

CU

Writing in English

Volume III / 2003

The Editors

(stories)



Joyce, Phoebe & Isaac

(poetry)



Jamie, Winnie, Rico & Sarah

published by:

Department of English

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

3/E, Fung King Hey Building, Shatin, HONG KONG

tel: (852) 2609-7005/7 fax: (852) 2603-5270

email: English@cuhk.edu.hk

webpage: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/eng/>

English@CUHK

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Volume III/2003

Introduction

It is my great pleasure to introduce this third number of *CU Writing in English*. The stories and poems published here have been written, chosen and edited by Chinese University English majors. As ever, the students continue to impress me with their capacity for creative expression in a second language.

Writing a successful story or poem calls for many things: a sense of form, powers of observation, human understanding, a sense of fun or tragedy. It also calls for subtlety in the use of words, a feeling for their rhythmic qualities and their layered meanings -- in short an understanding of the rich possibilities of the language. I have no doubt that creative writing is not only an enjoyable and instructive part of the English curriculum, but a truly vital one. By creating literature as well as reading it, Hong Kong students begin to understand that English isn't simply somebody else's language. It is their own language, one they can use for their own purposes. In reading the poems and stories in this volume the reader can sense the students' confidence, their ease in the language. This is one of the things that makes the teaching of creative writing so rewarding.

Last year we were privileged to have Professor Ho, one of Hong Kong's best-known poets, teaching the students to write poetry. This year Professor Ho fell ill, and the course was taken over by a former Chinese University English major, Dr Amy Lai, who had just returned to Hong Kong after finishing her PhD at Cambridge. Dr Lai is herself a poet and the students found inspiration working with her. The stories come from my course, Reading and Writing Short Stories.

I wish to thank the editors of the poems, Jamie Fung, Rico Kwong, Sarah Lo and Winnie So, and the stories, Lau Hoi Yung, Phoebe Siu and Isaac Wong. They have done excellent work.

I also wish to thank, Chow Chun Fai, who did the painting on which the cover design is based. Mr Chow is a Fine Arts student at CU and the work was part of his graduation exhibition.

Finally I must thank Tracy Liang for her fine cover design and ever-efficient administrative support and Olivia Chan for her last-minute help.

David Parker
Professor of English

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The Story of Mrs 801

Cheung Pui Kwan, Amy

1

It was a hot afternoon in May.

From flat 901 there came the sound of mahjong playing. Four pairs of hands were overlapping and crossing on the mahjong table, four castle walls were quickly built up by the skillful hands. Besides the noise of collision between the tiles, there was the “ting tong” sound of Mrs Chan’s bracelet; Mrs Wong’s continual tapping of feet on the floor; Mrs Chow’s humming of popular songs in the 80’s and Mrs Tang’s playing of coins on the table.

This round was Mrs Chan’s turn. She threw out the “Four Thousand” and said,

“The south position is unfavorable for me today. Nearly every round gets the bad tiles. I have lost more than five hundred dollars until now.”

After hearing Ah Chan’s grumbling, Mrs Wong said,

“Nine Balls, I want, Shang, Ah Chan, there must be ups and downs in gambling. As you are supported by your honey financially, so ask your honey to pay you for the loss tonight.”

Ah Wong opened a beauty salon; she was used to speaking in a soft voice. The other two also laughed.

“My bad guy is not so obedient to me,” Ah Chan smiled and said.

“Of course, your husband is not as good as the slut’s husband.”

After what Mrs Tang said, Ah Wong and Ah Chow winked at each other and smiled.

Only Ah Chan kept silent.

Ah Tang was the mistress of flat 901. Her flat became the social gathering place of all the housewives in this block. Undoubtedly, this was not only a club for mahjong playing; but also the broadcast station of all the rumors and gossip. Ah Tang seemed to be the leader of this building, she knew very clearly all the secrets of every family, such as whose husband borrowed huge loans from loan sharks; whose daughter got engaged; and even how much each family earned. She had a team of members under her control; they liked to listen to each other’s gossip and exchanged their news. Sometimes they also had conflicts between them, and then Ah Tang had to use her interpersonal relations skills to pacify them.

Last month, an old husband and a young wife moved into flat 801, and this immediately aroused the curiosity of all the housewives in the block.

“Oh, what can we compare to her? A thirty-year-old beautiful woman marries a sixty-year old

man; it is natural that he will care for her very much. But, I think, it will not take a long time for her to spend all his money.” Mrs Chow liked to invest; therefore she was very sensitive about money.

“I heard that her husband was a construction site worker before. As he was too honest, he could not find a wife. He was single and saved some money, therefore he went to the mainland to select one.” Mrs Wong said.

“It is a pity that he married such a slut. Look at her, she often wears a black no-sleeve shirt, and exposes half of her breast. It is a shame! She even thinks that she possesses a perfect hip. Her mini-skirt is so short that you can see her asshole; this makes the guard Uncle Chan stare at her every time. I really want to give her a kick from behind, to make her laughed at by everyone.” Ah Tang said and threw out the “One Bamboo”.

“Good!” Ah Wong and Ah Chow yelled.

“Ah Chan, you live next door to her, do you hear what the couples say to each other?” asked Ah Tang.

“This, I do not pay attention to it.” Ah Chan replied.

“Ah Chan, don’t blame me for not reminding you, be careful your husband isn’t seduced by 801.”

“Yes, especially your tits are so small, how can you compare with hers?” Ah Wong interrupted.

Ah Tang, Wong and Chow laughed heartily.

Ah Chan also smiled. However, she told herself in her heart, she had to win all their money today for revenge.

2

After the long hot summer had passed, the autumn came quietly. Four women gathered again to play mahjong. After each one talked about the recent condition of their husband and their children, their topic fell again on 801.

“Ah Chan, I hear that 801 is very popular in the restaurant. Very often there is a man accompanying her home. Have you ever seen it?” Ah Tang played the ten-dollar coin between her fingers.

“It has been much cooler now. After dinner, I close the door, therefore I do not see anything.”

“I hear that man and women’s relationship is very complex in the restaurant. Her husband is much older than her, it is natural that he cannot satisfy her.” Ah Wong giggled.

“But... in fact, she is not so bad. I often see her go shopping with her husband hand in hand when she has a day off. Moreover, I often meet her in the market during her break time. After we have greeted each other, she often says she needs to rush home to cook the dinner for her husband.

And, once...”

“Once, what?”

All stopped to wait, and looked at Ah Chan attentively.

“Nothing very important. In fact, I want to say that she is quite helpful. Last week, the new sofa was delivered. I wanted to put the old one to the rubbish collection under the block. However, my husband had not returned home from work. Only my eldest son Ah Ming was at home. We could just move it to the other end of the corridor even when we contributed all our effort. We gasped wearily on the sofa. Just then, 801 returned home during the break time. She offered to help us when she saw our embarrassment. I thanked her but said I could deal with it. She did not listen and tried to lift it. Ah Ming and I immediately lifted the other end. Perhaps she was used to do heavy work in the mainland, she was quite strong. With her help, she sofa was moved to the rubbish collection very soon. I was grateful to her and invited her to have a cup of tea at my home.”

‘She is so cunning. She knows how to win the heart of other people.’ Ah Tang said.

“However, I think, she is quite poor. She grew up on the mainland. Her living conditions must have been very poor. She believed that marrying a Hong Kong man could lead to a better life in Hong Kong. That was why she was willing to marry an old man. However, when she came to Hong Kong, she discovered that what she lived in was the old public housing estates. And her husband was so old; he had no ability to find a job. She, instead, had to earn the bread. I think she must be very disappointed.” Ah Chan sighed and said.

“Oh, I hate those new Chinese immigrants very much. They are too greedy. They imagine that it is easy to make a lot of money in Hong Kong. They insist on coming to Hong Kong and become a burden to us. I say, it is what 801 deserves, we do not need to give sympathy to her.” Ah Chow expressed her opinion.

“Yes, I agree.” Ah Wong nodded.

Ah Tang, Wong, Chow continued their discussion, Ah Wong kept silent.

There were still eight rounds to go.

3

After the autumn had passed, the temperature became lower and lower. The restaurant in the public housing estate was crowded with customers coming to enjoy the hot pot. That day, four women played mahjong again. Ah Tang said,

“Tell all of you a secret. I met 801 at the lift yesterday. Her eyes are bruised. There were also wounds at the corner of her mouth. I asked her what happened. However, she was very cool and said, “Just fell down and got injured. Her attitude is very bad, isn’t it?” Ah Tang asked.

“I guess she must have been beaten by others. Perhaps, she seduced a married man. But, the man’s wife later discovered it. Therefore, the wife decided to take revenge. She must have slapped her and hurt her.” Ah Wong said.

“If I were the wife of that man, I would scratch her face with a knife.” Ah Tang said.

“Yes, we should not tolerate this kind of slut,” Ah Chow expressed her opinion.

“But... in fact the truth is not like that.” Ah Chan muttered.

“Then tell us the truth!” Ah Tang said.

“Yes, please tell us.” Ah Wong and Chow said.

Actually, Ah Chan did not want to disclose the secrets of the family of 801. However, she could not resist the temptation of knowing the truth. Under the pressure of the other women, she finally told them.

“At the eleven o’clock of the night before, I watched television in the sitting room. I heard the sound of the opening of the Iron Gate. I thought it was 801 returning home. She usually returned home at this specific time. Later, I heard her husband yelling at the door front. “You bring a man home. It is such a shame!” And there was the muttering of another man’s voice. I could not hear clearly what he said. And there were the footsteps leaving. Only 801’s crying and screaming were left. “Don’t say that. The restaurant kitchen floor was wet. When I went there to take something, I slipped and fell down. I hurt my ankle. My colleague was very kind and accompanied me home.” Her husband shouted again, “All women in your restaurant die. Why must it be a man? I know what the neighbors say, I know what they say is true!” And I heard the sound of slapping and the crying of 801. I felt that she was very miserable. I don’t want to be involved in another’s family’s affairs. The following two hours I heard her husband’s scolding and crying. Oh, very poor!”

“Good! He should have taught her the lesson earlier.” Ah Tang said.

“Fortunately, her husband was not so stupid.” Ah Wong said.

Ah Chan kept silent in face of such reactions.

4

That day was the coldest day in winter. The children were having Christmas holidays. After preparing lunch for their kids, the three women went to Ah Tang to play Mahjong. At first, all of them kept silent. At last, it was Ah Tang who broke the silence.

“I discussed with the committee this morning. They all agreed to raise money to organize a ritual ceremony for her in the block. Therefore, everyone will be easier in mind.”

Ah Wong nodded,

“I hope she will get peace.”

Ah Chow shook her head,

“She was so young, what made her so determined to commit suicide?”

Ah Tang said,

“I hear that her husband is planning to go to the mainland to marry another one...”

Ah Chan didn't say anything, but her eyes were red.

Star Nights

Milky Way freezes
hearts with icy sea of stars ---
all eyes twinkling.

Heart chatters burn
nights of empty coldness; and
fill them full with hope.

Law Wai Man, Tracy

The Mourning World

Amy Wong

“Guest has arrived, hold your step! The first bow...the second bow...the third bow...” my voice echoes in the mourning hall.

The guests follow my guidance to bow three times and then offer three sticks of incense in front of the photo on the altar. It is a girl’s photo in black and white. I can recognize her face. She appeared in the headline of the newspaper a week ago: Death of charcoal-burning suicide in Cheung Chau. She was only fifteen years old.

Today is my last day to work in this place. The mourning room is nearly empty and particularly quiet. The only noise comes from my announcement and the deceased’s mother. She is not mourning, just sits aside and continues grumbling about the girl – who now sleeps on the bed quietly inside the repository room.

The girl in the photo gazes silently at the people inside the room, with her big and innocent eyes. She smiles like an angel.

“Hey! Can you shut your mouth? You’re so annoying,” the woman’s grumble is interrupted by her husband who has nearly fallen asleep. “Ai~ there is a fug in this room. It makes me sick. When will the ceremony end? You see, only few people come.” He yawns.

The woman ignores him and continues to mutter.

“Guest has arrived, hold your step!” A guest enters the room. She may be the classmate of the deceased. Today only her classmates and teachers come. This family does not have relatives, I suppose. The guest refuses to bow and offer incense when I announce the rite. She is a Christian. Well, it doesn’t matter. I tell her to step forward and pray quietly.

“Thankful rite from the family...”

The only one who can perform the thankful rite for the deceased is her little brother. He kneels near the altar and follows my guidance to bow to the guests. I wonder if he understands what is happening. It is the Chinese tradition that parents cannot perform mourning rituals for their children in funeral. For this girl’s parents, even if they were allowed, they will not do so. They are not strange. I have seen something more bizarre, within these two months.

I have been jobless for nearly half a year after graduating from the university. Two months ago my great uncle introduced me to be a temporary rite manager here. I hesitated...working in a funeral parlour? My friends jested with me: “Wow great! I could then visit you in the funeral parlour later! Haha...hope that you are not the lying one.” Touchwood! How inauspicious! But...under the current circumstance, I had no pretext to refuse. The pay was quite attractive: one

hundred dollars per hour. Although it was only a temporary job, I could not find any better at that moment. Before I could work here, my uncle had trained me for three days for running the rituals in the funeral parlour. Those rules were hard to remember: wife mourned for husband but husband did not mourn for wife; children mourned for parents but parents could not mourn for children; red candles were used in Chinese-style funerals while white candles were used in Western-style ones... What a mess! The last reminder of my uncle was: "Ah Fai, dye your golden hair back to black!"

On the first day of my work, I was required to wear an old-fashioned white *cheung sham*. In addition to my newly dyed black hair, I felt I was 10 years older... Well, I prayed faithfully that my acquaintances would not come!

When I held the first ceremony, I expected to see the whole room of families and guests mourning with tears. I was wrong. The deceased's family and the guests kept on chatting and some even laughed in the mourning hall.

"Wa...you are much thinner than I saw you last time...ten years, isn't it? Which slimming plan did you join?"

"Oh, no! I am still very fat ar...nearly 120 pounds. You are much more beautiful! Do you still remember..."

This kind of conversation could be heard frequently in the mourning halls. The children of the guests competed in folding golden paper ingots and burning them. They ran around in the room and their parents who busied themselves chatting seldom stopped them. When the little devils entered the repository room and saw the motionless body lying on the bed, they screamed "Ghost!" together and darted out of the room. When the Taoist priests came to perform the rituals, the guests acted as if they were in a concert. My senior consoled me that I would get used to all these later.

Somehow I wonder whether I am holding a farewell ceremony for the deceased or reunion party between old friends? The funeral is for dead people or the living? I really could not understand. The funeral ceremony is just like a show, and I am the MC of the show.

The show goes on everyday. Not long before a farce was presented here which attracted a group of reporters. On that day I needed to run the ceremony for a celebrity. We prepared and decorated the mourning hall early in the morning. Longevity buns, chess cakes, animal sacrifice and fresh fruit... I attempted not to miss out any of the ritual offerings. I was reminded not to make any mistakes in the ceremony. The spacious hall was soon filled with guests. The ceremony began. The deceased's wife and two daughters in white mourning garb knelt beside the altar and wailed. The ceremony went smoothly, until a woman and a young man appeared. The middle-age woman in a black gauzy garment with long curly hair was alluring and eye-catching. She stepped into the hall with the young man slowly.

"Guest has arrived...hold..."

“You whore, get out of here with your son of a bitch, NOW!” The kneeling relative jumped up abruptly and shouted at those two guests. Her two daughters followed her. Every one in the hall except the two newcomers was surprised by the widow’s act.

I didn’t know whether I could continue the ceremony or not.

“Haa... why can’t we come? Well...I think Wai-Ming is waiting for his only son to perform *daam faan maai sui*¹ for him rather than your two little girls.” The woman said in a provoking tone, with strong Shanghai dialect.

All the guests looked at them curiously, more and more gossip could be heard.

“Get out! You seduced my husband and cheated him, telling him that you had a son with him, Huh? You’re a shameless creature, get out of here! Don’t hope that you can get a cent from Wai Ming.” The widow’s face turned red and was trembling.

“Oh! Mrs. Ma. Is that the truth? Lawyer Cheung told us yesterday that my father had left a great proportion of legacy for mum and me. Do you want me to call him now?” The young man took out his phone, with a victorious smile.

The widow screeched suddenly and rushed towards the altar, grasping the longevity buns and hurled them at the two uninvited guests. There was chaos inside the hall: two women were fighting and clutching each other’s hair, some were throwing buns while the others escaped from them. The reporters were attracted by the big news and arrived swiftly to take photos and ask the mourners questions.

“Hey! Calm down everybody. The ceremony must go on, or the auspicious time will be over...” I attempted to mediate the fighting but I was pushed out of the circle. What a nightmare!

“How can you leave now? You two are the same! Stay here!”

I hear someone yelling again. The father of the girl wants to leave earlier. His wife shouts at him. Ai... I really take pity on the girl. If I were her, I would commit suicide as well. Hope she can live in peace in another world.

The father stays, but the ceremony ends in a hurry, just as the girl ended her life in a flash.

So I get extra time to take a break. I see Uncle Chan when I enter the washroom to wash my face. He is the experienced rite manager here. White hair, white beard, white *cheung sham* --- a kind old man.

“Ah Fei, you look really down.”

“Uncle Chan, how can you endure the ruthless scenes and people here everyday? They make me suffocate. Sometimes I even have nightmares that my family and friends and the beloved one

¹ *Daam faan maai sui* is the water-buying rite in a Chinese-style funeral. Usually it can only be performed by the deceased’s eldest son.

will treat me in the same way.”

He washes his hands in a leisurely way and smiles.

“If this world is already beyond your tolerance, then how can you stand the outside world? The outside world will let you truly understand what “ruthless” means. At least sometimes you can see people cry here, some of them are really sorrow-stricken, some of the tears are real. This is a job only, don’t put too much sentiment into your job unless you want to go insane.”

I look at him. Yes, that’s true. This is not the only place that will bring me nightmares.

“Go ahead! Finish your last show. Do a perfect job then go home and have a good sleep. Don’t think too much, young man.”

Uncle Chan pats my shoulder and leaves. I wash my face again and go out to prepare the last ceremony. After that... the number of unemployed people will increase by one.

Five o’clock. Everything is well prepared. The photo of a fresh-faced young man is set in the middle of the altar. Gastric cancer deprived him of his life. It is true that God envies the young their talents and always lets their lives end too early. This young man must have been companionable when he was alive. Many guests have come today. I have to add chairs in the small mourning room again and again. Wreaths ordered by the guests are brought in one by one. The ceremony has not begun but some of the guests already sit aside and sob. The atmosphere of this show is a bit different. Uncle Chan’s words appear in my mind.

The wife and sister of the deceased dress in white mourning garb and come to me. I have to tell them the regulations and procedures. The new widow attracts my attention. She is totally absentminded when I am talking. Her face is as pale as her garb. Her eyes are red and puffy. This young lady looks no older than twenty-five. She is very thin, very weak. I can imagine how she took care of her poor husband day and night. I can imagine how she cried when doctors certified her husband’s death. She cannot hear any of my words, I suppose. She just stares blankly at the photo on the altar. There is something in her eyes... I cannot describe...but I can feel the thing in her eyes has put a spark in my mind. Perhaps...I should not be too disappointed?

The show has to begin. It is the auspicious time. I announce the procedure of the ceremony with the rite manager’s special high and low pitch. The wife and sister of the deceased kneel beside the altar. She...is still absentminded, always forgets to bow back to the guests. But she will be forgiven. The show goes on smoothly. Fewer guests arrive, and the Taoists have not come yet to perform the rituals. I tell the chief mourners to take a rest. I especially want her to rest because her body is tottering. There is still a long time to go. Someone holds her by her arms and guides her to the seat. She sits aside quietly, still stares at the photo. The spark in my mind grows.

She suddenly stands up and walks towards the repository room. Other mourners want to stop her but fail, so they accompany her to enter the room. The mourning hall is silent suddenly. The

smoke of incense floats up slowly to the ceiling and disappears. All of us seem to see waiting something to happen.

A scream expels the silence in the hall. Then all of us hear the noise from the repository room. I dart into that room. That poor widow is pulled by others as she is grasping the edge of the bed and wailing.

“How can you leave in this way... Wake up! Wake up! Please don't... please bring me along with you, bring me...”

All people in the room except me weep with her. I cannot cry, but I cry with her in my heart. The spark is strong now. It becomes fire.

It seems that she has exhausted all her energy, she faints. This creates more chaos. She is moved out of the room immediately. People let her lie on a seat in the back row. They smear medicated wine on her temple. I want to give a hand but there is no room for me to help. The Taoists arrive. I have to talk to them but my heart is definitely not with them. I am absentminded as well.

The show must go on. The deceased's sister continues to participate in the ceremony. The Taoists patter and sing and dance. The hall is alive again. Some people cry, some people laugh, some people chat. May be the noise has awakened the sleeping beauty. She regains consciousness gradually and is quiet as usual. After sitting for a while, she steps towards me slowly and my heart bumps faster and faster.

“Can I...continue the ritual?”

Her voice is soft.

“Sure....as you like.”

My voice falters.

She smiles bitterly and kneels besides the altar with her husband's sister. This time she remembers to bow back to the guests.

The show ends smoothly and perfectly. Thank God! The fire warms my heart.

Midnight is coming. The guests leave, the mourners leave. I have to leave this place as well. I pack my things and say goodbye to the staff in the funeral parlour. They laugh:

“Hey- return here later if you have a chance, okay?”

“Touchwood!”

I step out of the funeral parlour and get on the last train to go home. I am a jobless man now. But there is still hope for me to find a job. I go out of the train station and walk along the street. It rains suddenly. I cross the road and want to find shelter. I freeze when I see a pair of shadow in front of 7-11. A man and a lady. They are embracing and gazing at each other passionately. I am chilly. The fire is extinguished. The spark is extinguished. The absentminded lady, the wailing lady,

the fainting lady... now is standing in front of me. Her face is as pale as snow, but there is a flush on her cheeks. Her lips begin to caress his... my heart nearly stops bumping. Then there is a great explosion in it. I scurry away immediately until I reach the entrance of my building. But I don't enter it. I look up to the sky. I want to mourn with the sky. The sky is crying with us. The sky is mourning for the world.

A Writer's Journey

Jump from history to the next century –
Extract life's essence in a line,
But love at first sight stretches a thousand miles.

Fly far to Rome and Spain -- race with all other planes
Catch all hijacking jets and keep them in space.
Rules of Mars hijackers need to obey.

Lick the lemonade moon, icy, sweet,
Kick away the fire ball in summer heat,
Hick! The moon melts when the sun hits!

Meet some fairies and make my best wish:
A prince kisses tenderly on my lips --
In a candychocokingdom we forever live.

Tell mum that stars can actually be reached.
Pick a few shiniest stars before I leave
Poor Kathy, mum said it's the shiniest one.

A writer's journey -- from now to past, near
to far, grown-up worries and childhood dreams,
reality to imaginaries.

Kwong Ngan Ying, Rico

The Winner

Wong Mei Ying, Eli

I was just back from Tokyo when I received a phone call from my father. Like the other calls that I received in the past three months, father used his monotonous and tiring tone to tell me the same news.

‘Your grandmother is in a critical state again. The doctor said she may leave anytime. Come quickly.’

‘Are you sure she’s really dying? If it’s just the same as last time...no, I mean...I’m tired. I’ve just got off the plane...’ My father made no reply. After a while, he said,

‘This time is different. She wants to see you. Come quickly.’ He hung up without saying goodbye. I arrived at the hospital after I had gone home to take a shower and get my clothes changed. I was startled when I saw my father. He was pale and his face had suddenly become so small that I could only see his eyes and the dark circles surrounding them. He looked at me, and then looked at my grandmother.

Yes, this time was different.

My grandmother was lying in bed. I couldn’t tell whether she was asleep or in a coma. She had shrunk – I couldn’t think of other words to describe her fragility. There were many tubes on her and her wrinkled face was grey.

‘Pa, what happened to grandmother?’ I tried to sound innocent.

‘She can’t make it. The doctor said she may leave anytime, tonight maybe.’ I couldn’t make any immediate response. My heart was beating fast.

‘But...but she looked very well last week before I went to Tokyo...’ I murmured. Father looked at me again and sighed.

‘No one can predict what will happen tomorrow.’

‘It was very true. Everything came suddenly and unexpectedly. Father and I had never expected that grandmother would suffer from any ‘elderly disease’. But six years ago, she just suddenly forgot how to go home from the market, how to cook rice by putting both the water and rice into the cooker but not just the rice, how to get back eighty but not eighteen when using a one hundred note to pay for twenty dollars, and finally, how to distinguish father and me. The doctor said it was the Alzheimer’s disease, and we needed to give intensive care to grandmother. I hated such ‘intensive care’. When my colleagues were going to a pub or meet their girlfriends after work, I had to go home immediately to look after grandmother. I was not like my father. He was willing to be absent from work frequently in order to stay with grandmother at home, but I was unwilling to

be absent from the gatherings with my friends. So, one day I gave him a suggestion that I thought was wonderful.

‘Why don’t we send grandmother to the elderly home? That won’t be too expensive. She will have good care there and our lives will be easier too.’ I would never forget father’s reaction to this: he put down the chopsticks heavily on the table, his white face turned red and he was trembling. He had never been so rude.

‘I warn you, don’t let me hear this again. That is your grandmother and you should take care of her. Do you know what life is like in the elderly home? You can’t be so stone-hearted.’ I was in fact silly in giving my father this suggestion. I should know that he would never leave grandmother in the elderly home because she was as noble as a queen in his mind.

‘She can’t bear living with so many people in the elderly home. You know how decent her life has been since the day she was born.’

‘Of course I knew, father. Did you forget that grandmother and you had told me about her dramatic story almost a million times?’

‘I was born in a very rich family in Shanghai.’ This was what I always heard from my grandmother. I studied in Kowloon Tong when I was small. Grandmother used to come picking me up every evening and we would go home by bus. Most of the time when the bus passed the beautiful and luxurious houses there, grandmother would say,

‘My house in Shanghai was much bigger. It was a villa. There were three storeys with twenty rooms and we had a front yard and a back yard. I loved to ride a bicycle in the backyard and play with water in the fountain at the front yard. Your great grandfather was very rich and it was like living in a palace when I was small. You know what, there were twenty servants, three drivers and five gardeners serving us at that time. I was looked after by a nanny and two other young female servants. I shall show you some pictures about it. You must be shocked when you see it.

‘Grandmother had never shown me the pictures of her house in Shanghai. I could not imagine how her house was similar to a palace. But I would believe that she was once a princess – she was remarkably beautiful when she was young. She had kept many black and white pictures of herself. Her big watery eyes, her high nose, her thin and rosy lips, and her slenderness revealed by the sleeveless Cheongsam made her look like a movie star, a Chinese Audrey Hepburn. Frankly, I really loved these photos. No one would refuse such lovely things. I used to bring grandmother’s photos to school and show them to the girls. They were useful for making girlfriends.

My grandmother was a university graduate. She was very proud of it. But every time when she mentioned it, she was not happy because she had lost the certificate and could not show it to me.

‘Not many girls at my time could get into the university. Don’t think your great grandfather had helped me by buying me a place. He would not bother. He hated girls studying so much,

stubborn! I did it all by myself and my results were excellent. If you saw my certificate you'd know how able your grandmother was!' She studied Fine Arts in university, which made her perfectly match my grandfather, who was a musician.

'A love story of a musician and a painter. No, no, that should be the love story of a poor musician and a rich painter. It was like what you see on TV, quite old-fashioned.' Every time when grandmother talked about grandfather, she was sweet like a teenage girl telling others about her first love. It was awkward. I hated hearing her romance and seeing her countenance, but like other parts of her history, there was no way to stop her from telling it over and over again.

'I had many rich and handsome admirers at that time, but I loved none of them. They thought they could conquer me because they had money. I hated that! Your grandfather was different. That silly guy played piano and violin at balls. He was not handsome at all, just looked like a big potato. He was shy too, it's me who dated him first. He was useless, right? But he was an honest man. He used his music to move me.' My grandfather died before I was born. I did not know if he was really good at playing piano and violin. I had once seen the wedding picture of grandmother and grandfather. Grandmother was even more beautiful in her wedding dress. There was a man who looked like that famous Chinese writer Lu Xun sitting next to her. This was my grandfather. It was all I wanted and needed to know.

Grandmother said my great grandfather was very angry when he knew that his gracious and delicate daughter was in love with such a so-called 'artist', but she was clever enough to change everything.

'Your great grandfather hated your grandfather at that time. He thought I should marry an equally rich young guy, but not a beggar-like 'artist' – it was really rude. I was angry so I ran away from home and hid myself. Your great grandfather was like going crazy and he promised whatever I demanded after getting me back.' She would consider such a thing as 'clever', but such 'cleverness' of hers just amused me.

'Since I got married with your grandfather, we moved out and did not spend a cent given by your great grandfather. Both of us got a job in teaching. I was an Art teacher and he taught Music. My life was not as extravagant as in the past, but it was still luxurious at heart, just because I had him. That was the most wonderful time in my life.'

Their wonderful time did not last long. Not long after their marriage, the Japanese invaded China. Grandmother said she had lost a lot because of the malicious 'radish head'¹. Even though the war had been over for more than fifty years, she still hated the Japanese and everything related to

¹ Radish Head: A nickname for the Japanese that most Chinese who had experienced the Second World War will love to call in a disdainful manner.

Japan. When she found that I was listening to Japanese songs, watching Japanese dramas, reading Japanese magazines or comics, she would just turn around to me and nag,

‘You do study History at school, right? Where is your dignity? Why enjoy the uncivilized radish head’s things? Do you know how we Chinese suffered when they invaded us? You must be hypnotized!’

‘Why be so serious? It is the 90s, the war has been over for a long long time. Today’s Japanese are not the Japanese in your days. If you hate them so much, why would you use the refrigerator, the air-conditioner, the microwave and the television? They are all made in Japan. Stop using them if you are that righteous!’ I was angry when I yelled this to my grandmother. I expected such impoliteness would shock her, and therefore silence her, or even make her weep. But it was not the case. It just invited her to lecture me more. I was always defeated.

‘You must not forget what your father and I have told you. The Japanese are villainous, no matter in the 30s, 40s or 90s! They killed many Chinese and robbed many things from us. They killed your great grandfather and took all his wealth! They made me lose my family and your grandfather and I had to flee from one place to another. That was a tough period. You may not understand because you haven’t experienced it. But no matter what, you have to remember that you are Chinese!’ After my graduation, I worked in a Japanese company and I needed to go to Japan frequently. My grandmother was angry with this.

‘You are shameless if you want to be their servant! Now go to their place and never return again. You are no longer our child!’

‘What’s the matter with you? You always love exaggerating things. Do you know that you are troublesome? If I don’t go to work where can I get the money to support you? Please leave me alone and say no more nonsense!’ I had really angered grandmother this time. She had not talked to me in the following month. I was happy for this on the one hand, because I could take a rest from her story telling and lecturing. On the other hand, I was annoyed. She still cooked for me, washed and ironed my clothes, and even made the bed for me, but she just refused to look at me and talk to me. Everything was like under her control.

My father was not as stubborn as grandmother. He loved everything to be peaceful. So, he just isolated me for about three days, and then opened up our conversation by telling me again how gracious grandmother was and how inappropriate I had been.

‘Your grandmother has experienced the hardship that neither you nor I can understand. You can’t blame her for being irate with the Japanese. The Japanese did leave a deep scar on her. Did I tell you that I was born when your grandmother was at the age of thirty-five? She could have had a child earlier, but she just didn’t want her child to suffer in the war. So she waited until everything had settled down, and that was after her thirty-fifth birthday. Even today it is dangerous for a

woman to bear a baby at the age of thirty-five. Can you imagine how risky it was for a delicate woman to bear a baby at the age of thirty-five half a century ago? She is a respectable woman and deserves no rudeness from her grandson whom she loves so much.'

I always thought grandmother and father made a perfect match – one loved controlling and the other loved being controlled. People always said father looked like grandmother. He was a good-looking man with grandmother's watery eyes, high nose, thin rosy lips and fair white skin. He had been teaching Chinese in the same secondary school for almost thirty years. It was grandmother who got this job for him because the principal was an old friend of hers. Father's only interests were calligraphy and studying Chinese Literature and History. When my friends' fathers brought them out to play football, my father would just stay at home and force me to practise calligraphy or read those thick and difficult books. It was cruel for a kid. I had once cried before my grandmother and complained to her, but her response had made me feel more unfortunate for myself.

'Why be unhappy? Can't you see that your father is very different from your friends' fathers? They are rude and have no manners at all. Your father is a real gentleman, a real Chinese gentleman. Your grandfather and great grandfather were also good at calligraphy, and they loved reading too, they turned out to be remarkable, right? Your father is also a remarkable gentleman and you will be another if you keep up such good habits. Forget about those silly sports!' From this moment I knew I was a different creature from my father. I did not know how to please my grandmother and saw no reason to do so. Father and his doings were all silly in my eyes.

'Would you please pass me a glass of water?' Father requested abruptly and I was startled. Did he see through my mind and hear what I had just been thinking? I passed him the glass and his bony hand was shaking.

'Why are you so late? She has been murmuring your name, she wants to see you.'

I looked at grandmother. Her mouth was slightly open but no voice came out. I knew she must have been calling 'fai fai' before I arrived. She started to call me 'fai fai' since I got the name Wong Man Fai. I was thirty now and she was still calling me by this. When I was in form one, one morning I was gathering with my classmates in the playground of school, and I suddenly heard a shrill voice shouting out 'fai fai'. It was my grandmother. She was holding a thick coat and waving to me outside the gate. She said it was a cold day and was afraid that I did not put on enough clothes. I did not feel warm for that, however. I could say that was one of the most embarrassing things that had happened in my life. After that, all my classmates tended to call me 'fai fai' – with a teasing smile. They said I must be a baby girl at home, and I would be woman-like when I grew up, just like my father. I hated this silly nickname since then, it meant humiliation. But no matter how I cried or how mad I was, my grandmother had never stopped calling me 'fai fai' throughout these thirty years –

‘Fai fai, wake up, you’ll be late.’ ‘Fai fai, put on the coat, it’s cold outside.’ ‘Fai fai, grandma will fry chicken wings tonight, see how many pieces you can eat.’ ‘Fai fai, close your eyes and pour the medicine into your mouth. I know you’re brave.’ ‘Fai fai is always the best in grandma’s heart. The brightest kid...’

Grandma, you have won. You always controlled the whole situation. I hated all your exaggerated stories but I remembered them better than anything; I hated being called ‘fai fai’ but I couldn’t forget how you called me, and I was eager to hear it again...

‘Ar fai, don’t cry. Grandmother will not want to see it.’

After all, father was not that weak.

Grandmother passed away before mid-night. When we left the hospital, there was a shower and the air was chilly. Father and I were walking side by side and both of us hid our hands in our pockets as we used to. I saw our shadows under the streetlight – both were very long, thin and fragile. I took out one hand from my pocket and put it on father’s shoulder. Our shadows had then become one, a stronger one that would please grandmother.

Paper

Transparent flesh of
you in maternity ward
covers a blank paper,

which's filled in school with
knowledge and experience
and also malice.

Spite and pretension
fetch you prosperity and
success in career,

but on your deathbed,
you feel weak and regretful,
that dirty paper.

Tsang Wai Ki, Ricky

The Way Home

Sin Sui Fung

It was such a fine day. The sun was bright. There was no cloud in the sky.

I walked slowly among a crowd in the street. Sweat kept falling from my forehead. It dropped onto the ground and evaporated into the air in an instant. How I wished to vanish like that, out of all matter...

I was unable to think in such heat, and the strong fragrance of carnations that many people were holding made me feel even faint. But somehow I enjoyed a moment like this, when I did not have to think about my troubles. Just as I was walking unconsciously amidst the flow of people, someone stood in my way, saying to me,

‘Have you bought a bunch of flowers for your mother yet? If not, the flowers in our shop are the best!

‘The shopkeeper looked at me with a sincere smile. I stared at her, murmuring,
‘Damn Mother’s Day!’ and then walked away.

I used to be like many other daughters, buying carnations for my mother every year on Mother’s Day. But this year... I looked around and saw the many happy faces of mothers and daughters. How nicely they talked to each other. How warmly they smiled to each other... The quarrel between mother and me came into my mind.

* * *

Early in the morning, even before sunrise, I heard father hurrying out the door for work. My family owned a fish stall in the market near our house. He had to go to pick up the fish very early. Usually mother went to work at the same time as father went out. But she had to wait for me, because it was a Sunday morning when I was supposed to help at the stall. I was waken up by the sounds mother made, but I did not get out of bed.

Suddenly mother opened the door of my bedroom and said,

‘Hey, wake up! You are to work at the fish stall today!’ She went out after saying this.

I was not going to get out of bed. I did not want to go to that stinky fish stall ever again. Yesterday afternoon I went there to pick up something. There were lots of customers and then I helped out a little bit. When I was going back home and was in the lift, a girl whispered to her mother,

‘Mum, she stinks! Bad smell of fish!’ She was pointing at me when she said that.

‘Sh!’ Her mother hushed her immediately but I could hear all of it. I felt so embarrassed that I got out of the lift even though the lift had not yet arrived at my floor. There was no way I could explain how I felt at that moment. I felt so terrible that I did not utter a word the whole night. I shut myself in the bedroom, and would not answer when mother called me to dinner. At last she was so upset that she simply ignored me. But that was not going to alter my determination. I had made up my mind firmly this time.

Mother came into my bedroom again, this time opening the door nearly violently.

‘We’re going to be late for work! Get up now!’

‘I covered my head with the blanket. But I could still hear mother murmuring in the dining room. She paced the floor for a few minutes. Then she rushed into my room and lifted up the blanket.

‘Get up!’

‘I sat right up and said,

‘No!’

‘Mother snapped at me,

‘What do you mean by “no”? You must! Now get out of the bed and...’

‘I don’t want to go! I’ll never go to that stinky fish stall again!’ I shouted at mother. She was frozen by my words. I lay down on my bed again. Behind my back mother said coldly,

‘Fine, do whatever you like. Just remember, it’s the stinky stall that has nurtured you.

‘Mother slammed the front door when she went out. I tried hard to get back to sleep but my mind was so full of different kinds of feelings that I could not. Was there shame? Was there regret? It was like different sorts of tastes being mixed together, making me unable to distinguish anyone of them. It was even more complex with my memory of the past.

* * *

Ever since I was a young child, mother had helped father at his fish stall in the market near our house. When I was in primary school, I had to go to help at the fish stall every day after school. At the very beginning I felt it was fun doing all this, being able to talk to the adults. But things changed as time passed. Eventually it only became hard work to me. I could not manage the time for helping at the shop and for finishing my homework. And, more importantly, I did not want to be seen working at a fish stall. Luckily the market was quite far away from my school. But still I became more and more reluctant to help at the fish stall.

The situation became worse when I was in Primary Three. I could never forget that day when I was so humiliated by a boy in my class. I had rarely talked to him before. One day at recess he

came up to me and asked,

‘Do your parents own a fish stall?’

I was startled, not knowing what to say. Though I did not intend to keep it as a secret that my parents owned a fish stall, I did not tell anybody about it. Even I myself could not understand the reason for this but I just did not want my classmates to know. I tried to walk away from that boy, yet he would not let me go. A glance at his face and I could see a cunning smile.

‘You haven’t answered my question!’ He stood in my way. ‘I saw you helping at a fish stall the other day.

‘I lowered my head, saying nothing.

‘Then you admit?’ He laughed satisfactorily. ‘You fishy person! Stinky person!’

Other boys joined him in calling me fishy and stinky. Their voices echoed in my ears, just like the very evil voices of some devils. My tears began to drop and I covered my ears with my hands. I pleaded for them to stop. I cried and cried until someone patted me on my shoulder. It was my teacher. She took me to the teacher’s room. She tried to talk to me but I could not hear a thing. I would not let go of my hands, even after mother had arrived at the school. Mother tried to take my hands off my ears. But I smelled the stink of her hand. Even her clothes smelt of fish. I turned my head away, shouting,

‘No! Don’t touch me with your stinky hand! Get away from me!’

‘Mother’s hand stopped in the middle of the air. Even though I did not look at her, I could feel her eyes staring at me. To her, I had always been the good daughter who went to help father and her right after school, without a word of complaint. She must have been shocked at hearing what I said, because her voice was trembling when she said,

‘Dry your tears and go back to your class.’

I could tell she was suppressing her anger with her greatest effort. If she had not been in the staff room in front of all those teachers, she would have slapped me then. I stopped crying at once.

‘Go home after school.’ She left these words and stood up. She turned to the teacher and apologised to her. Then she went back to work without a further glance at me.

That night when we got home we did not speak to each other. Mother still had the angry look on her face. She did not look at me at all. I glanced from her to father at dinner, wondering if she had told father about what had happened. I felt relieved when father did not seem to know a thing. He would have beaten me up if he knew I had said such things. But it was five days after that when mother would finally speak to me. And her first words to me were,

‘Never will you say those things in front of me again.’

I did not apologise for what I had said. I could not apologise because I had said nothing wrong. Eventually mother and I acted normally, making it seem like nothing had happened.

Deep in our hearts, we both knew that things would never be the same. In between us, the gap grew wider and wider, though we tried so hard to pretend it was not there. The bomb was always waiting for a chance to explode.

A couple of years later, I was preparing to go to secondary school. The teacher asked the parents of every student to go and meet her at school. I was carrying the notice in my schoolbag when I went to the market to pick up some fish for dinner from our fish stall. Suddenly I heard someone quarrelling very loudly. As I went nearer, it happened to be father and mother quarrelling with the shop owner of the neighbouring fish stall. Competition caused the old grudge between my parents and that shop owner. Ever since the shop owner had expanded his business, which meant some of his commodities would often occupy the space of our stall, they argued with each other more often. Right then they were quarrelling over the same matters.

It would have been a bad idea to approach my parents then, and I decided to go home first and then went back an hour later. Just as I was about to turn around and leave, I caught sight of a familiar face. It was one of my classmates. She was staring so attentively at the argument that she seemed like a reporter rather than a passer-by. I was startled at seeing her. What if she saw me and realised that these people were my parents? What if she told the whole class about my parents owning a fish stall and arguing very loudly with some other shop owners over small matters? My heart was beating very fast. I must get away as soon as possible before she saw me. I ran all the way from the market to my home, despite the heavy schoolbag on my back. I did not say anything to mother and father that night. That notice stayed inside my schoolbag. But a few days later, mother asked me holding the notice in her hand,

‘Why have you not told me about this?’

I did not utter a word. How could I tell her that it was because I did not want my classmate to see that she was my mother? I could not make myself lie that I had forgotten neither. I just stood there.

‘Why? Tell me! You’ve forgotten?’

She urged me to tell her the reason. But I would not say anything. At last she gave up. She was about to walk away when I whispered,

‘Why does it have to be a fish stall? Can’t it be a stationery store?’

Mother stared at me, seemed to be unable to believe what I had said.

‘How can you say such things, as if it is a shame to you?’

‘It is!’

Mother’s eyes were wide open. She slapped me on the face and shouted loudly to show her extreme anger,

‘Why do you have to be like this? At least we are not robbers, and we don’t rob money from

others! We earn our money from hard work. Now you're feeling... ashamed of us...?'

Her hands clutched tightly to her chest. Then she ran out of the door. I sat down on a chair, thinking about what I had said and done. Why did I say that to mother? Why did I always have to hurt her with those horrible words? I must have broken her heart...

* * *

I walked slowly along the street, not knowing where to go. Unconsciously I came to the market in which the fish stall was. I was just about to turn away in another direction when I saw my mother some distance away. I hid myself behind a truck and looked at her. In the hot weather, the T-shirt my mother had on was all wet. Sweat went down all her face. She went to a truck to get some fish to sell. She walked much more slowly than she usually did. It was already three o'clock in the afternoon. She must have been so tired. When I was younger, mother seemed an almighty person, who never looked exhausted. Right before my eyes, there was this woman, whose hair was turning white, who could not act as quickly as before. Back in the days when I was in primary school, I offered to plug the white hair for mother, but she would not let me. She would then go to have it dye to black again. Now that the economy was not as good as it used to be she had to work extra hard. She was not bothered with the white hair any more.

Mother held out her hand to fetch the large water pail. Those hands, contacting with water all the time, were much paler than any other part of her skin. Mother's hands were never those elegant, well-kept ones. I used to ask mother all the time why she did not keep her hands well. She would just smile to me, pat my head and say,

'For you and your future, we must work hard.'

Was all the hard work worth it, when all that was for a daughter like me? Every day father and mother went to work before dawn and did not come home till dinnertime. They never showed tiredness. They never complained. Why should I?

'Ouch!' Suddenly I heard mother cried out in a low voice. She put her hand on her back and looked painful. She must have hurt her old wound on her back carrying the large pail. Mother was hospitalised for a few days for that wound a few years ago. It never got better. When it rained her back ached severely.

Mother struggled to get up. But then she fell down to her knees again. It was a helpless woman, working hard to bring up her daughter who was so nasty to her...

I stepped up with my heart full of shame...

Pompeii¹

The dragon, detested for being trapped for long,
 envied the people living underneath.
Freedom, prosperity, warmth, peace, all sounded
 abstract to him, yet they were enfolded down there.

Heat, rising from heart to throat, extended
 to reach his feverish mind– there it burst.
Like a lump of blazing flame, he descended;
 breach out the mountain, start his invasion.

Crows bawled wretchedly: Escape! Escape!
 But they were too frail to be an alarm,
and were soon swallowed by the fierce flame,
 which melted houses, ravaged lives, and buried

Screech

Howl

Tears

Hope

Even despair faded.
Only silence–
survives.

Anonymous

¹ Pompeii is a city in Italy. It was destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79AD

Latchkey Child No More

Lau Hoi Yung

The news struck me like a bolt of lightning. A fragment of the TV programme I watched the previous night flashed on my mind; an innocent, helpless defendant being sentenced to lifetime imprisonment. I felt like I had become that victim.

‘Yes, Grandma is coming here in two weeks, to look after you.’

‘Mum, I can manage on my own. I’ve done it for three months now.’

Haven’t you heard what the government says on TV? Kids are not allowed to stay at home, and a six-year-old is still a kid. Do you want Uncle Policemen to punish you.’

‘But I’m different from those dummy heads, you see? I’ve always been a clever good girl, haven’t I?’

‘Yes, but a good girl always listens to her mum, I’ve always been a clever good girl, haven’t I?’

So that was it. Once the judge has made up his mind, you can never change it however you plead with him. I had two weeks of freedom left. I had got to figure out my strategies.

Being a latchkey child was a lot of fun. As the only child of my family, I had to look after myself in the afternoon on the weekdays. Everybody called me Devilfish. I had very short hair, but I spotted a small strand of locks that trailed over my neck and my back, so that it looked like the long thin tail of a devilfish. I would like to have long hair and wear plaits, but mom wouldn’t allow it, saying it would be too much trouble. Nevertheless, I was mighty proud of my self-designed ‘Devilish hairstyle’, which had become a fad among the kids in the neighbourhood, and the nickname that went with it.

Everybody would think that a six-year-old is still a tiny little fool, but I was no fool. I was an old kid already – precocious is the word, if you like. Living among a bunch of adults in the family, I regarded myself as one of them. I was not only taller than my peers – people sometimes mistook me for a ten-year-old – but the way I talked might be mistaken as the way twelve-year-olds talk. My favourite pastimes included playing teacher to my playmates, and imitating the news reporters on TV. It was mainly from TV programmes that I picked up my adult-like manners.

There were three of us in the family, at least for the time being. We are ethnic Hakka people originating from Mui Prefecture. We came to Hong Kong in 1978, when I was still in my mum’s tummy. My parents worked very hard to feed the family and the relatives in our hometown. Dad was a sturdy man with powerful arms and shoulders. He delivered goods for an electronic company, and could carry a fridge on one shoulder. Mum was a tall woman with soft velvety eyes. She

worked as a cleaner for the regional Council and swept the streets. They used to be farmers in the Mainland, but they were no hicks. They didn't learn to speak Cantonese until they came to Hong Kong, but now they spoke it as well as I did. They had very little education and didn't get the most respectable of jobs, but I looked up to them all the same.

Going to a half-day school. I was 'forced' to look after myself in the afternoon when my parents were still working. I didn't mind it a bit, to tell the truth. When I came back from school at noon, the first thing to do was to turn on the rice-cooker to reheat the food that mum had prepared for me in the morning. Mum was afraid that I might get burnt by the rice-cooker, but I was a smart kid who knew when to touch it and when to avoid touching. I had the whole place to myself and could do whatever I liked to do after lunch. My parents told me to do my homework and not to go out, but I often went out to play for a while right after lunch. Nevertheless, I always finished my homework before they returned, so they never knew I had gone out.

My parents would not allow me to go out after they heard there were rogues and drug-addicts in the area, but those bad guys didn't hang around in the afternoon. We lived in a so called 'resettlement area' by the Shing Mun river in Sha Tin. A resettlement area is inhabited by people who are not yet eligible for public housing, and they are becoming rare nowadays. Back in those days, it was very common, though. As most residents would not stay for more than a couple of years in the area, the whole place seemed to have a temporary air to it. In our case, we only had to stay in the area for one year.

Our resettlement area was a small one that consisted of only ten blocks. A block was actually a long, massive two-story shack jerry-built with corrugated iron, wood and other shoddy materials. Our block was divided into twenty flats, each occupied by a family. The layout for every flat was the same; when you opened the front door, you came into a tiny kitchen with a sink and a stove. Two steps forward, you found yourself standing in the living area, which was about fifty square feet. We did not bother to paint the walls or lay floor tiles, so the place looked dull and grey. We only had a few pieces of old furniture. We did not have room for a sofa. Four steps forward, you came to the corner at the back of the living area. There was a staircase which looked more like a ladder that led up to the sleeping area, which was also about fifty square feet. I don't call it a bedroom because we didn't even have a bed there, as we had no way of shipping a bed up that ladder. We only had rugs on the floor. The most annoying part was that we didn't have a toilet in the flat. There was a communal toilet at the other end of the resettlement area, but I had never been there. It was a mysterious place to me, but its stinky reputation was enough to keep my curiosity in check. I used a potty instead.

Besides the residents who paid rent to live there, we also had heaps of uninvited guests – cockroaches and sometimes rats – who lived there for free. The experience of having a cockroach

climbing up my leg was the source of many a nightmare. Yet, despite the squalid living conditions, the resettlement area was a fun place to live. In the summer days, we liked to move our collapsible table outside the flat to have dinner so that we could catch a bit of breeze and would not feel so cramped. When all our neighbours did the same thing, it was like having an alfresco banquet.

The upper course of the Shing Mun river, just a stone's throw from the resettlement area, was my favourite playground. Unlike the wide, foul-black lower course, the upper course was just about a meter across, and the water flowed clear and shallow. I liked to wade in the river and collect the small shellfish that clung to the banks, or watch the tadpoles darting away from my legs. Sometimes I went there with my playmates; sometimes I just went on my own. My playmates, supervised by their mothers or elder siblings, could not go out whenever they wished. They all envied me because I was free like an eagle.

Yet I knew my eagle days were numbered. I had a farewell party with all my friends by the river on the day before granny arrived. Small wonder that all seven of them managed to slip out, since I told them I was going to treat them to a feast. It was such a gorgeous sunny day that even the tadpoles seemed to be more active than usual.

'Devilfish, what's your granny like?' Octopus asked.

'I told you I've never met her. But I imagine she's a toothless wizard, like the one on TV who likes to cook kids in a huge boiling pot.'

'Yuck. She's not going to get us all, is she?' Goldfish asked, her big eyes wide open as if they were going to burst out. She was the most gullible member in our marine-animal club.

'Don't be silly. My granny certainly is nice and she always cooks yummy food for me.' Sea lion said. 'Maybe your granny will let you go out.'

'No way. Even my mum won't let me out by myself except when she asks me to get her something in the market. My granny's going to keep close watch on me.'

'Do you mean you'll never come down here again?' Eel asked.

'Maybe I'll slip out all the same. She can't run fast even if she gives chase. You just wait and see.'

'Devilfish, you said you've got a treat for us. I'm hungry already. I had very little for lunch in order to spare my appetite.' Shark grumbled.

So we went to the snack store and got heaps of ice-cream, lollies, chips and drinks. I used up the coins – eight dollars forty in total – in my piggy bank, which I smashed that morning. I saved that money with my own effort. Whenever mum asked me to get groceries from the market, I would bargain with the storekeepers. Usually I only had to pay four-fifty for a purchase of five dollars, because the storekeepers thought I was cute and smart. Then I saved the difference in my piggy.

We marched back to the river, and sat on the bank, with our feet in the water. In the meantime, we forgot all about my granny and tucked the food away. We ate our fill and laughed our fill, chatting about the good old days. I still remember the sensation of having the golden sun above my head, a melting ball of ice-cream in my mouth, and the cool running water at my feet. Then, we played our favorite games: hide-and-seek, policeman-and-thief, red-green-light. All the while, we laughed and screamed with joy, and I felt my tail flying in the wind when I ran. An eagle was soaring high above, cruising in the breeze without flapping its wings. I followed it with my eyes, and tried to outrun it with my feet. I ran into the river, ran out of it and nearly bumped into a tree before losing track of the eagle.

We rounded up our farewell party by singing “the Light of Friendship”: ‘How many real friends can one have in a lifetime? How many friendships can last forever ...’ I was so happy, yet so sad. We ended singing the song three times over. When I went home, it was past sunset and the flat felt empty and claustrophobic.

The miracle I dreamed about did not come. My granny arrived the next day according to plan. She was not much better than I had expected. She did not show a grain of resemblance to my mom, whom I thought was quite pretty. She was all wizened and shrunken, the network of wrinkles on her face like rows of guts on barren earth, while the blue veins on the back of her hands stood out like the rivers you see on maps.

The following weeks were a drag. My granny treated me exactly like a dummy head. I was not allowed out alone. Each day she followed me to school and back. The funny thing was that she, who was supposed to look after me, could not figure out the way until the fifth day. She did not even know how traffic lights worked. I could get to school and back myself with my eyes shut. When mum asked me to get some groceries, I thought the opportunity had come, but then granny would follow along, saying a little kid should never go out alone. The latchkey, which I used to wear round my neck, was now securely in her pocket.

My granny was a drag. She could not speak a word of Cantonese, and kept on talking in Hakka. All she ever talked about was ‘at home’, which meant her hometown. ‘At home, the pigs ain’t getting fat’. At home, the rice ain’t growing well’. She must be so old that she even forgot that she was now in Hong Kong. I seldom talked to her, and when I did, I always spoke in Cantonese, though I could also speak Hakka. I never called her ‘grandma’; I said ‘eh’ when I called her, as if her name was ‘eh’.

There were things about her that got on my nerves. First, she had the habit of taking out her dentures after supper. When she smiled with them off, I could see two rows of bare, pink gums, which was a horrifying sight. She also talked with a lisp, which I loved to mimic under my breath. Second, she liked to rub a very pungent herbal liniment all over her back to relieve her rheumatism,

and that liniment stank. After having my clothes washed together with hers, my clothes reeked too. I felt like an old woman myself wearing them. However, the most annoying thing was, when she fetched me home from school, she'd try to hold my hand, and her coarse, callous palm would hurt mine. So I usually just stuck my hands firmly in my pocket. I tried to put as much distance between us as possible.

I did manage to slip out of her bleary but watchful eye for once. I told her I needed to go to the toilet badly when she followed me back home one Friday. I darted away like an arrow without waiting for her answer. I ran to the river, took off my shoes and waded against the current. I stomped my feet as hard as I could, sending the tadpoles fleeing in all directions. I exhausted myself with all the stomping and splashing, and dozed off under a tree. It was getting dark and chilly when I woke up. I trudged back home and found my parents waiting for me. Granny must have told them. I did not say a word. It was the first time my dad beat me. Mum did not let me have dinner as a punishment. I went to bed, feeling sore and hungry. I did not even have lunch that day.

I was very quiet for the next two weeks. Nothing much happened, until I found I could bear it no more. I squeezed myself through the window when granny was taking her afternoon nap. I just wanted to have a breath of fresh air and come back before she woke up. I went to a playground nearby, and climbed on a swing. I had not been on a swing for so long that I felt rather awkward on it at first. I pushed as hard as I could, alternatively squatting and standing up on the seat. I was swinging in mid-air before long. The centrifugal force made my heart race with excitement and liberation. I kept on pushing. I had to grip the chains very tight to prevent myself from being torn away from the swing. The chains grew hot and wet from the sweat on my palms. Suddenly they slipped from my grip.

A severe pain shot from my elbow to my whole being. I lay motionless on the ground for a long time, unable to get up. When I struggled back to my feet, my right arm was badly swollen, and my head was throbbing with pain. I did not remember myself crying. I limped back to the flat and kicked the front door.

'Why, it's you! What happened, Ling-ling! Where have you been?

'I could not answer. I just looked at my swollen arm, my body trembling.

'You hurt yourself? Let me see.' She placed her hand on my arm. I screamed.

'I must get you to the doctor now. Come.' She took my left hand. I could barely walk as each step gave my arm a terrible jolt. She carried me on her hunched back, walking on somewhat unsteadily and panting loudly. She took me to the shop of a Dit-dar master, who specialized in bone injuries. My granny knew the place because she had been there for herbal treatment for her rheumatism. Now that the pain had abated a bit, I told the master what happened in broken sentences.

‘The joint of your elbow has been dislocated. I’ll get it back in place for you.’ The master said with an air of certainty. He applied some liniment on my elbow, and began squeezing it and pulling it. The throbbing pain started all over again. I screamed with each jerk on my elbow.

‘Pain, pain, pain.’ I yelled, trying to get his hands off me with my left hand.

‘Gentle, gentle.’ Granny pleaded, tears streaming down her wrinkled face.

‘Of course it’s painful. It’s a joint dislocation.’ He said condescendingly. The louder I screamed, the harder he pulled. Finally, when all his strength had gone, he shrugged and said, ‘Can’t fix it. You better go to the hospital.’ He was a quack. I was half dead.

We got a taxi to the hospital. The doctors said they had to take some X-rays for my injury to see how bad it was. They got my elbow onto a hard, cold platform and forced me to bend my elbow into some queer ridiculous angles that I may not be able to bend even with a good elbow. The stupid pain started all over again, but it was not as bad as before, because it was the third time that I went through it. Seeing the wince on my face, Granny murmured words of comfort and encouragement.

The scans came out almost immediately. The bones on my elbow were badly fractured, and I was going to have an operation that night. Only then did Granny and I realize the severity of my situation. I never imagined playing on the swing could be such a dangerous game. I realized what a naïve kid I had been.

I had to wait about three hours before being operated on. I was already exhausted—it was such a long trying day, probably the longest in my life. Granny was very tired too, but she did not leave me for a second. I was crying to see mum and dad, but we did not have their phone numbers with us. Granny did everything she could to cheer me up, singing Hakka folk songs, telling me stories. She was not such a drag after all. In her songs and stories, Mui Prefecture, our hometown, was an idyllic little place with verdant hills, clear rivers, simple country folk and huge gentle buffalos. She promised to bring me there when my elbow healed.

When I came round from the anesthetic, the first person I saw was Granny. I was lying on a gurney, with my elbow and lower arm in a plastic cast. Granny smiled down at me, and I smiled back.

‘How do you feel? Is there any pain?’ she asked gently.

‘I had a very sound sleep. I don’t feel any pain.’

‘I’ve found your Mummy and Daddy. They’ll be here very soon. Now, do you feel hungry? Thirsty?’ I shook my head no.

She sat down by the bedside, and neither of us said anything for a while. I reached out my good hand, took hers and whispered,

‘Grandma’.

Since then, I formed the habit of calling her ‘Grandma’ and holding her hand. Her palm was still coarse and callous, but it also felt warm and reassuring against mine.

Murderer

I need a knife
Fruit knife or bread knife?
Pork knife or beef knife?
Fruit knife is too small
Bread knife is too long
Pork knife is too big
Beef knife is too sharp --
Beef knife is the choice

What if I knew the Black Market
I could buy a gun
Killing would be easy with a gun

Apart from a knife, I may need poison
When she walks away
I'll put it into her cup of tea
Dettol smells too strong
Sleeping pills don't melt in tea
Rat poison tastes bitter
She is stupid but not so stupid to drink it
Poisons don't work
Beef knife is the choice

Tomorrow I'll buy a beef knife
For vengeance
Revenge This Poet calling me Murderer
I do not allow her to call me Murderer
Tomorrow I will kill This Poet
This is her last poem

This Poet (1981 – 2002)

Bye, Dad!

Winnie So

It was July 16, my birthday, my nineteenth birthday. I was sitting in a big round table in the Celestial Court Chinese Restaurant of the Sheraton Hotel, waiting for my dad. I hated Yum Cha; I hated to see children eating happily with their parents. I hated to see the big grins on the parents' faces and I hated to hear the innocent sounds of laughter of the kids. I stared at my watch, the Tag Heuer that my mum bought me when I turned eighteen. It was eleven forty-five; dad was one and a half hours late. I was not surprised at all; it was simply his usual practice. Often, he would find many stupid excuses to explain to me why he arrived late. Sometimes, he claimed that he was stuck in the traffic when we were meeting in the MTR station. There were other times when he told me that he was having business meetings with different government officials on Sunday mornings. I had already got used to his lies, big ones, small ones...

Dad eventually showed up at twelve thirty. I went extremely mad when I saw him, not because of his lateness, but because of the fact that he was not alone, he came with that whore, that bitch! I really don't know what the hell she is doing in Hong Kong. Isn't she living in China! Ah, yes! She must be spending her summer vacation in Hong Kong again, doing her annual shopping and robbing my dad's money. I knew of that bitch's existence years ago but this was the first time I met her, face to face. I hated the way she walked, the way she stood, the way she dressed. She waddled when she should walk, she scratched her left ankle with her right high heel when she should just stand and she wore a pink bathrobe when she should be well-dressed for an elegant place like the Celestial Court! If possible, I really hoped to be blacked out from this whole scene. I felt ashamed to sit at the same table with them and I just kept silent. I did not even greet my own father. Anyway, he was not qualified to be my father, neither was he qualified to be my mother's husband. It was that bitch who finally broke the silence after a few minutes,

"Ning hau..."she said.

"Sorry? I have been living in Australia for years and I don't know Mandarin! Do you speak English?" I asked, in a patronizing tone.

Dad gave me a look. He knew in his heart that I could understand Mandarin. I hated that look on his face and I decided to fight back.

"Daddy, I am starting to forget some of the Cantonese words as well, maybe you should also talk to me in English."

"Oh, is that so?" he asked.

"Yup! We haven't meet for ages! You wouldn't blame me for forgetting Cantonese,

wouldn't you? Mum and I also communicate in English, you know? Her English improved a lot and she..."

Just when I wanted to remind dad about mum, that bitch interrupted and she, that mainland whore, dared to talk to me in English.

"You mask be Catfin, righ? Your fadda off-ten tods about you, you nall?"

"Really? And you must be the 'Yee-Nine', I suppose. My name's Catherine, C-A-T-H-E-R-I-N-E, not Catfin."

"Hey! Be polite, Catherine. This is June, you can call her Aunt June!" Dad commanded.

"Wait...wait... Catfin... I dawn quite get what you said, did you call me 'Yee-Nine'?"

"Yes, I did call you 'Yee-Nine', so?"

"Catherine!" Dad shouted.

"What? Am I wrong? Aren't you my father's hidden mistress?" I screamed.

"Hidda mistress? I tink... I tink... you mishundersood. You fadda and I got marry muns ago."

"Oh, yes! I nearly forgot that we are of the same age, so you are also nineteen and are old enough to get married, right?"

"That's enough, Catherine!" interrupted dad, his face turned red.

His face turned red easily as he had very high blood pressure. His red face petrified me when I was a child because mum once told me that if dad's face turned really red, he would explode and die. Worrying that he would die of a face explosion, I behaved myself and acted like a good girl all the time. For nearly ten years, I hadn't seen that red face but today, that same face appeared again, right in front of me. His face turned blood red just because I insulted that bitch, his hidden mistress in China. He was on that bitch's side; he was no longer my father. He had only one identity; he was the bitch's paramour!

"Who are you to judge if my insult to her is enough or not? You bring this bitch all the way from China to here to celebrate my nineteenth birthday with me? What do you expect from me? Smile and call her auntie? Or even mum?" I shouted.

"Lower your voice! You are embarrassing me. Many of my clients dine out here."

"I embarrassed you? I thought you have long forgotten what embarrassment is. When you walked on the streets, hand in hand with this whore, who was at least twenty years younger than you, did you feel embarrassed? When you took photo stickers with this bitch in Mong Kok last summer, did you ever spare a thought for me, your poor daughter? Did you know how embarrassed I was when my friends emailed me and said that they saw you taking photo stickers with a sexy whore?"

He sat still and did not say a word, his face turned redder.

“You want to know what exactly the word ‘embarrassment’ means? I can go on and talk for weeks!”

“No... no... no...Catfin. The dim sums are getting coal. We batta eat furs!”

The bitch’s voice suddenly reminded me of my mother. If my mother was sitting there with us, I was sure she would be upset by me. Mum often wanted me to be a lady. No matter what happened, she expected me to stay calm and be a well-mannered girl. I kept silent and dad was silent, too. Again, that stupid bitch broke the silence,

“Oh... I steal had not say happy birthday to you, Catherine. I had bored a book fur you because your fadda tell me dat you light Shaspear, so I bored you the Rawmeo an Chuliet. It is a fairly famoose pay, you mask love it!”

“Save that for yourself! I read ‘Romeo and Juliet’ when I was thirteen. And I’ve got “The Complete Works of Shakespeare” at home. I do not need that stupid book!”

“Oh...oh... sorry fur buying da wong peasant fur you.”

There was a slight tremble in her voice and her eyes welled up. I studied her face inch by inch with great delight. I really liked the way she looked when she was about to cry, I felt satisfied and relieved just by looking at the tears in her eyes. She seemed to know what I was feeling and she was such a bitch that she was unwilling to give me that little bit of satisfaction. She excused herself and went to the lavatory. Only dad and I were left in the big round table. We went into complete silence for a few minutes.

“You shouldn’t call her ‘bitch’ all the time! She is my wife now, at least you should call her auntie June”, dad said eventually.

“You only have one wife, and that’s my mum!”

“Your mum and I have nothing in common and we aren’t compatible. We simply came from different planets. We could never be a good match, do you understand?”

“Of course I understand! I understand perfectly, that after fifteen years of marriage, you suddenly realized that you have nothing in common with mum. That after having me and Keith, you realized that you and mum could never be a good match!”

“We have very different characteristics!”

“The divorce has nothing to do with mum’s characteristics; it was you alone who destroyed our family. You divorced mum simply because you are selfish. You divorced mum because she was getting old and unattractive! And you men are only fond of young and sexy chicks!”

“That was not the case, I divorced your mum and married June not because she is young and pretty, but that she understands me, she knows exactly what I think and how I feel at all times.”

“Stop bull shitting! She understands you better than mum? You are just attracted by her beauty. Every single word that came out from her mouth, you take it as gospel! You know what? After like

ten or twenty years, wrinkles will also appear on that bitch's face and she won't be hot and sexy forever! Daddy, beauty fades..."

"But knowledge lasts, June is a very knowledgeable girl. She is an English major in Tsinghua University in Beijing. That's why I thought you two can be good friends..."

"Never, dad. We can never ever be friends! She is my lifelong enemy!"

"You don't really know her."

"Stop this, daddy, unless you too want to be my enemy. I am trying my best not to hate you too much! Don't put me into a difficult situation, I beg you!"

"Alright...hey, June is coming. Mind your words!"

I did not want to let her start a conversation again so I spoke before she did.

"Dad said you are an English major in Tsinghua University..."

"Yea... it's my second ear. I hab to tank your fadda, if he das nall pay fur migh school fees, I wood nall be able to go to dat universitay."

I could not believe my ears. My father was paying all the school fees for this bitch, while he was just paying half of mine? My mum was working so hard to earn my school fees and dad never offered any help and he was wasting money on this bitch? Was I less important than this brainless chick? Was I more worthless than this stupid jerk, who spoke English with strange accent? I could hardly breathe. I was burning with anguish and I wanted to take revenge.

"Waiter! One bug goo chicken rice, please."

When the bug goo chicken rice was served, I passed it straight to Dad.

"Daddy, your favourite dish! Hey, Auntie June, do you know we Hong Kongers, describe people like you as 'bug goo chicken'?"

"Shut up, Catherine! You have gone too far!" Dad shouted.

"Neva mine, honey, I won to nall da meaning of 'bug goo cheeken' too." June answered. "Go ahat an tell me, Catfin!"

"Well, 'bug' means 'North' and it actually refers to China as China is in the north of Hong Kong. And 'chicken' means 'whore' and therefore, the term 'bug goo chicken' means 'whore from China'. So, next time, when people call you 'bug goo' or 'bug goo chicken', you shouldn't be surprised! As my dad is so fond of the whore from China, I ordered this dish, 'bug goo chicken rice' for him. I knew he must love it."

Without saying a word, dad slapped me across the face. Everyone, the three of us, the people around, the waiters were all in stunned silence for a few seconds and then the noises resumed. I have acted on stage a few times before but that few seconds were the only time I felt myself truly in the spotlight. I did not want to cry but tears kept on running down my face. All the images began to blur but I could still hear the gossip of the people around. Some of them thought that I was fighting

with June over my dad. Some thought that June and I were both dad's daughters and I was the black sheep. Others came up with all sorts of different interpretations of the scene. Those noises were giving me a headache and I was angry and depressed. I did not understand why these things were happening to me. Were these what I came back to Hong Kong for? I was expecting a happy summer vacation and a warm meeting with my dad. Why did things end up like that? I hated dad, even more than I hated June and I did not want to stay with them any longer. I tried to hold my tears and clear my throat.

"This slap is going to pay back all that I have owed you. From now on, you and I have nothing to do with each other. Don't you ever phone me or mum. I do not want to see you again in my life!" I shouted, banging my fist angrily on the table.

I ran out of the restaurant and left the hotel without a backward glance. Fortunately, it was the last day of my stay in Hong Kong. Three hours later, I was already on the flight back to Australia and my face was still boiling hot. It was a real slap in the face! I could not sleep at all throughout the eight-hour flight and the in-flight entertainment was lousy. I missed mum. I missed my cozy home. When the plane landed in Hobart airport, I was relieved. It was similar to the sense of relief I felt every time I woke up from a nightmare. Mum was waiting for me in the car and when she saw me, she sounded the horn and shouted,

"Happy belated birthday, dear!"

I ran towards her and I could no longer hold my tears. Mum was horrified and she kept on asking me the same questions,

"What's the matter, dear? What has happened? Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, mum. No worries!"

"Why are you crying then?"

"Em... coz I missed you so much and was so happy to see you!"

"Crazy girl! Are you tired? Take a nap, I will wake you up when we reach home."

"Ok."

Staring out of the car window, I saw nothing but my father's face. Six years ago, I was sitting in this same car, on this same route and dad was driving instead of mum. That was my first visit to Hobart. I was upset about leaving my friends in Hong Kong but I was glad that my family could live together and start our lives all over again in Australia. We planned to open a small restaurant in Hobart and live a peaceful life there but dad destroyed all our fantasies.

"Mum, are you angry with dad?"

"What?" she asked, turning the volume of the car radio down.

"I was asking if you are angry with dad."

"No, not anymore."

“Why not?”

“Why should I?”

“Because... because he lied to you... because he is such an irresponsible man... because he dumped you and because he slapped your daughter!”

“What? He slapped you?”

“Yes, right across my face!”

“Are you ok? Why did he do that?”

“Because I was not respecting his Yee-Nine...”

“So, you have met June. Is she nice?”

“She is a real whore! How come you know her name?”

“Your dad told me.”

“When?”

“Can’t remember...”

“Mum, he cheated you, he dumped you, why do you keep in touch with him?”

“You shouldn’t put all the blame on him!”

“Why not? He lied to us! He cheated on you! He said that he borrowed money from the loan sharks and that it was not safe to live in Hong Kong and brought us to Australia. Then he dumped us all here and lived happily with his Yee-nine in China!”

“That’s a long time ago. Even Saints make mistakes, Catherine. Aren’t you a Catholic? Don’t you know how to forgive?”

“Yea... of course I should forgive him... Do I need to follow what is said in the Bible and let him slap my left cheek after he slapped me on my right cheek?”

“You must have been really rude, if not, your dad wouldn’t slap you.”

“Why are you always on his side? Why are you so devoted to him? He is not your husband anymore but someone else’s! And I am your daughter!”

Mum’s eyes welled up and her face turned red. When I saw her wiping a tear from the corner of her eye, I felt so guilty. I wanted to apologize but I just could not. I turned my back to her, pretended to be sleeping and I could hear that she was sniffing. After half an hour, we reached home and mum unloaded the luggage for me. She carried all the suitcases from the garage to our home, saying that she did not need my help. Walking behind her, I realized that she was a lot stronger than before. She was a brave and independent woman as well as a caring and responsible mum. When she was searching for the keys, I hugged her from her back and I burst into tears.

“I am sorry, Mum. I didn’t mean to be rude. Sorry...I didn’t want to make you cry...”

“It’s ok! It’s not your fault. You are right, I should be on your side instead of your father’s”

“Mum. I promise you, I will never dump you like dad did and I will always stay by your side.”

“Aiya! No, thanks! I don’t want to take care of you for such a long time. You quickly finish your degree and earn your own living. Then I can retire and travel around the world.”

“No way! I don’t want to work yet...”

“Lazy girl! Then quickly find a husband and get married so that he will take care of you!”

“I will never get married. I don’t trust men. They are irresponsible and selfish, just like dad! “

“Your dad is not totally irresponsible. He is still paying half of your school fees!”

“But he is paying all the fees for that bitch, you know? He ... alright... I do not want to argue with you and get into that vicious circle again, so don’t talk about dad anymore, ok?”

“Ok...ok...em... what do you want to have for dinner tonight? Wanna go to the Golden Junk Restaurant?”

“Yup! I want to have spring roll... sweet and sour pork... ..”

That night, when I was praying, I thanked God for granting me such a perfect mum. Although she was really stubborn sometimes, she tried her very best to take care of me. In the future, if I got the chance to meet dad again, I would tell him how stupid he was to dump mum. Also, I would like to tell him that we women could survive and live a happy life without him and that he should never look down on us...

Life

Chubby baby cries
Wagging fat arms and thighs.
Growing fast in size.

Naughty little boy
Runs around and climbs up high
Likes asking “Why? Why?”

Teen boy with glasses
Busy with dating, football,
And Newton’s three laws.

Bald fat businessman
Holding take-away lunch box
Works on his laptop.

Pale toothless old man
Complains, “the food has no taste!”
Shambles to his grave.

Ng Kwun Shan, Isabel

Child Labor

On Christmas Eve,
in a Nike outlet in Hong Kong,
a woman bought her ten-year-old son
a new pair of sports shoes,
made by a nine-year-old boy with bare feet
in a factory in Pakistan
on his birthday.

So Wan Ling, Winnie

A Barbie Girl

Phoebe Siu

It was a baking afternoon. Miki rubbed her cherubic face with a square pink handkerchief. She looked through a glass window on a school bus. She could see nothing, except the condensed vapors that were running down along the window frame. Miki traced the drops with her fingers nimbly.

The bus stopped in the parking lot of Sha Tin Hospital.

Miki entered a lift. She took out the memo that Miss Wong gave her this afternoon. She read, “CHAN LAI, 5A, BLOCK C, LEFT WING.” She pressed the button labeled 5/F. It was stuffy inside the lift. Her heart beat fast.

Miki strode along a corridor to a ward. When she first entered the room, she was shocked. It was very different, at least very different from what she saw in the soap operas shown in Jade.

The ward was rather empty. There were no bunches of flowers or bottles of Ribena¹ on the patients’ tables. Miki saw no nursing staff, but only a few patients who were wandering around in the room like haunting ghosts.

“Are you Miss Chan Lai?” Miki took a deep breath as she saw a slim back wearing an oversized whitish patients’ uniform sitting on a bed numbered 5A.

“Yes, I am. Who?” the slim back answered, stood up and turned around.

There stood a tall and bony figure, at least 5’9” tall. Miki recorded the images she saw in *Fashion & Beauty*. It was a typical model figure, though even thinner.

There was a pair of big brownish beautiful eyes staring at her. Miki’s face reddened like a ripening strawberry.

“Miss Chan Lai? Are you? Hi, I’m Miki. I come from the Sha Tin College nearby. Umm. Did the nurses tell you that someone would come this afternoon?” Miki said shyly.

“Oh, yes. Actually, I’ve forgotten. You know time doesn’t really matter to patients like me. I have to stay here anyway. Sit down. Call me Louise,” she said. “Oh, you’re a little beauty, ah?”

Miki blushed.

“No, you’re more beautiful!” Miki swallowed the sentence as she looked closely at Louise’s face.

¹ A famous brand of healthy drink for patients contains lots of glucose.

From the big brownish beautiful eyes, Miki could tell she was pretty. Though now the pair of beautiful eyes was screwed in a skull-like face, which was wrapped with the skin in pale yellow. Still, Miki could tell that she was pretty.

“Hey, would you do me a favour and eat all these?” Louise said as she stretched her arm out from the long sleeve, it was like a baton. “Those are tasteless. I hate food.”

Miki grasped the grapes obediently. She popped one into her mouth and chewed. It was juicy, though with a bitter taste.

“Do you like taking pictures? You look photogenic,” Louise asked as she fixed her eyes on Miki’s young and innocent face.

Miki tried to avoid meeting Louise’s eyes by blinking hers. But still, she could sense that there was a complex of emotions revealed in Louise’s pair of big brownish eyes. Yet, she could not tell what they were.

Louise did not wait for an answer. She turned aside and took out a photo album from a drawer. She opened it and flipped the pages over and over nostalgically.

There were moments of silence.

Miki was standing under a big fan. The wedges of the fan were turning round and round. Miki saw the shadows of the wedges reflecting on the opened album and chopping off the photos into fragmented pieces. Louise did not seem to notice it.

A thin sheet of paper was blown onto Miki’s feet.

It was a woman’s portrait sketched in pencil.

“Is it yours?” Miki asked as she squatted and picked it up.

“Yes. Thanks. I’ve drawn it for leisure. She is my mom,” She pulled a photo out from the album. “I followed this and sketched that.”

“Why was it torn?” Miki asked.

“Oh! My mom did it ... after the divorce. Another missing half was supposed to be my pa,” Louise tried to explain calmly.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to ...”

“It’s okay. I’m fine. It’s history now,” Louise uttered before Miki could finish her sentence. “My parents got divorced when I was four. I was then living with my mother in a rented apartment in Wan Chai. My mom treated me like a pearl on a palm². Sorry, I think you don’t understand such a cliché, do you? She used to call me, “sweet pea”, “little angel” or even “my Barbie”. When I was a little toddler, my mom used to dress me up like a doll. She would always bring me nice pinky

² A Chinese idiom translated into English, which means a parent values his/her own child very much, usually refers to a daughter, rather than a son.

skirts with hems in lace. She would then comb my hair with a golden brush with the smell of perfume. She would braid my hair with tiny purple ribbons. After that, she would always lead me to a large mirror of oval shape and say proudly, “Look, my sweet pea. Don’t you see? You’re so beautiful.”

Miki tried to relate what Louise said with her own memory of childhood. Yet, she could hardly find even a fragmented piece that was like Louise’s.

“My mom never did something like this to me. Never!” Miki grumbled. “She used to give me old clothes that my brother wore when I was a child. I really hate the clothes! They’re all dark and dim in color...Yet, I’d no choice. Of course, I’ve asked her the reason. She just told me that it’s because I was like a little monkey when I was a kid. But, I think my mom did it merely because she’s always economical.”

Louise broke into a smile suddenly.

Miki’s face turned red as she thought that Louise was laughing at her.

But Louise was not. Miki realized it as she later saw Louise absorbed in her thought ...

Louise was relishing her childhood memories. She remembered how she had seen her own reflection in the mirror thousands and thousands times. The image was deeply printed in her mind. She totally believed what her mother said. She thought that she was pretty. It was not until Louise had reached her teenage years that she started discovering some new comments from others towards her appearance.

“Oh! Louise. I haven’t noticed that you’ve a pair of smooth and whitish legs,” said Student A in the changing room after a P.E. lesson.

Louise bowed her head down and stared at her own legs.

“But, they are too fleshy. What a waste! Come on. You should go on a diet!” Said Student A soon after.

There was also once when Louise met Auntie Cheung next door. Louise was wearing a sleeveless shirt after a bath.

“Hi. Louise. It seems very hot today. Oh. Do you feel cooler in your sleeveless piece? I’ve also asked my daughter to try on such pieces. She said she wouldn’t. She’s afraid of showing fat meat. But, actually, she doesn’t have any. Her arms are much thinner than yours,” said Auntie Cheung as she was fixing her eyes on Louise’s arms.

Those comments were totally incomprehensible in Louise’s sight. However, they were like phantoms showing up everywhere in Louise’s daily life. At first, she would just ignore the comments. She would always close her eyes and recall her memory of seeing a sweet little girl who was standing in front of the mirror in a pinky skirt, like an angel. She would then hear her mother’s

soft and caring voice, repeating the most encouraging saying in the world – “YOU’RE SO BEAUTIFUL!”

It comforted her heart. She loved her mother. How could she not?

“Do you love your mom very much?” Asked Miki ignorantly as she saw Louise still absorbed in her thoughts.

Louise panted slightly as she heard Miki’s voice. She then realized that she had again locked herself in her memories. Miki had just rescued her out into reality.

“Ah? I do ... Of course, I do,” Louise burst into laughter. “Do you?”

“I think I do. Sometimes, I don’t,” Miki answered simply.

“Why?” Louise asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe, I just don’t like her way of talking to me. I feel like a child. She always tells me not to do this and not to do that. You know? You’ve said that I looked photogenic, haven’t you? My friends also said so. They persuaded me to send my photos to *Milk*³. I want to be a part-time model. But, my mom didn’t like it. She just told me not even to dream of that!” Miki’s cheeks turned red as she grumbled.

“Did she?” Louise commented indifferently.

“Yes, she always does. The photographer of the magazine met me once. He said that I was photogenic, but I must reduce weight. I don’t know why I always look much fatter in the camera. Also, my baby face ... looks very childish,” Miki grumbled again. “My mom knows that, but she still insists on feeding me with that oily and fatty Chicken soup. I hate it!”

“Your mom must be good at boiling lao huo tang⁴, ah?” Louise broke into a smile.

“Yes, but it’s nothing to do with it. The point is – I DON’T LIKE IT!” Miki uttered in a mild anguished tone, “do you always like your mom’s soup?”

Miki asked the question out of mere curiosity. Yet, like picking a thread out from a large woolen ball that was originally nicely fixed in shape, it again aroused Louise’s memory towards her mother and, inevitably, her past.

“You should like your mom. You should like her. You should like her soup, too. You must!” Louise spoke to Miki in a strange anguished tone.

Miki was shocked. She could not understand what Louise meant. She only felt dizzy as she saw Louise kept spitting her words out.

“You want to be a model, right? I tell you ... I’ve been one. I entered a small model agency after finishing Form Seven. There were actually few supportive voices around when I first

³ A fashion magazine

⁴ Traditional Chinese-style soup which may have to be boiled for half a day

announced my decision. None at all! My teachers, my friends, my relatives, my ... they all thought that I was crazy. They commented on my unrealistic dream to become a supermodel, like KiKi⁵. I know. I know what they're thinking. I know what you're thinking too. I know. My neighbors gossiped about the financial situation of my family. They thought I did it only for the money. That's what they said about me: 'hey, she did it only for the money. Money! Money! Money!' They treated me like an idiot. They even tried to show their empathy towards my mother. They thought that they understood the hardship for my mother to bring up a daughter in a single family. They thought they understood. But, they don't. Even till now, they don't." Louise bit her lips fiercely as she said. "I didn't mind. Why should I care? I know the truth well. I know the reason behind it. But, I wouldn't tell. I would not."

Miki saw Louise's bleeding. Louise's mouth was bleeding ...

"And her heart, too." Miki thought.

"... I would not tell them. I wouldn't. But, I tell you now," Louise uttered continuously and disregarded the bleeding. "For the first few months after I'd joined the agency, the manager only gave me trivial jobs. You know... only taking photos for some advertisements in the newspapers. They only occupied a small corner in the newspapers. Poor me! But, what I wanted was to be on catwalks! Like a shining star in the sky! I didn't regret. I did not. I was beautiful. I knew that I was beautiful. That was what my mother said. You see, here. My photos ... I thought that it's a matter of luck. What I lacked was just – OPPORTUNITY. I thought that I could wait. I kept going to the training workshops to learn walking manners and postures used on catwalks. I went to the beauty center twice a week. I used all my salary to buy beauty ..."

Miki listened to Louise silently. She began to be more attentive as Louise gradually softened her voice. She tried to pour a glassful of cold water for Louise. Yet, Louise declined it. Miki then swallowed the water down to her throat. She allowed Louise to continue her speech.

"Week after week, still nothing happened. I couldn't resist the temptation of coming to the manager's office. I could still remember how the manager lowered his head and fixed his eyes on my job portfolio when I first entered his office. I know what he thinking of. I know! Actually, he was staring at the air. The file was empty inside. But, he ... he still turned his head up and looked at me in a smirk. I could tell it's a smirk, but not a smile. You guess what he said ... He told me not to worry. He told me to believe in him, to trust him. He told me that I must help myself first. How? Actually, I could foretell. I was so stupid! I did ask him. I could still remember how he crossed his dirty arm around my shoulder and whispered in my ear: 'I think you should change your style of dressing and try to reduce your weight. I'm sure you'll look sexier then. Come on, Louise! Cheer up!

⁵ A famous Hong Kong model

See me three weeks later! I'm waiting for a new Louise!' Do you hear? He's so disgusting! Of course, I wouldn't follow what he said. I thought I wouldn't. But, I was defeated. I admit it. I borrowed money and went to the shopping malls and bought dozens of new clothes of various styles, tube-top, short skirt, low-V... I went to *California*⁶ and spent ten hours a day in doing aerobics, trying pills ... I wanted to succeed. I wanted to be one of the stars on the catwalk."

Miki felt as if she had swallowed bowlfuls of her mom's herbal medicine soup as Louise continued her story. Miki did not know how to respond. She just expected Louise to monopolize the conversation. Yet, Louise did not.

There were again moments of silence.

Miki began to learn to read Louise's eyes, a pair of big brownish beautiful eyes. Miki tried to look for hints of tears in Louise's eyes. Yet, there weren't any.

"Why? Why doesn't she continue her story? Why doesn't she tell? Why doesn't she cry and expel all the sadness from her eyes? Why?" Miki thought, but did not ask.

Miki played with her pink handkerchief silently as she later discovered that Louise was again rapt in contemplation. Louise was again in her own locked memory ...

It was only the night before the show that the manager suddenly gave Louise an urgent phone call. Louise could no longer remember what he said. How could she? She was already overwhelmed with joy. She just automatically noted down the date, the time, the venue ... She then hung up the phone. She rushed to the kitchen and gave her mother a big kiss. She led her mother out to the sofa and told her the good news. Both of them sat on the sofa quietly, sweetly, arm in arm. Louise gave her mother another kiss. Her mother did not kiss her in return. Instead, she handed her a bowlful of warm soup.

"Mom, tomorrow, would you please come?" Louise asked and sipped the soup.

Her mother smiled and nodded.

"Finish the soup and sleep early," said her mother. "There's no point to worry. Look, my sweet pea. Don't you see? You're so beautiful."

Louise then saw her mother walking back to the kitchen.

Louise sipped the soup alone quietly.

There was a strange sense of fulfillment. Not because of the show. Louise could tell. It was because of her mother. It was because of her mother that she could stand. She could ignore the gossip of others. She could lock herself in the fitness room. She could insist on taking those pills. She could take courage to find the manager. She could wear those things. It was her mother who gave her strength.

⁶ A famous fitness center in Hong Kong

Yet, it was also her mother who took away all her strength, all her strength to live, at that night, that sweet and painful night, at present and in her memory.

The show began at eight at that night. It was a fashion show for wedding gowns. It was in the rehearsal Louise heard that she got the place only because one of the models in her agency got sick and had to stay in the hospital. She was only a substitute. There was once a sense of bitterness erupted from the bottom of her stomach. Yet, she swallowed it. She pretended that she did not care. She would not care. She was happy. She told herself that she was happy. She just followed other models to do what the instructor told her to do. One Two Three Four ... Two Two Three Four ... She counted the beats at heart. She waved her hips to echo the background music rhythmically. The music was so sweet. It was the first time she ever wore a wedding gown. It was so strange. She remembered that she once saw her mother in a wedding gown too. It was in the wedding photo. It was with her so-called pa of course. She still remembered that her mother looked so sweet in the photo. Sweet? Maybe there was a magic spell in wedding gowns. All women look sweet in their wedding gowns. Perhaps. She could not tell. She could not understand. She only knew that her so-called pa left her mother five years after taking that wedding photo. It was he who left her. He left her for another woman. That woman was a model.

“Now, I’m a model too. Nothing special,” Louise thought.

It was the claps from the audience that woke Louise up from her deep thoughts in the show. She wanted to see her mother. Where was she sitting? The front row? She could not see. The lights on stage were too bright.

“Well done, Louise,” the instructor told Louise as she walked past the corridor to a changing room after the show.

Louise forced a smile in return. She was nervous. Not because of the show anymore. She was nervous because she could not see her mother in the audience. Did she come? How could she not come? She was the only audience that Louise had expected.

After getting changed, Louise waited for her mother backstage. Still she did not come. Why? She did not know. She had tried all the phone numbers. Yet, no one answered. She was not at home. Was she on her way? Why were there always voice messages delivered in the mobile phone? Why didn’t she answer phone calls? Why?????

Louise got the answer that night on her way home. She was on a mini-bus. Suddenly, her mobile phone rang. It was not her mother, but a strange voice. It was from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. The voice asked whether she was a family member of Lam Choi. She said yes. It was her mother’s name. The voice then told her to go to the hospital immediately. It was in the hospital that Louise knew that her mother was certified dead. She had died in a bus crash. She was on her way to the show.

It was since that night Louise had lost all her strength: all her strength to live, all her strength to eat, all her strength to stand on catwalks again. That sweet and painful night ...

Louise sobbed tearlessly in the patient ward. She then recognized Miki's innocent face. She realized that she was in the present again. She was back to her life, her own living.

Miki was shocked. She just stood motionlessly. She at last handed Louise a sheet of tissue paper. While she was giving Louise the tissue paper, she dropped her own pink handkerchief.

"Thank you. I don't need it. I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry. Sometimes, I can't help it. My emotion collapses so suddenly ... perhaps, it's because of my sickness. Oh! It's already time for soup. I mean time for home," uttered Louise.

Miki nodded as if she understood. Indeed, she did not. Miki did not intend to ask Louise to complete her story. She thought that she would never fully understand what was behind an anorexic patient like Louise. Miki rubbed her cherubic face again with her square pink handkerchief. As she left, she took a last glance at the slim back. Miki could tell that there must be tons of stories behind that slim back. It was from a sixth sense. Or it was life. She had her life too. Miki quickened her steps to home as she remembered that there were still piles of homework on her desk at home. She had to write a hospital visit report to Miss Chan too. She did not know how much she could write in the visit report with what Louise said in fragments. She could not tell.

In the supper at home, it was the first time that Miki had ever swallowed three bowlfuls of her mother's lao huo tang at a time. She could not tell the reason. Miki had a peep at her mother through the glass bowl as she sipped the soup inside sweetly. Her mother shot her a glance in return. They both beamed.

Trapped in the Polygon

Blood red brick walls,
Stained by the blood of people who died on the road?
Car crashing, lorries sounding horns, buses queuing,
people chatting, flirting, laughing.

Blood red brick walls, here, there, everywhere,
rarely can I see something different.
Grasses and trees, caged in blood red brick pots.
Transparent windows of the library, set behind blood red brick bars.

I, a little frog from the outside world,
suddenly bumped into this blood red brick well,
Looking up, I can only glimpse what the sky is like:
How can students stimulate their intellectual thinking,
in such a noisy, tiny and brick red uni ?

So Wan Ling, Winnie

Who

Isaac Wong

“Ha! What a mountain of dead!”

My friend Ming and I were walking in the cemetery. It was just after the week of Chung Yang Festival, the air still had the scent of burnt incense and some rotten food. I had to work hard – as I was a worker in the cemetery.

Tomb stones were in innumerable rows, and were in different styles. Some were only like a simple cube or square, some looked like little Chinese style temples, some had a hard and stony cross on them, and some of them had an obelisk on them, just as if they want to pierce the sky for the one who was lying below them. Outside was the city of the living, and here was the city of the dead. All kinds of people lying here, from different countries and different races, as our city was a place of variety.

I picked up a bunch of leaves from a bush and fingered it on the way, and put it close to my friend’s face.

“Hey~~! You PK! Don’t put it near my face!” my friend yawned. “Here is the place of the dead, and can you guess where the nutrients of this flower have come from!”

But then he turned mute again.

The tombstones were attractive and beautiful, and we walked towards them. On the road, there was rotten food left for the dead, and also ashes – the paper money, paper furniture and even property which had been burnt for the dead people. Also there were stains of the wine which was poured onto the ground to serve the dead people, and the things which were closest to the tombstones were the remaining parts of the burnt incense, standing in little metal pots, dying like the dead bodies beneath them. Worshipping, mourning... all of them meant nothing other than dirt that I had to clean in this very graveyard.

“Wow! *Whole family dead!* So who wrote the things on this tombstone? Well! What should I order people to carve on my tombstone after I die?”

I thought for a long time and said emotionlessly, “*I dug it myself! Here I lie!*”

“*D** le lou m**!*” (F**k your mother) the cemetery was filled with our slang. But I know that he used his rudeness to hide his own feelings.

I didn’t ask him what he wanted to have on his own tombstone, as I know that he always want to have a gold coffin and a gold tombstone, but never thought about how to get it, and what should be written, except his own name. Also, this useless coward, a little thug in his gang would not deserve any good even after his own death. Well, why should I waste my time with this

waste-of-food and walked here and there without any aim? Ming broke my harmonious day actually, and also the harmony of the whole cemetery.

Fortunately there was a dish of barbeque pork and roasted meat in front of a tombstone. Yum yum, it was still a bit warm, must be a fresh dish of meat. But just a problem that who was the owner of this dish? My friend stared at the tombstone and then at me.

“Ming, just eat!” I teased my friend, “Don’t dare to eat? You really think that you will anger anyone? Hey, there’s only a body, or even a skeleton lying beneath! You will anger no one!”

“But...” Ming murmured and shut his stupid mouth. His lips were stuck together and he became mute. And I opened my mouth as wide as I could to swallow all the barbeque pork on the dish.

“Yum... yum yum... yu just dun harf to care about... yum yum... angering the... yum yum... spirits or ghosts... Hm... Yeah...they taste good... yum yum... yu are sush as gosh damned... coward.”

“Yes, Yes, Yes, I know I am a coward, I know that I cannot be called a ‘man’!” Ming punched at the tombstone. “And I was unable to keep that bitch! I really wanna chop her into a million pieces!”

“Easy, um, easy, Ming!” I tried to calm Ming down, “She does have her reason...”

“Reason! She said that she doesn’t want a coward as her boyfriend! I am a coward just because I didn’t accept the mission to kill the Big Brother of the other gang! You! Stop swallowing the barbeque pork! I’ve never heard that a grave digger will behave like this!”

Shit! That’s not your business! Ming! You *all family dead!*

He continued to kick the tombstone, but the tombstone did not even shake a little bit. He sighed and looked down at the slope.

Suddenly, Ming was just like being obsessed, living without a soul and walked towards the steps. I rushed to him to try to save him, but Ming himself stopped. After a minute, I knew it was not “stop” but “stunned”. Ming murmured, and I hardly recognized that it was his ex-girl friend’s name. Following Ming’s eyes, I looked down to the other row of tombstones that were below us. And most important of all, she was with another man.

They held each other tightly, no gap could be found between their bodies. Their lips just looked like four pink worms squirming together, and never could be separated.

Ming’s face did not change.

The couple below were squirming together, and the sound of joy, bliss and moaning could be heard. They were rocking like two fireballs, and time was frozen.

Ming’s face did not change.

And she looked at us, with a sense of seduction and also protesting, and also like teasing

Ming's failure to keep her.

"I really wanna kill them, killing them here is convenient – you can bury them immediately."

Ming muttered in a emotionless way.

"Don't have this kind of misunderstanding... Killing them in front of a morgue or police station is better... Both for the living and the dead," I continued to look at the live show.

When I became conscious again, Ming had already left. Good, the graveyard was left with some peace.

* * *

I saw Ming at the entrance of the graveyard, standing in front of an obelisk.

"Hey come, PK," he continued, "don't worry about me! I'll find a new one in the bar this evening!"

I spoke no more to tease this humble, useless and foolish creature, and just saw Ming away. I pressed my hand on my stomach to fight the pain caused by the rotten barbeque pork... No matter how I thought that the pain would cease, my stomach still ached.

* * *

"Snake Eyes! Hugh!" Ming threw the dice into a bowl and said to me in the cemetery, days after the extraordinary "live show" performed by his ex-girlfriend. "PK, I have decided! I will kill the Big Brother of Mong Kok!"

"You are drunk." I stared at his bottle of vodka, and continued, "or just because you care too much about your ex-girlfriend's accusation?"

"No! Not for that bitch! For my fame, and for money!" Ming punched at an innocent tombstone again.

"Nothing is as solid as the mud in my shovel," I teased him, "And your fame will not be greater than the tombstone that you've punched."

He was silenced for a while, and drank again. He said, "Well, PK, actually I am a bit afraid of ... Ha! Afraid that I will die in this mission... but thinking that I will get great fame in my gang... what a bliss it will be!"

His eyes were filled with lights, and his future dreams could be seen through them. But how could this kind of expression exist on such a humble face? This kind of contradiction made a disgusting figure in this peaceful graveyard. What could you get after all? Hugh? A golden coffin and a good-looking tombstone? I decided to give a blow to his confidence and day-dreams.

“Well, if you die in the mission,” I asked him in a not-so-friendly tone, “What kind of tomb you will like to have?”

“Hm...” He sank into his thoughts and answered me after quite a while, “a dick-like obelisk with the wordings ‘*Ming F**ked many*’”

“No no no... gangsters should not have their name on their tombstones, or their foe would one day dig out his body to do something humiliating, or even worse! You must not have your name but only other things on your tombstone!”

Ming murmured, “then, my last word will be enough... but... you must...”

* * *

Damn!

I am standing beneath the burning sun, on a rail bridge in Mong Kok, just because of Ming’s demand! He wanted me to record his last word if he failed! I had never heard about any damned gangster who needed a friend to witness his own mission! How “lucky” I was!

He said that standing on the bridge would be safe enough for me, just like the old Chinese saying, “*Look at the fire on the other bank.*”

Ming told me that he knew Big Brother would come here to have some “transactions”, and it was the best chance for Ming to do Big Brother in. He grabbed his one-foot-long-blade which was wrapped in newspaper, went down to the road and said, “PK, see you in the graveyard.”

DAMN YOU, of course we will.

Ming went down the steps and onto the sidewalk. I saw that he was trembling, and put the blade in his jacket. A funeral march would be much faster than his steps. He was knocked by a cop but the cop didn’t make any trouble to Ming and let him go. This already made Ming shiver a bit before he really started his mission. What a useless thug!

Suddenly Ming changed, that I could see that he was with much awareness. Perhaps this is the mystical and great power of fame (and the golden coffin), Ming’s eyes flashed and found out his target - a middle aged fat man, with a tattoo of a snake on his left arm, and with a gold chain around his fat dark neck. I knew that he was the Big Brother of Mong Kok! All happened in a sudden. As I expected, there were doz... No! Out of my expectation, there were dozens of gangsters waiting for my good friend! Tattoos of skulls, dragons and snakes on the bulged up muscles... Long blades, daggers and water pipes... which could chop my gutless friend into a million pieces! Ming the coward immediately rushed back to the bridge – I knew him for a long time, Ming was not a good fighter, but he was good at running away. But could Ming see me in the graveyard in one piece, or million pieces a few days after? The gangsters chased Ming, and Ming rushed in to the crowd and

managed to cross the road.

Gangsters also rushed into the crowd to chop Ming. It seemed that Ming's shelter became his trap of doom. But hey! He got out of the bondage of the crowd!

Rush you guys! Damn you!

"Who...!" My friend cried out this simple word. He was knocked out onto the road by a baby cart, with a sports car approaching at full speed.

My friend was splendidly dashed into the air by the extravagantly equipped red sports car in a most perfect angle, and down onto the crossroad within a second. Well, Big Brother's gangsters did not have the need to chase Ming. Say thanks to the red sports car please you god damned guys!

Without any pause, a lorry crushed Ming the coward into pieces at full speed, made a strange sound which was even weirder than the sound of a closing coffin, stranger than the noise of crushing wood, or squeezing something juicy, and then made an end for all odds.

There had never been a time that Ming looked so cool.

* * *

I read the old newspaper in the hut in the graveyard. Ming got his fame, though not so big – his death was reported on page ten, with only a black and white photo. He went back to this graveyard in pieces. The graveyard could then have real peace.

Knock knock!

Someone knocked at my door, a young boy gave me an envelope and said, "He thanked you for your information." Goody goody, there was a pretty amount money inside which was enough for me to spend for a whole month. I sent the boy back and went out into the graveyard. I was PK, the "Graveyard PK" who was a good seller to all people, no matter if it was selling information, or body disposal, no matter legal or illegal.

The sun was sinking into the earth, all things were so peaceful. Ming's tombstone was standing on the slope, as he demanded, I carved his last word on it, which was "WHO!".

I heard a woman's moaning - Ming's ex-girlfriend was there, of course, with her new boyfriend. They were making love on Ming's tombstone, of course without knowing who was the owner of that grave.

So the dead continued to lie underground, lovers continued to f**k, Big Brother continued to have his transactions, and I continued to spend money and dig graves. So peaceful!

What harmony!

What a god damned peaceful world!

Exhausted

Swollen neck
Like a rubber
Held tightly.
Hardened shoulders
Like stones
Same position
Unable to move.
Sore eyes
Like being attacked by countless pins
Pointing at the same time
Unable to open wide, wide.
Swarm of documents
Swallow
The entire office table.
The contact lenses --
Suck and suck and suck
For nutrients
From the sore eyes.
The cosmetics --
Dig and dig and dig
For spaces
Down the skin press.
The high heels --
Drink and drink and drink
The energy
From the legs.
What's more fatal
The weeds --
Grow and grow and grow
To cover the garden
Deep in the heart.

Coppelia

Cindy Lau

“Erry-body STANDBY! You ev feefteen meeneets!” The boisterous director roared so furiously that I could hardly hear my mum’s voice, nothing but the tormenting whirring and hissing echoing within my ears.

“...and finally they realized that Coppelia is a –

“Coppelia is what, Mama? What is she?”

Boiling with rage, the impatient director was knocking at the door of the rehearsal room with all his might, so fiercely as if he were about to knock down a mountain.

With a loud bang, he finally managed to break in, with the latch and the handle broken.

“Prrrrrops! Wut da hell you’re do’in here? Goh git erryting set up!” I looked upward, avoiding his eyes, and saw a monstrous mouth yelling with showers of saliva.

“Ma...” I was so scared that I hid myself at my mum’s back.

“Syndie’s an actress!”

“I em aaaskin for prrrrrrops! Put Syndie on stage NOW!”

“I am afraid we have to start over as you don’t – keep – quiet!”

My mum gave the director an appalling stare, like an acute sword threatening his throat. Then the director took a brief glance at me and banged the already-broken door. “Errybody quiette!”

I didn’t understand why. Funny that every time my mum got interrupted, she would trace her hands along my spine and start everything over. If not, I would not be able to understand her. This happens even till now. Maybe I needed some sense of security. Maybe I had some sort of like readability problems. Who knows? I really wonder why.

But I had to figure out why.

Next morning I would have to go to Yale School of Drama for an audition, the place that I had always been dreaming to go to. If I could get in, I would have the chance to do “Coppelia” on stage. It’s my favorite play! What a great challenge for me! Well, all I would have to do was to present a monologue by memory, which I would do absolutely well after a short training by my parents. Yet, my mind was restless. My brain involuntarily recalled the bitter scenes of memories that I had when I was featuring in a kid’s TV show. The haunting words kept on echoing in my mind, even in this darkness.

“Witty Kids, act two, take one...”

“Ac---tion!”

The show had to begin. I could not help shivering. It was so strong that his deafening shriek

almost formed a fatal turbulence dragging me into a tornado, restless.

“Hello!!! Welcome to Witty Kids today. It’s Syndie again! Christmas is coming. What do you want from Santa Claus? Want some toys? A doll? Or a robot? Well, today, I am going to tell you a funny story about a toy-maker and his daughter. Once upon a time, there was...there was...”

“Cut! Doo yoo rrrrrremember da storrrrry? Doo yoo need your mom too tell yoo da story again?” yelled the director.

“Let me do it, director,” uttered my dad with a bland face.

“Now Syndie, listen to me. You have to trust your dad. If you don’t relax I can’t help you.”

“But pa, I’m nervous...”

“Turn around!” said dad furiously.

So I turned around, and felt something was tickling me at my back.

“Director. Now she’s alright. You may continue.”

“STANDBY! Erry-body STANDBY!”

I was dragged on the stage again, facing hundreds of lights and cameras.

“Syndie, this time, don’t make a fuss, ok?” said dad. He pinned his eyes on me. I would rather look at the director’s eyes than my dad’s as they were too fearfully empty. I began to question if he ever loved me, or just treated me as a doll. Somehow the relationship between my dad and me was just like Dr. Coppelius and his daughter: full of emptiness.

Empty. Empty. And empty.

“Witty Kids, act two, take twelve...”

“Ac---tion!”

“Franz and Swanhilda were young lovers. But one day Franz saw a beautiful girl in Dr. Coppelius’ house. She’s his daughter Coppelia. Later, Swanhilda discovered it...” My throat was shaking. My hands were cold. Yet drops of sweat were dripping from my bare hands, such was my nervousness. I knew I could not continue, but somehow I knew I had to.

“...laterrrrr erry-body discoverrrrrred dat Coppelia ees only a doll!” it was nearly the end of the script, but I could not help. My tongue was so terribly twisted. I could never forget the director’s terrible accent. Never. Maybe I acquired his speech. What if I would have this kind of experience tomorrow? That would be disastrous!

“Cut! Cut! Cut! Wut Englishee ees deese! Syndie, don’t ever trrrrry to rrrrruin my show!!!”

My eyes were sinking with drowsiness. Too soon it was time for bed. But I couldn’t sleep at all. There were thousands of thoughts running desperately in my mind. I tried my best not to think about my childhood, but somehow it reminded me of tomorrow’s presentation speech:

Why did Frankenstein make the “Creature” without caring for him? It’s cruel to bring him to the world for the sake of achieving fame and distinction in science. Why did...oh...My brain was

nearly torn apart by all sorts of thoughts spamming and jamming therein. I felt a sudden thirst in my throat that I jumped out of bed to get myself a hot chocolate.

“Still awake?” a familiar voice said. It was my mum.

“You too, mama.” I whispered, hoping that I wouldn’t wake dad up.

Mum sat beside me on the sofa. The living room had been swallowed by darkness, except for the faint moonlight. Mum turned to me, leaned forward to stay close to me. “Syndie, we are like mirror images”. Mum gently placed her hand on my face and looked closely at my features. Her long nose touched mine. I guess it was the first time I had been so close to my mum ever since my birth. I saw a pair of big dark eyes merging into one. I held back a little to give myself more space to look at her in detail. The images became clear again, and the pair of big dark eyes seemed to be looking at me still.

“When I was small,” my mum said, “I dreamed of being an actress in the theatre. But your mama’s mama disapproved of my idea. At that time, how I wished to marry a guy who could make my dreams come true. Your dad is an electronic engineer – which is nothing to do with drama at all. But somehow, I married him.”

My eyes did not leave hers. The light in our eyes seemed to have exchanged messages. All of a sudden, I realized why I am such a devoted actress. I suddenly knew why she put me on TV shows since I was 4. I am her dream, and her dream goes on – we are identical.

“Don’t think too much about your audition. Save more energy for tomorrow. Turn around; let me massage your back. You’ll soon be fast asleep.” My mum always massaged my back whenever I felt stressed and restless in the middle of the night. It was as if her fingers had a certain kind of magic that could make me feel so released and sink into a deep sleep in no time.

The next morning, I felt someone tapping on my back. “hm...let me...ahhm...sleep for one m-ooorreee meeennnit! Ahhm...” I murmured, half awake with eyelids too heavy to be lifted.

“Get up! Don’t you have to go for the audition?” dad roared. Arrrrrrrrrrrr! My body was shaking vigorously, like an electric shock.

I got up promptly and stood erect before my dad. He surely knew that I hate being tickled on my back.

“Your mum has cooked breakfast for you. Get it yourself in the kitchen. Then get changed quickly. We are driving to New Haven.”

I got my breakfast. Bacon omlette. It has always been my favorite, but I could hardly eat at all. My stomach was suddenly filled with gas. I could only hear my heart beating in acceleration. My dad got my breakfast packed and dragged me to his car.

The wheels on my dad’s car went running on, running on. I saw heaps of snow mounting along the pavements and outside the Gothic-style buildings. It was some ten degrees Fahrenheit, which

was far below freezing. The car finally stopped in front of a reddish brown brick house with a stained sign written:

The Yale Cabaret

217 Park Street

The door was unlocked. We saw no one inside, but we heard some footsteps from upstairs. So we walked up the wooden steps and saw a lady smiling at us.

“Hello! You must be Syndie,” said the lady in glasses. “Professor Yionoulis is waiting for you in the practice hall. Let me tell her that you are here now. Let’s go downstairs.”

So I followed the lady in glasses downstairs. I saw a big metal door outside the hall. It was cold. “Syndie, please wait for me outside the door. I have to give your portfolio to Professor Yionoulis first.”

I waited and waited. It seemed to me that ten hours had already passed. All of a sudden there was a dart on my head. Was it a stroke? What was that? I did not have enough time to think about it further. I was gasping in agitation. My fists were tightly clenched with my nails digging to the flesh of my palms.

“Syndie, you may come in.” The lady came out from the iron door of the hall.

“Thank you!” I tried to give her a smile out of this extreme anxiety.

I stepped into the practice hall. I could smell the breath of nervousness mixing up with the odor of wood. Again, I tried my best to lift up the muscles on my face to induce a smile of pretended confidence.

“The monologue presentation that I am going to do is extracted from Chapter Twelve of ‘Frankenstein’ by Mary Shelley.” The nervousness seemed to have gone after I began the speech, but a greater sense of tension began to possess me.

“By degrees I made a discovery of still greater moment. I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds...” Why, could only human beings articulate speech? How about animals? Or if there are some in-betweens? A strange force seemed to have dragged me into these silly thoughts last night.

“...this was indeed a godlike science,” Well, can science be godlike? What is so holy about science? Can human beings do the Creator’s work out of science? Why must Frankenstein do that?

“Their pro-pro-pro-prrrrronaaaaunnciation waaaas kick,” Pronunciation. Quick. “Why caaan’t meeeeeee reeeeed suddunnly...” My tongue was twisting. I knew it, but simply couldn’t do anything about it. I knew I had to go on. I should at least finish the audition.

“Okay, Syndie. It’s fine. Now could you ask your parents to come in? I would like to talk to

them.” Professor Yionoulis said very kindly with a big smile. What’s the problem with me? I just blew my own audition!

My parents came in to see what happened. Mum went straightly to me and asked me to turn around. She pressed her fingers on my back, just like pressing some buttons. I sank on the floor. I did not even have the strength to stand up. I was too dizzy.

“Syndie was doing alright, but she suddenly lost her speech after ten to twelve minutes. I think there’s a need to improve her stability. How much memory does Syndie have?” The professor asked dad.

“800 gigabytes. It’s more powerful than ten personal computers. Maybe there are still some bugs in her DSAP, the Drama Speech Articulation Program. After all, this robot is coated with cloned flesh of my wife. She looks exactly like my wife when she was young! I love it as my own daughter and I will try my every effort to optimize her as soon as possible. When would the ‘Coppelia’ show be?”

I could no longer hear anything. Everything went black.

A Palatable Lover

*It was the best trip in my life,
Where I met an ideal lover in my mind:
Soon I'll meet a face unknown.
Soon he'll get a bride at home.
Day to night; night to noon,
Miles by miles I can see you soon.
The sun has set and rain has stopped.
In the dark I climb a mountaintop.
Kok kok kok ; kok kok kok.
A cough in silence ceases my knock ---
The new home of mine is warmed by stove
And perfumed with scent of fresh-cut roses.
A table of pork, a bowl full of veal,
But none of those foods fulfills my will.
Odor of flesh I smell is tempting.
Nothing from a carcass can be so appealing.
You like this meal so much, as I can tell
From your gentle smile;
I love your flesh even better, as you can tell
From my good appetite.
Bite after bite and slice after slice
Until your blood is cold as ice.
I like to swim in the red sea
Where your blood will spill over me.
Two bodies in one soul
Forever together ---- do not let go.*

Lo Wing Sze, Sarah

Annie God

Fung Kwai Wa, Jamie

“I got up at nine this morning. You know, I usually get up at seven but this morning I was tired. When I woke up, I felt that the room was different. I stood up and looked around.”

She paused and moved her head slowly from one side to another.

“There was no one else. The door was still closed. The wardrobe was still closed. I walked to it. My heart beat so fast when I opened it.”

She opened her eyes wide and suddenly opened her mouth and shouted, “Wa!”

“No one was there. I counted my clothes. No more or no less. I closed the wardrobe and looked around again. The window was still closed. The bed was still next to the window. The chair was still at the desk. The desk was still by the wall. The typewriter was still on the desk. My drawer was still closed. I moved to the desk and opened my drawer. There were two drawers and mine was on the left. I don’t know if anyone owned the other one. You know, I only own one bedroom, one door, one window, one wardrobe, one bed, one chair, one desk, one typewriter, one pen and one pile of paper. So I am sure I only own one drawer. I’d never touched the other one. I opened my drawer and saw my pen and paper. I closed it and wondered what was different.”

She looked down as if she was in her bedroom and wondering what was different.

“There was only one place that could be different and yet not observed.”

She looked up all of a sudden and said quickly, “That was the drawer.”

“I examined it carefully. It was closed and I opened it. There was something! Some paper was in it and something was typed on it. I read it and realized that I had read it before. It was before I came to live here. I read it once and it was in future tense. The one I read this morning was in past tense. So I knew it. I knew it happened.”

“Have you brought it with you? Can I read it, Annie?” The only other person in the room asked.

“Sure, why not? It happened, so you should have known it too.”

She handed him the paper and said, “You know I hate God. Have you even heard that ‘Everyone’s life is a fairy tale that God creates’? My life should have been a fairy tale but God turned it into something else. I wonder why She did so. Maybe She wanted to create some varieties, maybe She was bored with fairy tales, maybe there were never fairy tales, it was just our own imagination. But no matter what reason it was, my life was not a fairy tale. She turned me into a murderer. She put me into a wrong place at a wrong time that I became jealous of a woman, that I hated her and I killed her. I hate being a murderer but God liked it. She thought being a murderer

was a different life. She didn't know that I didn't want a different life. I want a fairy tale life.

Annie's Love Story

Annie had been crazily in love with Ken from the first day they met. Their first encounter was still so vivid in her mind that she could recall every detail of him. His blue trainers with ticks on both sides of them, his deep blue jeans with his wallet in the back pocket, his long-sleeved brown tracksuit with zip-zap done, his pair of non-framed spectacles, his carefully combed hair. . . She was so attentive staring at him that she could even observe his blue socks despite his wearing jeans. Every single detail was etched on her mind. She was not afraid of the pain of etching. She liked etching things on her mind. Etched on her mind, one could also find what she had thought on that day. She thought of the female student in a Japanese story "Joseito" ("A Female Student") written by Osamu Dazai. The female student believed that as long as a girl smiled at a man, she would be forced to marry him. Annie fancied herself smiling at him. She knew that if he asked her to marry him, she would accept it without any consideration or hesitation. She would love him deeply with all her heart. Wasn't she crazy to imagine marrying a man that she just met? She knew it was. She knew she was crazy and she let herself be crazy since the first day they met.

She did not know why she loved him and neither did she want to find out the reason. She enjoyed a passionate and unexplainable love. It was more than a fairy tale, it was a Romeo-and-Juliet kind of love that everyone longed for.

She jumped into the sea of love and let herself be carried away by the waves. She enjoyed jumping into the sea with nothing on her mind. It was a most courageous act that a man should perform at least once in his life.

They didn't meet often. She did not know when she would see him again, so everyday she tried to do something related to him. She put milk candies in her pocket after she knew that it was his favorite snack. She put his picture in her wallet. She went to the place he lived everyday even though it meant a two-hour journey. She got online every night

to see if he was online too. If he was, she would talk to him on ICQ. She tried to find every possible connection between them.

She fancied herself dreaming of him. Sometimes it was daydream, sometimes it was a real dream. She dreamt of meeting him coincidentally on a bus. She dreamt of seeing him in a market and her friend admired how good-looking he was. She dreamt of hiking with him. She dreamt of seeing him in the street and chasing after him. She dreamt of many things that she could not distinguish between daydream and real dream. They all became a part of her real life.

She enjoyed talking to him on ICQ. She could ask him everything. She asked a lot about his life and a lot about nothing in particular. She simply enjoyed talking to him. She always stayed online longer than he did because she wanted to talk as much as she could and she did not want to miss a minute of seeing him online.

“When I first read it, I was glad. I thought it was a fantastic beginning for a great love story. A girl fell in love with a young man madly. I loved this beginning. It would become a wonderful fairy tale in which the two of us would fall in love and live happily forever. Then...”

It was four months until Ken told Annie that he had a girlfriend.

“Oh God! She played such a big joke on me. You know, I hated God for this joke. But it only lasted for a while. Then I remembered “The Little Mermaid”. Do you know the story? Well, who doesn’t? The witch...” Her eyes glittered, “The witch could still marry the Prince although the Prince was in love with the mermaid. The witch’s life was a fairy tale.”

The news as heavy as an iron hammer struck Annie hard. Her heart bled with fresh blood springing out like a fountain. She was pounded to the bottom of a sea surrounded by darkness.

She dreamt of seeing him on the street with his girlfriend. She dreamt of meeting them on the MTR and she ran away. She dreamt of saving the man from a traffic accident with his girlfriend witnessing the whole event. She wanted to protest to his girlfriend that she loved him so much and she was ready to die for him.

She could not and did not want to think of what his girlfriend

was like. She did not ask Ken anything about his girlfriend. She knew that she loved quickly and she hated quickly too. She could love crazily, she could hate crazily.

She sat on a bus and went nowhere. She was unconscious of her direction. She just took off at the final stop and got there. There was where the man lived, she then realized. She stood at the bus stop and planned to take the bus again. Again to nowhere, probably to where she got on the bus. Back to the beginning and forget the journey.

It all happened at one second, one glimpse.

Ken came out of the building he lived in with his girlfriend. Last month, Annie was still wondering when she would see him again. Today, she saw him with someone whose existence she would never want to know. She turned around and hid herself behind a signpost.

Annie looked at them coming out and the metal gate slammed loudly. She felt her face burnt and reddish as if she had been slapped. She dreamt that she was slapped by his girlfriend in front of all her friends and was scolded, "Slut! Bitch! You snatcher! You want to snatch my boyfriend from me? Don't you have any shame? He already has a girlfriend. ME!"

Annie heard it, instead of feeling angry, embarrassed or ashamed, she felt happy and relieved. She could look straight into other people's eyes and say that she had fallen in love with someone else's boyfriend. She knew that if she was publicly known as "slut", "bitch" and "snatcher", she had every right to destroy other people.

She was excited, "You see? You see? That's it! She would destroy her girlfriend. It was exactly what the witch did. I was thrilled when I read this part. I knew my life could be a fairy tale."

Annie followed them. She tried to focus her eyes on Ken but she failed. She could only see his girlfriend. His girlfriend, wearing a long white dress, was slender and short with tender limbs and a small head. Her shiny black hair ran smooth over her shoulder. Her big glittering eyes with dark pupils matched her beautiful smile and her teeth sparkled. When a light spotted on her, she glowed. And when she glowed, the bottom of the sea floor got darker.

Jealousy had been seeded since Annie learnt about the existence of his girlfriend. And the sight of her was fertilizer. Jealousy budded and was transformed. Hatred grew out like seaweed. It waved and ruffled her.

Annie stayed at the dark sea floor. The seaweed grew rapidly from her body. She had become a part of the sea. She would never be able to live outside the water.

More and more black seaweed grew hysterically from all over her body. It was getting longer and longer and the tip of it was already out of her reach. Did she want to get rid of it? She did not know. And she did not bother to figure it out because she knew that it was already too wild and was out of her control. She could do nothing, so she surrendered to it.

Annie spied them. Ken accompanied his girlfriend until she got on a bus, then he left for home. Annie got on the bus quickly and sat behind his girlfriend.

"Be careful." When his girlfriend saw an old woman toddle towards the seat next to her, she gave the old woman a hand immediately and smiled warmly.

The smile was a stab to Annie. Annie felt a knife in her heart. She let the seaweed deal with it. The seaweed was ready to spread out and grasp the knife, wrap it, squeeze it and suffocate it.

A mobile phone rang.

His girlfriend took out her phone and answered it. She talked quietly and politely for a long time.

Annie could not hear clearly what she said. But when the bus stopped at a boisterous street, his girlfriend spoke more loudly.

"She may try to snatch your boyfriend from you but if he really loves you, you have nothing to fear. You may not buy what I said but you have to believe your boyfriend. Real love can overcome any problem."

After the bus left the noisy street, she spoke quietly again.

Annie was relieved. She could not stand the conversation any longer although she only heard two sentences. She felt like she was going to explode. The sincere advice and the sweet voice of his girlfriend were explosive. They sneaked into her and were ready to explode at any moment.

She could not imagine how this sweet voice could speak words like "slug" and "bitch". Anyone could tell that it would not hurt even if she slapped your face. And how could anyone imagine that this girl would actually slap? Even Annie knew that it was impossible.

Annie knew that her existence was only an alarm to her own evil. She had to get rid of it. Annie followed his girlfriend the next day. She put on sunglasses and hat, so that she would not be recognized. She followed her from her home to her office and from her office to her home. All the way, she pondered how she could get rid of her in the quickest way.

When they took the MTR home, Annie's mind was already exhausted. Her mind was so empty that she could not think anymore. She just stared at the railway. His girlfriend was standing behind the yellow line and Annie lined up behind her. When the train came into the platform, the headlights shone brightly and the railway went dark. Annie seeing the glowing and the darkness suddenly awoke and pushed his girlfriend in the back.

"I killed her. I was thrilled. I thought I was going to marry him like the witch did. But I didn't realize that the story ended there. God didn't script me to marry him. She only made me a murderer. And my fate after the murder must have been written in another story and I never found it anywhere."

"May I keep it?"

"Is it safe? Will God know that we took her story?"

"It is safe. Do you remember you gave me one before? It is still here." He patted on a file.
"No one knows it."

Annie handed the paper to him.

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"No, that's all for this time."

"Okay, then you may go back to your room now."

"Thank you. See you next time."

He opened the file with some paper on which the title "Annie's Love Story" was typed. The margin of the paper was full of scribble which started with "She claimed that this was God's Plan for her. She just found it in a drawer. She read it and followed the Plan." and ended with "No evidence showed that she was pretending in any way."

He wrote “No obvious improvement in condition” on a report sheet after Annie left and closed the door on which the tag read:

Dr. C. K. Yim

Consultant

Forensic Psychiatric Service

Siu Lam Psychiatric Centre

Dr. Yim closed the file and put it back into a drawer with the name “Annie God” on it.

Why did you wake up after death?

In hell, I met Shakespeare. He said, "How now, my love?" Why is your cheek so pale?" "Because I have died." He screamed, a bit too passionately. I wondered if he knew that every creature in hell had died. "Alas, what's the matter?" "Suicide," I answered. He was eager to know about me, "What? Suicide? Wherefore?" "I was bored'n had nothing to do, so I picked up a book. I died, after reading three lines." He continued to exclaim, "O spite! O Hell!" "Died of boredom," I laughed. He cried, which frightened me. "Be not afraid, that book shall not harm thee." He took out Twelfth Night (the book I read before death) from his pocket, handed it to me, "a very good piece of work, I assure you." Terror made me strong. My soul flew back to my body.

Li Mei Yee, Florence

When ordinary me met extraordinary she

Chan Wai Shan, Maggie

“Five years, so quick!” said she, quietly, but without fear.

“Yes, from Form 6 to the end of Year 3, only five years...for..ever friends, my dear..est Hiu.. Fate!” I murmured, as I had already burst into tears. Having cried over one hour at the airport, cried a whole night, whole day, whole week, my cheeks had a sickly pallor. My voice was unclear, “remember me, remember to write, keep in touch!!!”

“Cheuk Sea, we will have another five years and five years of friendship, we will meet again. That is for sure!” said she.

That was an unforgettable scene that happened five years ago, at the Hong Kong International Airport—two girls hugging each other and tears glistening in their eyes. The two girls were Hiu Fate and me, two fresh graduates.

* * *

Yu Hiu Fate, a famous name in our school--no schoolmates would forget her; no teachers would forget her. She was the only new student in our form six. Everyone, including our principal, admired her English fluency. Coming back from Australia, her English, her talents, shone glamorously wherever she went.

“The best debater of the Inter-school Debate is Yu Hiu Fate, from SCSS!”

“The Overall Champion of the 47th Hong Kong Speech Festival is Yu Hiu Fate!”

“The SCMP Outstanding Student Award in drawing this year is Yu Hiu Fate!”

“The most outstanding student of this year is Yu Hiu Fate.”

These were just some of the awards she received. Actually, the name “Yu Hiu Fate” appeared nearly every day during the morning assemblies--sometimes, leading and being involved in the clubs or societies’ publicity of their coming events; sometimes, announcing the champions of drawing competitions, solo-verse speaking competition, debate, reading and writing competition, singing competition and the like. She even had the chance to interview the exchange students and being the presenter holding the whole morning assembly talking about her success and sharing her study experience with us all.

Usually, I would not make friends with such a glamorous person. Well, I should say,

according to my experience, for those who were teacher's pets, they had no need to flatter me . I was just a small potato in class. To them, I did not have any practical value. I was not anyone's stepping stone for their success nor a piece of chess for them to make use of. Around them, there were already enough fans and flatterers and admirers making them suffocate. I was neither their competitor nor admirer as most of them were arrogant or behaved falsely. I only wanted to enter the University of Hong Kong. So, I needed to study hard. That was why most of the popular leaders and chairpersons in our schools were not my buddies. However, she was the only exceptional one.

* * *

One lunch time, I attended our class noontime vigils. What a coincidence, she was also there. This was the first and only time she and I had attended that. What a coincidence! Within this fifteen minutes, there were hymn singing, prayers and daily life sharing. She dropped tears.

"I feel I am under great pressure. I know maybe you all feel I am very talented, I am very lucky... but I feel depressed, I feel down that I always need to adapt to a new environment, going to Australia for four years, besides having fluent English, enjoying the studying of Fine Art after settling. Then, when I built up my friendship there, I needed to come back to Hong Kong with my family. Why?"

I felt the tears were from her heart, her words all from her heart. I started to comfort her. At the same time, the topic of this noontime vigil was "our dreams".

"I would like to be a painter" said she.

And I said, "well, this is really only my fantasy, haha, I would like to be a poet, I would like to have a book written and illustrated by me, hehe~~just my dream." However, really a surprise when she told me, "I feel you can, if you think you can, you can!" That was the first encouragement from her, very touching. Though we were not Christians, and this was our last attendance at that noontime vigil, we started chatting. She was so nice and modest. We started writing letters, too. This was a common trend in our school. We would like to put our letters on our little mailbox on our board in our classroom. We started having lunch together. Friendship had been built by then.

* * *

We both entered the Faculty of Arts of the Hong Kong University. She was a double major in Fine Arts and French while I was majoring in English and minoring in Chinese. We could always study together in the same library, have meals together, go to Causeway Bay shopping and walk around the bookshops after our lectures.

* * *

After the exam of the first semester of our sophomore year, my whole family went to Macau for two

days. And I stayed at home. This was the only time we stayed together overnight, though she always visited me. We chatted overnight-- from morning to night, and from night to next morning. The university life and the campus environment were very different from the secondary school. Human relationships became more intriguing and complicated. As she had already got used to being popular, glamorous, charming and outstanding throughout her life, she did not come across those new problems that I encountered. Or I should say, those problems were not new to her. I remembered I sobbed, "I really can't bear that eye-wash."

"No need to be worry, just be yourself, no need to deal with those gossiping guys saying words behind your back. Those who are really your friends would not trust that and have distinguished right and wrong. Your cheerful manner and energetic personality which you did not notice in secondary school before can really attract others and some will probably become your good friends one day. Actually, it's only you, yourself, do not feel your own idiosyncrasy. You sometimes do not feel your luster but others do, though that may not have been the case in our secondary school. But it really is different now. Even your smirk can attract people and people would feel your delighted living attitude and feel easy and comforted when being friends with you. So, don't worry!"

"Really? Haha...thanks"

"So, don't feel those difficulties as great obstacles. Take it easy. You should have a breakthrough when life goes on. We need to grow up. Our attitude towards life will change when we know more about the world. We will get initiation and realization when we grow up. As we know, everything always shows within a frame, not just movies, but our life too. We always have restrictions. So, we always need to make efforts to break them. Then, we can go into another stage. Cheuk Sea, cheer up!"

We shared our daily life, ups and downs continually that day. She really comforted me, just by talking with me. This was what a buddy was. I once read someone wrote "Friendships multiply joys and divide grief." And, now, I really feel sharing joy doubles the joy; sharing sorrow halves the sorrow. And yes, I remembered that song we had listened to that night—

*" Keep smiling, keep shining,
Knowing you can always count on me, for sure,
That's what friends are for
For good times and bad times
I'll be on your side forever more
That's what friends are for*

*Well you came and opened me
And now there's so much more I see"*

We played psychological tests and the checking our zodiac signs in order to know more about ourselves.

“What do you feel about this picture? Tell me your first impression on that!”

“Very artistic and modern!”

“Oh...Cheuk Sea, guess what does this picture imply?”

We were shocked that in one psychological test, that was about my attitudes on death!

“Hey, as we are both adventurous and haha... artistic people, let's go to France when we graduate.”

“Good idea, you can practice your French and we can go to the museums!”

“Yup, we can go to Provence, taking photos with the field of sunflowers and lavender!”

“Wow, excellent!”

* * *

Dearest Cheuk Sea,

You know my name, “HIU FATE”, it's not me, it's the FATE. That's my fate! We need to “Hiu¹”—learn that, I don't want to go here and there all the time. Before, you know Hong Kong people were afraid of the Handover of Hong Kong's and migrated to other places like Australia, New Zealand and Canada. So, I went “Hong Kong-->Australia--> Hong Kong-->Oxford-->... Hong Kong?” I want to settle in one place, not always leaving my friends though I like to go traveling. Remember our dreams--to fetch our stars, no matter how far. Even a small potato also can fetch a star and be a star. Let me share something with you--life is just like a bus trip. Sometimes, friends cannot accompany us in our whole journey. People keep getting on and off in our journey. So, don't be upset. We will meet again. We will go to France together one day. I remember, we have never gone traveling together, what a pity. But we surely will have the chance. Keep in touch, I am all ears!

Love,
Hiu Fate

This was the letter given by her when I saw her off at the airport. Our plan to travel to France was cancelled as we had a time clash, I found a job working in a small publishing company and required me to start my job once I finished my final year's exams. And she also needed to go to Oxford

¹ Hiu, in Chinese, it means, learn and know.

that summer to prepare her Master of Fine Arts there.

* * *

Five years passed. We kept chatting in ICQ every night, writing letters once a month and phoning each other on our birthdays and at Christmas. Once she finished her Masters degree, she worked in the Van Gogh Musuem. And this year, she was busy in preparing her first international painting exhibition in France.

After graduation, I worked in a small publishing company and used my free time to write poems. My imagination would not grow old even though I was not a naïve girl anymore. But I still remembered my dream and so Hiu Fate was working on achieving her dream--becoming a famous painter. I kept on my hobbies-- listening to radio drama, writing poems, radio drama scripts and the like.

“Ladies and gentlemen, are you a fan of radio drama? Now, you can have your chance to have your creative radio drama broadcast on Metro Radio 997. Let’s particpate in the Metro Radio 997 Radio Drama competition. We will cast the Champion of the competition by pop singers Kelly Chen and Eason Chan. The Champion can also have the chance to publish his/her manuscript. So, grasp the chance! Show your talents!”

I, then, sent my writings delicately, with the script, the theme song, and the illustrations. Life went on.

* * *

Dearest Hiu Fate,

Hey, guess what? Remember once I told you I sent my radio drama script to Metro Radio 997? When I had forgotten that, I received an email from Metro Radio 997. Wow, bingo! I won! I was overjoyed! I could have the chance to publish a book, fantastic! They even agreed to publish all those materials in the book, including my illustrations. Hiu Fate! We’ve both fetched our stars! Achieved our dreams! Yeah!!!

Really miss you, when you will be back in Hong Kong? I will have a press conference on the release of my book. Will you come? It’s the first Saturday of next month. I know you are busy with your painting exhibition. But it’s nearly five years since we’ve been apart.

Hiu Fate, tell you another piece of good news. I can have two weeks holiday this December. As you once mentioned that you will study in Paris. Let me go to France to visit you, ok?

Drop me a line when you are free (Drop me a drawing or a paragraph when you are busy =P hahaha!)

Love,
Cheuk Sea

* * *

Dearest Cheuk Sea,

Wow, congratulations! Excellent! Nice to hear that! Both of us achieved our dreams. I am sorry that I can't come to your press conference. But I can share your joy at heart. And tell you a piece of good news. I will go back to Hong Kong for a month after I finished my painting exhibition! Then, I will go to Paris to study my for Doctor's Degree. We could finally meet, it's already the fifth year since I have left Hong Kong.

And about visiting me in December, it's really sweet that you can come to Paris. We can go sightseeing and to museums together finally. When you know about the exact date of your Christmas holiday, please tell me, ok?

Hey, lastly, tell you one thing, you will receive a surprise in two weeks. Stop here. Wish you every success.

Love,
Hiu Fate

* * *

But this was not my life. Life would not be so wonderful.

Though meeting extraordinary she changed me from ordinary, fate would not be in favor of me. Fate is fate. I could not escape from it.

When I finished delivering my press conference, suddenly, my sight faded. I could not see anything. All was dark.

* * *

"It is Pathological Myopic Macular Degeneration though it may be caused by your deep shortsightedness. However, it is a rare case in such a young girl. Your case is a bit complicated as you have both detached retinas and Pathological Myopic Macular Degeneration so that your degradation of sight is very sudden and serious. If your first surgery failed, you have almost no hope to see the world again," I was told by Doctor Woo.

"Doctor Woo, But I have just had my regular check on my eyes three months ago. I did not have cataracts or any serious eye illness!" I said desperately.

"Yes, we cannot explain why you have this so suddenly. But your situation is very serious and we need to do the surgery as soon as possible."

* * *

Surgery FAILED!

* * *

That night, I received Hiu Fate's phone call--

“Hiu Fate, I want a colorful world. What have I done wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong.”

“But why I go blind, so suddenly, really without reason??? I am not Oedipus the King, I am not a tragic hero! Wah.....how come!!!

“Don’t get addicted to literature, Cheuk Sea.”

“But you know, I like writing poems and illustrating them myself, I like taking photos...”

We both burst into tears.

* * *

Dearest Hiu Fate,

“Row, row, row, row the boat,

Gently down the stream,

Merrily, merrily, merrily,

Life is but a dream”

When I achieved my dream, I wanna go back, remember that psychological test? Maybe I won’t be afraid of death. Death is artistic. Death is a form of art. When ordinary me met extraordinary you, my life was brightened and had direction. Me, from a small potato, became a little star. => We both love art. And now we have achieved our dreams. Life is but a dream...when you thought of where I would go, I was already rowing the boat, rowing into the heart of the sea, the origin of my birth... Fate is fate. Let it be me.

Hiu Fate, I received your surprise you mentioned in your last letter today—that bunch of Lavender ! And really thanks a lot that during these years you have kept writing letters to me in such a computer dominant world. You still remembered me hating to receive emails but liking to receive handmade cards and letters written by pencil. However, I could only smell the fragrance of Lavender. I had no chance to go to France with you. This is our unfinished dream—to go traveling to our dream place, France, province to province, anymore. >_<

No matter how, I still feel depressed for the sudden blindness. To learn your name, “Hiu Fate”, yes, it’s a lesson to me, yes, it’s really my fate. I know I have very deep shortsightedness. However, it’s too sudden. I cannot figure out what I have done wrong, why I am just like all those classical tragic protagonists? Oedipus went blind, Earl of Gloucester went blind, both characters in Greek and Shakespearean tragedies were like that. However, I did nothing wrong. This is only my destiny. Maybe you can also draw a comic about me as everyone knows you also have talents on drawing comics. Anyway, before I died, I have inspiration that you really made my life colorful and glamorous. Remember? Life is just like a bus trip. You will still have my shadow

in your mind, unforgettably, right? That's enough. You really supported me always, changed my attitude. You are my best friend, my idol and my angel forever.

Lastly, remember once you said our life is just like those scenes, those novels—frame within a frame. I remembered you once used the frames in literature to apply to our life. And that concept really helped me and cheered me up. But I think my frames are not endless. I think we were wrapped in many frames. We overcame them and broke the frames one by one. And when we broke the last one, we reach the destination of our life and that is the origin of our birth. We realize the meaning of life and that is our end, too. I feel I have already gone out from all my frames. I am not within any frame now. And now, I am blind, back to my initial stage before I was born that I cannot see anything. And as you know, I like the sea very much just like my parents. (You remember my mother specially used “Sea” as the English translation of my Chinese name, as most of the people will use “Sze” instead of “Sea”, just as in your case “Faye” instead of “Fate”). So, I CHOOSE to go back to the heart of the sea.

Love,Cheuk Sea

* * *

All the above was written on her favourite Precious Moments letter set, attached to those selected letters we wrote in the past. She wrote all that before she... she...left me! I felt how difficult when she wrote that in the dark, word by word when reading this letter. But I still loved her handwriting. I treasured that and cherished that forever! I was touched that she had kept all my letters and even the copies of letters that wrote to me. Cheuk Sea, you were not ordinary. Cheuk Sea! Do you know before I received this letter, I would like to tell you the good news that I will get married with Frank? Cheuk Sea...Cheuk Sea, I would never forget you, I promise. I will publish this and draw the comic based on this! I will write the preface and design the cover of the book. I will use all my efforts to get “When ordinary me MET extraordinary she” published to achieve your dream.

Cheuk Sea, you are my best friend forever. You share your life with me and I also share that with you. I remembered the song “That's what friends are for”--

*“On and then for the times when we're apart,
well then close your eyes
and know the words are coming from my heart”*

Monopolized 'dialogues'

You have engaged in a decade of defiance.

Iraq.

World, we must take a hard line: Iraq must disarm.

Weapons of mass destruction affront our community,

Threaten global safety, fuel anxiety.

Their arrogance -- whole world should confine.

Inspector troops trample our land,

Baghdad.

A peaceful approach's beautifully commanded:

Biological, chemical, nuclear disarmed.

Every nook and cranny they peer into--

Full account of weapons program they demand.

With empty reasons Iraq should disarm --

Pentagon Plan, the mastermind of global hatred --

His revenge, oil and personal ambition covered,

Their face of evil on our land mirrored.

Kwong Ngan Ying Rico

Far Side of the Moon

Yuen Kam Wa

What we call the beginning is often the end,
And to make an end is to make a beginning.

--- T. S. Eliot

On a Saturday morning, a hopeful sunny morning, we will all dress in black as we are supposed to pay respect to *the dead*, but I am not yet ready. The story began in the summer of my unforgettable year. At that time, I was quite nervous about the result of my application to study in the California Institute of Technology. It was a rainy Tuesday.

It rained. It rained heavily. It rained cats and dogs.

It was Tuesday. It was a Tuesday afternoon. It was a rainy Tuesday afternoon.

I was waiting for my brother Eldon. I was waiting for my brother Eldon to come and visit me to discuss the matter.

I was tired. I had been working on the invitation list for a whole day. My stomach burnt like fire, but I couldn't move away from my desk. It was because I knew I was responsible solely for *this matter*. I had to finish it before this Sunday, and deliver all the invitation letters as soon as possible.

Then I heard the bell ring.

"Hey, Maverick, it's me, Eldon." He shouted as if I was deaf.

"Coming..." I replied, as I wanted to assure him about my existence.

He may be right. I am so weak, and have fainted on the street several times. But I never did faint in front of him, Eldon, my dearest brother; because I told myself not to.

I remembered it was a Saturday morning five years ago. It was weeks after our father had passed away. Looking up to the blue sky, I saw not just the lovely clouds but also the distorted moon shadow. It could hardly be seen in the daytime, but its existence offered a panoramic view of the sky. It was a breathtaking view from the hilltop. I spent most of my time standing there, staring at the stars.

I could stand there for a day or two without moving at all. It was always my younger brother who persuaded me to go home.

"What happened to you? Are you crazy? How many times do I have to tell you that you will be blind? Ah ..." He taunted me.

"I can understand English perfectly well, and I know exactly what I am doing right now." I

replied.

“You know? So, do you know how old are you? Do you know I am not your nanny?”

“I know I am going to be admitted this time. California Institute of Technology is going to admit me this time. I am going to study in the Department of Astronomy. I am sure about this.” I murmured.

“I am not going to believe you any more. You have to pay all the bills before the end of the month.”

“I am going to apply for a studentship or even a scholarship this time. I will be able to afford to pay my bills soon. Please help me one more time!” I begged my younger brother, “I am going to pay you back twice as much as I owe you.”

“Okay, let us make a deal. If you are not admitted this time, you have to give it up at once. And you have to find a full time job as quickly as possible.”

“That’s fair.” I agreed.

“Mark, you know it. You know you are going to sell the goddamn telescope. You have to let me sell it before I pay the bills.”

“Eldon, it’s not mine. It’s the only thing father left for me.”

“No, you are going to sell it. And I will be the only thing father left for YOU.”

I squinted in the sun and smiled, and then we left.

Now, five more years have gone and so has our mother. I have been admitted to study in Caltech this year, but I decided to reject the offer to save the telescope. I am now working in a fast food shop as a waiter, and saving up money to catch my dream in the sky.

“You are no longer a kid, man.” My well-educated brother speaks. “You have to take care of yourself. Now both mom and dad have left, you have to...”

I coughed and stopped him. “I know it all well. Shall we begin?”

“Okay, as you wish. But I don’t think living in this old house would do any good to you.” He sat down in the sofa.

I told him everything that the officers asked me to do and thanked him for coming to help me getting the job done. Then we decided that Eldon would start with packing up mom’s belongings, and I would finish the invitation list as soon as I could.

It was so peaceful and quiet in the next couple hours. Everything was living in harmony until Eldon told me about finding a diary of our mother. I asked him if he was sure about it because I did not know she kept a diary of her own.

It was a black-leather covered, small and delicate diary. We found a letter inside as we opened it. It was a letter for a man called Ah Hoi. It began like this: Dear Ah Hoi, It is likely that I am flying to America when you read this letter. I hope you will understand my motivation. I

decided to follow Ah Ming because it will be the best for our children, Little Ma.

...

It was shocking and I stared at my brother for a long time. It was already the time for the moon to rise when I told my brother not to bother about it at that moment.

The moon shone and lit up my path to the main entrance of the house. It was so ironic and stunning that I could not believe the truth. But anyway, I had to get her funeral done well to honor my mom as the elder son in the family.

Two weeks later, on a sunny Saturday morning, I went to China Town to find Auntie Mui. She was my mother's best friend in New York. She knew everything because she had known my mother over the past decades.

I told her that I wanted to know what happened to my mother in Mainland China in the seventies. She refused at first, but after I came to her home a couple times in the past two weeks, she began to tell me about it bit by bit. She said my mother was too stubborn to live in China at that time. Auntie Mui had been asked to accompany my mother to flee to the States.

"It was a revolutionary time in China. Everyone was fancy about the utopia promised by President Mao. Your mother was one of the minority who did not believe in his fancy words. She has decided that both you and I must leave the hopeless country as soon as possible."

"Then she began to date Mr. Li, the richest man in town."

"Mr. Li? Do you mean my father?" I asked.

"Yes, it is. But he is only your step father."

"So, do you know where my blood comes from?"

"He? He is not worth a name. He is not practical at all." She said angrily. "I mean he cares about nothing, not even your mother who was bearing his child at that time."

I could not explain to you how sad it was when she tried to tell me everything in detail. And I don't know why I would not stop her from telling the truth or even comfort her in the right way.

She told me that my father was an honest man, a handsome one too. He never get into any competition, thus he never experienced any failure. He always turned up having whatever he wanted. It is all because his father was so rich. But this is the problem, a serious one at that time. All rich men's families were condemned and most of them were sent to the re-education camps set up by President Mao. Then my mother told him that maybe they should give me to Auntie Mui to leave China. However, when my father knew about her decision, they quarreled a lot and ended up divorced.

It was in my late twenties that I finally knew that what I was following in the past twenty some years was a dream of a stranger. I could hardly remember what she had told me in that three hours talk, but what she told me at the very last moment was astonishing.

“... I believe you should be proud of being his son as he never gives up his dream.” She said, “By the way, I found it in the suitcase that he left behind. I think it is time to give it to you.”

She handed me a magnifier for a telescope.

“Is it what he left for me?”

“I am not sure. What is it exactly?”

“I am not so sure. But I am sure I will figure it out soon.”

* * *

I traveled to China last month to find out the truth, but the truth will never be revealed because he was dead. I was so depressed and frustrated. I totally collapsed. I am not so sure about my past and my future. Could I possibly catch my dream if I continued to be a waiter in Chinatown? Maybe I will never know because I always fail.

The moon is too far to catch, and too mysterious.

I am destined to fail, but *it matters* because it is all about *following my dreams*.

Echo

Leaves fall ---

Kissed: the serene image

Disperses, in the light of ripples.

Pulses stop ---

Shiver: your chilly hands

Slip from my grasp, swinging in the air.

Christine