

Chapter One

Day One: Sunday (Very Early) Morning

MEI

“Are you a Singaporean citizen, over twenty-one, and a lawyer?” he said.

I recognised that voice at once, the English accent, the voice roughened by too much tar, and endless lager sagas. It could only be Andy. Now the above question might seem fairly innocuous to the casual eavesdropper, but in this instance it caused me a great deal of aggravation. Believe me, if Mother Teresa was in my place, if she was asked the same question under the same controlled circumstances, it would be enough to make her chuck her role as the saint of the century, and send her screaming down the streets, going apeshit, looking for babies to kick.

Why was Andy’s question so provocative? I’ll tell you why. Firstly, not only because it was one in the morning (and looking at my glow-in-the-dark Casio clock, I saw that it was 1:16a.m. to be exact), but secondly, and more importantly, Andy knew, that I knew, that he knew, the answer to all three questions, because five hours earlier he was supposed to meet me outside Tung Lok Shark’s Fin Restaurant to celebrate my getting the license to practise law. Of course, Andy didn’t turn up. I hate eating alone, so I went home early, and woe to me - I returned to the flat only to find my mother having a karaoke night with her mah-jong playmates. So instead of feasting on Abalone Delight and Peking Duck, I spent my evening trying to block out the sound of fifty-something housewives wailing songs from the Karaoke

Hit List From Hell, songs like “Sealed With A Kiss”, “Singapura, Oh Singapura (Sunny Island Set In The Sea)”, “Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree”, “Que Sera Sera”, and “Ne Xin Li Ken Ben Mei Yao Wo” (or ‘Your Heart Never Had Me’). Trust me, you haven’t seen something truly Satanic until you’ve seen your mother belting out “Chain Reaction” complete with Diana Ross hand actions and bum wiggles. So, as you can imagine, when Andy phoned, I was in less than a good mood. What would you do if you were woken at one in the morning by someone who had stood you up five hours earlier, and asked three completely inane questions?

I pondered my options, rolled over the choices that surfaced to mind, and finally decided upon the calmest, the most apposite, indeed, the most mature response. I slammed down the phone. It rang again, and I picked it up and said, “I’m very pissed off now, and you have about five seconds to make me un-pissed-off, preferably using a technique which involves three words or less, or else this phone is going down again.”

Silence on the other end as Andy paused to think of those all-important three words. As our Andrew ponders upon those crucial phrases, perhaps now would be a good time to introduce him. This is a tricky process because of the Eugene Connection. Andy wasn’t really a friend, he was more like a friend-in-law - I knew him through Eugene. Eugene was my neighbour-cum-childhood playmate. When we were kids, we had great adventures together, like investigating ‘The Case of Mrs Lam’s (Possibly) Murdered Maid’, but that’s another story. Now pay attention, here’s where it gets complicated, because Eugene is one of those people with those complex, exotic backgrounds that most normal people like me would kill for. During his teens, Eugene and his parents emigrated to Holland to open a Chinese restaurant. He returned to Singapore for a few years to complete his National Service, then he went to university in England, where he met Andy. They became best friends, and spent their undergraduate years cultivating their passion for soccer, kebabs, and Cocoa Bombs.

Anyway, post-graduation, when Andy (unsurprisingly) couldn't get a job in England, he decided to go East to seek his fortune.

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Andy finally thought of those three magic words - "I'm in jail."

Now it was my turn to be speechless.

So Andy said, "Have I used up my words quota yet or can I say more?"

I graciously granted him permission to speak.

"They think I'm the head of a soccer gambling syndicate. I'm supposed to be like some octopus, with tentacles all over the place, in Asia, Europe, everywhere. Imagine that - little ol' me. Head of a multi-million betting empire. I don't know whether to be flattered or outraged."

"Have you been charged?"

"I've been arrested under - what was that phrase again? - the Common Betting Act. They said it was a 'bookable offence'. What's that in normal English?"

"It's legalese for 'You're in big trouble.'"

"So, as you see, I need someone to bail me out. And the police said that that someone had to be Singaporean, and over twenty-one. And I thought, hey, I've got a friend - not just an acquaintance, but a *good* friend, who fits that description perfectly. Plus she's just got her law license."

“I’m impervious to flattery at one in the morning.” But once again, I knew I had to do it. I had to rescue Andy again.

Andy was always stumbling into trouble. I don’t think he ever had a plan in life, but if he did, it was probably to live a life of complete cluelessness. He would do something outrageous, after which he would flash his trademark stricken-yet-ingenuous look: he would widen his doe-like eyes, scrunch his mouth and flap his hands as if trying to fend off any accusations of misconduct. “It’s not *my* fault,” he would invariably say, “I don’t know how that broke* / I don’t know how the snot got sprayed all over your CDs* / I didn’t know you weren’t supposed to smoke that in this country* (* delete as applicable) - it just *happened*.” I was used to getting him out of trouble. In the past few months, he always depended on me to bail him out, in the metaphorical sense. I didn’t mind that. It’s just that I never expected to have to bail him out *literally*.

Ah well. Some were born to guardian angel-hoods; others have guardian angel-hoods thrust upon them. I fall into the latter category. Eugene came to Singapore for a few months to help Andy settle in, but last week, I had to take over from Eugene after he got a phone call from his parents.

“My father wants to open two new branches in Leiden and Utrecht,” Eugene said, “called ‘Triple Pagoda’, or ‘Moon Dragon Flying Round Lotus Umbrella’, or something stupid like that. I better go back to Holland and stop him before he does any more *pei-say* things like that. Can you imagine, he even wants to put bami balls on the menu?” Eugene stuck a finger down his throat, and pretended to gag.

So Eugene entrusted Andy to my care. “You got to take care of him for me. We’re like brothers. Like Frank and Joe Hardy. Like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.”

“Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid weren’t brothers,” I said.

“Ai-ya, you lawyer types are so pedantic,” Eugene said, *“But hey, seriously, Andy needs help. You know what he’s like. I need someone to look after him for me.”*

That someone had to be me. I didn’t really have a choice. I remember when I first saw Andy. He stood out from all the other passengers at the arrival lounge, surveying his surroundings with innocent awe. His face looked so fragile - skin white as fine china, as if one touch would shatter it into a powder of dust. Pale like marble, with wisps of red hair, and fine, fragile features, he would have looked terribly pre-Raphaelite, but for the freckles and glasses. With those plump cheeks, curly red hair and brilliant blue eyes, he looked like a baby angel, empty of guile, filled with pure, naive joy. One look at him and I knew that I had to dedicate my life to protect that innocence, preserve that purity, shelter him from an evil and cunning world. Even though his red head towered a foot above me, I felt a deep need to go up and pat him on the head.

Andy had this helpless boyish charm, the kind that brought out all the maternal instincts that I never knew I had. When I first saw him I suddenly had all these unnatural urges - I wanted to bring him home, sit him down on the sofa, place the remote control in his hand, and say, *“You just stay here watching the highlights from the Premier League while I go into the kitchen and happily spend three hours brewing a bowl of red date soup for you.”* Once, while watching *“Four Weddings and A Funeral”*, I had a vision of myself smiling up at him, barefoot and pregnant, like some model out of a Ministry of Community Development poster. And I was like - Holy Jesus, what’s happening to me? Why am I thinking these evil thoughts? Why have ten years of feminist education suddenly evaporated?

So that’s why I have spent the past few days cleaning up after Andy. Recently, there have been many of Andy’s ‘It Just Happened’ incidents. Like the time when we were at Newton Circus, and Andy ordered a cup of Ovaltine. He poured the Ovaltine into a saucer, blew on it to cool it, then added some vodka. ‘It’s called Cocoa Bomb,’ he said.

Afterwards, we made our way to my new car. Now I know that Andy loves my car, because when he first saw it, he knew a lot more about it than I did -

“Unbelievable! You’ve got the best model in the range. As Jeremy Clarkson says - not only does this car combine the smooth ride and responsiveness of a gasoline engine with the fuel economy of a diesel, it also has three-channel anti-skid brakes, and a computer-controlled traction control system. Cool.” However, I didn’t buy the car because of those specifications. I bought the car because I fell in love with its one genuinely distinctive feature, its green-tinted glass roof, which Andy proceeded to make even more distinctive by being sick all over it. That night at Newton Circus, I learnt another dubiously useful lesson, which I shall pass on for your instruction and edification: if someone pukes on your car roof, it will set off the alarm.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to do that. It just happened. It must have been the curry.”

Footnote: Even if he’s drunk three gallons of beer, it’s never the alcohol that causes Andy’s awesome feats of regurgitation - it’s always something else - like the kebab, or the crisps, or the Wagon Wheels. When I point that out, he says, “Don’t *you* tell *me* what to eat Miss Slim-Fast, Miss Ryvita-With-Jam. You’re just jealous because *I* don’t have to worry about my thighs.” That’s another thing that drives me nuts, the way Andy mainlines Mars bars and liquorice without gaining a pound. I think he’s signed a pact with the Devil. How else can you explain how Andy manages to maintain the body of an Adonis while subsisting on the fantasy diet of a nine-year-old?

Another time when there was a lot of cleaning up to do was during Andy’s first MRT trip. There were these big signs plastered all over the train station, these drawings of a cup and a plate of steaming food, with a huge red cross stamped across them. For those lacking the ability to interpret visual symbols, a caption underneath the drawing warned the public that the possessors of food and drink in a MRT station would be subjected to a five-hundred

dollar fine. I told Andy to hide his bottle of Cocoa Bomb in his bag, but he said, "I'm not going to let any foreign government dictate *my* eating habits." So we were standing on the platform, waiting for the train, and Andy starts recounting Fallensham United's latest victory, jiggling his hands as he tried to reconstruct Varney's last-minute winning piledriver. Of course he spilled his drink all over the floor. He took off his T-shirt, got down on his knees, and went - "Shit shit shit shit shit" as he tried to mop up the brown mess. Then this huge mother of a voice booms out from some hidden P.A. system. The cameras had been watching us all this time, that panoptic system that governs our public transport system. The voice said, "Will the topless man please make his way to the Central Control Station." As usual, it was down to me to deal with the grim, grey-uniformed MRT wardens, grovelling on Andy's behalf, soothing things over in the Singlish lingo that only the natives could do - "Ai-ya, sorry about my friend *lah*. He's *ang mo*, you know what they're like. He just got off the plane, he come from this small *ulu ulu* town in England, very *sau-ku*, he doesn't know anything. You give him chance, okay or not?"

"Okay, this time we give him chance," the station manager said, "but next time he do this again, we *ou kong* him a lot of money."

It was Andy's first encounter with Singlish, so after we left the control station, he asked me, "What were you talking about?"

"I told them you were this stupid white foreign country bumpkin," I said, "and they said they would let you off this time, but if you litter again, they'll fine you five hundred dollars." I explained to Andy that though people like me and Eugene could speak perfect English, we reserved our 'proper' English for foreigners, job interviews and English aural exams. With friends or family, we always used Singlish, that is, Singapore slang. Singlish is a type of pidgin English, where English words are arranged according to the rules of Chinese grammar, and sentences are sprinkled with the occasional Chinese, Malay and Indian words.

Singlish sounds like 'broken' English - to foreign ears it can sound unintelligible, uneducated, even crude. However, we didn't speak 'broken' English because we lacked the ability to speak the Queen's English; we spoke Singlish, because with all its contortions of grammar and pronunciation, its new and localised vocabulary, Singlish expressed our thoughts in a way that the formal, perfectly enunciated, anal B.B.C. World Service English never could. Besides, who wants to talk like some 'O' level textbook, instead of using our own language, our home language, the language of our souls?

I don't speak either standard English or Singlish consistently. When I'm with friends like Eugene, I enjoy switching between the Queen's English and the *Ah Ma's* English, randomly, arbitrarily and often in mid-sentence. It's just the Singaporean way, this totally jumbled, multi-lingual lingo - just part of our melting pot, *rojak* way of speech, thought and life.

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I didn't know how Andy managed to get arrested, but based upon previous experiences, I could probably guess correctly. Every Saturday over the past few months, Andy would get together with Eugene and their other punter friends to bet on soccer results. I told Andy he would get arrested if the police caught him, but he wouldn't listen. He's obsessed with soccer. A month ago, I was yabbering away for about five minutes before I realised that I was talking *at* Andy, rather than *to* him.

I hit the back of his head, and he jerked to attention. "Sorry - just thinking about class tomorrow. I'm thinking of giving the kids Defoe. He can be, really, uh, deep." Andy shook his head and blinked a couple of times to clear his head. "Right, I'm with you now.

'Justice is always violent to the party offending, for every man is innocent in his own eyes.'

Marvellous quote from 'The Shortest Way With The Dissenters'."

"You weren't thinking about Defoe or justice," I said, "Don't think you can smokescreen me with all that literary crap."

"I *was* thinking about Defoe!"

"No you weren't. It's the same every Saturday night. You sit there, practically catatonic. When I jerk you to attention you always insist that you were thinking about Updike's latest novel, or the Bosnian peace process, or the Tory party conference at Blackpool, but I know you're lying. I've seen that glazed look before. You're replaying the winning volley by Mikhailichenko against Man United. You can disappear into your own little fantasy world for hours. Your mind's like a VCR on perpetual re-wind."

Andy raised his palms in surrender. "You know me too well. I started off thinking about Defoe, about justice, then I thought about how unfair it is that Man U win all the time, and before I knew it I saw the ball dropping over Mik's left shoulder, his right foot pivoting, smashing the ball in mid-air."

"Mentally, you've never developed beyond puberty. You're twenty-two going on twelve."

Andy stuck an imaginary knife in his back, twisted and turned his body, his face contorting in mock agony. "That was a completely unprovoked attack, but I know you love me anyway."

"I never could resist little boys." I said, "I know I keep nagging you about this, but one day your obsession with soccer is going to get you into trouble."

"I'm not obsessed."

“Yes you are. What’s the name of the wife of the coach of the goalkeeper of the England team?”

“Meg.”

“And you say you’re not obsessed. Which brings me back to what I was scolding you about before you went into your dream world. You know who Meg is but you can’t remember the name of my niece.”

“*Zhen Chou, Zhen Cai* - it’s not that big a difference. It was an easy enough mistake to make.”

“There *is* a big difference. *Zhen Cai* means ‘genuine fortune’. *Zhen Chou* means ‘really smelly’. I don’t think my niece appreciated being called ‘stinko’ at her birthday party.”

“Oops.”

“Oops indeed.”

“I can’t help it if you’ve got such a big family,” Andy said, “Fourteen aunts, twenty uncles and millions more nephews and nieces. It’s difficult to keep track of names.”

“I can remember the names of *all* your relatives.”

“Considering that just includes my mother and father, that’s hardly a serious mnemonic challenge.”

Only last week, Andy promised me that he would stop gambling, but tonight I knew that he must have lied. I guessed that despite his claims to be a reformed man, tonight, he must have backslid and run the betting house again, only to be raided by the police. So I decided that it was probably good for him to rot in jail for at least a night.

“Where are you?” I asked.

"I'm in the lock-up at the Central Police Station. Come and bail me out now. Please."

"Forget it," I said, "I'll bail you out tomorrow."

"Why can't you come now?"

"It seems to have slipped your notice that it's half past one in the morning. You might be surprised to learn this, but the courts aren't open at this ungodly hour, so I can't apply for bail now anyway. I'll see you in the morning."

"I'm sorry I couldn't choose a more convenient time to be arrested. So you're just going to let me rot in jail then?"

"Don't worry, you won't rot. This is Singapore. Parliament outlawed bacteria in nineteen seventy-eight."

"Oh go ahead, make fun of me. It's fine by me, never mind, you can come tomorrow. I'll just have to sleep in this dark, small, stinking cell for an entire night, with only a chamber pot for companionship. I hope you enjoy your air-conditioned room, I don't mind. I hope you're not feeling *guilty*. I hope you'll be able to sleep *in peace*."

"Don't worry, I will." I put down the phone.

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"*Ai-yoh*, so late already who call?" My mother came into the living room.

"Andy," I said. "He got arrested for running a soccer gambling syndicate."

My mother slumped into the sofa. "I *knew* this was going to happen. I keep telling you, it's the tree."

"Oh Mummy, not the tree again."

"It is!"

My mother blamed everything bad that happened on the big Flame of the Forest outside our apartment block. "Bad *feng shui*. It's true what Master Chou said. When he looked at our block, he said if got big tree planted outside your main door, very bad luck. If the money wants to flow into your house, it cannot come in, because the tree is blocking the money. Also, this type of tree, so big, no good - demons like to come and live in it," my mother said, "I was talking to Mrs Lam tonight, and we both agreed that it's all the government's fault. You know the last few months we keep writing, write to everyone - the HDB, the M.P., keep asking them to cut down the tree but they don't want. You see, now this sort of thing happen. So bad luck. I tell you, next time election come, I won't vote for this government. Ask them to do a simple thing - cut down tree - they also don't want."

"So you're saying that the demons in the tree made the police arrest Andy. I knew there was a logical explanation for all this."

"Hah, you always think so funny to make fun of me. I never go university like you, but I'm not stupid. *Feng shui* is true. What did Master Chou tell us at the community center?" She shut her eyes and frowned. "Fortune...is not a random occurrence of chance, but has a vitality of its own, a...energy that moves, that can be attracted...enhanced...manipulated.'" She smiled proudly at being able to remember Master Chou's verbatim. "You wait here, I show you something."

She ran to her room and returned with a leaflet.

WIND & WATER CENTRE

Master Chou

Geomancer & Metaphysician

A.C.S. (American Chirological Society, National School of Palmistry, University of
France)

Advised the USA Embassy (Singapore) on their ground-breaking ceremony (1994)

Consulted by the Government for the work site at Marina Bay MRT Station (1988).

Interviewed by SBC in the "Tuesday Report".

Prediction of China Tiananmen Event & Gulf War (Features in **Asia Magazine**)

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“You see, even the big businessmen in Singapore and Hong Kong, even the US embassy believes in *feng shui*. University people,” my mother said, “This Master Chou, he's very famous. He can do *feng shui* for our flat, only one thousand and seven hundred dollars. Offer ends next Wednesday.”

“Forget it.” I didn't want anything to do with these so-called *feng shui* experts. I knew how they operated. Master Chou would come into the flat with his trigram, which looks suspiciously like a spider's web, and walk around the room shaking his head. Then he would stroke his long white beard, jiggle his fingers as he calculated our fortune, tell us to move our hibiscus plant from the living room to the kitchen, and then charge us two thousand dollars for his advice.

“And I don't want you to do any *feng shui* arrangements yourself either,” I told my mother. Last month she bought a D-I-Y *feng shui* book. I returned one night to find my room filled with purple cushions, and a lamp radiating red light. My mother insisted that the red light gave my bed a prosperous aura. I told her that it made my room look like a Turkish brothel.

“Are you going to be Andy's lawyer?” my mother said.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Don't think about the case while you're in bed. If you want to think about your work, think about it at your desk. Master Chou say if you mix home and office, your energy will clash. I keep telling you not to read your files in bed, but you never listen to me. That's why you can't get married. I don't want to say things like what I'm going to say now - *very bad luck* - but I think you should know.” My mother took a deep breath. “If you don't get married

soon, afterwards you become an old maid, you'll be all alone. You're nearly thirty. Your expiry date coming up. You wait too long, you'll get left on the shelf."

"Mother, getting married isn't like going to NTUC."

"Getting married is *exactly* like going to NTUC. Shopping for a husband is the same as shopping in the supermarket. I warn you, once you're over thirty, very difficult to get fresh men. You wait too long, you can only get divorcees. Re-cycled material. Second-hand goods. So if you see got good bargain, remember - grab first, worry later."

"Was Daddy a good bargain then?"

That shut her up. For five seconds. Then she said, "All I'm saying is that you're at the right age to get married. I got married when I was your age."

"And we both know what a mistake *that* was." In her desperation to get off the shelf, my mother married a businessman fifteen years her senior. My father died from a heart-attack a few years ago. I do not miss him.

"Your generation different now," my mother said, "Last time, divorce very difficult. But now, after you're married, you don't like it, can always refund or exchange. That's what divorce is for."

"The reason why I'm not married," I said, "is because I don't *want* to get married."

"How can you say that? I tell you, Mummy's not going to live forever. After I die, you all alone, how?"

"Life without you might actually be pretty pleasant," and as soon as I said that, I regretted it immediately. I knew what her next words would be.

"Why do you hate me so much?" my mother said.

I could have told her why, but I figured that she probably knew the reasons already. So I just said, "I don't hate you," and went to my room.

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The reasons had nothing to do with anything that was happening *now*. Over the next couple of days, the problems with my mother and Andy, most of them weren't caused by the immediate situation. The seeds of trouble and deceit were sown ten, twenty years ago, and now, we reaped the results.

Nearly twenty years ago, my grandfather accidentally swallowed a fish bone. He was rushed to General Hospital, where they x-rayed and ECG-ed him, but they couldn't find anything wrong. The surgeon announced, "We've examined his oesophagus, but when we introduced the scope into the gullet, he suffered an intense reflex spasm. We were unable to examine the oesophagus as far down as we would have liked."

I nodded.

"We're going to give him some barium. Hopefully that will reveal any obstructions in the body when we take an x-ray."

I nodded again. I didn't understand anything he said, but it sounded like a good idea.

They fed him the white liquid, but my grandfather caught a fever. Panadol relieved this, but two days later, a stroke struck him down. All I remember about my grandfather in his final days, is his fingers gripping the rails of the bed. At that age, I wasn't tall enough to see any further.

“What’s wrong with *gong gong’s* fingers?” I asked.

“Gangrene,” my mother said.

The doctor came in and said, “We’ve carried out some tests and detected an abscess behind his pharynx. We’ll have to drain it to prevent infection.”

My grandfather was in a terrible condition, so the doctors performed the operation quickly, and didn’t look for a foreign body. He died from septic poisoning a few days later. He suffered for an entire month, and nobody knew what caused it. We only discovered what killed him after the autopsy.

“There was a fish bone stuck in his oesophagus,” the coroner told us. “Four c.m. long. It pierced his oesophagus, cut into his heart, the upper left chamber.” The coroner tapped his chest. “The bone caused all the infection, formed small blood clots. The clots travelled in the blood to his fingers and toes, and that was what caused the gangrene. The clots killed him.”

All the problems that came up this Sunday, they all arose because of the foreign bodies within us - things that happened in our childhood, some big, some small, but all significant; things that happened ten years ago, but still control our lives today; things from our yesterdays that will decide what we drink, dream and doubt, till the day we die. But you can’t see those things, because they’re not on the outside. The press got it all wrong, of course, surprise, surprise. You wouldn’t *believe* the articles they printed about us. For them, it was all *so* simple: Andy was the foreigner, the evil outside influence, the *ang mo*; Eugene was the Singaporean kid led astray by corrupt Western expatriates; and me, I was the local, naïve, *sauku* mountain tortoise of a girl who should have listened to her mother and not fallen for a criminal like Andy. All the experts in the world could never figure out what was wrong with us, because our wounds were lodged deep, hidden from the sharpest eyes, the

most advanced machinery. But now, we're all going to have our turn - first me, then Andy and then finally, Eugene. We're each going to tell you tales from our youth, tales of how we got our wounds. So forget first impressions, ignore what you see on the outside: these are our real stories, the stories only we know, the stories of our foreign bodies.

Chapter Two

MEI

When I die, I'm not going to have a funeral like my *gong gong*'s. My funeral will be a quick and simple affair. People would arrive at three, say nice things about me, then leave at five.

When my *gong gong* died, his funeral lasted forty-nine (7 x 7) days. An army of priests gathered outside my grandfather's house, ready to storm Hell with their rituals and rescue him from the demonic clutches of *Yuen Thou Wong*.

During the afternoon, I drank Fanta orange while the saffron-robed monks beat their gongs under the red canopy. The tock-tock-tock of their gongs mingled with the background music -- the Bee Gees singing "Staying Alive." To this day, I don't know who chooses the music for funerals. The only thing I know is that the same inappropriate music plays at public functions in Singapore all the time -- I've yet to attend a wedding where they *haven't* played, 'Please release me'.

It's usually terribly humid in Singapore, but today it was so bad it was like breathing soup. I hid under the red canopy, because on a day like this, five minutes under the sun and my black hair would be hot enough to fry an egg on. We tried that at a Brownies' camp once, but that's another story.

My grandfather's photo sat on the red altar, flanked by bronze urns and brown joss sticks. In that starched, wide-collared white shirt, he looked unusually mild. In real-life, blown-up size, with his crew-cut (dark on top, grey at the sides), rough tanned leathery skin and Marlboro breath, he looked like a sergeant. He often acted like one, for it was his birth-

right, as the patriarch, the head honcho of the family, to boss people around until he got what he wanted. Though my grandfather looked naturally stern, his pot belly, cultivated via the mass consumption of Guinness Stout and KFC, gave him a cheerful aura reminiscent of the Laughing Buddha. He didn't dress fancy -- he went everywhere in his roach-bitten singlet and khaki bermudas, but there was one accessory he was genuinely proud of. He loved to play with his dentures, punctuating his sentences by lifting up his bottom front tooth. It was a gold tooth, and it was his only luxury possession.

I coughed. There was smoke everywhere -- grey smoke from the joss sticks, black smoke from the cars and trucks that whined past, and puffs of cigarette smoke from the monks having their tea break in the corner. I finished my twelfth glass of Fanta. Orange is a lucky colour, so it's the only drink, apart from Chinese tea, that's served at our family functions. Though sick of Fanta, I asked for yet another glass of orange soda because there was nothing a kid of eleven could do at funerals apart from drink, choke on smoke, and wonder which level of hell the deceased had descended to.

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My grandfather was in Hell, and he was taking me with him. He always taught me that everyone goes straight to Hell - "You are guilty until proven innocent." Two bull-headed, long-tailed, trident-bearing, toe-tapping creatures waited constantly by your bedside, ready to drag you in chains once you've breathed your final breath. Our fate was sealed a few years ago when we went to Haw Par Villa. This was the garden of the gods, a real tourist-magnet, the home of the Golden Buddha, the Prosperity Buddha, the Health Buddha, the Longevity Buddha -- well, you get the idea.

My grandfather couldn't care less about the statues. No, instead he made a beeline for the cave with the "Ten Courts of Hell". Boiling in oil, disembowellment, sawing in two, eye-gouging, tongue-plucking - all these tortures were re-created in wax, with a loving attention to detail - we're talking blood, pus, intestines, sliced breasts and stray eye balls. Nothing was left to the imagination. One thing was clear: there is no hell like the Chinese *tei yuk*.

My grandfather pointed at the first exhibit, 'Rats Gnawing Off A Man's Tongue.'

"That is what happens to liars," my grandfather said.

I knew then that we were going to hell, for my grandfather lied about my age at the box office, shaving three years off my actual age to get me into Haw Par Villa for free.

My grandfather suddenly clamped his fingers on my wrist. "There are things that even Haw Par Villa dare not show. Tortures like the Exploding Water Torture. The demons stick a hose into your mouth, then pump you full of water. When your body gets big big, they jump on you and -- boom!"

I saw my heart, kidney and intestines sprayed across the walls of Hell.

"This is what happens to children who are not *xiao xun*", my grandfather said. "This is how they're punished if they have no respect and forget their elders." He flipped his golden tooth out of his mouth and drew it back again.

Then he told me a tale that served as a guide, a sort of 'How to Reduce Your Time in Hell' story:

Once upon a time, there was a boy who lived with his widowed (of course) mother. He slogged all day planting rice, but his earnings only enabled him to buy a single bowl of rice. The conversation at the dinner-table usually went like this --

"Mother, take this single and only and last bowl of rice that we might ever get for the next two months."

"No son, I'm not hungry," she lied. "You need the rice to give you strength to plant more rice."

"Mother, I'm not hungry." His stomach growls.

"But son, you're so thin."

"But mother..."

You get the idea. Of course the mother gets the rice in the end. That night, a thunderstorm wakes the mother. She screams. The boy rushes into the room and hugs her all night until the storm dies.

After a few weeks, the mother snuffs it (tuberculosis would be an appropriate agent of death). So, after his mother is in the grave, whenever there is a thunderstorm, the son runs to the graveyard and hugs the grave, crying, "Don't be fearful, Mother, I'm here to protect you."

After he finished his story, my grandfather dropped his Marlboro and stamped on it with his flip-flops. "After *gong gong* die that time you know what to do right?"

I shook my head.

"You must visit my grave, talk to me, bring things for me to eat. Are you going to do that?"

I didn't say anything.

My grandfather nudged me. "After I die, you going to feed me or not?"

"I can't."

He glared at me. "Why?"

"I'm a Christian."

"Since when?"

“Last week.”

“Who did this to you?” He enquired in that shocked tone people reserved for victims of child abuse.

“Uncle Cheong.”

*

Children have heroes whom they idolise beyond sense or reason. Possessing a transformative vision, children invest the object of their adulation with sublime qualities unseen by the common eye, a vision one often finds in poets, and second-hand car dealers. In my eyes, Uncle Cheong could do no wrong. Even his farts smelled like Aramis No. 7. With the heart of Mother Teresa and the body of Tom Cruise, Uncle Cheong was my hero, and whenever he came to visit, for a week I would be ‘Uncle Cheong did this, and Uncle Cheong did that.’ I loved the way his wavy black hair fell naturally over his broad shoulders, but Singapore Immigration didn’t share my admiration for his coiffure -- the airport officials always demanded that he cut his hair short or they wouldn’t let him into the country. He just laughed them off. The skin around his eyes crinkled whenever he smiled, which was often, and whenever he flashed his dimples, I just melted.

Perhaps, now that I’m older, if I met him today, I would view him differently. Maybe I would see him through adult eyes, my aunts’ eyes, see him as a rootless, idle, no good, useless bum. But I’d never know -- he died in a boating accident when I was in my teens. Who was the real Uncle Cheong? Was he a tramp, beggar, vagabond, or an adventurer, crusader, pilgrim? Juxtaposing fragments of malicious gossip with shimmering projections of

my fantasies, I constructed my image of Uncle Cheong -- he was the collage of our Imaginations.

Uncle Cheong spent his life travelling around the world, doing missionary work for Operation Mobilisation, or TEFL-ing, teaching English in Third World cess pits. I always thought Uncle Cheong was like Michael Landon in 'Highway to Heaven' (only less soft-focus), an angel roaming the universe, going where good needed to be done. I pictured him wandering around rugged ruins, all stubbled and bulging-biceps, looking like the guy out of the Camel ad (only without the cigarettes).

Uncle Cheong was a free spirit, a dreamer. When you listened to him you could hear fireworks, exploding constellations, sweet jazz music booping across the muddy banks of a wide emerald river. In Uncle Cheong I saw a life spent cruising exotic lanes in the East and hip alleys in the West, working in desert cities where the humidity frosted the windows, where men cycled through sandy streets, pulling carts of ice yellow with sawdust. There he would open his window, to let in the thick smell of spices, the reckless butterflies and the song from the women, the psalm that rose above the golden city. Sometimes I dreamt of him wandering streets innocent of asphalt and corners untainted with street lights, sleeping in houses that cracked loudly as the cold night air contracted the wood, waking to walk in fields of gold, chewing oaten stalks until the sharp sweetness filled his throat.

Uncle Cheong dazzled me with incredible stories, tales of men who through faith shut the mouths of lions, slayed giants with a sling and a stone, turned armies of invaders to flight - stories that did what all stories should do: announce a history, while proclaiming a mystery. Stirring me with his smooth voice, his words came alive, hypnotized me and all around, I could feel the flower buds buzz, the electricity crackling through the mud of the earth. Everything became sensitive to the touch.

'Jesus said that if we had faith as small as a mustard seed, we could toss mountains into the sea.' Uncle Cheong said that we could stop the sun in its tracks, turn rivers to blood,

make locusts sweep through the nation - all these things have happened before and can happen again. There was more to life than meets the eye, more than I could possibly imagine. 'Faith is seeing what you can't feel, taste, hear or touch, seeing with your soul, not your eyes. There exists a parallel universe, an invisible world, where the unseen is more real than the seen -- that's the ultimate reality. What do you see when you look at the sun? Do you see a golden disc, or thousands of angels singing *Holy, Holy, Holy*? That's what Blake tells us. We need to use our Imagination, see the world not with, but through the eye.' Uncle Cheong told me the story of Elisha, how the army of Syria surrounded his house. His servant panicked, but Elisha prayed, "Lord, open his eyes, that he may see, that those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Suddenly his servant saw the mountain filled with angels in fiery chariots.

Uncle Cheong told me that only if I surrendered all - 'your fears, your goals, your life - to God, don't care about friends or family or whatever' - only then would I be able to find something amazing, miraculous, glistening with joy and rapture, life above the skies, lifted to a kingdom that was way beyond the blue.

I became a Christian because I wanted to be like Uncle Cheong. I wanted the jazz alleys, the burning sands, the road black with ice, a life raised to a visionary pitch, soaring above the earth to the heavenly kingdoms. On the god-awful streets of man, Uncle Cheong's excitement, mystical devotion and sheer hunger torched me, taught me how to deal with the pit and prunejuice of life. He could out-road Kerouac any day. I didn't see Uncle Cheong often, but whenever he visited me, I knew there would be cries and wild eyes, rocking and roaring, horns, snares, sticks, kicks. Whenever he arrived, I could hear a portal whine open, gushing holy white light onto the grey cement floor. All I had to do was lift my foot and step into a new, magical world, a world shimmering with tremendous possibilities. And then I knew -- big deep bass strumming in the heart kind of knowing -- that if I became a Christian, somewhere along the line there would be visions and everything. Somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me.

*

“If you become a Christian, after I die, who will take care of me?” my grandfather said.

“I don’t know.”

He drilled his finger into the side of my forehead. “You everything also don’t know. You better don’t listen to your Uncle Cheong. You want to end up like him? He’s so useless. He doesn’t care about anybody, only care about Jesus. After his wife died, you see him do anything for her?”

I shook my head.

My grandfather grunted. Then he said, “You’re Chinese. How can you become a Christian?”

I was going to say “I don’t know” again, but I decided that silence was the best policy.

“Now you’re a Christian, but you can always change your mind. You can un-Christian.”

His voice grew soft. “So after *gong gong* die, you can take care of me. So do you want?”

“Want what?”

“Do you want to un-Christian?”

I couldn’t answer his question.

“You love me more or you love your Uncle Cheong more? You want to go Chinese heaven or Christian heaven?” He started rubbing my face with his palm. “*Ai-ya*, why you girls, always cry for no reason?”

I sucked the mucus up my nose. “I want to go both heavens.”

“Nowadays, you children are so spoilt. Always want both. Well you can’t have both. You got to choose one. When you die, who do you want to be with - me, or your Uncle Cheong?”

I didn’t say anything.

He patted me on the head and smiled. “Never mind, don’t cry, I know who you’ll choose.” His golden tooth bobbed in and out of his mouth. “You’re not a bad person, like him.” He pointed to a man thrown from a cliff into a field of spikes. “You’re a good, filial girl.” Then he threw me a dark look, as if any aberrant behaviour of mine would be punished by a fate too horrible to imagine.

*

Now, some people might think that gambling at your father’s funeral would be a gross violation of taste and propriety, but not the Chinese. After all, my relatives reasoned, you need *something* to keep you awake. So, as darkness fell and eyelids drooped, my aunts and uncles clashed mahjong tiles across the plastic table top, while hired mourners huddled round the coffin, wailing and weeping. For some reason, these two groups seemed to co-exist happily: the mahjong players weren’t put off by the flood of grief by their side, and the mourners weren’t offended by the gaiety at the gambling table. Consequently, as at all Chinese funerals, sobs mixed peacefully with the triumphant cries of ‘pong!’.

A wave of murmurs rippled through the crowd. Heads twitched and eyes cast snide sideways glances – signs that always marked Uncle Cheong’s arrival. Many years ago, he had offended everyone because of the funeral arrangements (or rather, the lack of) for his wife. My aunts always gossiped -- ‘After his wife died, he couldn’t be bothered. Her funeral, just any how

do, can already. He just put her in a coffin, dump in church, that's all. Then the next month after she died, you know what he did? Go world tour. Wife not even cold in her grave yet, he go London, India, China, go all over the place, enjoy himself. All these men are all the same, *so* useless. Their wife die already, they so happy, can do whatever they want. No more wife, can get a life.'

But no matter what they said, they couldn't poison my heart against Uncle Cheong. When he arrived, I ran to him, screaming, 'Uncle Cheong, Uncle Cheong!'

He grunted as I crashed into his chest. 'Woah, woah, and I missed you too.'

'Play Superman!'

'*Ai-ya*, girl, how come you got no taste, your grandfather's funeral and you still want to play?' He grinned. 'If your mother sees us playing, she'll scold us.'

'I'm not afraid of my mother.'

'Well, *I* am. Your mother is the fiercest woman I know. They didn't make her disciplinary mistress at her school for nothing. Just one black look from her and I'll curl up in a foetal position.'

'But I'm so *xian*, this funeral is so boring.'

'Your *gong gong* was so close to you, aren't you sad?'

'Yah, but you can be sad and *xian* at the same time. All I do here is sit and drink Fanta.' I dropped my head. '*Gong-gong* love me so much, but I can't even cry at his funeral.'

'Sometimes we're so sad we can't cry. When my wife died, I never cried at the funeral, so everyone thought I wasn't sad. I looked at her but it didn't look like her. She was so white, so hard, it *wasn't* her. She was packed in this big, black box, like something on display. It was like everyone was crying to this ice statue. So I couldn't cry. But every night I

dream about her, dream about how she was really like - living, breathing, laughing, and when I wake up - my T-shirt is all wet.’

Uncle Cheong told me about his dream: He saw the coffin that his wife laid in, heavily draped. It had twelve escutcheons, and twelve locks with twelve different keys. He sought those keys, crossed the wastes of sea, made runes in the rainless sands. Finally, he came upon the black beach. There, on the dark water, the dead lake, was the black-browed boat man, the guide of shadows, his cold pale hand at the oar. He boarded the boat. The oarsman toiled, bending his body, climbing through the night and the water, beating the oar until they reached the other side. There, on the dark sand, she stood, all in white, pure as her mind. She opened her arms to embrace him, her voice echoed his call. Echoed like an angel dissolving in the air, like a shapeless flame. He woke, and the echoes became mere echoes, sounds shaking dust in empty spaces - waking up to absences, to air without angels.

After he told me his dream, Uncle Cheong didn’t say anything for a long time.

‘When I die, I want everyone to cry,’ I said, ‘I want everyone to really miss me. I want buckets, real tubs of tears, Niagara falls. I want them to declare a National Day Of Mourning, and make everyone hang a black flag outside their flat. People *better* be upset, if not I come back and haunt them.’

Uncle Cheong laughed.

“What are you going to do now?”

Uncle Cheong shrugged. “Sit here and try not to fall asleep.”

“But isn’t that bad?”

“Why?”

“My mother always tells me that *gong gong* loved me the most. Last time, he always bring me go out, go to Haw Par Villa, go K.F.C. He never did that for any of his other

grandchildren. But I never did anything nice for him.” I was only a kid, and there was nothing I could give my grandfather that he didn’t already have. “And now he’s dead. I have to do something for him.”

“But there’s nothing we can do. We just have to leave him in God’s hands.”

“But God will send him to Hell.”

Uncle Cheong spread his hands. ‘You have to be willing to be helpless, and let God be your help. You can struggle with your own power, try and fix things with your own flawed schemes, but you’ll find that it’s useless in the end. Better just to surrender it all to God. His strength fills us when our strength is gone.’

A shrill voice pierced the air. It was my mother - “Mei, stop sitting around doing nothing and come over here and help these people cry.”

She dragged me to the altar. The King of Hades judged the deceased’s popularity by the amount of tears shed for him, hence, the professional mourners. Volume, not sincerity, counted.

I stood there, trying to cry, bashing my heart with images that would bring tears: my grandfather after his stroke, sitting on the bed, his brain gone, a recipient of Interact Club care. Now, the Interact Club is a society at my school that visits old folks’ homes every week. Bearing gifts that they made during their Art classes - wooden clothes pegs glued together into toy chairs, bookmarks made out of dried orchids stuck on yellow construction paper, lanterns stapled together from red *ang-pow* envelopes - the Interact members act as surrogate grandchildren, chatting with the old folks. They always rounded off their visit by singing “That’s What Friends Are For”, only they never ever complete the song because by the time they reach the middle of the chorus, the sopranos (that is, the girls) have become a blubbering wreck. In Moral Education class, the Interact chairman would always share the latest “Granny Abandoned by Ungrateful Children” story, and my teacher would conclude with a lecture on

filial piety, one of the core Confucian values found in the national curriculum. During these classes, my face had one of those mug shot moments, my features fixed in a vacant stare, emotionless, inscrutable, revealing nothing. I focused on the full stop chalked on the black board behind my teacher's head, hiding what I felt, hoping my class mates would never find out that *my* grandfather was an Interact Club charity case.

During the few occasions when we did visit my grandfather at the Evergreen Moral Home For The Aged Sick And Handicapped, I never wanted to go back. It's the smell that hits you first, the nauseatingly sweet smell of open sores and wet bandages, reeking of urine, saliva, sweat, pus - the stench of incurable sickness blanketed by the pungent odor of strong medicine. I stood at the doorway, gagging, my lungs fighting to adapt to the atmosphere. This wasn't the smell of death - that would be bearable - no, this was the noxious smell of decomposition, when flesh and soul and heart and bone separate, then rot, deteriorate until all is reduced to a putrid pile of rubbish, ready to be wheeled out. The syrupy smell of decay.

The Home popped all the nasty 'D' words into my mind -- dark, dank, dungeony -- it was like walking into a giant sewer. Blades of light slid in from the steel-shuttered windows, stenciling the emaciated silhouettes crouched on their beds, skeletons draped with over-sized pajamas. The room seemed semi-liquid, the floor wet, the walls sweating, a sick dampness infused the air. There was nothing to do here, just old people on beds in the blackness, and the occasional nurse in white marching down the corridor, the steel bedpan glistening in her hand.

I couldn't recognize my grandfather. His pajamas were too big for him, something I never thought would ever happen. The pot belly I always rubbed for luck had melted away, replaced by sagging folds of helpless flesh. He didn't bark orders to his children, instead he just lay there nodding at their inane icebreakers.

"Look! It's Mei Mei!" My mother would point at me. "Your favourite grand child come and visit you. Don't you recognise her? Can you say the words -- 'Mei Mei'? She bought you some oranges to eat."

Technically, it wasn't me, but my mother, who bought the oranges, but usually I was the one who offered the gift to my grandfather. My mother told me that -- "Whenever your aunts and I give him anything, he always push our hand away, but he love you so much, he will take anything from you."

So I held the oranges towards him and said, "*Gong Gong*, eat oranges."

The fruit hovered in his line of vision, but he didn't seem to see them, his watery grey eyes remained blank. After a while, he said, "Oh!"

He didn't say anything for the rest of the visit. My Second Aunt peeled the orange and stuffed it in his mouth.

This was not my grandfather, not the man who raised me, but a stranger I couldn't connect with. It was like my grandfather had died, and this stygian pit was the first level of hell.

I thought about all this, standing in front of the altar at his funeral. God knows I didn't do enough for him while he lived, the least I could do now was cry for him, but I couldn't even do that. And I knew that because I couldn't cry, the King of Hell would think that I didn't love my grandfather and make him stay in Hell longer, which made me feel even more guilty. This line of thought dried me up completely.

Meanwhile, the pro mourners wailed on, the Nile flowing down their faces. I don't know how they make themselves weep buckets, maybe it's because they're lamenting how Fate has been so cruel as to consign them to such a degrading occupation.

"Hey, you stand here so long, why you still don't cry?" My mother dug her sharp nails into my arm, drawing blood. "Hurry up, pray to your grandfather."

"Ouch," I said. A tear finally trickled down my cheek.

Finally came the time that I dreaded the most, the few hours before the body is coffined - the Death Watch. Boredom, I could handle, but dealing with the threat of turning into a lump of coal was another matter altogether. According to my mother, if a pregnant cat jumped over the corpse during the Death Watch, the deceased would jerk up and start a mad dash, running in a straight line, uprooting trees in his path and killing anyone within his reach. One touch, just one touch and the demon would choke all the breath out of you, turning you black.

Shoulders jerked at the unexpected clap of thunder, and a few of my aunts turned their heads from their mahjong tiles to glare at Uncle Cheong, like it was his fault. Two aunts volunteered to stand over the corpse with paper umbrellas to protect it from the lightning.

I heard a meow. I knew I was a bad person, an ungrateful, no-good non-crier. If a pregnant cat resurrected my grandfather, I'd be the first person he'd kill. I had to hide.

In the corner, two monks dozed at a table, the areas around their necks and armpits wet with sweat. I crawled under the table. Hidden by the thick table cloth, I hugged my knees tight to my chest, but I could still hear it, the cat's long, cold meow. Did pregnant cats sound any different from normal cats? I wasn't taking any chances. I shut my eyes but the vision wouldn't go away - my grandfather bearing down on me, black, demonic, his arms flung out, clawing for me, droning, *why you never cry for me? Now because of you, I have to stay in Hell. Why you never pray to me? Now I'm going to take you with me, forever.*

The cold sweat soaked my clothes, made dark rings under my armpits and damp, freezing patches around the small of my back. It was no use hiding, my grandfather would find me anyway: the thump, boom, thump, boom of my heart filled my ears, drumming out my location to him. I didn't know what to do. Should I un-Christian myself so I could save

my grandfather by my own power? But if I un-Christianed myself, what about Uncle Cheong? Who should I choose?

This phrase suddenly popped into my head - Christ took my sins and cleansed every stain. Of course I always knew this, Uncle Cheong always repeated this to me, but before today, it was nothing but a dry, empty slogan, Christian auto-pilot words, a mantra chanted in church so often until it became nothing but a hollow noise. But under the table that day, I suddenly realized what it really meant, and I don't know why.

Everything which God sees as bad is not there any more. Now things which other people might consider bad about me, things which my parents and teachers always scolded me for - like abandoning my grandfather at the old folks' home, not crying at his funeral, crooked margins in my maths exercise books, forgetting to switch off the video - I still had these horrible flaws, but everything which *God* considered bad about me - that's all been removed. In His eyes, I can do no wrong. Can you imagine having a relationship with someone like that? Someone who sees no faults in you, who finds nothing offensive or deficient, who weeps and sings songs of adoration to you, because in His eyes, you are flawless.

Nobody else I know can ever be as completely satisfied with me as God is - for other people, there will always be some flaw in me that makes me less than perfect in their eyes - maybe I'm too short, or too logical, or don't squeeze the toothpaste in the right way. Christ is the only person who loves me because I am perfect in his eyes. At that moment, it didn't matter how much my mother scolded me, or how my grandfather hated me, I'd found someone who would always love me to the point of near-worship, and I knew that that was the only thing I'd ever want for the rest of my life. All my guilt disappeared. My soul fed on Something, tasted the tears - were they mine or God's? - for each drop lighted my mind, altered my genes, turned me into something new, from soul to soul, from blood to blood.

His spirit filled me until He became my very breath and my only desire: when I breathed I was using His breath and all I wanted to breathe was Him. Thus, panting after him and panting him, I opened my mouth and felt the unutterable kiss.

I opened my eyes. The thunderstorm stopped, and moonlight trickled under the table cloth like silver water.

One of the monks stirred. His hand went under his robe, pushing it aside. Before this incident, I'd always wondered what priestly underwear looked like. Was it spotless? Was it holy? The monk's robe fell open, revealing – Levi 501s.

Chapter Three

ANDY

'Your problem, Andy, is that you never plan,' my father said, 'When I was your age, I always knew what I wanted to do. I had a plan for the day, the month, the year and even the decade. And that is why I have always known where I wanted to go and no one has ever been able to stop me. Nobody has ever taken advantage of me. And do you know why?'

I said 'Hmmm,' which could mean a) 'Please tell me more,' or b) 'I don't care,' or c) 'Yes, I do know why. You've never been fucked because no one can find a dick that's big enough for your asshole.'

'Why? It's because I have a sense of direction,' he said, 'While you just drift along with the tide.'

I said 'hmmm' again in my best drift along voice. Why didn't I defend myself? Why didn't I marshal my wits and let loose a Wildean riposte? Yeah, but that would like, require intellectual effort. And saliva. I had better things to do with my spit than to waste it on a goggle-face, bat-breath midget who had more hair on his butt than his head.

It's Saturday, it's summer, and outside, God's free tanning machine hangs in the air, shining its ultra-violetness on the good and evil. It's the kind of day that's ideal for wandering around half-naked, scaring children with the sight of your hairy back and corpse-white skin. In other words, the perfect out-doors day. So what am I doing in-doors, why am I in Debenhams, squatting outside the ladies' changing room?

It's because Saturday is our Family Day, our official day for family bonding. Don't get me wrong. I've got nothing against family bonding. However, could someone please tell me how waiting for my mother to try on four blouses is going to bring us closer together as a domestic unit?

My mother got the idea for Family Day after watching some slot on Richard and Judy. According to R & J's special guest, Dr Lilith Chambers, author of the New York Times best-seller, Families Are From Saturn, you had to set aside at least seven hours a week to spend with your spouse and sprogs to save society from its imminent, apocalyptic demise. How could my mother not believe her? One look at Dr. Chambers, and you knew she had to be right. Dressed in a black Donna Karen suit, she had that all-wise, Athena aura - she looked like a Jewish Oprah. Dr Chambers smiled her more-soothing-than-Prozac smile and told us how divorce and single parenthood had led to a rise in teenage pregnancies, domestic violence, drug abuse and homelessness, accompanied by a decline in consumer confidence and SAT scores.

I agree. As we all know, the deterioration of family values has also led to breast cancer, global warming, the Lockerbie air disaster and United's shock defeat against York in the third round of the Coca-Cola Cup. The happy family is the nucleus of civilisation itself. So every Saturday morning, me, Mummy and Daddy had to do something Together, no matter how anal it might be. But hey, I could take comfort in the fact that my time in Parent Purgatory would somehow mystically contribute towards ensuring the advent of world peace and a buoyant British economy.

"Have you thought about which GCSEs you're going to take?" my father said.

"No," I said.

“Now, I know that you may find the number of options bewildering rather than liberating,” my father said, “but from my experience, I’ve found that there’s nothing that cannot be solved with a little foresight and a strategy for the future.”

You see, the problem with my Dad is that we can never have a normal conversation about neutral subjects like the weather or TV listings. Every time he talks to me, he feels like he has to improve me. I mean, like hey, his time is precious. If our conversation had no utilitarian function, he would have wasted his time talking to me instead of doing something useful, like thinking of ways to increase the yield of pre-tax dividends under current accounting standards, or something like that. So every time before he speaks to me, he thinks of something I might fuck up and gives me a long lecture about what stupid thing I’m probably going to go off and do any moment.

“You must avoid the temptation to follow the crowd,” he said, “Don’t choose a subject just because your best friend chose it and you want to be in the same class as him. Don’t be a lemming. You have to base your decision upon a careful evaluation of your own personality. You have to ask yourself certain key questions, for example, what are your skills and abilities?”

I shrugged.

“What are your values and interests?”

“I’m not really into anything at the moment,” I said. It was July, post-F.A. Cup, weeks before the start of the new season, and most of the big clubs were off playing exhibition matches in Jamaica, Malaysia, Hong Kong or some far off place like that. The summer is a nuclear winter for all football fanatics in Britain.

“I’m trying to teach you to ask the right questions,” my father said, “The 5 ‘Ws’”

“Huh?”

“Not ‘huh’? That’s not the right question. You have to learn how to ask the right questions. The five ‘W’s. For example, what do you want? Why do you want it? Where can you get it? etetera.”

“Hmmm.”

“Well, let’s start with the first, basic question. What do you want to be?”

“I don’t know.”

“What is your goal in life?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if I *want* a goal.”

My father gave up. “Why don’t you just take English, French, Literature, History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Maths?”

“Okay,” I said.

Before I went to university, my parents planned everything for me. I followed their lead, not because I liked it or agreed with it, but because arguing with them was too much hassle. I was never a rebellious teen. I was just bored. During adolescence, I wasn’t a rebel without a cause - just a kid with no decent TV programmes to watch.

*

I come from Fallensham. Don’t come here. It won’t be easy though - many people don’t plan to come here, but for some reason, they stumble into town and end up living here forever. Fallensham is like Hell - to find it, all you have to do is follow the path of least resistance.

Fallensham has nothing apart from grass and cows, nothing but the wide, empty skies above the flat fields that spread out forever. The only landmark near my home town is this sewage plant that looks like a giant white maggot, and a black water tower, a steel skeleton with spider legs.

In the city centre, there is, excitingly, one off-licence (which also contains the video shop, the cobblers, the dry cleaning service, and the Royal Mail), and the obligatory WH Smiths, Boots, a NatWest bank, and a Co-Op. The proprietor of the Co-op has a major attitude problem. I remember a housewife going into the supermarket, clutching her new Delia Smith cookbook, and asking him if he had any sun-dried tomatoes. Judging from the look on the manager's face, you'd think she had just asked him for some peppermint-flavoured condoms. After he recovered from his shock, he said, "We don't do sun-dried tomatoes, we just have ordinary tomatoes. We don't have any of those new foods," as if sun-dried tomatoes were recently invented by some mad, German-based, Brussels-backed scientist from Geneva. The supermarket only has the standard staple foods like potatoes, carrots, lettuce, cans of tuna, rice pudding and frozen chicken, none of that fancy 'new' food suggested by Delia, like cranberries and pesto sauce. Here, everyone eats bangers and chips. There are no Indian or Chinese takeaways, just a chip shop that serves cod, mushy peas and chips.

All the shops are completely utilitarian. Just enough shops for you to get by, providing all you need to live on, but nothing that made life worth living. No art, no entertainment, no culture. No computer game shops like Future Zone, no HMVs or Our Price or Virgin Megastores, no shop devoted to something that was just for fun, no frivolous yuppie specialist shops selling candles or cheese exclusively. The city centre enables you to buy your fags, crisps, and pick up some Spam and bread, so that you can go home after a hard day's work and switch on the TV.

Not that there's anything *wrong* with Fallensham. There's not an oppressed minority group in sight - no single mothers, no orphans, no Rwandan refugees, no gays, no blacks, no Pakis, we don't even have anyone who's fucking handicapped. Somebody must be doing something right.

I looked at my father. He stood outside the changing room, clutching my mother's handbag. For a horrible Mystic Meg moment, my future balloons into view - I will go to university, then wander into a job that pays me five figures, even though I don't Believe what I am doing. I will spend 80% of my life trying to help some MNC achieve complete and utter world domination of the chocolate biscuit market, and even though I know it is a completely pointless job, I cannot find more meaningful employment even if I tried. I will marry a girl, probably called Sara, have a blond son named Thomas, and spend my weekends in our house in Surrey gardening, cooking Delia Smith recipes and D.I.Y.-ing. I will become my father, the 'Husband-Waiting-For-Wife-To-Try-On-Dress', standing there with a glazed look, seeing nothing, bored mindless, a living corpse, the man with the handbag. This is the best British life can offer. Death by domesticity, afternoons spent measuring out my life with coffee spoons.

I fled. I ran out of the store into the sun that glowed white death. It was a hot summer's day, hotter than it had ever been before and hotter than it has ever been since. The sun burned so intensely that it melted the car tyres, choking the air with the tang of burnt rubber. The glare of the sunlight upon the yellow brickwork of the houses hurt my eyes. The white light bounced off the pale pavements until the whole air was white with light. A broken bottle lay on the tarmac, flashed in the light, blazed like burning magnesium. I couldn't see a thing, nothing but white light, the rays piercing my eyes, so I closed them and opened my ears. I heard nothing. No roar of engines, no creak of bicycle wheels - it was

safe. Eyes still shut, I started running, fleeing Fallensham, trying to escape from what I was to become. I will not turn into the man with the handbag.

How long or how far did I run? I don't know. I just bolted down the road, eyes shut, listening to my Nikes crunch down on the gravel. Finally, breathless, having burnt all the fear that fuelled my sprint, I collapsed. My knees cracked the baked mud.

I opened my eyes. I was by the bank of a river. I had no idea where I was, and where to go. So like, what else is new?

I walked by the bank for, I don't know, ten minutes, and got bored. I had no alternative but to go home. Where could I run to? It's so boring, everywhere, anywhere you go.

I set off in a random direction. I knew I would never find my way home unless someone helped me. But I wasn't going to get any help, not out here by myself, so I just kept walking. After a while, the sky turned red, then black. I didn't know what to do, so I started to pray. Sure I'd been to church and made all the right noises (after all, my parents were Church of England hatched and dispatched) but I had never prayed seriously before, never really felt that I really needed God to hear my words. But at that moment, standing in dark, I would have tried anything. I'd try telepathy, tracking duck prints, Indian smoke rings, sub-Saharan rain dances, anything really, just so I could get home. But none of the above worked, so I said - *God if you're there, give me a little direction.*

A bright, round light loomed towards me. I ran out to it and bam! - I flew. For a moment, everything went truly black, a darkness that wasn't just a mere absence of light, but a night so thick you could choke on it - death descending.

Then the air turned into light, white and clear, transcendent, all in all, filling everything so I could see nothing else, nothing but brightness - God, the King of Kings,

dwelling in unapproachable light. I sucked the liquid air and knew that this was what heaven was going to be like, when you feel you could live like this forever, a moment when you'd like to be frozen in time, in a photo, a portrait, a sculpture - the moment when you looked full at your desire. It was the only time in my life that I've ever felt any meaning. If I could have just captured that moment, kept it inside, I'd never hunger for anything again.

A great fire blazed between four bronze columns. A gold cup stood right in the middle of the flames, but it shone so brilliantly that the fire lost its brightness, just as the stars do when the sun rises. I reached for the cup. I wanted something I could take back to prove that I had really met God.

An angel flew towards me with a lance. Though it had no flesh or veins, blood spurted from the white tip of the spear, flowing down to the angel's hand.

"Will you take charge of it?" the angel asked me.

"I will," I said, and grasped the cup.

The angel raised the lance and drove it through both my thighs.

My body smashed the earth. I opened my eyes. With the side of my face pressed against the ground, I saw the sharp edges of the grass rise gently. The breeze blew over me, where it came from I did not know. And then it was gone.

*

When I woke up, my eyes blurred and everything looked white like before, only this time the smell of antiseptic hit me strong. When my vision cleared, I saw my father, my mother - and a doctor.

"What happened?" I said.

"We don't know," my father said, "We found you lying on the grass by the river."

"Can't you remember what happened?" my mother said.

"Yeah. There was this big white light, it was like, round. And then God and the cup and...." My legs hurt. A lot. I looked at them. "Why are my legs hanging from the ceiling?"

"You fractured the bone in both your thighs," the doctor said. "We think you were in an accident."

"He says he saw a big round light," my father said, "maybe he was hit by a motorcycle."

"How did I get here?" I said.

"A motorist found you lying by the road," my father said.

"But I saw...where's the cup?" I said.

"What cup?" my father said.

"Nothing. So it was just an accident?" I said.

"What else could it be?" my father said.

What else *could* it be? I had no cup, no proof, no souvenir from heaven apart from two broken legs. How the hell could I ever convince anyone that I saw God?

"I guess you're right," I said in my best drift-along voice.

Chapter Four

Day Two: Monday

MEI

I woke up that morning to find myself suffering from a bad case of *fragilitas crinium*, or in layman's terms, split ends. Strands of hair stuck out of places in my head I never knew I had. It was a rebel hair day, a day when nothing on your head will submit to styling. I had only two options: chop it off or wear a hat. Andy always says that I make too much out of my bad hair mornings. I see them as a bad omen, a sign that the rest of the day will be damned. And I know I'm right - you know that the next twenty four hours are going to be tough when the first thing you see in the mirror looks like Yoko Ono with a live porcupine on her head.

*

As I drove up the black hill towards the Central Police Station, the cuckling of motorcycle engines and the wheeze of buses faded away. I noticed a strange smell, strange because it was natural, not the fumes you expect to find in the Central Business District - the smell of fresh, dew-encrusted leaves. I could actually hear the crickets as my car cruised past the dense mass of vine-entangled trees.

Though I've been to the Central Police Station many times, it still shocks me. I'm addicted to Cagney and Lacey, NYPD Blue, and I keep expecting police stations to be dark and menacing, the air heavy with heat, assaulted by grime, noise, cigarette smoke and paper blizzards. But police stations in Singapore are so clean and bright, so unexpectedly cheerful, it's unnerving. With pink floor tiles, lime green walls, air-conditioning, and an assortment of potted dumb canes and money plants, the station looks more like a civil service office than a sin bin.

The duty officer sat beneath a framed Snoopy jigsaw puzzle. I asked to see Andy. I waited beside the "Charge Office" board, next to the fire extinguisher. Some resourceful person had created a make-shift container for the marker pens and duster by wedging a soap dish between the wall and the extinguisher. In the corner, through a Panasonic stereo system, Technotronic exhorted everyone to work their body. The duty officer took Technotronic's advice to heart and gently rocked his head to the dance beat. On the top of the left stereo speaker, a gold trophy proclaimed this station the winner of the "Most Courteous Report Room Contest".

I could see part of the lock-up from where I sat. I expected bars of steel, but instead, a wire mesh fenced in the cells, mesh reminiscent of the ones used for the chicken coops at my aunt's kampong. I've always had my TV-fed fantasies about police stations, about how they must be centers of excitement, buzzing with blue cops snapping on their gun belts, the air frantic with the crackle of walkie-talkies. I mean, police stations are places where people *kicked ass*. But this station reminded me of a clinic. Sometimes I think my perpetual disappointment with real-life police stations, or with real life in general, is due to my over active imagination - what I see with my mind's eye is always a million times better than what this grey earth can produce. But other times I think it's not my fault at all, but that the

banality of this country is due to the authorities' desire to replace excitement with efficiency, passion with punctuality - their ability to turn everything into boredom.

Andy finally emerged from his cage, his shoulders scrunched, twisting his fingers.

"You're such a liar," I said. A week ago, Andy told me that he had become a Christian, that he had found God and that he wasn't going to let the punters use his flat as a betting house anymore. "You faked it all, pretending to have seen Jesus, supposedly giving up gambling. You only said that to trick me into going out with you."

Chapter Five

EUGENE

At parties Mei always introduces me with the same line - "Oh, come, meet Eugene. We've known each other since primary school. He's like the little brother I'm glad I never had." Well, that's me - in Britain, I'm what you call a 'swot', in America, a 'nerd', and in Singapore, the '*kia su* kid' - the tiny child in the corner with the Asimov novel and spectacles face. I'm sort of like Jordan's brother, that dark, quiet and ugly member of New Kids On The Block whose name no one can ever remember. Mei's intro always gets a laugh from the guests, but it doesn't do anything for my confidence. Introductions, in general, have never done much for my confidence. When my mother brought me into the world, she made a *major* mistake. For starters, she named me Guo Xing. But then my uncle, who is some sort of fortune teller, calculated the number of strokes in my name and it was a bad number, or something, as it meant that I would die or generally catastrophize my life when I was in my twenties. He wasn't very specific as to what exactly would happen, but pronounced my doom in terms filled with terrifying generality. So my mother changed my name to one which had a more auspicious number of strokes - Ge Xun. But I always think, hey, I've already been named. My fate has already been set. I'm really going to fuck something up when I go past the big Two Zero. *Oh my God.....* At this stage, Mei usually passes me a paper bag while I hyperventilate. But I hope this at least explains why I've spent most of my twenties in a state of constant neurosis.

*

When we were kids, Mei spent most of her time beating me up. We always played fighting, but according to the rules, I couldn't actually touch her, I could only feint blows in her direction. She, on the other hand, could punch me as hard as she liked. When I asked her why we played by these rules, she would just glare at me and said, "Because I'm a girl and you're a boy, *stupid*. Boys can't hit girls." Mei invented those rules, but to this day, she still insists that she's a feminist.

When we were thirteen, every time we watched a Bond video, we would pretend to beat each other up. Once, I jumped off the bed, spun and swung my right foot at Mei's head. She ducked, crouched on the balls of her feet, and leapt. Her right fist, propelled by the entire weight of her body, struck my chin like an ejecting spike. I crashed into the basket of laundry.

"There's only two things that touch me," Mei said, "My boyfriend, and soap."

We spent the afternoon punching the hot heavy air, bare feet swinging from the floor towards the ceiling, only stopping to peel our wet T-shirt collars from our necks. The thunder jerked us back to reality. Pins of water bounced off the window shutters, puddling the void deck with murky grey splotches. Though they were made of stainless steel, public opinion deemed that the shutters weren't strong enough and needed the protection of the green iron grilles. My mother told me this steel-iron barrier kept the burglars out, but I knew better. Anything exciting, like criminals, were in short supply on housing board estates. The labyrinthine metal outside our windows kept people in, not out, trapped them in their dinky two bedroom flats, entombed them in Fortress Boredom.

I escaped through fantasy, transforming my bedroom into an adventure land, injecting magic into the mundane. A lot of our games involved nothing more than jumping on and off my bed, but in our minds we leapt out of trees to ambush aristocrats, or scaled Mount Everest with skipping ropes. We played Star Wars by switching on the fan to full power. When Mei spoke into the whirring blades, her voice went metallic - she became Darth Vader, and droned chilling threats while I made heroic noises as I waved my light-sabre/broom-stick.

Sometimes, lying in bed at night, my stomach hurt. It was useless, all these games were just make believe. My fantasies couldn't satisfy me, they only whetted my desire, lodged an ache like a balled fist in the pit of my stomach. The day dreams floated like vampiric phantoms, sucked the joy from my present existence, possessed me with the demon urge to morph into someone else, haunting, taunting me to get out, get out, go West young one.

"Why nothing ever interesting happen in Singapore?" I complained to Mei. On TV, we always saw lots of shootings, car chases, bank explosions, but they all took place in the West. "Why we don't have any guns? Why can't I get kidnapped or shot? I don't even know anyone who has been burglarised!" Raising my voice to compete against the loud rattle of rain against the shutters, I announced my goal in life - "When I grow up, I'm going to go to England or America, and I'm going to catch a lot of murderers. I'm going to be like Arnold Schwazeneg, Schwitznegger, Shch - oh never mind." How could someone be your role model if you couldn't even pronounce his name?

The West was filled with rolling hills, verdant fields, purple mountains, golden ponds and emerald lakes, full of opportunities to wander lonely as a cloud and chance upon a crowd, a host of daffodils. My English pen pal often wrote about the cute furry animals that would sneak into her house, wild squirrels and baby rabbits. Cockroaches and fruit flies were

my household companions, creatures which have never been made into soft toys.

Consequently, I am ashamed to confess that sometimes I do a Wordsworth and lie on my couch, wishing I was in some field in the Lake District, finding my blissful solitude in viewing that golden flash with my inward eye.

*

Hundreds of washing poles hung from the windows at the back of our apartment block, their wooden-clipped clothes swaying in the darkness. Water plopped from the clothes to the pavement, scattering black, round rings on the grey cement.

Someone screamed. A woman crashed out of the window on the fifteenth floor, tumbling through the layers of wooden poles. The poles cracked, splintering wood on the ground. Clothes snapped from their clips, fell, and covered the twisted corpse like a shroud. These were the clothes that buried her: one pair of blue Giordano jeans, two cockroach-bitten singlets, four Triumph bras, a pair of green Crocodile briefs, a dark blue Raffles Girls' School track top, a faded brown Brownie uniform with badges for First-Aid, Tracking and Crafts, one green imitation Chanel T-shirt, three plain white shirts for the office, and one yellow-grey batik shirt for the trip to Bali. A child's T-shirt floated onto the corpse. Strawberry Shortcake smiled up from the T-shirt at us. She said, "I'm always smiling, cheerful, and very bright."

"Oh my God," Mei said, "Don't look. You see this, afterwards the rest of your life you get nightmares, cannot sleep."

She covered my eyes with her hand.

“Oh cool. Is it *that* gross? Let me see.” I clawed at her hands.

She let go, I saw the woman, and ran from the window. “Oh yuck yuck yuck, so gross, so grosssss.”

“I told you so. Now you cannot keep the picture out of your head, they have to send you to Woodbridge mad hospital. Serve you right, who ask you not to listen to me?”

I returned, carrying a camera. “Oh so gross, take picture, take picture.”

She snatched my camera.

I continued to make ‘bleargh’ faces. “You see the head twisted like that. 180 degrees. Yuck, yuck.”

“So yucky then you look for what?” Mei said, “this kind of thing you also want to see.” She snorted disdainfully. Then she peeked at the body below. “The corpse’s eyes are still open. Hey, Eugene, she’s looking at you. She’s going to get you.”

“Shut up,” I said. “Do you know who she is?”

Mei stared hard at the corpse. “I think...she looks like...Marissa. Mrs Lam’s maid.”

“You think she jumped?” I asked.

Mei shrugged.

“Hey you know that Mrs Lam kept nagging her,” I said, “She always shout at Marissa so loud - ‘You stupid girl, Chinese New Year how dare you sweep the floor? You want to sweep all my luck away? You continue like that I take away your deposit.’”

“Don’t be stupid, if a maid gets nagged, it doesn’t mean that she’ll go and commit suicide. If every maid that gets nagged, commits suicide, then there’ll be no maids left in Singapore. It won’t be raining cats and dogs anymore, it’ll be raining maids.”

"Hey if the maid didn't jump then you think what - somebody throw her out of the window?" My eyes widened. "You think somebody...*murdered* her?" I started humming the theme tune from "The Twilight Zone". "*Wah*, wait till I tell the people on my school bus. 'Hey, you know what? Yesterday somebody in my building got murdered'." I jumped and clapped my hands. "Excitement."

"Why you think somebody murdered her?" Mei said.

"Cos it'll be really cool if she was murdered," I said, "Then we got mystery to solve. Nothing ever happens around here. I hope she was murdered."

"*Choi, choi*, don't talk rubbish," Mei said, "Mrs Lam is a very nice lady. She's not the psycho type."

"You know what they say," I said, "It's always the quiet ones."

Mei glared at me. "Don't you have a test to study for?"

"Can't you stop acting like a prefect for five seconds?" I said. "Even my mother isn't as strict as you."

"Even my mother doesn't have tits as big as yours, you fatty bom bom."

More insults were traded, followed by a spot of mutual hair-pulling, chest-pushing and shin-kicking.

After we exhausted ourselves, I said - "Maybe we should go and visit Mrs Lam. To comfort her."

"To *kaypoh* you mean, you big busybody," Mei said.

"Hah, like you not interested," I said, "Don't you want to find who murdered Marissa? This is our chance to be real detectives, like 'The Famous Five.'"

I went to my school bag and took out my Whizz Kid's How To Be A Detective. "Now according to this book we need fingerprint powder. Charcoal is the best."

"Where to get charcoal?"

"Go to the kitchen, *girl*."

"Stupid, we only have a gas stove and a microwave. Who cooks with charcoal any more? We can use 'Johnson's Baby Powder'. It works better on dark surfaces than charcoal."

"That's so un-macho. Why your kitchen so lousy, got no charcoal?"

"We can use pencil lead instead."

We gathered all the pencils in the flat, and started scraping the lead tips with our pen knives. Black dust powdered the air, settling slowly into the jam jar.

I looked at my book again. "It says here that we need a brush, made from camel hair. You got one or not?"

"Singapore where got camel? We'll use my paint brush."

"Right. All we need now is to find an excuse to go up to Mrs Lam's house and dust her place for prints. Oh goody, more excitement." I said, "I'll go put on my scout uniform, and you go get your guides uniform. We'll go to her flat, and we'll tell her that we got to do this good deed, clean her house, to get a 'Helpfulness' badge or whatever those stupid things are called. You distract her, bring her to the kitchen, wash her windows, while I dust Marissa's room for prints. Ask Mrs Lam loads of questions about Marissa, and remember to switch on the tape recorder. If she makes a slip, we can use it as evidence. You get the picture?"

"Cheese."

*

I hit the red button, filling the air with chimes from the first bars of the 'Blue Danube'. The door opened a fraction, then shuddered to a stop. Mrs Lam peered through the chained gap.

"Hello, we're from the scouts and the guides. Can we do a good deed?" I lifted my red bucket and cloth to show her that I had brought my window cleaning apparatus along.

The door sprung free from its chains. "Of course, come in, come in."

Mrs Lam gathered us in. She looked at Mei. "Why your face so white, you poor girl? You having your period now? I go and pour some ginseng tea for you." Her back disappeared into the kitchen.

Mei stuck out her tongue. "Ginseng."

"Say you love ginseng tea, say she's the best ginseng tea maker in the world. Drink as much as possible, keep her occupied while I do some snooping."

Mei sulked towards the kitchen, while I ducked into Marissa's room.

Marissa's dressing table was buried under all sorts of chemicals - hair spray, lipstick, the usual stuff, but also some tubes and aerosols that did more subtle stuff that I didn't know anything about. I picked up a bottle of transparent yellow liquid called 'Eskinol Clear', and noted the Manila Import Services Pte Ltd.'s promise that it would whiten any Filipino skin "in 14 days, Guaranteed!" Pencilled on her complimentary AIA Insurance calendar was a mysterious list of numbers: "4046 - 1, 8241 - 2, 8460 - 1, 0922 - 2, 5686 - 2, 8712 - 1,

0724 - 1 Quickpick \$1". The bottom of the drawer was filled with love paraphernalia, stuff like this packet of pink envelopes with loads of red roses on the front and the words, "When we are together again, our relationship will be ♥♥♥ ". Puke-inducing or what? Stuffed between the pages of her diary was a poem written in romantic doggerel, e.g. rhymes like "flame"/"rain", "see"/"me", professions that "my own heart brims with tears unshed", like in a bad Michael Bolton song (is there any other?) The poem was signed "Tom", plus a phone number and address. Who was Tom? A white American G.I. grinned from a black-and-white photo clipped to a McDonalds menu. Was that him? I scribbled in my notebook - "Tom. Boyfriend? Murderer?" Shading in all the empty spaces, I ensured that no gaps on the page could be filled with forged evidence, in case the book fell into criminal hands.

Time to dust the table for prints.

"Eugene, would you like some ginseng tea?" Mrs Lam walked into the room. Her eyes swivelled from the paint brush in my hand to the black powder that smudged the cream table top. "What are you doing boy?"

"Nothing." I chucked my equipment into my bag.

Mrs Lam snatched my bag. Rummaging through it, she found her card:

Criminal Record Card No. 1

Name: Mrs Lam

DOB/Age: 40?-50?

Place of Birth: Singapore

Occupation: Teacher

Distinguishing features: Freckles, pimples, a mole on the upper lip and more wrinkles than Jabba the Hutt.

"Is that supposed to be me?" she said.

Under the 'mug shots - front and side' section were two crude sketches of Mrs Lam.

I nodded.

"You really think I weigh that much? Do I look that old?"

I gulped.

She gave me a hard stare and said, "I don't like your manner."

I knew what I should have said. I should have been cool like Marlowe, and said through the side of my mouth, "You don't like my manner? That's all right, cos I'm not selling it."

But I wasn't cool, I couldn't think of a single snappy wise-crack. I just stood there, thinking oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit.

*

Back at our detective HQ, Mei had her mouth stuck under the tap, trying to wash out the taste of the ginseng.

"Why you didn't distract her long enough?" I said, "You know how much trouble you got me into? Lucky she so shocked, I ran away before she could catch me."

Mei dislodged her mouth from the tap and sputtered. "It's your own fault. Who ask you to be so slow? Did you get any fingerprints?"

"I didn't have time. I managed to get a bottle to dust at home." I produced the 'Eskinol' bottle.

Mei gave me *such* a look. "You're going to hell. I can't believe it. You *stole* something from a dead person?"

"It's not stealing, it's confiscating evidence." What was the big deal? Detectives in novels always took stuff from crime scenes and nobody ever made a fuss. I drenched the bottle with talcum powder, all psyched up to find arches, whorls, loops, composites. I knew all the different categories from reading the Whizz Kids book, but though I zapped sticky tape over every inch of the glass, I got nothing for my efforts.

"Did you get any useful info from Mrs Lam?" I said.

"She said she was away on holiday when Marissa fell. She thinks it was an accident. She say that whenever Marissa was hanging out the clothes, she always did it very dangerously. Like if a bird landed on the end of the pole, on one of the blouses, Marissa would try to shoo the bird away, stick her hand out at the bird to hit it. I guess that's what happened that night - Marissa leaned and leaned, then whooshed out of the window. "

I rubbed the imaginary stubble on my chin. "I don't believe this accident theory. Marissa was a spy. The numbers on the paper were code messages."

"Those were lottery numbers, stupid."

"Maybe someone hypnotised her. I saw that on Columbo once. The murderer hypnotises her, say that when she hears the phone ring three times, she'll feel really hot, and jump out of the window. We can go and ask Mrs Lam's neighbour if the phone rang three times before Marissa fell." I clapped my hands together with glee. "I'm such a great detective, the clues just fall in place like that - ." I snapped my fingers. "It's almost too easy. Everything is clear when you have the vision of a genius."

"Rubbish. Columbo is TV, life is life. Get real."

"You got a better idea?"

"I'm not the one with the vision of the genius."

I shut my eyes. "Marissa definitely had a boyfriend, that's why she had so much make-up. But they split, that's why she put all the love envelopes at the bottom of the drawer."

"So what do you think happened, Oh Wise One?"

"Maybe Marissa's boyfriend wanted her to run away with him to America. Maybe she couldn't because...because...she had to stay and work in Singapore to earn money for her family. Maybe her boyfriend got jealous, they fought, and he pushed her out of the window."

"Marissa wasn't murdered. It was just an accident. She was just doing her job, hanging clothes, and she fell. She died doing a boring, boring job. That's how our lives are going to be like. Die after living a boring, boring life."

“You're wrong, it was murder, I can feel it. I know what will happen - we'll discover too much, because people always think children don't know anything, but we *know*. We'll find the murderer, and he'll try to capture us, but we'll escape to the police just in time.”

“That kind of thing only happen on TV one *lah*. Or in England and America. Nothing exciting is ever going to happen to us. Face it Eugene, you're too ordinary. You look exactly like all the other boys your age - durian hair, big owl glasses, brown oily skin. If they drove a bus down the pavement, they would hit twenty kids that looked exactly like you. You're not special. You're like me, you're just *normal*.” Mei said that the problem with this world is that nine out of ten people are so dull that no one would want to write or read about them, and the tenth person, their life is so bizarre that no one would believe it. It's this horrible, but necessary and inevitable imbalance that rules our lives.

But her words only made me burn to prove that inside this typically dorky-looking boy was a Rambo. Authority types like Mei hated me, because I was an unorthodox, fly-by-wire kind of guy, a renegade who would cut through red-tape and regulations to get things done. I'd do whatever it takes to get justice, and if those pen-pushers at city hall can't take it, they can stick their biros and DA126 forms up their you-know-where. I flapped the photo of Marissa's boyfriend in Mei's face. “I'm going to catch him, no matter what you say. Then they'll interview me on Crime Watch and I'll be famous.” I stuck out my tongue at her. “And you'll be nothing.”

Mei snatched the photo from me. “I saw him.”

“When?”

“On the night Marissa fell, I saw this guy go into the flat.”

“You sure?”

Mei nodded. "We better go tell the police."

"No, I want to interview the guy before we go to the police. Search his flat. Now, if we..."

"What's this 'we' thing? If you want to go talk to a murderer, you can go by yourself. You want to get killed - that's your problem."

"You're going to desert me, chicken?"

"I'm leaving it to the police." Mei opened my toy cupboard. "Maybe we should play Scrabble instead."

"Maybe you should go home, Judas."

"Maybe I will."

*

After receiving my tip, the police raided Tom's flat. They found Marissa's purse and jewellery in his cupboard. Faced with the incriminating evidence, Tom broke down and confessed.

"So strange," my father said. He showed me the newspaper report. Tom supposedly had no idea how Marissa's purse and jewellery got into his cupboard. That's what really scared him. He thought that God or Marissa's ghost must have planted them there, so he confessed to the police to save his soul.

"It's a miracle." I shrugged.

As for Mei, because she was so nasty to me about the whole detective business, I resolved not to friend her for at least a week, to teach her a lesson. I decided that I wasn't going to speak to her unless she bowed down, made flapping worship gestures with her arms and addressed me as "The Great Detective". But three days later, we passed each other along the corridor, we both said 'Hi', and everything went back to normal.

Chapter Six

Day Two: Sunday morning

ANDY

When I first asked Mei to go out with me, she told me that she couldn't be "unequally yoked". When I asked her what the hell she meant, she quoted 2 Corinthians 6:14 at me - "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" - which basically means she wouldn't go out with anyone who isn't a Christian.

"Last week, when you suddenly converted," Mei said, "at first I thought - hmmm, *very* suspicious, but I decided to give you the benefit of the doubt. I was so wrong."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I kept warning you but you never listen. Don't deny this. Ever since you came to Singapore, every Saturday night you had to bet with the bookies, and every Saturday night I kept telling you that you're going to get caught. You never learn, do you? You had to keep on betting, betting, betting until you got busted."

"What do you think happened?"

"It's obvious isn't it? All week, you kept going on about Newcastle and Man U, how Saturday's match was going to decide the championship. So I guess your punter friends turned up as usual, and you just couldn't say 'no'."

I shook my head. "That wasn't what happened at all. There wasn't any gambling in my flat when I was arrested. I told you, I've turned to God. No more gambling. I'm a changed man."

"So what really happened?"

"I was in my flat, on my way out to see you - just putting your gift in my pocket - oh you'll love what I bought - it's this packet of diet chocolate bars. It's got all these cool centers - orange, apricot, mint, toffee, coconut - sugar and fat free, only a hundred and six calories each. I know how you worry about your thighs. Is that a good gift or what?" I looked longingly for approval.

"You were supposed to get me some shampoo."

"Oh yeah, right. But anyway I was like putting the chocolate in my pocket - on my way out to see you - no punters around me, in an absolutely non-soccer, non-gambling situation - when there's this knock on the door. The police raided my flat, they arrested me and everything, but I didn't do anything wrong. I was framed."

I told her all about my arrest.

*

The fan hung above me like a chrysanthemum, its golden petals spinning from the ceiling. Cutting through the hot, thick air, the swift blades cast dark strokes against the concrete above it. Blurred, black stripes streaked around the orange ceiling. I never noticed it before. It's one of those moments when you casually glance at something that's always been there and suddenly you realise you've never seen anything quite so magical in all your

life. I sucked my breath and dropped on the sofa. I had to get dressed to leave but I couldn't move - though this sight was a thing of beauty, I had to meet Mei, another thing of beauty, in ten minutes time. Mei's beauty was unlike that of the pattern above me - hers was the steely, even caustic type, like mercury. She had an impatient energy, an attraction too powerful to be fixed. She hated everything that was late.

The flames from the altar next door licked the fumes of the 'Lucky Oil' into my flat. Smoke curled in through the steel shutters of the windows, sweet incense from the burning oil. A couple of months ago, returning home drunk and consequently, stricken with a mad craving for chips, the bottle of 'Lucky Oil' was a dead ringer for Mazola corn oil. So I nicked some to deep-fry my potatoes. Fortunately, Mei popped by an hour later and sent me to the hospital to get my stomach pumped before anything lethal happened.

I know I was going to be late for my date, but I just lay there, transfixed. I had entered one of those rare moments in life, that maybe, if you're lucky, you get once - those seconds when fantasy and reality merge, when you live out what you only usually dream through TV. I pressed the volume button on my remote and watched the chrome knob on the Sony wind upwards, drowning out the rattling rain. The bass bounced off the floor, knocking the breath out of me. But my body soon adjusted, my heart thud along to the rhythm; I melt into the song, let the guitar riffs wind round my body. That's the thing with loud music - fight it, and it's like banging your head against the wall. You'll just end up with a headache and bleeding ears. Better to surrender to it, let the wailing waves carry you, ride the surf.

Spread-eagled on the sofa, wearing only black boxers, I felt like a model in a MTV video (dir. David Fincher). The scene I'm in had all the elements of a Fincher video - the bass, the smoke, the fan, the acid rain outside. Everything is picture perfect - I lay there, my white skin pale against the black leather cushions, expecting a mystical visitation, waiting - any

moment now - for the face of Madonna or George Michael to appear projected on the ceiling, mouthing the lyrics to their latest Billboard Top 5 hit. Life can't get better than this.

A Chinese face peered through the shutters. He tapped the window to get my attention. I just stared at the ceiling. He waved a plastic ID in his left hand and flapped some paper with his left. His lips moved and it sounds like he's saying - 'Shit is a Sioux warden' - but I knew that couldn't be right. I cut the music.

After I opened the door, the inspector did more paper flapping in my direction. "Inspector Koh, C.I.D., Gambling Suppression Branch," he said, "This is a search warrant. Please co-operate with us. We will conduct the search in your presence."

I'm shitting myself, thinking - they're going to bloody wreck my flat! You know, I've seen the movies and I know that when you get raided, the police splinter down your doors, yank down your cabinets, take out their knives and slit up your sofa looking for contraband.

"Who?" I said.

"Don't pretend," he said, "We've been watching your flat for the past month."

I knew who the inspector was referring to. 'They' were the bookies. Usually, on Saturday nights, Loong ran his betting shop in my flat, but fortunately, not tonight.

"I'm not hiding anyone. You can check, you've got the warrant," I said, "I'm the only one who lives here, apart from the usual lizards and the occasional stray iguana."

"Check the toilet," the inspector told his junior officer. The junior officer was this skinny teenager. All I could think of was how young he looks - like hell, I was being busted by some kid who probably wasn't old enough to buy cigarettes yet.

The junior officer returned to the living room with a filofax.

"It's all here sir," the officer said, "Names and numbers".

The inspector shot me a meaningful look, but I'm like 'Huh'?

"I've never seen the filofax before in my life," I say. "And if I'd seen it, I'd never would have bought it."

I mean like, huuurgh, it was ugly. The cover had this blotch of yellow, brown, white squiggles, like someone shat on it, wanked all over it and then topped it off with a sprinkle of pond scum. It looked like something that dropped out of the Sphinx's nose. The filofax looked so hideous it completely screwed up my head. I knew that I should be worrying about jail and shit, but all the time, the only thing I could think of was - how the hell can they even think that I could even own a filofax like that? I mean, I'm a cool, hip guy. I'm always aware of what's in the UK Top Twenty, I know who's in, who's out, who's on the move. I mean, I'm like the 'in' kind of guy who knows who's the smart one in Beavis and Butthead. So I say to the inspector, "You don't *seriously* think that the filofax belongs to me? You know, like I have more *taste* than that", and he looks at me real funny like, and I know that, in his eyes, my cool quotient equals to zero. And I feel like a pile of cack. And I tell myself, 'Andy, you are one mind-fucked boy. You ought to be worried about spending the rest of your life in jail for a crime you know nothing about, instead of worrying about whether Inspector Koh thinks you're hip or not'. But you've got to see it to believe it - the filofax was so ugly, it was traumatic.

The officer cuffed me and led me out, past the other flats. The corridor is filled with the noise of clanging swords and the flutter of kung-fu somersaults, the sound of twelve TVs all tuned to the same channel, everyone watching Chinese Cinema I: "Ming Demon".

We reached the lift. The doors opened, revealing a Filipino maid with two children, a teenager in a dark blue pinafore, lugging a black Nike tennis bag that was half her height,

and a housewife, her hands full with four big red plastic bags from Robinsons, probably on her way back from the Great Singapore Sale. When she saw us - the police officers, and me in cuffs - about to enter the lift, she nudged her nine-year-old boy with her knee and says, "Let's go."

"But not our floor yet," the boy protested.

"Shut up. We'll walk up the rest of the way," she said, and pushed him out of the lift.

The other passengers also shot fearful glances in my direction and scrambled out.

I've never felt so dangerous in all my life. It was *so cool*.

I thought I was going to get it when the police brought me to the statement room. I expected this dark room, pitch black with nothing but a huge hot yellow light blazing in my face, you know, those rooms you see in cop shows, the ones with two way mirrors. I expected two detectives to play good guy, bad guy, both hunched over me, their hot breaths down my neck, shaking me by the collar, trying to extract a confession, threatening to beat me. I was all psyched up to say stuff like - 'I know my rights, I want my lawyer. I'm a British citizen. Call the embassy. Call the British Council. I'll sic Amnesty International on you if you so much as lay a finger on me.'"

But the real statement room looked like the staff room in my school. It had all the usual office stuff - biros in mugs, packets of blu-tack, ring re-inforcements, half-used wrapping paper, a family photo of a kid flapping around in a pool with a Jurassic Park dinosaur float, a huge Garfield tissue paper holder, and on the wall behind them, a 'Mr. Kia-su' cartoon calendar. I felt like I was being audited by an accountant, it was like being arrested by Coopers and Lybrand.

The inspector starts making some pretty serious allegations - he's going to book me for being some triad, secret-society gambling honcho or something. He serves me the notice and I read the charge.

"Do you wish to say anything in answer to the charge?" he said.

I'm completely gob-smacked. I work as a relief teacher at Dai Tang Secondary School, and earlier on in the morning, you wouldn't believe the crap I had to go through just to be able to bring the kids to Fort Canning. My principal said it wasn't safe - like please, I'm bringing the kids to look at some cannons, it's not like I'm taking them bungee jumping over shark-infested waters or anything like that. I told my principal that, and he said, 'Fort Canning is a big hill. What if the children fall down and break their heads? Like Jack and Jill. Then the parents will come and sue the school. Then how?' My principal only agreed to the field trip after I made the children sign all these consent forms in triplicate, absolving the school of any responsibility "in the event of any injuries (whether psychological or physical), damage or deaths." Anyway the point of this story is, and there is a point to it, is that this morning my principal treated me like I was some pea-brain git who couldn't even supervise a simple field trip, and ten hours later the police are trying to get me to admit that I'm this genius mastermind who's been funnelling millions of dollars in bets all around the world.

I told the inspector about the field trip but he didn't say anything. He just eyeballed me for a minute and said, "I advise you to mention any facts you intend to rely on in your defence at the trial."

"Don't I have a right to remain silent and all that TV stuff?" I said.

"Yah. You can tell us your defence for the first time in court. But it's better not to."

"Why?"

“Usually the judge will think that you’ve made up your defence. You leave it so late to give your defence, he might not believe you. If you’re innocent, then there’s no harm talking to us right? All we want is a voluntary statement.”

The inspector passed me the filofax. “Look carefully at the names. Do you know them?”

I looked at the list of names - ‘Ho Fat Foon. Yap Chin Chai. Kwok Wok Woon’ etc., but it didn’t ring any bells. I mean, I could have been reading out from a Chinese menu, for all I knew.

The inspector started reading all this stuff from the filofax, like “August 24, Liverpool versus Arsenal, two hundred thousand dollars”, and I was like “What?”

“Don’t try and bluff me,” he said, “We can verify all these bets. Three - million - dollars.”

“You know all about these bets?” I said, “Good for you. Because I sure as hell don’t know *anything* about those bets.”

*

“Well, I’ve got good news and bad news,” Mei said.

“Bad news first,” I said.

“The maximum sentence is a fine of two hundred thousand dollars and jail not exceeding five years.”

“Ouch. And the good news?”

“The minimum fine is twenty thousand dollars, and one month jail.”

I jerked my head back. “That was the good news?”

“Sorry, I lied,” Mei said, “What do you expect - I’m a lawyer. I should have said - I have bad news, and bad news.”

“Twenty thousand? That’s more than a whole year’s salary. How am I going to find that kind of money?”

“Didn’t you make a lot of money betting?”

I shook my head. “Sometimes I win, sometimes I don’t. It evens out. I’m about a thousand dollars in profit at the moment. Shit. Jail...”

“Is mandatory,” Mei said, “One month, minimum.”

When I first got arrested I wasn’t too worried about it. Yeah like I got stressed, but only in the way people get stressed if they get done for parking on a double yellow line. You sort of think like “oh bollocks”, but it’s not like your life is over. When I got arrested, I thought like the worst thing that could happen was maybe a big fine, a slap on the wrist. But now I saw my whole life evaporating before me. “Five years?” I said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll visit you,” Mei said. “I’ll bring cookies.”

“I can’t cope with jail. I mean, like I’m twenty-two, I’m in my sexual prime, I can’t spend five years in jail. And after I get out I’ll be screwed, like who will want to employ a convicted felon? And if I can’t get a job, how am I going to pay off a two hundred thousand dollar fine?” I snapped my fingers. “I know, maybe I can write a book. Don’t you think this

whole gambling/jail thing sounds pretty exciting? Maybe I can get loads of dosh for my story, you know, to help me pay the fine.”

“I’m sure your life will make a great alternative detective story,” Mei said.

“You really think so?”

“Yes, most detective stories would be about the protagonists’ remarkable powers of observation. Your story would be about your remarkable lack of observation.”

It hit me for the first time - the whole big bag of shite, cosmic seriousness of the situation. They say that in moments of despair, staring at the dark night of the soul, you tap into pools of poetry that you never knew you had; a rare moment of eloquence grips you, as the Muse is moved by pity to visit you, enabling you to articulate the awful existential condition of man. Sitting there, contemplating my penalty, I had an epiphany, my lips moved to utter two simple, yet moving words that described my plight, something Hemingway might have said, a real literary statement in the dirty realism tradition.

“Oh shit,” I said.

“That is an accurate summary of the situation,” Mei said.

“Why jail? It’s not like I did something evil or anything,” I said, “It’s only gambling, it’s just fun, a laugh, you know. I didn’t hurt anyone.”

Mei rolled her eyes. “It’s just a ‘guy thing’, I suppose.”

“Exactly.”

“You expected a spanking rather than a kick in the teeth.”

“It was just a *game*.” I spread my hands. “I’m just the victim of a cultural misunderstanding.”

In England, gambling is just fun, like you had Anthea Turner and Mr. Blobby and lottery balls popping up on your screens every Saturday night and everyone thinks it's a right laugh. In Singapore, most forms of gambling carries a mandatory prison sentence. I was finding this to be true a lot lately - things in England that you do in order to become one of the lads, those hard-men initiation rites, things you did to make you socially acceptable among your peers - in Singapore, those exact things would get you fined, incarcerated and caned. That's like, well confusing. Like at university, drink and drugs were my defining substances, but in Singapore, it's illegal to get pissed in a public place - I mean, like *why*? The only people who stay at home to get pissed are like, alcoholics. And get this, you can get the death penalty for possessing pot, even if you're not selling any of it, you'll get hung just for having some grass in your pocket. You can get two weeks jail for swallowing one E tablet and thirteen years for being a heroin junkie. When I asked Mei what people did here for fun, she said, "Karaoke", and, I like, nearly died. In England, karaoke is okay because you're usually so pissed you don't care that you and everybody else can't sing, but imagine having to sit through a 'live' rendition of 'I'm Too Sexy' while you're sober. I mean, this place is so strict, with all these laws you would never even dream of having in England. Like if you brush - even if it's like a complete accident - against a woman in a bus, she could get you caned for "outraging her modesty". In England, you wouldn't even think of having a law like that. Imagine all the men riding in the Tube during rush hour. If we had the same laws in England, they'd all have the shit beaten out of them by the authorities.

"I'm getting really paranoid," I said, "I keep thinking, any moment, I'm going to get done for something that I didn't even know was illegal. Like I'm scared that if I fart too loudly I might get hung for polluting the environment."

*

During our university days, every Saturday afternoon, Eugene would listen to “Sport On Five”. Every ten minutes or so, his mobile phone would ring and he would jabber frantically in Hokkein. At night, we would gather in the common room with our beers and our Salt and Linekar crisps, watch “Match of the Day” and jeer at Jimmy Hill. We also bet on the soccer results. The losers would have to buy a crate of beer or pay for the week’s subscription to ‘The Sun’.

When I went to Singapore, Eugene introduced me to the punters he had jabbered to while he was in England. So when we had the soccer betting in my flat every Saturday night, it was like continuing the hallowed, male-bonding ritual that we had started at university. When Mei first told me that the betting was illegal, I was so shocked.

“It’s so stupid. I mean, soccer betting is perfectly legal in England. It’s fun, it’s like the lottery, it’s like beer,” I said, “Can you imagine if a government tried to ban alcohol? Can you imagine being only allowed to drink *water*?”

Mei did not look distressed at all.

“It’s ridiculous,” I said, “Every Saturday, on my way to do ECA with those kids at my school, I always get caught in the traffic jam at Bukit Timah Road. All these cars, buses, unloading hundreds of punters, all going to the Turf Club to bet on horses. How come betting on horses is legal, but betting on soccer is not? How can the Singapore government be so inconsistent?”

“I don’t know,” Mei said.

“What do you mean you don’t know? You’re a lawyer. Why do you have such stupid laws in your country?”

Mei shrugged. “All I’m saying is that if you get caught you’ll be in big trouble. You have been warned. Proceed at your own peril.”

“I don’t care. You have to fight this law. It’s awful. I can’t imagine not being able to bet on soccer. It’ll be like - not being able to play ‘Doom’.” I lowered my voice in hushed horror. “It’ll be like banning the *F.A. Cup Final!*”

“For some reason, I’m not shocked by any of those proposals.”

I sighed and looked sadly at her. “You are one culturally deprived woman.”

I guess I let the punters meet in my flat because I never had the feeling that I was doing anything *bad*. I couldn’t imagine getting into trouble over it. It was all so casual. We were just a group of twenty guys, watching a ‘live’ soccer match on TV, drinking Tiger beer, smoking Camels, chomping on melon seeds and betting. Gambling in my flat was the same as all the boozing and drug-taking I did while at university, it was just fun, you never got the feeling that you were doing anything evil. It was all just a good laugh.

*

“Your problem is that you’re suffering from a chronic case of Peter Pan-nitis,” Mei said, “You keep acting like this perpetual Lost Boy.”

“I’m not immature,” I said, “I’m just a free spirit.”

“Irresponsible.”

“Spontaneous.”

“Unprepared.”

“Fun-loving.”

“Andy, there’s a difference between the fun that is funny - ‘ha, ha’, and the fun that is funny - ‘weird’.”

“Like what do you mean?”

“You have a distressing inability to distinguish between the brand of humour that is amusing and the type that is merely disgusting. Your ability to fart louder than is biologically necessary definitely falls into the latter category.”

Mei always treats me like I’m some toilet-trained pig. She always gives me so much stick. She’s always so superior, like she knows everything, while I know nothing. Sometimes, like now, I’d really like to have a go at her too, but I can’t, because she’s like a woman, and if I point out her faults, it just sounds sexist and condescending. But there are things I could teach her, if she could only humble herself for once and admit that I am obviously right.

Here is my list of Top 5 Lessons that Mei needs to learn:

5. ‘How To Stop Whining and Nagging’ or ‘How To Act Younger Than Your Mother’.

4. After happily and painlessly spending over a *fifty thousand* dollars on the Certificate of Entitlement, road tax, sales tax, insurance, all that just to get a car, it does not make sense to park your car half a mile from Cathay cinema so you don’t have to pay *three* dollars to enter the Central Business District.

3. You will not be emotionally crippled for life if you don't shop on the same day you receive your pay check.

2. 'How To Kill Cockroaches Silently'. Screeching and 'eeeeeeek' noises have no deleterious effects on lizards and spiders. Yes, you, even you can learn how to exterminate household pests without having to make squealing pig noises!

1. Wearing the sexy bikini swimsuit I bought you will not damage your brain cells.

But anyway, right now is probably not a good time to slag her off, because she's like my lawyer and the only person who can get me out of this mess. So I just swallow my indignation, nod at her and agree that I've been a bad boy.

"How are we going to find who framed me?" I said.

"Right, in order to draw up a list of suspects, we need to think three things." Mei stuck up her thumb. "Motive." Up came her forefinger. "Means." Finally, the index finger rose. "Opportunity." She put down her hand. "Motive first. Revenge might be a motive. Did you offend anyone? Does anyone have a grudge against you? Who hates you?"

"You know me. I'm Mr. Lovable himself." I grinned. "Who can resist my charms? Why would anyone hate me?"

"Didn't you ever offend anyone? Maybe when you were drunk?"

“No. I’m not that bad when I’m pissed. Like, I mean, I’m not the type of bloke who gets *psycho* pissed.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I’m drunk, I don’t get violent and hassle people or beat up them up or anything. I’m not a job. I just enjoy myself, puke and pass out.”

“But you often don’t remember what you’ve done when you’re drunk. Could you have done something to someone and just not remembered it?”

“That’s a really stupid question. If I can’t remember what I did when I was pissed, how can I tell you about it?”

“What I mean is...” Mei put on the tone that I’ve heard her use with stray dogs and wilting plants. “...in the past few months, can you remember *when* you were drunk? Maybe I could check up on any witnesses. Maybe they can remember you doing something that you didn’t.”

“Well you’re usually around, most of the time I’ve been really pissed. If I’m not with you, I’m usually with Eugene. Maybe you could ask him.”

“What about the punters? Did any of them have anything against you? Maybe something you said?”

I shook my head. “Most of the punters spoke Hokkein, so I hardly even talked to them.” When I arrived in Singapore, Eugene told me that I could survive by mastering the all-purpose phrase - “Is it?” (pronounced as “Izzit?” in Singlish) which could be used to express agreement or disbelief, or used as an acknowledgement that I was paying attention, just two handy words I could throw in whenever there was a awkward gap in the conversation. “I just

said 'Is it?' to the punters whenever they spoke to me. There was no way I could have pissed any of them off with something I said."

"How did you place your bets then?"

"I would tell Eugene about what bet I wanted and he'd translate for me."

Mei frowned. "Well, I guess another possible motive might be money. Who stands to profit? Would some punter make more money if the gambling took place somewhere else?"

"I really don't know. They were always talking in Hokkein. Maybe you better phone Eugene and ask him about it."

"How many punters met at your flat on Saturday?"

"About twenty."

"So you're telling me that there were about twenty gamblers, most of them with dubious backgrounds, meeting every week in your flat."

"Uh, yeah."

"And I supposed that all of them used your toilet at one point or the other."

I nodded.

"Anyone one of them could have planted the filofax," Mei said.

I could see that things were not looking good. Twenty men, most of them pretty dodgy, and I remember some of them spent a *long* time in my toilet. They all had plenty of time to plant the filofax. But I always figured that like, a man's got to do what's a man got to do, so I never made a fuss about it.

“So when can I get out of here?” I said.

“Tomorrow,” Mei said, “Maybe.”

“Why ‘maybe’?”

“Your offence is non-bailable.”

“What? You’re kidding. Even shoplifters can get bail.”

Mei shrugged.

“You mean I’ll be stuck in here till my trial starts?”

“The magistrate will usually grant bail if you apply for it.”

“What? So you mean I *can* go?”

“Not until maybe tomorrow. The sub courts don’t open till then.” Mei paused. “And that’s if you can find a bailor.”

“What do you mean ‘if’? You’re going to bail me out aren’t you?”

“We’ll see.”

“You’re not going to leave me here! You can’t!”

“It depends on how much bail is. Maybe I can’t afford it.”

“Look, I swear I won’t do a runner. You can trust me.”

“Since when?”

I searched my memory for a precedent, but found none. “What if I don’t get bail?”

“You’ll be remanded in custody until the trial starts.”

“For how long?”

“A couple of weeks.”

“No way. I’m innocent. Why should I stay in jail for yonks for something I didn’t do? I have a life to get on with. Responsibilities to take care of.”

Mei made a lip-farting noise. “Like what? Playing level 3.11 in ‘Doom’ for the eight hundredth time?”

“No. For one thing, there is no level 3.11 in ‘Doom’. And another - answer me this - if I’m in jail, who’s going to take the kids to Fort Canning?”

“I’m sure they’ll survive the disappointment.”

“You are so mean to me. I don’t think I want to go out with you anymore.”

“Thank God. Another prayer answered.”

I stared at her for a while to see whether she was serious or not. I couldn’t tell. “You can’t expect me to sit here, doing nothing.”

“You *can* do something very useful while you’re here.”

“Like what?”

“Thinking - now that might be a nice activity that you might consider picking up.”

“What do you mean?”

“You never think about anything before you do it. Andy, I know you think you’ve been framed, but the way you’ve acted ever since you arrived in Singapore, the way you’ve acted all your life, you were just asking for it. When bad things happen to you, it doesn’t ‘just happen’. You have to re-think your life, because at the moment, you’re trapped in this cycle

of destruction. You're going nowhere, just wandering around in this circle of chaos. I mean, so what if you're acquitted? If you don't change your basic ways, you're just going get into trouble again. Things will never change. And you won't always have someone like me or Eugene to help wipe up after you."

"But what's wrong with my life?"

"You'll have plenty of time to think about that now," Mei got up to leave. "As for me, I have about twenty suspects to investigate. Enough of this idle chat, I have to go."

*

The English Premiership is huge in Asia. Believe me, you have *no idea* how big it is. 'Manchester United' ('The Official Magazine Of The Double Double Winners') sells fifteen thousand copies in Singapore and Malaysia alone. The magazine is so popular, they've even got some bloke to translate it into Thai, and this special edition attracts an amazing twenty thousand readers, month in, month out. If it wasn't for football, England might as well not exist. Mention major cities like Durham, Birmingham, Dover, Bristol and York, and all you'll get is a blank stare. Mention Chelsea, and it's like Christmas - faces light up with epiphanic recognition, grins flash around the room and voices chime in a single chorus - "Ah, Gullit!" Okay, okay, so Chelsea's fame in South East Asia is due to a Dutchman, but that's the nature of the game these days.

I don't know why English soccer is so big here. Though the Brazilians are world champions, and Italy arguably has the best league in the world, Singaporeans only have eyes for the teams in England. Why? Why do they idolise players who couldn't even qualify for the last World Cup Finals?

Traditionally, in England, you support your local club. Football clubs are rooted in the community, so when the team wins a match, the whole city celebrates. Just look at the names of the clubs - Newcastle, Liverpool, Manchester City etc. (The only exception to the rule is Tottenham Hotspur, of course. I've been involved in *way* too many conversations with Singaporeans, trying to explain to them why Spurs don't play at Tottenham Court Road). Okay, okay I know that it's changing nowadays, as evident by the obscene number of Man U fans located miles outside of Manchester, in bourgeoisie southern outposts like Surrey. But the fact that Man U fans in Putney get stick for supporting Fergie's babes is evidence that there is still a widespread, deep-rooted belief that you should support the football club nearest to your home. London-based fans of the Red Devils often get taunted with the fact that they can't be real fans because they don't even *live* in Manchester - they're just 'jumping on the United bandwagon'. I guess it's this whole British thing about 'loyalty'. Local supporters are supposedly more faithful. Though the sky be pissing down, though the Wagon Wheels be stale, though the home side gets thwacked time and time again, the local fans will always be there, enduring the agony of defeat through the draws and losses, the replays and the play-offs. Soccer, for the football fanatic, has nothing to do the quality of the game. Their local team might only score goals from accidental deflections off the butt, but the fans will still pay over fifteen quid to watch those gaffs, simply because it's *their* team. In fact, technically, their love for their team has nothing to do with soccer, but everything to do with these huge, abstract values - fidelity, passion, love.

Fans in the Far East are no less obsessive. I don't know why. They put their money where their heart is, and they sure have a lot of money. When the police read out the bets from the filofax to me, going through a list of five, six figure sums, I knew they weren't bluffing. Five figures is a pretty average bet for a big Premiership match. The punters in my flat were always taking the piss out of me for only placing four figures at a shot, and I knew

that if I couldn't prove that I wasn't responsible for co-ordinating those bets, my sentence was going to be as large as those numbers typed in that filofax.

Chapter Seven

ANDY

Following Mei's suggestion, I decided to compare the Saturday I just had in Singapore with the Saturday I had in England a year ago, to see if I could spot any patterns that would expose my supposed cycle of chaos.

Saturday (Last Year)	Saturday (This Year)
<p>Fallensham</p> <p><u>Late, late morning.</u></p> <p>Wake up in time to catch the closing credits for the 'X-men' on "Live and Kicking!"</p> <p>Annoyed with yourself for waking up too late, because you fancy Rogue, who is one of the cartoon characters (like Jessica Rabbit) who you find extremely snuggable. Resort to satisfying yourself by having perverted daydreams about children TV presenter,</p>	<p>Singapore</p> <p><u>Late, late morning.</u></p> <p>Wake up. Switch on TV. RTM, the Malaysian TV channel is unbelievably bad. They're running clips of flowers, with Richard Clayderman playing lounge lizard music in the background. It makes you fall asleep again.</p>

Emma Forbes:

Scene: Inside a personal limo

Emma (naked): Don't worry about messing up my hair and make-up. My personal hairdresser and make-up artist is waiting for me at the BBC studios. Oh Andy, take me now! I've always wanted to make love to an England International striker.

Afternoon.

Remember it is Eugene's birthday. Because he has been so consistently nice to you, you decide to do something nice back, like buy him a cool gift. Mention casually to Eugene that you are going down to the city center and did he want anything in particular?

"We're out of milk," Eugene says. You decide to buy him a chocolate cake. You go to the bus-stop at three o'clock, but the bus does not arrive until half past three. You arrive at the city center at four, wander around

Afternoon.

Remember that Mei has just been promoted. Because she has been so consistently nice to you, you decide to do something nice back, like buy her a cool gift. Ring Mei up and mention casually that you

looking for a cake shop, but somehow, manage to get *completely* lost and end up at the train station. By the time you find a cake shop, it is five o'clock - the shop has closed. The only shop that is open is the newsagents cum off-license cum video shop, where you buy Eugene a birthday card. You have enough money to buy a Terry's Chocolate Orange, but then you remember that you haven't bought your Saturday quota of lottery tickets yet. You are convinced that if you *don't* buy your usual numbers today, this is the day they will win three quidzillion pounds and you will kill yourself. So you buy the lottery ticket. You feel a bit guilty, but you make a mental note to share the money with Eugene if you win the rolled over jackpot.

Evening.

Lottery results come out - you do not win anything. Sadness. Give birthday card to Eugene. "Where's the milk?" Eugene asks.

are going down to the city center, and did she want anything in particular? "I'm running out of shampoo," Mei says. You go to the bus-stop at three o'clock, but the bus does not arrive until half past three. Three No. 56 buses arrive at the same time, one behind another. You are getting used to this in Singapore. Though the buses are scheduled to appear every fifteen minutes, often, due to bad traffic conditions and poor logistical planning, they appear only every hour, en masse, one behind another. You hop on the bus. At four, you realise that you have taken the bus in the wrong direction, because you are now at the Pasir Ris Interchange, which is at the *completely* wrong end of the country. By the time you manage to get the right bus to Orchard Road, it is five o'clock. You are gripped with a delirious joy when you remember that unlike England, the shops here don't close until ten in the evening. You are saved! You love this country. Being a British citizen in a foreign country, you decide to expand your shopping horizons by going to new exotic shops in Takashimaya to

	<p>look for shampoo. You find nothing exotic there, so you retreat to the familiar and go to the ubiquitous Marks and Spencers. There, you are over-loaded with choice, there are eighty different types of shampoo. Unbelievable. You realise that there are many questions that need to be answered before you can make a purchase - does Mei need extra shine, or extra body? Is her hair easily damaged? How frequently does she wash her hair? You ring Mei up, but she says that she's at a meeting and does not have time to talk about her hair. So you buy her the diet chocolate bars instead.</p> <p><u>Evening.</u></p> <p>You decide to be a good Christian and not have any of the punters around to gamble tonight. You get arrested.</p>
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Five lessons I learnt from the above exercise, in ascending order of importance:

5. I have a vivid, but rather disturbing, imagination.

4. I am crap at shopping.

3. I get lost easily, I am, as they say, 'directionally-challenged'.

2. When I get lost, I get confused. When I get confused, I do stupid things. (Refer back to lesson number 3) This might explain why I'm often into trouble.

1. I am not a bad person, but bad things just seem to happen around me.

I want to do nice things for people, but it never seems to work out. They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I am full of good intentions.

Chapter Eight

Day Two: Monday morning

MEI

I unlocked my drawer and took out the title deed to the flat.

“Where are you taking that?” my mother said.

“To court.” I put the deed in my briefcase.

“What for?”

“Business.” I snapped my bag shut and brushed past her. “I got to hurry. The place shuts for lunch at twelve thirty. If I don’t make it before then, I’ll have to wait until quarter past two.”

My mother grabbed my bag. “You can’t take that.”

“Why?”

“You give away the flat, where am I going to live? I know what you’re up to. You can’t take the flat from me. I homeless, how? You want me to sleep in the drain?”

“Nobody is going to be sleeping in any drains. Why you always get hysterical for nothing?”

“Nothing? This is not nothing. You want to take the flat away from me and you say it’s nothing.

“I - am - not - taking - the - flat - away - from - you,” I said. “You understand English or not?” I repeated the same thing in Mandarin.

“Then you take the title deed for what?”

“This morning I went down to the sub courts to get bail for Andy. The judge granted it, I’m going back to the courts to deposit the security. I need something to prove that I have the means to provide security for Andy, like share certificates, title deeds, jewellery...”

“I’m not giving you any of my jewellery.”

“I’m not asking for your jewellery. I’m not taking anything away from you. Why you go crazy for nothing? You act like I’m selling the flat or something. All I’m going to do is take the title deed and deposit with the court. As security. After Andy’s trial is over, I’ll get back the title deed. It won’t affect us at all. You can still live in the flat, do what you like as usual. Why you make a big deal out of nothing?”

“But if Andy run away, then how?”

“He won’t.”

“But if he does, then how? Will we lose the flat?”

“Maybe. But that’s really unlikely.”

“Why you want to use our flat? So risky. Why can’t you use your own money? You got so much in POSB, why you don’t use instead?”

“Very troublesome. If I use my POSB account as security, that means I can’t use my ATM card to draw money. And I’ll have to cancel all my giro payments.”

“What kind of excuse is that?”

I didn't want to tell my mother this, but I guess I had to. “Anyway I can't use my POSB account. It doesn't have enough money to cover Andy's bail.”

“What? But you got so much money,” my mother said. Even though I only just started my career, just because I am a lawyer, my mother thinks I have giga-zillions stashed away in some Swiss account.

“What did Andy do? Was it so terrible? Why the judge set the bail until so high?”

“Andy's foreign.”

“The judge afraid Andy will run away?”

“Andy won't run away.”

“Why not? He got no reason to stay in Singapore. He got no family here. If I were him, I'd run away.

I looked at my watch. “Let go of me. I'm late, I don't have so much time to argue with you.”

“You can't take the deed.”

“Yes I can. This flat belongs to me and I can do whatever I want with it.” I took out the title deed and jabbed at it. “Look - my name. It's written here in black and white. It's mine.”

“Just because your father left it to you, doesn't mean the flat isn't mine too.” My father left everything in his will to me, instructing me to take care of my mother, as she was absolutely terrible with her finances. “Your father gave me nothing when he died. Where got any other wife like that?”

I rolled my eyes.

“All my other friends, all get richer and richer,” my mother said, “They got progress. Last time they live in one-room HDB flat, then move to HUDC, now many of them live in landed property, got their own garden! But me? My life never get better. I born that time - got nothing; get married - still nothing; I die that time, you know what I will get?”

“What are you talking about? You have everything. The flat’s under my name, but you always act like the flat’s yours anyway. All the decor in the flat - it’s all done by you. You think I *like* pink walls?” I made a face. “But I let you do whatever you want with the flat.”

“You say only. I want to do *feng shui* but you don’t let me.”

“That’s different. That’s just a waste of money.”

“Everything I do also waste of money right?”

“You think it’s so great to have all the money? You want Daddy’s money? Go ahead, take it. Then you can take charge of all the business - pay the bills, do the taxes - and I can relax. Why do you think Daddy left all the money to me? Tell me - the water bill - do you know how pay that?”

My mother didn’t say anything.

“No?” I said, “You don’t even know how to pay the PUB. You only want money so you can buy this, buy that. Money is not just for spending. It’s a great responsibility. You know what would have happened if Daddy gave you the money?”

“What?”

“You would have lost it. You would have given everything to the temple priest.”

My mother shook her head. “I’m always very careful with my money.”

“What about the time you tried to buy that ‘magic’ stone from him? Ten thousand dollars to cure your rheumatism.”

“In the end I still didn’t buy.”

“Only because I wouldn’t give you the money.”

“You never give me money for anything.”

“Why do you always talk like I’m depriving you? You have food, clothing, a roof over your head. And what do you do? Nothing. You don’t work. You don’t do anything. You just sit at home and shake leg, play mahjong all day and sing karaoke all night. You even have a maid to cook and clean for you. Why do you keep complaining that you have no money? What do you need it for? I take care of everything for you.”

“Last time, your father also said that.”

“Oh forget it.” I turned to leave. Then I stopped, and said, “You think I care about all the money Daddy left me? I don’t need it. I’m making enough on my salary. Daddy’s money is all for you. I take charge of the money to protect you, make sure you don’t waste it, make sure you got enough to last you until you die.”

“You really want to *protect* me than you don’t take away the deed.”

“I really need the title deed. If not, I can’t bail Andy out,” I put down my briefcase.

“But if you’re really worried about the flat, I won’t use it, okay?”

My mother took the deed from my brief case, went to her room and locked the door.

Eugene answered the phone with a fancy BBC English accent - "Hello, this is the Lee residence, Eugene Lee speaking," but once he recognised my voice, he slipped back into Singlish - "*Wah leow* woman, you know what time it is now? We're not living in the same time zone anymore. Why you call me so late?"

"Andy was arrested last night."

"Hah, what?"

"For being the head of a soccer gambling syndicate."

"Wha-what? Andy can't even buy *milk* without getting lost, how can he run a syndicate? No. It can't be. What about the other punters? Did anyone else get arrested?"

"No."

"Can I do anything?"

"I need money for Andy's bail." I told him how much I needed.

"Ouch. I want to help, but I got no money in Singapore."

"You can transfer some to a local account."

"It's, uh, a lot of money. What if he jumps bail?"

"He won't."

"Erm, this is *Andy* we're talking about. Whenever there's a problem, he runs."

"We can't just leave him in jail."

"Can I do anything else?"

“Forget it.”

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“I can’t get bail for you,” I said, “Sorry. Not enough money.”

“What am I going to do?” Andy said.

“Are you going to plead guilty or claim trial?”

“I’m innocent.”

“It’s your word against the police’s. Why should the judge believe a bookie?” Mei said, “These are the facts. The police have been watching your flat for the past couple of months. They know you’ve been using it as a betting house. The only thing they needed was some written proof, something to link you with all the bookies. And now they’ve got it.”

“The filofax.”

“Exactly. I’ll be honest. If we go to trial, we *will* lose.”

“But don’t you believe in God?” Andy said, “I mean, I know things look bad, but if I plead not guilty, I’m sure we’ll win. God won’t let me go to jail, not after I’ve become a Christian. I can’t believe that the first thing that’s going to happen to me after I’ve turned to Him is to go to jail. You can’t believe that He’ll let a thing like that happen to me. He won’t let me take the fall for something I didn’t do.”

“Let me tell you what I believe. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe he died for my sins and rose from the dead. I believe that he justifies the righteous and punishes the wicked. What I believe about the judicial system in Singapore is a different matter entirely.” I looked

around the police station. "And I intend to keep my opinions to myself, because my thoughts on the law might get me arrested under the Internal Security Act. Right now, I don't know how God figures in all this. What I do know, I'm telling you. I know that as things stand, there is no way you will be acquitted. All God requires to acquit you in the heavenly court is to look into your heart. That's the way God runs things up in the sky, but the judge down here requires more than your word. And that's all we have at the moment. Unless we can find out who framed you, unless we have concrete evidence - if not, as your lawyer, I'd have to advise you to plead 'guilty'."

"I'm sure the jury can see that I'm innocent."

"We don't have juries."

"What? Why not?"

"It's a Western idiosyncrasy," I said, "The judge is the one who decides your fate. Him and him alone. We'll be going before District Judge Philip Ng. He sentenced four people to death last year. He could jail you for parking on a double-yellow line, and feel that he's doing society a favour. If we lose, you're looking at three to five years in prison."

"What should I do?"

"If you plead guilty, I could do a good job in mitigation. Maybe if I do a lot of grovelling and snivelling on your behalf, who knows? You might get off with just a few months in jail."

"What are you going to say?"

"I'll probably play the 'innocent abroad' card. But you can use anything. You could say you were born prematurely. It worked for Michael Fay, it got him a few less strokes of the cane. Anything goes."

“Five years versus a few months. That’s a big difference. But I’m innocent.”

“It’s up to you. What do you want to do?”

Chapter Nine

ANDY

The first time I laid eyes on Eugene, he was like having this weird conversation on his mobile - "How am I? Can do, lah. Classes haven't started yet so I'm very *eng*, just sit in my room and shake leg and eat *waffelstroop*... *Ja, lekker*." When he saw me, he jerked out of his seat, and said, "Uh, someone's here. Bye". He fumbled the phone shut and hid it behind his back. "Hi. I'm Eugene. I'm your room mate. Unless you don't want to live with me. I...I won't mind if you want to change..." He punctuated every phrase with a violent nod, hoping (I guess) that I would nod along with him in room-mate-ish affirmation. I didn't think anyone could be more nervous about the first day at university than me, but here he was, right before my eyes, the poster boy for Neurotics Anonymous.

"Hey, no problem, you're cool," I said. Then I nodded a lot. That seemed to pacify him. "Who were you talking to?"

"My parents."

"What language were you speaking?"

"English. And Hokkein. And Dutch."

"In the same sentence? Wow."

"I've been...around." Eugene took out his mobile from behind him. "You don't mind this, do you?"

I shook my head.

“I know it annoys some people. They think you’re showing off or something. Like I...I was on the train and my phone rang and this lady just *looked* at me. I started talking to my parents and she just kept looking at me and I...I...I got so scared, I couldn’t talk anymore.” Eugene breathed deeply to calm himself. “Where I come from - Singapore - we use mobiles all the time. It’s really normal.”

“I didn’t think you were trying to be flash.”

Eugene jumped and pointed to the ceiling. “I installed a carbon monoxide detector. Don’t you think that’s a good idea?”

“I guess so.”

“You can’t be too careful about these student digs. We have to check it every day. If it goes blue, we will too.”

We stared at each other for a while.

Awkward moment.

I asked him the usual Fresher’s FAQs to break the quiet - we exchanged ‘A’ level results and course details. When Eugene found out that I was doing English and Philosophy, he asked me about God and evil. He said that he knew someone who, literally, got away with murder. “You know, why does a good God let good people suffer? Huh? Why doesn’t he, like, kill bad people?”

I shrugged. “How would I know? I can’t even figure out how to use the microwave in the kitchen.”

“But you’re doing philosophy. Don’t you think about good and evil - stuff like that?”

“I’m more into epistemology. Stuff like, ‘Who am I? What am I doing here? Is this really happening to me, or am I dreaming?’ I think about things like that, usually after I’ve done a lot of drugs.”

Eugene laughed.

I was like - *ting!* - roll the canned laughter, flash the ‘Applause’ sign - I said something right. I finally got him to calm down.

I asked Eugene why he decided to come to Fallensham.

“Well, like the university has a really *progressive* education program. Lots of emphasis on real life case studies, and...and...’the flexibility of the modular system gives you the freedom to explore specialist interests without sacrificing core subjects.” Eugene nodded. “I remember that from the prospectus.”

I was impressed. Eugene really *researched* this place. I chose Fallensham because it was the university in the UCCA handbook that was closest to my football club.

However, Eugene would rather have gone to Oxford. He got a conditional offer, but screwed up his maths exam. He put the decimal point in the wrong place on his binomial theorem question. That’s so typical. Eugene puts one decimal point, one tiny black dot in the wrong place, and that completely alters the rest of his life. Most of the other first time conversations with freshers in my corridor were depressing in this kind of way. They spent their time exchanging lists of universities they would rather have gone to if they hadn’t messed up their ‘A’ levels or their interviews.

Tonight, I had only one plan in mind - go to my first Fresher's disco and pull. The disco was having this 'Traffic Light' theme, like wear red if you were unavailable, orange if you were open to propositions, and green if you were like - go! go! go! In particular, I was eyeing Clare. To make sure that she got the message, I drew a traffic sign on my T-shirt that said, "Park and Ride".

Now I know that a lot of guys are like - 'huugh let's get really pissed tonight', but I'm not like that at all. You might find this hard to believe but I don't ever plan to get drunk. It just happens.

I mean, like take the night of the Traffic Light disco. I know that a sure way to get pissed is to drink on an empty stomach. I did try to eat dinner beforehand, honestly I did. But this was like my first time in the kitchen, and I didn't even know how to switch on the stove. The only other people in the kitchen were the girls, and I didn't dare to ask them how to operate the stove in case they got the impression that I was some useless eighteen year old who's never cooked or cleaned in his entire life and is completely reliant on his mother. That described me perfectly, but that's not the point. So I tried opening a can of baked beans, only I didn't know how to use the can opener. I kept turning and turning the can opener but it just nudged the lid downwards, it wouldn't actually *open* the damn thing. I mean, like they should call those contraptions can nudgers, rather than can openers. So I thought, oh sod it, I'll just have to cook the beans in the container. So I put the can in the microwave, and it's like one of these really advanced machines. I stabbed all the buttons in sight, and all these numbers came up, they flashed, some in red, some in yellow. I kept pushing the buttons randomly, but all that happens is that the symbols on the display changed and the machine went beep! and boop! and I basically didn't know what the hell I'm was doing. But I persevered, I refused to succumb to the tyranny of this white box from

hell, and I pushed more buttons and the machine suddenly went - eeeeeeeenh! - and the yellow light blinked and the can started to rotate round the microwave and I'm was like "Yes! Victory is Mine!"

Someone screamed. It was Clare. She got all hysterical about me putting metal into the microwave, like what's the big deal? Anyway, she stopped me from cooking my baked beans.

So the only alternative left was toast, and I thought - I can handle that, like I *have* toasted my own bread while living with my parents. So I put the bread in the toaster, and this tiny, and I emphasise *tiny*, like minute, insignificant, barely discernible, wisp of smoke rose to the ceiling, and set off the fire alarm. It blasted the whole corridor with noise, and I decided that now would be a good time to make a quick, sharp exit.

So basically I didn't get to eat anything all night, which was what made me really drunk later on, but as you see, it wasn't my fault. I did try my best to eat something before I drank.

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The L.C.R. disco is probably one of the most anti-social social events ever invented. It's completely dark so you can't see anyone, with music so loud so you can't hear or speak to anyone. All I did all night was stand in the dark and feel the music beating me to death. The music was so loud I could feel it, the floor vibrated with the thumps, beats bouncing off the ground, smashing into my feet. The bass went duh, duh, duh, slamming against my chest, the physicality of sound, the music hit me in blocks, and I wondered, like why the hell

did I actually pay to do this? I could like, get the same effect in my room by turning on the stereo at full blast, switching off the lights, pouring beer on my carpet and puking, and I could do all of that for free. But here I was, standing on a damp piss patch on the carpet, and I thought - I can't believe I actually paid three quid to do this. Usually, if you have your mates around you, it makes the whole process bearable. But the worst thing was that it was Fresher's week, the first week at university, and I didn't know anyone.

Then I saw Clare and went up and offered her a fag. I followed up with some Fresher's FAQs, then Clare asked me, "What sort of music do you listen to?" And I thought hard about my answer, because I really wanted to pull. At this stage of the evening, I was willing to get into the knickers of anything that wouldn't give me a rash. So after much deliberation, I said, "My taste is fairly eclectic. Indie, funk, New Age, R & B, jungle, swing, rock - though I hesitate to use the term 'rock' because it has like, become a generic term for chart music that includes such a wide range of artists so that it has lost its ability to define musical boundaries." Clare just nodded and refused the offer of another fag. Then she gave me the classic brush-off, waving cheerfully at some imaginary friend at the other side of the room, and said, "Right, luv, I've got to go."

So there was no one that I could talk to, and no one who seemed interested in talking to me. So I stood there in the dark all night, panicking, thinking - I'm never going to make any friends, I'm going to be alone forever, I'm going to die a virgin in a council flat, and it'll be five months before the neighbours notice the smell of decomposition coming out from the cat flap. So I just drank and drank and drank.

What *really* happened after I staggered out of the L.C.R. I'll never know. My recollection of the events that evening are hazy at the best. I can't confirm any of this, I only know this through the testimony of others, but I supposedly went to the loo and tried to turn the faucet off with my head. I also allegedly puked at every other lamp post, like a dog marking his territory, before finally managing to navigate my way back to the halls of residence. Sometimes I think my mates are just taking the piss out of me, like I never did any of those things, but I can't remember whether I did it or not. One thing which people claimed that I did, which I definitely think I did not do, was to throw pebbles at Clare's window and shout - "Oi! Fancy a shag? No. What about a tongue sarnie then?" Like I know I'm bad, but I'm not *that* crass. You believe me, don't you? I guess this supposed 'request for a little something' incident might explain Clare's rather cool attitude towards me throughout the Autumn term. But I always think that it's got nothing to do with that, maybe Clare was just so traumatised by me putting the can in the microwave that she couldn't speak to me for weeks.

Naturally, when I got back to my block, I was starving. It's really funny when I'm drunk, like I start believing that I have talents that I don't possess when I'm sober. Like when I'm drunk, I *know* that I can't even walk in a straight line, but for some reason, I suddenly think that I can really cook. And I also suddenly think that I can really sing. Like whenever I'm really pissed, I'm like Luther Vandross meets Delia Smith. I walked into our communal kitchen, and there was no lock on the fridge. I was like - hah, the fools! - like they were just *asking* for the food to be stolen. So I raided the fridge and started dumping everything in the frying pan - Findus crispy pancakes, fish fingers, eggs, mushrooms, 'Chicken Tonight' sauce, peanut butter, sausage rolls - and all the time doing an imaginary, but very loud "Endless Love" duet with Mariah Carey. Then one of my neighbours started shouting at me, like "Oi! What are you doing with my pancakes?" and wrestled me from the frying pan. I was too pissed to fight him off, so I just staggered to my room to get some of my own food. The only

problem was like, I couldn't open my door. Like I knew where the keyhole was, but though I kept jabbing my key at it, it wouldn't go in. The keyhole was about a millimetre long and wide, and my hand-brain-eye co-ordination was shot to hell, so I just stood there, stabbing my key randomly into the door. I kept swearing and squeaking - 'I can't get my key in, I can't get my key in', the pitch of my voice getting higher and higher. I was like, my life is over. Then the drugs I took really started to kick in, and set off this panic attack and I was thinking, oh my God, I'm going to die. Like all the things I need for survival, like my bed, my stereo, my cashpoint/Switch/Visa card, my jumbo economy packs of 'Snickers', they were all in my room, and I couldn't get in my room. Worse still, nobody was helping me, but all the people in the corridor were just standing there, pointing, *laughing* at me - "Look at him, he's so pissed, he's *crying*." My first night in college and I was homeless, starving, penniless, and the only people I knew were standing around me, laughing. Then someone prised my room key out of my hand, threw it down the corridor, and said, "Go boy, fetch! That'll teach you to steal my pancakes."

I crumpled to the floor.

"Hey - yeah - like - leave him alone." It was Eugene. He picked up the key and opened my door. Then he carried me in, and laid me on the bed. He tucked my palm under my butt and turned me to the side, putting me in the recovery position, so that in case I threw up, I wouldn't drown on my own vomit. He stayed up, watching me, until I fell asleep.

They say that friends you meet in the first day at university, you stay with for the rest of your three years. And they say that the best mates you have in college, usually stay your best mates for life. In Week 0, Fresher's Week, because of what Eugene did for me that night, he became one of those friends.

Chapter Ten

Day Three: Tuesday Morning

ANDY

“Bangon!” the Chinese policeman shouted, and waved his hand at me to stand at attention. It was so weird. Why did he shout the instructions in Malay? Everything else in the court took place in English.

Mei entered a plea of ‘guilty’. She started mitigation by making the usual noises about me saving the court valuable time and money by not claiming trial, then continued, “My client, being foreign, was unaware of the severity of the crime. To him, he was just letting a few friends meet in his flat to bet on soccer. Back in England, where he came from, this activity is of course, legal. My client did not know that he was even committing a crime.”

“Are you going to continue this line of argument?” the judge said, “because if you are, I’ll have to reject your whole plea. According to this, your client master-minded all the bets. Are you denying this?”

“Nobody master-minded anything. This is just a case of a few friends meeting casually to bet on a game.”

“What about the filofax? It lists all the bets your clients co-ordinated.”

“The filofax is just a record. There’s no reason to suspect that it belongs to my client. It was probably dropped by one of his friends.”

The judge shook his head. "That's not what it says here." He tapped at a piece of paper on his desk. "According to this, the accused allegedly masterminded all the bets. He kept his records in the filofax. But you tell me he wasn't involved in the actual betting. He only let the bookies use his flat. From your mitigation, the argument is a clear disqualification of your plea. I'd advise you to think before proceeding."

Mei looked at me. I didn't know what the hell was going on, so I just spread my hands.

"Could I request for an adjournment while I discuss the matter with the accused?"

Mei asked the judge.

The judge looked at Mei like she had sheep entrails for brains. "Court is adjourned until two-thirty," he said.

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"The judge wants you to concede that you masterminded the whole gambling thing," Mei said.

"But I didn't do it," I said.

"If you don't concede, he'll throw out your plea. You'll have to go to trial. And we know what will happen then."

"What?"

"You'll lose."

"What if I concede? What kind of sentence will I get?"

“I don’t know. Maybe a year or more.”

“A year! No way. I am not pleading guilty.”

“But you’ve already pleaded guilty. If we change the plea now, when we go to trial, it’ll look bad.”

“But I can’t plead guilty now. My only decent excuse was sheer ignorance. And if I can’t say that, then we have...nothing. I don’t even have the excuse of premature birth. This is all your fault. Why couldn’t you see this coming?”

“It seemed like the best thing to do at the time.”

“How could you be so....” I shut my mouth before I uttered the word ‘stupid’.

“I’ve never done this type of case before. You called me, I didn’t call you. You can always hire another lawyer. What do you want to do?”

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When we returned to court, Mei said, “Your Honour, my client would like to withdraw his plea of ‘guilty’ and claim trial.”

The judge nodded. “I’ll set the trial a week from today.”

