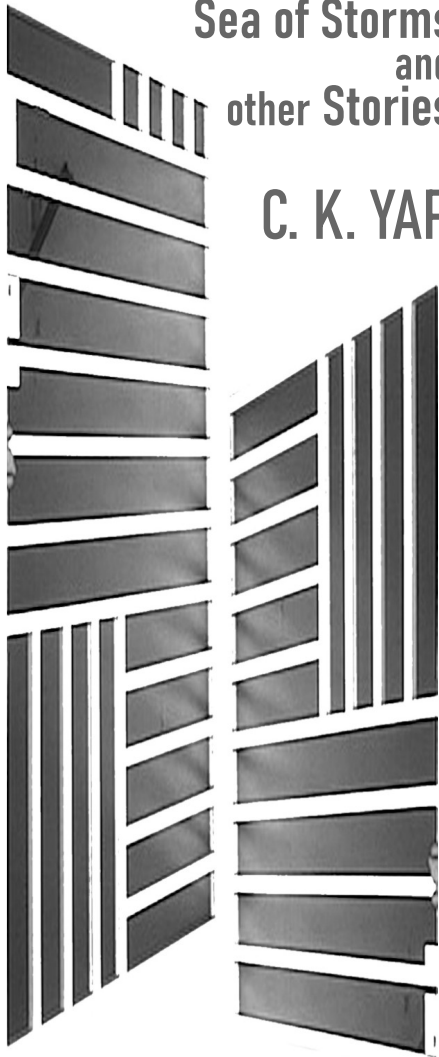


Sea of Storms and other Stories

C. K. YAP



The Writer's Room

-1-

"Hope-pleasure-austerity-death
-and the burning urge to tell your
story..."

It was the middle of the last week of March and I had just finished doing 9 months at the State Juvenile Correction Facility for a simple honest mistake. I lost it all except the clothes I had on when I was taken in, 25 dollars pay for my labor, and an all-in-Chinese tablet computer the gate guard had pressed into my hands as I left -you'll need something, he said tearfully.

-2-

Doris Yandel, my Jewish friend was still a friend, and the address she gave me led me to a shelter where I had roasted new vegetables, fried chicken, and crusty bread with real butter. I fell asleep in a bed with a springy mattress and slept through the clean-up work in the kitchen, waking up at 10 pm, stumbled through the hall which was empty and lit in an eerie fluorescent glow.

-3-

Walking past the Odeon, it started to rain. I hailed a bus. But cigarette smoke wafted over from the back seat. A girl with a nose ring and an

armful of pamphlets dragging on a fag. We represent young voters, she smiled apologetically through the haze and asked if I'd mind learning about the elections. Her body was warm, her lips soft pink and as the rain streaked over the dark window, I took her in gingerbread man arms, our kiss trembling from the months I'd gone without love and the privileges of freedom.

-4-

Mrs. Okra didn't vote. I'm from Russia she told me. I don't want your pamphlets. I can write better than that. I asked her if she was a real author, and she said, yes. She told me

her bestseller was "Times and Past" - about ordinary lives in Eastern Europe separated by war and prejudice. I said I was trying to be a writer, and she smiled. What are these to you? She showed me her loamy hands. Scraps that you'd just throw away? She pushed the purple rooty bits of onion into the sandy black soil. No, life is a lot like the onion. These will become new bulbs, given time and a little sacrifice, we'll always have life.

-5-

I took the author's advice and called at my family home. A strange man answered the door. I said that I used

to live here, that I'd just been out of gaol and whether he knew my father and mother. Your mother's inside. Your dad, he jumped bail which she paid for. Broke her heart -both of you. I stared at my feet. Have any money? He asked, suddenly kind. I said I had about 20 dollars, so he gave me the same. It's all we can afford. The smell of floral perfume and hair curling drifted warm past our faces which were set like stones man to man. Pigeons were pecking on the sidewalk around their green-white shit. I thanked him stoically and took my leave.

She was like a lioness on the Serengeti. Chin on elbows draped over the back of the bedroom chair and legs flowing off it sideways. She had a mental disability, but we were into making love. I loved her a whole season. Her name was Annette. She was one of the last people I met handing out election pamphlets. What do you do? She asked, aside from politics, but I didn't want to tell her about my jail time and erstwhile affair with Smokey. She smiled, guessing my heart. It's incredible what Ann can tell about a person, said her mother. Come in and see

how she's decorated her room.
Annette took my hand.

-7-

Because the Party manifesto specified that everyone should have a job, Annette's father introduced me to a friend who ran an ice-cream stand. Annette became a washroom matron because she was agoraphobic and a neat freak. Together we earned enough to rent a trailer at the trailer park. I made her buy sweet dessert wines for cheap at the mall supermarket which we sipped by the campfire every night. Burning wood and nutty bouquet masked my hands that smelt of mint, chocolate chips

and vanilla and her clothes, of farts and urinal deodorant balls. We held hands lying on the dry grass, staring up at the Milky Way as an Abba song drifted among the wagons:

"... something in the air that night, the stars were bright, Fernando. They were shining there for you and me, for liberty..."

-8-

Do you really believe we can run this country? She asked. No, I said, and I don't know or care how anymore. She smiled, eyes shifting furtively. I want it, she said, same as you gave her. Marry me, promise, she fumbled with

her buttons. Mom says we should. I said I wasn't sure, and she turned aside, but I bit her on the ear through her spaghetti hair. We made love like we did every night that summer. I held her tight between the bursts of fireworks as then it was the 4th of July.

-9-

To save some money, I slept under the sky in August. Are you Christian? Came a voice from among the trees as I was lying in the small square of park outside the art gallery in the Autumn twilight. Sort of, I replied. Then come join us, brother, he said,

picking up my newspaper pillow and half bottle of Lambrusco.

-10-

There was a small gathering on the benches outside the gallery. The man who found you is Pastor Hwang, whispered a pretty redhead. I'm Joanne. The candle she held in her lap flickered, and I saw how old she really was. Most men have that, she said indulgently. What do you mean? I said. What life is like, she replied. It's like an onion, I said. She laughed and it sounded like sleigh bells. It's like the autumn leaves. And the candle glow spread over her high cheeks and orange and gold hair.

Foolish virgin who stores not oil for the long winter, came the pastor's sermon. Joanne and I drank the last of the sweet fizzy wine.

-11-

OH, she sighed, rubbing the bulb between her fingers. We were sitting in her kitchen, Annette and I, and Mrs. Okra was bent over the window box, breathing heavily. What's the matter? I asked. It's the onions, she said. Their skins are so thick and... I fear, this Winter... I'm old, that's just what it is, she composed herself again and poured the tea. There was a tear in her dress that had somehow gone unnoticed. Annette and I looked

at each other as the eminent author fussed over opening a tight tin of Russian spiced biscuits.

-12-

Smokey and her preppy bunch found me reading with Joanne at the art gallery café. A tall young black man shook my hand. Jay, for the Party. Can we count on your vote? I replied that they could. Yet as the patriotic sweet nothings he effused belied all the changes that were sweeping the country, so too my life, I sensed the distance between us. I was just a hobnobber, much less a dreamer, while everyone else was far away, moving up to higher things.

Annette left me a letter wadded up and wedged into my sleeping-under tree. Having unfolded it, I rushed over to her house, but she wasn't there. Nor was she at the mall washrooms. It was an odd and painful note, and I couldn't bear to read it through, stuffing it into the back pocket of my jeans together with her poetry and Hwang's verses. Friends come and go, said Joanne. The Lord gives to us not as the world gives, added the pastor. Do not be afraid.

Mrs. Okra is in hospital, said the housekeeper. Why -for what? I asked, shivering in the snow in my tee shirt

and denim jacket. It's freezing. May I please come in?

-14-

They say Winter's colder when you're alone particularly when it's all you can afford. Tapping out my novel bundled up in a market stall quilt in the unheated room where I rented, 5 dollars a night. Singaporean soy-corned ham, tomato soup, baked beans -food I had put away over the Summer stacked in a cabinet in the kitchen. A bag of subsidized rice stood open on the tabletop along with a pen knife I'd been using to open cans, a small Pyrex glass pot. I hadn't saved enough to run a fridge

or dryer or to get warm clothes but what I had was more than most facing the crisis.

-15-

Dropping off over the kettle at 11, the television rerunning the news -more flu deaths, more businesses forced to close their doors. A raucous demonstration underway at Gallery Park, the tall black man who led the Party called out over sharp cries and rumbles of discontent:

-16-

"...what's out there scares us,"
I felt my knees ache -Father.
"Makes us feel -small."
And I was wrestled again into a

stretcher with sandpaper knelt into the corner of my eye. "We're not a part of it, though it's come into the very space around us that makes us exist." All that blood. "We're faced with Hobson's choice: Wrap ourselves in this new norm, tighter now, -we can feel the unknown." I sank into the couch, gasping. "Tighter still," I chuckled. "-it is emptiness -and PAIN." Winter haw-hawed a toothless, frosty laugh.

-17-

Mrs. Okra gave in to the flu yesterday, said the pastor, she died in

hospital. There's a wake at her house this evening, he said. She left you some money, and Joanne's daughter: Patty will be there. She would like to meet you. She has a skin condition - you'll see.

The note Mrs. Okra left me -the last thing she had to say, I didn't expect anything easy to understand, much less a psalm.

"Hope-pleasure-austerity-death -and the burning urge to tell your story. Fugitives of silence in a moonlit desert. Daybreak, truth stabs from the sky. But irony broods in the shadows of the dunes, where, scooped of heat, there is mercy. I dig in the sand, thirsting for justice,

filling my mouth and throat with dust -millings from the pelvic grinding of loves and wars. Too long have I indulged of this world, growing all the more crooked with years. Don't let me die alone -promise me... promise me!"

-18-

You can wait in here, said the housekeeper. It was Ma'am's writing room. She opened the door to a spacious suite lined with pinstripe wallpaper, old photographs, and leather upholstered couches. At the far end, a tall window and a small spindle-legged desk angled to catch the light.

Leprous white skin with a slight slouch, Patty congealed from the lace curtains. Breath like ice. There, on the table, she nodded. It's for you. I picked up the letter. It was from Annette. She explained that she left me in October to care for Mrs. Okra, seeing as how I'd made other friends. She caught the author's flu despite their crushing onions as a remedy. Now she's contagious and waiting to be put to sleep like all the trash that the Party incinerates. Remember me, she wrote. Love you forever. Patty laid a hand on my shoulder as I cried, feeling the press of her bird bone ribs.

"...because the onion was one of the few vegetables that could easily be stored for the winter ...it was worshiped by the ancient Egyptians. They believed that its spherical shape and concentric rings symbolized eternity."

Three Vignettes

-1-

Langkawi beach late Sunday morning was dotted with mats, umbrellas, tethered Jet Skis. Amidst fallen mangrove trunks, amidst bushes of hoyas and other tropical climbing plants, his eyes were dark rimmed, focused on the limestone islet rising from the strait like a diseased tooth, on top of which unusual tufts of green lured him ever more.

With a sharpened iron rod, he had been grating on a rock, he tore off a square of bulldog fence, then striding up to a fishing boat, harvested a

tattered sun-bleached tarp, shaping the wires into a basin, he lashed the tarp over it, making a coracle.

He carried the rough raft out to the waterline, above his head with its frayed dreadlocks. A child was paddling in the shallows with her mother. Lend me your fins, he slurred. He lowered himself into the coracle as a small crowd gathered loosely around, slipping his fingers into the borrowed flippers. You do it, man! Someone cried in a high voice. He pushed off, scooping at the surf with long sweeps of his tanned arms.

It took him half an hour to reach the islet, to feel the sharpish pebbles

grate under his bare feet, he dragged the soggy coracle ashore and lay down under a tree with spiny leaves, panting, exhausted. Sunlight glinted through the greenery onto his body. Cool wind rushed through gaps in the limestone hill, he closed his eyes.

-2-

The lovers had gathered in the lake garden as the sun went down and the chills came on. Birds on the water left in formations of flight, and he wrapped his long scarf around his girlfriend's shoulders as they huddled around a circle of thick candles amidst the stubby oriental grass. Shadows thickened around the

willows and the wild rose bushes, a murk through which couples waded, wobbling flashlights sending beams across the clearing. In her hands, a red crêpe paper lantern, ribbed with bamboo splints and calligraphed with their names, the shape of a heart, all in bold black Chinese ink. Their breath began to frost and with shaky hands, they packed the little burner basket with firestones and set it alight. They held the lantern between them, now puffing with hot air until it could lift its own weight, brushing pass their fingers and palms, twisting in the black of night, rising, spitting firestones giving off orange sparks, to become just another glowing red star

of the swarm of red stars hitching onto the currents of the high winds.

She hopped for joy, saying, "too good to be true", and many clapped their hands, muffled by cold-swollen ears, rosy and expectant cheeks pressed against each other's cheeks. He put a hand against her belly and she put her hand over it. Soon they would have this child, soon they would be wed.

-3-

If there was a well-kept culinary secret, it had to be Taiwanese sliced noodles. Streaky pastel white with frilly edges, rolled into flat ovals and sealed in a clear plastic pack.

Reverently, she cut open the bag and extracted the delicate dried patties, slipping them into the boiling water where they softened and squirmed like live albino eels. A yellowed enameled tin bowl would soon be filled with the severed wheat tentacles, then spooned over with gritty bone soup and green onion shoots and bulbs. As a dip, tangy fermented shrimp and a garden-grown lime.

She had learnt long ago that food was to be respected. That meant attention to time as well as substance. Not so much "what" the ingredients but "why" the ingredients. Not "how much" we eat but "how

little" can we eat. Her daughter brought the single enamel bowl to the dinner table, almost embarrassed, and the small dish of salted shrimp she slipped alongside. Her father twirled the slushy noodles about his spork, slurping them down followed by a dab of shrimp. Excellent, he said, unabashed. Everyone dug in. We should buy these again soon, said the daughter. Silence. Her father slapped down his spork and pushed off the table, followed belatedly by her mother. She dipped her finger into the salty pink shrimp and sucked it, over and over.

Sea of Storms

-1-

Water, she said -is the glass half empty to you? If you mean: am I an optimist then no, it's half full. We were sitting around a small table at the dinner buffet. There were windows all round, on the roof of the small street corner hotel and dark slate clouds hung over the Straits of Johore where a bunch of ragtag scientists and me, a philosopher-mathematician, were meeting to debrief on the world crisis which I had started.

-2-

And what happens if I upturn the glass? She continued, making a point. Is your glass now dry and your lap wet? Yes.... I winced, expecting the punchline. Then take off your pants and wring them, math genius. The table roared with laughter. Daphne looked like she just caught a 4-foot tuna. She turned kindly and put a coaster over the glass and held it, turning it upside-down. It held onto the coaster and nothing spilt. This is what we've got to get out, she said.

-3-

We should do it, said Boris, the Russian expert on high altitude

winds. He nodded solemnly. What we do is we put the fusion reactors into the ocean and then, as the water all evaporates, the Earth will cool, finally the increased amount of vapor in the atmosphere will brake and burn up the asteroids. After a -say small - impact, the Sun will be hidden for a while but with the thicker atmosphere, we can make it. It will also rain easier, and the haze will clear sooner, said Bob, the American physicist.

-4-

They looked at me, the group of scientists. Well? Bob asked. Is there anything we've missed? Don't

interrogate the poor guy, said Boris, there'll be plenty of storms that's all - and I'm going to vote "yes". We retired to our rooms.

-5-

There was a knock on the door -it was Daphne. You know, I didn't mean to embarrass you, she said, looking condescending and kind as only she could. I've had a rough life as well. I know the pressure on you is max right now and everything had better work. I nodded. She reached into her handbag and pulled out a mask. You'll need this tomorrow morning.

-6-

I was up at 6am. I took a shower and combed my bedraggled hair back. The room lamp was set on dim and threw an orange light across, turning the small corner strip of window into a mirror. I went up to the glass and touched it -it was cold and frosted with dew. I opened the window and fog rushed in, condensing in the air-conditioning. I rushed to the elevator clinging on to my mask, not knowing how to put it on.

-7-

A hotel staffer showed me how as I entered the rooftop dining room. Make sure the eye goggles are tight,

she said, and the fuel cell, turned on. Can you breathe? Yes, I said. It won't be so easy later. I took out my phone and did a panorama of the port city as the sun came up. It felt like we were on top of a mountain with rolling foggy clouds moving among the lowrises and yes -it was quite a bit of a struggle to breathe but not terribly uncomfortable.

-8-

Boris sipped his coffee through the breathing mask's mouth straw. Bob dunked his teabag absentmindedly while staring out the window, and Daphne had on a sequined gown which I guessed was for the television

interview. How do you eat? I rasped, through the voice transmitter, sounding like a Stormtrooper. Beats me, she replied. How does my mascara look? I laughed. Yes, I have a wet lap, I admitted, pushing the food aside. If they had vaporized any more of the ocean, nothing on Earth would make it, said Bob. Hope you know where we come in. I nodded like a pet dog. 13% -that's your bang for the buck. You know, Boris, I've always wanted to challenge you to a game of chess. The Russian looked up from his tablet slate and raised an eyebrow. Here, now? He said, tapping open the app. I'll have the sausages to go, I told a waiter.

Kid, I don't know how to tell you this, Daphne confided, but I've always wanted an Asian guy. Well, here I am, I said. She laughed. As a chess partner. Don't you play, math whiz? I said I don't count moves. Neither do I. You know, Australia seems like a good place to live, like a month from now, I think, she calculated mentally. And so is Death Valley and the Gobi Desert, but I digress. We stared at each other through the transparent mass of tubes and wires across our faces, and she laughed. I don't think I need it anymore. She turned and left through the lobby doors, into the

foggy Malaysian morning. But I do....
I whispered to myself.

-10-

A child came up to me: where are all the animals, sir? I looked at him huffing through the mask and knelt on one knee. They don't have masks. I ruffled his hair and told him not to worry. You've built an ark then? He asked. Yes, what happens to them? Said his father, holding the news open in his hand. We haven't been told. Reckon most of them just die? Actually, we've thought of that, I said, stammering. It sounds cruel but most every animal we could catch, or lure is by now, in hibernation. And a lot of

people too -soon. Snakes, bears, lots of creatures can go under, it just takes a bit of coaxing. That way we have more food. The kid smiled. They think of everything, said his father rubbing his shoulders nervously. We'll walk, the car wouldn't start, he said as they left.

-11-

The high-speed rail to Singapore city was shrouded in fog, so it looked like a steam train had pulled up to the station. I got on board and pressed my mask valve open, breathing the dehumidified cabin air. To the left, an immense compound rainbow had formed with all its colors clearly

visible. I posted it on my Facebook. Coming for the conference then? Replied Daphne.

-12-

The Shangri-La was a hive of activity. Press badges were everywhere. I pushed through to the courtyard balcony where she was standing after the presentation, in her sparkling green mermaid gown, taking questions. She saw me wave and said, no more questions. Amidst the LED flashes and raised voices, security guided us to the open-air atrium. Look up, said Daphne. It's a storm, I said looking up into the flashing grey, white eye. You know why I wore this?

She asked, head tilted. We're going to get wet. I started to speak when the first of the giant raindrops landed on my L'Oreal hair. That -is going to be one hell of a killer, said the government scientist moving in on me -for the next 50 years, kid, so you had better kiss me now.

Reminisce

-1-

Many years ago, the open-faced pewter dish clock still hung on the wall of my grandfather's house, above a line of low cabinets upon which stood Chinese porcelain forms. Just in front of it, their dining table in pink line and dot melamine with matching plastic and steel chairs. It was mid-morning, a time suitable for breakfast. Mostly because the butter had to thaw and the bread warm up from being in the fridge. The bread was strong white and came in a waxed paper sack. Back then, it was something delivered to every house,

just like the milk man, we had a bread man. So the bread sack stood open on the pink table and the butter on a blue plastic dish under its frosted clear cover. My grandparents brought out the radio -a Japanese battery transistor radio in dull green and tuned in the news. It was only turned on for 5 minutes to conserve the batteries. Then we sat about the table listening to the ticking of the pewter 35-years-service commemorative clock.

-2-

I suppose that one of Grandma's ways to my grandpa's heart was her home-made marmalade. From orange

peel, orange juice, and lemon juice, stirred slowly over the stove. There was barely any left in the repurposed jar, but with conjuring sweeps of the knife, a thin glistening layer of golden jam was applied to the bleached white square of bread. Then the butter, evenly scraped on its flank and daubed on as well. After which, I was offered my turn. I declined, so Grandpa folded the slice of bread in half and bit into it. Grandma followed a step behind. I just sat there feeling as if time itself were a burden one bears -the effect of closeness to the very old.

There isn't a clock on the wall at Grandpa's house anymore, and the porcelain pomfret with its magic eye is the only decoration on the cabinets by the dining table. Just to the left of his wood-framed photograph, placed there after his lost battle with prostate cancer. Grandma no longer makes marmalade, and the bread comes from the gas station nearby, enriched with bran and honey and modern preservatives, in a plastic sack pinched close by its best-by tag. It's always soft and warm and the satellite TV permanently reruns the soaps. I understand now that time is what you fill it with, before the

mouth that remembers so many turns of phrase is shut forever, before the trained, targeted spin men flood the channels and we don't really see or hear.

-4-

Out in the garage, the curvy Volkswagen Beetle they owned stands on bricks. I'd like a car like this someday, I effused to Grandma when I was younger. It'll go to your uncle she corrected me. Try to drive my Volks out the gate, Grandpa chipped one day, as I struggled to kick in the stiff clutch. Taking it the wrong way, it wasn't a lesson or for fun and laughs, but the kindness of a

frugal man I discouragingly couldn't receive. I turn away and don't see or hear. The Windows of the Volks dusty and loose, an ungainly shell of the past. Lives are burdens time bears.

A Question of Procedure

-1-

He came over one day unannounced. Stout, green and wattled with independently rotating eyes and a wide smile -a sort of humanoid chameleon, the size, and weight of a baseball. He asked to be called Robert after I picked him up from under the hedgerow where it was frosty and brought him into the warmth of the kitchen. Are you a gnome? I asked. Maybe, said Robert, elusive. Have any magic powers? No, he said.

I was about to catch a plane to Singapore, to hop on a shuttle to London from Manchester, then on to the Far East, for my wedding. You have a wife? Asked Robert. Soon, I replied. Is she Chinese? What's it to you? Just asking, Robert trailed off, they tend to be kindly to us. I stared at the mitten-sized reptile, who said you were coming along? I was in two minds whether to put Robert back - under the hedgerow, but he had taken a liking to sleeping near the heater and eating cooked food, so it was obvious he had to come along.

-3-

Rather than go through the whole process of getting him registered and all the questions I'd have to answer to get him a passport, I said I would just tuck him into my coat pocket. Worse come to worse, he'd go into a box in the cargo hold. Robert nodded.

-4-

The first hurdle cleared, I stuffed my suitcase into the boot of the black cab and got in the back. Claire and I chatted on WhatsApp. I have a surprise for you, I said -and his name is Robert. Oh, you're bringing a friend. Is he your best man? I laughed, no, I said, more like a pet.

She sent a smiley, and I patted my pocket just to be sure it was still there.

-5-

Baggage checked in, I passed through security and onto the 757. Being frisked was my only worry, but thankfully nobody thought of that. Every time I fly, I take the International Herald Tribune. Subconsciously. Reading it puts me to sleep. I also make a point of tasting the packed breakfast box we get on the shuttle. That's when the freeloader in my pocket piped up. My ears are stuffed up, he said. That's because we're on a plane, I

whispered. But already, faces had turned our way. Sorry, I'm a ventriloquist, I said, dismissing their curiosity. No, a high voice pipped up, you've got someone in your coat! Umm, I said, well he's a pet. A hamster, a mouse, a cricket -you know. That's when the stewardess leaned over my seat and said to take Robert out. I reached in, sullenly and felt -nothing. He's not there, I said. I mean, nothing was there. Well alright, she said comfortingly. She gave me the eye, so I unfolded and hid behind the Tribune. Come back when you're ready, I whispered. See - there's an elf on the plane, said the

kid. An elf, Dad. Oh hush, Jimmy, said his mother.

-6-

Rather shaken, I decided to have the mini-Mars bar only to find Robert already chewing at in inside the box. I gave him a raised eyebrow, and he just shrugged. Then I put one finger against my lips, and he nodded. We drank the shallow cup of orange juice and had a bit of the sandwich, then landed at Heathrow. The kid and his family were going to Singapore too. I'm sorry for my son -he believes in nonsense, said his father. I'm in Insurance, AIA, he said glancing at my newspaper Yes, I always have

this, I said -superb coverage. He nodded proudly. What stocks do you watch? I'm into Bitcoin, I said. Ah, cryptocurrency -good. I develop for the App Store. I'm quite the nerd. What's your App? He asked. LittlePad, I replied, a patented displaced Qwerty keyboard for super-fast typing. We'll have to give it a spin then, said the insurance man.

-7-

His pocket just wriggled, said Jimmy, staring. Now Jimmy, don't be a bother, said his mother. I'm sorry - your name? John, I said. John Emmanuel. I felt a sharp jabbing. It was Robert. Excuse me, I need to use

the men's room. I've got to molt, said the chameleon-like creature. Molt? Shed and grow, he said. Oh, then we'd better get into a stall. I put Robert on the cistern. He looked nervous. Don't touch me till I'm hardened, he cautioned, breathing heavily. He turned dark at first then later, after his outer skin had peeled off, a pale pink blending into a healthy olive green. He smiled widely, looking over his new size. You're a little harder to hide now, I said. We only molt once, offered Robert.

-8-

The long-haul flight to Singapore took over 12 hours. I was sleepless,

having mislaid my reading matter, probably about the time of Robert's molt, when he had to be rinsed off in the sink. He wasn't very comfortable to carry in my coat pocket anymore, so I zipped him into the hand luggage, overhead, leaving a small gap. He wasn't too pleased but obliged anyway.

-9-

Hi, I'm Vicky, said a petite blonde. Is this seat taken? No, I said uneasily - go ahead. You're with someone, she pouted. Yes, actually -no. Sit, I stammered. Vicky must have had a spine problem as she began to lean into my space so as to nuzzle into my

shoulder. All, things avoided by carrying the Tribune, I thought -the never-fail that swats off spunky girls. I need to lie down, cooed Vicky, stretching herself out over my lap. I put on the earphones and tried to lose myself in the in flight movie. It was a romantic comedy: The Truth About Cats and Dogs. You should watch this, I said. But she was already having a better dream. Her breath smelt of beer, and I eventually ordered one myself.

-10-

By and large, we both fell into a stupor, Vicky, and me, drifting off to sleep. The lights were shut off and in

the semi darkness of the cabin, small feet started padding, small hands dragged out my hand luggage, unzipped it and took Robert out. You're real, said Jimmy, -elf. He stared at the chameleon who stared back impassively, then both nodded a silent pact. I won't tell anyone, said Jimmy.

-11-

Vicky woke up like a woman after a one-night-stand, also bringing me to with a warm feeling. It isn't everyday someone beautiful lays in your lap. She gathered her golden hair into a bun. Who's your girlfriend? She asked. Claire? I said. She's, my

fiancée. She's a Singaporean Chinese. We studied together in Manchester-
Feed your elf, Jimmy interrupted, holding out a paper airsick sack. Soup's up. Thanks, I said with a stiff upper lip, grabbing the sack from him. He returned to his seat and pulled the tray down, watching me from across the aisle.

-12-

What elf? Asked Vicky. I sank in the chest. I suppose everyone had better meet Robert then, I announced loudly. But nobody seemed much to care. I have a chameleon in this sack. Now we're going to have dinner together, will that be okay? Again,

nobody cared. Perhaps how the food tasted was more on their minds. Even the stewardesses just turned away all smiles.

-13-

I laid the puke sack on the fold-away tray and Robert crawled out gingerly, on spindly legs and arms that contrasted with his otherwise barrelish shape. You're so cute! Effused Vicky. You too, replied Robert. As we ate, Vicky fed him from her dish. I think I'm in love, he said, looking at me. Indeed, he seemed to have swelled a little in his man-area.

-14-

Vicky asked for coffee and so did I. And for the little man? Asked the stewardess. A deck of cards, please, said Robert. Claire taught me a game, big 2, while we were in university together. A kind of poker where the 2 card is the most important -the dii. Robert suggested that Claire join in via mobile, as I dealt the cards.

-15-

What a good idea, I exclaimed, publishing the video feed. Tell the whole world, then. It's part of his plan, said Vicky, jealous of how comely Claire turned out to be. Claire didn't bat an eyelid at Robert. Show

me the cards, elf, she said dispassionately as Vicky cosied up to me unabashed. A stewardess brought over a little Santa hat and put it on Robert, and everyone laughed. It's Christmas, eh? I said cheerfully.

-16-

Robert and Claire won all the hands, and they were rolling with laughter from each other's jokes. You're a lot more fun than John, she said, wiping tears from her eyes. Robert smiled. That's why I brought him, I said -to meet you. Robert, Vicky, and I took a selfie for Claire. Can't wait to meet all of you, she texted.

Soon, it was Jimmy and Vicky, Robert, and Claire-via-Internet, against just myself in a best of 3 hands of "coup", with the winner getting to have the chameleon over for Christmas. It was the middle of the final hand, and a storm rumbled and groaned outside the aircraft. About of a sudden, everyone's eyes glazed over. I suppose you like that blonde thing, Claire said, referring to Vicky. I suppose I do, I replied. Actually, I'd never found you that much charming, John. I know, I said. Robert interjected that Claire looked a lot like Selena Gomez, and she blushed slightly.

Thunder shuddered the plane. Everyone looked blasé like we had just seen the CIA take Sasquatch aboard a UFO. I, started Claire, and at that moment, all of us rushed for Robert, but Vicky was quickest, snatching the chameleon to her bosom. Give him to me! Squealed Jimmy excitedly. But Vicky said: we trade. What do you have? Robert lounged smugly in her palm like an Auntie Anne's pretzel, pleased to be his little green, influencing self. Claire said it wasn't every day you see a talking Chameleon who plays poker. I agreed. Okay, you can have my John for Christmas if I get Robert over for

Christmas. Vicky smiled sultrily, and I was suddenly aware that I was compulsively massaging her thigh through her leggings.

-19-

You're a whore, said Jimmy, but Vicky ignored him. Can't Robert come to our house for Christmas? No, said his mother, taking him back to his seat. The seat belt warning came on as we began the descent to Changi airport.

-20-

Claire could have spent her whole life with Robert. They opened presents, Jacuzzi-ed together, smoked Cuban cigars. She gave him a Black Pink Ice

Cream poster for Christmas and a mini bean sack that he often lay in as he watched the harbor cranes hard at work from her high-rise air-conditioned apartment window. Me? I married Vicky. She was an actress, and indeed a tart, who had landed the lead role in the sexually charged upcoming Edmund Yeo thriller: *The Strangeness of Death*. Jimmy and his Dad were seen down at Chinatown, in an old family-run pet store, trying to describe talking chameleons. Come on, 200 dollars, urged Jimmy's Dad, over the singing mynas in their bamboo cages. China men laying about looked on drearily in shorts

and hitched up Chung Kai pagodas.
No have, lah, sir. No such thing, one.

The Pearl Fishers

-1-

The Venusian pearl, a seed that starts from Pikka dust, thrown high into the pressure-cooker planet's atmosphere and left to fall, snowflake-like, snowballing, gathering to itself layer upon lustrous layer of pink-black-green, amber-like lacquer from the soup of compressed chemicals -till it lands, crystalline and iridescent, upon the planet's storm-raked, semi-molten crust.

-2-

Demi was a pearl fisher. She had beautiful long black hair, porcelain

skin and a swimmer's body with strong muscular legs. She and the other fishers lived in hollowed out caverns beneath the planet's surface which were cooled by a technology they didn't yet understand. In those caverns, were discovered hibernating aliens -reptilian beings with green scaly skin and red bug eyes. All attempts to wake them failed, so with powerful lasers, they were sliced open, and their skins used as the only suits able to withstand the harsh Venusian climate.

-3-

It wasn't by any disguise that the world wanted Venusian pearls, but it

was already a foregone conclusion that nobody sent there would ever make it back alive. Dropped to the surface in a drill ship, the 12 fishers had scant hours to tunnel below the surface and hope to hit a cavern mapped out by the Martian codex, discovered on the red planet along with a few of the priceless pearls. They made it, but there was no way back home -no escape from the super dense Venusian atmosphere.

-4-

Demi slipped into the bile tanned alien skin, naturally adapted to the extreme heat and pressure. It was soft on the inside and brick-like on

the outside but was adequately flexible. Air bladders and recycling filters squished around her as she rolled the skin tightly over her chest, sealing it. Looking out through the bug eyes, she could see the fluorescent Venusian auroras above her, into which she had to dive, and deposit the Pikka dust.

-5-

She waited for the twisters to descend as they did every evening, catching one with her arm, she was lifted into the air, undulating, and kicking, she surfed the storm winds into the opalescent nebula, and scattered the Pikka. Swiftly as it had

come, the twisters dissipated, and Demi descended, spirally, upon the dying winds.

-6-

Many of the vitals for survival were discovered by the fishers including bathing in alien blood. It never got dirty, and eating the strange alien hanging mushrooms that grew on the cavern roofs which were their only source of food and water which condensed in their gills. The mushrooms grew by prayer. When the fishers didn't observe the delicate ecosystem, there would be fewer mushrooms, and when their

intentions were pure, the fungus was tastier and juicier.

-7-

The caverns housed many other alien technologies. A neutron schooner was discovered in a launch silo. Ragged cone-shaped, as high as an obelisk, the monolithic alien ship seemed to have no doors or means of propulsion. It was also made of material so dense; it could not be scratched or chipped. The fishers suspected that it was made from super dense neutron star carbon.

In a deep and secluded cave, alien hearts were kept alive and beating, attached to their brains. They communicated that it was okay for their skins to be used -that Venus was a hopeless cause of a world. Demi knelt before the throbbing purplish hearts and washes of kindness came over her. Do you want to leave? The aliens pushed into her mind. She nodded. The alien organs squelched, and she put her hand in between them. It came out sticky with mucus that fizzed against her skin.

She went to the silo where the schooner was, crystalline and smooth. This time she noticed grooves zigzagging up the monolith, and she climbed them gingerly. At the very top, exhausted, and trembling, she found nothing but a pyramidal point. She cried. There was no way off the planet, no way to sell their pearls. With her sticky hand, she rubbed the spiked tip and prayed. The alien fluids seeped into the capillaries of the diamond spar and the tip began to lift.

Demi crawled into the space it left. It was large enough for one person. She didn't know what to do so she sat in the cold hard hole cross-legged and prayed. The shard tip descended and sealed her in. She felt a vibration, like someone swinging a gimbal. And she was connected to the ship's intelligence. She asked it if she could return to Earth, and it replied that she could. How? She asked. By ejecting thimbles of neutron star, came the reply, we will soon be clear of Venus, then I must return. Demi thanked the alien gods and asked how she would survive the journey. The ship replied that it had plenty of

food and air but only for one passenger at a time. Then let it be me, she said.

-11-

She was awakened as if from a night's peaceful sleep by the ship's intelligence, having eaten but 3 mushrooms and breathed 2 sacs of air. We are in orbit about your planet. You must speak to the space authorities. Demi smiled, her hands clutching a string of the most beautiful iridescent Venusian pearls.

Somewhere between Jupiter and Mars

-1-

Bop!

"What was that?"

A dull thud, then a shudder through the capsule. Then another, followed by an urgent whooshing sound somewhere along the back end of the cabin.

The A-2 Albatross was a light schooner built for speed, for interplanetary travel, consisting of an economical fission pile and an all-in-

one living space fly-wheeling about a cargo boom.

-2-

Captain Ross "Rosie" Sheriff, once ace Navy pilot, turned transsexual, flushed half the air into the boom tanks, distributing the risk. They put on evacuation helmets. Marsha Ismel, first Moslem woman in space and a member of the Mensa Club held a strip of PH film to the curved wall, checking for leaks. She found just one -a big one, from the wild flapping of the delicate cellulose.

Rosie handed her the putty gun. Marsha pressed the nozzle against

the wall deftly, and it ratcheted, making three clicks.

-3-

"Wake up Nestley and send her across the boom. We're under attack"

She pulled the hamster from its slumber with a piece of cheese, and placed a vest of electrodes over it, then sent it through the service duct towards the fission core. A video from Nestley's eyes appeared over her visor and they became sympathetic in the mind. A second head that machine AI could never achieve.

"Be careful, Nestley" she intoned mentally.

Rosie folded the boom, causing the Albatross to swing wildly -sending it into an accelerating spin. He pulsed the ion engines and ejected hundreds of metallic hydrogen bearings from their confinement field within the reactor. The dense little spheres whizzed in all directions, countermeasures to whatever was out there.

Marsha and Rosie waited, perfectly still for regulation two minutes as streaks of sparkling fire whipped around the port windows -hydrogen balls burning up. Then a flash, like lightning. They unstrapped from the

cockpit wall and Marsha floated towards the duct.

-5-

"Nestley found the other leak and it's bad. Should we seal off the boom?"

"No," said Rosie, making the thumbs down. "we'll need the access."

Marsha pressed the hamster to the leak and triggered the sealant in its vest and the video from Nestley fizzled out on her visor. She looked at the hamster container. There were three left -all clones of genetically-engineered Winter-White Nestley.

-6-

"What hit us?" asked Marsha, cradling the remaining rodents.

"God only knows," answered Rosie, staring through the port windows, shoulders slump. "We're way off course"

Marsha peeled away as well, reading from the Koran she kept in her pocket. And Rosie put on a Sinatra song.

"Fly me to the moon Let me play among the stars..."

-7-

Somewhere out there, the souls of pirates from their destroyed Scimitar

mingled with the mangled pieces of Nestley's soul. Rosie started humming as he righted the nimble ship.

"May you all make it home," prayed Marsha.

Rosie looked impassively at her thick dark lashes and plump purple lips muttering Arabic blessings.

"...In other words, hold my hand In other words, baby, kiss me"

The Color Matcher

-1-

The appreciation of colour is a later development of the mind's eye. Where the eye darts, there is white. Where the eye averts there is black. Where the eye rests, there is subjectivity, the insinuation of material differences: hardness, softness, weight, and size. The urge to feed on ripe fruit, to breed at the sight of lipstick and mascara, even to judge a person worthy, which we do, despite being of the same skin or hair colour, therefore admitting we are in fact influenced by physics more than psyche. Wrapped in white, our bodies

no longer stench of the connotations of hair and pore, nail and tooth, and the shadows within our nostrils. Clothed in black, we are anonymous. Accentuating the weave and weight of the fabric, powerful even. Yet in colours of any pleasing combination, we invite greed, hatred and jealousy.

-2-

Why not do it up in just plain white, he said, I don't know, white -and maybe dark brown or tan floors and furniture. Matte white or gloss white? I asked, rustic brown or polished? Rustic brown, definitely, he said. Then how about blueish white? I asked, with cobalt painted plates and

vases? He closed his eyes for a moment and opened them -it's good, he said. And the floors should be darker than the furniture, I offered, the ceiling, more matte than the walls. He chuckled softly, you're way ahead of me.

-3-

By the modern day miracle of VR, I held my phone up to his eyes and through the stereo focal camera lenses, the high definition display recoloured his walls. The empty rooms were instantly filled with designer furniture, and light and shadows coursed through the windows, hung of a sudden, with

perfectly fitted Venetian blinds. Wow, he said, stunned.

-4-

I left the mansion feeling upbeat. In under 30 minutes, I had earned \$3000 of my service fee. I was a professional colour matcher, one of the best, and had flown in from the West coast just for this job. My client, a towering basketball star worth millions.

-5-

Back at the office, I breezed through the time-proven process of material and paint selection, automated by deep databases of video animated samples -not just photos, each

material swatch came alive in stereo vision, glinting with light and motion on the three widescreen, colour-calibrated LCD displays on my desk. I pulled at the arms of chairs and sofas, dragged hanging lights lower towards the floor, switched between morning and evening light, with strokes of the pointer I waved in my hand, I orchestrated a feast for the eyes I knew he would love. Everyone did. Next, I made the calls to my contractors to build my plan. I wired them the design then poured myself a flute of sparkling golden wine.

At the end of the week, I flew over again, to appear politely alongside and explain the rationale behind the design -to describe it in the lush, ego-caressing, nomenclature of interior architecture, like a chef expectantly describing the flavours of a dish, to bite at the opening to confess humbly that certain things could have been better except that such-and-such happens to be the current limit of what is humanly possible. Last but not least to collect the rest of my generous fee.

I almost didn't recognize him when he had answered the doorbell. Titanium white chalk paste was rubbed into his wiry hair and streaked horizontally across his milk chocolate skin, and he was clothed in rippling dull silver grey that twisted and pleated around his lanky frame. Reflections are not colours, he said, just a memory quickened to be shared. In his hand a thumbed, worn paperback -something by an obscure philosopher. He was barefoot and so I kicked off my heels. We were walking through the entrance hallway, the hardwood flooring I had expected, substituted for arcs of cracked clear

glass tile and smooth colorless glass beads. The walls, papered in varioptical frosted plastic that prismed and shifted hue as we passed. What have you done? I wanted to ask, but the absence of colour, for once, was so refreshing that I swallowed my words.

-8-

The spiral stairway that led to the basement was white marble, veined with dark grey streaks which pinched and swirled as we stepped on them. I wanted to ask, how did you do that? He grinned at my expression, keeping the secret to himself. Besides playing national basketball, he was also

widely known as a shrewd businessman. Water seeped from the edges of the glistening steps, as if we had waded into a children's pool, drizzling into a circular pond at the foot of the stairs, a shallow disc lined with mercury mirror-smooth metal. The colour of water is necessity, he quoted, stepping onto a blood red carpet printed with upturned nails, razor wire and other cruel devices. A stiff current swept across the floor, setting the mat of fibers in motion like the polyps of some hellish coral. Pain coursed through my nerves, piercing phantom pain. How could he bear this? But my client strode on

with iron-cast resolve towards the seating area.

-9-

Please, he waved a hand, throwing his imposing frame down into a plush, otherwise shapeless fuchsia couch. I gently lowered myself onto the bulbous leather settee, behind which, a 20-foot-high wall of seamlessly-arranged plasma panels ran scenes from old noir movies. It's ironic, isn't it, he lifted a corner of his mouth. To? I asked. To have a conversation with this amount of distraction, what we're sitting on, standing on, have going on behind our backs. Isn't that the antithesis of

colour? What he had been getting at all along, I finally understood. You've made your point, I said meekly. Colour must be the most evil thing ever created. It's what we have to live with. What colour would you be in heaven? -See, he interrupted his own question. I sucked my lips in, then realized what the vagina-like couch represented and laughed out loud. He laughed as well.

-10-

Looking more relaxed, he offered us a drink. In a small earthenware bowl, bright green powder which he spooned into tiny cups made from cockle shells, pouring over hot water.

Matcha, he said. Only the best, I enjoined. We put the fishy, sour brew to our lips and nodded to each other knowingly, my phone added to the ziggurat of his philosophy books.

The Best Thing Since

-1-

The master baker and I shared the same last name. Not long after I left his short weekends course, I decided to try my hand at a bread so delicious -it would certainly sell.

-2-

Meticulously, I accumulated the ingredients for the sourdough loaf. I shopped before our church meet, lugging oil, and flour to the hotel suite where we communed. I fussed over getting a regular supply. I had done all the math -the weighing and costing. I had approached

wholesalers on the Internet, to get the best possible price. My bread was special -a variant of French pain. Wet and sticky, I slopped the limp dough against the sides of the mixing bowl, dreaming of -what else -but Rhea. And no, she wasn't a baking ingredient. She was my course partner, and we had made eyes at each other for weeks. Before we broke off, she had her hair done up, and she looked great, but I hadn't any money to spare. She had her own car while I took the train home.

-3-

I punched down the risen dough, now solid, and squidged a sheet of

clingfilm over the bowl. The previous day, I stingily spooned sour milk over the wheat and rye slurry and mixed it in. Then shutting the Tupperware lid snug, I put on my bedroom air conditioner, set the temperature to 25 degrees Centigrade, and rested the precious tub of bubbling starch and proteins on my work desk. I slept on it while the yeast and lactose-eating bacteria worked lace-like holes through the slurry. I showed the dough to Rhea through WhatsApp, and she said it looked like a decaying corpse. The tattered sheet of a Halloween ghost. But I knew the bacteria had done its magic. Would I be available for book shopping at

Salvation? I wasn't sure. The proofing needed getting done. I had to wait for the final rise and check the skin of the dough to make sure the crust would be thin and crispy. Okay, she said.

-4-

I pre-heated the small electric oven, popped in the round, puffy lump and settled down to wait. Slowly the white dough ball browned and rose in the oven's heat. It puffed and split along the sharp incisions I had carved on top. When it was done, Rhea asked me if she could come taste it. I said, sure. She said, I brought you something you forgot. Okay, I

sounded irritable. The loaf had to rest. It had to be sour enough, and moderately crumbly from the milk powder and oil. Above all, I realized that I might not meet the bottom line against Uncle Slocum and the Roman Bakery. Maybe I'd give the Adventists a run for their money, but then they had sprouted grains. I cut into the loaf. The skin gave and cracked as the knife sliced through moist, dense crumb. I put a piece in my mouth and to my delight, it was sour. But was it sour all the way through?

-5-

Rhea caught me in the kitchen,
chewing on mouthwatering

sourdough and said, it's this you forgot -the cookbooks we ordered. Our names were on the list, but you must have forgotten, so I paid for you. Thanks, I said garbled by the bread. I'll get you back the money soon. And how's the bread, she inquired. Good, I replied. Have some. She opened her mouth, and I pinched a piece and promptly placed it in her hand. Sulkily, she fed herself. We stood in the warm kitchen chewing for a while, then a long while, what seemed like an eternity.

-6-

You haven't any tea? No, I looked embarrassed. I have some at my

place, she smiled. Then you can have the rest of the loaf, I said. Right -pack it up. She got into her car. It was late and the evening buzzed with midges and crickets. Somewhere among the project houses, somebody started playing a song -Free Falling. Rhea started up her compact, she glanced at me in the mirror, so I waved goodbye. I stood there for a bit, almost unconscious that a tear had rolled down my cheek.

Old Man's Car

-1-

My father often told me the story of his father -how he never got the chance to taste grapes. Grandpa died the very same day I was born with only a bicycle to his name. One day you'll buy me a Mercedes, said Dad. And he cried -his son, a college dropout and diagnosed schizophrenic -his son, who got sent into detention for a violent family argument - treated like a common criminal.

-2-

But that was some years ago. I hadn't made a lot of money since, though I

remembered Father, and had just bought a self-driving car made by Daimler. It was a compact 2-seater in jet black. As the car pulled out of my apartment parking lot, I closed my eyes and prayed. We were going North -to the sleepy town of Taipeng -the "great peace", where my grandpa and grandma's ashes stood in 2 small urns side by side behind a glass pane in an outskirts Buddhist temple. I called ahead over the car-phone interface, just talking naturally with my eyes shut and my hands on my lap. Mom answered, 76 years old, yes, he's all packed. Remember to bring the offerings, I said hypocritically - they knew I was a Christian. I felt the

car turn slowly and reverse into my parents' driveway.

-3-

Father emerged from the house carrying a black travel carry-on and a large garbage bag stuffed with the offerings paper hell money gilded with faux gold and folded into Chinese boat ingot shapes. Sometimes, worshippers would also purchase paper shirts, cars, and houses to be burnt up to the Lord, but Dad's father died poor. In his mid-seventies, my father still had his hair, neatly trimmed and his shirt pressed. He wore the Uniqlo expandable leather belt I gave him

after I was freed from rehab. It looked posh and the woven strips of recycled leather had acquired a wabi-sabi like most of his possessions.

-4-

Getting into the Daimler, he chuckled -finally, son, he said -a Merce. I smiled back calm and proud. It must have cost a bundle. No, I said, not really, it's made in China, just like all the electric self-drivings flooding the market. Dad was interested immediately. So, you don't have to touch the wheel? Yup, I said, feeling the admiration. He wanted to hug me, saying son -you've made it. But for affording a 99 dollar per month

long term loan on this 2-seater, I brushed it off. I'm doing okay, I replied. He smiled. Tell it where to go, Dad. He gave the car the address of the Seri Malaysia hotel and I confirmed it with my voice. We sat back, two old men in state-of-the-art technology.

-5-

As the little Daimler weaved through the Saturday morning traffic, Dad leaned back, breathing heavily. I know you became a Christian because I treated you harshly, he said. What I do for my father, you don't have to do for me, he said, referring to the offerings of paper

money and joss sticks. It's just that... he trailed off, wiping his eyes, I shouldn't have sold you out -it was wrong, but we were so poor. Dad, I started, also in tears, I'm sorry for hitting you.

-6-

Mother called and I picked up by voice command. She wanted to know we were safe, driving with the new-fangled technology. Father said the car's judgment was solid, and he was sure it would be an uneventful trip. In fact, both of us were happily sipping Starbucks iced lemon tea, while chatting with her. We nibbled on seaweed crisps, and had removed our

shoes as well. Mom was aghast, but Dad reassured her, and she said to take care, grudgingly. She's just jealous, Father joked. Well, it shows I need to make more money, I said, thinking of a Proton 7-seater SUV, but Dad clapped me on the back and said, this one is just fine. We ate and drank, taking in the sights, as the little car pressed along the high limestone cliffs of the Kinta Valley. We're close to Taipeng now, said Dad.

-7-

Father asked whether I could give him command of the car for a while. I said, sure. Don't go straight to the Seri Malaysia, he said. Take us by the

clock tower. There, said Dad, under the spreading Angsana trees, where we played as children in the falling yellow petals every evening. And he pointed out his old school, St. George's where he received a missionary-style education way before the government had enough resources to set up schools of their own; his family's rented house -a wooden affair on high stilts, squatting in a poorer neighborhood built over radioactive tin-mine tailings. So many here died of the "big C", he said, -your grandpa as well. We passed beneath the majestic rain trees planted during British times, which drooped overhead, dipping

into the lake of the botanical gardens -a favorite location for wedding photography. But that afternoon, it was empty, and the sky bruised with blue-black clouds. Dad told me how coastal winds breaking on the marble-veined foothills brought rains to Taipeng every afternoon, how every schoolboy was resigned to getting wet, walking home after lessons.

-8-

Now you can take us to the hotel, he told the AI. And the car obeyed. We fitted into an electric vehicle parking bay automatically and both doors unlocked and popped ajar. Father

was a little surprised. It knows it has 2 people in it? I shrugged, we live within a generation of "will wonders ever cease?" and "nothing much surprises". He shook his head at the irony as I hooked up the charging cable. That night, as we stared glassily at the hotel TV, Dad opined: If I had seen this far into the future, I would have been a better father to you. If we had done trips like this more, I wouldn't have lost control so easily, I said. People will fight in times of hardship, make up when they are prosperous. It's all nothing - that's life. Yup, I agreed softly. You know, thinking out loud, what if you

burnt me up a paper Mercedes, -a self-driving one?

-9-

Dad and I became closer immediately following the Taipeng trip. Although the car was too small, we put the roof down and carried plants home from the nursery on our laps; we visited relations living out of the way; Mom and Dad went out together to the movies and the Daimler's auto-valet parked and picked them up afterwards. Father was so pleased: God has given me a good son! So, I came by more often and Dad got used to commanding my car which soon accepted him as the second

driver -to my surprise. We were coming home from a dim-sum breakfast, and I was reading The Star e-Paper to him as he leaned back in the passenger seat, when out of the blue, he said, My Car: take us away. Pardon, sir? Questioned the AI. I raised an eyebrow. Take us away, he restated, far away, -far, far away. Very well, sir. I didn't have the heart to ask.