calmer and quieter world? Maybe he feels his generation was the last of a few that were guilty of putting Song in his wretched situation?

Unlike Song, Ma has lived through a full spectrum of human follies, from technologically-driven hyper-delusions to those of the post-modern Stone Age. At his age, it is unlikely that he will be the last one out, though he knows there is no guarantee. A bad case of dengue fever or cholera could kill everyone else, leaving him to shiver alone. He had thought modern amenities superfluous when they were around. "People take hot showers and sleep in air-conditioned rooms everyday," he used to lament. "Do they ever feel the privilege? These

things bring joy only in the first few days, then become part of the energy bill, nothing more." Now that they are no longer available, he would scream with joy if he could take a hot shower, drink a cold beer, or just enjoy a summer night's sleep in air-conditioning, out of the whirring clouds of blood-thirsty mosquitoes.

When the world shut down, Ma was in his early fifties. About time, he thought. Civilisation had long flown off at a tangent in all directions, ignoring common sense, deriding mass balance, disregarding obvious limitations in a tiny planet. The world had become derailed and had plunged into wishful-thinking, frivolous wishful-thinking. Delusion, realism, and cynicism had become interchangeable and indistinguishable to most.

He had cunningly exploited this mental chaos at work.

Everything sounded too good to be true, and was mostly untrue: universal justice, human rights, zero discharge, people power; yes to global warming, no to global warming, transparency, globalisation, sustainable development, free economy, free press, free expression, free worship, free lunch.

In olden days, imperial sycophants pandered to the whims of a few lunatics. Twenty-first century lickspittles pandered to collective chimeras, inflicting long-term damage with unprecedented vigour. Denial seemed an outstanding human talent. If reality was not brutally twisted by a few despots, it would be fatuously distorted for the majority, by the majority. People in power – be they a few hoity-toity royals, a bulldog of a despot, or the democratic *hoi polloi* – ended up behaving the same.

There were real and imagined crises of prodigious scale and complexity. Nobody understood, so they left them to politicians with a four-year vision and grade-nine science. Excesses were universally worshipped. Globalised people shared a straightforward desire for more – simply more. Ma remembered his father's mercantile wisdom. "It's quantity, not quality, that matters." He was dismayed how right his old man had been.

Rich nations were fatally dependent on suicidal growth and consumption. Poor nations strove to become the same. There was no turning back. Humans were being chased down the cliff by the hungry tigers they had raised. Keep running and jump; or stop and be eaten.

His generation was the last of a few that worked hard to destroy. What baffled him most was the lack of a rational motive. In strangling

the future, they stuffed themselves fat, and were constantly unhappy about something. They were too stupid to be called selfish. They gained nothing by destroying the future for their children. But, if the world were not ending, Ma wonders, would Song's generation have continued to make the same mistakes?

Ma could see some kind of an end approaching. The laws of physics told him sustainable development could not last. The way it is ending is perhaps unexpected, but to him not puzzling. Statistically, human existence is a miracle. Once existence has happened, eventual extinction is certain. If not because of this, it'd be because of that. Only a matter of time.

He tries to imagine the cause of universal sterility. The atmosphere is a proportionately *thin* crust of the planet, like the skin of an apple. Something that humans had been jamming into it for decades, perhaps centuries, suspecting no harm, accumulated quietly. Parts per trillion became parts per billion. Parts per billion became parts per million. Obliviously, breath by breath, our mysterious and fragile reproductive systems were nibbled at, eaten alive by our own waste. On top of that, lunatics had been manipulating the ionosphere for decades, turning it into a weather weapon.

One day, it snapped. Something unidentified had transgressed an unknown threshold, expediting an industriously devised self-extinction. Well, Ma thinks, unsentimental, what do you expect?

Nonetheless, watching Song and Rhea shuffling along at the end of a vanishing line of humanity saddens him. Perhaps longing for posterity is after all a potent instinct that can't be suppressed by rationality.

\* \* \*

"Look who's here!" Song sounds more cheerful.

John Johnson jogs towards them along Robinson Road. Although only a few years Ma's junior, he looks a young athlete from this distance, with big springy strides. He yells excitedly up to them. "Guess what I saw this morning, boys?"

"Oh, no! Not another one," Ma mumbles under his breath, rolling his eyes into an 'oh-my-god' face, forgetting how goofy it looks behind those glasses. A laugh spurts out of Song. "Don't mention it to John, will you? I don't feel like more discussion."

"Sure," Ma says. "Enough of that for one morning. Plus he might run up to resuscitate him, then we'd be in real trouble."

Song gives a wry chuckle.

"You know," Ma looks into his eyes, sincerely sympathetic. "I would have done the same thing, except I wouldn't have bothered with the water and tomato. You had no choice."

"Thanks," Song says, feeling lighter, grateful for his verdict.

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Chapter Four**

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