

Anak Sastra, Issue 5

Table of Contents

"Forgotten Youth" by Mamü Vies

"Dahl" by Lasantha Rodrigo

"Type 3 Typhoon" by Eli Terris

"Saya" by Chandru Bhojwani

"Fortune Tallying" by Andrew Wright

"See-Saw" by Paul GnanaSelvam

Mamü Vies has been writing mostly as an outlet for dreaming while awake. Armed with nothing but a childhood full of movie watching and a head filled with erratic imagination, he hopes to leave a mark in the local literary scene, with plans to venture into the world of screenwriting in the horizon. He blogs at [Planet MamüVies](#).

Lasantha Rodrigo is a Ph.D. student in English Studies (Creative Writing focus) at Illinois State University. Originally from Sri Lanka, his work has been previously published in Sri Lanka, the United States, and India. He largely draws from queer theory, postcolonial theory, and trauma theory in his work.

Eli Terris received a B.A. in anthropology from Brandeis University in May 2011. Throughout his years of college, Eli had extensive international experience and fell in love with Southeast Asia during his explorations of that area in the summer of 2008. He is currently an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer in West Virginia.

Born in Africa, [Chandru Bhojwani](#) grew up between Nigeria, India, and the UK. With a Masters in International Business from the University of Westminster, he moved to New York where he worked as a Business Development Manager for three years before moving back to Nigeria. Chandru has been writing for [Beyond Sindh](#) since 2004. *The Journey of Om*, Chandru's debut novel was published in 2009 by Cedar Books and is available in the UK, US, and throughout India. Chandru is currently in the midst of his second book and devotes time to his blogs: [My Marriage, My Wife, My Life](#), and [Lemonade for the Mind](#).

Andrew Wright is an English literature enthusiast who was born in China and has lived in numerous cities around the country. He has worked as teacher, editor, translator, and interpreter over the past few years. These jobs have offered him different perspectives through which he can observe and feel the life of society as a whole. Now a freelance writer, he hopes to use his unique understanding of the world to succeed as a writer.

Paul GnanaSelvam has published short stories in e-Mags *Anak Sastra* and *Dusun*, and in a number of anthologies, including *Write Out Loud*, *Urban Odysseys: KL Stories*, *Body2Body*, and the literary journal *ASIATIC*. Apart from creative writing, his reading interests include works by writers from the Indian Diaspora and New Literatures in English. He teaches academic writing and interpersonal communication at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in Kampar, Perak, Malaysia.

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October 2011 featured author interview with Mamü Vies

Q. What is it about writing that appeals to you? From where do you draw your inspirations?

I suppose it all goes back to my childhood days when I was rarely the type who played with others, preferring instead to sit in one corner and play by myself or doodle in my exercise books. I immersed myself in worlds that I created for myself, all of which stemmed from the age old question "What if?"

So as I aged, that part of me evolved as well. I still sit in one corner every now and then, although this time around I put my thoughts onto paper. It would appear that I still draw my inspirations from the same place. I would look at how the world works and how people do things, and very often I would think, "What if things go a little differently? What would that world look like?"

Whenever I get the opportunity, I tend to allude to various lore that I read along the way, all of which I connected with at some level. Examples include Greek mythology, Shakespearean dramas, the Christian lore and many other religious mythos. At this point, however, I'm still experimenting with them.

I also idolize Ken Kesey and Ernest Hemingway, which may have very much influenced my writing style.

Q. Describe your writing process a little. Do have any strange writing habits?

I don't know if it's strange, but I have a particular liking for writing character-driven stories. So what I often do is write down my first impressions about the characters as I see them in my mind's eye. I would give them some background and later act them out while coming up with their mannerisms and idiosyncrasies, going so far as dressing up as the characters sometimes.

This usually takes a lot longer than the amount of time I spend actually writing the story. However, oftentimes only about 50% of these things would show up on paper as to avoid the story from becoming overly self-indulgent. I think this is where I take on after Ernest Hemingway who referred to his style as the Iceberg theory; the facts float above the water while the supporting structures and symbolisms operate out of sight.

But of course, I don't think I am yet able to do it with the same intensity.

Q. You mentioned that you are interested in screenwriting. What sort of challenges do you face transitioning between the literary scene and the big screen?

I have no experience in writing screenplays, so the only frame of reference I can use is the handful of stage plays I've written; a couple of short ones and a full-length stage play I have yet to complete. Immediately apparent is the problem where most of the things you get to do in a novel or short story, you need to achieve the same thing through dialogue and character interaction alone. Obviously you can't have the characters read out prose passages.

But I think it's only a matter of getting used to. It's hardly an obstacle but as you said, they're only challenges.

Q. What is your most vivid experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia that you think is unique to this region?

These are just my two cents, but the way I see it, plenty of communities around these parts are rather conservative. While I am in no way saying that it's all bad, it's hard to deny that it also makes these communities more reluctant to fully embrace differences, making them a lot more intolerant and fearful of the things that they don't know or not too familiar with. So it's like the idea of "agree to disagree" is lost on them. It's always "do it our way or get the hell out of the way".

The irony of it is that those are the same differences that make Southeast Asia unique in the first place. But they are only celebrated in so far as including them in parades and advertisements for tourism but not so much in our daily lives.

I don't know if what I said is exclusively a Malaysian thing, because the only times I've been out of the country are the two times when I went to Indonesia and Japan. Even then it was only for a week, so it's not my place to say anything about either one of them.

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"Forgotten Youth"

"Women *are* bad drivers, you know?"

"How did you figure that?"

"It's how God made us"

"Aw, come on... Don't bring God into this."

"But it's true! God gave us men this... *equipment* and it's symbolic for many things."

"Okay, one: we drive with our hands! And two: What does *that* have to do with any of this?"

"Well, look at that gear shift. What does that remind you of?"

"You're disgusting!" I said, although I couldn't resist a chuckle.

And he said, "Why, thank you", with a wink.

Frankly, I didn't even know how the conversation got to where it was at. It felt like only minutes ago when we left our apartment, on our way to Strawberry Sky—my favourite cafe—to meet up with some friends of mine. We decided last week that it was time for us to introduce ourselves to each other's friends. I just hoped that he would tone down his dick jokes in front of my friends because it was not going to go down like it did back when he introduced me to *his* friends.

You should have seen them. They were laughing and slapping each other's backs at every exchange, more disgusting than funny. Worse still, they weren't exactly quiet about it. Sure, some of the patrons at Asia Cafe were giggling and smirking themselves, overhearing his friends asking questions like, "*Which would you rather see: Rozita Che Wan taking a dump, or Adibah Noor taking a piss?*"

But for me it was just awkward as hell. It was just grossly inappropriate. I even wondered if their other older-women related 'conversations' were influenced by me being there.

Oh, did I mention?

I'm older than my boyfriend. How old am I? Well, let's just say that he's sixteen years my junior.

It's true what they say about the honeymoon period, it only takes time for the magic to evaporate. In our case it's not so much about the age difference, but neither of us can deny that there *isa* difference; we are both products of different eras.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoy racy jokes as much as the next middle-aged woman. I know my housewife friends can attest to that. But the kind they're telling these days are very crude and rough-around-the-edges by our standards.

But then again, that's about the only thing about him that I'm not really in favour of. That's the only thing about him that I'm trying to change.

"So these friends of yours... How many will there be?" he suddenly asks.

"Just two. Sharon and Akmar. Nina couldn't make it."

"What are they like?"

"Why don't you decide for yourself, you know... When you meet them?"

"Still, I *could* use a little heads up. Any do's and don'ts?"

"No, just be yours-"

I hesitated to finish that sentence, without even realising it.

"Okay, what was *that*?"

"What was what? Nothing, I said just be yourself"

"No you didn't... I mean, you just did, but not before. You..."

He then narrowed his eyes and looked at me with a smirk on his face. Sexy little devil.

"You're afraid I'm gonna cramp your style, aren't you?" he said slowly, almost teasingly.

"No! I just... Okay, darling. I just... need you to be who you were when we first met."

"But I'm still the same guy, *and* more."

"Exactly, they don't need to know you all at once, you know what I mean?"

"I guess."

Awkward silence.

“They certainly don’t need to know *all* of me.”

“Yes, exactly... You’re special to *me* because I know you like no one else does.”

“Uh huh... You know what I’m like down below too.”

Damn, I would have preferred the awkward silence.

“No, you see? That right there is exactly what I’m talking about. No dirty-“

“Hey, hey... I know, I’m just messing with you, sweetheart,” he said with a laugh. “Just trying to remind you to be young at heart.”

“I didn’t forget. You’re the one who needs to learn when to be young, and when to be... Well, an adult. Eh, didn’t we already have this conversation?”

I took a quick glance sideways and saw that he was frowning. Oh no, I think I might have offended him.

“Yes, we already had this conversation. Didn’t we also agree that you would love me the way I am?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then you should also know that I wouldn’t purposely make you look bad in front of your friends.”

That’s all I needed to hear, really. I didn’t even know why I was so nervous about this meeting. I guess that I just wanted my friends to accept him. Or better yet, *like* him.

“Speaking of friends...” he began saying, and I began to dread where I thought this was going. “Last night was pretty crazy, huh? What do you think of my friends?”

“They’re okay.”

I didn’t look, but I could feel his cold stare just trying to pierce its way through the side of my head.

“...But?”

“There’s no but... Sure, they’re a bit loud, but it’s not like I didn’t like them or anything.”

He was still staring.

“It’s just the things that they talk about. God knows I wouldn’t want to sit through the Sarimah Ibrahim and Nasha Aziz debate again.”

Apparently that broke the tension because he started to laugh. I’m not sure if it was because he was reminded of the joke, or amused by how I was ‘tortured’ last night. But suddenly it didn’t seem to matter anymore when he placed his warm hand on my knee.

“That was just one side of me, and it’s the same with them too. You see, ever since all of us started working and having steady relationships, we barely hang out anymore. It’s just one of those things... We see each other and it’s like, we leave everything behind. No job, no girlfriends, just for one night.”

“So why did you bring me, then?”

“I wanted you to see a different side of me. I wanted you to see *that* side of me, the side that you probably think is the worst. If you can be okay with that, then I figure it would make it easy for you to be okay with everything else about me.”

Don’t get me wrong, I thought that that was really sweet. But I was just a little insulted that he always felt like he had to put our relationship to a test. I’m a thirty-nine year old woman, for crying out loud. I have no time for games anymore. But then I spotted a petrol station by the roadside.

“Sweetie, I need to use the ladies room. Wait in the car, okay?”

“Okay”

Immediately upon entering the ladies room, I whipped out my phone and speed-dialled Sharon. Maybe I could make time to play just *one* more game.

“It’s good to finally meet you. You know, for a while we didn’t think you actually existed,” said Sharon while she shook hands with my boyfriend.

“Yeah... I mean, she talks a lot about you, but it took her months to introduce you to us personally” said Akmar.

“I heard some very lovely things about you too, she told me you guys have been BFFs since... well, forever!” said my boyfriend, giving them both the sweetest smile.

“Oh yes, we’ve been through a lot. The stories we could bore you with... hahaha” said Sharon as she discreetly winked at me. “Of course, there’s only one thing we couldn’t really talk about with your darling here.”

“What is it?” my boyfriend replied, leaning forward with an eyebrow raised.

“You see, both Akmar and I are married with children while your girlfriend here is taking her sweet time getting there. Are you planning on putting a baby in her soon?”

And so it began. I had to stifle a laugh watching my boyfriend get caught completely by surprise as evidenced by that look on his face; he was still smiling, but his eyes were opened widely and both eyebrows were raised so high that I thought they were going to merge with his hairline.

But we were just getting started.

Akmar decided to join the fun by adding, “Did you know that childbirth is nothing like in the movies? Sure, they got the screaming and the sweating right. But the things they don’t show you are actually the worst. For example that little cut they give you right at the time we’re pushing the baby out”

“...cut?” my boyfriend asked, bewildered

“Yeah, and I’m not even talking about the C-section. No, that’s another story. No, the conventional way is they cut right below the hoo-hah, making a bigger exit for the baby”

“And speaking of pushing the baby out, you can’t push something that big out of something that small without pushing something *else* out, if you know what I mean?”

I thought I saw my boyfriend’s shoulder twitch a little, “Urm... I... Don’t” he said. Grossed out as he was, he still tried to keep up with the conversation.

“Well, how do I say this delicately... Human waste? Yeah, you see,” Sharon started to grin as she began using her hands to illustrate the process. “You know how the female production organ is close to the waste processing plant, right? Well, when we push the baby out, oftentimes we can’t help pushing out whatever’s left in the waste processing plant as well.”

“And trust us when we say, they look nothing like the kind you flush down the toilet” said Akmar while all three of us burst out laughing while my boyfriend was still smiling with that dead look in his eyes.

This went on for another hour as we discussed the freakish shape of a newborn baby and the placenta and so on.

We exchanged driving duties for the ride back home. He was driving this time around, very quiet, no longer looking terrified but thoughtful instead. I, on the other hand, couldn’t stop smiling, replaying the conversations we had with my friends inside my head.

Being completely honest, I thought that that was really fun. Maybe he was right; maybe I had been a bit too serious about all this. Maybe I *had* been making our relationship a bit more strenuous than it really needed to be. Sure, he's dating an older woman, but why did that mean I had to deny myself all the things that all these youngish couples do?

"You okay baby?" I asked, looking at him lovingly.

He broke into a smile. "Well played darling... Well played."

* * * * *

"Dahl"

It was dark when Arjun got into his brother-in-law's turquoise van with two heavy suitcases. Sparrows began chirping as early morning sunrays filtered through the canopy of leaves on either side of the road. For a tropical island, the morning was unusually cold, and the midnight blue backpack still on his back felt, all of sudden, heavier than when he bade adieu to Mulberry Street that was home for nearly two decades. He was going to miss the morning scent of dew on jasmines. As the vehicle drove away from his frosted buttermilk home, the figure of his waving Mom occupied his peripheral vision long after Mulberry Street was a thing of the past. When Arjun boarded the Sri Lankan Airlines plane with twenty three dollars in his worn-out leather wallet and Mom's sad smile imprinted on his mind, he instinctively tried to wipe away tear trails that had not dried up. He knew they clung to the brownness of his skin.

That was eight years ago, and his circumstances were far from what he envisioned them to be. He lay on a lone, white bed in the middle of the United States – the Midwest, the Broadway attraction a distant dream slipped from his grasp for good. There was a nurse, coloring her nails a peachy pink, somewhere in the kitchen. And Brad was still his, one of the few sureties in Arjun's life. All of a sudden after all these years, Arjun couldn't bear the physical distance from Mom, golden dunes and cerulean waves of the Indian Ocean whirling in his mind. It's been a long time since he heard her voice: that voice of forgiveness, of encouragement, of reason, of mercy. His hand was limp, and he examined it with clinical detachment. He never called Mom, their communication existing only through emails, but maybe it was time to call her now. When Brad asked how his day went, Arjun usually told him everything including orange-red lady bugs on the window pane and the smell of curry from his Indian neighbor's saffron-scented kitchen on the other side of the dry wall. Brad had said he should call Mom and invite her for a visit and that he would pay for the ticket. Brad was probably busy at work, teaching tongue-pierced, green haired undergrads who couldn't care less about Socrates.

Arjun looked at the cordless phone by his bedside for a minute. With some hesitation, he picked it up and slowly dialed his Sri Lankan home number from memory. It would be way too early in the morning in Sri Lanka, but some things, as he had learned, could not wait. Through the darkness of the dawn, Mom's phone would wake up neighbors, he thought, but he couldn't wait. The phone rang six times before she picked it up. When he heard the faint, soft "hello," Arjun was on the verge of tears.

"Hi Amma"

"Arjun!?? Is that you???"

"Yeah. How are you? Were you sleeping?"

"Yes, but never mind that. What a surprise to hear from you!"

"Well, I... I..."

"Are you okay, Putha?"

"Yeah. Would you like to come for a visit? You are not teaching, are you? You said the Montessori was closed for break."

"Visit you in the U.S.? Putha, I don..."

"I can send you money for the ticket. Brad is my roommate. He's, well... he's a very close friend. You'll like him."

"Br... well, I don't... why all of a sudden?"

"You must come, Amma. I will explain later. Will you come? Brad will take care of everything."

"I'm no... Can I think about it and email you? Is there anything you wan..."

Mom always worried about Arjun; he was a sensitive kid. When he hung up, Arjun was convulsing. His sobs were loud enough to be heard by Radha in the saffron-scented kitchen who was stirring a thick and creamy tikka masala curry. The smell was seeping through dry wall into Arjun's nest. The delicious aroma made him hungry, but it was difficult to eat solids anymore: he could only eat soft baby food. When he was home, Brad fed him with a loving sense of discipline. "Carrots now," he'd say. "I boiled them for you."

"I know, babe. Difficult to chew, though."

"Pudding, then? I got your favorite butterscotch flavor."

Arjun would eat with pretended enthusiasm. When Brad got paid, he always brought him ice cream. Strawberry and mango were Arjun's favorite flavors.

"And we have ice cream today. Can you guess what flavors?"

Arjun would imitate the Church Lady from *Saturday Night Live*.

"Could it beeeeeeeeeeeeee SATAN??" And they would laugh until they cried.

Arjun's thoughts took him back to the time he was only two years old, living in his Grandma's big mansion. There were discolored bronze vases and figurines in every corner. When his maternal Grandma housed her youngest daughter's family from an illicit marriage, Mom fed Arjun and Sha, his elder sister, from her own hand. With one plate of soft, cotton-white rice and a couple of curries that were cheap to make like dahl and sprats, Mom fed Arjun and Sha alternately, mixing rice with the two curries and forming it into bite sized balls. Arjun *had* to have dahl and refused to eat without it. When Mom fed, it was always tastier, he remembered with a wistful fondness.

Eight years ago, Arjun had come to the U.S. on a full ride to study theater. He wanted to be a Broadway star. Then he discovered his brown body and his fascination with whiteness; male whiteness. It was in a chat room that he met Brad four years ago, and Brad stayed by him despite the purple lesions that were becoming more pronounced.

Would Mom understand his urgency in wanting to see her? What would she say? How would she feel? Would she understand what those purple lesions meant? It was too much to think about, and Arjun dozed off with the cordless phone still in his grip.

At the Chicago airport, Brad waited near gate seven, holding a sign with a name that seemed, and probably sounded, alien to many who passed by. As passengers came into view one by one, he put on a forced smile on his pale white face. His palms were sweaty, and he brushed away dirty blond hair from his eyes. Towards the very end of the long line of disembarking passengers, a woman in a white sari and flat shoes visibly hurried her pace and came up to Brad, smiling with South Asian reservation. Brad took her bag and led her through crowds of people looking at flat screens on the wall, trying to figure out where they needed to be. Once they were in the car, Brad kept his eyes firmly fixed on the road, but he knew she was studying him. He felt he had to say something.

"How was the flight?"

"How did you meet my son?"

"We... well, through a mutual friend."

When the Persian indigo Toyota Camry pulled into the two-door garage, Arjun stirred in his bed. Then he heard footsteps outside and within a minute, the sound of a bunch of keys jingling and the front door opening. The sounds were getting closer and closer, the thud of Brad's heavy shoes and alongside, slow and deliberate sound of familiar flat shoes that hardly disturbed the floor. In a plain white sari with graying black hair, Mom came into view followed by a nervous Brad, counting tiles on the floor. She was thinner, older. Arjun wanted to get up, but he was on an IV.

She sat by him tenderly and quietly, her heavy eyes trying hard to disregard purple spots and bumps on Arjun's face. She felt his black hair as if to make sure he was there in person.

"I brought you dahl, baby. I will feed you from my own hand."

* * * * *

"Type 3 Typhoon"

It was our first night in Manila, the Philippines, and there was a chance of showers. In the summer after our freshman year of college, Zoe, Monica, and I decided to travel through Southeast Asia in rapid speed. We had trekked through Thailand's rainforest, waded down Laos' Mekong River, and dodged motorcyclists in Ho Chi Minh City. Now, here we were in the Philippines wrapping up the spectacular five-week voyage as the typhoon season commenced. The following day we had plans to bus forty-five minutes away to hike around the crater of a volcano and picturesque lake. We were staying with Malou, Zoe's former nanny who had raised her in Boston a decade prior. I was looking forward to being pampered for a few days compared to the rugged hostels we had been lodging in.

When we arrived at sun set, Malou, her husband, and son picked us up in their pick-up truck and drove us off to their gated community in the outskirts of the sprawling city of Manila. The Filipino men (Malou's husband and son) carried all our bags without accepting any assistance. They insisted we make ourselves at home. We toured the two-story house, admired the photographs on the wall, and sat in front of the television for some downtime. For dinner Malou put in front of us a delicious bowl of warm noodle soup that I inhaled instantly. By 8pm or 9pm the rain started to come down. There was no transition of drizzling or sprinkling raindrops. One moment nothing, and the next, rain came down like a wall of big, heavy, fast moving bullets of water spewing from the sky.

It was nearing the end of June, and the seasons were shifting. We were informed that a few big typhoons hit regularly, but there hadn't yet been any noticeable storms that year. We

opened the door to observe the torrential weather. It was definitely raining hard, but as a native Bostonian, I had witnessed intense and beautiful lightning thunderstorms at home. The only difference is that storms in the northeastern United States only last for a few hours. But by the time we went to bed around midnight, this typhoon showed no signs of fading. As I closed my eyes to sleep, I could hear the rumbling of rain clunking on the roof overhead. When I awoke the next morning, the sun was shining and the air felt crisp. I hadn't thought much about the storm, despite that its white noise undoubtedly assisted my deep slumber.

When we came downstairs, it was clear that our elaborate plans of exploring the volcano were not going to happen. We learned that it was a type 3 typhoon (the highest rating given to a typhoon). The rain had poured through most of the night at full capacity. Furthermore, there was a state of emergency in the southern region of the country from the storm's aftermath. During the typhoon a massive ship sank, thousands of families were displaced, hundreds of people were missing, and at least 60 individuals had already been confirmed dead. I wondered how the storm had affected Manila. After breakfast we went outside and walked around the neighborhood. Some trees had tumbled over and the plants look disheveled. The neighborhood as a whole just seemed a little shaken up but nothing tragic. As we walked around we heard people on the streets talking about the events of the night before. They were concerned about their neighbors, and were offering to help in any possible way. This was my first time seeing the Philippines during day light hours. The sun innocently radiated overhead as if pretending nothing had happened the night before.

To give us some excitement after the gloomy morning sentiment, Malou's husband decided to bring us to the biggest mall in the Philippines. We were told it was also the biggest mall in all of Asia (however, we learned later this claim turned out false). It was during the drive to the mall that we truly saw the effects of the typhoon. The moment we pulled out of the gated community, almost half of the nearby streets had been transformed into rivers. Some of the streets had drained entirely, while others were still sunken beneath several feet of water. As we wove through the roads towards the mall, almost every other street was either roped off, under a pool of water, or blocked by locals. It was a labyrinth. None of us had our cameras, so unfortunately the extraordinary visuals from that day are only etched in our minds.

As we would turn a corner, for example, we would see a man waist deep in water, waving his arm violently in our direction. So we would detour until the next street, finding it under a whirlpool of water. On some streets children were swimming and making boats. They were giggling and treating this natural disaster as a new playground. The Filipinos we saw were not confined to their homes, but were out and about. Just before giving up entirely on our mall mission, we found a path of streets that had drained the rainfall enough to make our way into the mall's parking garage.

Although parts of downtown Manila had been buried under seven hours of an intensive storm, the typhoon was a reminder to me of Mother Nature's capabilities. Additionally, I reflected on the human relationship with weather. Yes, we can sometimes predict a thunderstorm, tornado, or tsunami. It's true that we own umbrellas, raincoats, our homes

have lightning rods, and our cities have underground water drainage systems. But ultimately, we're just pretending to be in control of the weather. We create methods that give us the illusion that we're the ones with the power. But in the end, this experience reiterated our weakness next to the strength of the Earth. Boats sank, cities collapsed, and people fell victim to nature's vigor. I realized that we only really have control of our minds, attitudes, and energy. Whether it's making boats while giggling, floating down the water with friends, helping a neighbor clean up the collapsed shed, or going into the city to clear up strewn garbage, the Filipinos we saw that day showed strong power and control of their attitudes that miraculously had not been broken by the debilitating effects of the storm.

* * * * *

"Saya"

Ashok looked at his watch before he turned the page and continued to read the autobiography of his next patient. It was almost 9 p.m., and he hoped his new client would arrive soon.

'Doctor Virani, your son is on line two', the secretary informed via the intercom.

'Thank you, Monica. You know, you can leave. There is no need for you to stay.'

'I'll wait for you to finish up, Doctor. Thank you.'

'Are you sure? I can close up myself, you know?'

'That's alright, Doctor, I don't mind.'

Ashok switched lines to speak to his 6-year-old son, Jai.

'Hello?'

'Papa, when are you coming home??' Jai squeaked.

'Soon beta, I just have to finish up some work. Aren't you supposed to be in bed?'

'Papa, there is a monster in my room! It's not letting me sleep again,' he sulked.

'Oh, is that right? It's back, is it? Alright, I'll come home soon and take care of that monster, ok?'

'Promise?'

Yes beta, I promise,' Ashok said, reassuringly. 'Let me speak to mummy.'

Ashok looked at his watch again and then the door, anxiously waiting.

'Ashok, why aren't you home yet?' Sonia asked sternly.

'I'm still waiting for my client.'

'At this hour?? You finish up by 6 usually,' she nagged.

'Yes, but I told you I'd be late today.'

'This late? Ashok! Which psychiatrist stays open at this hour?'

'Sonia, I have to go, I can't have this discussion now.' His frustration began to take over.

'Ashok, I'm worried about Jai. He hasn't been sleeping. His teacher called and said he falls asleep in class. His school work is suffering and he just looks haggard. I think we need to see a pediatrician.'

'Sonia, please, can we talk about this when I get home?'

'Ashok, this is your son, for God's sake!' she shrieked.

'Fine!' Ashok screamed back, 'I'll set up an appointment. Ok?'

'Fine! Your dinner is in the fridge.' She slammed the phone down.

Ashok replaced the receiver and began to pace around his office, trying to get his wife's irritatingly nagging voice out of his head. Eight years ago, it was the sweetest sound. Today, when he hears her call his name, he can feel his blood pressure rising.

He once again began to wonder why the property billionaire and philanthropist, Rakesh Mehta, sought out his services and that too, at such a peculiar hour. Ashok was aware of his capabilities, and knew he wasn't considered a renowned psychiatrist. Yet, this pillar of society wanted to speak with him and only him. This was too good of an opportunity to pass up!

'Doctor Virani, your client has arrived,' buzzed Monica.

Reaching over the desk, he pushed the button on the phone and instructed his secretary to let in the most prominent client he's ever had (and possibly will ever have). Standing upright, he began to straighten his tie. For the first time since he had opened his practice, his hands were clammy.

Rakesh Mehta walked in and immediately, his presence could be felt. A tall, broad man, with thick hair, his aura and charismatic smile could capture a room. Ashok noticed that Mehta was much bigger in person than the papers and magazines suggested.

'Doctor Virani, thank you for seeing me at this hour,' Mehta strode forward with his hand outstretched.

'Oh, it's my pleasure, Mr. Mehta,' responded Ashok, as he tried not to wince with his hand being crushed in Mehta's vice-like grip.

'Please, call me Rakesh.' Rakesh released the doctor's hand, noticing the pain he was in. 'Unfortunately, my schedule is rather hectic so this was the earliest we could meet.'

They exchanged formalities as they sat down and shared their opinions about the sudden heat wave. Ashok was curious, and while he wanted nothing more than to get into the session, he was seasoned enough not to let it show.

'I'm sure you're wondering why it is I wanted to see you, Dr. Virani,' Rakesh asked while unbuttoning his impeccably tailored pinstripe suit.

'It certainly did cross my mind.'

'Well, why does anyone want to see a psychiatrist? To hear themselves talk of course!' Rakesh smiled, easing Ashok somewhat.

The irony wasn't lost on Ashok. In this situation, it was he that was supposed to calm the patient. However, the stature of Mehta was so immense, he couldn't help but feel out of his element.

'Doctor Virani, I am sure you are aware of my public image and standing in society?' 'I am,' Ashok nodded, maintaining his poise.

'Then you understand that anything discussed in this session cannot leave this office, no matter what the circumstance might be?'

'I'm surprised you're asking, Mr. Mehta -'

'Please, call me Rakesh,' he interrupted.

' - Rakesh, since you must be well aware of the doctor-patient privilege we are bound by.'

'Indeed I am doctor, but I do need to protect my interests. Certainly, you understand?'

'Of course.'

'Then you wouldn't mind signing this confidentiality agreement?' he asked, as he pulled out an envelope.

'Mr. Mehta, I mean Rakesh, I assure you this is not necessary.'

'I hate to put you in this position but this is a necessity for me,' his tone now sterner.

'Rakesh, I can't sign any documents without my lawyer having a look first.'

'Then I'm sorry, but I can not continue this session without a signature on these papers.'

Mehta stood up and began to place the envelope in his pocket. Ashok twitched, and was uncertain about what to do. This was highly irregular. He justified the situation to himself; what would a man of Mehta's prominence want to swindle a mediocre psychiatrist like him for?

'Please, Mr. Mehta', he stood, 'we're here to help and heal, and if this is what we need to do to guarantee you peace of mind, then so be it,' he reached out for the papers.

'Thank you, Doctor. I understand I've put you in an awkward position, but like I mentioned earlier, it is a necessity for me.' He handed over the envelope, 'I assure you, it's nothing more than regular boilerplate information. To put it bluntly, if any of our session is disclosed to anyone, I can sue you for any and everything.'

Ashok's hand paused an inch above the paper and he looked up, disturbed.

'I'm sure that won't happen...it's not as if you intend to leak any details to the tabloids, are you?' he smiled

Ashok smiled back nervously. He signed and handed the documents to Rakesh, who promptly returned it to the inside pocket. Ashok sat down, feeling a little rattled but was ready to push forth.

'Shall we begin?'

'Yes, let's. Do you mind if I walk around, Doctor?'

'Well, usually patients find it easier to sit or perhaps lie down.'

'Yes, well I prefer to walk and talk, it helps me communicate. I hope that's alright?'

'Whatever you're comfortable with, Rakesh.'

'Thank you.' Rakesh walked around, absorbing the vast amount of information that surrounded him. He inspected Ashok's degrees on the wall, his books, even the family photographs.

'You have a beautiful family, Doctor Virani. Is that your son?'

'Yes, his name is Jai, he just turned six.'

'Adorable.'

'Thank you, but you haven't come here to talk about my family, have you?'

'Of course not,' he laughed, 'I've come to talk to you about mine.' He turned towards Ashok and smiled. 'Do you know anything about my family, Doctor?'

'Well I know what I've read. You lost your parents at a young age and were raised by your uncle and aunt who dealt in garments. That's pretty much what I know about your family.'

Rakesh once again faced the walls, ignoring the fact that Ashok was scribbling away on his note pad.

'Well, allow me to fill in the missing details. Lata, my older sister, was my parents pride and joy. She also was the closest thing I had to a parent. We weren't from a wealthy home, Dr. Virani, so both my parents worked hard to provide us with a decent life. My mother was a nurse and often worked the night shift while my father managed a factory floor. He, too, worked late into the night.'

'Doctor, it's your son on line one,' the intercom buzzed.

'Monica, you know not to disturb me when I'm with a patient.'

'Yes sir, but your son said it's important.'

'Monica, he's six for God's sake! You should -'

'Sir, he's bawling on the phone,' she interrupted.

'Doctor, please take the call, I'm sure it's important to your son.'

'I'm sorry, Rakesh, I won't be a moment.'

'Of course.'

'Hello? Jai? What's the matter?'

'Papa, it's in my room again and won't leave me alone. It's troubling me,' he sobbed.

'Who, beta?'

'The monster papa. Papa please, please come home. Please Papa, please!'

Ashok could barely understand what his son was saying through all the wailing.

'Jai, let me speak to mummy.'

'Papa, please! The monster's here! It said it won't leave me! It's sitting on the bed now papa! It's coming closer and closer!'

'Jai, beta, calm down. Stop crying. Let me speak with your mummy. Jai? Hello? Jai?'

Realizing the son had hung up, he called his wife's mobile phone.

'Hello?'

'Sonia, can you please check on Jai, he's in hysterics! Please, handle this! I'm in the middle of a session.'

'What happened?' Sonia was alarmed.

'Nothing, he's just talking about the monsters again, please just go upstairs and get a handle on this!' he hung up, frustrated.

'I'm terribly sorry about that, Rakesh,' he said, regaining his composure.

'It's quite alright. Is everything ok?' Mehta asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

'Yes, yes. You know children and their wild imaginations. My son insists there is a monster in his room that has been bothering him for the past few days.'

'I think every child has a healthy fear of the monster in their room,' he smiled.

Ashok was confused with that response, but paid it no heed. Instead he picked up his note pad and asked Rakesh to continue.

'As I was saying, my parents worked late into the night and it was Lata who raised me. I was always asleep by the time my parents got home and only saw them briefly at the breakfast table. Close to my seventh birthday, my father passed away in a fire at the factory. It was a tragic scene, numerous employees died that night. I'm sure you're aware that India isn't well known for its safety standards.'

Ashok instinctively wanted to say something but knew better, and allowed Rakesh to continue expressing himself.

'We received some compensation, but it wasn't enough. My mother began working double shifts at the hospital and began to run her self into the ground. I saw her even less. Lata became my mother.'

Rakesh stopped walking around and sat down across from Ashok. He took a sip from his water cup and smiled at the doctor.

'I understand you live near the Rajni Estates in Parelle.'

'Yes,' Ashok was surprised, 'Yes I do, but how did you...how did you know?'he stammered.

'It's my business to know, Doctor Virani. Information and knowledge are important commodities. Acquiring it and containing it is what controls the business world.'

Ashok sat silent, unsure about how to respond.

'Don't be alarmed Doctor Virani, I own a great deal of property in that area so I'm bound to know.' Rakesh smiled.

'Oh I see, ok,' Ashok said, reassured once again.

'Are you aware of how my property empire came to be?'

'Well, I understand you have purchased land and constructed.'

'Yes well, before all that happened, it was more primitive, if you will. My mother passed away when I was fourteen. Being aware of our situation and the impact her long hours had taken on her health, my mother had prepared a decent insurance policy in case of her demise. Being the entrepreneur that I am, I took a portion of it and invested. You see, the area near Rajni Estates, where you live, was very dilapidated during my youth. I hated coming home to such a morose and depressing surrounding. Hiring some of my friends, we began to refurbish homes. It began first with painting and repair, and then turned into brick and mortar work. Some children used to play, I used to make a living. It helped me deal with the loss of my mother. It also allowed me to stay away from home.'

Ashok caught on to one of the statements. Mehta had a desire to stay away from home. It wasn't surprising since he had lost both his parents and lived in semi-poverty but still, he made a note of it. Suddenly, he felt his mobile phone vibrate against his waist. Picking it up, he noted it was his home calling.

'Rakesh, I do apologise, it's my wife.'

'Please, family does come first,' Rakesh insisted.

'Hello?'

'PAPA!' Jai screamed. Ashok wrenched the phone away from his ear, grimacing in pain. The loud blood curdling scream startled Rakesh. 'PAPA!!!' he screamed louder and longer.

'Jai? What happened?'

'PAPA HELP ME!!!' He screamed again, 'I'm begging you HELP ME!'

'Jai, what's the matter? JAI?'

The line went dead again. Immediately he called the house and Sonia answered.

'What happened? Jai just called me screaming!'

'I know, I just heard. I'm heading upstairs. Let me see and I'll call you.'

Ashok replaced the phone on to his belt and looked at Rakesh who had a concerned expression on his face.

'Is everything ok? Perhaps we should end the session?'

'No, I'm sure my wife will take care of it, it's ok. Please continue'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure it's nothing. My wife will call momentarily telling me it's ok. Please continue.'

Ashok ruffled through his notes and began:

'You mentioned your work allowed you to stay out of your home and gave you an opportunity for a brighter future. What were you running from?'

'It wasn't what I was running from but rather, whom?'

'Excuse me?' Ashok asked.

'You see Doctor, there is something I haven't mentioned to you about my childhood. It is, in fact the reason why I am here today. It all started near the time my father passed away. When I was seven, Lata used to creep into my bed with me.'

Pausing briefly, Rakesh unbuttoned his top button and loosened his designer tie. Taking a deep breath, he cleared his throat and continued.

'She threatened that if I told anyone what she was doing she would kill me. Then again, who could I tell? Even if I wanted to, she was the only parent I had. I both loved and hated her. At first, she convinced me that this was how one loves another, but I knew it was wrong. There were times I cried through the whole experience, begging her to stop, but it didn't matter. She used to take me to school and back, made my meals for me as a loving parent would, and at night, had her way with me as a lover would.'

Mehta reached for the tumbler of water and took a sip to moisten his parched throat.

'The abuse continued for years. When our mother died, I hoped it would end, but it didn't. Since Lata was my guardian, I couldn't leave her either. So, I began to spend as much time away from home as possible, hoping it would stop. It didn't. When Lata started having boyfriends, I hoped it would stop. It didn't. Every night I feared entering my bedroom. I wanted to sleep, hoping that she wouldn't wake me, but I couldn't sleep because of the fear, the anticipation. I was haunted every night until my fear became my reality, a reality that took place almost every night.'

Mehta paused once more and ran his fingers through his thick, grey stained hair as he leaned back in the chair.

'After my mother died, I hoped we'd move in with my uncle but Lata, being the legal guardian and decision maker, made sure we stayed home. She said she'd never leave me. That she loves me.'

They sat silently. Ashok waited for him to continue. Mehta, stone-faced stared into Ashok's eyes.

'I remember I was fifteen at the time and Lata was still abusing me. I knew she was never going to stop creeping into my bed. For half my life I lived in fear and cried myself to sleep. She tortured me and found pleasure in doing so. I wanted it to stop and I had to be the one to stop it.'

Still sitting back, Mehta tilted his head back ever so slightly and gazed at the ceiling as he remembered what transpired next.

'She had a party at home for her twenty first birthday. It was a Saturday. I controlled the bar and made sure the alcohol kept flowing throughout the night. More importantly, I made sure Lata's glass was never empty. Finally, In the early hours of the morning the last of her drunk friends left. Lata had passed out on the sofa. I picked her over my shoulder and brought her into my room and lay her on my bed.'

Rakesh leaned forward placing his elbows on his knees and intertwined his finger. His voice softened.

'I opened up my cupboard and removed all the clothes. There was a large hole in the back I had dug over the past few days. I bound and gagged Lata before placing her in to the cavity. I lit a large candle and put it in with her. I wanted her to watch the candle and the light die with every second that passed until she was immersed in absolute darkness. I wanted her to suffer the torment of waiting for the inevitable. I watched her for a moment in her unconscious state. She seemed so peaceful. After the moment passed, I sealed her in, alive.'

Ashok's phone vibrated once more and he picked it up without hesitating or asking for permission.

'WHAT!?'

'Ashok you need to come home now!'

'Why?'

'It's Jai! Ashok, he won't stop crying. He's so cold. He keeps rocking back and forth shivering and murmuring. He keeps saying, 'help me, help me'. He won't even look at me, he just looks straight ahead and rocks. I slapped him but I can't snap him out of it. I'm really scared. Please come home we need to take him to a doctor. Ashok, please, hurry!' 'I'm coming. Give him half a valium and put him to bed. That should calm him down.'

Ashok looked up to find Rakesh standing by the door.

'I'm sorry, Rakesh, it's an emergency. My son needs me.'

'I understand, Doctor, don't worry about it.'

'Perhaps we can reschedule, I'd like to help you.'

'Help me?' Rakesh smiled, 'I've made peace with my demons Doctor, I am here to help you.'

'Help me? What do you mean?' he looked confused.

Rakesh was half way out the door. He took a moment.

'Doctor Virani' he sighed as his grip on the door tightened. 'You're living in my house.' Rakesh turned towards him, 'Your son. Jai, he sleeps in my room.' He paused, 'I'm sorry, Ashok,' whispered Rakesh before he gently shut the door behind him.

Overcome by a numbing sensation, Ashok tried desperately to process all that had just transpired. Like a man running against a typhoon, his mind fought to understand and confirm what his gut already knew. Seconds that felt like hours passed by and when he looked back at the door, Rakesh was long gone.

Lunging towards the phone, Ashok's fingers, now trembling with adrenaline, dialed his home. Frustrated by the busy tone, he threw the phone on to the desk and ran out the door.

'Doctor Virani, what's the...?' The secretary tried to ask, only to be ignored by the sprinting psychiatrist.

Slamming on the accelerator, Ashok snaked through the cars that littered the roads late at night. His mind struggled to focus on the road as he replayed the events of the night, the client that was his meal ticket and savior of his practice turning out to be anything but. His screaming little boy just needing his father to protect him from his nightmares – they had to be nightmares.

'It's not possible...' he whispered as he ran another red light.

Throwing the car door open, Ashok left the car running as he ran up the drive way to his house. Digging into his pocket he searched for his keys with one hand while he furiously rang the door bell with the other.

'Open the bloodydoor!' he yelled.

Frustrated, Ashok leaned back and kicked the door open, causing it to swing and rebound off the inside wall and back towards him. In that split second, he saw his wife standing in front of him with tear stained mascara streaming down the front of her face. Catching the door, he pushed it back and grabbed his wife by her shoulders and asked.

'What happened? Where is Jai?'

Sonia stood still, unresponsive.

'Sonia?' Ashok raised his voice. 'SONIA? Where is JAI?'

He shook his wife vigorously, trying to snap her out of her state but she remained catatonic.

'Fuck!' he snapped before side stepping her and running up the stairs to his son's room. 'Jai? JAI?' he yelled as he threw open the bedroom door.

His son's room lay in utter disarray. The blanket, chair and lamp were all on the floor and the single bed had been moved to an angle.

'Jai?' Ashok yearned for a response, a clue to where his son was hiding.

He flipped the light switch but remained in darkness. Using the light from the hallway, Ashok frantically turned the room upside down while screaming for his son. Unsuccessful, he went to the other rooms, toilets and even ran by his stationary wife to look in the kitchen. Finally, he returned back to Sonia who kept staring at the now broken front door.

'Sonia. I need you to tell me where our son is? Please. Snap out of it and tell me where Jai is?' He pleaded.

The black, salt stained mascara had turned hard and crusty on her skin. Her pupils, now dilated, stared out into nothingness. Ashok noticed she wasn't blinking. Raising his hand he brought it thundering down and slapped her across the face. The noise echoed through the silence in the house as Ashok waited for a reaction. Moments passed, but Sonia did little to remove the hair strewn across her face.

'Damn it, Sonia, WHERE IS OUR SON!' He screamed, sending globules of spit on to her face.

Silence fell upon the both of them and all he could hear was his heavy breathing. His heart pounded viciously and his body throbbed with each beat. His gut was telling him where he needed to look but his mind struggled to accept it. Pushing Sonia to the side, Ashok grabbed a torch from the chest of drawers at the bottom of the stairs and ran up once more to his son's room. Pulling open the doors to the cupboard he found his son's clothes neatly hung up in front of him. Grabbing them with both hands, Ashok pulled them off the rail, sending hangers flying in to the air. He shined the light on the back wall and noticed the amateur workmanship. Ashok's chest heaved heavily as unfathomable fears began to creep into his soul. His scientific mind was bending to the illogical will of the paranormal.

'It's not possible!' he whispered.

Placing the torch on the bedside table, he aimed the beam of light on the back wall before picking up the standing lamp. As he gauged the weight of the heavy-based lamp, his eyes remained fixed on the bricks in front of him. Amidst the dark stillness, Mehta's last words echoed in his mind.

'Your son...sleeps in my room.'

Letting out a scream, Ashok lifted the lamp over his shoulder and ran to the wall. Chips of brick and mortar ricocheted off the sides of the cupboard walls as the psychiatrist violently bashed the base of the lamp into the back wall. Cracks began to form on the bleak, grey surface and with each strike, his scientific mind came to terms with what he once perceived as illogical.

'JAI!' He screamed, praying to hear his son's angelic voice respond.' JAI!!!'

Painful tears streaked down his dirt stained cheeks. Finally, a solitary brick flew back and after a momentary pause, he jumped forward and tried to look through. Darkness.

'Jai? Beta? Can you hear me? Speak to Papa, beta? Don't worry,' he gulped, 'Papa will get you out.'

Fueled by fear and adrenaline, his swings got mightier as the wall started to give way to his will and might.

'Don't worry, beta, Papa's coming!' Ashok repeated reassuringly. Papa's here. Almost there, Jai, almost there.'

Knocking through a few more bricks, Ashok dropped the lamp and started to pull the remaining bricks with his bare hands. Making light work of the rest, he stuck his head through the void into the darkness on the other side.

'Jai?' Are you there beta?'

Stepping back he grabbed the torch and leapt back through the cavity, into the darkness and shone the light around. The circular beam travelled along the walls of the long, narrow channel as Ashok continued to walk forward and detected a blinding stench. Covering his nose with his dirt-covered shirt, he moved on.

'Jai? Jai? It's Papa. Jai?' Ashok called out.

The secret passageway ran the length of the house and even with the torch, Ashok struggled to see clearly. Suddenly, catching his foot on a protrusion in the floor, Ashok tripped and fell forward on to the ground. Moaning in agony, he reached out to the flicking beam of light and brought the torch to himself. As he got up on one knee, he slapped the base of the light until the beam remained steady. Covering his nose again, he turned the torch to the floor and noticed a large black clump that had caused him to lose his footing.

Lifting his head, he turned the beam ahead and his gaze followed. As he gasped, the air escaped his lungs and his body suddenly turned cold. There she lay, balled up in a semi-fetal position, nothing but bones and rags covering them. Realising he was no longer breathing, Ashok inhaled deeply, only to cough brutally as the dust contaminated his lungs. Returning the light to the corpse, he followed the torso and uncovered the rag around her mouth as Rakesh had described. The beam continued down the limbs and Ashok noticed the worn ropes hanging off her hands. As he inspected the body, the torch began to flicker once again. Ashok caught a glimpse of another shape in her arms, and anxiously turned the light before it went out completely. Recognizing the vibrant coloured garment, Ashok jumped forward.

'Jai? Jai?' He shook his son by the shoulder before picking him up and putting him to his chest. 'Jai, it's Papa. I'm here Jai. Wake up.'

Ashok patted his son on the back as Jai's limp head rested on his father shoulder. Concerned by the lack of response by his son, Ashok felt for the torch on the gritty ground. Struggling, he lay his son on the floor and crawled on all fours in search for the light. Finding it had rolled behind him, Ashok picked it up and smacked it to life.

'Jai.' He called out as he turned and shone the light on his son.

Lata's dead arms were once again draped over his son as she held him close to her bosom. Scrambling towards his son the torch fell out of his hands and the beam of light landed on Jai's face.

'JAI!!!!' Ashok shrieked as he fell backwards and continued to kick his way away from his son.

Jai's face had withered and aged as though as he had been there for decades. His once innocent eyes were now wide open and fear stricken. Sunken cheeks revealed his cheek bones and his skin was pale and rotting. The light from the torch flickered on Jai's lifeless face before dying out again.

The ambulance ushered the catatonic Sonia away while the police tried to question Ashok with little success. The burly cop looked at his partner before calling out to the paramedics waiting in the second ambulance.

'Take him to the hospital, we'll have to question him there. We aren't going to get anything from him here.'

Wrapping him in a blanket, the paramedics helped Ashok up and guided him to the white van with the flashing lights at the end of the drive. Turning his head ever so slightly, Ashok peered over his shoulder and saw the yellow tape that had barricaded his house. He noticed the front door was still ajar but couldn't muster the strength to say anything.

The two men in bright yellow jackets helped Ashok up the steps and placed him on the stretcher before shutting the van doors. As they strapped him in, Ashok sat up and looked through the glass panes at his home once more. The van wobbled gently as it maneuvered its way over the gravel path and around the remainder of the driveway out of the gates. Overhanging trees and unkempt bushes started to obstruct Ashok's view as the distance between him and the house grew. A sudden gust of wind caused the van to sway and startled everyone in the van except Ashok.

'PAPA!!!! PAPA!!!!' The wind carried his son's loud cries.

Suddenly, the partly open door slammed ferociously shut, from the inside. Ashok watched and remained silent as the van left the premises.

* In the Hindi language, 'Saya' means both 'Shadow' or 'Spirit'.

* * * * *

"Fortune Tallying"

Wrinkles were quivering around the old palm reader's face as gibberish was spurting from between his lips, whose flapping revealed an elusive yellowness on his teeth. Lee could not concentrate on the conversation, or more accurately speaking, the monologue, so he ran his eyesight around. He glanced from the receding hairline to the deep furrows on the forehead, from the loose-fitting semi-silk shirt of the traditional Chinese style to the tarnished leather shoes dotted with fissures here and there, plus a worn-out briefcase whose original color could not be recognized.

“The other day a girl interpreter served m-e—” with a prolonged utterance at this point, the old man seemed to be absorbed in the recollection of what had happened, “a Tsinghua graduate. Superb interpreting...”

Lee took a glimpse of the old dim eyes, in which the shrewdness flashing from time to time made him feel a bit uncomfortable. He turned his eyes to the other performers around the courtyard. Beside him in the floating and mottled shadow of the Chinese pagoda tree at the southeast corner of the yard sat the tea boy in a waiter’s uniform, hat gripped in one hand and a long-and-slim-nozzle tea kettle propped by the chair on the other side. He craned his head forward and kept an adoring gaze at the old face, leaving his kettle tilted downward, allowing some water to trickle out. Farther from where they sat, under the grape trellis in the center of the yard, were the two teenage girl acrobats busy with quadriceps stretching under the instructions of a lean, middle-aged woman, and the magician, an imposing man like a white-collar commuter except for the lack of a tie, who was checking his guitar-shaped box of gadgets for the upcoming performance. In addition to these people was Yating, the Chinese coordinator from the host company of culture exchange, who also stood leisurely under the trellis, watching their final preparations for the performance and ready to provide any help if necessary.

What struck Lee the most when Yating ushered him into the yard was not how demure her manner was, how sensuous her lips were, or how slim the figure inside her close-fitting *cheongsam* was, but rather, how smoothly she communicated in English with her co-workers. He had wondered why it was necessary to hire an interpreter for the event until Yating explained to him who he would serve this afternoon. Among all the performers, only the palm reader and the magician would be communicating with the audience, consisting of the host company’s senior executives. It was a concern that some of the terminology they might use would warrant the assistance of a professional interpreter. Lee was arranged to have talks with the palm reader first to prevent any possible glitches in the event.

Almost everything was ready. As Yating had shown, the Chinese-style furniture was arranged so that the chairs were placed into rows like pews at a church and a desk was put at the side for a laptop that would play the music. With the chairs on the west part of the yard, the vacant east part would serve as the stage. Traditional Chinese music was drifting from the laptop on the desk through the open doors of the house and easily heard by everybody in the courtyard.

Everybody was engaged in his or her preparations while waiting for the distinguished guests to arrive. The old palm reader continued his bragging while the tea boy was still staring out into space. Lee maintained his manners, though he frequently just let the words go in one ear and out the other:

“You know, we diviners never accept such things like rehearsal, or interview, or whatever it is called...How could such things be tolerable?”

Rehearsal? Interview? Or whatever it is called? Does it have anything to do with me? Lee thought. Though the procedure was routine, he had gleaned as much information about the

assignment as possible before he accepted it. He was clear that the schedule today did not mean that all of the performers would be hired. Despite their efforts today, some would not gain anything from the experience. *But it is none of my business*, Lee told himself. *I just serve my clients, whoever they are, and take my pay and leave for supper, that's all.*

Almost instantly, everyone stirred into action as the bosses arrived at the gate. Yating immediately straightened up and, along with her co-workers, hurried over to welcome them. All of the performers also stopped what they were doing to look at the people who would decide their immediate financial futures. While the host company's staff flanked the gate and the performers saluted with their eyes, about twenty middle-aged bigwigs, some well-groomed in casual clothes, some tousle-haired and heavy-whiskered in the style of artists, loitered into the yard and were ushered into the main room by Yating.

As everyone settled into position, the tension became visible. The palm reader's face was perfectly composed, but the eagerness in the flickering of his eyes showed how anxious he was. The tea boy straightened his upper body, but his ass remained welded to the seat. The magician turned to take care of his gadgets again and seemed unbothered by the newly-arrived VIPS, but his fingers were strumming the gadgets in a non-rhythmical manner. The shoulders of the two acrobat girls wriggled impatiently when their instructor patted them while whispering something in their ears.

Yating appeared at the door and summoned the two girls. This move was like throwing a pebble into a pond, upon which the ice was broken and a slight agitation was rippling around the courtyard. Under the gaze of the others, the two girls entered the room with gaits as smooth as two well-tamed cubs being guided into their performance arena.

As the courtyard was permeated by the accompanying melody, the tea boy sneaked to the window sill to peep through, while the others, gathering around the instructor, began to pour out their hypocritical praises for the girls. The instructor merely responded, "They are so popular. Invitations to perform come one right after the other."

"How amazing they are! Such hard work at such an early age." The magician seemed to be particularly impressed.

The instructor immediately answered, "I regard them as my own children. I will not allow them to work around the clock." But the voice was so lacking in emotion that nothing, except the alertness against the implied accusation of child labor could be perceived in it. Not satisfied with such repartee, she launched her offensive by distributing her business cards. Brightly-colored as they were, this courtesy move seemed like butterflies flying around and then fluttering their wings upon the fingers of everybody. Lee glanced at the one offered to him: *Emily Wong, Executive President of Red Dragonfly Culture Company, Contact Information blablabla...*

Within several seconds the instructor had engaged the palm reader in a lively conversation, in which the old man continued to stress how reluctant he was to accept such a rehearsal.

“The quality of your performance must be very high.” The instructor’s gaze at his wrinkled face showed a mutual understanding.

“The other day I was invited by a friend to perform at an event organized by his company. When he asked me how much I charge, I did not know how to answer. He promised me 800 Yuan,” he cast an innocent gaze around, “but the final pay was 1,300.”

The instructor nodded approvingly at the pay rate, but her eyesight was not completely fixed on the old man. Her squinting at Lee from time to time sent an uneasiness through him and compelled him to try and figure out a way to handle her.

A mobile phone rang, sounding: “You have an incoming call,” saving Lee from dealing with the instructor. He gave the lady an apologetic nod as she eyed him, stepped aside, and pressed the OK key. It was Chan, his best buddy and roommate from his days at university. Just like in the old days, they would joke around and make wisecracks before exchanging the latest gossip about their school mates. Their life on campus had become remote memories whose colors were fading quickly. In general, though, life was harsh for them and their school mates.

But today Chan seemed rather weird. Unlike the straightforward character Lee was used to, the lukewarm voice on the other end of the phone suggested that the speaker’s interest lies elsewhere. Lee decided to cut short the digression and simply asked, “What are you getting at?”

“How about dinner together this evening,” Chan paused for a second, “at the old place?”

“And?”

“And it’s our treat.”

“Our treat?” Lee pressed.

“Cuiyun and I.”

The answer was distinct, but Lee was still not sure whether he heard clearly. “Cuiyun and you?”

“Yes.”

Confirmed. For a moment, Lee did not know how to respond properly but offered his congratulations mechanically. This bewildering surprise put him in such a daze that he did not even remember what they even talked about afterwards. After he hung up the phone, he was still not sure he actually received the invitation.

* * *

As early as their sophomore year, Chan's infatuation with Cuiyun had been an open secret. But already into their university studies, both were still somewhat cynical of the opposite sex, a feature unique to teenagers, rendering them both ridiculous and sweet in retrospect. It was common for a girl to remark: "A swine would fly with wings had any guy been reliable" while hiding a love letter from someone in her pocket and a sweetness in her heart. And it was frequent that the love-letter-writing boys complained: "Bernard Shaw says a poor family's daughter is their initial offerings, but now every girl, rich or poor, is well-versed in making herself the initial offering."

But Cuiyun, a garment design major admitted into the university in the same year as Chan and Lee, was an exception no one denied. Cuiyun's demure manners, her serene disposition, and her absolute devotion to Christianity were so genuine that even the most caustic quibbler could not produce the least negative comment about her.

Among her adorers in the Department of International Economics, Chan was never the most zealous one, but rather, the most persevering. Unlike others who launched their ostentatious campaigns by besieging her with flowers and gifts, escorting her to the church, or bombarding her with irresistible love letters, Chan did so much homework in such an obscure way that even Lee, his bosom buddy, could not fathom what he bore in his mind until one day, Lee found he could not utter a sentence without a Bible quotation.

"What are you up to?" Lee could not hold any longer and raised the question at the dinner table one evening.

"I'm up to the celery," Chan blurted while picking up the green vegetable, "Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred."

"Screw it", Lee retorted, "I mean your obsession with the Bible."

"What do you think?" The ball was kicked back.

"Do you want to win her heart with your erudition of the Bible?"

"Yep."

"Jesus Christ. Study the Bible to court a girl. You desecrate the gods."

"I will not desecrate anyone seated on the altar." Chan began to elaborate with a grave expression, "Christ will not be infuriated if he knows his religion could serve for love. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

"You are drunken with love. But your goddess has been flooded with pursuers who could not make any wilder behaviors, while you remain as detached as a bystander. Are you serious?"

“A worthy love will not be deviated by any wild behavior. Communion with the other’s soul would be the deciding factor. It’s like a military operation of which the basis is to prepare, while it is doomed if one rushes toward the target unprepared.”

“So you will keep away from her, watching in a cool-headed way how others advance toward her, while having your communion or empathy in an invisible way?” Lee could not cover his sarcastic tone.

“I will launch my field operation.” Chan’s answer was terse, and his attention was turned to the meal.

So he did. On the following weekends, Chan became a pious churchgoer; in the following months, the enthusiasm of other competitors subsided and Chan stole the spotlight in the chase; and before one year elapsed, he had become the apple of Cuiyun’s eye in their talks about the religion, which rendered all the other competitors hopeless.

Undoubtedly, his steady progress sparked admiration with a tinge of jealousy among his roommates, whether they were Cuiyun’s fans or not. So quite a few times when Chan came back to the dormitory after his dating with Cuiyun, he found himself hailed with some chorus like this, half teasingly and half jokingly:

*Love is patient, love is kind;
It does not envy,
Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude;
It is not self-seeking, nor easily angered.*

.....

To this he would mostly keep silent and grin in an amiable way as every winner would do in front of those disappointed competitors. Sometimes when he was repeatedly pressed for a reason behind his success, his answer was simply, “Focus on the fundamentals,” while his rock-like lips and smiling eyes made others question whether he was serious or not.

In private, Lee once asked Chan what were the “fundamentals” he was referring to. “Do you make a girl-pursuing strategy like an economist would do in his academic studies?”

“Yes.” Chan’s confirmation was uttered in a flat tone, but inspired unquenchable ideas in Lee’s mind.

“You said YES!” Lee did not know how to proceed with the conversation with the curiosity swelling at an explosive speed.

“Yes.” Chan’s seriousness was unquestionable, “You love a girl, you focus on her soul in which you try your very best to trigger resonance; you launch a war, you apply every muscle in each stroke of your fight; you get involved in business, you spare no efforts serving your clients and the public; you engage in academic studies, you exert your

intelligence to the utmost extent that no split of mind is allowable. Victory or defeat, glory or infamy, gain or loss, whatever these efforts yield, will you swerve your mind in the slightest way?"

These words left such a deep impression in Lee's mind that many years later, when Lee recalled this conversation, he still believed that Chan was under the spell of some god-like spirit, or was enlightened as some legendary figures in the Bible used to be, at the moment when these words were uttered. It was more than who Chan was. And the holiness and vigor radiating from these words could not always be felt in the same person on different occasions. Sometimes Lee wondered maybe bosom buddies could not understand each other as easily as a stranger who cast a detached view at them. These words could not be spoken to everybody else in their dormitory, but all the others' expressions from day to day demonstrated that they had received the same meaning in some unknown way, and, subdued by the holiness therein. They believed what Chan said would come true sooner or later for them. And as everything settled, Chan's escorting of Cuiyun around their campus, both in the typical T-shirts and jeans of young student lovers, made a permanent image as saint or angels in the minds of their school mates.

But the steed of time had all along been galloping forward in an unbridled manner. Their senior year had snuck up before any of them realized it, and the atrocious job-hunting battlefield became the center of their attention and unrest set in. The unprecedented challenges in their life engendered various reactions. Those who had secured a job by whatever means tried to conceal their complacency while enjoying their last leisure of their school days, and those who were determined to apply for postgraduate institutions had to go through the throes they experienced before their college-entrance examinations again. It was a well-known fact that none of these university graduates could find a well-paved way to go after their graduation as easily as their forerunners did two decades ago.

However chaotic the campus was, Chan and Cuiyun still enjoyed their serenity which nobody could deny they deserved. Chan's dazzling performance in school had attracted so many olive branches from Fortune 500 enterprises, and Cuiyun, whose rosy future nobody would doubt, had also been granted the examination-free access to the postgraduate programs of their alma mater. So their routine of life remained unchanged. Every time Chan returned to the dormitory from his dates at the church or library, he would be welcomed by such mimicking quotations, like "Only diligence could lead to ease."

But like most of the others, Lee had no time to admire their sweet happiness any more. He had to squeeze through one job fair after another, straighten up for each hard-earned interview, and hurl himself upon every glimpse of hope which could possibly help him keep heart and soul together in the days to come. Such hustle and hurry was so exhausting that Lee, for the first time in his life, felt his energy and confidence was oozing out of his body in a manner beyond his control. He could do nothing but drift forward, or in any other direction, like a straw on turbulent water which would bring him to God knows anywhere. As his desperation grew to near unendurable lengths, he landed a position with a Turkish Trade Company. The story thereafter was a logical expectation. Accepting the offer, starting his career life as an intern, sharing a two-room house with Chan who as a

PricewaterhouseCoopers employee had begun his development like a sprout with abundant sunshine and rainwater, and then helping Chan and Cuiyun find a new home. All these things proceeded forward as irresistibly as they were pre-designed by God.

But the pre-design of God did go beyond Lee's imagination when Lee found Cuiyun's photos on their alumni community online about one year after their graduation. On the fashion magazine cover, her well-cut trendy clothes matched her hairstyle in a grotesque way, her face was behind such a thick layer of makeup that no expression could be seen, and more importantly, her forward-gazing eyes were blank and out of focus, which seemed to belong to another person when compared with those luster-radiating eyes on campus. Beside the photo the exotic-flavored caption ***Debut of an Oriental Princess, a Devoted Christian*** ran so wild that the surging implications therein would overwhelm every viewer. And the comments made by other fellow students were predominantly insincere compliments, but some basic facts were disclosed by someone, purposefully or not: Cuiyun's application for the Art Department of Paris-Sorbonne University was declined; she was enrolled by the Theology College of another university, diploma mill or not, as patronized by some French guy in the name of Christian studies; she had taken specific steps to enter the fashion industry before she had a full view of this metropolis. And her relationship with Chan was not mentioned by anybody any more and was completely forgotten about, as if they never existed.

Art, Paris, paradise for a girl. All these were so reasonable, and the only thing with which Lee could justify his surprise was the pace at which such things happened. At that moment and more than once in the following two years, Lee had wanted to ask Chan for an explanation. But he held back. It was nothing honorable for a man, and he would surely let him know after everything was settled. And today Chan emphasized that he *and* Cuiyun invited Lee for dinner, triggering much speculation for him.

* * *

When the palm reader and Lee were ushered by Yating into the main room, all eyes were riveted on the two dainty lotus flowers in full blossom. Their supple bodies were coiled and stretched at random angles, their emerald sleeves were the leaves intensifying their colors, and the white trays rotating speedily at the top of the slim poles on their limbs—and mouth—constituted the silvery petals. *What an enchanting scenario!* Some of the audience was under similar spells that their mouths even gaped. Full blossom at the budding age. Was it something to be blessed? When such an idea occurred to him, Lee felt slightly startled. When did they, voluntarily or not, drop out of school? And what did they go through before being led to this arena and creating a full blossom today? What would it be like when they reached the blossoming age some day?

Such wandering thoughts were interrupted by the sudden burst of applause. Lee turned to the arena and found the two children had concluded their performance with the ending pose. Yating exhorted Lee and the palm reader to get ready, and after the applause subsided, went to the two distinguished guests seated behind a tea table in the middle of the front row to report on something while the others also whispered something to each other. In the humming commotion, the two gasping girls shuffled away, with perspiration

dotting their foreheads and zigzagging downward along their cheeks. The blank indifference in their eyes reminded Lee of circus animals guided by their trainer back into the cage after a performance was over, to which none of the audience would pay the least attention. The only difference was that this trainer, instead of making any appealing gestures, was discussing with the old palm reader on how to avoid traffic jams and reach the next destination as early as possible.

But he had no time to care about them. Two stools had been added to the tea table, and the audience had quieted down. As signaled by Yating, the palm reader and Lee sat at the stools. When the old man was fishing out his belongings from his briefcase and placing them on the table, Lee sized up the two guests of honor. The graying hair and slack skin of the gentleman indicated he was not younger than the palm reader, but his white face was almost free of any wrinkle; the delicate complexion of the imposing lady showed how carefree her life was, and the assuaging smiles on her face made Lee believe that everything would go smoothly. However, the opening remarks of the palm reader took him aback, "Divination is a divine art with supernatural powers. The presence of anybody unconcerned on the occasion would make a sacrilege."

Was the demand reasonable? He had no time to think about it, because the inquiry in the eyes of distinguished couple had almost put him in a corner. Luckily, after he rendered the message with an upset mind, no disagreement was expressed, and all the people, including the male guest of honor, immediately stood up and filed out of the room as demanded, while the lady stayed put and maintained her graceful manners. So as requested by the palm reader, she extended her right hand and attentively listened to his explanations of the implications of the three major lines in her right palm. He asserted that the lady always enjoyed good health and was full of sunshine in her mind, that she had been working so hard and blessed with great luck, and hence, scored great achievement in her business, and that she had more than two children, all of whom were sturdy, clever, and lovable, *blablabla*. Such ambiguous and pleasing comments were always so undeniable that no listener would be willing to judge objectively—let alone retort—any word of them. The lady's agreeable smile and nodding from time to time indicated that she was no exception.

But a seasoned fortune teller would never forget to add some ill omens or something like that to concoct a convincing judgment, or even to exert psychological pressure upon the clients for extortion under the name of driving away the evil and defending the soul. *Then, how would this old man play fox?* Lee wondered while gazing at his strained face. Although the old man had tried every effort to assume a professor-like air, the vulgarity and slickness in his face could not be completely concealed, and particularly, the glimpses he stole of the deep breast cleavage of his client from time to time betrayed something lurking in the deepest recesses of his mind. While Lee was analyzing the old man's behaviors, he was shocked by his oily voice, "Her palm line of love is so long, which implies that she has a large number of boyfriends."

The old satyr! Why not say "a large number of sex partners"? With a slight aversion creeping into his mind, Lee hesitated for a second, and stammered, "the long line of love represents that you are so romantic." This peccadillo immediately caught the lady's

attention. Although her smile remained undiluted, her meaningful glimpse at Lee betrayed how unfathomable her mind was. At this point, he heard the old man grunt, "Not every interpreter could fully understand my profession." But this complaint did not incite any reaction, so the old man had to proceed with his performance.

The next theme was coin tossing. As signaled by the palm reader, the lady held three bronze coins in her fist and then sprinkled them on a porcelain tray. The old palm reader scrutinized the scattering pattern of the coins on the tray and scribbled something on a pad of letter paper. The mysterious hieroglyphic codes were written to radiate certain magic power, but the pale splotches on the crinkled paper made it look so ridiculous. Lee had a whim to ask the lady whether she believed it or not, but the graceful smiles remaining unfazed on her face indicated that it was unnecessary. He even felt himself rather nosy. So he turned to look outside. The acrobatic girls and their instructor had been gone. Under the refreshing grape trellis were the other guests seated, enjoying tea and snacks. In the tree shadow stood Yating and the other two performers. The magician was aggressively demanding something from Yating, but she only listened absent-mindedly and stole glances toward the main room from time to time, while the timid tea boy was standing aside like an outsider who would accept whatever decisions the other two made. A vague uneasiness flashed across Lee's mind. But he had no time to think more about it, because the palm reader had begun his predictions. With his eyes narrowed and an earnestness assumed, the old man checked with his ball-point pen one item after another and articulated every possible presage. Time of Birth, God of Longevity, Taboo, Bone Weight. Intentionally mystified as they were, Lee did his job in a dull and mechanical way. What did these words mean to him? And to the other two? He himself was like a machine, into which the source language were fed and out of which the target language was transmitted. As to the graceful lady, the palm reader and he, and all the other performers, were nothing but source materials to be conveyed into a machine which she operated to produce the output she desired.

When Lee almost reached the end of his tether, the old man startled him again with his concluding remarks, "Too much disturbance here. It's not a good place. If you are interested, some day let's find a private room for more." But he had no time or interest to consider whether these words were decent or not because he believed that the lady would handle them with great ease. Would an operator get infuriated by any ulterior motives of a machine under her control? Everybody could see that the old man threw his tentative words as a bait to angle for something, but her graceful complexion with the soothing smiles was like a pond caressed by a spring breeze that his bait just disappeared in it, producing no effect at all. However reluctant the old man was, Yating had hurried in and politely helped him clean up the tea table. Before he had time to say goodbye, the other guests in the courtyard had streamed into the room, which engulfed the lady and Yating immediately and drifted the old man outward like a scrap on the ebb tide.

Lee stood up and stretched his limbs a little. While he was considering how to accommodate himself to the magician's performance, the tea boy entered and began to place his tea kettle and other devices. Lee felt the uneasiness creeping into his mind again. Before he could raise any question, Yating had approached him and explained that the

schedule had been reset and the magician would be present as the last one, probably after supper.

“Why?” Lee responded mechanically.

“You can be with us to enjoy the tea performance, or enjoy your own time. Just remember to be here after supper.” With the last syllable swallowed, she had turned around to operate the laptop.

Lee stood there blankly for a few seconds. When it occurred to him that he should tell the girl working after supper would incur an extra pay, the room had been permeated with the enchanting ground music, with which the audience had quieted down and the tea boy had propped up the heavy kettle over his back in an oblique manner, the beginning pose of his performance. Immediately, Lee, who had been indispensable on the preceding scene, turned out to be out of place and supernumerary.

So he stepped outside to take a breath of the fresh air. The magician had disappeared, and the palm reader was still standing alone under the grape trellis, with his face shrouded in gloomy reluctance. But when his eyes fell upon Lee, he began his grunting again, “We diviners never accept rehearsal...” This irritated Lee even more. So he pulled out his mobile phone, dialed Chan’s number, and walked out of the courtyard.

* * *

The girl sitting beside Chan was thin, heavily-made-up with huge earrings, and wore a purple skirt of a unique style, or more accurately speaking, a mix of sleeveless *anorak* and skirt, whose charm was intensified by the rays the setting sun reflected on the rear window glass. Her billing and cooing with Chan from time to time was made in such a slightly ostentatious manner that it was obviously meant to impress others how firmly committed to each other they were, and her greetings of Lee from time to time were soaked in such a mellow tone that was typical of business courtesies. Since so many subjects were to be avoided, the three tried their best to smooth the impalpable rigidness at the table and steer their topics away from any sensitive matters. Their fellow students became the safest topics. Some got promoted or better-paying jobs, some were busy with job-hopping, while others were sacked or even stayed unemployed; some got married or shacked up with his or her lover, while a few others remained single. However violent those changes seemed to be at this moment, the years that passed behind laid the solid ground to make everything reasonable. And interestingly, those who had risen to distinction or had the convincing momentum to do so became more and more distinct in their memory, and then even became their closer friends whose names and feats always danced at the tips of their tongues. Those who failed to score shining achievements up to that point in life or whose status quo heralded a bleak future, familiar or strange to them, were less pleasing topics to discuss and their memories gradually faded.

While mustering up the strength to maintain an atmosphere as cordial as it used to be with the reunited couple, Lee racked his brain to get this maturing figure associated with the

once most dreamed-of Muse on campus. But his efforts were in vain. So he turned to the menu and glanced at the familiar items. "Does Cuiyun acquire some new favorites while in Paris?" He asked.

"Oh, just the same as before graduation." The graceful flick of hair accompanying this sugar-coated answer betrayed some kind of condescending tolerance.

"But a different taste." Lee murmured in his mind and signaled the waitress standing by that he wanted to order, but only found the girl gazing at the originally-designed dress worn by Cuiyun. Thus he said jokingly to the waitress, "If you get our bellies filled quickly, the designer will make you a dress just like it."

"Ah, yeah, yes, sir." The poor girl got slightly flustered, and with a pale blush, straightened up to serve her guests. In a fit of amicable laughter, the three completed this procedure, and then resumed their talks so wholeheartedly that no one paid any attention to the yearning eyes the waitress cast at the dress before leaving.

Undoubtedly, this episode helped loosen up the atmosphere, and their conversation ambled to Cuiyun's plan after returning to Beijing.

"Set up a design studio of your own? You two must have big plans." Lee sized up the expressions worn by Cuiyun and Chan while making this tentative suggestion.

"Never a piece of cake, particularly for a graduate without much funding or personal connections." Cuiyun's blank tone underlined her lack of interest on the topic, and her evasive wink at Chan indicated that they were to cut to the chase. So Chan produced a paper from his pocket and spread it on the table before Lee, asking the latter to do him a favor, "Do it for me, buddy."

"Do it" meant "Do the translation", which was as definitely as Lee had to peruse the source language text before starting any translation. Even under circumstances like today, he still habitually scanned through the paper. Under the title ***Blossoms and Blessings on Buddha's Birthday*** was a well-structured brochure, in which all the parts, including the preamble, the mission, the qualified applicants, the procedures, and the expenses, were written in such elegant and enchanting words that Lee suspected that no reader could remain untouched by it. The content roughly ran like this: *Buddha's birthday would come soon at the prime of spring, when all the flowers would be in their full blossom. Hereby, a series of events were to be held in Mount Putuo, the well-known Buddhist island, in the next month. Lectures on Buddhist studies and meditation would be given by eminent monks, sacrificial rites arranged, sightseeing scheduled, sutra chanting, and vegetarian food to be enjoyed. Spring scenery with the bliss in Buddhism deserved the commitments of every Buddhist or Buddhist to be—the participants to be desired were senior government officials or owners of prosperous businesses, as noted in the part of qualified applicants. Just embrace the immortal land, the Enlightenment and the Nirvana, and it was reasonable to charge a tiny amount for travel and accommodation.* The contact information was the couple's mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

When Lee lifted his eyes from the paper, he met the hopeful and zealous gaze of his two friends. "So..." He was not sure of what he would say.

"So what's your take?" Undeniable ambition was spilling over from his voice.

"A great...", Lee hesitated, "business plan?"

"Kind of." Cuiyun seemed more earnest than her boyfriend.

For one second, the earnestness on her face reminded Lee of the piety she exerted when she devoted herself to Christianity on campus. A motto popped into his head: *There is only one religion in the world*. Yes, only one religion. But however his friends would caress the religion, he was just supposed to make no comment, give and keep his promise. So he did. And since the dishes began to be served, their focus was shifted to the table, upon which words were exchanged sporadically and the dinner ran its course in an uneventful manner. With the food diminishing below their chopsticks and the topics running short, the nearly-set sun had eked out the last residue of its afterglow, and the thin dusk was sneaking into the room where the lingering music got everybody slightly intoxicated.

It was time to go. The waitress was summoned to get the bill, and everything was taken from the table. They were about to leave when the waitress stopped Cuiyun. "Excuse me," the slightly faltering voice betrayed the strong curiosity and agitation in her mind, "can you do me a favor?"

"Go ahead, please." Cuiyun's manners were perfectly kept while she stared at the vivacious creature.

"It's about your dress. We all—I mean my fellow waitresses—all like it, and we want to know more about it." She paused, and for a few seconds thereafter was caught in a fit of stammer, "we, ah, we had an idea. I don't know how to say, we..."

In Cuiyun's eyes an elusive impatience appeared, but in no time she blinked it away, and the sweet smile never faded to the least extent on her face. The eyes she cast toward the waitress were so encouraging, "so..."

"We all like it. So if it is possible, can you help us purchase, say, ten or twenty pieces?" Slowly, her voice went down to an almost inaudible level as she sized up the listener's face on which the surprised expression threw her into unfathomable uneasiness.

But the surprise did not last more than a split second. The demand worked like a strong catalyst to trigger amazing chemical reactions on Cuiyun's face, where all the former expressions were fused into such blossoming smiles that promised everything possible. Since both parties were turned on, the talks became much easier. From the originality of the design to the difficulty in fabric selection, from the match of hairstyle and dress to the latest fashion of the coming spring, all these topics would always make her eyes sparkle.

And in order to showcase her work better, Cuiyun even waltzed around like a peacock displaying its plumage which earned her unanimous acclamations and applause.

When women were engaged in such conversations, it was wise for men to leave them alone. So Chan and Lee stepped out of the restaurant to embrace the coolness outside. Road lamps were vague and listless under the shroud of thickening dusk, and everything looked to be floating back and forth on the street, all of which presented a mixed feeling of déjà vu and unreality. Standing idly beside the pavement, the two friends remained silent and gazed forward at the hustle and bustle of the world, which seemed to have nothing at all to do with them. Although neither uttered one word, Lee still felt inside Chan the complacency was surging in such a strong momentum that his own personality was overshadowed by it. Just like viewing montages, Lee saw clearly what had been going through Chan's brain. How many attendees would his Buddhism-study-tourism project secure and how much would it bring in? Would the girls' demand translate into a purchase order? And how many suits would they order? The brain was working like a high-precision tallying machine which, very efficiently, classified all the information into different categories, labeled those useful ones for in-depth researches and calculated their potential returns respectively.

What turned the once saintly figure into a cold machine? What tainted the pure soul and created a philistine in it? Sadness. But on the other hand, what if they think positively? Wasn't the duckling so ugly before she grew up? Wouldn't a philistine evolve to be an elegant figure some day when he made a huge success and every word of his was taken as the absolute truth? Lee chewed these philosophical questions over and over again in his mind. And to his own surprise, he found himself not as strongly interested in such puzzles as he had been before. His curiosity was subsiding. He grew to be callous toward such things. He could not concentrate on one thing for long. His attention was always drifting towards God knows where, as was his life, which seemed like a falling leaf tossed up and down by an unpredictable whirlwind. Who knows what's to befall tomorrow? The only thing one could do was make every effort to focus on what one is doing now. Never expect anything. Expectation means distraction. Yes. Do it. Now.

* * *

When Lee returned to his workplace, almost half of the seats had been taken. In the hummings of the audience, Yating, just like a busy bee flitting among flowers, rushed back and forth to serve her bosses. The magician, the last performer, sat to gaze at the laptop absent-mindedly and stole a glance or two at Yating from time to time, leaving his gadgets ignored.

But Lee's entrance attracted all of his attention. He almost sprang to his feet, beckoned Lee to come near for a seat, and said eagerly even before Lee touched the chair, "I need your help, brother."

"What's that?" Lee was kind of taken aback, sizing up the mixed mischievousness and earnestness in the expression on his rather bloated face.

“I need you to say something to the boss of this organizing company. You know, some company would organize an event in the name of art or rehearsal. But when the rehearsal is done, everything is over. No further action, no payment. So I demand to call it the performance today, and payment...” Suddenly he paused, shifted his eyes from Lee’s face and stared at something meaningfully behind Lee.

Lee turned back and found Yating hurrying toward them. Before he realized what happened, Yating had begun her efforts to appease this scheming soul, “I assure you that your demand will be reported to my boss.”

However, this diplomatic response did not produce any positive result. The magician, who had apparently been snubbed perhaps more than once before Lee came back, looked desperately outraged and issued his ultimatum, “I’m not sure I will perform anything for our audience if I’m not paid today.” His words were as sharp as an invincible blade, but when Yating’s assuaging remarks came out, the blade was as if it were being thrust into a serene rivulet slightly rippled by the spring breeze. On Yating’s face the sweet smile didn’t fade a bit, let alone reveal any expression of impatience or frustration. Before she hurried back to her bosses, she even did not forget to nod politely at Lee. And her slim figure sailing through the audience, understandably, became the focus of the magician’s attention. Luckily, everything went on smoothly. She approached her boss sitting in the center, whispered something in his ear while pointing at the magician from time to time, and got his nod for approval.

Undoubtedly, this magician was greatly relaxed by what he saw with his bare eyes, and his attention was turned to Lee. Although Lee believed that no trace of contempt or disgust could be detected in his own eyes, the magician, maybe in order to mitigate the slight embarrassment in the air, explained to Lee in a kind of self-mocking way, “I only want what I deserve. A man at my age always has a whole family to support. You know, as the only bread winner...”

Lee didn’t know how to respond, so he pretended to be interested in the entertainment news online and clicked the mouse randomly. Coincidentally, the headline video episode of the entertainment edition was a charity event organized by a vogue brand. With sweet smiles, close hugs, intimate chats and harmonious awarding moments, the stars competed ferociously against each other for more limelight. Between the climaxes of the enthusiastic atmosphere an interval was arranged. Liu Qian, the magician who rocketed to fame for his close-up performance at the 2009 Spring Festival Gala of China’s Central Television, was announced by the MC in a ceremonious manner. He cracked jokes as a kind of pep-up, he prayed for the earthquake victims to highlight his compassion, and he mobilized every means to create an active atmosphere but in vain. He had a glass mug shattered, without touching it, from several feet away; he squeezed a girl who sat between two boards on rails to be a poster image, and then pulled it back to be a person; he folded a one-hundred-Yuan bill in hand and unfolded it to have two ten-Yuan bills. However, the stars present were not the puppets of the spring festival gala to be manipulated in any possible way. So except for one or two applauses out of politeness, most of the audience refused to mete out any sign of appreciation. As the magician exerted himself to the utmost, the audience wore the mixed

expressions of indifference and vigilance as if watching clown tricks or against an ambitious intruder into the vanity fair.

Lee felt a touch of sadness at the embarrassment griping the magician in the video when he heard the magician beside him comment, "Liu Qian is overblessed by Heaven. We magicians are supposed to get only what we deserve. Too much attention will not bring about anything good. His fame will not endure. He will find it difficult to develop in this industry someday..." Lee could not tell how much jealousy and how much objective judgment were mixed in such a comment. He had no time to think about it, because Yating came to tell them everything had been organized. So they put aside what they were doing and went to tend the well-seated guests. With the help of Lee, the magician exchanged greetings with the guests of honor and completed his warm-up tricks. Then he placed a round tea table in the center of his arena, spread a tablecloth on it, and put a candlestick on top. After inviting the lady guest of honor to light the candle, he pinched a corner of the tablecloth, and with an elegant wave of hand, he had the table float slowly up and sail in whatever direction he commanded.

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"See-Saw"

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