

The Gold Jacket



C. K. YAP

All His Best Stories

Edited and specially annotated by ChenKuang Yap

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Once Upon Writing a Book¹

Happens at the end of the age was a competition to write the world's final book. Yes, there was a reason behind it, quite obviously, everyone had better pool and contribute their personalities, experiences, skills, and viewpoints before the sun went red giant.

Secondly, though, it was to see if anything miraculous would occur or come together from the billion or so

1 Like Lewis Carol, I write with math (not AI) overtly as well as covertly. And it never occurred to me that some sensed my inner motives. But this story revolves around the well-known postulation that information is never lost. Mathematics is not information. Nor are the sciences. Information exists in what it says to itself. In that sense, it shouldn't be lost, only diffused. And at such point becomes a part of all of us, a light to the wise. Scary to imagine!

minds of at least some intelligence and blessedness.

Finally, and it was a risk they had to take, absolute complete knowledge could enable every soul to transcend this dimension—into a new one of their choice. And they would know the key upon reading that final book.

Gauss would have been proud.

The boy sat in front of his laptop. He had popped open a can of Coke and turned on the box fan in the window of their summer-sweltering apartment. Should he begin now or later, when should he stop, and how could anyone hope to write the world's final book? Does a final anything exist?

His dog knew a bit of physics. Prove that information in the universe is like God jumping rope. As long as you keep holding on to the handles, even if you miss a skip, information is never lost. And as such, information is finite, provided the beginning matches the end.

The boy listened to the bred-for-intelligence mini

dachshund, wagging by his feet, pleased to have unloaded a wisdom. He stroked its long plump body with his bare soles and smiled.

“To kill the gods”—that was the title of his manuscript.

He loaded up the elastomer dart gun, a short, pugnacious weapon cast in graphene. Should he shoot the judges too? Would they still read his book? He loaded the polonium-core soft bullets into the magazine. How many people would he have to kill to make the difference?

They turned up at the submission hall, Adam and Eve, who wrote a book together, “Return to Paradise: Return to Eden,” came quite possibly last. He shot them. They would die a slow death from the radiation. He shot the judges; they would have to hurry up. Then he submitted his MS. Could he walk out a free man? A man who saved the world?

The sun was shining through the frosted panes of the hall, above the entrance tunnel. There, his dog was

waiting for him, wagging. In his mouth, the dachshund held a little book of its own.

Canyon and Sumida²

*Sumidagawa Meigetsu ya hashirade nami ni
miyakodori — “Sumida River Oh, full autumn moon,
don't be in such a hurry: the capital birds are riding the
waves.”*

-Torii Kiyonaga, the British Museum

Kyoko, that was her name. In the space of a postcard,
I thought I knew her. She had studied English at Tokyo

2 The word “Sumida” fascinated me -the name of a famous waterway in Japan. I have never been to Japan but worked for a Japanese company as a technical writer in my youth. I almost married a Japanese woman, pretty as well but it didn't fall through and sometimes, I dream of her and that telephone call where neither of us understood one another. Her name is not ‘Kyoko’ but rhymes with it.

University and, at the Canyon souvenir store, had purchased the postcard. Her raven hair falling about her face as she wrote on it, and a smile on her lips like the sunshine on my neck, warm.

She wanted me to post it to her to receive it in Japan stamped. But that day, I sat on the card instead. To say the Japanese girl was beautiful wouldn't be precise. To say she came from another world was more correct. It must be an orderly, extra polite, sexually permissive world. And I had dreams of stepping barefoot into it. I flipped her postcard in my fingers.

That was assuming she wanted anything to do with me. But surely a friend was more valuable than a postcard? Still, on that sunny day at the canyon, I had nothing much to share, just smiles and bows.

A year and some passed, and I had made it as a songwriter. I was invited to Japan for a performance at a folk and blues festival. I remembered the postcard she bought and entrusted me with. I packed it along with my

guitar and harmonica. And some hours later, I was sitting in a steak joint by the Sumida River.

The music festival featured all the big names from America and was televised live. So happy to be here, I said, Japan. Long ago I fell in love with a girl from Tokyo, I pulled out the postcard I never sent, from when I had nothing but fragments of songs on scrap paper stuffed in my jeans pockets. And I read out what she wrote over the air.

I had turned it into a song—the biggest one of the festival. I called for her to meet me at the Sumida River (Sumidagawa). It was the full moon of autumn, and indeed the crowd was laid back. What are those birds that swim and fish by moonlight? ** Good natured laughter **

I paced by the riverside. Kyoko, as with everything in Japan, was prompt to arrive. We met on a crossing, in the center of the water. I held out the postcard and bowed. It was signed by a dozen blues greats. I showed her each one. But then, the bridge stop light came on, and we were

swept apart as it swung in halves towards the riverbank. She giggled at the irony. She pushed the postcard back into my hands. We would meet later at her address. A boat passed, obscuring my view of her smile, like sunshine on my neck.

Maybe she was shy. Had I asked for too much time? But she stood on the banks of the Sumida no more. And under the light of the autumn moon, I read the old poem, "Don't be in such a hurry." A woman in a green kimono, tightly wrapped, slipped the postcard from my fingers as I had had too many beers. ** Where is Kyoko? ** She blinked at it for a long time, as if to weigh its consequences for a whole nation. But truly, that night, I and 12 blues greats—we rode those Tokyo waves.

The Gold Jacket³

There was a wedding dinner. A tall man had taken a short wife. She was barely as high as his chest, dressed in a simple black gown. He was dressed in white boat shoes, rolled-up white pants, and a billowing white shirt with ruffles around the collar and wrists. Over this, he wore a gold jacket stitched with dragons, pearls, and curly clouds. It had loops and knots for fastening, but it wasn't fastened, and his shirt bulged from beneath, stained with drizzles of Champagne.

3 This story is multi-layered and if you can guess what the theme is -and it is not how people dress up, you are indeed a sensitive and forgiving person. It is about love and how it waxes and wanes with every step of its purpose which is to multiply and prosper, to grease those wheels and make life more of a pleasure within limitations we honestly should delineate with kindness.

The boy asked him,

"Are you rich, sir?"

"Not at all."

"You seem prosperous."

The tall man laughed,

"Being a stylish slob doesn't mean I have money to burn."

The boy asked again,

"Why take such a short wife?"

"She's a friend."

"Won't you not be satisfied?"

The tall man didn't reply. He took his curly-haired love by the chin and, with his other hand, fed her a chocolate strawberry. She ate it, staring straight into his eyes. But before she had finished, he kissed her, making her blush, leaving her out of breath and flustered. He turned to the boy,

"She may not have melons..."

"Yes, I think I know what love means."

The boy had a friend. And as they wandered through the seafood displays and among the freezer chests at the back of the theme restaurant, he proposed to her.

"I've seen a kiss."

"And..."

"I want one with you."

"No!"

He held up a chocolate strawberry and looked at her with utter seriousness. With hesitant steps, she walked up to him and put out her hand.

"Give it to me."

"No, I'll put it into your mouth."

"Then do it."

He let her bite the strawberry and waited for her to chew it. Then he pressed against her. Their fingers locked

and she blurted out,

"Ohh!"

She pushed him away, still chewing, looking embarrassed, but in her eyes, she had grown just a little bit older.

He stumbled backwards as she pushed him against a freezer door. She pressed close to his ear. And whispered,

"I love you."

"Just not right now."

In his heart, he thought, I hope she never grows.

But grow she did. And her melons too.

They were 18 when they met again. It was at the airport fish and chips joint. He had ordered a ham sandwich and a glass of fizzy water when he saw a beautiful young woman with a plate of strawberries and chocolate mousse sitting across. She held up a strawberry and bit into it sultrily, looking right at him. He got up and moved his meal to her table.

"Are you...?"

"Just not right now."

He smiled,

"I'm going abroad tonight."

She looked disappointed.

"Why, for how long?"

"I don't know. Mom and Dad say we're moving—to Australia. Probably for good."

He sipped the fizzy water.

"What about you?"

She laughed,

"I don't think we can afford that."

"Then marry me."

She blushed.

"Or do you have someone else?"

With her fork, she stirred the strawberry mousse.

"A lot has happened since then."

"I suppose so."

The tall man who wore the gold jacket was among the well-wishers. This time, he was dressed in red paisley pants with a silk shirt printed with elaborate purple and maroon abstract motifs. His wife wore a linen slip decorated with sunflowers. They both looked older, yet they were still very much in love.

"I reckon there's no way to persuade you."

She didn't reply, gazing at the loving couple two different sizes.

"Eat your sandwich."

There was a nook with a sink, mirror, and hand dryer. He watched himself watching her bend over to check her eyelashes as he straightened his shirt. The wash area was claustrophobic narrow, and as they turned, he brushed against her fullness. She didn't protest as they kissed.

On the plane, he felt something stiff in his pocket and

reached into it. He drew out an envelope, and in it a letter he unfolded with shaky hands.

"Marry me -when you're ready."

He sank into the seat, eyes closed.

In the summer of 2024, he graduated from Melbourne with a degree in strategic studies. Promptly, he was recruited into the diplomatic service as an intelligence agent, not to use the word "spy".

That same year, his love interest married, and her invitation letter to him brought tears to his eyes. He had to see her one last time.

The tall man in the white outfit and gold jacket sat at the banquet table beside his short wife, dressed in navy.

"Nice to see you again?"

"Yes, you too."

"Married yet?"

"No."

"Planning to?"

"Maybe—maybe not."

He shrugged. The red diplomatic passport in the inner pocket of his coat.

She waved to him from the front-most table, and her husband raised his glass of champagne. He smiled back, also lofting his glass.

"What about your marriage?"

"I have... been too busy."

"Doing what?"

"Confidential things, mostly."

"007?"

She laughed. He smiled a strained smile.

"I think I'm ready... now."

He expected her to grimace but instead she enjoined,

"And so am I."

She locked arms with him, and they strode out onto

the balcony. It was night. Paper lanterns and glow chains dangled from the trees and off the hotel facade. They made their way down a spiral staircase and into the inner courtyard, which was done up Spanish style.

He could hear a sound like bees buzzing amid a dark, dense grove of dwarf orange and lemon trees.

"It's not as if we were never in love"

"It's not as if I will always be -with him."

"Give one of your tricks to me—I know you have them."

"No!"

"With your job, we could live anywhere, do anything—be free."

She looked sad.

"Do you think I'm stupid or mad?"

"It's loyalty, integrity, backing up our choices."

"Sometimes people hop, Mr. I always walk straight."

"Sometimes they dance."

She undid his belt

He reported the needle of poison used,

"To kill a dog."

And no further questions were asked.

He thought about what she had said about life and morals, and that made him cutting, daring, and ultimately more successful.

He chose a wife eventually, someone arguably better than her. With golden hair and melons too, more like tan-rust snow pears, which matched the rest of her slender, freckly sun-kissed body. Her eyes were blue and streaked with the colors of Sydney Bay.

Deep down, she knew he had many associates and admirers. It was something they never discussed.

Her husband was a diplomat himself, he soon found out at an embassy meet.

"It's okay to be attracted to my wife. She's a woman.

We're men"

So she told, he thought.

"And I'm sure you'd grant the same for me."

The other man smiled. He smiled back.

"How deep is love?"

He drew out a slim cigar case, and they lit up together. Of a sudden, he felt more relaxed.

"Brother!"

The other man grabbed his shoulders and ruffled his coat. He was shorter, had a thick Chinese accent, and a face like Cary Grant. Under his dark striped suit, a nimble body that moved in sudden and graceful strokes.

His Australian wife had on an avocado green gown, and her blond hair was stretched back and knotted with a mother of pearl comb. She seemed at ease talking with the dignitaries. He watched her from the side of the hall, semi-conscious he was holding that smoldering cigar.

"I suppose you had a good time?"

"Yes"

He bent over to nuzzle her ear, and it smelt strongly of cigar smoke and cologne.

"What about you?"

"Just fine"

"What do you really think of me?"

"I think I love you, always—you're beautiful."

She smiled.

"Women do grow old."

"And then what?"

"We understand, that's all."

"And we hope men understand."

It wasn't as surprising a statement as he expected.

"And I was afraid you'd taken up Tai-Chi."

She giggled, and layers of pretense dropped off their shoulders. They were more natural towards one another over the antipodal summer, and when he had to go home

unexpectedly, alone, she didn't ask.

His friend had had a baby. It looked serene, asleep in the pram, bathed in a tinkling lullaby from the toy radio clipped to the frame.

The cigar man smiled ear to ear. My son, he announced proudly. She picked up the sleeping infant, who smacked his lips and frowned, and placed him into his arms.

He shivered, feeling suddenly weak, but took the baby to his chest and bent his back backwards. She leaned over him and kissed her baby on the forehead. It giggled and spurted, legs wiggling. And she looked into his eyes cautiously.

"Congratulations"

"Thank you. He'll be our only one."

"Enforced?"

She nodded. The one child policy, he presumed.

"I never considered it much that the continuation of

life can be this precarious, so delicate."

She looked disinterested.

"It's only dangerous when you obsess with weeding the garden too much."

"And pull up the tulips and lilies."

"Right"

"What then are chances, big hero?"

He wanted to answer, but she took her baby from his arms and began whispering to it.

"Let's light up, my friend."

"Sure, and I'll buy the Americano."

Her husband patted him on the back, grinning and he registered that he had found friends among friends.

He hadn't aged much, but his wife had. Her face showing telltale cracks under her makeup and her body imperceptibly more strained with all the yoga and aerobics she'd been doing to keep it supple. The gold-

jacketed man and his diminutive partner waved him over.

"When are you having one?"

"I don't know."

"No time?"

He wanted to say that he didn't love his wife enough, but he swallowed that thought. Maybe he didn't love anyone quite that enough.

"You're an idealist."

"Pardon?"

"This isn't a world of good friends and good times"

"Why?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I turned into a bat and bit you."

He chuckled,

"Do what you have to, not what you want to."

He looked across the hall to where she was slow dancing with her child and her lithe, suave husband

working the floor animatedly. And something in him snapped.

"I crossed a threshold of sorts when I married your uncle."

The gold jacket man's petite wife spoke up in a soft tinkling voice.

"Had a deck of cards experience of love all my life."

"What do you mean?"

"He didn't see me just for the hearts and spades."

Gold Jacket reached out and took him by the hands. He had large hands. He pulled him forward and they leaned against each other's cheeks and he whispered,

"Don't be the one who lets himself down."

He wanted to say thank you and same to you, but that would have been insensitive. It was obvious they wed for love so deep the average person couldn't fathom or believe.

There was a span of several years where, in between,

he did many important things, made decisions that affected the supply of food to countries struck by famines, provided aid to war zones, and made personal visits to disaster areas.

She came to him on one such occasion, after his pinpoint appeal on TV poured donations of bread and soup into her wintry Nepalese town.

She was the most beautiful woman in the country, or so she implied, and when they were alone in his tent, she placed over his shoulders a gold jacket, stitched with motifs of peace and love.

"Are you Buddhist?"

"Why?"

"These are the wheels of life."

She traced the embroidery on the jacket with a long, pointy painted nail.

"How long have you been without?"

"Too long"

He didn't have the heart to deny her...

"Are you positive you're barren?"

"She nodded"

"I didn't want you to know."

"Would it have mattered?"

She looked away, but he caught her arm and stroked it.

"We'll adopt"

Tears filled her blue eyes as she nodded.

"I don't love you any less."

"And I can't love you much more."

They were twins. A boy and girl. The most beautiful woman in Nepal let them go to a better life with the angel who loved her people.

"They have your skin."

She smiled back, happier than she had been in years. And shortly he retired from the service.

They moved back to the Far East, making a life for their motley family amid the Spice Islands. And when gray started creeping into his hair, he received an invitation from his first love to the wedding of their only son.

He was dressed in rolled-up fishermen's pants and a burlap tunic, feet clad in Indian moccasins. Around his shoulders, a well-worn sun-bleached gold jacket. He had taken it on numerous walks along beaches, on boats across straits, and along jungle paths.

He sat there, a carbon copy of his uncle, though his wife was far taller. She was dressed in a sarong gown, her blond hair whisked into a wreath to hide her age.

The lucky boy, just turned 19, beamed from ear to ear.

"Uncle!"

He called, bowing to clasp his hands. He pointed out his wife, standing several tables away with his mother and

father.

"What do you think of her?"

He just smiled. And a calming aura of love surrounded the temporarily manic groom and his nervous entourage.

"You approve?"

He nodded,

"We're so much in love."

"I can imagine."

"Hey, you're... not Uncle."

He patted the young man on his shoulder.

"We knew each other by heart..."

The groom stepped back a little as his mother appeared.

"He had cardiac failure."

"Who?"

"Gold Jacket—with the tiny wife"

"And what happened to her?"

She chuckled through tears.

"We didn't really poison that dog way back."

"He nodded knowingly."

The Chinese Cary Grant came over to be with his better half. He was wearing a rhinestone cowboy vest over a stiff, starched tux shirt and bow.

"Where I got this?"

"Texas-oil drilling. Made me a fortune."

Mrs. Rhinestone glowed with admiration. He put a hand behind her waist.

"Wife's got the melons, eh?"

They all laughed.

When the night was almost through, a staffer passed him a small card which said,

"Meet me in the courtyard."

The orange and lemon trees were laden with fruit, but

she wasn't there yet. He had searched the space with its many private nooks and crannies.

"Australian intelligence?"

"Formerly, retired—with honors"

The muffled woman's voice came from behind the stand of lemon trees.

"Who?"

She asked.

"I don't know you."

"But you came."

Hushed silence.

"I was expecting a friend."

"So was I"

"What happens when you retire from the service?"

"Anything, presumably—even this."

He waited for the punchline. The expose. All his cover-ups and indiscretions.

"What do you think we all get for walking the absolute straight and narrow?"

"What do you think of swimming with sharks?"

"And are you one such?"

"Huh!"

"You're an idealist."

"Do what you have to do, not what you want to."

Sweat started beading on his neck and forehead. He was well trained in diverting a covert strike from someone—perhaps an insider—with knowledge of his personal history.

But the muffled voice went silent, and he could sense the sniffing sounds of her weeping.

"Count to 10, then come to where I am."

He counted out loud and, as he reached 10, heard a scooter throttle its engine, speeding off.

He rounded the lemon trees, and there it was, hanging

on a bough, the unmistakable gold jacket his uncle used to wear. Near the shoulder and down the lining, a spurt of old blood stain. He picked up the garment and scrunched it to his nose, recoiling from the lingering trace of deadly chemicals. Leaning shakily against a tree trunk, he exhaled heavily to clear his lungs.

He thought of burning the jacket or tearing it to bits, but instead, with a knife he kept folded in his belt, he cut free a square of the stained fabric and neutralized the poison in his brandy.

He made his way up to the first floor, to a gift shop where they sealed the piece of gilded silk for him between slabs of clear lead glass. He paid \$2 to have it wrapped and dedicated.

It stood on her mantelpiece a long time.

Rose⁴

Rose among thorns. The bundle of bones I had become, wrapped in a tight, padded tracksuit in midnight blue, looked on through a frayed balaclava at the tattoo forming on her sleek upper arm.

It wasn't that beauty had died, nor that it had been perfected, but that it was being celebrated in ways purer than it had ever been, even in the time of Esther.

The cyborg artist leaned back in his mesh swivel chair, his thick, veined fingers withdrawing from the needle

⁴ I wrote this story more as a prose poem than anything else. It was inspired by the moon and how it causes tides and waves in our oceans. And I imagined a bridge held together by the gravitational pull of the moon, how 2 people in love came to stand on the precise tangent of that delicate arc -what does this prove?

gauntlets. Unusually small, prune-shaped head with granny glasses turned to me and inquired in Cantonese: Will that be all?

I looked at "Rose," spread naked upon the Tyvek-lined couch, her lashes caressing her pierced, inked skin. 200 credits passed wirelessly through a fist-to-fist punch, like an eye-wipe at an auction. Money these days lingered nowhere.

She got into her sleeveless catsuit of silky chiffon, and we made our way out of the box and container city to the squat of low plastic tables where fake meat noodles were hawked by the corridor exit. The gritty broth wet the corners of my balaclava as I slurped from the cracked China bowl.

You're beautiful, she said—like she always did whenever I took my vegan meal. Then an apologetic girl with acne served hers: a slice of orca flesh, skin, fat, and all. It was just an inch or so square, propped up on a bed of GMO alfalfa—at last, healthiness that tasted as good as

it was beneficial. The meat was free-range, as the food chain had been restored from overfishing and intensive farming. Barring cannibalism, always feed, harvest, and eat the highest, most prolific of God's creations. As such, a square of orca flesh was all the meat she needed for a day.

I never want to see your body again -actually a compliment. The tracksuit I wore kept me from losing water, thus nutrients, kept me at a constant metabolic rate. They had discovered that a form of inner body stasis dramatically lowered a person's nutrient requirements, provided they were ethnic Chinese. A soft pack of Yuri-nade recycled Cosmonaut wine was in my pocket. We tore two holes in the foil, sandwiching an intestinal tubing that coaxed out our salve and mingled it with the nutrients within. I drank greedily of the mixture, of the sweat of her mouth.

What passes for art in a beautiful world, but the capture of pure pleasure? We wandered through the

exhibition piazza of mindless clones created for and driven by the fixation on sex, perfect men and women who only lived for a single orgasm, entombed in synthetic nanocrystal. She stopped to run her fingers over a slab pocked with their ejaculates, looking into my eyes, gray and weary for sleep, behind the ribbed balaclava.

And the symbiotes we had become were never more apparent.

“Why do eyes never touch—those windows of the soul that share so much, but ears brush against one another in search of neck, and mouths press together in search of permission, fingers locked not from doing harm in pursuit of such, but to milk every last drop of it, selfishly, in forced reciprocation.”

Across the reservoir hung a long, thin bridge, made firm by the gravity of the moon. There was a sign at the crossing points of times it was open for each lunar

passing.

She stared into my eyes, gray and weary for sleep. And above, the Sea of Tranquility reflected in the midnight blue waters of the dam. The moonlight glinted in her eye, dancing with the wavelets below, and I touched it to mine, not directly but through a single tear released psychosomatically. And the bridge, perfectly motionless for the moon's gentle glide. Across the sky, stars shone that knew our names. And the waters of the reservoir middled between their banks, as sight met sight in perfect tangent to the gentle curve of walkway. This was beauty —this was art.

Salon⁵

Somehow I had always to wait my turn whenever I went for a haircut. I once had thick locks of burnished copper, streaked underneath with oyster shell highlights. The ladies loved it when I angstily raked my hair through my fingers, head bowed over the lecture theater folding table. Large glasses slipping down my nose, hunched over in a dark knit cardigan.

Thing was, I never liked scissors snipping away around my face.

5 This story is about what happened to me -yes, I never recovered as the bucktoothed boy who felt a woman for the first time, and I never forgot it (I wonder why). Thus fornication consumes from within, and indeed vows are necessary to abet it. And maybe this story is my way of doing that which was simply implied and accepted all those years ago.

The hairdresser may have been pretty. She had a peach-shaped head topped with a peroxide French bob that obscured her lashes. And as I was waiting, a bucktoothed kid with cross eyes took his seat, helped in by his expectant mother. They spoke in dialect. Swiveling in the padded armchair, his eyes searched for her in the mirror just as mine did from behind my magazine—was she pretty, our hairdresser?

She looked at me, painted eyebrows and mascara glimpsed through her straw-colored fringe, and pulled the boy close to her chest. She smiled down on him, his head nestled between her breasts, slipping freely beneath the salon-issue black tee she wore. And the kid, he must have been 14, heaving as he stiffened uncomfortably in his too-small downtown Parkson-bought shorts, his restrictive white cotton full briefs. It could have been me. I crossed my legs and waited patiently.

Years passed. Then decades, and the unisex salon at New Town, an upstairs shophouse house which smelt of

keratin and ammonia, was still there. Advertised by a black sign with a swoosh of hair and shoulder, stood by the stairway. I crept up slowly as my knees ached. Something to do with my mother more than the rheumatic monsoon weather.

Do I have to wait? I asked like pouring sugar into a coffee, hand reaching for a magazine. The hairdresser was younger than me and eager to please the day's first batch of customers. A teenage girl with a gummy grin and wide almond eyes was seated in the high-backed leather chair. I want to look like Dua Lipa, she effused, drooling slightly. But the hairdresser motioned her to another seat, where a young man with a sharp nose and bicycle helmet blow-dry took care of her.

You can give me whatever you like, I said, trying to lean back into her bosoms, but the mechanism of such somehow eluded me. The hairdresser caressed my sparse locks. You're thinning on the left side, she said. You have a lot of new growth that is slow—that's why you lack

confidence. You can if you really try.

Apparently my head was her crystal ball. But would she show me some love?

I'm a writer, I told her. Novels. I described my series of books set in the universe of the InterFaith.

And you're unmarried? Her breasts pressed nearer.

Had a girlfriend once.

She puffed, which smelled of bubble gum and mint thins. I looked at the girl in the other chair being transformed into a singing stage siren. Her tongue in one cheek, barely concealing her smirk. Hands gestured about her head, instructing how she wanted her hair to clump in long waves—really long ones.

And how about you? She sized up my skull shape with long painted fingers, comb over? I told her I knew my head was a good shape. Yes, it's pretty much standard. Maybe take it all off? No, leave a little as streaks, I suggested. But you're too old. Don't attract unwanted

attention. She'd apparently been around the block more than I suspected.

All you need is a trim and a wash.

Look my age, sure.

I thought I saw the buck-toothed kid slip in. He never fixed his teeth but had grown well into his slim merino suit and shiny Doc Marts. He made it and his wire brush hair had suffered none for that.

Here to pick up your daughter?

Ha-ha, yes.

The hairdresser smiled (at the sweet smell of success?). That will be just \$30.

Tears are one thing that shows up clearest in a mirror, especially one so large and close. But then she tipped the chair around-back, and my lank locks fell into the small sink basin, where a shower drizzled water over my forehead.

You should tell the truth more, she advised, instead of

sugar-coating other people's medicine. So she knew—everyone did, maybe.

This is an iron, okay? This, a blowdryer. Don't be nervous... and this man is my younger brother. Oh! Good, I slipped semi-Freudian. I wouldn't need to tell him to leave us alone.

There was a woman here, I began, with the same hairdo, and I... I hesitated to say what I really wanted.

She had a way with younger boys who needed IT. Yours doesn't, even if I were topless.

And as she ironed and blew my hair into ribbon wafts that fell naturally about my "very standard" skull, I began to grow in confidence. I didn't need bosoms to lay in. I didn't need ONE ex-girlfriend. Maybe the poetry I sent her that lost me my side coverage was unwarranted, and the meds I took for the sake of Mother that stopped me rising up the pecking order were a ball and chain of my imagination.

Then the hairdresser began scrunching at my hair energetically, giving it volume. You look better now—almost what I'd call good. I smiled. But that doesn't mean you get a night job here or my “younger sister” for a snack. Do you pay or play?

Tennis -yes...

Then I have a backhand I need to improve, and you'll buy me a short Lacoste dress that shows everything. We kissed professionally; at least our mouths seemed to connect in the mirror, quite convincingly. She carried on tidying up my ends.

Wolf⁶

And the lion stood up—on its hind legs, and its wings fell off. It was given the heart of a man—a man! Pastor Omer searched the small Bible study group.

What does this mean? He asked the gathering.

Outside, there were wolf howls as it was night, lit by a moon waxing full. Omer put on his anorak and fetched his cane left by the door. The hand that held it open for him belonged to Jimmy O'Donal. I know what it means, Pastor; he spoke in a soft voice. There are some here who

6 This is not a werewolf story, though such movies are my favorite. Bare flesh and visceral scenes. Instead, here is a tale of corruption, complacency, and disinterest in the end times which I imagine we all feel happening on some level, as of writing this.

do NOT.

And you're suggesting...?

Jimmy's face turned stony and stiff, so Omer looked away. Fine, he whispered to himself. And the door closed behind him.

The November winter night air prickled his nose, cheeks, and ears. He fumbled for the keys to the SUV when he heard a cry from far away. The keys dropped and were scrunched into the snow by his shaking feet.

Who are you? Are you okay? The pastor yelled. The moonlight casting the landscape in a dim silver light. Deep in the shadows, the voice cried again, and grunts could be heard. Omer advanced with his cane held out.

The pastor never found out.

Omer woke up in a hospital emergency hallway. You have a concussion, said a nurse. Your dog helped bring you in.

I don't own a dog...

Well, she's waiting outside in the cold. We've been feeding her.

Chills ran down Omer's spine.

*** I know what it means, Pastor. Help... HELP ***

How did I get here, he asked, forcing his brain sober, exactly, I mean?

We think she dragged you, by your cuff. He looked at his anorak bunched up at the foot of the bed and it was ragged on one sleeve. I can get up; I can walk. I have to see this 'dog'.

But the nurse held him down. Sir, you have a concussion.

Jimmy O'Donal paced nervously by the bay windows. If he doesn't show, I'm notifying the police.

Maybe you should, said little Claire, a grandmother with bifocals and a Bible open in her lap.

There were wolves that night, said Aboo. We all heard them. But as usual, he wasn't taken seriously, being a

visiting apologetic Moslem.

Wolves got him, OMG. Jeffy held his cheeks in genuine terror.

*** Shaddap, you lying shite ***

I say we begin with Daniel 7 again, offered Alexa, listening from Amazon HQ. Or does anyone care to read a whodunnit?

Jimmy stared at the Echo Dot, its LEDs rippling along to the comforting female AI's voice. He wanted to ask it some questions, but somebody might be a wolf—in sheep's clothing.

I'm clean, he said, am I?

Yes, so far, said Alexa, YOU are.

The wolf indeed looked like a large dog breed. In fact, they asked him what she was, but he couldn't say. Isn't this a wolf? He thought, reaching out to pet the canine's head. It licked his palm, and he couldn't help but smile.

A detective in plain clothes approached Omer. It was

snowing, and he had just come in out of the cold. Sir, you're under suspicion for rape and murder. Do not leave this hospital room.

What—you say I'M a criminal?

No, you're our number one suspect. Fill him in, but don't tell him. He passed the buck to his rookie. She was kind, with an English accent.

Whatever you say can be used against you. But your hit head doesn't probably know it. What you might have done earlier in the night. Where were you between 8 pm and 10 pm?

I... I'm a pastor, for heaven's sake. I was at my regular Bible study.

Did anyone go out into the woods? Anyone you know?

I did.

Sir, I'm going to have to put you under house arrest. Do not give him his mobile or computer equipment that

can reach out.

Omer sat at the emergency entrance with his dog/wolf —whatever it was. He was handed warm tomato soup, which he sipped. It tasted creamy. We'll get to the bottom of this heinous crime if it takes all night. He overheard the detectives talking somewhere inside.

Wolf howls could be heard from afar. Omer's dog, lying in the warmth of the hospital, apparently did not care.

Jimmy drove the Jeep while Alexa controlled the swiveling halogen lights on the kangaroo bar. Claire, Aboo, and Jeffy stared out the windows into the moonlit night. It looked like soot rubbed onto silver.

We're nearing a police line, said Alexa suddenly. Do not cross, do not cross, do not...

Fukk, the Jeep's been deactivated.

What, Jimmy, whadda you mean?

Alexa, restart the Jeep.

There was no reply but static and some Morse-like blips.

Jeffy grabbed a crowbar while Jimmy held the Dolphin flashlight. Aboo followed behind, hand on his back, while Claire stayed in contact with her friends who knew the local law enforcement through her WhatsApp.

They stopped at a clearing in the woods. Yellow tape wrapped around tree trunks. Jimmy directed the Dolphin's strong LED beam across the area.

There was blood on the snow, lots of it, and glints like cat's eyes all around them. He stumbled back. Alexa, activate the Jeep, he screamed into his smart watch. Do it now!

Omer sat at the entrance to the hospital emergency, feeling dejected. He looked at the dog, and it looked back at him.

Katherine sat down beside the old man. I'm visiting from the UK; that's probably why you think I sound

different. In the UK, we don't carry a gun. She hoped to console him. Pastor Omer, the house address you gave us is empty.

They must have gone looking for me—in the woods. Jimmy—he's a strong leader. He'd go looking. Katherine took notes.

Jeffy lashed out with the crowbar as Alexa turned on the halogens on his command. Dozens of wolves attacked and were beaten off.

*** Not bad, Jeffy—you shite ***

In Aboo's hand, a bloody dagger. Jimmy lay prone on the snow, his face buried in it. I hope you have a plan, brother. Go kill Claire before she WhatsApps it. Fukk, Alexa, turn off the WhatsApp inside!

Omer and the detectives showed up at the fracas. Sirens and lights blaring.

We jacked off in the woods, that's all, said Aboo, me, and Jeffy.

The kid who saw you then. You did her in?

Jeffy took her back home.

I don't think so.

Sir, I'm placing both of you under arrest.

Pastor, did you know this?

Tears filled Omer's eyes.

The bodies of Jimmy, Claire, and the little girl (earlier) were taken to the morgue. The detectives left. And Omer was alone with his dog/wolf. He was aware of the others—her pack—looking on. They had suffered casualties.

He asked, sniggering, do you all want Burger King? 112 whopper meals coming right up, Alexa sounded a little more cheerful, can I take your card?

Lizards⁷

Giovanni, the man in the dark silk shirt and python skin vest who vaped weed-tinted Flowers & Tea™, said, SANTA MARIA. Another one!

Sonno'ma Beech, Johnny. Put the laser down and come to bed.

He dropped the 'zappo, stripped, and climbed in with his girlfriend. Now, don't you be going trans on me, baby. She was considering ending their relationship over

7 I had always been fascinated by Italian culture, and I had to write an Italian job. It came at an odd time, Donald Trump (elected 2025) had just been shot through the ear, as I was discussing genetics with my friends and the Woke movement gained steam. There are house geckos here in Malaysia, we call them "cicak" and maybe they, like flies on a wall were the gentle creatures who knew all -all the scum we curse the world with.

its unfulfilling love-making but needed an excuse.

They say the best excuses are seen and not heard.

Hey, Dolly, should I write that down? ****Laughter****, they rolled apart. Johnny was short and balding, but with a build like an ape. His girlfriend leaned somewhat petite and supermodel-thin. She had long, curly hair and puffy lips, always matte pink.

But before we go any further, Dolly did turn trans eventually, and “he” thoroughly enjoyed it. They all came to Johnny’s funeral, but nobody cried. Jesus reached down, gravitationally raising his soul against the magnetic pull of the Earth’s core on its sarcophagus (being the astral form).

Johnny watched the satellite with Dolly in his arms. News of the presidential candidate shot through his ear. They snuggled more into one another as forensic AI replayed bullet trajectories, showing how close they’d come to losing the prominent businessman, cum patriot-crusader.

Tsk... tsk-tsk-tsk...

It echoed from the bathroom. Another DAMN gecko.

Dolly checked in at the transformation clinic. There was a pamphlet that detailed the science of gender changing. It went like this:

DNA is a fatty acid chain. Just like the brim of a hat is wavy, the binding base pairs of DNA cause it to roll up on its own and form a chain. The chain strains against itself, binding itself into a squiggle we call a chromosome.

Humans have a fused chromosome (no. 2). This happened as 2 ape chromosomes were mutated to the extent they were able to coil into one as they had no base-pair conflicts.

Not only did mutated DNA recombine perfectly to become a single large chromosome, it needed to—as the mutation had to be transmittable by sex.

Adam's XY and Eve's XX sex chromosomes contain

the zipped-up instructions to make all 23 chromosome pairs in our cells. But the X is much larger than the Y. And further, there are no YY human beings.

Eve, having XX, could not therefore have pre-existed Adam, just as YY did not. Therefore, her X chromosome had to be augmented with additional DNA of origins unknown.

Today, at Exo Transforms, we have reverse engineered those augmentations from profiling of the fused chromosome no. 2, and we are pleased to offer you the choice of becoming male or female no matter what your birth sex!

Johnny and Dolly read the pamphlet in bed together. They would share love one last time. They were rocking the bed; that's when the 'zappo left carelessly on the sheets shot Johnny through the eye. He screamed as Dolly orgasmed, then collapsed from what was later diagnosed as a heart attack.

The funeral was solemn. Dolly, now called Dale,

looked down on her former partner, lying serene beneath the glass top. He had his favorite silk shirt on with his python skin vest. Clasped in his hands, an icon of the blessed Virgin.

*** SANTA MARIA, Gianni! ***

The laser had stabbed deep into his brain. He never stood a chance. Even the geckos were more low-key that day, looking on, clucking faintly, from behind the chandelier. Why? Maybe that was all their simple minds felt. And as the service drew to a close and the people shuffled out, Johnny was lowered his full 6-feet under.

Dale went on to become the one-eared president's running mate. You're full trans, aren't you?

Yes, sir, said Dale.

The president smiled. Exo are the best. Just had myself cloned by their lab. Aren't you gonna ask me?

What, sir?

How I'll make the jump. The jump, Dale, is like

flushing the loo on your brain. Know what happens? All the shit we accumulated gets washed into the new brain. And what's in the new brain to begin with? Tsk... tsk-tsk-tsk...

Maybe God was against clones and transforms. In any case, Johnny had hated the sound. But it was the same sound he/she had heard during the gene-supplanting sleep.

Now that we've shared, Dale, confided the President, tugging on his torn earlobe. I'm gonna have to come outta the closet myself to ball you...

They leaned back in their chairs, laughing.

Unchained⁸

I used to be a backroom assistant in an event planning company. It ran a bustling office in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, and I woke up every morning raring to go to work. One Friday, as I was already thinking of having a round of drinks with my colleagues down at the Pavilion's Irish pub, my boss, a large, friendly White guy, gave me an assignment:

“We’re ramping up for a major event this Sunday, and we need games. All our games stink. See what you can do

8 This story was abandoned, unfinished on Google Docs for 2 years. It’s about a secretive society of foreign geniuses who dominate the world with their knowledge of human nature, our psycho-somatic weaknesses. Loosely based on my experiences around when I dropped out of college. Hope the second half I tacked on, measures up.

to get everyone breaking the ice.”

I was bouncing a tennis ball on my bedroom wall, thinking how my sister keeps interfering in my life, stopping my weekend tennis lessons, feeding me medications I did not need—she is a doctor—when I thought of a re-entrant concept for a social game: clean in-out is what keeps a game fun. What if a group separated into guys and girls pretending to make out and have babies? I reached for my iPad and titled it Doctor, Doctor. Then I wrote down the rules, with the scarce object being my tennis ball.

“Boss, I think I have it,” I typed into his WhatsApp.

The reply came immediately, “Great! Send me the rules right now.”

As thanks for being so inventive, I got my Sunday rest replaced with a supervisory role in the weekend event at the Shangri-La.

“Watch what you created,” said my boss. “Everything

has consequences,” he added enigmatically.

I arrived at the 5-star hotel in all black, in long sleeves with the company baseball cap turned backwards because everyone says I’m fly. But mainly, I intended to be anonymous and inconspicuous.

So, the food was served and eaten, and then the games started. Normally, there would be team building, holding hands, intellectual stimulation, talent time, etc., but this time, boss used 4 of my ideas, which were completely different. The CEO’s personal assistant tapped me on the shoulder. I had always thought she was a lesbian, but she kissed me on the cheek for luck, and we made the two thumbs up together. Then my favorite game, Doctor, Doctor came up.

Soon, I realized that this group was different from the Asian groups we normally hosted. They were all Western people with slick suits, perfect hair, expensive makeup, and caressing English accents. Suddenly, my polo neck felt a little hot.

“Where are these guys from?” I asked the CEO’s aide, who was standing beside me, emotionless. Maybe she really was into women.

“They’re a high-IQ club even more exclusive than Mensa.”

“Oh my God...” my heart sank. “What are they called?”

“Quasi billionaire religious outfit. Don’t inquire; you’ll regret what you know about such types.”

I watched as hourglass, big-haired women raised on muesli and fresh milk and hunky men with Hollywood stubble and dimples cavorted to my game, poking their fingers into rings made by each other and getting pregnant with my tennis ball.

“Hey!” I exclaimed.

The CEO’s assistant laughed, for once in her life, probably. I wasn’t sure if it was at my puny pain or that the game had turned out so fun. When it was all over and

the hotel staff began clearing the used napkins and imported confetti and stripping the chairs of their satin wrappings, she talked with a tall, bristling 30-something guy with his tie undone and nodded towards me. He nodded towards me as well, and I bowed shallowly. Then the CEO's assistant came up to me and handed me my marching orders.

“I -why...?” I was in tatters.

Then I looked up, and she was in tears also and gave me a big hug. She left abruptly, touching her face with her fingertips, disappearing behind curtains of cleaners in the posh ballroom. I looked at the pink slip, and tears began to run down my face. Then my phone beeped.

“You did too well, kid. Now go to Suite No. 5”

The suite door was ajar, so I poked my head in.

“Ah, there you are—the genius game inventor. Come on in, friend.”

He said friend like he meant me great respect, so I

bowed. “At your service, sir.”

“All you Asians are the same,” a voice came from left of the door. “Don’t you check your weaker side?”

Deep and husky voiced, she could have stepped out of a Miss Universe competition cum Wonder Woman flick.

“I’m Gaye. Not lesbian. Like the song, all I needed was to love you, Gaye.” She stared at me until I flinched, then turned away, flicking her Shania Twain hairdo. It looked better on her, to be honest.

“You know, weakness is rudeness,” said the bristling young man whom I met earlier. “You owe yourself—you don’t own it.”

“I think he understands,” said a teenage girl in one of the front seats. She looked at me, and her cheeks lifted. Then she bit her lip on one side, and I began to see angels ascending and descending.

“In love, are ya?” She said in a surprisingly coarse

tone, moderated by how her shoulders swung. “I like you, Mr. Basic,” and she got up, uncrossing her legs carelessly. This time, I didn’t look away. “Follow me.”

She led me to an elevator, and its door opened automatically, so we got in without breaking a step. Before the doors closed, she stood on tiptoe and threw her arms around my neck. Then, in private, she whispered in my ear.

“We’re going to meet your new CEO so be polite.”

I felt good all of a sudden, and I didn’t even know her name.

I didn’t say or think it, but I almost broke down when I saw the CEO. He was literally tiny. In fact, though he may be listening, I have to say he was only a rug rat. I thought of Stuey in *Family Guy* or Maggie from the *Simpsons*. Could he even talk?

“Welcome, friend,” said the toddler, unfazed by my analysis. “I do know I’m small—it was my own choice.

No—not that I would remain small forever, but that I’d grow up on my own terms. He smacked a tiny fist into his palm, eyes calculating.”

“He wants to be exactly a certain age when he meets Jesus,” said the pretty teenager.

“That too, Amanda,” said the toddler. “Thank you for putting on Boards of Canada.”

“At once, Mr. Jones,” she said, and Aquarius started playing on the Hi-Fi set behind me.

The CEO shut his eyes. “Don’t bother me any further tonight,” he said as funky synth beats filled the presidential suite.

Amanda told me to go home for now, “If you can manage that.”

I told her I could, and she checked me over, concerned, then flicked out a card and wrote on it.

“Call me first thing tomorrow,” she said hesitantly.

I turned the card over. It had a colorless embossed

logo on it: a circle around a pyramid. There wasn't any print. I held it to the light, and the 3 corner markers of a QR code appeared translucent against the lamp, although it seemed not to have any content other than that. I keyed Amanda's number into my phone and put the mysterious ivory-white card into my wallet. Something drew me away from my usual excited going-home feeling, back to the hotel and the events of the night, so unusual. In disgust, I crushed my pink slip and threw it into a bin at the train station.

~

That night I had an odd dream. My mind was flooded with an American woman's voice, counting in a series that began linearly and then opened up randomly, over buzzing electric guitars, water being stirred, and echoey womb sounds. I woke up before dawn and went into the bathroom. Looking at myself in the mirror at 5 am wasn't cathartic at all. I had a crazy thought that staring down my reflection would fix my malformed Asian

features. Then I could be Amanda's boyfriend for real, not her personal clutch voodoo doll. I thought I heard tinkling laughter, but it could have been someone stirring a cup of coffee. I sighed heavily at being let go from my cushy job into the arms of people so different from me.

"Why, God?" I wanted to ask, "Because God," I answered myself out loud.

"Because God, fukk you," came the reply from across the air well.

"Fukk you too," I retorted. The coffee cup stirring sound happened again.

My bedroom was in a nook on the flat roof of a shophouse downtown. Everything I owned fit into the 2x3-meter space, which overlooked a playing field hemmed in by rows and rows of other shophouses in various stages of disrepair. Standing outside my door, I felt the still morning air tingle on my freshly washed face and neck. On the hills just a stone's throw away, upmarket condominiums clustered on the slopes, warm

yellow lights winking on one by one as the managers and directors got ready for another day on the job. Warming up their Mercedes and Audis.

I sniveled, took my Aerobie Pro flying ring off the wall and flipped it in my hands, then, in a moment's recklessness, tossed it as hard as I could towards the rich people's hillside apartments. The 'astounding' Frisbee I bought online from a Hong Kong surplus dealer for \$9.99 lofted higher, higher then descended like a golf ball onto the putting green for a birdie. I watched the neon yellow aerodynamic ring disappear amidst the tower blocks.

"What now?" I collapsed onto the rough rooftop concrete on bent hands and knees and kowtowed in the direction of my private Jerusalem as the sun came up from behind the thickly forested slopes.

At 7 am, I activated my phone and called Amanda's number. I felt like snapping at those foreign intruders, but instead put on my best customer service voice.

“Hello, Amanda, please.”

“Hello yourself. What’s on the card I gave you?”

I said that it contained a hidden QR code.

“So?” she replied.

“Um,” I hesitated.

“What symbols are on the card?”

“A pyramid in a circle”

“Which means what?”

“I don’t really know,” I said, hopelessly lost.

“Then you’re not one of them,” said Amanda.

“Welcome, friend. Can you see me down at Rajoo’s?”

I squinted at the Indian bistro across the field. There was some girl waving, so I said, “Probably.”

“Good,” came her reply. “I’m the one in the torn jeans, waving.”

“Yeah, that’s you.”

“Come meet me now,” she turned off her phone

ostentatiously.

I assumed that she had dressed down for the poor area where I lived, so I didn't bother to change out of my Shopee shorts, flip-flops, and Pagoda. She nodded at me, so I pulled up a chair and sat down.

"I know you're fired. Have some money on us," she said guiltily in case I refused.

It felt odd taking cash from a teenage girl I barely knew, but she seemed to be genuine, so I stuffed the wad of US dollars into my pocket wholesale.

"DaVinci Code," I thought aloud. "Are you guys that?"

Amanda laughed. "Not at all," she intoned clearly. Then she pulled the card from under my palm, seemingly by magic, and held it to the sun. She turned each corner of the embossed pyramid vertically upward and stared at my face. Was she expecting some sort of reaction?

She looked me in the eye, "That's all," and got into a

Grab car that had just pulled up as if on cue. As it left, she flung her hair back, looking quizzically in my direction. I knew her tricks by now and just ignored it, though on some subconscious level, she had slaved me to her inner queen.

One triangle, 3 orientations and the QR corners. I wet the card and heated it with a hairdryer to no avail. I scratched it with a coin edge. So close yet so far. Counting the money she left me, it came to just over a thousand US dollars.

~

“Hey, you joke,” it was my next-rooftop neighbor. “Let’s see that card.”

He told me about QR codes. It didn’t matter how one rotated a QR code, it read the same. Even at odd angles. As for the circle, anyway you turn one, it will be the same. The pyramid inside it, however, points in 3 directions. It’s where you should start.

3 directions, bounded by a ring. What could it mean? The angles of a triangle added up to 180 degrees where a circle's center was a perfect 360 degrees. A circle had no points -no vector, yet was described by twice the sum of a triangle, But what a circle was at its perimeter were angles so small -they didn't practically exist. I slumped back onto my bed, head spinning.

That evening, I used some of Amanda's money to purchase a dozen paint spray cans and 3 big reels of masking tape. Powers bought bags of cement in Ballard's "The Voices of Time" but I had no intention of winding up narcoleptic on a hospital bed as the world ended around me.

"Hey, Joke, where's your Frisbee?" The voice of my neighbor from behind the curtain of his prayer cubicle.

"Lost. Threw it into the condo complex"

"Dumb ass," he scolded. "How will you prove you can't fling something that has purely 2 sides?"

I shrugged.

“Fling a 3-sided Frisbee and it will fly. 3 is the minimum number of a lot of things.”

He told me to think about that. But I had made up my mind already. I would head back to the hotel the next morning.

~

At Mr Jones’ suite with Amanda and her toddler boss:

“What you’ve discovered is central to the problem with the world. We can look at any one time at 3 persons including ourselves, call them: Ee, Lu, and Wa. We can tell them truths or lies, doubling the complexity of our relationships, being, however, sure that they obey the circular path, clockwise or anti—” He stopped to be burped.

“Epiphanies like Mr. Jones’ are rare. Take your time to let it settle in,” Amanda took over, “Simple truths— not asking why and by how much, make you beautiful to

watch, successful, popular.”

“I behaved pointedly when we first met, to show you your heart wasn’t ready and so we left you—to reconsider your life via your intellect, we gave you the Card.”

Then she handed me my hire contract from their toddler CEO. It was long and wordy as it was exquisitely wise and polite.

...Tears shed harder than blood. Words come harder than tears. Hearts change slower than speech alone effects, as such, they feed our bodies their mortality—the bind you have against ultimate success. You’ve heard of Masons? We are rather, fishermen. When we played your games, we noticed that spark in you—it was Spirit, and it’s rare. Spirit is a harbinger of change. What it showed us was our future—your future is with us...

~

I called at the condo complex guardhouse about my

flying ring. Had anyone seen one? I, like Powers had been grazing half-asleep on the malaise of our times. And it was ripe for that to change.

“Yes, there was a notice up on the announcement board —if anybody had lost one. What color and make was the ring you lost?”

“It’s an Aerobie Pro in neon yellow.”

“Thank you, sir. Let me make a call.”

I waited with my neighbor, looking uncomfortable, almost miserable amidst the luxurious hillside homes.

Then a child and her mother appeared. They were ostentatiously rich and apologized graciously for hanging on to my Frisbee.

“My daughter loves it. Can I persuade you to part with it for \$25?”

“It’s part of this joke’s destiny.” Neighbor scoffed.

“I bought it off the ‘Bay. You can’t get it for \$25 anymore,” I said to the kid, “What do you like so much

about it?”

“It flies so well but it doesn’t have a middle.”

Neighbor took over explaining the physics, “When you fling a thing in 2 dimensions, it requires 3 sides. If it were 1 dimension, it would need 2 sides. Otherwise it wouldn’t move...”

The little girl was fascinated. And I decided to let her keep the ring.

Walking home took about 20 minutes, being mostly downhill.

“What else you been learning?”

“Learning? I’ve been HIRED against my better judgment.”

Neighbor gave me a playful jab, “Ha! Bet you’re going in for that posh-looking chick—what’s her name—Amelia?”

I didn’t reply. “Wa,” I said.

“Lu?”

“Ee,” I finished.

He looked at me, “You a Hokkien or baby talking?”

“Ee-Lu-Wa,” I put it together.

“Eloah: God,” I said, tracing a circle with my hands.

“Why God? Because, God, huh—fukk you!”

The little girl stood on her balcony as panga emotions pulsed through her young heart. “Jesus, this is for you,” She flung the amazing flying ring skyward with all her strength and it disappeared into the clouds, pink with the sunset.

Following the ring’s upward trajectory, we cringed from a sudden bolt of lightning that lit up the evening sky’s dressings. It started to hail yellow ice. There are some who would have called it a miracle. But where I was now hired—all in a day’s work. And yes, I did fancy Amanda. Would I have a story to tell her.

Evidence of Foul Play⁹

“Every generation learns that a matter of honor is settled over and proceeding from many generations of generosity and the brotherhood forthcoming.”

Someone’s been murdered, she said.

They were just finished with a late and hearty dinner of fish and chips at the seaside pub and had filtered into the dim, otherwise empty arcade, against the NASCAR racing seats and the claw machine transparent glass boxes.

The police are everywhere. There’s something like a

9 I am a fan of Ariel -the little mermaid Disney made into an animated character / movie. At the same time, I wondered: What if there were a darker side to the sea? Secrets lying hidden beneath those restive, primordial waters that witnessed and swallowed up so much of the history of mankind.

body or parts of it on the cobbles.

You've heard of the harpies, Medusa of the Greek legends. The gods of storms and the children of Poseidon. Mermaids, to use an euphemism. The sea is full of secrets.

The bespectacled historian bit into a lamb kebab, chewing noisily.

A man in a trench coat and horn rims pulled them aside. We'll need to do a DNA test, but we think what's left on the beach is your father.

What's left of him?

Just his legs.

You know, Al often told me of his broadsword. The one that slew a thousand men. I've seen him wield it. Swordsmanship runs in the family. It was forged in Crete during the Crusades – supposedly. And its handle was a fish's tail.

The historian brandished his umbrella by the handle,

wrists and elbows twisting as he swung the folded broly in wide, sweeping strokes that glanced against the game machines.

Yes, the Arabs and their scimitars were more agile, but a spearhead of knights with sheer strength and coordination were unstoppable. The Matilda tanks could have saved France, stopped Hitler dead in his panzer tracks...

She watched her eminent uncle lose himself among the displays, talking to the air.

In their hotel room at the Trident Resort, detectives discovered his diary. It was full of tales of the sea. How generation after generation of his family knew and loved the mer-creatures. The gumshoe showed her an entry from 20 years ago. His gloved fingers obscured the last paragraph.

Did Al believe in mermaids?

Why yes, I was very little, but I saw the sword with the

fishtail handle given to Dad by a relative. Said it'd been in our family for generations. Forged during a storm in the Mediterranean with hammers found in the Roman ruins in the shallows. There were shards of stone and steel, I have some of it in an amulet.

She showed the detective the encrusted disc under her jacket.

He took a brief look at it, then turned to the other officers. You keep it safe, he said, folding his notebook close.

And there were the stone fragments of people who stared at Medusa. Parts of their bodies, noses, eyes, and ears, under the water. So real that the salt water and the sea creatures that ate away at them revealed vessels and cartilage. Say you were wrong, detective.

The historian stopped short of stabbing the cop with his umbrella in an en garde position.

You're welcome to believe whatever you want. I

believe someone was murdered, that's all.

The police filed out of the entertainment parlor, leaving the small group of family to commiserate. An ambulance took the remains away.

Many of us have blasphemed the sea. The garbage we put into Poseidon's mouth. The microplastics and drug syringes. Offended the gods with our sin—so called. Maybe Al knew what he was in for. What he saw was a mer-beast. Maybe it took him. Maybe he has a new life under the sea with the legless creatures he was meant to be with. In any case, the sword goes to you—and the legend therewith.

~

Beneath the waves, wyrm with fangs gnawed at the dismembered body of Al Farling. Around his neck, a Crusader's talisman. There was a smile etched on his frozen face. He had found his god, albeit after 4 and a half beers.

You know mermaids are bare-breasted, said her college boyfriend. I hear you have an amulet from the Crusades.

You can see them all together all you like, she said, peeling off her top.

Wasters¹⁰

Jill Wasteful exited the confession booth. It was apparently not a sin to grow mushrooms in her vagina. Though the persistent thoughts of displaying herself cost her four Hail Marys.

You must be 25? It made her head turn.

Yes, of course, she said, glancing at the man standing beside her.

I'm 47. But he didn't look a year over 27.

10 Mea culpa, I had a fantasy of growing mushrooms in my ex-GF's vagina -thin stringy mushrooms. It was mainly to tease her, and the first girlfriend I had was indeed Catholic (get well soon, Francis). This formed the germ of a story that I wove about a crossbar of immortality and the whole gender bender movement. Caitlin Jenner, this is for you.

So you do it too...?

Nodding on both sides.

Treatments are a lifesaver.

No, I meant prayer.

Ha-ha, Jill laughed. Yes, I suppose that would work too.

I'm more confident than I am filled with Botox, she said. It's not what you are but what you do.

Looks actually matter to me.

Yea.

No, that they're God-given.

I see.

What about art?

It's a waste of space.

Jill and the young-looking man stared at the gigantic white canvas hung on the curved whitewashed wall of the gallery. At the far end of the piece, it slowly crumbled like

cottage cheese into a large glass dish.

I guess this artist knows something.

The man smiled.

I may be immortal, but I'll never know.

I may be immortal if I ever know.

They stared at one another.

I like your beard and glasses, and the way you're built.
You're a thinker. That's a plus.

Thanks, he said. I like that you're honest enough to
do what you want to do and not let anyone tell you
otherwise—and it works for you—great.

Can I see you sometime?

Why not?

Same place, here, same time, tomorrow.

~

You know, Gillian, the more I think of you—the
perfect antithesis to my immortality—the more I want to

change you. Yet to change, you would destroy me. What do you think of that?

I have mushrooms in my vagina, she replied.

Would you like a look? Hail Mary.

No, I would like a taste.

Then you're an artist.

And Death is a blond white middle-aged woman.

Jill Wasteful lived in the space between time. In the instant after her Botox injections and firming gel massages, in that fleeting glance of her "young" body in the windows of the subway train. In the superficiality of a man's appreciation. Likely, she shouldn't need to exist, who needed so much to have it!

He waited for her to emerge from her intensive oxygen treatment in the frosted glass pod that stood by her condo's glass facade. Her skin was silky white, and

her strawberry-blond hair perfectly held its shapely bob.

He wondered if she wore a wig or transplants. But so much didn't matter to him anymore. A shoulderless puff of crepe pink and cream laced her body down to mid-thigh.

How about those mushrooms?

~

Their “moment” was a brief one. She felt so soft, so perfectly tender, yet real—unlike a toy or doll. That the capillaries in her blushed skin were probably 80 years old and maintained by Reservatol and every chemical from there up to formaldehyde. She should come with laundering instructions. He hadn't the slightest hesitation to look for. But the mushrooms in her vagina, he uprooted. They were like Inoki. Stringy with small caps and plenty of mycelium.

He pressed the fungus to his beard, to his nose and breathed of them. They smelt like a larder of cured meat

and Christmas pudding.

And she straddled him, left helplessly in love.

~

They saw one another more times than they could remember and talked long into the early hours of the morning.

Why we exist is for the pure worship of God—He who gives all.

Why I exist, she pondered for a second, is my insurance premiums keep going down.

I should have guessed.

A smile played on his lips.

Trade, he said.

I knew you were smart, she replied.

Due to medical innovation, the switch was trivial. Robot surgeons lifted flesh and bone, nerve, and vein effortlessly from Jill to her lover and vice versa without

spilling a drop of blood.

They woke up switched.

Do you want to see my mushrooms? He said.

Only if you say a Hail Mary.

It was late in the evening. And that night, Gillian Wasteful and her man, call him Hank Chaffer, married, legally, to a packed hall of well-wishers and numerous friends.

“And they shall be one flesh.”

Amen.

The Flamers¹¹

It must have been some war, he said as they wandered through the thicket of mangroves by the beach with fallen giant robots. Hulks of titanium bleaching in the salty air.

If you dig, you'll find their brain worms.

What?

Pieces of their AI—they un-form and re-form as necessary, independent neuro serpents who seek heat.

-
- 11 The idea of AI brains that could slip away and hide, then reform like a mass of eels was the starting point of this tale. I also used the scene, of a mangrove lined beach -we have those aplenty in Malaysia, which I scattered with giant war machines such as those I watched in the movie, Pacific Rim. My idea of such machines going out of control yet still protective of human life -maybe a salute to Asimov formed the poignant ending.

Heat is their motivation; motion is their intelligence.

If you get a whole bucket of them, it'll be enough to revive a hulk.

After dragging a bulb through the sand for an hour, the two friends succeeded in snaring a hundred worms. They climbed up onto the lap of a hulk. The giant machine sitting half buried in the surf with its arms spread wide.

What do we do now?

These were simple machines, designed to last and recharge independently. Most aren't broken, just asleep.

He stared up at the slumped head of the giant robot. Its corrugated optical sensors, 3 great big eyes blindly navel gazing. It had a mouth and ears that were just seams between close-fitting metal plates.

See the third center eye is an infrared sensor. The other two are its cameras. The microphones and speakers are locked behind its armor. It's deaf and mute, but it sees

us. It's got no brain left to decide what to do.

They stared at the AI worms in the bucket, squirming into a mass of networked cognition.

Give me my hands, he said.

The grappling claws snapped on over his wrists and fingers. Then he fished a worm from the bucket, held it up to the slumped head, and tore its sheath off. Sparks and lubricant sprayed from the destroyed AI machine. It smelt like WD40, and Coke. He threw the dying worm out to the sea.

The boy looked down into the bucket of remaining worms. They were frantically re-forming, thinking maybe. He stepped back. Then they both ran for the mangroves. The metal giant stirred, first its right arm, lifting its haunches from the sand, then its left leg. Finally, it stood up, creaking like a broken trolley. Lube seeped along capillaries in its joints. The hulk knelt and scooped up its brain, now calling desperately. It looked out over the sea. And its thick fingers received the torn

body of the dying worm. It stared at it a long time, then turned towards the boys in the mangrove thicket.

What have you done? He said, as the robot started towards them.

He felt warm pee run down his legs as the hulk peeled aside the trees. Then it said,

Fix, master.

And it dropped the dying worm into his hands.

The breadboard was easy to prepare, and the worm's contacts readily accepted the solder, sensing its new lease of life. It felt their breath through its flute-like pitch converter. He put it into his backpack, with its speaking tube taped to his lip.

Take us up, he said.

They stood on the hulk's shoulders.

What's your purpose? He asked the robot.

Chaplain, it replied, medic-chaplain.

The giant machine swayed in the salty air, its limbs and fingers stretching and clasping. It spun at its waist, and the plates over its ears and mouth unfurled.

In the fading evening light, other hulks started rising from the beach. Some that were badly damaged collapsed into the rising tide. Others unleashed fiery rockets into the air, attacking an enemy locked into their sensors, now long gone. Bursts of TNT and groans of buckling metal filled the night.

Can you shut them down? He shouted.

There is a God, replied the hulk. Only He knows.

Thermite rockets grazed the chaplain-medic, singeing their hair. The machine gracefully side-stepped the munitions with the two boys on its shoulder, slipping against its ear.

Stop it! The boys screamed.

God will intervene. God will save us. He will send the Messiah. It raised an arm over its face as depleted

uranium rounds slammed deep into its armor.

He knows all things. A storm with flashing blue lightning lit up the cloudy sky. And it began to rain. It tasted bitter against their lips.

Heresy¹²

The body of the witch was cold when he got there. Her skin like wilted lettuce and her lips, like wax on crepe paper rose petals. Bending over her face, he put an ear to her nostrils and nodded. The woman was dead.

It came from out of the stark blue desert sky like a bullet, 20 feet off the ground. Throwing up a burst of sand and dust as it broke the sound barrier. Belinda put her hands to her mufflers as the reflection of the ramjet flicked over her face shield. Flik-flak stinging her bare legs.

12 I wrote this story expressly for submission to FFM. It was rejected without reason given. I still think it's a nice if not good weave of elements that synergize. Admittedly, it lacks a strong message and is included for historical / academic purposes, being my first serious query attempt.

Wind rippling through her knotted paisley blouse and around avocado breasts.

“I tell you it works!”

“It will -given time”

“No, surely not time itself, nor can time be apportioned much less gifted an inanimate thing”

“But regardless this autistic hair splitting, Albert, we have to reconcile our points of view”

“Harrumph!”

Her dress is wet. Soaked with something vile. I think it may be balsamic, to be polite. Already the edges of my Bible are damp and crinkly. We must be sure she doesn't rise.

The Defender rattled as it took on the bumpy, rutted dirt road that led up to the reservoir. The limp body of the witch, still soft, sat upright on the back seat of the jeep, held down by a seatbelt.

There are times, Belinda, we must do what we believe

in. Regardless the direct consequences to our selves, pride, even our reputation.

“Yes, Father”

She got on her sand skipper, pivoting into a horizontal prone, with her hands on the throttle. Ahead, the pilot of the sonic bullet in his blue flight suit stood by the landed craft with his helmet under one arm. She had Polaroids of them, she looking like Marilyn Monroe in a glitzy movie production, and him in trunks by the pool. His hair was gloss wet. And the sun turned cold for an instant, to her girl skin and its goosebumps. These were called emotions. Not a fear of losing control. At this speed, anything might happen. And she glimpsed approval on his face as his eyes squinted over a widening smile.

“The speed of sound can be squared, Albert, but surely not the speed of light”

“As an absolute constant, hinged on 4 dimensions, I dare say depend on some other coefficient to be treated

quadratically”

“That’s why you don’t understand”

“That speed can be constant while space-time plays to its own ear like fingers stretching a rubber band?”

“No, but that the rubber band knows it can be stretched”

“Light is time doing distance”

They reached the dam at sundown. The jungle rustled with sounds of wildlife coming to the lake edge to drink and the treetops buzzed and chirped with insect song. They took the body out of the jeep and lowered it into the sampan. The small narrow boat glid on the still water. On his lap, the Vulgate and beside it, a kerosene lamp. Ripples of light. Jimmy, who looked like an ape, with his chin only beard and beady black eyes, pulled the single oar gracefully, port to starboard with graceful flips of the wrist. He looked aside from his hungrily staring assistant. His high Roman nose and slightly drooping cheeks. A

white skullcap over thinning gray hair cropped short.

They hoisted the body of the witch over the side of the sampan. Sweat beaded on his brow as he chanted. The rosary smelling of her vinegar, grating against his moist palms and knuckles. Then her eyes opened, white and pupil-less, and her fingers snared his cassock like thorn bushes around a white tail buck. Jimmy rose up and started hacking at her with the oar blade. Silence at the water's edge. A macabre silhouette against the hunter's moon. Diana, best turn away.

Belinda set the instant camera on the seat of the sand skipper and ran over to her man. She pressed into his shoulders and her lush lashes focused in on the shot, turning suddenly serious as a woman scolding a dog. Speed is perfection, perfection is speed. Likewise for those whose feet touch not the good earth.

“What do you say to more tea, Albert?”

“ ∂t —but of course.”

“Right on cue for the Champaign!”

The Equator¹³

The problem with algebra is the equator.

What equator?

The equals sign. It isn't meant to be so simple.

Then what would you propose?

A pipe. For example, how would you equate an elephant to a mammoth? The answer would eventually be found by piping 'elephant' through every other known equation constructed, then out the other side.

13 You may find this story 'full of shit' or an eye-opener depending whether you like speculation or are afraid of it. What if math were the wrong approach to discerning truth? What if it took a lifetime to learn? Why should anyone care? But somebody did, and discovered that the secret lies in plain sight.

Algebra is meaningless otherwise.

I understand, said the student to her master.

She climbed down the rocky precipice to her meditation cave. There she rolled hillside clay into a thin sheet and folded it into a pinched U-shape. She waited patiently for it to dry so she could hold it. Then, by firelight, she wrote on it in Morseish-Braile. Poking a sharpened stick into the clay to form words, concepts in constraining blocks of big and small depressions.

Her theory was that every block could be defined by a vector. Its checksum, which was its position within an equation that could equate normally without pipe. Then, writing that vector onto another clay book would enable the pipe when run over by the fingers of a scribe, both books, at once.

She wrote the checksums of every mainline / classic equation that she knew into her book. It was her Principia. And when she was done, took it to her master.

The old woman, exiled to the mountain for her heretical mathematics, looked at the clay fold. She ran her hand over it as she felt the equations, their Truth, pipe through her mind and body and sighed.

Another student with an incomplete logic system. So the girl climbed down the mountainside again to think it over.

Algebra is nothing without bounds. What are 'bounds' but the physics of the universe laid bare as their building blocks? How big should an elephant be to stand against a mammoth? That was imaginary trigonometry.

She cried a little as it was beautiful. Like a fractal that somehow contained every other fractal. Master told her how it was made: by swinging compound pendulums filled with thickened fish bile over the scrubbed smooth goatskin she held up to the evening light.

These were the bounds of creation itself.

But what if we weren't created? That we just evolved?

Mathematics only applies when nothing in the universe is fully right or righted. Have I grown old for nothing?

Then what of the result? Can knowing change anything but to know more, to know better?

That, young one, is Truth.

So, Master, there is the Equator, Bounds, and Truth—is there more? Can Truth be equated, piped?

The old woman looked into the embers as she stirred the smoldering fire.

A long time ago, I did that, and here I am exiled for it. What is Truth, *huh...

She gazed upon Master with a different opinion of her now. She had to unravel it alone—the mysteries of existence, maybe unto everything that would and could ever exist.

In her cave, she rocked herself as she thought. Don't think too hard, her mother had reminded her. Father said

the best things come free, naturally. Was this Truth? Was she piping and equating Truth? Oh dear, oh dear... She fell into a deep sleep, pale with worry.

Truth is when something works, said Father. We pursue it as we pursue a goal. Truth is always changing. The more we know, the more is Truth true. Nonsense, Dear, said Mother. Truth is the summation of all knowledge. It exists in flux until every bit of creation agrees to become one. Everyone at any stage reads the flux differently and therefore becomes a creator. A better and better one. Dear, said Father, THAT is what I meant as well.

She woke up shivering as it was now snowing. How long had she been asleep? Upon the mountain top, Master was gone. There were tracks down the precipice where her teacher had apparently descended, seeking warmer weather.

She had to know what Truth was to complete the equators, the imaginary trigonometry, and the pipes. She

gathered her things in a sling sack and followed the tracks down to the plains below.

There she found her master washing in a stream.

Equating Truth, piping it, it's what destroys, deludes, does it not?

Not true, if I may venture that.

Then what is Truth?

Some believe it can be equated because they know pure imagination.

What is pure imagination?

The completion of the small set, which is illogicality. A joke is the square of pure imagination; a joke is Truth deep within. Do not ask anymore, my student. Go your own way.

She thought about it a long time. Her hair grew long and lustrous, living on the verdant plains, and her skin, plump and rosy. She no longer cared about Truth, about math, and all its devices. And one day, lonely, she desired

a mate, a family.

What is Truth? Asked her daughter.

What indeed? She replied. The algebraic equator, its symbol, is a lie, an imperfect simplification, she began. Mathematics begins with what we call a pipe...

The shuttle to the prairie moon was packed. She kissed her daughter on her cheeks. It would be a long time before this episode ended. And as she thought it over, a smile crept across her face—what her parents had done for her, she perpetuated. She could hear the questioning voice running through her daughter's mind, and the old woman who fought for nothing, climb the mountain in the summer all over again. She saw her scribe training to read Morseish-Braille in the dim of firelight, poking a stick into damp clay, growing her breasts out on the plains below. Her daughter turned to her, questioningly, and she laughed, hand over her mouth.

The Writer's Room¹⁴

“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

14 I spent 9 months in rehab for family violence -it was a punch up mutually, and a lot of lies were told to smooth things over. But after I was released from custody, the world of writing opened up to me. It was like the pin had been pulled from a grenade and I was holding it. This was one of the first stories I wrote that year, 2019, which was also when COVID-19 broke out around the world. Some of the characters were people I knew in rehab and some of it roughly really happened.

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.

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.

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's arms, our kiss trembling from the months I'd gone without love and the privileges

of freedom.

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.

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.

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 smelled 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..."*

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.

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.

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.

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.

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?

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.

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:

"...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.

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!"

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 birdbone 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 Vignettes¹⁵

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

15 More prose-poetry I thought up. Are these little droplets of logic disguised as fleeting imagery? What do they do to your insides? These are potent little pills of hope.

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.

~

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 rosebushes, a murk through which couples waded, wobbling flashlights sending beams across the clearing. In her hands, a red crepe 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 past 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.

~

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" we can 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 Storms¹⁶

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 around, 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

16 I thought of this Cli-Fi romance as during the COVID years, we all had to wear masks. And I wondered: What if we were 'underwater' -then the story came to me -one day we might need to increase the vapor content of the atmosphere. The characters are a motley bunch of scientists who gathered in Johor Bahru, a city opposite from Singapore -somewhere I loved to visit with my former boss (Hi, Paul!). I loved his spacious MPV and the street corner hotel he booked us. Too bad my scripts weren't any good back then...

the world crisis that I had started.

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 spilled. This is what we've got to get out, she said.

We should do it, said Boris, the Russian expert on high-altitude winds. He nodded solemnly. What we do is 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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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 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 are 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.

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, I replied, stammering, we couldn't save all the animals, but those we did—that count—are 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 enough 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.

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.

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. 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 gray, 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.

Reminisce¹⁷

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

17 This isn't 100% fiction but don't tell anyone and I won't. I wrote it to honor my grandparents -what made them the people they were and why they didn't come out and say things that were important, but did things secretly -no maybe with unspoken purpose, as if there were a world -an internal one I should not have suspected they lived in.

delivered to every house; just like the milkman, we had a breadman. 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.

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.

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 are dusty and loose, an ungainly shell of the past. Lives are burdens time bears.

A Question of Procedure¹⁸

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.

18 I was talking with my grown-up friends who were troubled. I used to make up characters and little finger puppets to entertain my depressed sister when we were young. Soon they were introduced to Eniwetok Wolliah, Todak the horned toad and his horny son Tucker. And as luck had it, some of this ‘nonsense’ would later become a story similar to Winnie the Pooh, Wind in the Willows, the Muppets, Fraggle Rock -you can tell I love this genre. Have a good read and try to laugh along with my attempt at humor.

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 about 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.

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.

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.

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 piped 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.

Rather shaken, I decided to have the mini-Mars bar only to find Robert already chewing at it 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 'coin, I said. Ah, crypto—good. I develop for the App Store. We'll have to give your creativity a spin then, said the

insurance man.

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, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. All 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.

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.

Claire could have spent her whole life with Robert. They opened presents, Jacuzzi-ed together, and 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. Chinamen lying about looked on drearily in shorts and hitched up Chung Kai pagodas. No have, lah, sir. No such thing, one.

The Pearl Fishers¹⁹

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.

Demi was a pearlfisher. She had beautiful long black hair, porcelain skin, and a swimmer's body with strong

19 Venus is uninhabitable but what if it were the source of immortality, where would the pearl seeders stay and what would they eat? How would they escape the pressure cooker planet? This was inspired by J. G. Ballard's "The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D". JG -one of my favorite authors.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

The Color Matcher²⁰

The appreciation of color 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 color, therefore admitting we are

20 It came to me, this tale, as I considered the meaning of color. Gandhi wore white, as his skin were a dark choc black. He was assassinated. Darth Vader (Hey, Mr. Lucas) wore all black and he came to know the good within himself. What if color were 'evil' -a remnant of the Atlantean gods? What would an overload of sensory suggestion lead to?

*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
colors of any pleasing combination, we invite
greed, hatred, and jealousy.*

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.

By the modern-day miracle of AR, I held my phone

up to his eyes, and through the stereo focal camera lenses, the high-definition display recolored 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.

I left the mansion feeling upbeat. In under 30 minutes, I had earned \$3000 of my service fee. I was a professional color 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.

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, color-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, and with strokes of the pointer I waved in my hand, 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 flavors 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 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 colors, he said, just a memory quickened to be shared. In his hand, a thumbbed, 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 variational frosted plastic that prism-ed and shifted hue as we passed. What have you done? I wanted to ask, but the absence of color, for once, was so refreshing that I swallowed my words.

The spiral staircase that led to the basement was white marble, veined with dark gray streaks that 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 color 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.

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 color? What he had been getting at all along, I finally understood. You've

made your point, I said meekly. Color must be the most evil thing ever created. It's what we have to live with.

What color 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.

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 Since²¹

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.

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

21 I dropped out of college and all but flunked high school so I pursued a course in bakery. As the story goes, I failed to score myself a girl from among my course mates, being constantly short of dough (pun unintended) and maybe this is my confession. IIRC, I never picked up my cookbook order. Yea, RIP Don Yong, master baker, and I'm sorry for forgetting.

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—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.

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.

I pre-heated the small electric oven, popped in the round, puffy lump, and settled down to wait. Slowly, the white doughball 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?

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.

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 called 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.

My Malaysia²²

Malaysia used to be very different, not so long ago. I shouldn't be the one to say this as I wasn't born here, but really in Australia, 47 years ago. Near the then newly cleared outback where they were constructing Canberra -Oz's planned capital city.

But that hot and dry day, we were standing on the rim of Borneo's Bakun dam, where I had proposed a modification to the turbine feeds. Just a simple laminar

22 This is actually part 1 of a 3-part series on speculative race-religion politics of the projected future, here in Malaysia, being, I believe, a microcosm of the world's struggles / conflicts. It was my first dip into writing political commentary this touching to the heart. I received a call, supposedly from the MCMC, asking me to remove it, but up till now there has been no written order. Spooky. And they now say MH370 didn't crash.

module that when inserted into the shaft, sped up the outflow of water more towards the edges of the turbine blades for a 300% increase in power.

There hadn't up to now, been a Malaysian innovation so exportable. Our government-linked firm had easily won the contract to modify China's Three Gorges Dam and collected their extremely generous reward. Nothing like beating reliance on US controlled oil and gas to the hungry Chinese economy.

Earlier that year, I had influenced, by petition, a 'yes' to the joint Malaysian-Thai construction of the shipping canal that would effectively split our peninsular into an island. Talks went on late into the humid night, about a new regional capital in the Malay heartland, by the mouth of the new canal. "Kota Madani", was the mooted name for the soon to be bustling port city. And with the East Coast High Speed Rail Link, it meant that east of the Bintang range would at last develop. Exactly how, and how much was up to the Sultans as it involved a huge

projection of power between Johor and Singapore in the south. Power to change lives for the better -Malay and Chinese, together.

This was not to mention the transformation that solar latices were making Down Under. Previously thought to be impossible due to strong gusts, the looping latices and expanding-contracting wind catcher-buds had made renewable energy a viable option to coal in Australia for the first time. I had not been to my birth country in 43 years and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, had been avoiding long haul flights abroad. I longed to see these technologies deployed firsthand, to touch the metal, and to visit with my family, now settled in Melbourne.

One afternoon, as I was walking through Mutiara Damansara, I visited the manager's office. All the innovations I had made had given me a green pass to people such as I was about to ask, does anyone play the piano in the foyer anymore? No, she said. Not since the pandemic. He was this bald Korean guy with fingers

faster than his memory, I said. Yes, the manager giggled. Should I play here instead? I asked. There's no budget for that, I was told. Then may I loan your baby grand? She nodded, if you pay to have it moved.

The house me and my folks had in Paramount Gardens was practically a shoebox. Wind rushed straight through from the front door to the back, which opened up directly to the rear of an art gallery that used to be a Chinese coffee shop wet kitchen. There is a picturesque lane of houses crawling up a slope nearby where owners had stood flowerpots and painted their walls in coordinated sunny hues, kind of like a Malaysian Spanish Steps, or something you'd see in a San Fran neighborhood. I liked the idea of having our back door open, with the breeze coming in. So one day I made a petition for it as well.

Nora was a tall and weedy Malay 20-something who wandered into our house one late afternoon after prayers on Friday. She said she could hear a piano as she leaned in

on my room door which was ajar. Are you playing Mozart, she asked? No, but I'm trying to do it -something similar, I replied. She laughed good naturedly, in a gentle way, if Mozart were drunk, she said. I am very avantgarde, I defended myself. As am I, she said. She sat down by me on the bench and began to unspool her own music. "I had a feeling it would end this way, no more to say, just the breaking of the waves..." Nora sang the sad lullaby -a tale of jealousy among her people, as I accompanied on bamboo flute. At the end, we both had a good laugh -at how well we coordinated.

She turned to leave, so I called, can I see you again tomorrow? For it was just before the weekend. Maybe, she thought. And her eyes were dark like ripe kurma (dates), her lashes like the drizzles of sweet date nectar. And her unvarnished lips said, -not. Not? My heart fell. Her hands went to the pin of her tudung (hijab) and hesitated there. My place is better, she smiled conspiratorially.

The Korean pianist did eventually turn up, albeit at a more posh location -the TRX Exchange. As Mutiara gently degraded into a Thai-Singaporean-held economy oriented strip of malls. I knew the baby K. Kawai was mine to keep!

Caitlin was only 15 when she came for piano lessons with me. There were no other teachers nearby so her Mom dropped her off at my place from just a kilometer away. I know who you are, she said, rocking and squeezing her full breasts as she made a downturned 'v' with her tensed arms. You're the Mehedi! No, of course not, I corrected, I'm Christian -and it's a job called the Madani evangelist. But you're a prophet, she continued undiscouraged. No, not at all. I just have a ticket to heaven from Jesus and can read people through their expressed thoughts and behaviors. I'm just another bucket in the bucket line to save the world, and you've passed me your bucket.

Haha- Caitlin laughed openly. Prophecy is like

launching a rocket. Ever heard of the rocket launch train wreck? Or how an arrow bends like crazy just after you fire it? No, she pouted. Well, prophecy has to be moved and then it moves. A very heavy thing moved from far behind generates a lot of commotion, sometimes suffering -if you weren't spiritually prepared.

She had then wandered into our kitchen and began pouring herself some Robert Timms black coffee. Do you think I'm fat? She asked. Actually, yes, a little -but don't be offended. Fat people deserve love too, she cooed. I think we should get engaged. My Mom can get us the rings. I didn't know what to say and must have looked like a gutted roasted chicken so Caitlin smiled at her good fortune. And we carried on the lesson.

Old Man's Car²³

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.

23 Soon everyone will have a car with an auto valet function. A real life-saver. Elon, we need Teslas that have it. We feel for you also -the weight of America and so much else is on your shoulders this 2025. And I wondered what if I owned one of his self-driving cars? This is not “Old Man’s War” -the novel by John Scalzi. Minishorts, stay safe and stay well. Fight the good fight, everyone.

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.

Father emerged from the house carrying a black travel carry-on and a large garbage bag stuffed with the offerings of paper hell money gilded with faux gold and folded into Chinese boat ingot shapes. Sometimes, worshipers would also purchase paper shirts, cars, and houses to be

burned 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. His first. Father was a little surprised. It knows it has old 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 and 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 burned me up a paper Mercedes—a self-driving one?

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 relatives 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, replied the car. I didn't have the heart to ask.

Fin.