

MAN'S LAST SONG

T W O

SMILE

"Yksi. Kaksi. Kolme." One. Two. Three, Sari Salonen whispers in Finnish.

Blank your mind.... Just count.

She pauses to examine the toque-in-progress. So tiny. How can anyone be that tiny? Should I make it a few stitches bigger? "Neljä, viisi, kuusi..." – Four, five, six....

She speaks four languages, mostly English now, but still counts in Finnish. Numbers are like that, stubbornly native. Her man Song Huan uses English at work and home, but mumbles numbers in Cantonese. Ah, that's easy, *yat, yi, saam*. Anyone can manage that. In Swedish, her other official language, it's *ett, två, tre*, cut and dried. German exactness starts quite simply with *eins, zwei, drei*. Even the French manage to curb their passion for complexity, and settle for the prosaic *un, deux, trois*. Why are numbers so uncharacteristically lengthy and complex in Finnish? Why do the taciturn Finns make so much sound to say one, two, three? God knows. It gets worse. *Seitsemän, kahdeksan, yhdeksän*, and *kymmenen* for 7, 8, 9 and 10? Imagine. One needs big lungs to go beyond single digits. In Finland, it takes twenty seconds to countdown to a new year; and Seven Eleven – *Seitsemän Yksitoista* – doesn't exist for obvious reasons. Maybe that's why Finns don't talk much?

Amused by the mental detour, a gentle smile surfaces like a bubble rising from the bottom of a still lake, spreading soft ripples, ruffling the agreeable expression that Sari wears like a mask these days.

For months, she's been focusing on positive thoughts only. To the outside world – the irritating outside world – she has erected an impregnable shield around her, barring traffic from either direction. Her thin lips, tucked determinedly at the corners, give the ambiguous expression of both content and annoyance: annoyance at the core, content at the surface.

Everything, including her capricious hormones, particularly her capricious hormones, is testing her resolve, trying to nudge her over the limit of sanity.

They won't succeed. No, they won't.

Maintaining a constant smile helps to internalise focus. It reminds her of Mona Lisa. When she first saw the famous painting in Paris, she was shuffling behind Mr and Mrs Tourist Bob in an endless line of visitors.

"Look Bawb, that's the famous Mawna Leesa."

"Yup, here she is! Cool! Beautiful right?"

"The color's kinda dull and blurry though. Like, so brown?"

She looked at Lisa. The Florentine lady was politely giving her celebrated smile, dutifully displaying mystic femininity. Wait, behind that smile was something else. A plea?

Sir, Signore Bawbo, move on now. Per favore.

She imagined what it must be like to face an interminable onslaught of visitors. Fatuous comments, affected admiration, nine to six everyday except Tuesdays when the Museum closed. How many understood what immortalised her enigmatic expression? How many cared?

"She ain't that pretty though. Who painted her, again?"

I beg your pardon Signora Bawbo?

"Da Vincent. It's worth millions I tell ya."

Alas...

"Good art's never cheap Bawb."

If you don't mind...

"Hey, don't know 'bout you but think I've earned a good burger and Frenchie beer with all that artsie farting. What'd you say?"

A marvellous idea, Sir. Now move on. Arrivederci Signora Bawbo; and don't forget your wife.

Sari gave Lisa a sympathetic glance. She probably preferred to remain stolen, hidden, or, better still, unfinished, unknown, forever uncertain, travelling, drifting, simmering to become perfect in his mind's eye. He saw an adoring world. Ostentatious, superstitious, dumb, righteous, dangerous. He sneered. Disdainful, contemptuous, defiant. But it must

not show; he was cautious as always. He encrypted it in mirror image, hid it in sfumato. A smile – feminine, content, agreeable – pasted in the shadows, masked with paint to please his patrons. They won't see, not really see. Now, now, that's great. A few extravagant comments if it pleases you, sir.

"Oi, s'il vous plaît Madame!" Someone behind her commanded insolently in a beautiful language, threatening to push her.

"Pardon," she smiled.

Just smile. Sari needs hers to stay positive, to shield herself from a loving world which doesn't understand. Things don't change do they? Be patient. Don't lose it, for the baby's sake.

Calm... Om...

It's okay baby. I'll do whatever they ask, smiling. These idiots only want the best for us. I'll comply, be happy, positive and strong.

See you soon.

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Sari squeezes the diminishing ball of off-white yarn to size it. Enough to finish this one. Yet another toque for her girl.

"Neljä, viisi, kuusi..." She sucks in her breath quietly as she counts. This is the fifth one. The nurses, smart asses, reminded her one little hat would be one too many in Hong Kong. What do they know? All Finns enter this world with a handful of insulating headgear waiting. A baby's head must be kept toasty from day one, the first instant.

Besides, it keeps her own head occupied. She now realises how Zen Buddhism works. Scrub the latrines scrub the latrines. Year after year after year. Then – enlightenment!

"Seitsemän, kahdeksan, yhdeksän." She pauses to hold the half-finished garment up with both hands to examine, admiring again how adorably miniature it is.

Her mother Laina sits across a chunk of coffee table, the kind that can only be found in hospitals and government offices. Brown. Wooden. Substantial. Very ugly. Four square monumental legs. In case of earthquake, crawl under. How much structural strength is needed to support coffee mugs and cookies?

Laina sits straight on the sofa, hands on lap, looking at Sari, grinning with endearment. For an old lady, she has an exemplary posture. Sari finds that admirable and irritating.

She's evidently adoring the same thing Sari wishes to adore discreetly and privately. She's gratified by the opportunity to just sit there and watch her daughter count stitches. Yksi. Kaksi. Kolme. Sari knows exactly what mum's doing without looking up. She keeps her head down, pretending to have forgotten Laina's quiet, loving, and obtrusive presence.

Oh well, she only wants the best for me, just like every goddamned body else.

Nonetheless, can't you go read a book, take a nap or go for a walk? Or learn to knit? Or get diarrhoea and spend some solitary time in the toilet for crying out loud? She feels guilty for the nasty thought. *No bad wishes, not on Mum anyway.* She glances up to beam lovingly at Laina – a secret apology.

"Beautiful yarn." Mother seizes the opportunity to say something.

"They are." Sari's uninterrupted, eyes on the crocheting hook. "Bamboo yarn. Very soft and natural. Difficult to find in Finland."

"Yeah?" Laina has no idea. She doesn't knit.

BREAD DELIVERY

Laina last visited Hong Kong six years ago, shortly after Sari moved there. It was her first trip outside Europe.

Her daughter had met Song Huan in Shanghai. She was on an internship programme with a company manufacturing electronic components in China, part of her degree programme. He was an engineer from the Hong Kong office. Like most love affairs, it happened impetuously on first sight. What followed was mere formality. After Sari returned to Finland, they courted through e-mails, and he went for any training excuse the head-office had to offer in Helsinki. Two years later, in 2041, Sari moved to Hong Kong.

Her first request home was some dark rye bread. "They don't even have *ruisleipä* over there? *Voi ei!*" Laina booked her flight the next day, and stuffed a large suitcase with good old-fashioned dark rye bread. High density stuff, almost non-biodegradable. She had to sit on the lid to close it, and pay eighty euros for overweight luggage.

Before departing, she looked Hong Kong up on the map again. Of course she knew where it was – way over there; but she needed some visual reassurance. It was only a dot on the south coast of China the size of – a wee dot. Inside it lived more people than Finland. She wondered if there was still room for her.

From Helsinki to Bangkok, her stomach felt bloated with anxiety during take off and landing. Otherwise, it was smooth flying. The stewardesses were Finns, quiet and detached. The three-hour transit at Bangkok was a different matter. To get to her connecting flight, she had to cross a huge concourse. She stepped out of the plane, straight into the busiest shopping mall she had ever seen.

Wow.

Silk! Such colourful dresses in bright red orange green blue and gold. She couldn't help stroking them, smiling nervously at the salesgirl as if caught shoplifting. Perhaps a little loud but hey, what about concerts? A hint of fashion – even small doses of ostentatiousness – is okay for concerts.

Her sixty-year-old boyfriend Heikki was Music Officer Grade III (Cellist) in the city orchestra. Technically a civil servant; but deep down an artist. He loved things different, as long as not too different. He was a bit shy, perhaps fusty to some, and only truly at ease when behind his giant cello, sawing and sawing. He would be secretly proud if she showed up in one of his concerts dressed like a peacock. He would not utter a word of compliment, oh no, but she would be able to tell from the way he was quiet about it.

Electronic gadgets beeped, sang, played movies, or just made boing boing sounds. Noise, noise, noise. She was in a world-class hubbub for the first time. That's why Finland's so silent; all the noises are out here, she thought. Look at the beautiful tea sets, dishes, picture frames, leather and silk purses, elephants carved out of wood, and miniature banyan trees carved out of ivory. She could have shopped for three hours easily. But this noisy world only understood Thai, English, Chinese and Japanese. She was lost in a strange land, a stranger isolated by the language barrier; trying to overcome it was exhausting and hurtful. Laina could manage conversational Swedish and a little English when she didn't need it. Sari had taught her two identical Chinese words – "xie xie" – meaning "thank you".

Three hours were stretched into one hundred eighty minutes, many more seconds. Each phlegmatic second that wore on made her feel isolated, insecure, useless. "Why can't I remember my English?" She was disappointed in herself. "What are they announcing through the loudspeakers?" It sounded ominous and urgent. Something could be desperately wrong, and she had no idea what. She wanted to cry, her normally collected self rattled by tiredness and the onslaught of jet lag.

ISÄ'S ASHES

Alone in a frenziedly beeping airport, embroiled in foreign noises that droned on without meaning, not even a rhythm, Laina felt dizzy.

Why am I doing this? she asked herself, travelling so far away from her cosy apartment, the comfort of familiarity, from Heikki, to be stuck in the sticky time-zone of this clamorous terminal.

All for Sari, her daughter.

She was trapped by love at the end of the planet, in a dot of a place without dark rye bread. Laina had never been anywhere that didn't have some form of ruisleipä. She couldn't imagine. Her girl evidently needed help although she had no idea what. And if Sari knew of her secretly helpful intentions... Alas.

Her baby girl was turning twenty-five in a few months, stolen by time, intoxicated with love. Wasn't that what she once searched for? Why then was she so worried? And Sari was twenty-five. Already twenty-five!

Only twenty-five!

Still young, but threatened by age; still hopeful, but desperately tired. One day, it feels the exciting beginning of a new chapter. Next day, it feels the hasty ending of an unfinished book. What a critical turning point. So brutal. Better be there for her one and only daughter, her dearest person in this world, just in case.

When Laina turned twenty-five, life was yet to begin. A quarter of a century had slipped by. Not much had happened. What was that something big she had been preparing for, while the body and spirit quietly started to wilt? A young and zestful girl woke up one morning to discover the shadow of an old woman in the mirror. Hidden, but she saw it. The realisation was abrupt, nearly shocking, and cruel. At twenty-five, she was only young in the eyes of those who didn't

matter. When exactly does middle-age start? The little girl lost grip of her dream.

Dream? What dream?

She could not say. Did she have one? Most certainly, yes. It was here a moment ago, yet... With each passing day, she became less sure that she had ever had one. Her dreams had vanished like the soap bubbles her mother blew to her when she was little. So many, each with a rainbow on its skin. But she had never caught one. Blip. They never existed. She giggled.

What good is a young woman without dreams? Her surefooted steps to become somebody, achieve something or, perhaps, something else, never existed. Intoxicating love never existed. In their place loomed an uncompromising urgency, hanging empty.

It was about time. Yes. She married Sari's father the following year.

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They grew up in the same neighbourhood. He had been in love with her ever since she could walk, although he was only a few years older. Evidently an infatuation carried over from a previous life. With drained blue eyes, he watched her drift in and out of his life, like the tide, unstoppable both ways, eroding his fragile heart.

He was her storm shelter. On a nice day, she would set sail and disappear beyond the horizon, frolicking into the bright blue sky without compass or destination. When it turned dark and windy, she would rush back whimpering. He would be there – still there – staring at the horizon, waiting. It's Okay. Here, take the towel, dry yourself; have some warm coffee. She knew she could count on that much in life.

He was a book-keeper with the local supermarket. Steady, loyal and honest. Sensitive to other people and everything else, especially her. Never opinionated when he opened his mouth on rare occasions. Put all his attributes on a piece of paper, and you would have a perfect nice guy. "Too nice," she used to complain to her girlfriends.

She was a salesgirl at the music store, envisaging a career in some kind of art. "A good match," their friends said, but never elaborated why.

His reticence deepened after the marriage. A year later, just after Sari was born, he came down with postnatal depression in her stead.

His love and hurt could not escape through words. Only vodka could release them through tears. The blue in his eyes started to run, making them paler. He drank more and sobbed louder.

The first Saturday after Sari's fifth birthday was a beautiful early autumn day. For a change, the weather wasn't to blame. He spent the afternoon drinking at home, weeping on and off, condemning himself for doing so. The kitchen was saturated with sad vibes and the fume of alcohol. After putting Sari to bed, Laina leaned over his shoulder and whispered with anger and spite, "Pathetic," before going to bed and putting her head between pillows. He woke her up with a severe fit of cough early next morning, and died in the hospital fifteen hours later. The doctor said it was a particularly spontaneous and fatal strain of pneumonia.

Even back then, it was pneumonia.

Laina decided to scatter her husband's pulverised remains at the lake where his parents' cottage was. "That's what he'd have wanted. I know. I was his wife," she wrote in his Facebook memorial.

It was cold and sunny. The wind was up. She took Sari out to the middle of the lake in a paddle boat. Their faces were numbed by the slashing wind. The wooden box provided by the crematorium sat heavily on her lap, giving the feeling of stability and contentment. She emptied the ashes into the water without ceremony. A gust of cold wind immediately snatched most of the sand-like remnants of the man who had loved her under any circumstances. After a lifetime of waiting and dithering, his last days had been hasty in every respect. A few heavier particles, probably dental fillings, made silent and negligible splashes.

On the drive up, she had visualised his final ripples waning softly in his beloved lake, gently nudging up to her. It was to be her poetic farewell to his unconditional love and unmitigated melancholy. Instead, everything rushed away with the wind, denying her the posthumous opportunity to have one romantic moment in their deceased marriage.

"Say good-bye to your father," she said, turning to her daughter, almost commanding.

Sari was sitting beside her, stiffened by the lifejacket, frozen. She knew what this was all about, yet didn't quite know what this was all about.

"Moi moi isä," she complied.

Laina flung the empty box away. It spun like a rectangular frisbee, landed with a crash.

"Äiti, can we go now? I'm cold."

Laina wept for the first time in her marriage. He had monopolised crying. Now that he was gone – flung off – she could cry again herself.

The next morning, they went down to the beach before heading home. Sari spotted the box in a patch of bulrushes. It had been washed ashore last night. Laina threw it back out as hard as she could, propelled by an unreasonable annoyance with Sari for having noticed the damn thing.

The wind had died down earlier. A light mist hovered above the sleepy lake. The box made a splash, shattering the morning silence. Startled gulls appeared out of nowhere, screeching like demons rejoicing at their escape from hell, causing a rare moment of excitement in the tranquil northern air. The box, as if stunned by the violent rejection, undulated dazedly where it landed.

"Let's go!" She grabbed Sari's hand and started back towards the car. Sari, half pulled along, turned to take another look at the box. Concentric ripples, gleaming softly in the lazy autumn light, rushed belatedly towards an empty beach.

ULTRASOUND GHOSTS

"Bamboo yarn?" Laina wonders out loud, nodding thoughtfully. "Can you make yarn out of bamboo?"

"Yeah, for about fifty years," Sari replies, not sarcastic.

"Very plain though." Laina tries to keep the conversation going.

Mum, you said it was beautiful a minute ago...

"I like them neutral," Sari explains, emphatically patient. "It'll suit a boy or girl."

Sari is probably the only person who doesn't know it's a boy. Laina respects and understands her wish, and keeps quiet. Better not spoil nature's intimate surprise. But are there other surprises in stock? *Will he live?* she wonders.

Sari prohibits anyone from telling her what they've deduced from ultrasonic speculation. That scanning thing was spooky. In the only session she watched, at the beginning of her second trimester, a foetus with shadily developed hands waved to her in suspended animation. Through electronic smears, an eery image reached out. *This is ancient... Where's my baby?*

It had been a part of her. She couldn't have visualised a separate life inside if she tried. But now, she saw a ghost metamorphosing before her eyes. Something from someone's previous life had entered her body, biding time, waiting to be life again. It was shedding an unknowable past, assuming a new identity, changing face, growing new bones, right there, on TV, trapped behind a glass screen. It beckoned through the monitor as if it could see her also. Hey... Mama... It was the colour of preserved meat, vampiric meat. Dr Wong should have calibrated his monitor better.

She glanced at it for a few seconds, then stared at the ceiling, eyes reddened with disappointment. "Where's my beautiful baby?" She couldn't make anything out of the blotchy phantom, not to say its gender.

"Sari," Dr Wong said with professional certainty. "Good news. Everything looks fine. The little one's developing well." He clasped his hands, then asked coyly, as if Sari was also an infant, "Now, could you see if it's a cute little boy or girl?"

"No!"

She snapped so hard and unexpectedly the doctor took a moment to recover. He then mumbled, pride wounded, "Hmm, I just thought you might ... "

"No!" Sari cut him off, warm tears mixed with icy determination in her eyes. "And don't let anyone make smart guesses in front of me. I know how to sex humans without expert guidance; when it's a human."

Dr Wong looked at Huan and shrugged. *Your wife. You deal with her*, his eyes pleaded through turtleshell rimmed glasses.

"Don't worry Kulta. I'll make sure of that," Huan promised, momentarily putting aside his fascination with the latest generation of 3-D supersonic scanners. He would have loved to spend a few minutes with the doctor on that but – some other time.

She closed her eyes, and saw it filling up her mental vision.

A spirit is being recycled... stripped down, reassembled, right inside.

* * *

Sari abhors predictions. Horoscopes, tarot cards, projections, prophecies, scans, extrapolations, wild guesses. Why not know in due course? Advance information rarely changes the course of eventuality anyway. In the end, predictions only serve to generate anxieties while things happen the way they're meant to. Didn't they have a million tonnes of data on climate change? In the end, nothing except the climate changed.

She hopes the scanning had not disturbed her baby. It's not the recycled ghost Doctor Andy Wong proudly captured with a bunch of wavelengths. Pixels. Resolution. Wavelength. Background noises. What vocabulary for the most beautiful and magical process in life. "I'll name her Sonja. Sonja Song. Beautiful like a song."

It's a girl; mother's instinct knows best. Save your gadgets. Inside, she feels calm and secure, trusting her mother, her Äiti, completely. Nothing truer than instinctual trust; that's love uncontaminated. She's kicking, turning, stretching, hiccupping, sucking her thumbs and playing with toes, killing time – no, no killing, not even metaphorically – just waiting, making time. Awaiting the magic moment, patiently. We'll see each other in due course. All in due course, when we're meant to. Not before. Soon, now.

She'll teach her Finnish. Some Finnish anyway. She cannot imagine baby talking in a foreign language. It just wouldn't sound right. Must be in mother tongue, her mother's tongue, my mother's tongue.

Right now, they are one with each other. They say this about many things. One with nature. One with the gods. One with oneself. One with this and that. Do they know what it means, how it feels, to be one with someone in body and soul?

It feels heavy.

Well, maybe it's a boy. It won't matter. Unlikely though. In her mind, she can see only a cute little girl. Her princess will have traces of her, carrying her to the future.

Lately, she's experienced a quantum leap in empathy for Laina. More than ever, she feels Mum's aspirations and anxieties, happiness and sadness. Sari has always loved Laina dearly, but also wished Mum to be... well, different. She can't say how her mother could change for the better but... Oh never mind.

Sari wants to go around the huge coffee table with her big belly to give Mum a hug. She looks up from her crochet just as Laina is getting up to go to the washroom. "My guts feel funny," she says, massaging her abdomen. "I wonder if it's something I ate."

Oh no. I didn't mean it when I wished you diarrhoea. Sorry Äiti.

BABY TOM

Officially, Sari is being cared for by twelve doctors of eight nationalities. All world-renowned, under-worked.

The Medical Authority has prepared a website and twelve-page pamphlet. In the introduction, the Chief Executive and Consul General of Finland both say the Song Baby represents hope for humanity and universal love. Click "We Are Ready" to see a comprehensive checklist. The Government has done everything possible to ensure an impeccable operation. Inside "The Experts Behind" tab are virtually identical resumes and passport-size photos of the doctors in lab coats. All but two have a stethoscope clipped around the neck. All wear a confident and clinical smile.

Dr Andy T L Wong is Team Head and Obstetrician-in-Charge because he's local. Dr Nelimarkka, the Chief Anaesthetist, appointed by Finland, is supported by four specialists. There's a sub-team of paediatricians. A local professor and three international figures from Beijing, Finland, and the United States, all super bright and inexperienced. The USA sends someone to attend every birth on the planet if allowed. Then there are clinical psychologists standing by for the mother and the newborn. "How do you head-shrink a newborn?" she had asked Dr Wong. "Just in case, Sari; just in case," was the answer. The doctors are backed up by a contingent of nurses and midwives to monitor Sari round-the-clock, using up oxygen around her. The hospital is ringed in by cops and besieged by journalists. Sari is a captured alien from outer space.

The government has chartered the Maternity Ward of Queen Mary Hospital. It would have been deserted otherwise; there isn't another expecting woman within a thousand kilometres. Many people had started to question the purpose of maintaining a maternity ward, and suggested merging it with the busy department of Gynaecology, giving

fertility treatment to women. Maintaining the unused maternity ward is a waste of money, they had said. The government defended it as a matter of principle, a symbol of hope. Just in case, you know, just in case. Then came Sari to save the situation.

But the underused Maternity Ward was not quite ready. Its ventilation system had to be separated from the rest of the hospital.

The government had learned its lesson from the last birth – Baby Tom's nearly three years ago. Although most babies anywhere in the world die within the first twelve months, Baby Tom's death sparked an emotional outrage, nonetheless. People bandied about the reasons as usual. Finally, the theory of cross-contamination through the ventilation system proved the most popular. The Chief of the Medical Authority would have lost his job had he not promptly bowed on TV with tearful eyes. The government is determined this time. Baby Song must not die under official care.

After that? Well, the statistics are foreboding. Worldwide infant mortality in the past three years is eighty-two percent, so far. Out of 844 births, 147 babies have lived past their first birthday. Five are yet to celebrate this perplexing milestone. If the records are extended to cover the previous decade, the deadly ratio would drop to thirty-seven percent. Better, but still astounding by historical standards.

Hong Kong had had low infant mortality for many decades. Fewer than three deaths per thousand births. But both babies born in the past five years had died within their first year. Two out of two. One thousand per one thousand by the reporting unit of the United Nation. One hundred percent.

Baby Tom slept through his life. He did not once open his eyes. He never cried or coughed, but died of pneumonia, right here in this extremely well equipped hospital, surrounded by doctors and their professors.

It was some form of pneumonia.

LIFE AND DEATH

Philosophy is mental masturbation. Sari jumped to that conclusion after a first year university course.

The professor – a Dr Pinto who lectured with a voluntary stutter and theatrical accent – was a diminutive intellectual. He spent half the course re-ruminating on a pamphlet he had written, "Existentialism and Ethics". What have they got to do with each other? Sari never managed to finish reading all twenty-eight pages. She said she had read more stimulating tenancy agreements prepared by a lawyer on time charge. Pinto wasn't to blame though. Look. Kant said this... Aquinas said that... Spinoza summed it up thus... Sartre pointed out... Wittgenstein argued... Pinto himself was only responsible for the prepositions and conjunctions linking the convoluted wisdom of a bunch of dead men.

Philosophising is a waste of time, she decided. Low level vanity. Inevitable issues are best dealt with by instincts, not obtuse circumlocution. What about acceptance? This most powerful wisdom has been lost to blindness and arrogance. To realise limitations requires clarity and humility, qualities most men lack. Huan's an exception. He likes to challenge feasibility, but accepts the inevitable the way women do. He knows helplessness when he sees it. She has never told him this makes him a good partner; men's good qualities are easily ruined by self-consciousness.

Pregnancy has changed something in her.

Her research on Baby Tom and the Infertility Crisis has planted questions in her head like multiplying viruses. What's life? What happens when it ends? She can't help wondering.

Perhaps it's the recurrent nightmares. They started the night after the ultrasonic viewing.

A baby emerges from a vast field rimmed in darkness. He turns his head frantically from side to side as if trying to fling it off, while ballooning into a giant. She screams at the rapidly inflating infant, "Look this way, Mum's here!" But no sound ever came. She's watching a silent horror movie, black and white, in an empty cinema.

In another nightmare, a ghoul seeks shelter like a vampire fleeing the rising sun. It transmutes into a cyclone, twisting into her, entering between her legs. It feels cold but mortifyingly seductive; it once made her wet the bed. Similarly, she would be helplessly muffled in dumb horror.

In the most disturbing and frequent nightmare, she gives birth to a naked mummy. Tiny, dark, desiccated. She pushes it out in a puff of light dust, with unnerving ease. It lies still between her legs, immobile like herself. She can't feel her body. Doctors and nurses, Huan, her mother stand watching by, totally ignoring her and the baby. None of them seems surprised. They watch and nod, exchanging tut-tuts and muted comments. "Get the baby!" She would scream until she wakes, drenched in cold sweat and uncontrollable tears.

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Song Huan is puzzled by her uncanny existential interests, but he's willing company as long as it makes her happy. She doesn't find his indifference to metaphysics very stimulating, but his pragmatism is sobering.

Humans know next to nothing about the mysteries of life and death after working on it for a long time. Why do we exist? What's life? How is it acquired? What went before and comes after? What drives our body of electromagnetic forces and chemical bonds? So many fundamental questions... none satisfactorily answered. Not one. Not to Sari anyway.

"Why do we need an answer?" Huan asks. "What difference would it make? Would an answer make us different? Happier? Wiser? More sensible to ourselves and others?"

Most likely not, she concedes. From experience, the more we think we know, the more confused and dreadful we become.

"Can't agree with you more. So why waste time?" he concludes, hoping to end the discussion.

She agrees, but still... She tries to put things into perspective. Since our simian ancestors ventured outside mountain grottoes with stone axes and pilot fire, we've been trying to understand the origin of life. Millennia later, many are still stuck with Let there be light! Isn't that pathetic?

"It just shows that God used voice-activated switches long before us, and didn't like working in the dark even when there was nothing yet to illuminate, that's all."

She does not find it amusing, and continues her train of thought. In comparison with the meagre but measurable progress in science, we haven't scratched the surface of life's deep secrets. Let there be light would have made sense to Grandpa Caveman; but he would never have understood how digital cameras work.

"So there you go!" Huan clasps his fingers together as if praying, attempting again to conclude the discussion. "A few thousand years of no progress. So why now? Waste of time. Want some ice-cream Kultra?"

"Yes or no," Sari gives her favourite answer, ignoring the temptation of ice-cream. It was a waste of time, but not anymore. Not since she became pregnant. Not since the dreams. She doesn't want to think why. She doesn't want to admit that childbirth is again a matter of life and death, especially for the baby. We may not know what life is, but existence feels undeniable. Life can be seen and felt.

She gently cradles her tummy with both hands.

There's a carnal side with muscles and bones, and a pattern we can take for granted. Death's another story. It can't be felt. It takes over when life ends, slipping things into the unknown. If life is intrigue unresolved, death is fear unmitigated. Dark and unwelcome, philosophers can't find enough words to bring it to life, poets find it depressing, scientists can't find the funding to penetrate it. So it was left to the priests. Overcome ignorance with organised ignorance; conquer fear by concentrating it in the hands of one frightening God. Dear Lord, give us strength to spill the blood of those who don't believe in what we don't know. Amen. Something's wrong there.

"Perhaps death isn't the end of everything?" He interrupts with a suggestion, while checking the freezer. "Then it won't be so scary. Ah, here it is. How come you're the one who's pregnant, and I've got the cravings?"

"Hell, it's worse!" she says.

"What's worse?"

"Life after death. I've given some thought to that too. Eternal life is petrifying. Imagine: Hell fire for a trillion years just to warm up... or, sitting at the right hand side of God for eight million billion trillion years, then sit some more. What do you think?"

"Ooooh.... Shit."

"Exactly. Trying to choose between heaven and hell isn't as simple as it seems is it?"

"Then don't choose! It's not up to us anyway. Do you want chocolate or strawberry?" He offers her chocolate. She shakes her head. "No thank you. You're the one with the cravings."

"You guys seem to have a better sense of proportion. Someone must have noticed that eternity lasts forever, and suggested reincarnation instead: Chickens. Pigs. Dogs. Tape-worms. Horse flies. Politicians. Philosophers. Maggots. Is that what makes biodiversity?"

"Probably, from the point of mass balance." He missed her joke. "In that sense, left to the mechanics of nature, we're all unripe maggots."

"Yuk!"

"Literal truth though." He digs into the carton with a spoon. "Furthermore, scientifically speaking, every bit of our body is reincarnated. If we had a soul, a detachable consciousness, it'd get recycled in the same way, like everything else in the universe. No reason to assume we're exceptional, right?"

"No. None at all," she agrees, and imagines the chain of biological events. People – maggots – flies – frogs with meaty legs – back to people, most likely Chinese. Not Finns anyway, ha ha, we don't eat frogs. "Hey, can you quit eating straight out of the box? Take what you want into a bowl."

"Sorry," he says, and continues the same.

She thinks out loud. "Perhaps that's why we act like maggots on the planet? Nibble up everything organic, every drop of oil. Burn them off. Let it cool down, reduced. Dead. In the end, just bones and rocks."

"Frightening isn't it?" He doesn't seem frightened at all.

"Yes it is. That's why we're scared. But then we hand fear over to ignorance, which makes it more fearful; a self-feeding stupid cycle."

"You're absolutely right." He returns the ice-cream to the freezer and keeps quiet, hoping that was the end of this session. But she continues. "That's why most people don't even like to mention it. Many intelligent people plan their lives as if they'd never die. When someone passes on, kicks the bucket, bites the dust (there's a wealth of euphemism when it comes to death; anything to avoid the D-word), something must take responsibility. One needs an official reason to die even at a hundred and thirty. A Cause of Death is required by law, certified, dated, signed, chopped, then filed. Otherwise, a coroner would carve up the corpse to look for a scientific cause. *Aha, see that? Right there, in the liver.* A Death Certificate can now be issued. Everything's in order."

"Yup, that's how it works."

"I've looked up the World Health Organisation website you know."

Yes I know, he thinks. I saw you absorbed in it. "Really?" he says instead.

"They've published a list of Official Causes of Death. It includes nearly a hundred reasons including the unpronounceable musculoskeletal diseases, tetanus, falls from excessive height, war, fire, and congenital abnormalities."

"What about old age and bad luck?"

"No they're not listed. According to the World Health Organisation, no one ever dies of plain old age."

* * *

Baby Tom didn't die of old age.

He died of pneumonia although he never coughed. Perhaps his lungs were too weak to convulse. A beautiful baby with a sweet calm face; eyes resignedly closed. Such heart-breaking peace.

Shhhhh – let him sleep. Do not disturb him. He will wake soon.

But he never did. He slept his whole life, all eighty-three hours of it. The suspected cause was idiopathic. The doctors' way of saying "Uh, no idea. Sorry," in Greek. People were left to speculate. Eventually, cross-contamination became the cause of death. That must not happen again.

Sari hardly paid any attention to the news of Baby Tom when he made his brief appearance, but she had since dug him up from the internet. She studied all the public enquiry reports and testimonies.

She read about the Fertility Crisis. "It's much more severe than I thought!" She studied the global infant mortality figures. The more she read, the more it seemed hopeless.

Back to Hong Kong. Two out of two in five years.

So depressing. She nearly miscarried.

There must be a reason. But nobody knows. Idiopathic. Bullshit.

Stop thinking. Stop finding out more. Quit.

She started her clinical focus on positive thoughts only. She started to knit. Keep counting stitches. Smile. If I can't resolve the puzzle through reasoning, she thought, I'll overcome it by will. For my baby.

FERTILITY CRISIS

Women often experience changes during pregnancy.

In Sari's case, it was more than an insatiable appetite for the pickled herrings that she normally detested, or a nauseous reaction to the smell of her favourite liquorice candies. She also became uncharacteristically, edgily, inquisitive. Besides musing on life and death, she also became obsessed with the fertility crisis, an issue she had had little interest in before.

Like Huan, she grew up in the Age of Terrible Calamities, and had long become inured to looming threats of apocalyptic proportion. Ever since she could read, there had been a new headline catastrophe every few months. Some were fascinating; reading like thrillers. Some were so complex they seemed unbelievable even as they ravaged the neighbourhood. Infertility leaned towards the latter. Plus, low birth-rate wasn't a big deal to a generation apathetic about parenting to start with.

Now that she was unexpectedly expecting a baby, the Fertility Crisis had become critically relevant. What exactly was it? How did it start? When did it become an issue? What was its current status? Was it worse than global warming? More threatening than the recurrent bird flu? AIDS? Was it more crippling than the last surge in the never-ending energy crisis?

She googled it.

There were thousands of lively forums, overflowing with earnest explanations, learned articles, confident conjectures, zestful propositions, all seemingly derived from a different reality. She kept scrolling, and came to the conclusion that two decades of hindsight had not helped to illuminate.

Nonetheless, there was ambiguous consensus about a few things. Most people assumed infertility would continue to worsen, until the

end. Sari was surprised and distressed by the widespread pessimism. The scientific community also concurred that the unknown agent of mankind's childless plight must have been lurking in the atmosphere – the only thing universally shared by every living human, north and south, rich and poor. A form of radiation? Trace chemicals? Nasty radicals? Everyone rushed to discover the answer. Many suspects were found, far too many. The search became impossibly confusing, resoundingly inconclusive. Meanwhile, a Hollywood celebrity put on a full space suit for photographers. Others attempted to isolate themselves from the rest of the planet with full face masks.

It was also commonly believed that the way humans had been living and reproducing was somehow responsible, although for very different reasons.

The religious produced a long list of popular sins. Abortion, contraceptives, homosexuality, promiscuity. Even masturbation made a comeback as being quaintly sacrilegious. Most culpable sins had something to do with sex. God had lost patience – *just how many times have I told you...* and decided to punish His depraved creatures with a brutal touch of irony. Let those who kill foetuses and flush sperms down the toilet have no more. Isn't that obvious enough?

Claims of divine punishment were often delivered with triumphant smugness, making it hard to tell whether they were meant to be taken as good or bad news. Regardless, Sari thought the whole thing did bear a resemblance to classical God wrath.

"Look at the way we live," an environmentalist pointed out. "We're planetary pests. The Earth's been infested with *Homo consumers*, multiplying and consuming mindlessly. We dig and pump stuff out of the ground, turning it into disposable items. We've always known that material balance will get us, and our numbers will destroy us one day, but have done nothing about it."

"Calling ourselves pests is to insult the human spirit," someone responded, indignant. "Every human life is sacred, unique in the universe. The human spirit marks us from other animals, and gives us the privilege to multiply and exploit the earth for a better tomorrow. Low birth-rate is a temporary issue that will be resolved with human ingenuity, just like numerous challenges before, if we'd stop trashing ourselves."

Sari didn't like to think of people as pests, now that she was incubating one herself. But she also wondered if every human life was indeed sacred and unique. No one elaborated on the relationship

between over-population, an unsustainable lifestyle, and universal sterility. Regardless, overpopulation did seem to her to have been a practical concern for a long time. How come nothing had been done about it?

She searched, kept scrolling. Ah, here's one.

The economy. *What?* Yes, nobody did anything about population because of the economy. The economy dictated politics; a growing populace was good for economic expansion, and vice versa.

The global community had become hooked on economic stimulants to feel alive. But the economy itself was chronically ill, rebounding erratically only when zapped with lots of money. *Print the money! Promote consumption. Buy, chuck away. Borrow more to buy more, chuck away more.* The remedy seemed incredibly simple for such a complex malady, but it often worked, at least for a while. Voila! The financial engine would again wheeze vibrantly. Consumption would start to creep up, dragging the indices along. Digging and chucking would resume. *Well done! Call an election!* Would any politician in his right mind dare to tackle the issue of population at such a delicate moment?

Besides the economy, governments were bogged down by all sorts of exigencies: epidemics, natural disasters, all the usual culprits.

"Hmm. Just like now," Sari thought. "The world hasn't changed much." But back then, people were less used to them, so made a big deal out of everything. Even the weather, newly capricious, stirred numerous debates. Some experts said the weather was *as it always had been*; other experts said it was *as never before*. Looking through archived news, it seemed there had always been a drought not far from a flood. When the flood had receded, an epidemic might hit, sometimes followed by a famine, all of biblical proportions, according to the press. When things finally quieted down for a while, everyone would rush to the stock market to speculate on which companies might benefit most from the next round of disasters... until the market crashed again.

Under such hectic circumstances, population control never had a chance to make it to the global political agenda.

* * *

The UN was a bottomless mine of idle, useless data for Sari.

According to records, the world population peaked at eight-and-a-half billion around 2020. She was yet to start kindergarten. But this figure, official though it was, was widely disputed. Some believed it was at least a billion short, even two, depending on how data had been collated and adjusted to reflect the millions who followed a long tradition of cheating the censuses.

Eight or ten billion made little difference to the big picture anyway. Whatever the number, the world was overcrowded. Oh really? Many begged to differ. Even ten billion would have been nothing compared with numerous earlier projections. For years, after generations of demographers and futurists had competed for media attention with increasingly alarming estimates, everyone had been expecting the world population to peak at twenty-five.

But...

What?

More debates between a few involved professionals as usual, just something to do.

Then came 2024.

That year, the unruly rising trend eased so abruptly it skidded. When Sari showed Huan the historic graph, he gaped. "Wow! Must have caused a panic." From almost two hundred million births the year before, the number of newborns dropped to just one hundred million.

"Just?" Huan did a quick calculation on a candy wrapper. "Line them up head to toe, and you'll get a line of babies all the way round the equator, with sixteen million left over."

* * *

There were passionate debates among and between biologists, doctors, family planning experts, economists, sociologists, politicians, journalists, religionists, bankers, socialists, insurers, environmentalists, and everyone else, for a while. Sari got lost in browsing through the prodigious amount of discussions. They all seemed insightful and authoritative, covering even the most staggering and remote possibilities. Experts continued to disagree over the cause, extent, significance, and implications of the birth plunge.

Meanwhile, the number halved again the following year to fifty million. For the first time in more than a century, zero population growth was achieved.

It continued relentlessly at this rate.

The birth-rate chart looked ominous two decades on; no wonder Huan expected panic. But archived information showed an indifferent world. A hundred million neonates were still a huge burden to an overextended planet. At the end of that year, after fifty million had died in accordance with the tyranny of statistics, the population expanded by fifty million, net. Sure, something weird must have had happened; nobody knew what, didn't care, either. Only God and a few politicians claimed credit. One for Divine penalty; the other for prudent policy.

Besides a murmur of unease about these freakish phenomena, few were truly distressed. No-one would say this, but it was alleviating news for a world deeply threatened by itself. One hundred million babies fewer than the previous year was spooky. But one hundred million new babies were still too many, far too many.

There were sporadic pockets of violence and hysterical petitioning the Heavenly Fathers over the next few years, mostly in America. After the riots were quelled and wailing at God had calmed, it was business as usual. Hardly anyone took the posterity of humanity to heart. Kind of understandable perhaps. People in the middle of a flood, with water up to their waists, furniture afloat and banging against walls, were not going to lose sleep over the prediction of a drought ten years down.

After some hoo-has, the average person returned to more pragmatic concerns. "There'll be significantly fewer workers contributing to the Provident Fund," commented an editorial in the *Morning Post*. "It may not be sustainable in the long run."

It caused an outcry.

Government was under pressure to do whatever it might take to defend the integrity of the pension system. Fund managers took the opportunity to point out that once the system had lost equilibrium, it would take considerably more effort to manage. They foresaw substantial increases in management fees. In the following year, the industry raised their fees by half a percent. Immediate concerns were dispelled.

The long-term prospect of the human race loitered around editorials and opinion columns for a while, making occasional

appearances between election frauds and natural calamities. From digging into the archives, Sari could feel the subject losing newsworthiness.

Reports on the "Fertility Crisis", as it was now called, soon gave way to ads for fertility drugs. Pregnancy became prestigious and lucrative. Maternity wear was the fashion of the day. Women – some men too – wore rubber tummies that doubled as carrying pouches with a flipped bellybutton for headphone wire to pass through. "Yes! I remember that," Huan said, kind of nostalgic, when Sari showed him an old poster of a couple, each wearing a colourful Rubbertum® , holding hands, smiling very happily. "Don't look at me like that, I never wore one. They were banned in my school." Sari couldn't remember having seen one herself; probably not the kind of thing that would catch on among Finns.

Governments competed to do something about it. Tax breaks for babies and children, and benefits for expecting mothers became more emphatic with each election. According to market oriented wisdom, the problem would eventually go away if adequate financial incentives were provided.

Upon confirmation of her pregnancy, Sari became entitled to perpetual maternity leave with an inflation-adjustable allowance equal to her present salary, or HK\$82,347 per month, whichever was higher. Airlines sponsored free tickets for the whole family. Buses and trains offered free rides for life. The list went on.

For as long as the baby lived, practically everything would be free, for as long as these things continued. But what if the baby died as expected?

Well, it said right there in the officiously exuberant letter from the Chief Executive, after long paragraphs of heartfelt congratulations: "For the sake of clarity, and to obviate misunderstanding, the allowance shall cease within twenty-five calendar days of the child's death." (*Why twenty-five*, she wondered.) The Government would, under that unthinkable and tragic circumstance, take care of the funeral which might attract tens, even hundreds, of thousands of mourners and spectators. Sari and Huan were not expected to object. "Please sign here then, Mr and Mrs Song."

* * *

This is 2048.

Twenty-four years after the Fertility Crisis started, world population still stands at 6.8 billion – give or take a few hundred million – but overpopulation is no longer a concern. The problem, like people, is working itself out. Median age is 63.2. People are still *Homo consumers*, enjoying their shopping. If anything, consumption has intensified, working up to a grand finale. The medical industry is booming. Brewery stocks have gone up tenfold in the past ten years; only three in every ten thousand are below drinking age. Middle-aged and childless, professionals with an interminable career ahead tend to drink indulgently. Retirement age is around eighty in most countries, so as to diffuse the pension crisis. With life expectancy at ninety for men and ninety-four for women, deferring retirement seems reasonable – inevitable in any event.

Six-billion-eight-hundred-million people, with hardly any youngsters, is the general demographic picture.

Worldwide, there have been 184,271 births since 1 January 2038 – fewer than two hundred thousand in a whole decade. At the beginning of the century, the prolific human race produced this many babies in less than twelve hours. That's not all. Out of the tiny new stock, thirty-seven percent die before they can walk.

Pneumonia, of course.

Meanwhile, the congested and sterile world continues to struggle with increasingly ferocious weather and epidemics. Mega-typhoons and earthquakes strike frequently. Magnificent human monuments and infrastructures crumble humiliatingly. Famines recur at breathless rates in Africa and Asia. Even agriculturally bountiful North America suffers periodic food shortages. Australia is a rapidly growing desert. Global warming again? Perhaps. The temperamental cycles of nature? Perhaps too. God knows.

Like super typhoons, epidemics are common. Unlike typhoons, they strike without warning. They also hang around longer, though never long enough for humans to develop inoculants.

At the same time, *Homo sapiens*, still in the billions, ageing, working harder than ever to stay advanced, productive and competitive, battling the consequences of overpopulation, worrying

about not having enough babies at the same time. They plod along, numbly aware that mankind is an endangered species, most likely a self-endangered species without a saviour from the outside. They hold on to their way of life, the only way they know, to feel safe together, while dying out slowly, very slowly.

BIRTH

Dr Wong and two midwives are guiding Sari through a contraction when Laina returns from the washroom. Huan has been woken up from his nap next door by an overly excited nurse. He's presently barefooted, uncertain about his role in Sari's contraction. The obstetrician is nervous; Laina wonders if he has ever seen a woman in labour before.

Twelve hours later, in a boisterous delivery room, Song Huan, overwhelmed, assisted by soft and dextrous medical hands, places baby Song Sung – a clamp on freshly cut umbilical cord – on Sari's chest.

"What a beautiful baby.... What a beautiful baby..." she mutters, sobbing from a mixture of feelings. Joy, joy, and many others she can't name. Through the optical distortion of teardrops, she sees Laina chatting with Dr Nelimarkka at the end of the bed, drinking warm champagne which the anaesthetist had hidden in the delivery room, against hospital rules. Mum smiles proudly at her (Sari's also a mum now!) waving discretely.

Huan sits next to her, nose all red, squeezing her shoulder. "You're so brave, Kulta. You're so brave, Kulta." They both have acquired an emotionally induced stutter.

Everyone in the cramped room is rapturous, hugging and kissing. Half have tears in the eyes, a few nurses sob. These annoying characters have changed in Sari's eye. They now seem close friends, family, utterly loveable. She has not slept for a very long time, but she's not tired.

Little Song Sung cries forcefully. He's hungry, impatient to get on with life.

He'll live.

Yes, he'll live. Everyone can sense that. No doubt about it.

Sari has completely forgotten about the little girl she has been expecting for nine months and fifteen days.

LULLABY

"Mama I can't sleep. I'm scared."

"What are you scared of, Sweetie? Tommy's fast asleep."

"This house makes a strange noise."

"Just the wind, Sweetie. Same as in the old house."

"No Mama, this is different. The wind here scares me. It's bad."

"The wind's never bad, silly. Only people are."

"Listen Mama! The music stopped! How come?"

"Don't know. Maestros take breaks."

"To do what?"

"Whatever. Don't know. Don't talk about them Sweetie."

"Can you sing me a song now?"

"Mmm... OK. Just one?"

"OK. That one?"

*From the far side of the ravine
blows a gentle wind.
Sweeping over the silver moon
Sailing across the purple sea
It's come a long, long way
to be in your dream.*

*Sleep, O baby, sleep
Only when you dream, I can come in
Only when you dream, everything's real
When the sun comes up
We'll disappear
Like the wind, gone, gone
Blowing beyond
Never to be seen.*

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