

Man's Last Song

FOUR

TEARS IN SHEK O

Rhea dries her hair vigorously with a towel, standing back from the window just enough to be in the shadow, while watching him collecting firewood on the beach. She's been watching him for days, a little more than fifty hours to be exact.

She hasn't learnt anything from this stealthy observance, except that now she's hooked. What would happen when he leaves? She can't bear the thought. The last three days has been a whole mini-lifetime, a new one. He can't just go now, she thinks, right away embarrassed by the possessive tone in her head, which she suspects isn't quite together this very moment.

He seems much better today, but still sad.

Sad people are harmless anyway, right?

Yes they are. Yes they are...

No other possibilities could be entertained right now.

Since his arrival, she has been spending her days watching him, and her nights crying for him, or because of him, she doesn't know which, or why. She only knows the maddening dullness of life – one that had been reduced to mere living – had suddenly been lifted. He has saved her from the death grip of desolation. There are more than just salty waves and wandering ghosts out there. There's him – a living person, a young man who has filled her indistinguishable days with suspense and surprises, even emotions – intense emotions. Imagine!

She is confused and scared. An indulgent kind of confusion that one snuggles up to; a titillating kind of fear that tickles. Yes, she still exists. She's alive, not just living. Everything seems real again; it feels so unreal.

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After this morning, she no longer worries about him killing himself in front of her eyes, framed between two wooden slats of the louvred shutter. He may be a little schizophrenic (who isn't?) but no, he won't hurt himself. In fact, even from her distance (probably because of that?), his presence conveys hope and security. He does not seem the kind that would hurt anything.

The sight of him strolling along the beach at sunset resurrects the butterflies in her stomach, butterflies she thought were long dead, digested and flushed down the toilet with a bunch of cellulose.

"This is ridiculous!"

She reprimands herself again for this ludicrous state of mind, for smiling coquettishly at the mirror like an adolescent. "Loneliness has driven me insane!" she mumbles out loud, pacing the spacious sitting room. "Rhea, you're crazy. Nuts. Mad. Pathetic! Get a hold of yourself. Calm down!"

But she knows that, if she does not act now, she might wake to find him gone in the morning. In his place would be an empty spot, just sand and the waves, again.

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He appeared in the late afternoon two days ago. There had not been anyone on the beach for many months. He looked young. How's that possible? She wondered.

He started a fire before dark, and grilled something for dinner. After eating, he sat by the fire, seemingly enjoying his solitude. Rhea was about to go down, or light some candles to make her presence known.

All of a sudden, he started to cry.

Oh no, not just crying. She shuddered; goose-bumps rose on her neck. He wailed for half an hour, then stopped abruptly as if his vocal cords had snapped. The waves continued with their swishing, insensitive. He threw some sand over the fire, and lay down next to its cindery remains.

Everything turned black in a few minutes, collapsed.

Rhea realised she had a candle turning soft and slippery in her hand. She did not light it. She locked the doors – something she hadn't bothered to do for some time – before going to bed. She could hear his crying in her head.

Is that real? Has he stopped? Is he asleep?

Is it possible to sleep after crying like that?

So many tears...

She put her head between two pillows, and cried herself to sleep.

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She woke up with a headache. The pillows were damp, like the air. She rushed to the window. The sun had started to glow below the horizon. He was not there; only his lone backpack on the towel, next to the ashes of last night's fire. Was it really last night? Did I sleep? Everything seemed to have lost orientation and continuity.

Twenty minutes later, he came in from the choppy sea, long wavy black hair straightened by the water, exposing a pair of big ears. Rhea noticed the proportion of his muscular body. He must indeed be a young man, she thought, and blushed.

How she wished she had a pair of binoculars.

This must be the only sea-side villa in the world without one. Her maternal grandparents – Gong Gong and Po Po – perched above the promontory in their majestic villa, hated looking out of the windows. The sight of breathtaking Shek O Beach vexed them. They never swam, or took walks along the shore. The feel of tacky sea breeze and wet sand in his shoes drove Gong Gong berserk; strolling barefooted was disgusting, a disgrace, out of the question. That stretch of sand also attracted noisy tourists like flypaper to bugs: barbecuing families, running children, and teenagers with ghetto blasters. *These people* – their collective pronoun for the rest of the human race – were loathsome even from their protective distance. Zooming them up optically would have been unthinkable.

This was their seaside villa. Their main house, similar in size and layout, was in Repulse Bay, another beach town barely fifteen minutes away. It also looked straight out to sea, with an awesome view which Gong Gong bitterly called *million-dollar pitch-darkness*, which was what greeted him by the time he came home from a full day of work he didn't need to do, and social intercourse with people he despised, seven days a week.

He was rich, ranked twelve worldwide by magazines, therefore generally regarded as successful. People lined up to suck up to him. They invited him to chair this and that committee or charity or advisory board. He once enjoyed his prominence; but found it increasingly detestable as he aged. But he did everything he could to defend it. He even filled his final years with more of it, perhaps to show he still could, and was not about to fade away to die. Never.

The main house was also without binoculars.

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He prepared breakfast out of cans and jars.

After breakfast, he wandered to the far end of the beach and disappeared. He returned two hours later, and approached the scarp underneath Rhea. To her relief, he did not climb the steps to explore. He was about fifty metres away. She tried to hold her breath, her pulse, her thoughts, lest they blurt out loud.

He's Eurasian... like me.

More surprisingly, he looked in his late twenties, at most early thirties. She had not met someone younger than herself for a very long time. She had not met anyone for a very long time.

He was restless in the afternoon, trying tai-chi, yoga, meditation, reading, swimming, walking, reading, napping, then back to meditation, each lasting about fifteen minutes.

Such a short attention span for a man like him... Like him? What do I know what he's like?

The tide was rushing out when the sun set gorgeously behind the hills in the opposite direction. Rhea seldom took notice. She had lived all her life in houses with beautiful sunsets, nearly every day. Before she was even old enough to admire their beauty, it had become tedious. This evening was somehow different. Golden reflections shimmered on the receding tide, giving off sparkles she had not seen before.

The young man finally settled down. He sat cross-legged at the edge of the water, a towel over slouching shoulders. The last trace of daylight had vanished. Gong Gong's million-dollar pitch-darkness had returned.

The waves lapped lazily against the rocks, making soothing swishes. Rhea once loved that sound. At Repulse Bay, the waves were far away and mostly silent. In Shek O, they linger on after the day is done. That was one of the reasons she moved here. But she had since found it exasperating; that swishing sound day after day. What incessant futility!

Should I go say hi?

Should I ...

A startling howl.

He started to cry again.

Oh no...

The air was instantly filled with the same heartbreaking wail. Rhea pictured his mouth wide open, epiglottis trembling at the centre. A wounded lone wolf. The sound of a heart being ripped out, and crushed.

If I ever had to cry like this, I wouldn't go to the sea.

The sea makes a mockery of human tragedies. The indifferent waves never take note of our sadness. Tears run into the sand and leave no trace. I'll go cry in the mountains, find a cave that echoes. Rhea was frozen by an eerie moment of poetry.

She turned away from the window and stumbled to bed as if intoxicated; trembling. She buried her face in the damp pillow, and started to cry. She did not want it to stop. She wanted to stay up all night to cry and cry and cry. But she finally fell asleep.

Tears continued to flow in her dream, into the pillow.

* * *

*Che bella cosa e' na jurnata 'e sole,
n'aria serena doppo na tempesta!
Pe' ll'aria fresca pare già na festa
Che bella cosa e' na jurnata 'e sole! ...*

What a beautiful thing this sunny day,
The air serene after the storm!

Rhea woke to O Sole Mio with its original Neapolitan lyrics. She sat up with a start, shook her head, rubbed her eyes, and tiptoed to the window as if she might otherwise be heard.

"You must be joking!"

A translucent glimmer in the morning sky foretold another hot and sunny day ahead. He was standing on the edge of the water, naked, facing the emerging sun. His legs were wide apart, like the Vitruvian Man with a slight backbend. His arms were stretched out high, fingers extended, in a grand embrace of his audience – the sun itself.

* * *

He's a different person today – lively and positive-spirited.

He spent the day swimming, resting, reading and writing. He napped for more than two hours after lunch, then cartwheeled across the beach. Either he's discharged the sorrow that choked him, or has broken at last. Whatever the reason, there is something new in him that makes Rhea want to sing, scream, or hop.

All afternoon, she debated with herself about going down.

Just go. You have no choice now anyway.

What nonsense. Go down those steps, and you'll be asking for humiliation, or something much worse... You'd have only your stupidity to blame.

What humiliation? What worse? He's harmless, a fellow human for Christ's sake. Trust your intuition, if not judgement.

Well, go then. You've been fantasising for two days. About time you meet him face to face, and find out what it's like for a woman in your situation to deal with a mentally unstable man on a deserted beach. By the way, he's naked.

Rhea! It's now, or never.

Okay. Okay. Now then.

She checks her closet, and frets. She did not move anything from Repulse Bay. The wardrobe here is a lavish collection of brand-name fashion. Shockingly, nothing suits the occasion. In fact, nothing seems to fit any conceivable occasion these days. She picks a white cotton hippie dress. It'll look good with my long black hair on the evening beach. It's too revealing bra-less though, especially for meeting a naked man for the first time. But a bra doesn't work either, so dowdy. Damn. Forget the bra, take a shawl. She pulls out a cashmere shawl from India, and tries it over her shoulders. Yes. A bit warm but...

"Oh my hair!" she screams.

It has been rumpled into an unwashed heap for days while she suffered the unknown tragedy of this stranger. She has not brushed her teeth or taken a bath either. She runs to the outdoor pool and jumps in, not caring about preserving the reservoir for drinking use right now.

RUNAWAY

When Song returns home from an overnight visit to Repulse Bay with Ma and John, a note, weighted down by his father's favourite piece of antique, the jade *qilin*, awaits him on the desk.

He reads it again and again. *That's it? That's all?*

He replaces it under the paperweight. He feels his breathing becoming heavy and slow, not sure if it's calming down or giving up. He starts to pack as if by instinct. Five carrots, two firm tomatoes, two drumsticks from the big jar of rendered chicken fat that Huan preserves cooked meat in, three sweet potatoes, a bag of macaroni, a light camping pot, one big bottle of water (there'll be streams wherever he ends up going), and a can of ancient black bean dace.

An extra shirt and pants in a waterproof bag. Toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, a big wad of tissue paper, matches and a few disposable lighters. Diving knife, chopsticks, and a big towel. A book about wolves gets thrown in; he picked that up from the bookstore last week. He wanted to better understand the mystic and cunning beasts that dogs are reverting to. Pens and notebook. No plan or order; just throwing things into a knapsack.

On the way out, he walks past his fancy mountain bike. His father's is gone.

He needs to run, forever if he could. He has no destination in mind. There isn't any point running all over Hong Kong to look for his Bub. His father has planned his disappearance well; nobody can find him.

Just run.

* * *

He's jogging much faster than usual. Something's burning inside, driving all cylinders. His unstoppable feet take him in the direction of

Repulse Bay where he came from early this morning. The rest of him follows. His father's voice rings in his head.

*Geriatric shit smells a lot worse than infant pooh.
Secretly wish me dead... Don't...
It'd crush your heart... forever.*

It is a warm and sunny day, not a speck of cloud in the deep blue sky. He is thoroughly soaked, and has to refill the bottle three times before reaching Repulse Bay.

*Don't force yourself.
Think clearly son.
Don't force yourself...*

At the normally deserted beach, a small group of old folks are having an afternoon out. What a surprise. A man with a flowing beard is playing erhu, pulling an uncharacteristically light tune out of the melancholic two-string instrument. A woman who looks in her early seventies sings merrily to it, hands locked in front of her stomach like a soprano. Her crystalline voice belies her age. The youthful melody comes out effortlessly, slicing through the thick hum of humid sea breeze.

*In a faraway land
Lives a beautiful maiden
Everyone who passes her by
Turns his head for a lingering glance...
A lingering glance...*

They regard each other, proud of their performance. Humans and monkeys seem always to know how to entertain themselves even under dreadful circumstances.

They have a geriatric audience of two men and a woman. The men sway in half-doze. The woman claps silently, mutely out of sync, moving her lips to sing along.

The singing lady waves for Song to join. He normally would have spent half a day singing and chatting with them, giving them news of the outside, reporting that nothing has happened. But he is not in any

mood to socialise. He waves back, tries to look friendly, and runs on. How ironic, he thinks. Hardly anyone left, yet he has to keep running to be alone.

When he reaches Stanley, he still does not feel like stopping, and continues all the way to Shek O Village on the other end of Hong Kong Island.

He wanders into the local grocery store to check it out, and is surprised to find a few cans of spam and sausage waiting on the shelves. Evidently, rich folks in this part of town are not so desperate. Most supermarkets were emptied out long ago although it is still possible to discover odd bits on top of high shelves or hidden away in the corners. Most people did not live long enough to consume half of what they had grabbed. Apartments are therefore better stocked than supermarkets. But scrounging abandoned homes carries the risk of bumping into the owner, covered in maggots. It would ruin the appetite for days, defeating the purpose of food hunting.

Mega-warehouses remain the most reliable source of well preserved food-like substances from the past. Due to their relatively remote locations and sheer size, initial looting hardly dented their immense stocks. Without cars, looters could not carry much. The bountiful godowns would remain an emergency food source till the end of human time.

* * *

After dinner, he breaks down. He cries, and cries, like never before, then collapses from exhaustion.

He wakes before sunrise, and goes for a swim. Swimming in the dark spooks him. Right now, strangely, he craves a long swim in the dark.

It feels good. He is not scared of the black water this morning. The glints of the deep dark sea soothe him as he crawls out. The hypnotic sound of water sloshes gently about, as if whispering their commiseration.

He keeps going. *Yes, keep going, son.*

His right leg cramps, so he floats on his back to wait it out. The predawn sky is lighter than the water, with a few morning stars.

On the way back to the beach, the sun rises behind him.

All day, he feels like a zombie. The glaring beach seems surreal in comparison with the dark sea. His thoughts are involuntary, broken by blank spells. They come in fragments, then disappear at random.

Äiti loved the beach.

He has not thought of his Mum for a long time. He was eighteen when she died. Forgetting made things easier, and teenagers are good at that. People die in epidemics; that's what epidemics are about. Death was everywhere, reported on TV like an international football league, keeping people informed of the latest scores. The only option was to detach oneself, objectify, and deny.

Don't think about that. It'll make me sad.

But only top meditation masters can tell the mind to stop thinking. Ma says he can do that.

He attempts meditation and all sorts of distractions. None works. Memories surface like gas bubbles in a swamp. At sunset, he surrenders and lets go. It erupts into a melodrama. He asks the sea questions. Why? Why are you doing this to me? Why am I so lonely? So terribly lonely? He bursts into tears again, relieving the pressure in his chest. He wails to unravel a knot.

He cries like a baby. Suddenly, he realises how ridiculous and unreal his situation is, and laughs out loud, then cries even louder.

He runs out of tears. The pressure in his heart has lessened. He whimpers like a wounded puppy. He has never cried like this before, or seen anyone crying like this. It feels good. It unclogs him like chemicals unclog an old drain pipe.

Everything starts to flow again.

Talking to the sea is dumb but relieving. No one is watching anyway. He needs to talk to something. Circulating thoughts in the head only magnifies questions and suppresses answers, creating deadlocks. The sea is a patient listener, totally indifferent.

After the tempest, clarity returns. Empty, fresh, clear. The cloud in his head has dispersed. He can see his own thoughts coming and going.

At the cottage in Finland, by the lake, where the family spent their summers, they watch the mid-night sun. He's a little kid, on Äiti's lap. The smell of sauna; the tea-like fragrance of birch leaves splashing water on the scorching rocks tickles his nose. Contentment is that simple... that vulnerable.

He's about five, perched high on his father's shoulders to watch the fire-dragon dance in Tai Hang. This is Mid-Autumn Festival. The dragon is made of incense. The smoke hurts his eyes. He looks down and sees his parents holding hands. He feels a burst of happiness and sniggers.

He's running up the Peak with Bub's goofy friends.

The plague has claimed Äiti. Did it really happen? Bub has vanished. He's worried, but he waits, very patiently. He realises he can wait a long time. Somehow, he doesn't want the waiting to end. While waiting, nothing is final. While waiting, he can postpone all other problems. His breathing is shallow and light, waiting.

Don't stop. Keep waiting.

He wonders, finally, where his father might be, right now.

Warm tears flow again, but tenderly. Big drops roll down his cheeks, silent and gentle, no longer angry. Some of it drains inward; he swallows.

He sits by the water all night, going through whatever comes to mind. Let them come. No more thought control. Everything is allowed.

Come. If you don't come, you can't leave.

If you don't come, I can't set you free.

His first taste of ice-cream was a shock. He shudders. How he loves to taste it again, so sweet and cold in the mouth.

His parents are mad at the people swamping him in the park. He's shocked, a little scared of Mum's angry face.

Memories he never knew existed file out of hiding like long-lost friends straggling into his father's memorial. They take him by surprise, make him smile, and cry once more.

Haaaa... That feels good.

For the first time in two days, he realises that sand fleas have been feasting on him. He is itchy all over.

The sun is rising. Beautiful. Magnificent.

He takes a deep breath, springs to his feet, and sings at the top of his voice.

O Sole Mio...

It sounds quite good.

The sun, glowing happily, seems to agree.

"Bub, you're right."

ENCOUNTER

Song squats naked, fanning the fire.

For the first time in days, his head is clear, thinking only of food. The mental storm had swept clean the dark corners of his memory.

Simple peace never lasts. While enjoying the uncomplicated pleasure of anticipating a lousy meal, a woman enters the corner of his vision. A woman? And from what he can make out, a young woman!

Holy shit.

She's in white and orange, standing at the north end, pretending to be looking out at the sea, obviously to avoid direct confrontation with his nudity. The lurid remains of the sun, low behind her, make her fiery orange. His heartbeat picks up abruptly; exhausted adrenaline and hormones are again on red alert.

He pulls the towel and wraps it around the waist, then ostensibly returns to the kindling. He would have jumped to scream hi to the fellow human but... she's an impossibly young woman.

What difference does it make? A great amount, somehow. He sits on his heels, continuing to fan too vigorously. His poor head is again somewhere else, reeling, wobbly.

She notices him kind of dressed, and strolls over. Song watches her approaching. Impulsively, too rash and irrational even to call it presumptuous, he sees her entering his life. It is taking forever.

"Hi," he greets her. "Human?" He stops fanning, sweat beads ooze from his forehead and upper lip for multiple reasons.

"Only part-time these days." She smiles politely. "I live there." She points with her chin. Both her hands are lazily occupied with keeping the shawl around herself. "Just got back from a trip and saw you here. Haven't seen anyone around for months, so I thought I'd come down to say hi."

Uh! Do people still take "trips"? What a dumb thing to say Rhea! Oh well.

"What a pleasant surprise. Hope I haven't alarmed you. I've camped out here for a few days to enjoy the magnificent sunrise," says Song, immediately conscious of having talked too fast and smoothly, sounding almost a stranger to himself. "By the way –" he struggles to find his own voice "– I'm Song Sung."

"Oh sorry. Rhea. Rhea Rhella." She doesn't offer her hand. He is too way-down-there for a proper handshake.

Song resumes flapping the piece of cardboard at the fire.

"Did you say Song Sung?"

"Yeah. Song like the dynasty. Sung like the pipe instrument, in Chinese. It should be Sheng in Mandarin but they spelt it Hong Kong way. I know, it sounds like a Song is Sung. More fun I guess. Perhaps a bit ominous too?" He gives his most charming grin, then turns to regard the hills behind, catching Rhea's eyes en route. The sun's gone. A few wisps of grey clouds remain, rimmed in crimson orange.

"It'd be even more dazzling if it sets over the water," says Song.

"Then it'd have to rise behind the hills."

"You're right. Can't have it both ways." He forces his attention back to the fire. "I saw the most memorable sunrise this morning. It was... mind-blowing." The fire gains strength. "Here we go." He puts the cardboard down and looks at Rhea. "Like to join me for dinner?"

"What's on the menu?" She leans to examine the small pile next to the fire, clutching the shawl closer.

"I had chicken drumsticks preserved in schmaltz like French confit, only better, but I finished them last night. Just to let you know I normally eat with more class," Song explains meekly. "I've only got spam and canned sausages left." He holds the cans against the fire and squints to read. "May 2071 and February 73. Hmm. Not really in their prime but... The spam's fresher. You're the guest, you can have that."

"Uh, you've just made me vegetarian."

"That bad?" Song grimaces. His mood is improving by the second. He's talking faster than usual. "Macaroni? But boiling water with this fire takes patience. And the pot's too small. Wait!" He reaches into his backpack to take out three sweet potatoes. "Almost forgotten. Home-grown!"

"Perfect," she smiles sweetly. "Invitation accepted." She actually loves sweet potatoes roasted. She takes off her sandals, and sits down across the fire. "It feels strange to see someone here."

"It feels strange to see anyone anywhere. I've been a lone ghost here for days."

"I've been a lone ghost here for months, and months." She then reflexively regrets lamenting her loneliness to a strange man, and adds in a nonchalant voice, "Well, who isn't a lone ghost these days? Where do you live?"

"Robinson Road, near the Botanical Garden."

"What? That's a long way. Did you take the bus?"

"Ha ha. Not that bad. It normally takes me about four hours. But I was on nuclear power this time, and set a new record of three hours and a bit, I think. I don't wear a watch but I know my time when I run." He opens the spam and sniffs it. "A little bruised and grimy; nothing that fire can't purify."

"Sure you want to eat that?" Rhea looks concerned and disgusted.

Rhea never eats these "virtually non-biodegradable food-like substances." She does not need to. There is a sixty-square-metre pantry in the villa stuffed with daintily preserved proper food. (Whole legs of Parma ham and blocks of cheese flown in from Italy, for example, and a dazzling collection of salty fishy morsels and preserved veggies and flower hearts in cans or jars.) Much of it has moved on with time and the help of oxygen and moisture. They have been partially consumed by mould, or become desiccated; but enough were left to meet Rhea's occasional craving for a nostalgic treat. The wine and liquor shelves can easily satisfy the most fastidious alcoholic for a lifetime or two. All that within fifteen steps from her kitchen table, but she mainly eats fresh produce from the neighbourhood golf course, grown by Zhu Yi – Auntie Zhu.

Zhu Yi's in her mid-sixties. She grew up in a farm in mainland China, came to Hong Kong thirty years ago, and got stuck working as a domestic helper – a servant according to Gong Gong, who was too rich to bother with politically correct euphemisms – for Rhea's family. She loves Rhea like the daughter she never had. "Romance's not in my karma," she had told Rhea. Rhea commented that she made it sound like a great blessing. "*Aiya*, Wheea –" she never could pronounce Rhea – "to someone like me, it is."

She now lives at the Shek O Golf and Country Club, once colonial and ancient, with two women who also served rich families in the area, also without romance in their karmic composition.

Most of the golf course is now a young forest. The fairways, with the exception of the 18th hole, have been swallowed up by trees and wild plants. The resourceful ladies turned the final approach, next to a picturesque brook, into a farm, and the clubhouse into a barn, with a growing population of chickens.

Rhea who had previously not given any thought to where potatoes come from is now a seasoned farmhand. She helps the old ladies out regularly. Sometimes she would stay in the barn. She loves the Ladies of The Brook and is grateful for their company, but their nice and simple ways, unpretentious contentment, cheerful and aimless small talk, and suffocating attentiveness, would all start to bug her after a few days. She would have to escape back to the villa, to be alone. After all, they are from a different universe than hers.

The ladies found a pig in the village, possibly a surviving pet. They kept it fenced up in the fairway bunker for a couple of months to fatten up before slaughtering. It was a squealing event that kept Rhea away for a whole week.

* * *

"You ran all the way here to watch the sunrise?"

"Actually no. I had no plan when I started. Just needed to keep running, to escape I suppose, and be alone."

"Hope I'm not intruding."

"No no! Not at all. I no longer need to be alone. In fact I was starting to feel lonely. You showed up at the right time. Perfect, really."

"What happened?"

"I lost my father."

"I'm sorry... You know, I lost my parents too. Maybe I never had them. And they're probably not even dead yet."

"My father's not dead either. And I may not have lost him. I don't know."

"What about your mum?"

"She died long ago. Plague."

"Oh... . . ."

* * *

"Did you ever go to any Project Future events?"

"You mean those government Gen-Zeder parties?"

"That's right."

"Just once or twice when I was really young. Can't remember anything. We preferred to stay away from government activities."

"Giving excuses for being antisocial?"

"Well, I needed survival skills, not public pampering. My Dad also tried to keep me out of the shrivelling school system. It was funny. I was encouraged and helped by my parents to play truant, everyday if possible."

"Lucky you. I wish my parents had done that. We would have met if you went to those functions though. But I was a big girl when you were still wearing nappies."

"Hey, I've been told I wore only designer nappies you know, all monogrammed and sponsored."

* * *

"Are you Eurasian?"

"My mother's Finnish. But I thought I look pure Chinese."

"Says who?"

"Everyone I know. My skin, hair, eyes."

"They must all be men. You look 100% mixed to me."

"Is there any issue with logic here? Once you're mixed, nothing's a 100% anymore is there?"

"Are you trying to confuse me? Didn't know I'm talking to a mathematician. Now what's the chance of two Eurasians meeting in Shek O, in a deserted world, huh?"

"A hundred percent, obviously. Can't change that fact now, can we?"

"Mathematically okay this time?"

"Absolutely!"

"You said your father's Greek?"

"Sort of. His mother's from Algeria. Also a mix of god knows what. You know, I sometimes hope all that mixing's good, makes me stronger, like cross-pollination right?"

"I doubt it but I like the idea. I need every excuse to feel strong and special these days."

* * *

"They sent you to boarding school in Switzerland when you were thirteen!"

"Sick, isn't it?"

"I didn't say that. And you studied International Relationships!"

"Very useful, isn't it?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean it that way either. Just that it sounds so... fascinating."

"Just say *bizarre*. I could tell your lips were getting ready to say it."

"You speak French?"

"Oui monsieur, plus German, Italian, Greek, English and Chinese."

"All fluently?"

"All rapidly; none perfectly."

"I only speak three languages. Now I feel like a mute."

"That's all they ever taught me, languages..."

"Come on! You must say something with these languages too, I imagine?"

"I know a lot about shopping and music, I suppose."

* * *

"You're lucky. You've got wise parents. My mum was a compulsive international shopper. When she came home from the Champs-Élysées for a brief stop, before going to Shanghai, she'd first give orders to the servants for five minutes. *Put this here, put this there. Be careful with this.* Then she'd give me the same phoney hug she gave the dogs."

"...."

"She called me and the rest of the world 'Love' or 'Darling'. *Hello love! How're you doing, Darling!*"

"What about your father?"

"He didn't exist. He spent his life pretending to be busy and useful to strange women, and avoiding his family. I'd seen him maybe a few times more than Haley's Comet after I was about six."

"...."

"I was much closer to my grandparents, especially my mum's parents. Even as a little kid I found them more human but...money had ruined their lives and destroyed their children. They realised that when they were old. But too late. They treated me differently, with more time and care, like a kind of compensation. But they were always unhappy about everything."

"Hmm, never knew it's so much hassle to be rich."
"It is... . Actually, it is."

* * *

"You always eat like this? You really seem to enjoy every bite of that spam, you know."

"You see, every meal could be the last. Understanding that makes food indiscriminately delicious even without wasting time on fine cooking techniques."

"That's an interesting theory."

"And we are what we eat. Of course you've heard that before. Food become us, every bit. Some may stay until we die. This is the only chance to see and taste a potential part of yourself. Don't you think it's a rather intimate process?"

"I'm afraid what you've been eating is only good for shit, Mister!"

"Fine! But all faecal matter remains a part of me until I pooh right? If you say I've made friends with Song Sung, you can't possibly exclude the slithering tube of faecal matter inside my gut can you?"

"You're gross! You should have studied scatology."

"What's that? A branch of theology?"

* * *

"For a thirty-five-year-old man, you talk about your parents a lot."

"Do I?"

"Don't take it wrong, just an observation; perhaps a bit of envy as well."

"This is a special day too. My mind's been fully occupied by them. I grew up without anyone else, no other kids, no school mates. They are my world, my everything... I mean, they were... .

"I've been very emotional for a few days. Hope you understand."

"I know. I've been crying too."

"You too?"

"...."

"I won't apologise for crying though. My Mum – see? here I go again! – Mummy used to say people who're afraid of emotions can't be trusted. There's nothing wrong with expressing one's feelings, sharing them with those who are willing to listen. If we apologise for crying, we should say sorry for laughing too, right?"

"What about anger? Should we apologise for losing our temper?"

"Probably. Never thought about that one before."

* * *

"If you have ONE big wish, what would that be?"

"A l-o-n-g hot shower. I'm sick of baths. I miss a good steamy splashing."

"Oh I'd love that too! Even a short warm one would be great!"

"You'd be welcome to join me, to save water you know."

"Ah, ha ha."

"What about an apple pie à la mode?"

"Yum! A glass of cold milk?"

"Or just ice? A bucket of ice would be nice."

"I hate eating ice by itself. That's it? Shower and ice for your one big wish?"

"Not a lot more really. I might sound a bit of a saint but I've never wanted much. You?"

"I'd like a baby."

"WHAT?!"

"I want a baby."

"You serious?"

"Why? It's nature. All women want babies at some point."

"But you're not supposed to confess that to a strange man!"

"Oh pardon my impertinence, Sir! What was in your sweet potatoes?"

"Even if you have a baby, by a miracle, it'd grow up all alone on this planet."

"There'll be others."

"Get real lah, Missee!"

"Yes. There will."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. Woman's instinct."

"OK. Even if there were to be others, how would they meet?"

"Like us."

"Like us... ?"

* * *

"Can I make a confession?"

"Confession? Oh I love them by others."

"Promise you won't be offended?"

"Depending what it is."

"I've been watching you from behind the windows for two days."

"Ah, I somehow suspected that to be the case, Ms Rhella! Did you like the show?"

"Uh... not really."

* * *

"What do you do up there all day?"

"I spend a lot of time at the golf course farming with the old ladies. Otherwise, I day-dream, and play the piano."

"You're a good player?"

"Mmm... as good as it gets for semi-professionals. I used to perform in small concerts and big parties for friends, for my grandparents' charity things, stuff like that. No one dared to criticise anyway. They all told Gong Gong I was a genius."

"See, being rich isn't all bad. You can be a genius."

"But I *am* a genius!"

"OK then. Genius. Don't you think music's strange?"

"You mean beautiful."

"Yeah, beautiful, but strange that it exists in every culture, from fishing folks to mountain tribes, from the equator to the Arctics. It's not really something essential, if you think about it; not like, say, language. So how come every culture has it?"

"Because it's essential."

* * *

"There had been no starry nights like this in Hong Kong for a long time."

"Busy people had no use for darkness."

"So beautiful."

"Do you believe in the stars?"

"You mean horoscopes?"

"Kind of."

"Only good predictions. But I read somewhere that everything on this planet, everything in us, supposedly originated from out there so... I wouldn't be surprised if we've retained some mysterious connections."

"A good friend of mine is a physicist. He teaches me Tai-chi too. He said the exact same thing except that everything's a temporary

disruption of the original state, like ripples on the water. All will calm down one day and vanish!"

"Hmm. Meanwhile, what's the chance that some atoms in our bodies knew each other on a distant galaxy billions of years ago, and shared electrons?"

"Infinitely small but not impossible. I like the idea though... kinda seductive."

"Ha ha. Stop daydreaming Mister. It's late now."

* * *

"What about destiny. Do you believe in destiny?"

"I believe everything's predetermined, maybe down to the molecules."

"Doesn't sound like you somehow."

"Why? Should I be sounding like some macho guy who's got fate by the balls?"

"No, but you said you've been brought up to just get on with life."

"Yeah but it's my destiny to be the way I am, you see."

"But if everything's been decided, what are we here for?"

"To play it out. The sunrise has been determined but it's still fun to watch, plus we don't know how determined actions interact in the long run. There's another point. If there's no fate, then there's no room for sympathy."

"Mmm..... Strange theory I must say."

"If fate's in our own hands, then all misfortunes are just, and could have been prevented with a bit of hard work and other admirable human virtues, right? Why then should we be sympathetic or charitable to anyone who's too lazy to improve his own fate, making it perfect?"

"Why? Because the expression of sympathy impresses God, and increases our chance of going to Heaven; that's why!"

"Ha! I like that. Great strategic consideration. Did you attend a Catholic school by any chance?"

* * *

"Do you like cognac?" Rhea asked. The fire is dying; the air is warm and sticky. The sweet potatoes were good. Rhea had one; Song ate the rest.

"I learned to like cognac not too long ago, but we're used to the best, since it's free. I'm spoiled," Song says with smart-ass satisfaction.

He senses the arrival of a critical moment. But for the past few minutes, he's been holding back the urge to go to the toilet, or a spot behind the big rock he calls the toilet for now. The anticipation has caused a tremor, stirring up his inside. Some clumsy instinct is trying to alert him for what he already knows might be coming, tightening up his guts, speeding up peristalsis as a result.

Goosebumps appear on his arms. He can no longer focus on what Rhea's saying.

Hang on! Suck in *Qi*.

Oh shit.

He's just made it worse, charged it pneumatically like an air gun.... And he doesn't have pants on. Just a beach towel around him, a light colour beach towel for that matter.

"Gong Gong has only the very best. There's a roomful. A case of Chateau Margaux 2060 too if you like wine, and..."

"Rhea, can you excuse me for a minute?" Song interrupts, bending slightly at his waist; pathos on his face.

"You OK?"

"I'll be back in a moment." He rushes off ten paces, then hobbles back, grimacing with embarrassment. He bends down to grab some tissues from his knapsack, then duckwalks quickly back towards the rock, folded over. A fleeing Quasimodo.

Pants! Should have grabbed my pants. This is the best time to put them on with dignity. Oh well.

* * *

When Song reemerges, Rhea is standing by the fire. She clutches her shawl with one hand, holding the sandals with the other. Her face, barely illuminated by the dying fire, radiates an introspective delight. Her eyes, staring at the embers, glint with feminine instincts: coy and bold, determined and cautious, amused, loving, calculating, ruthless, full of dreams. Capture, now! Women's dreams are fragile. In the post-modern world, they are even more ephemeral and uncertain. But at times of crisis, when men have stopped dreaming, women must go on, keeping his alive as well...

Song's feelings are much more straightforward right now. She's gorgeous! He kicks some sand behind like a dog.

"Washed your hands?"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry."

"Why apologise over basic human needs?" Rhea asks with mock challenge.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting. It didn't flush."

"Should we put some water over it?" She looks at the cinders.

"Yes."

He makes a few trips with the little pot, until the charcoals turn dark and limp. The only light left comes from the crescent moon, and the thousands of stars looking over its curvy outline.

"Shall we go?" Song clasps his hands in a – well, let's see, everything taken care of – tone, a little too nonchalant.

Rhea's silent. Sure.

He puts one arm around her waist. She leans lightly on him, and they stroll towards the Villa. The crescent moon makes a smiling face above. Stars are twinkling, winking. All wonderful things from our childhood come back to life when people fall in love, however old they are.

Song can see Huan smiling; it's his own smile. Today, for the first time, he feels his parents in him, now that they're no longer with him. Every little idiosyncrasy has a genetic shadow. His father must have kept running the same way when Sari died.

Yes, we're all a continuation of others, Song realises with a refreshing sense of clarity. That doesn't make us less individual. No. Chapter two is a continuation of chapter one, not a part of it. This is how the story continues. No matter how unique we regard ourselves, we're just descendants of some amino acid molecules which coagulated a few billion years ago. Our genes link us to the distant past, and allow us – well, they did – to live on into the future. So much magic. Impossible things happen all the time. And now, against all odds, he has a beautiful woman in his arm. Rhea feels so good against his chest. He feels warm blood running wild in him.

She looks down at their steps, trying to synchronise like kids do. There's an erection behind the towel.

Oh dear. Men should always have pants on. They can't hide what they have in mind as well as we do...

"Can I say something?"

"Yes?"

"Hmm. How should I put it. You're the first man I've ever invited home this way. We've only known each other for a few hours. I don't want you to think I do this regularly."

"I know."

"You do... ?"

"I can tell from your eyes."

In darkness?

Rhea looks up, trying to judge his sincerity. Men don't hesitate to lie in this situation, and women don't hesitate to believe them. She can't see his eyes in the dark, but feels sure that he's sincere.

Song's precocious tumescence is becoming terribly awkward and embarrassing, unfairly distorting other noble and upright feelings that he has, or is developing as a matter of urgency, for Rhea.

Oh you fucking thing. I should have remembered my pants.

Rhea glances down at it again, trying not to laugh with secret satisfaction, or to allow silly doubts to spoil the moment.

All of a sudden, Song lets go of her and unfurls the towel in one big dramatic gesture. He flings it over the shoulder, and walks on ahead theatrically like a triumphant Greek god returning from a fantastic celestial massacre. His penis leads the way, pulling him along, bouncing like a mini plank at the bow of the galley. He starts to sing O Sole Mio in a deep and powerful voice.

Rhea laughs so hard she doubles up, holding her stomach. She hears her own laughter reverberating in open air. What an unfamiliar sound – her own laughter. It must have been a long time. Or is this the first time ever?

GUJI'S ENCOUNTER

She sits on the parapet wall on the roof of her low-rise apartment, bare feet dangling on the outside, oblivious to the danger of plunging down six floors.

She lights another cigarette. Pale blue smoke rises towards the metallic crescent moon, crossing the dark space in between. The smoke makes her head light. She's rising like a fish fascinated by the silvery hook overhead. So inviting...

She has never smoked before. There is no previous experience to tell her how dried up the tobacco is, and how horribly stale it tastes. She just puffs away, one after another. She has the urge to do something "bad" tonight; smoking is as close to it as she knows. Her tongue, numbed by the strange assault of oxidised nicotine, feels slimy and heavy, twice the normal size. But it's the only thing that feels substantial right now, weighing her down, tentatively safe from the lunar bait.

"Does life happen in here? Or out there?" She asks herself a strange question, and chuckles lightly. She's never thought of that before, and is not going to think about it now. There's nothing left. Everything has been extinguished. Not that there was very much to start with.

For almost sixty years, she has been like the condensate collected by the battery of dehumidifiers in her parents' home at the Peak. A distillate of nothing. Pure and tasteless, just something sucked out of thin air, day after day with a whir – the same monotonous whir, to be dumped.

A different whir, sometimes by Beethoven, sometimes Mozart, sometimes Saint-Saens, occupies her head. Like drunken party guests from a different time-zone, they brazenly disregard her wish to end the party, to go sleep.

No! The music must go on, louder and softer.

Quiet !

No way. A different tune comes on instead.

It's Mozart again; that eerie requiem.

Oh please... turn it off

Just for a little while... I beg you....

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord

What about me O Lord...? Why not unto me?

She was cursed by music at the age when Mozart first started composing. It took her down an obsessive path of no return, then humiliated her for her lack of genius. Then it punished her for trying too hard. Now it haunts and torments her with unprovoked vengeance.

In the beginning, her piano lessons were nothing more than a cultural supplement to family riches. Her father, a successful investment banker, was keen to demonstrate an interest in things outside the money circle. A grand piano, on top of it a small vase sitting on a lace mat, makes tasteful furniture in the living room; and lessons from a good teacher were affordable. Her parents even gave her what they thought to be a musical name. Melody. Melody Mok.

Unfortunately, Melody was instantly obsessed by music. Madly, all she wanted was to listen, learn, play and talk about music, neglecting everything else. She told everyone she would become a concert pianist one day. "What if you can't?" grownups teased her. "I can. I have the talent," she would answer. Cute. As a matter of fact, she was talented, but not enough. Having a little talent can be a big curse. She also tried way too hard, too early.

Gradually, talent and ambition gave way to agony, bitterness, and disappointment. But the melodies continued, involuntarily, incessantly.

The music could no longer be stopped.

Her head has been subjugated by men – recognised geniuses. Their ghosts have made her their concert hall and cabaret. Movement after movement, they torture her with their masterpieces.

See? Melody. Easy does it. La di da!

But not to you huh? Ha! Not to you! Not to you!

Ay ay ay, not you! No! Not... .

She pulls out another cigarette, long and thin, spotted with brown stains. She tries to light it. The wind is up without her noticing, strewing clouds over the thousands of stars that dotted the sky earlier. Her long black hair – blackened again by dye for the first time this afternoon – flows across her face, fluttering roughly, feeling like linen rather than the smooth silk that it once did, smelling of ammonia. The wind smears her into the night sky like a wet painting, merging her with darkness.

Flick flick flick – the lighter won't work. She throws it into the wind, screaming. "Useless! Useless!! Useless!!!" The cigarette drops off her lips, and rolls off her lap. The background chorus reaches a crescendo.

She closes her eyes, and sees the lighter tumbling through the air. A few seconds later, it lands with a pedestrian click – barely audible.

Shattered. Motionless. Settled. Peaceful.

*Grant them eternal rest, O Lord,
May everlasting light shine upon them.*

She wonders how it would feel.

* * *

"Ah! You startled me, little girl. I could have fallen off!"

"Sorry."

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here."

"All by yourself?"

"With my little brother, Tommy."

"I've never seen you here before."

"We've been hiding."

"Where's your family?"

"All dead. Long long time ago."

"Poor girl."

"Can you be our Mama?"

"Of course I can Sweetie. I'll be your Mama."

"What did you throw away just now, Mama?"

"A lighter. A useless lighter. Dead now."

"What's that noise?"

"It's music, Sweetie. Just music in my head."

"I don't like this song, it's scary."

"I don't like it either."

"Can you play Twinkle Twinkle Little Star?"

"I can but it's not up to me right now."

"Oh... Is it up to him, the man with curly white hair?"

"Sometimes."

"He scares me."

"Don't mind him, Sweetie. Let's talk."

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**MAN'S LAST SONG
Chapter Five**

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