The World and Everything in It

By Shaun Tan

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To my mother and my koong koong.

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Contents

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Note: In Asian usage, the terms "Uncle" and "Aunty" do not necessarily denote a familial relation, but are used towards older men or women, usually of one's parents' generation or older.

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Prologue: Empire's End

Hong Kong, 30th June 1997, around midnight

Rain, the kind that lingers in the air long after it has fallen, muting sounds and blurring sight, scattering and smudging every pinprick of light as if all the colors of the washed-out world are bleeding into each other.

The wind blows in from the sea and three men stand high on the balcony of a building at night. The beehive of the Prince of Wales Building below glows like a clouded lantern. To the right, the new Convention and Exhibition Centre perches like a chrome pelican on the harbor's inky waters.

Inside the apartment, a screen flashes and "God Save the Queen" plays ponderously as two blue flags are slowly lowered. A minute later, two red flags are raised. Slowly, slowly they climb to the top of their poles and billow in an artificial breeze. A different song plays. A marching song. A triumphant song.

The first man presses a button and the screen winks off.

"The farewell ceremony was better," he says.

The second man, younger, all American impatience and knotted muscle, shifts. "Indeed?" he says.

"Indeed," says the first man in a voice as rich as his tailored suit. ""Nimrod" playing. The flags waving in the wind as they were lowered one last time – *real* wind – not that artificial rubbish they had just now. A rifle salute. "Auld Lang Syne" on bagpipes. Yes…there were bagpipes. It brought tears to my eyes."

The second man turns, the cords in his taut athletic body rippling beneath his grey T-shirt. His grey eyes flicker beneath a head of sandy short-cropped hair. On a finger on his right hand gleams a large gold ring with a red stone at its heart. He sniffs. "I thought bankers aren't supposed to be sentimental."

"We're not," the first man waves expansively. "But my dear fellow, try to appreciate the significance. The Union Jack finally lowered on our last colony. The last great British imperial moment. The end of empire. And the end to much more than that too, perhaps." The first man sighs heavily. "You could not be human – and British – and watch that and not weep."

Silence for a while.

"It rained then, too," says the second man.

"Perhaps the gods were weeping," says the first.

The third man speaks for the first time. "Tears of joy, I wonder, or of grief?"

The first man sighs again and reaches for a paper box. He extracts an egg tart from inside and offers the rest to his companions. The third man takes one.

The second man waves the box away.

The first man shrugs. "Your loss."

"Too sweet."

"No they're not."

"Maybe they're an acquired taste."

"Maybe," says the first man. He takes a mouthful of egg tart, the sides of the pastry crumbling into his short white beard. "If you don't like them," he says, chewing, "go acquire some taste."

The second man doesn't reply, but the garnet on his ring flashes like an angry red eye.

The first man finishes his egg tart. He eats another. "I'll miss these," he says, patting the pockets of his suit jacket and pulling out a satin handkerchief. He dabs the crumbs from his beard, then uses it to wipe oily fingers. He too wears a ring, a gold signet ring imprinted with a coat of arms. He looks at the third man. "You're very quiet tonight, my boy."

The third man, the youngest of the three, leans against the railing. A breeze caresses his wavy black hair and leafs through the fabric of his white shirt. His sharp oriental features draw into a tight smile. "What this city represented," he says, "What it could still represent-"

"Put that out of your mind," says the second man. "What is that to what we'll accomplish?"

"Not I," says the first man, "I'm too old."

The second man ignores him. "An end to brutishness, and needless violence and conflict and foolishness. Something the world has never seen."

"I've heard *that* before," drawls the first man. "People *always* say that. But there's always brutishness, there's always needless violence, and conflict." He pauses. "And there are always fools."

"When Athens fell to Philip of Macedon and was subsumed into his empire," says the third man before the second man can retort, "was that not cause for regret?"

"Not for Droysen," the first man points out.

The third man considers this. "True," he concedes. His eyes sense motion below. "They're leaving now." He gestures toward the Tamar site where several black cars pull up. Out of the cars emerge figures: men in dark suits and white military uniforms, women in clothes of gold and blue and cream and teal.

The three men on the balcony watch as the figures from the cars make their way towards the end of the dock where the royal yacht *Britannia* is moored. Crowds of well-wishers line their path. A band plays a slow, somber tune. The figures seem sad to leave. They walk with meandering reluctance, stopping to exchange hugs with some, and to wave to others, who wave wanly back.

Finally, the figures climb into *Britannia*. The last to board is a portly man, and as he walks heavily across the gangplank he turns around and gives a final wave (and here the first man on the balcony raises an egg tart in silent toast). With that the band picks up a jaunty tune and *Britannia* slips her moorings and drifts into the open sea, a fleet of smaller vessels coalescing around it like a shoal of fish.

The men on the balcony watch until the lights of the yacht are specks in the distance.

The first man heaves one final sigh. "So," he says, "it ends."

"No," says the second man. "So it begins."

The first man rolls his eyes but holds his tongue.

"Come," says the second man, gesturing inside. "We could use a drink."

"In that," says the first man, following him, "you are correct."

The third man stays on the balcony looking at the sea.

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Part One: Noble Houses

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Characters

In Singapore

The House McAffrey

John McAffrey

Samantha McAffrey, his wife

Their children: Louisa McAffrey, James McAffrey

Mei, their maid

Students at Raffles Institution: Guan Zhen, Maulik Mittal

In Kuala Lumpur

The House of Chan

Tan Sri Vincent Chan

Cassandra Chan, his wife (deceased)

Nathaniel Chan, their son

Puan Sri Ruby Chan, Vincent's second wife

Their children: Huan Chan, Suzen Chan

Their maids: Marian, Rose, Yati

Zul, their driver

Dato' Chan Kin Loy, Vincent's brother

Jian Chan, his son

Dato' Chan Tock Seng, Vincent's brother

Dato' Daniel Chan, Vincent's brother

Datin Charlene Chan, his wife

The House of Lim

Tan Sri Lim Jit Meng

Puan Sri Cecilia Lim, his wife

Their children: Kenneth Lim, Melissa Lim, Spencer Lim

At Lake International School:

Mr Haynes, the principal

Ms Patwardhan, a Malay teacher

Students: Amanda, Ashraf, Cady, Chantel, Durvesh, Leanne, Lucy, Nabila, Rebecca, Suet Li, Sumira, Woo Jong

In Hong Kong

The House of Cheung

William Cheung

Wendy Cheung, his wife

Their children: Dawn Cheung, Summer Cheung

Grace, their maid

Uncle Huat, their driver

Tundra, their dog

At Chinese International School:

Ms Yuk, a teacher

Students: Ada, Colin, Jasmine, Luke, Oliver, Tim, Victoria Wong

In Beijing

The House of Bao

Bao Xialai

Bao Kanglai, his wife (deceased)

Bao Guozhong, their son

Cai Rizhao, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Central Commission for Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress

Employees at the Ministry of State Security:

Dehua, Huifang

Bu Zhidao, Mayor of Shanxi Province

Fatty Hung, his "younger brother," a businessman

In Tianjin

Rong Yikang, Party Secretary of Tianjin

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A man is born; his first years go by in obscurity amid the pleasures or hardships of childhood. He grows up; then comes the beginning of manhood; finally society's gates open to welcome him; he comes into contact with his fellows. For the first time he is scrutinized and the seeds of the vices and virtues of his maturity are thought to be observed forming in him.

This is, if I am not mistaken, a singular error.

Step back in time; look closely at the child in the very arms of his mother; see the external world reflected for the first time in the yet unclear mirror of his understanding; study the first examples which strike his eyes; listen to the first words which arouse within him the slumbering power of thought; watch the first struggles which he has to undergo; only then will you comprehend the source of the prejudices, the habits, and the passions which are to rule his life.

- *Alexis de Tocqueville,* Democracy in America

The Child is father of the Man

- *William Wordsworth,* "My Heart Leaps Up"

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Chapter One

Singapore

"Look," said his mother as soon as they broke through the field of clouds, "it's our new home."

Twelve-year-old James McAffrey peered blearily out the plane window. Below he saw roads, houses, condominiums surrounded by tall trees. Didn't seem like much.

He turned. In the cubicle-seat to his right sat his sister Louisa, a year older, earphones in her ears, eyes stubbornly fixed ahead while her fingers toyed with the buttons of her iPod. His father sat behind him, scotch in one hand and the *Financial Times* in his lap. The ice in his glass tinkled with the shuddering plane.

"Look Louisa," said their mother. "Louisa, *look*!"

Louisa irritably yanked out an earphone. "I don't *want* to look. I didn't want to come here in the first place. I *liked* it in New York."

"No you didn't," James interjected, "you were always complaining about something."

"Shut up!"

"Louisa-" cried their mother.

"I want to go back home. I had *friends* there."

"Louisa," said their mother, "Louisa darling, this *is* home. Think of it as a new chapter in your life. A new adventure." Tall and slender and golden-haired, Samantha McAffrey still had all the perky exuberance of a young second wife.

"This isn't-"

"Louisa, *enough*!" said their father from behind them, his words cutting through the air.

Louisa flinched, and James watched as she forced herself into composure, sealing her rage behind a wall of ennui. Her anger was now a cold thing, brittle and sarcastic. James turned back around.

"I heard this place is like Disneyland with the death penalty," Louisa muttered.

"Well that's good, honey," replied their mother sweetly, "you like Disneyland."

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When the plane landed they disembarked first. They always disembarked first.

Travelators drew them through the terminal and Changi Airport swept past in a phantasmagoric blaze. They were conveyed. Conveyed past a black and gold Godiva store and a silver and gold Gucci. Past clusters of fat sofas that surrounded large LCD screens like flocks of sheep. Past an arcade and a cinema. Past a pond filled with shimmering koi. Past a Trojan horse built of massive beams of wood and children skating in a mini ice rink.

"Sure beats JFK, huh?" James heard his father say behind him. James nodded. He'd been to the airports of many of the great cities of the world – New York and Los Angeles, London and Paris, Melbourne and Shanghai – and yet here he gaped like a country bumpkin. Even sulky Louisa's eyes, he noticed, were beginning to linger on some of the exhibitions.

His father laughed. "You haven't seen anything yet."

They cleared customs quickly ("Much faster than at JFK," their father reminded them), and waiting for them at the arrivals hall was their driver with a placard reading "The McAffrey Family."

They cruized down East Coast Parkway towards the city. Pruned trees lined either side of the expressway, their branches spreading dendritically into the air. As they got closer, James saw buildings in the distance, the morning sunlight glancing off their angled glass. His mother spoke animatedly, pointing out landmarks and telling them the names of different places. His father sat in the passenger seat, the tap-tap of his plump fingers on keys signaling his reunion with his Blackberry after their long flight.

The driver made a right and they entered a residential area. Trees spread in profusion and they passed schools and apartments and private clubs. They came to a stop in front of a pair of forbidding black gates, their dark metal twining elegantly upwards into a shield. The driver wound down the window, James' father spoke a few words to the guard, and the gates folded away. The car rolled into the driveway, rounded a fountain, and stopped by a tall apartment building of glass, black metal, and alabaster stone. An agent in a suit awaited them at the entrance.

"Mr McAffrey," he said as they disembarked, "it's such an honor to finally meet you."

John McAffrey, the famous investor, Guru of Wall Street, Oracle of the Dot-Com Bust and the Global Financial Crisis, smiled as he shook the agent's hand. "Likewise," he said lazily. "Is everything in order?"

"Of course sir, just sign here…thank you…and here you go, these swipe cards get you inside the building, tap it again in the elevator to push the button for your unit." The agent simpered, summoning porters to carry their luggage, asking them about their

flight, informing them about the gym in the basement, the swimming pool and spa on the first floor, and the tennis court on the third.

"Do let me know if there's anything at all I can help you with," he said. "Welcome to Singapore, and I'm sure you'll love your new home."

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The elevator doors opened into the hall of their apartment. James walked around, exploring, Louisa trailing behind him. On the ground floor was a kitchen, a laundry room, and a balcony with a small swimming pool and a Jacuzzi. Up the stairs were their bedrooms and a study. The view from James' room overlooked an expanse of trees, with the towers of the city in the distance.

Hearing their father calling them, James and Louisa went back downstairs to find a small Chinese woman in her late twenties standing next to their parents.

"This is our new maid Mei *jiejie*," said John McAffrey, "she'll help you unpack. She's from China and she's been instructed to communicate with you two in Mandarin to give you extra practice. Mei, these are our children, Louisa and James."

Mei *jiejie* gave a small bow. "*Hen kaixin renshi nimen,*" she said. *It's nice to meet you.*

Their father checked his watch. "Right," he said, "you two have forty minutes to shower and get ready before we go out to explore."

"Already?!" protested James and Louisa together. "Can't we-"

"Next week the both of you'll start school. Best to hit the ground running."

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The car drove them into the city center. Blue and white ERP gantries loomed overhead. Their mother explained how the gantries worked in tandem with the device by the car's windscreen to charge motorists for using certain roads at certain times.

"Singapore is a very small place," she said, "so they need to control their traffic carefully."

"A fine city," their father drawled.

Occasionally they passed construction sites, where dark-skinned men (Bangladeshi migrant workers, apparently) labored in the afternoon heat. Some of them

operated diggers, some carried heavy equipment, some bent over pails of cement. They wore yellow safety helmets and gumboots, and the sun glared off their luminous vests.

The car turned a corner. "This is our first stop," said their father, stepping from the car, "Orchard Road."

They stepped out into a great boulevard lined with shopping malls. Rows of tall angsana trees flanked either side, their thick foliage shielding the people below from the blazing sun. The McAffreys walked along Orchard Road, passing families pushing prams, couples strolling side-by-side, shoppers laden with bags. Not Oxford Circus in London, thought James, not even Fifth Avenue in New York compared with this.

"Champs-Elysees was better," said Louisa, though her eyes darted furtively from shop to shop.

Each shopping mall was bigger and grander than any James had ever seen in the West. Here was Paragon mall, a construct of metal and gleaming glass. Ngee Ann City mall was the red marble one with the burbling fountain. Here was Wisma Atria with its rainbow stair reaching up to Food Republic. Here was the great Chinese arrow tower of Tangs mall: green sweeping roofs and carved marble balusters, a lofty white pagoda rising behind it.

Lunch was a quick but delicious affair, the McAffreys ducking into a restaurant and gorging on a meal of succulent white chicken flesh and soy sauce-stained rice. Sated, they emerged again, stepping between the crowds gathered around exhibitions and street performers. A crowded stall gave away free ice creams. Pop music thumped from a stand promoting an upcoming party. Girls in short shorts invited them to run through a makeshift obstacle course. John McAffrey laughed and declined.

Samantha McAffrey disappeared inside a Marc Jacobs, and Louisa, abandoning all pretence, slinked after her.

"Do you see this, James?" asked his father as they continued along the street together. "Do you see how alive this place is? Do you see how the trees are placed to shade us as we walk? Nature tamed and bent to serve us. Do you see how form blends with function? This city is *clean*. Everything here has a purpose, each component locking together like a giant clock. A truly fine city." He had a certain theatrical flair.

His father told him the story of Singapore: how it rose from an obscure fishing village with no natural resources to the gleaming financial hub it was today. How it attracted the best minds and talents from around the world. How its meritocracy pushed its people to greater heights of excellence. How its wise policies kept its different ethnic groups in a state of prosperous harmony. How its meteoric success left its regional rivals in the dust: Indonesia a backwater, Thailand wracked with political instability, Malaysia ruled by corrupt incompetents. All of this, stemming from the genius of Singapore's first citizen, Lee Kuan Yew; apparently some kind of cross between Margaret Thatcher and Qin Shi Huang.

As the sun began to set, the McAffreys called for their car and headed to Clarke Quay, an area along the Singapore River filled with restaurants, bars, and nightclubs. Dinner was at Madame Butterfly, a restaurant that resembled an old opium den, and there in the fading light of the day, amidst scrolls of calligraphy, terracotta warriors, and silken drapes, they ate a meal of seafood, braised pork, and roast duck. Outside, small boats chugged along the canal.

At the end of the meal John McAffrey belched contentedly and reclined with a martini. He looked across the table at his children and James sensed the speech before it came.

"Do you know," John McAffrey asked, "why I moved us here?"

"If you were smart in 1807 you moved to London, if you were smart in 1907 you moved to New York, if you are smart in 2007 you move to Asia," intoned James and Louisa rolling their eyes. As if he hadn't told them that a hundred times before.

Their father smiled. "Quite right. But why *here*? Why Singapore?"

"Because Singapore is the center of Asia," said Louisa.

"That's one of the reasons, yes, though there are several cities that could make that claim. It's also a good environment for you to learn Mandarin – something that's becoming increasingly important. It also has no capital gains tax, making it ideal for investors like us."

You mean investors like you, thought James, but he didn't say it.

'But the main reason," his father continued, "is *security*. Security of our persons, and security of our holdings. This fine city is one of the safest, most stable places in the world." He snapped his fingers. "People here know that if you break the law, the authorities will be on you in a flash. Singaporeans do not waste time with silly strikes and demonstrations. They concentrate on working hard and making money. They're pragmatic. Like us."

He signalled for the bill.

"And look around," he said with a gesture. "What do you see? People just like us. Expats seeking their fortune. No one knows how long this financial crisis will last, but what we *do* know is that the West is on its way down – *Asia* is the future, and this city is one of its great hubs."

"But I miss New York too," said James, feeling a lingering loyalty for his old home.

His father clicked his tongue. "Good investors don't have sentimental attachments. *We* don't have attachments; we don't have roots. We are not plants, James, doomed to shrivel if our field grows barren; we have the freedom of animals, and if conditions become more favorable elsewhere, we can move."

"Just like our ancestors," said Louisa, who knew what their father wanted to hear.

"Exactly!" John McAffrey exclaimed. He launched into a summary of their family history: how their ancestors left the world they knew behind when they sailed to America from Ireland, how they built a new life from the slums of New York. Our ancestors learned to adapt to their new environment, he told them, and so shall we.

Around them the lights of Clarke Quay glowed golden and blue in the night. Their father paid the bill and swirled the last of his martini.

"The current of history turns," he said, a tad melodramatically, his eyes half-closing, "and people can swim with it or drown." The last chunks of ice melted into the drink. "The world changes, the fortunes of nations rise and fall, but our *family* endures. Most importantly, *our family* prospers. That is the way it is. That is the way it has always been."

They got up and walked along the quay. A group of revelers spilled into a nightclub on the left, heavy R&B beats pounding as the doors closed behind them. Girls in tight tank tops served food at the Hooters on the right. Up ahead, a reverse bungee catapulted screaming couples into the sky.

They strolled beneath a glass pavilion. Children played in a fountain that spat cascades of water and light. Noodles tossed in woks and kebabs turned on grills. A handsome Czech bartender juggled cocktail shakers and smiled at Louisa, who blushed accordingly. A belly dancer shook to the rhythm of hand drums and the air filled with the sound of revelry.

"A fine city," their father kept saying. "A fine city. *A fine city*."

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Chapter Two

[T]he house and these old stones,

give them a voice and what a tale they'd tell.

- Watchman in Aeschylus' Agamemnon

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

When the car pulled up Nathaniel Chan disembarked, green file in one hand, black schoolbag over a shoulder, feet crunching on the gravel path. He slipped out his wallet and held it against the reader at the door. He heard a *chunk* as the large bolts slid away, and he pulled open the heavy oak door.

He removed his shoes inside and strode through the great hall, up a stair that reached up and curved round a chandelier, its crystal links hanging lifeless in the stale air, then down another hall, through the house that always *seemed* gloomy despite the adequate lighting, that always *felt* dusty even though it was cleaned daily, this house that for all its opulence seemed to lie under a perpetual pall of decay. Nathaniel's feet padded lightly across the polished tiles and the dark house closed around him like a pair of jaws.

He continued on, through another door and into the dining room where his lunch was being served. He sat at the placemat at the foot of the dining table and reached for his cutlery as Rose placed a steaming plate of carbonara in front of him. There was a hot-spring egg on top. Things were always better with a hot-spring egg on top.

As he ate, his eyes strayed out the window into the neatly landscaped garden, hedges trimmed into arches, vines curling around trellises, stumps of marble columns artfully placed. At the edge of the perimeter were rain trees, great boughs creeper-covered, spreading outward.

The Chan house in Kenny Hills had been built many years ago by his grandfather, and when old age and ill health forced the stubborn old man to permanently relocate to the top two floors of one of their hospitals, his father as the eldest son claimed the house as a matter of right. The house had been renovated since, and now had four levels and included a swimming pool and a library. An elevator ran through it and its halls were perpetually air-conditioned against the afternoon heat.

In truth, a house like that, situated as it was in a semi-jungly area, required more than the skeleton crew of three maids who maintained it, and each maid had to labor hard every day for their miser of a master. There was always something to be done. Someone needed to sweep away the dust that collected in every corner of the house and the gecko shit the tiny reptiles let fall from the ceilings. Somone needed to wipe away the mould that grew periodically on the walls from the tropical damp. No one however, despite their best efforts, seemed to be able to keep away the gloom; the gloom that permeated the house, that seemed to ooze out of the very walls.

No, Nathaniel thought, *not no one.* When his mother was alive, the maids and Uncle Jit Meng had told him, the Chan house had been a very different place. His mother had tamed the shadows and ghosts. She'd put up pictures on the walls and fresh flowers in the vases. She'd opened the curtains to let the sunlight in. She'd opened the windows to let the wind in, making the curtains dance behind it and scattering the scent of the flowers through the halls. Many were the parties and performances that graced the great hall and many were the guests who were feted: visiting dignitaries and musicians,

writers and dancers, and family and friends were always welcome. There were stories of how a famous stripper had once performed there at his mother's invitation, to the embarrassment of his father and the great amusement of their guests, but even then his father had not denied her – he could deny his mother nothing. Even at night the Chan house had sparkled with light. But that was when his mother was alive.

How much had changed, he thought. His mother's death had transformed his father, turning him cold and brittle and forbidding, a man consumed by his work and The Company. He seldom smiled, and he laughed even less. Their interactions were terse and awkward; in fact they seemed to avoid each other. His mother's death had also brought in Aunty Ruby – he refused to call her "mom," and after the first token attempt, his father's second wife had never insisted on it. She always seemed too occupied with her lunches, her fundraisers, or her Rinpoches or Feng Shui masters to bother much about him anyway, unless it was to ask his father, pointedly and querulously, why he got something *her* children didn't.

Finished with his meal, Nathaniel pushed aside his plate, removed some books from his schoolbag, and started on his homework.

He was halfway through when his half-brother Huan (ostensibly sick, taking a few days off school), strolled into the dining room, his entrance accompanied by a series of electronic bleeps from his PSP. He placed a cup of Milo on the dining table and then leapt, cat-like, onto the table to sit two seats away. His fingers worked at the buttons, loud bleeps emanating from the console.

Nathaniel tried to concentrate, irritated by the noises, irritated by the absurdity of it all in a house with that many rooms, irritated at Aunty Ruby who had drilled her petty territoriality even into Huan's juvenile mind.

He looked up from his work. "Aren't you supposed to be resting?"

"Am." Huan's eyes never left the console screen. Three years younger than his stepbrother, the nine-year-old brat slouched on the table's edge, his expression a mixture of boredom and disdain.

Nathaniel tried again. "Could you turn it down?"

Huan ignored him, the light from the screen reflecting off his eyes. Then finally: "I have as much right to be here." The words were not his.

Nathaniel grew angry. "I'm working. Go somewhere else if you're gonna be noisy."

Huan's only response was to tip over the cup of Milo on the table.

Nathaniel jumped from his seat, grabbing at his stuff to rescue it from the chocolate flood. He managed to save his textbook, but his answer sheet was soaked with the brown liquid, the words losing their definition and swimming across the page.

Huan looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

Then Nathaniel was upon him, seizing him with sharp fingers. Huan cried out and squirmed like a stoat in his grip. He flung Huan to the floor, the PSP clattering across the tiles.

"Get out!" he shouted. "Go!"

Huan picked up his PSP and shot one final glare before scampering off.

Nathaniel turned back to the table. He grabbed a box of tissues and mopped up the spilled liquid. He wiped the sticky table with a wet towel and washed his hands, before slowly rewriting his answer sheet.

When he finished, he packed his stuff away and checked the clock. It was still only five, though the sky was already darkening. The Lims were out of town, or he could've gone over. He *could* go down to the pool, though he didn't really feel like swimming. In the end, he went upstairs to his room, removed his school uniform and took a shower. He was toweling his hair when he heard a sharp rap at the door.

"Hold on," he said, pulling on fresh clothes. The raps increased in frequency.

He swung open the door. A heavy waft of perfume hit him, cloying, obscene in its excess, and there in the doorway stood Aunty Ruby, eyes blazing beneath her permed hair, which had been dyed a ghastly red copper.

"How dare you!" she spat, "How *dare* you! Huan has *every* right to go wherever he pleases. You-"

"I was working. He disturbed me."

Aunty Ruby made a pained face. "Why couldn't you have gone somewhere else? You think you can throw your weight around just because you're bigger?"

"No, but I was there first."

Aunty Ruby seemed to flinch. "Huan told me you threw him across the floor!"

"Yes, but-"

Aunty Ruby's face purpled. "By what right do you lay your hands on him?!" she shrieked. She ran through a litany of wrongs. Didn't he realize how much younger Huan was? Didn't he know Huan was *sick*? Didn't he know Huan had been recovering from a cold all week? Didn't he see how frightened Huan was of him? The string of pearls on her neck jiggled as she yelled. "I will *not* have my son bullied in his own home!"

Nathaniel forced himself to take a breath. "My home too," he said. "A home we all share. Remember that."

Aunty Ruby pointed a trembling, exquisitely manicured finger at him. "You watch out!" she hissed. "Your father will hear of this!"

She turned and stormed off. As she rounded the corner she shouted over her shoulder again, "You *watch out*!"

Nathaniel sat at his desk for a while until his breathing slowed. There were times when he imagined killing Aunty Ruby. There were times when he imagined lacing his hands around her wattled neck and choking the life from her. He shook away such thoughts and headed downstairs.

The library was located at the basement level of the Chan house and was one of the few places in the house the gloom didn't seem to penetrate. Soft cream carpet swallowed your footfalls, and a warm glow emanated from green desk lamps. Overhead lights illuminated the rest of the room – lights that could be brightened or muted to suit your mood – and two smooth wooden tables stretched down its length. The panels and the shelves were of carved wood, dark and rich, and a small black stair twisted up to a mezzanine. Windows on one side looked into the garden and let the sunlight in during the day. A small reading nook at one end gave you a spot to recline. The library had, of course, been built at his mother's behest.

And there were the books – some from Nathaniel's own collection, but most procured by his mother long ago – books on history and politics, poetry and philosophy, shelves and shelves of books, more books than could ever be read in a lifetime. Histories of Europe and ancient Greece and Rome filled one shelf. Locke and John Stuart Mill sat on another, next to Henry David Thoreau and Gandhi. The Bible nestled against the Quran, next to Darwin's *Origin of Species*. The poetry of Aeschylus mingled with Shakespeare's. Most of all, there were novels: *Don Quixote* and *The Satanic Verses*, *Little Women* and *The Joy Luck Club*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *War and Peace*.

There were children's books too; his mother had been a great reader and she'd requested this library for herself as well as for the children she was planning to have, though she only lived long enough to have one, and novels like *A Christmas Carol*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, and *The Hobbit* filled the lower shelves.

Nathaniel looked at the portrait that hung on one of the panels. His mother Cassandra Song looked back at him, smiling, young and healthy and beautiful, reclining on a chair with their garden in the background, no hint of the terrible car accident that would snatch away her life just a few years later.

Nathaniel had little memory of his mother: she'd died when he was a baby, but he remembered – or thought he remembered – her warmth and the sound of her laughter. *What sort of woman was she?* he wondered. What sort of woman could have made his father laugh, could have dragged him along on adventures, could have made him build a library like this for her?

His father must have loved her fiercely.

Nathaniel turned away from the portrait. He loved this library. Loved its warm smell of wood and leather and its air of open intimacy. He loved walking along the cool black metal of the mezzanine. He loved browsing the shelves, running his fingers along the spines of the books, picking one at random and leafing through the pages.

This was also his sanctuary. Neither his father nor Aunty Ruby nor his stepsiblings Huan and Suzen ever visited the library; none of them had much interest in books, and Aunty Ruby seemed to shrink away from the picture of his mother. And so the library had remained his special place through the years, remained despite Aunty Ruby's repeated suggestions to his father that they demolish it and convert the space into something else "because no one ever uses it."

Nathaniel went over to the reading nook. Here were his favorites: Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the stories of King Arthur, the epic poems *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*, and *Beowulf*, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, and Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*. Tales of brave heroes and noble lords. Adventures, glorious battles, and lives of significance and honor.

He chose a book from the shelf and began to read.

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Chapter Three

We both have meritocracies. Yours is a talent meritocracy, ours is an exam meritocracy. We know how to train people to take exams.

- Tharman Shanmugaratnam, former Singapore Education Minister, comparing the American and Singaporean systems

Singapore

It was the humidity. That and the heat: the sweltering merciless heat that beat down relentlessly like an infernal hammer, turning any structure with a metal roof into an oven, turning the stone floor beneath your feet into a blinding mirror, and then dispersing into a shimmering haze that made the very air seem heavy as water. The classrooms were air-conditioned of course, but not the halls or the canteen, and the fingers of heat reached everywhere, touched everything, and even the short walk to the car became an ordeal, there under the oppressive glare of the cruel yellow eye.

Before long James found that he felt lethargic and irritated in the afternoon, that his mind became muddied and sluggish, that his limbs were as lead, that his energy and vitality were leaking out of his body with his sweat, the sweat that seeped out of his pores in sticky rivulets and plastered his white school uniform to his body like a translucent film.

As if the climate wasn't bad enough, there were the other students and their strange language with its baffling array of noises. His father often said that one of Singapore's greatest advantages was the fact that most of its population spoke fluent English, but this didn't sound like any kind of English James had heard before. For example, the word "can" could take on completely different meanings depending on which sound accompanied it. "Can ah?" meant "Can you or can't you?" "Can lah" meant "Certainly," "Can meh?" meant "Are you sure?" and "Can lor" meant "I think so." Then there was "Sabo" (Sabotage), "Talking cock" (Talking nonsense), and "Where got?" (What do you mean?). Foreign-sounding words were also often dropped into English sentences, like "*siao*" (which meant crazy), "*kiasu*" (which meant hyper-competitive, but which confusingly enough could also be applied to someone who brought home tupperwares of food from a hotel buffet), and "*arbuthen*" (whatever the hell *that* meant).

Worse still were the classes. Back in New York, James was used to having an Asian kid in his class who always seemed to know the answer to every question. In Singapore though, his class was stuffed with kids like that; in fact every other kid at Raffles Institution seemed to be an insufferable know-it-all. They seemed to anticipate questions: before a teacher even finished asking one, a forest of hands would already have shot up. Not once did any of the other boys seem to need something explained again – not how to do long division, not how gravity accelerated masses towards the Earth, not how to structure a sentence in Mandarin, not how premarital sex led to moral and physical ruin – not one boy ever said that he didn't understand or asked the teacher to repeat himself. It was then that James realized the superiority of Asia. The minds of these boys were quicker, battle-tested by a hundred exams and a thousand quizzes, their brains were like sponges, absorbing every detail, infinitely nimble and infinitely capacious; no concept in class seemed beyond their understanding, comprehension coming to them in rapid synaptic bursts. When their English teacher asked how *Of Mice and Men* illustrated the futility of the American Dream, one boy answered with a complexity that made their teacher beam with delight. "I couldn't have said it better myself," he concluded.

And they *knew*. They knew and they knew and they knew and they knew and they knew. The elemental composition of the Earth's crust, the percentage of nitrogen in the air, the formula for calculating the volume of a sphere, all the key dates leading to the outbreak of World War I, all these they knew off the top of their heads. They had marvelous minds for facts, and their rate of recall seemed just as fast as their rate of uptake. When their history teacher asked them about the causes of World War I, one boy responded with an answer that consisted of both long-term and short-term causes and that lasted for five fucking minutes. Their teacher nodded vigorously with approval.

Later, when James was leafing through the textbook, he found the exact same answer: that little bastard had memorized the entire page word-for-word.

Most of all, they knew how to score. No one ever seemed to get below seventy percent on any test. They knew which template to follow for each essay to get the very highest marks. Sometimes when James was asked a question, he was tempted to say that there were several answers, or that it depended on where the emphasis was or what the question really meant. But there was usually only one right answer, of course, and the Singaporean boys seemed to know which one was expected of them instinctively. Sometimes when something confused him, James was tempted to ask the teacher to explain again, and he'd turn to look to his classmates for support, searching for allies in his perplexity. But then he'd see their expressions: their features, whether of Chinese, Malay, or Indian ethnicity, all identical in their certainty, some of them nodding solemnly, others sitting with their chins framed between thumb and forefinger, a thoughtful look on their faces – and his courage would fail him. James felt like a castle under siege, with giant waves crashing unceasingly against its walls; no sooner had he plugged a leak in his understanding than another appeared, these waves and waves, tireless as the surf and maddening as the Chinese water torture.

By the first week, James felt uncomfortable. By the second he was worried. By the third he was falling behind. By the forth he felt utterly lost. By the fifth he was terrified and lay whimpering in a nervous heap in front of his father.

***

"It's too hard!" cried James kneeling on the carpet, the slightly crumpled pages of his latest math test lying next to him. The red circle of ink on the front page showed that he'd scored fifty-six percent.

His father sipped his scotch. "This was the lowest mark in class?"

This sent James into another fit of hysteria. "I can't do it, these kids- They're crazy! They're like machines! They know *everything*! They're so much smarter! They're just naturally smarter! I try so hard, but I can't compete with them. It's too hard!"

John McAffrey regarded his son coolly, waiting for him to finish. At last he said softly: "That is precisely why I brought you here."

"You brought me here to-"

"I brought you here to learn to adapt!" John McAffrey shouted. "*We adapt.* It is what we *are*. But instead of learning you kneel here in a puddle of your self-pity."

"I *tried*-"

"Not hard enough. All those years at school in America have made you soft."

"The school system here is so-"

"*Don't* blame the system!" John McAffrey roared, real rage showing on his face. "That's *weak*! It's pathetic! *That's* the difference between Asian and Western culture – instead of wasting their time blaming the system just because they didn't do well the kids here blame only themselves. Then they work on improving themselves. They're pragmatic. They don't fight the system; they concentrate on gaming it!" He drove his finger into the table to emphasize his point. "*This* is why their test scores are through the roof! *This* is why Singapore is where it is today!"

James remained motionless on the carpet, head bowed.

"Look," his father said, softening his voice, "here are some of the smartest kids in the world. The future belongs to them. *Learn* from them. Louisa is having to do the same. Find out what they have and make it yours too. Anything they can do, you can learn to do. If you can do that, you'll be far ahead of your former classmates in New York."

Easier said than done, thought James, *especially when they have a twelve-year head start.* He shifted into a sitting position. "How?" he asked.

John McAffrey shrugged. "That's for you to work out." He took a deep breath that swelled his plump belly. "You know," he said, "I'm not that smart."

James highly doubted his father really thought that, but he kept quiet.

"But I *am* good at finding people smarter than me and talking to them, that's how I got to where I am today. Go up to some of the smart boys in your class and get them to show you how they score."

"But I'm not that close to many-"

"Then do something about that! In evolution there's only one choice! Adapt or die! Now get up and try again!"

***

The next day at school James approached Guan Zhen, the smartest boy in class, during lunch and bought him a bowl of noodles.

Guan Zhen usually topped the class in every subject, apart from English and Geography, in which Maulik often beat him. James began by flattering Guan Zhen, expressing astonishment at his answer on photosynthesis earlier that week, before asking

for his help. Guan Zhen eyed him suspiciously for a moment, before seeming to decide that this plodding American posed no threat to his academic hegemony, and acquiescing.

That day James did his homework with Guan Zhen and a few other boys in the canteen. Halfway through, James asked them how to do one of the math problem questions. Guan Zhen looked at it and wrote out the solution in half a minute. When James asked him how he did it, Guan Zhen shrugged.

"I just applied the algorithm," he replied.

"No, but I meant, how did you know to do that?"

Another shrug. "To answer these questions you always just need to use an algorithm. And there are only two possible algorithms that could apply to a question like this. So you just see which one to use and plug the numbers into it. We learned it before."

"We learned it before," agreed another boy.

"I see…" said James, who couldn't recall having covered that in class, "…*where* did you learn it before?"

They gave different answers. Guan Zhen had learned it in his previous school; some of the others had learned it during private math tuition.

The next day James visited Guan Zhen's home, a small HDB flat in Yunnan. James didn't know what to expect when he entered Guan Zhen's room – a Rubik's Cube on the desk perhaps, or a ticking Newton's cradle, shelves lined with books on philosophy or nuclear physics, as befitted a great genius. What he found instead was a small dull space. A motivational poster with a photo of an eagle in flight hung above the desk proclaiming: "You were not meant to scratch the ground like chickens, but to soar above the clouds like an eagle." In the corner of the drab room was a white cabinet filled with revision guides. Guan Zhen pulled out one of the revision guides and explained how they distilled all the material they'd need to know into key points, how they contained all the questions that were likely to come out in the exams, as well as model answers. He explained how to select the best brands of revision guides at Popular Bookstore. Then James had to leave because Guan Zhen had to go for a private science tuition class.

The following week James studied with Guan Zhen and the others in the library. At one point, James asked Guan Zhen what he thought of the war in Iraq. It was an exchange James had planned carefully: Guan Zhen would give his opinion, and then James would opine that the American invasion of the country in 2003 had been motivated by their desire for oil, something James had heard his father say at the dinner table; it was a question selected to show Guan Zhen that James was a sophisticated thinker too, that he was an intellectual equal.

Instead Guan Zhen just frowned at the question. "I don't know," he said. "That's not really relevant."

"Well…no, but aren't you interested in it?"

"Not really. I'm not interested in politics." He looked a little irritated.

"But you're interested in history…aren't they kind of the same? What's the difference?"

"Politics isn't on the syllabus," said Guan Zhen. And he turned back to his textbook.

Another time, James asked Guan Zhen how atoms joined together to form molecules. Guan Zhen replied by quoting the exact words of the text.

"Yes," said James, "but don't you find that explanation a bit incomplete? Like it doesn't explain-"

Guan Zhen shrugged. "That's what the book says."

"That's what the book says," agreed another boy.

And they turned back to their revision guides.

James looked at Guan Zhen as he studied. He watched as Guan Zhen memorized algorithms and formulas, definitions and Chinese characters, essay templates and model answers. Guan Zhen would cover the page of the revision guide with a sheet of paper, write something out from memory, and then remove the sheet of paper and compare what he had written with the text. James thought about how Guan Zhen had flawlessly recited the long-term and short-term causes of World War I, and how he always scored the top grade for math and science, sometimes full marks, certainly never anything below ninety-five percent.

And then it hit him like a crossbow bolt between the eyes. *He didn't understand many things because there wasn't really much* to *understand. You didn't need to understand things; you just needed to KNOW them.*

He thought, also, of Maulik's analysis of *Of Mice and Men*. Their English teacher had remarked that he "couldn't have said it better himself" because he *didn't* in fact say it better himself: Maulik's answer consisted of their teacher's own words from two days before, gulped down eagerly by Maulik, regurgitated, and then fed back to their teacher just as eagerly.

That was what was expected of him, that was what they wanted, and something in James had fought against it, resisted it. *Not any more.* James looked around in wonder. The solution to his problems was so simple, so laughably simple.

Before, James had felt like a castle under siege, with giant waves crashing unceasingly against its walls. Now, James sighed with relief and opened the gates to let

the sea come rushing in. He relaxed as the water enveloped him and flowed through him, bearing him along like a mote in a flood. He closed his eyes and he felt his anxieties and his confusions and his questions and his doubts peel away from him in that glorious, soothing, obliterating current.

Everything made sense now. Because it *didn't*.

Later that week, James bought a series of revision guides and got his parents to enroll him in private afterschool tuition classes for math and science. In the weeks that followed, he found his grades steadily improving. He could memorize complex arguments and argue them confidently, with no idea what they meant. He solved math problems deftly and cheerfully, without the faintest notion of what he was actually doing. He would perform any amount of mental gymnastics to reach the right answer. And there was *always* The Right Answer, floating there in the ether, flawless and unassailable. His mind was as a blank slate, his brain a hungry sponge, absorbing torrents of information without resistance. He found that he was just as intelligent as most of the others: scoring was just a matter of how hard and smart he worked.

Within a month he was no longer at the bottom of the class. Within three months he was somewhere around the middle. Within six he was in the top third, still nowhere near Guan Zhen or Maulik or some of the other smartest boys, but pretty good just the same.

"You seem to be acquitting yourself well, son," his father observed as he looked at the score on James' latest test, "you're doing even better than Louisa."

Louisa glared at James and made a face.

"I knew you'd work it out," said their father. "I'm proud of you."

James grinned. "I think I'm getting the hang of it."

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Chapter Four

I have found nothing in my belongings that I care so much for and esteem so greatly as the knowledge of the actions of great men, learned by me from long experience with modern things and a continuous reading of ancient ones.

- Niccolo Machiavelli, "Dedicatory Letter to Lorenzo de Medici," The Prince

"So why did he write it?"

Dawn looked at her mother, fair-skinned and raven-haired, the pupils of her dark eyes fixed on her. Her father reclined on a chair nearby, reading through a report on his MacBook. "After the Medici took over, Machiavelli lost his position," she answered. "The Medici didn't trust him because they knew he liked the old republic more than them. But he liked being in a position of power: under the republic he'd been an important official. So he wrote it as a gift to Lorenzo so he'd notice him, and maybe make him his advisor."

"So *The Prince* was written as a job application?" her mother asked.

"I- I guess," Dawn replied.

"Do you think he was serious about it being a manual for ruling?"

Dawn thought for a moment. "Some people think he wanted it to be a trap for the Medici," she replied. "They think he purposely put bad advice into *The Prince* so that the Medici would be ruined if they followed it. Others think he wrote it ironically because the model of the book's, Cesare Borgia's, plans failed."

"I asked what *you* think."

Dawn thought again. "I think he was serious," she said finally. "I don't think it was a trap because the advice seems…sensible. And if it was written ironically, it wouldn't have made a good job application."

Wendy Cheung permitted herself a slight smile of pride at her ten-year-old daughter's reasoning. She leaned back on the cream sofa and stroked Tundra, their mongrel dog, running her fingers through her white fur. "Speaking of Cesare Borgia, who was he?" she asked.

"He was the son of Pope Alexander. He was powerful, but soon after his father died he lost everything."

"Tell me about what he did to Remirro de Orco."

"Who?"

"The governor he put in charge of Romagna who-"

"Oh yeah, once Cesare took over Romagna he got Remirro to do his dirty work and oppress the people there. Then the people there were obedient, but angry. So Cesare had Remirro cut in two and left his body in the city square one morning, and after that the people were" – she checked her notes – ""both satisfied and stupefied.""

Her mother stirred her cup of tea and took a sip. "Was Machiavelli evil for praising Cesare's actions?" she asked. "Was he evil for saying that it's ok to deceive people? That you should sometimes be cruel? That it's better to be feared than loved?"

"I don't know," said Dawn.

Her mother's eyes remained on her, silent, waiting.

Dawn squirmed impatiently in her chair. *This was taking too long.* But she knew if she gave a half-assed response her mother would be dissatisfied, and then she'd *never* get to leave. She glanced at the clock on the wall, wondering if her mother would notice. She didn't, or pretended she didn't. "I- I don't think so," Dawn began slowly. "I think he's a bit like Hobbes…He says that people are selfish and dishonest, and so you have to be like that with them. You wouldn't have to be that way if they were good, but they're not." She checked her notes again. "And even then tricking them and being cruel to them is only alright if you really need to; not if it's too much for no good reason."

Her mother nodded. She took another sip of tea. "One of the reasons Machiavelli is called the father of modern politics is because he says there's a difference between private and public morality," she said. The saucer clinked as she set it down on the table. "You can have your own private idea of morality – and for many people morality means being gentle and honorable. But if you're a prince, you have a higher "public morality," which means you might have to do harsh and dishonest things for the sake of your people."

"Machiavelli saw that some leaders who failed to do that – who failed to put public morality above their private morality – allowed their cities to be ruined and their people to be killed," said her father, looking up from his laptop. "During Machiavelli's time, one of the leaders of Florence was a man named Piero Soderini. Because Soderini was too noble to crack-down on the traitors inside the city, they managed to destroy the republic that Machiavelli loved, and bring the Medici back into power." He regarded his daughter carefully. "To Machiavelli, Cesare Borgia was a merciful devil who served the greater good, whilst Soderini was an irresponsible leader who let his people suffer because he refused to get his hands dirty. Do you understand?"

Dawn nodded. She understood. Or thought she did. She kicked her feet under the chair restlessly. Attracted by the movement, Tundra came over to lick her toes.

"So tell me," said her father, the lights in their living room glancing off his sharp features, leaving half his face in shadow, "Can a leader have a moral duty to do immoral things? If so, are those things still immoral?"

Dawn thought for a while. "I don't know," she said at last, and this time no one pushed her for another answer.

Her father stretched in his chair and yawned. "What else in the book struck you?" he asked.

"The part where he says that cities that are used to liberty are difficult to control," Dawn answered.

"What did that make you think of?"

"Hong Kong, of course."

Her father smiled and nodded. "What else?"

"Machiavelli also says that a leader should try to look kind, honest, and holy, but that it's fine for him to behave completely opposite to that if it's convenient. But I don't agree."

"Hah! Why not?"

"It made me think of the US and China." Dawn frowned as she thought. "The US likes to act noble, and it gets criticized a lot when it does something bad. China doesn't bother to act noble, and it doesn't get criticized as much. Especially in Africa." She glanced again at the clock, pointedly.

"Ah, so it seems there's a penalty for hypocrisy then?"

"I guess."

"Good observation. What else?"

"The bit where Machiavelli says that it's better to be feared than loved."

"And what did that make you think of?"

"You two."

William Cheung glanced at his wife and burst out laughing.

"What?!" protested Wendy in mock outrage. "How could you say that?"

"Actually," said Dawn with a laugh, "a lot of this book reminds me of you two. Like the bit about it being better to be thrifty than generous." *Now,* she thought. "And the bit that says that a prince should commit injuries all at once so people don't notice them as much, and give out benefits one by one so people enjoy them slowly. I guess that's why I've been studying all week. And why the sleepover tonight, which I'm *already* late for, will be the first I've been to in the past three months."

At this her mother laughed too. "Oh alright, I'll take the hint," she said with a sideways nod. "You can go now."

Before the words were out of her mouth, Dawn had bounded from her seat, a little girl again, grabbing her overnight bag and running towards the door, Tundra chasing after her and barking.

"I'll send Huat for you at twelve tomorrow!" Wendy called as the door slammed.

Tundra scratched at the door for a few minutes, and then, realizing she wasn't going to get out, padded back to the living room, found her dog basket, and curled up inside.

"Shouldn't you be on *Discourses* by now?" William Cheung asked, getting from his seat and walking slowly towards the balcony.

"We got a little caught up on *Mandragola*," Wendy explained, following him.

"And yet it was you, my dear, who authorized this sleepover."

Wendy shrugged. "She'll learn about politics and human nature from sleepovers as well as from Machiavelli. And she'll be back by one tomorrow."

"What's the occasion?"

"Victoria Wong's birthday party. They live at Repulse Bay. Good family."

Their balcony on the Peak looked into the city. Taller than all the other buildings stood 2 IFC, a great white beacon, its shaft of light reaching into the sky. To its right was the Standard Chartered Bank Building, looking like luminous blocks stacked atop each other by some industrious godchild, the iconic white crisscross of the Bank of China Building, and the Skyspear tower, a sleek shard of glass that pierced the clouds and glowed soft gold. Flecks of light from boats and floating restaurants floated in the harbor's black waters. Nearer their house the luxuriant trees that carpeted the mountainside hid winding roads and nature trails.

"How were things at her Parents Day yesterday?" William asked.

"The usual. Her English, Mandarin, and Math are said to be particularly good. She also tops her class in every other subject with the exception of Computer, in which she scores second. Not that that's a great reassurance: at her age half of her grades seem to be determined by how neat her handwriting is or how pretty her leaflets are. Her teachers also say she's pleasant, helps her friends with their work, asks interesting questions, stuff like that."

"How perfect they make her seem. Did they also mention that she's impatient, willful, stubborn-"

"All of those strengths, not weaknesses, as I'm sure you'll agree," said Wendy with a laugh.

William smiled. "Don't I know it." He drummed his fingers lightly against the balcony railing. "Think she should skip a grade again?"

"Perhaps."

They were quiet for a while.

"Do you ever wonder…if it's right…what we're doing with her?" Wendy asked.

William Cheung's hand flexed around the railing, then he relaxed his grip and released it again. "All the time," he said softly.

"I'm sorry, that was an unfair question. I know the priority is for her to be capable of playing her role if the time comes."

"If we coddle her she won't grow strong enough to fulfill *any* destiny. Remember that everything we don't manage to do will fall to her."

"…and everything *she* doesn't manage will fall to Summer," Wendy agreed.

"And the rest…" William thought of them, of cold grey Davion King with his flinty eyes and knotted violence, and Amshel von Reinhardt, elegant, aloof, but no less dangerous. And the others: Carver, Kiryanov, Yu, and whoever else might later be added to their ranks.

An end to brutishness, Davion had said on that rainy night, *and needless violence and conflict and foolishness,* as if what he envisioned, like so much of his life, would not be written in blood.

"And their heirs," Wendy reminded him. "And their heirs. Depending on the timeframe."

"Which brings us back to-"

"Dawn." Wendy sighed. A cool breeze caught her hair and blew it in a cascade behind her. "So much sacrifice for the greater good. Machiavelli would have approved."

William Cheung gave an ironic smile. "Well that's a relief," he said.

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Chapter Five

There were formerly no such words as "family system" as a sociological term; we knew the family only as "the basis of the state," or rather as the basis of human society. The system colors all our social life…It very nearly takes the place of religion by giving man a sense of social survival and family continuity, thus satisfying man's craving for immortality

- Lin Yutang, My Country and My People

These roofs – look up – there is a dancing troupe

that never leaves.

They cling to the house for life. They sing,

sing of the frenzy that began it all,

strain rising on strain, showering curses

on the man who tramples on his brother's bed.

- Cassandra in Aeschylus' Agamemnon

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

"You know why I called you here."

"To discuss my school report?" said Nathaniel.

"Amongst other things." His father waved a hand towards the chair in front of his bureau. He reclined in his high-backed chair and regarded his son as the latter carefully took his seat. Tan Sri Vincent Chan, current patriarch of the illustrious Chan family, was a man who brooked little familiarity. In a face hard and imperious as a mountain crag, his eyes were deep wells, black and mirthless, and his mouth was a sharp gash in his face. Many of his employees had learned to fear that mouth – usually drawn up into a frown or a sneer of cold command, but which could twitch violently and turn white with anger with his volatile temper, and which contained a tongue as stinging as a lash. His employees had learned to read the signs of his face as farmers read the gathering of storm clouds – the furrow of his brow, the flash of irritation in his eyes, the tightening of his lips. Vincent Chan was a man who had never learned to soften his speech or build camaraderie, who had never learned to earn the affection or loyalty of his employees. He was also a man who was rich enough for that not to matter: people put up with him, or they found work elsewhere, and he paid just enough that there were always others willing to take their places; he did not want their love and he did not need it, his coin bought their obedience, and that was sufficient.

He tossed the school report across the desk. "Adequate, I suppose."

Nathaniel realized that was all the congratulation he would get for his work.

"Your Math grades should be higher," his father remarked.

"Seventy-seven percent-"

"-is not good enough, need I remind you that Uncle Tock Seng's kids top their class for Math? Maybe I should have sent you to a Chinese school instead – there at least they'd have drilled your numbers into you."

Nathaniel felt a flush of anger. "My English and History grades are good," he said. "My poem won the prize for-"

"Oh?" asked his father in a voice thick with derision. "And I suppose I should be grateful for that? Grateful for how good you are at such important things?" He glared at his son, who lowered his eyes. "When you lead the company you'll have to master geometry and mechanics to ensure your architects and engineers aren't fooling you. You'll have to master accounting to ensure your contractors and managers aren't cheating you. You'll have to calculate cash flow and interest rates to keep your bankers off your back. These are the things I have to deal with every single day to keep the company together – *practical* things. What care have I for what ancient civilizations you know or how good your *poetry* is?"

Nathaniel didn't answer, though his eyes flickered.

Vincent Chan laid his palms against his desk. "How much are your school fees?" he asked suddenly.

"What?"

His father asked again, pronouncing each word with deliberate slowness, as if addressing a dolt. "How. Much. Are. Your. School. Fees?"

"I- I don't know."

"RM 23,000 plus a RM 500 "technology fee" per term brings it to RM 70,500 for a year. How much, do you think, are fees for Uncle Tock Seng and Uncle Daniel's kids at Chinese school?"

"No idea."

"RM 3,600 for a year. And how much, do you think, are fees for Uncle Kin Loy's kids in government school?"

"I don't know."

"Eighty for a year. *Eighty*. How many kids could I send there with your fees?"

Nathaniel tried a quick mental calculation. "Eight hundred and something?"

"Eight hundred and eighty-one. I could send *eight hundred and eighty-one* kids to that school for the amount I pay at yours. And what do you have to show for it?"

Nathaniel bit back a reply, recognized that he was being deliberately goaded into anger. He glanced at the school report on the desk.

"You've been reading the company's reports?" his father asked.

Nathaniel thought of the quarterly reports that were delivered to his room and which usually lay untouched. "I flipped through them," he lied.

"How much is our Bangsar South condominium development selling at per square foot?" his father demanded.

"What? I…I don't know."

"What's the total acreage of our Johor plantations?"

Where was his father going with this? "I don't know."

"What is anticipated to be our biggest venture this year?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "I don't know."

"No?" his father glowered.

"No."

"A contract for three coal power plants in India! Each with a capacity of four thousand megawatts!"

"How was I supposed to know-"

"Your cousin knew!" his father raged. "Your cousin who's a year younger than you!" His lip curled into a frightening smile. "Oh yes," he continued, "your damnable Uncle Kin Loy brought Jian to the company's annual dinner, seated him at the high table with the ministers and bankers, and had him recite things like that off the top of his head! Had Jian go on about his interest in the business and how much he *loved* constructing Lego models when he was younger. I thought the bankers were going to wet themselves with excitement. "A chip off the old block!" they gushed, "He'll take the business to even greater heights! The future of the company!"" Vincent Chan's features twisted with rage. "*The future of the company!* Do you know what that means??"

Nathaniel did. Three years ago, when Nathaniel's grandfather, the old patriarch, finally went to meet his maker, it was his eldest son, Vincent Chan, who emerged as the dominant force in the company – a position he held tenuously, perpetually in tension with his younger brothers, Kin Loy, Tock Seng, and Daniel. Despite the business papers and society magazines showcasing their unity, rivalry between the brothers was fierce, especially between Vincent and the second-born, Kin Loy. It was natural, therefore, that this rivalry would extend to their children and the question of the future leadership of The Company.

"They did that in front of me," his father continued to fume. "In front of *me*!"

Nathaniel shifted uncomfortably. He was the eldest of the old patriarch's grandchildren, but only by a bit. Personally he found the rivalry petty and unbecoming, and the constant comparisons with his cousins tedious. Not that he'd ever say that to his father. "That may be," he said, "though I'm sure I know other things Jian doesn't."

Vincent Chan sat silent, his chin trembling slightly, his breath coming out in sharp thin hisses. It took Nathaniel a few seconds to work out that he was laughing at him.

"And what might that be?" mocked his father, the bitter laughter dying on his lips as swiftly as it came. "How to talk back to your elders? Why the Roman Empire fell? How to appreciate *Romeo and Juliet*? Do you pride yourself on being a stockpile of completely useless knowledge?"

Nathaniel felt his face go red with anger and shame. He wanted to call his father out, to insult him, to throw something in his face. But instead he said: "I'll take another look at the reports."

"See if you can," Vincent Chan replied with exaggerated courtesy. "See if you can find some time away from your fantasies and your storybooks to look at some practical matters. Maybe then you'll amount to something."

Nathaniel got up from his chair.

"And one more thing. The Lois will be hosting a dinner at Chyna at the Hilton next Friday. The usual families will be there: the Lims, the Tiongs, the Oois. You will represent our family there. I have pressing business elsewhere. Your mother, too, is otherwise occupied." He wrinkled his nose. "Some work with that Rinpoche of hers again."

It always annoyed Nathaniel when anyone called Aunty Ruby his mother. "And what would you have me do?"

"Do? Nothing! Just go there, eat your food, speak when you're spoken to, and thank the Lois when it's over. And wear your jacket." Vincent Chan dismissed his son with a nod. "Go." He flicked his hand at the school report on the bureau. "And take that with you."

Nathaniel took his school report and strode quickly out of his father's study. When he got to his room he locked the door behind him, threw his school report onto his desk, climbed into bed and buried his face in his pillow.

Hours later, he pulled out a copy of The Company's consolidated annual report from the shelf. He sat at his desk and flipped it open, noting the interlocking gold and silver C's of Chan & Chan on the cover, his father's scowling photo and statement on the first few pages followed by his slashing signature, the overview of the different subsidiaries: Chan & Chan Construction, Chan & Chan Power, Chan & Chan Plantations, Chan & Chan Properties.

As he pored through the report though, the profiles of The Company's directors, a statement hailing the company's new venture in India, the legalese of the corporate governance statements, the pie charts of spending and profit, the tables and tables of

accounts, Nathaniel felt his concentration straining. As his eyelids began to droop, his father's words came back to him.

"The future of the company!"

Let Jian lead it if he wants it so badly, he thought wearily, as if in answer. *Let him have it if he truly finds joy in reading such things.*

As the darkness came rolling down around him, he thought of the day his grandfather died.

***

The lighting throws shadows across the walls. Nine-year-old Nathaniel's eyes follow the shadow-shapes: here is a dragon, here is a dark bird, here a ravening wolf.

On the day before the old Chan patriarch shucks his mortal coil, his sons wheel around him like carrion birds. And like vultures they *are*, crowding into the sickroom, smothering their father with promises, entreaties, and exclamations of grief, purporting to comfort him but really adding more cares to his already besieged mind, then being shooed off by his doctors and waiting sullenly outside, before creeping back into the sickroom an hour later, only to be shooed off again. Only Mr Ananthan, the old patriarch's lawyer and executor, remains seated by his bed, gaunt and silent.

It's a good thing they have both floors of the hospital to themselves, Nathaniel thinks, looking around. Each of the Chan brothers occupies a different section, each with their own camp: their families, their retinues of staff including secretaries and lawyers, and numerous well-wishers, here to offer their support during this sad sad time. Relatives and friends hang about, chatting and eating from Styrofoam boxes. Bodyguards man the entrances. A troop of Buddhist monks has already been through to pray for the soul of the dying man, the incense-scent from their bright yellow robes still unfurling in the air.

And there is the palpable tension. Nathaniel can read it in the tautness of his father's back as he sits, in the urgency with which he furtively mutters to his lawyer next to him. It seems no one, save Mr Ananthan, knows what is in the old man's will. And after his stroke, and his subsequent declining lucidity, there is but a swiftly narrowing sliver of time in which to get him to change it. Will he divide the equity of The Company amongst all four brothers equally, or will one of them get a disproportionate share? And, if so, who will it be? Will it be his first-born, the grim and brooding Vincent Chan, as tradition suggests, or Chan Kin Loy, the ambitious second-born, long rumored to be his favorite?

Suddenly, Nathaniel sees his father stiffen. One of the doctors has walked out of the sickroom. The old patriarch, it seems, is calling for his sons. Vincent Chan stands up

and strides towards the doctor expectantly, but no, it's Tock Seng Third-Born the old man asks for first. Dato' Chan Tock Seng enters the sickroom and the door closes behind him. He stays inside for a long time whilst his brothers fidget in their seats, their eyes boring holes into the woodwork of the door. When at last he emerges, Nathaniel sees his father strain to read the signs on his brother's face, but Chan Tock Seng's expression betrays no hint of what transpired. Daniel Last-Born is next, and after him is Kin Loy: there seems to be no particular order. When Dato' Chan Kin Loy finally emerges, Nathaniel sees, or thinks he sees, in his face a barely concealed look of triumph. At last, it's his father's turn, and Vincent Chan crosses the hall to the sickroom, his expression grave.

And yet it is Vincent Chan who emerges from the sickroom forty minutes later clutching the prize in his hand – a sealed copy of the old man's will, witnessed by two of the old man's doctors, awarding Vincent a forty percent share in The Company, and his three brothers twenty percent each. Another sealed copy lies in the safekeeping of Mr Ananthan. With this piece of paper, Vincent Chan holds the reins of Chan & Chan and reigns as its CEO – so long as he retains the support of just one of his brothers. Uncle Kin Loy would contest this will later, Nathaniel remembers, would threaten scandal and legal action, but all in vain, for Mr Ananthan's drafting is airtight and the word of the old man's two doctors is impeccable.

Nathaniel sees his father strut across the hall bearing the will, and he sees Uncle Tock Seng's expression of outrage, sees Uncle Kin Loy's face wrench in fury and disbelief. Only Uncle Daniel keeps his expression neutral – Uncle Daniel who is humble and unassuming, Uncle Daniel who defers to his eldest brother in most things, Uncle Daniel who Vincent counts as his stalwart ally.

Half an hour later the old patriarch suffers a second stroke and dies on the spot. Only then are the doors of the sickroom opened to all his children and grandchildren. Nathaniel stumbles in and sees the dead body of the grandfather he barely knew, looking so small and pale in his bed. His relatives wail noisily and knock their heads against the walls in grief. Nathaniel sees his father kneeling on the floor by the old man's right hand, weeping loudly, his forehead pressed against the metal bar of the bed, the very picture of Confucian piety, though Nathaniel also sees his father's hand grasp his left jacket pocket, where he has kept the sealed copy of the will.

The King is dead, Nathaniel thinks, recalling a line from a movie, *long live the King.*

***

Consider this family. Consider the Chans, whose company often occupies the front pages of *The Edge* and the business pages of *The Star*, and whose images often grace the pages of the society magazines *Prestige* and *Malaysia Tatler*. As rich as the Queks, as

glamorous as the Khongs, amongst Malaysia's great families the Chans stand, if not at the very pinnacle, then within a hair's breadth of it, and thus have they stood for generations.

Would it surprise you to know, therefore, that not so far back in the annals of the distinguished Chan family lies a rather more dubious past? So dubious, in fact, that those Chans who know of it (and there aren't very many who do) often prefer to forget it?

Well it shouldn't.

The story of the Chans in Malaysia begins commonly enough: with Chan Lian Hock, Nathaniel's great to the power of three grandfather, fleeing famine in Fujian Province in China in a rickety boat and arriving on the shores of colonial Malaya purportedly with only the shirt on his sun-scorched back. He worked for seven years as an indentured servant at a tin mine to the people who had arranged his transit, then, having completed his term of servitude, found employment at a tapioca farm. He married another Chinese immigrant, and had two sons, Hang Wei and Hang Meng.

Hang Meng, the younger brother, married early, and found a job selling chicken feed. Hang Wei however found a far more unusual vocation as a monkey-trapper. Hang Wei discovered early on that it is really easy to catch monkeys. This is because, for all their vaunted neurological similarity to humans, monkeys are actually pretty damn dumb. All Hang Wei had to do was cut a small hole in a coconut – just big enough that a monkey's paw could fit through, but small enough that a monkey's clenched fist could not – and fasten said coconut to one of the trees near his home. Monkeys would inevitably be drawn to the coconut, and after one of them had slipped its paw into the hole and grabbed a handful of the succulent white flesh within, it would find that it was unable to pull its fist out. The monkey's incredible greed meant that it refused to relinquish a handful of coconut flesh, even if that meant remaining stuck, and Hang Wei would find the wretched creatures still there hours or even days later, trapped by their own greed, upon which he would creep behind them and throw a gunnysack over their heads.

At first Hang Wei killed the monkeys he caught, skinned them, and sold their meat, but he soon thought of a more lucrative idea. He began to train them. He taught them to do tricks, to do back-flips, to dance for an audience. He charged people a few cents to watch them, and pretty soon his Amazing Monkey Show became quite famous. People from nearby towns came to watch his monkeys caper. He even named one of his monkeys "Smith" and gave it a white helmet and a cane. His audience would laugh themselves to tears as "Smith" donned the helmet and strutted around the stage twirling the cane, in imitation of a local colonial officer. After the act, "Smith" would doff the helmet and hold it out to the audience, who would throw coins into it. Hang Wei still sold the occasional wild monkey he caught for its meat, but his show monkeys were different: he gave them all names, called them his little rascals, and loved them as his own children.

He was however also accused of training the monkeys to steal things for him, some of which he later sold on the black market. Indeed, many of his fellow townspeople reported seeing monkeys fleeing their homes carrying handfuls of cash and valuables, and sometimes – because Hang Wei was a notorious letch – women's underwear. But because the monkeys scampered so quickly back to Hang Wei's home, no one was actually able to follow them, and so that charge was difficult to prove.

One day Hang Wei also seduced his brother's wife. When Hang Meng eventually learned of it he swore revenge. He feigned ignorance of their affair and waited for a day when Hang Wei had to leave town. He invited his brother to stop by his place for dinner on the way back, to which Hang Wei agreed. As soon as Hang Wei left, Hang Meng started by beating his wife savagely and tying her up in his house. Then he went over to Hang Wei's home, found the pens where his show monkeys were kept, and slaughtered every single one. Then he skinned some of them, extracted the flesh, stir-fried it, and served it at his house as a feast for his brother. Hang Wei arrived at his brother's place to find the table laden with food: a selection of fruits, a pot of rice, and a big steaming dish of meat (which contained the flesh of his show monkeys). Hang Wei ate heartily of the food while Hang Meng watched him and smiled. When at last Hang Wei finished, Hang Meng brought him a cup of red liquid that he said was wine. It was in fact the blood of one of the show monkeys. When Hang Wei spat out his first sip and asked what the hell it was, Hang Meng laughed hysterically and asked him if he'd enjoyed his meal. When Hang Wei replied that he had, Hang Meng laughed even more. He doubled over and laughed until there were tears in his eyes – before revealing to his brother the grisly truth.

When Hang Wei heard this he was so horrified that he vomited some of the meat onto the table. Then, he cursed his brother and called down doom upon his house, to which his brother replied that it was just punishment for fucking his wife. When Hang Wei asked Hang Meng where his wife was, Hang Meng replied that he had taught her a lesson and kicked the shit out of her and that Hang Wei would never see that slut again. With a roar of rage, Hang Wei grabbed the nearest thing to hand, which happened to be a durian in the fruit basket on the table, gripped it by the stem, and swung it at Hang Meng. The thorny green fruit descended on Hang Meng's head like a morning star and cracked his skull open, spilling his white brains onto the table to mingle with monkey blood and regurgitated monkey flesh. Hang Wei dropped the gore-spattered durian next to his brother's corpse, searched his brother's house, found his lover, and untied her.

The police got involved of course, and Hang Wei's trial scandalized the small town of Segamat. However, Hang Wei told the judge that his brother attacked him and he acted in self-defense, a story Hang Meng's widow corroborated. The judge took the severe bruises on the widow's body and the mangled monkey carcasses as evidence of Hang Meng's violent intent, and believed the story, setting Hang Wei free. After an appropriate period of mourning, Hang Wei married his brother's widow and they too had two sons, See Boon and See Yang.

The elder brother See Boon opened a textiles shop, whilst See Yang found employment as a sub-manager for a British-run rubber plantation company. See Yang

learned a lot working at this company, but he was fired when he was caught selling their bags of fertilizer on the side. Then, at around the same time, another disaster struck their family: their father Hang Wei died. Ironically he was killed by a falling durian as he walked recklessly beneath a durian tree one morning (durians really are dangerous things). One can only sympathize with his poor widow who had now lost both husbands to a durian – henceforth, durians were banned from her household, and no one was even to mention the fruit in her presence.

Anyway, back to the story. Hang Wei's funeral involved a lot of praying and chanting. It also involved See Boon holding a small stick, as was his privilege as the first-born. Just before the gravediggers began shoveling dirt on the coffin, See Boon was to throw the stick into the grave, and this was supposed to bring him luck and prosperity. At this point, See Boon's textiles shop was already thriving, and See Yang, recently out of a job and no doubt thinking that he needed the blessing more, snuck up behind See Boon, grabbed the stick from his brother's hand, and threw it in himself. What resulted was a major altercation in which See Boon roared with rage at the blessing that had been stolen from him, punched See Yang in the face, and cursed his brother and called down doom upon his house (as you can see, the Chan family abounds in brotherly love).

However it was See Yang who got the last laugh. From that point on, everything he touched miraculously turned to gold. He began by scraping together what money he had and buying a small rubber plantation. The expertise he gleaned during his time working at the British-run plantation company made him a model of efficiency and the plantation prospered. He then bought a larger plantation in Segamat and quickly increased its yield.

By contrast, See Boon's textiles shop suddenly burned down. People told him not to be ridiculous, not to allow that silly episode with that stick to ruin him, but it was true that every venture he attempted from then on failed miserably, and in the end, reduced to pauperism in the span of a few years, See Boon hanged himself from a rafter in his house, and with his dying breath he cursed his treacherous brother one final time.

As for See Yang, he kept going from strength to strength. He began to acquire more and more plantations around his home state of Johor – not just rubber plantations, but oil palm plantations too. He moved to the capital of Kuala Lumpur where he married and had two daughters and a son named Chee Yeow (who would later be known as the old patriarch, Nathaniel's grandfather). See Yang acquired even more land, and, as urbanization increased, he began to convert some of the land he bought into housing developments instead of plantations, thus starting the construction arm of his business.

When he died, his son Chan Chee Yeow inherited his business, which had by then become an established name. Hailing from the first generation of the Chans that had grown up wealthy, that had gone to England to study, Chee Yeow brought a class and a polish to the family business that it never had before. He was a skilled networker, courting prominent British officials, and later, influential Malay politicians, rich Chinese businessmen, and clever Indian lawyers. He slipped money under tables and obtained

licenses and contracts unavailable to anyone else. He bribed police officers and judges, politicians and bureaucrats. He expanded the company internationally, buying properties in Singapore, Australia, and England. In time his sons took the helm, adding power plants to the company's burgeoning portfolio, rebranding it as Chan & Chan, a sleek modern empire ready to compete with the other great corporations of the world.

Consider this family. Consider how the history of this so-called eminent family is stained in blood, treachery, and monkey-thievery. Consider how it is a family both blessed and cursed, its fortune built upon a heart of darkness. Consider how despite its wealth, education, and supposed refinement, it still clings to its ancient traditions. Consider also how the line of succession points most acutely to Nathaniel, this eldest son of the eldest son, this reluctant heir, this feckless scion, this incorrigible romantic, this boy who lies asleep at his desk dreaming shadow-dreams of the past.

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Chapter Six

It seems only two types of people exist [in China]: those who admire power and wealth, and those who are being admired for their power and wealth.

- *Annie Wang,* The People's Republic of Desire

Beijing, The People's Republic of China

Not for the first time that night, Guozhong wondered if it was all too much.

He sat at a table in a private room on the upper floor of the Maison Boulud. Champagne flutes stood unused in a corner next to a huge bottle of Moët; no one seemed interested in actually drinking it, just in seeing the liquid shoot out in a golden froth when the hosts popped the cork. Bottles of Johnny Walker Blue Label lay strewn across the table; *these* at least were being drunk copiously, as was the rice wine: the kind that comes in intricate ceramic flasks that resembles Ming dynasty pottery inside elaborate folding boxes so fucking beautiful it seems a crime to throw away.

One of the hosts, Fatty Hung, was yelling something at the top of his voice whilst pouring a flask of rice wine into the cups of his guests, whom he toasted in an endless series of "*Ganbei!*"s. Bald, with gold rings on his fingers and his shirt unbuttoned to his navel to reveal a white singlet stretched over a bulging belly, Fatty Hung laughed

uproariously as he downed cup after cup of rice wine. At one point, he hawked and spat onto the polished floor, and an assistant knelt quickly to wipe it up.

Guozhong shuddered inwardly. *Not here.*

Formerly the American Embassy during the Qing Dynasty, the building that now housed the Maison Boulud in Beijing was built in 1903 using steel and lumber imported from the United States. Just this year it had been refurbished and opened as a luxury restaurant, the latest outpost in chef Daniel Boulud's dining empire. The exterior was a stately two-storey neo-classical structure of granite and gray brick. White balustrades lined its roof. At the front of the building was a terrace where some guests sat sipping drinks beneath fir trees in the cool summer air. At the main entrance a small pointed pediment rested on two slim Ionian columns.

Step between the doors of the Maison Boulud and you find yourself in a lobby of leather sofas and polished wood. Great white columns and golden chandeliers flank either side. On the wall in front of you is a frieze of capering horses, nymphs, and satyrs. Turn right and you enter an elegant restaurant of glass, black furniture, and white wood panels. The food is good, if incredibly overpriced: try the crab wrapped with avocado topped with pine nuts and fennel pollen; the mushy segments of the green fruit perfectly complimenting the firm succulent crab flesh. Try the crispy pork shoulder and the confit belly tender as the night. Try the DB Burger (if you really want to pay a fortune for a burger) containing sirloin, foie gras, and braised short rib.

Turn left and you enter a stylish bar with muted lighting, the floor white marble with black squares, where you can munch profiteroles and macaroons and sample the house's special cocktails. Go up the staircase with its white carved banisters that reaches up and then splits into two directions and you arrive at the upper level with its private rooms.

Once, Guozhong mused, not so long ago, dining at a place like this, especially as a government official, would have seemed decadent, even dangerous. Once.

Once, this area had served as the residence of the Dalai Lama, the office of the Chinese Foreign Minister, and the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. It was also said, that it served as the site of the secret meeting between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai in 1971 to plan President Nixon's historic visit to China, a story the restaurant's proprietors encouraged.

Tonight, one of its rooms served country bumpkin businessman Fatty Hung from Shanxi Province and his "elder brother" Mayor Bu Zhidao as they celebrated the discovery of a rich new coal seam in their region.

Something woke Guozhong from his reverie. Fatty Hung had brought out a large silver punchbowl, and, calling for the bottles of wine that his guests had brought to the dinner, had them all uncorked and their contents poured into the punchbowl. Guozhong

gasped in horror as the contents of his bottle of Chateau Lafite 1962, which he had procured at considerable expense, was mixed with seven other different wines.

Oblivious to Guozhong's dismay, Fatty Hung laughed and stirred the punchbowl with a ladle like a demented alchemist, before scooping its mingled contents into glasses for himself and the nine others. He pressed the first glass into the hand of his "elder brother." Not much slimmer than Fatty Hung, but with sleazily slicked black hair over black-rimmed glasses, Mayor Bu Zhidao laughed as he accepted the glass of wine, toasted his guests, and drained it in one gulp.

When the ¥180,000 bill came, the guests reached unconvincingly for their wallets, though Fatty Hung stayed them with his hand. It was Mayor Bu Zhidao, however, who insisted on paying. Fatty Hung beat his breast in outrage and protested about loss of face, but in the end it was the "elder brother" who gestured to his assistant, who stepped forward, unzipped a black sports bag filled with fat stacks of ¥100 notes, and upended it on the table. A waitress quickly whisked the notes off to run them through a money checking machine.

Once, not so long ago, such blatant extravagance would have been stupidly reckless, would have inspired shock and disgust. Once.

"Come," said Mayor Bu Zhidao gesturing to the door. They would adjourn to the nightclub where there would be girls waiting for them at their table.

Good, thought Guozhong as he stepped into the cool night air, *I could use one tonight.*

Behind him glowed a building of light with a bright red star at its pinnacle. The wide expanse of the old legation quarter, now called Ch'ien Men 23, lay ahead, the Beijing Center for the Arts in front, and another neo-classical building (this one with its walls covered with ivy) to his right, all around a square of stone and trimmed grass.

He waved away Fatty Hung's offer of a lift. "I have my own car," he said.

He called his driver and walked out towards the main road. Nearby he could see the Arrow Tower, perched like a giant spider over the portal, and even nearer was Zhengyang Men, the great gatehouse that led into Tiananmen Square. Even at night, though, you could see the smog, the smog that lay over the city like a toxic gauze.

As his car pulled up, his phone rang. Guozhong looked down at the screen and cursed. The girls would have to wait. His master was calling.

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Twenty minutes later Guozhong stood across the desk from the person many considered the most dangerous man in China.

Full of face, hair dyed jet black over piercing black eyes behind icy glasses, Cai Rizhao, The Crab King, The Master of Whispers, Commander of the 50 Cent Party, Chairman of the CCP Central Commission for Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress, leaned back in his chair in his Zhongnanhai office with the same aloof air he assumed anywhere else in the world. Whether making a speech at the Great Hall of the People, or greeting foreign delegates at an international summit, or striding through a grisly disaster site amidst the cries of the wounded and dying, no one in living memory had ever seen Cai Rizhao seem the least bit disconcerted. And *that* was disconcerting.

He was called The Crab King because he was the chief of propaganda. It was said that he could convince people that black was white, and white black. It was said that he could make or break a man with words: that he could elevate a nobody into a national hero, or bring a colossus crashing down to earth (something Guozhong knew all too well). It was said that no personality was safe from him, no sterling reputation, no record of honor, nothing was out of his reach, he would *find* a blemish, somewhere and sometime, and *blow* on it, making it spread, as inexorably as a drop of ink on a sheet of white paper, until it had grown to cover the whole. And then came the dissolution: the accolades of former comrades would wither in their mouths, the bonds of devotion between friends, bonds that had been built over years and pledged over a hundred dinners and a thousand cups, would suddenly become as mist, even kin would distance themselves from the unfortunate victim, and then even death seemed a blessed release.

He was called The Master of Whispers because of his close ties to the police force and his extensive network of informers. It was said that networks of officers and street urchins, waiters and prostitutes, reported to him. He was known to engage rivals in pleasant conversation, and then suddenly reveal their secrets to them to throw them off balance at critical moments. It was said that he often deployed his 50 Cent Party (his army of internet propagandists) to undermine his political opponents. It was said that he never slept. It was said that he had compound eyes like those of a fly that enabled him to see from every angle. It was said that he had poison pill caches of secrets positioned around the world, caches that would be released in the event of his unnatural demise, and which had the potential to take down the current Chinese leadership and half the country along with it.

These were rumors Cai didn't discourage. They had helped him scale the mountain of power, had helped him reach the dizzying heights of the Politburo Standing Committee at the tender age of fifty-eight, and, someday, might allow him to reach even further.

It was, of course, an honor for Guozhong to serve as his *mishu* – it had granted him extraordinary prestige, contacts, and access to the halls of power – however it was also supposedly an honor to have been a kamikaze pilot. Cai had purged one of his *mishu*s in the past for disloyalty, real or suspected. Those who survived the tutelage of

their exacting master, though, were fast-tracked on the bureaucratic ladder, usually assigned as provincial governors or ministers on the State Council upon leaving his service.

And those former *mishu*s, Guozhong reminded himself, those protégés of Cai Rizhao, who had been trained to carry his files and then seeded into key positions around the country, were another of his power bases.

"How was dinner?" Cai asked in a voice smooth as oil.

"It was…interesting." Guozhong chose his words carefully.

"The Mayor paid." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

Guozhong quickly recounted the details of the evening – who was there, where they were seated, what was discussed, how everyone behaved, the dynamic between Fatty Hung and the Mayor – all the while conscious of the fact that his master probably knew all of it already.

He has a way of listening, Guozhong thought as he spoke. Cai Rizhao seldom smiled when being addressed, nor did he laugh or nod or frown or raise an eyebrow, his face conveyed none of those simple human gestures that acknowledge and reassure the speaker; he just looked at you quietly, his eyes unblinking, his expression inscrutable. The effect was unnerving. Soon, Guozhong felt his face flush, felt his tongue stumble over his words, he felt pressured to speak faster, to say more – anything to draw some kind of reaction from that face that remained still as wax, all this despite his close association with the man, despite the fact that he'd addressed Cai countless times. When at last Guozhong related the part about the mixing of the wines and the sports bag full of banknotes and concluded with an incredulous laugh, his laugh hung thinly in the air like a string of incense. Guozhong cursed himself inwardly. He had a theory that his master enjoyed awkward silences, that he purposely cultivated them so that those they unsettled would feel compelled to fill them, to blurt out more…and in the process unintentionally let something slip.

Cai Rizhao let the silence stretch out for a few more uncomfortable moments before finally breaking the tension by inclining his head slightly. "It must be difficult," he drawled slowly, "for someone of your background to have to witness such boorish behavior."

Guozhong felt a chill run down his spine. *Your background.* He forced his voice steady. "Not for a humble servant of the people like myself."

For the first time Cai seemed amused. "Of course," he said with a thin smile. Then, after a moment, he added: "I've heard your father is well." Cai studied Guozhong's face, his sharp eyes searching for a reaction.

Guozhong met his gaze, his expression betraying nothing. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Does it ever bother you," said Cai, the pupils of his eyes sharpening to black points, "to know what people call you behind your back?"

Guozhong felt his face flush. His fingernails dug grooves into the flesh of his palms. "No more than it bothers you to be called The Crab King," he answered, not knowing if he should feel proud or ashamed that his voice remained so steady.

At this Cai chuckled. "Indeed." Cai withdrew his gaze and Guozhong felt his heartbeat resume, even as he strained to suppress any visible sign of relief. Cai drew out a file from a stack. "There was an earthquake," he said, changing the subject, "in Sichuan."

"Of course," Guozhong replied. Everyone knew.

"There have been criticisms from ah…certain quarters. The usual: online commentators, bloggers, a certain professor from Fudan University."

"What have they been saying?"

"That the schools collapsed because of shoddy construction. Criticisms of the rescue efforts, alleging inadequate communications, vehicles, equipment, training."

"So-"

"Remind the censors and our friends in the police that we want them silenced. Have our online commentators concentrate on this issue too."

"As you will."

"These criticisms have also been picked up by the foreign media. Your English is good. An extensive statement will be needed to counter them." He handed Guozhong the file. "All the materials you need should be in here. Relate the solidarity of our people and the bravery of our soldiers. Mention how our soldiers' hands were cut and bloodied as they strained to moved the rubble. Stress how quickly we mobilized the rescue. Compare it favorably with the aftermath of that hurricane in America a few years ago, what was it called? Kat-?"

"Katrina."

"Yes, Katrina."

Guozhong flicked through the papers in the file. "When will we release this statement?"

"First thing tomorrow morning." Cai indicated a small desk in the corner of the room. "Sit."