A Daughter Less Ordinary

Frances Yip
Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband, children, brother, and late parents. Thank you for being there for me.

I would also like to dedicate it to my third sister who is suffering from a serious illness. I hope she will recover completely and live her dreams.

All my love,

Frances Yip (Ipohgal)
Preface

I had always wanted to write this story when it first happened thirty years ago but had been held back by two reasons.

Firstly, I doubted if anyone would believe me and secondly, I wondered if I would be ostracized after opening up like this.

Young and naïve then and after much consideration, I decided not to. I was not ready yet.

So what prompted me to write it now?

The answer is very simple – I have come of age. I am fifty one this year.

I have found that age empowers me with the courage to write anything my heart desires without having to worry whether people will believe my story or not or whether people will shun me after reading this. When you have reached a milestone in your life’s journey, you are less fearful of contempt, rejection or ridicule.

Also, age heals me. Now, I am able to write this without a trace of self-pity or resentment. Through the years, I have learned to accept and to forgive. This is the only way I can find peace again.

I wish I do not have to include certain people in this book but it is unavoidable since they were part of my story and experience. Collectively, they have taught me some very valuable lessons in life.

Let me make it very clear that I have no intention whatsoever to promote any religion or practice to anyone through this piece of writing. What I have written here is exactly what I myself have gone through and how my family helped me deal with it, nothing more and nothing less.
Praise for Frances Yip
and
A Daughter Less Ordinary

Mrs. Wong Yew Choong
Bachelor of Science (University of Malaya), Grad Cert. of Education (University of London).

When Frances told me she was planning to write another book, I was pleased that she would continue on her chosen path as a writer. But when she said she planned to write about her experience as one who possessed a “third eye”, I had wondered what she could make of such a story. However, she has successfully penned her personal experience in a realm which few of us know about. Whilst believing that such events did occur, I had never explored the details about such “bizarre” occurrences. Reading what Frances has written, I have learnt more about this world of the supernatural. She has woven a fascinating tale of her life, love, sad and happy experiences…..a story everyone will appreciate and enjoy.
Every experience, no matter how bad it seems, holds within it a blessing of some kind. The goal is to find it.

- Siddhartha Gautama
**Prologue**

Mom used to describe herself, my eldest sister Ophelia, and me as people *less ordinary* due to our inborn ability to see and feel what people more ordinary could not. You see, the three of us were born with *yin yang* eyes. *Yin* and *yang* are opposite elements in the universe. *Yin* means dark, cold and gloomy while *yang* means bright, warm and cheerfulness. *Yin* is a term used to refer to the dead while *yang* refers to the living. Thus, with *yin yang* eyes, one can see the dead and the living. The dead here does not mean corpses but ghosts.

Some elderly Chinese also believe newborns have *yin yang* eyes in the early days of their lives. Have you noticed how some of them would cry non-stop for no reason at all? They are believed to have been traumatized by the sight of ghosts in their midst. Jealous that such babies manage to gain rebirth while they are denied this privilege, the ghosts would hang around these babies, poking and pulling them to show their displeasure at being left out. Unable to express their fear, the only thing the babies can do is to cry endlessly. Praising the babies by saying how beautiful or cute they are will further increase the wrath of the ghosts who in turn will torment the little ones even more. This is why superstitious Chinese do not praise newborns in their presence. On the other hand, they would say something like, “How ugly this baby is!” hoping this will please the ghosts and make them go away. However, it is believed this condition will disappear after several weeks when the ghosts are thought to have accepted their fate and moved on.

Apart from humans, some animals too, are believed to have *yin yang* eyes. Dogs are a good example. Have you heard how the dogs howl eerily at a quiet and dark corner at night? Their howling can make your hair stand on end or send a chill down your spine. It is also widely believed that applying the blood of black dogs on the eyes would enable one to see ghosts. I don’t think anyone would like to give this a try, given the frightening consequences.

I have heard that *yin yang* eyes can be acquired after one has gone
through some rigorous training and rituals. Those who aspire to be a
ghost-buster or a medium would know more about this than I – but I
have yet to meet any ghost-buster or medium in my entire life.

Besides being able to see the paranormal with our eyes, Mom, Ophelia,
and I can feel them too. By just stepping into a particular building, we
can tell whether that place is inhabited by ghosts or not. When our hair
stands on ends, our bodies tremble slightly or some strange and hollow
noises ring in our ears, most probably that place is haunted.

In the home where I grew up, Taoism was very moderately practiced by
Grandma and Mom. As children then, all my siblings and I were mere
spectators and sometimes, ignorant participants. It was not until I had
reached adulthood that I began to understand the meaning behind their
practices. On the other hand, Dad was a free-thinker. Besides being Tao-
ists, many Chinese are Buddhists too.

It is interesting to note that there were two observances common to both
religions – *Ching Ming* and the Hungry Ghost Festival. Both have the
same theme – centering on the dead.

*Ching* which means clear, and *Ming* which means bright, is also some-
times known as *All Souls Day* or *Tomb Sweeping Day*. It is an observance
to celebrate filial piety, a virtue dearest to the heart of every Chinese for
thousands of years. We were taught to be filial to our elders when they
were alive and even after they have died.

This observation normally falls on 4th or 5th April each year. Through-
out the two weeks before and two weeks after the actual date, and also
on the day itself, daytime visits are made to the tombs of ancestors to
pay respect to them. It is like a picnic at the countryside. Weeds are
pulled out, tombs are swept clean, minor repairs are made to parts de-
stroyed by the elements, and faded gold-colored inscriptions are given a
fresh coat of paint.

Food such as roasted pork, steamed chicken, pink-colored cupcakes,
dumplings, fruits, wine, and Chinese tea are then offered. Paper offer-
ings in the form of money and clothes are later burnt in the belief that these items will keep the dead contented. Some families even let off fire-crackers, believing this act will attract good fortune to the living as well as the dead.

For many, *Ching Ming* can be viewed as a fun-filled day of wholesome activity. Besides Chinese New Year, this observance brings together young and old in the family and allows them to catch up with one another, as well as enabling them to carry out their filial duties together. Little wonder then, many staying in other states or parts of the country take the trouble to travel home for this important festival.

Unlike *Ching Ming*, the Hungry Ghost Festival is dreaded by many. The mere mention of it sends a chill down our spines. This is because the dead honored in this observance are not our benign ancestors but unknown wandering spirits who can cause harm if we are not lucky or careful enough.

The whole of the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar which usually falls in the Gregorian calendar months of August or September is dedicated to this observance. Thus, the Chinese seventh month is also known as the Ghost Month. Among the Taoists, the Hungry Ghost Festival is known as *Yue Lan Jie*, and among the Buddhists, it is called *Ullambana*.

This observance commemorates a very filial son called Mu Lian who managed to save his wicked mother from the deepest level of Hell. When Mu Lian wanted to leave home and become a monk, his widowed mother was very displeased with his decision and mocked him. She also committed wicked acts like killing dogs and then offering the meat to other monks who went to her house to beg for alms. A very conceited woman, she often jeered at beggars and chased them away whenever she came across them.

As a result, she became a ghost after her death. In his meditations, Mu Lian saw how his mother’s soul suffered in Hell. She could not eat anything because whatever food reached her mouth became fire, thus burn-
ing her tongue and throat. Nothing could reach her stomach and she became a hungry ghost, pleading to be helped out of this misery.

Seeing this, Mu Lian consulted his Master who advised him to do as many good deeds as possible to compensate for his mother’s misdeeds. He donated vegetarian food to thousands of poor people, chanted *sutras* (Buddhist verses) day and night, and released trapped animals. His collective good deeds finally touched the *Buddha* who quickly ordered the gates of Hell to be opened so that the dead could have a month’s respite. Mu Lian’s mother was eventually released from Hell and was given a higher rebirth.

From then on, the gate of Hell was believed to be opened each year on this particular month so that wandering spirits could roam the earth among the living.

According to Grandma and Mom, it is believed that vengeful spirits will come back during this particular month to seek revenge. Those who have blood on their hands will not be able to sleep peacefully during the Ghost Month. They are afraid those they have killed will come back for them.

The Hungry Ghost Festival is also a time to observe many taboos or *pantang larang*, as the Malays call it. They first started as old wives tales but were later widely accepted and followed.

Those who had drowned would go back to the rivers, pools, ponds, lakes or seas to wait for their replacement while those who died on the roads would orchestrate some accidents so that their souls, trapped where they lost their lives, could be liberated. So, no swimming or night time driving, folks!

Grandma often scared us when we were kids by telling us that malicious spirits were lurking in many dark or quiet corners or under trees. We were not supposed to go out at night to places like parks or dark alleys as crossing the paths of these malicious spirits at such spots would bring dire consequences – they will make us fall sick.
Bright colored clothes are not allowed lest they attract the attention of wandering spirits. Red or yellow are strictly forbidden because these colors are believed to be their favorite colors. Auspicious celebrations like weddings, birthdays, moving house or starting a new business venture are not encouraged in this month because the Ghost Month is considered a *yin* month, a month when the evil forces are believed to be very strong.

Eating out at night at stalls where the food is hung up for all to see and choose, is also strongly discouraged. A good example would be the stalls selling roasted chicken or pork rice. Some people claimed they saw hungry ghosts licking the food with their long and fiery tongues. If you buy such food and eat them, chances are, you will get sick.

Although the Hungry Ghost Festival has its origins in China, the practice of burning offerings such as paper money and paper clothes as well as laying out food on the roadsides for the wandering spirits actually started in this country some one hundred years ago.

According to one popular theory, an influx of poor Chinese came to Malaya to work in the mines during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were mainly from the southern provinces of China. They dreamed of striking gold here before going back home for good. However, many fell sick and died due to very harsh working conditions in Malaya in the early days and could not return home in time to seek treatment. As a result, their families were not aware of their death and did not claim their bodies. Needless to say, they did not get a decent ceremony or a proper burial. It was believed this resulted in their becoming wandering or homeless spirits, forever not at peace, forever wandering in search of food, and whatever their hearts desired.

In Taoism, it is believed that when a person dies, his soul still needs money, food, and clothes in the next world to be comfortable. Because of this belief, the living burn paper offerings, and many leave food on the roadside for these poor wandering spirits who could not return to their home villages in China. This later became a popular practice which persists till this day. It is like giving some money and food to the dead.
just as what we do to the living poor. These are acts of charity, only that the recipients are the dead. Now can you understand why many women folk squat by the roadsides or back alleys when night falls to offer paper money and clothes as well as food to these wandering spirits whom they politely address as *good brothers and sisters*?

Some Taoist temples also hold Chinese operas to entertain these wandering spirits. Rows and rows of long wooden benches are arranged for these guests and no humans dare to sit there as the audience is from the other world. Therefore, it will not be a surprise to see the opera troupe playing to an empty gallery.

My entire childhood, and that of my siblings, as well as my cousins staying at 188 Hugh Low Street, were spent listening to wakes, watching funerals, and also observing the Hungry Ghost Festivals. This is hardly surprising considering our house is just across from Hume Street which is known to the locals as *Coffin Street*. Not a day passed without hearing the noises created on this street feared and avoided by most Ipoh residents.

At these funeral parlors, elaborate ceremonies are conducted for a few nights to commemorate the dead each year during the Ghost Month. Prayer sessions called *Pu Tu* in Cantonese are held. *Pu Tu* means universal deliverance or universal liberation from sufferings. It is believed hungry ghosts, like Mu Lian’s mother, need salvation through prayers.

As a child, I remember seeing rows and rows of long altars being set up outside these funeral parlors. All kinds of cakes, fruits, and drinks were lavishly laid out. Heaps and heaps of paper offerings were scattered on the ground to be burned later as offerings to the wandering spirits who happened to pass by this eerie street.

A large paper effigy of the *King of Hell* about twenty feet high with two protruding fiery eyes was erected in the middle of Hume Street. Beside him stood the *Cow Head* and *Horse Face* who were the King’s generals. They looked equally tall and fearsome. A large paper ship was also constructed to carry the dead spirits to and fro to take part in the ceremony.
With my siblings and cousins, we watched from our windows in awe as Taoists priests in black ceremonial robes (with a large yin yang symbol on their backs) spat out some alcohol mixed with tea into a large fire pit fixed on the ground outside the funeral parlor. Chanting Taoists verses while holding a sword in one hand, and a tablet bearing the names of the dead in another, they would jump over it, and the fire would burst out into a big flame.

This ritual, called thew for, or jump over the fire, is an imitation of how Mu Lian descended to the deepest level of Hell (believed to be Level 18) to save his mother from suffering, and helped her gain rebirth. The priests would repeat this many times throughout the night, each time to represent a dead person. These acts were carried out in the hope that they too, would gain salvation for the dead just like what Mu Lian did for his mother.

On the fourteenth night of the seventh month, after all the chanting of prayers and thew for were done, all paper items were burnt in a huge bonfire in the middle of the street. When everything was over, and the crowd had dispersed, silence descended over Hume Street again. Stray dogs were seen foraging for food which the fire had not consumed.

The Hungry Ghost Festival comes to an end on the thirtieth night of the seventh month when the gate of Hell is closed again at the stroke of midnight. It coincides with the birthday of Earth Store Bodhisattva who is also known as Ti Tsang Wang Pusa in Chinese or Ksitigarbha in Sanskrit, the patron saint of all the dead. He is believed to have made a great vow to stay in Hell to guard the dead until it becomes empty one day.

It was during one of these Hungry Ghost Festivals that my story begins……
Part 1

Grandpa’s Folly

We must recognize that the suffering of one person or one nation is the suffering of all humanity.

– 14th Dalai Lama
Chapter One

When I opened my eyes again, dawn had arrived to take the place of night. The sky was no longer completely dark. Beams of gold from the sun hidden below the horizon brightened up the morning sky and dimmed the distant stars. Had I not been jolted up by a sudden chill that ran through my entire being, I would have blissfully slept on for several hours more. But now, after having been woken up so rudely, my bleary eyes started to ache for something familiar to latch on to. From where I lay on the bed, I could see the yellow floral curtain being thrown back to allow some fresh air from the hills into the room. Strangely, at this hour, the light in my room was still on.

As soon as Mom and Dad saw me stirring under the quilt like a trapped animal, they sprang to their feet and hurried over to my side. I could hear my father calling out my name gently and repeatedly. Seeing how I finally turned my head towards his direction, he heaved a loud sigh of relief.

“It is morning now, she’s already gone,” Dad told me in a voice that sounded very much like a promise, “and we won’t allow her to come back and harm you again.”

So, it was not a hallucination after all. It was real. Somebody did come and borrow my body last night while I was asleep.

To this, I could only nod and give him a weak smile from the corners of my dry lips. Anyway, there was not much vitality left inside me to give him a more vigorous response.

When I gazed into his eyes, I could see they were clouded with concern. Beneath his stern-looking face, bewilderment mingled with disbelief gave him away. There were not many occasions when Dad, the family’s patriarch, would bare his soul so freely.

“I think she’ll be alright – see, even the glow has come back to her
cheeks already. A little rest will serve her well,” I heard him telling this to Mom and she nodded in complete agreement.

It took me some effort to digest this and recall what had happened the previous night. My brain had been slowed down by this sudden attack. However, my hearing faculty was still in topnotch condition. I could still hear very well what was going on outside the house.

The pack of stray dogs assembled outside the gate of my brother’s house had already disbanded on their own. Their jaws must have gotten tired or their bellies empty from howling miserably all night long. So they just took leave from that spot, either to take a much needed rest along the back alley or to scavenge for some food at the dump further down the street.

Chirpy little sparrows on their way to gather food darted noisily from tree to tree, and also on the electrical wires that were hanging precariously between the street lamps fixed along the pavement outside the row of houses. Faint sounds of cocks crowing could be heard coming from the new village a short distance away.

By now, Dad’s plump fingers were hard at work wiping off the little beads of sweat that had sprouted along my hairline. He had done this for me many times before, when I was a little girl and under happier circumstances – usually when I ran back home to him after playing with the neighborhood boys along the corridor in the evenings. But this time, the situation was so different.

I, his youngest daughter, who had barely stepped into the threshold of adulthood, had just been through a very horrifying experience. It happened one quiet night in August 1984 soon after the family had retired to bed.

I do not know how it feels to have a dagger plunged into one’s abdomen like what you get to see in Chinese sword-fighting movies at the cinema, but common sense tells me it must be very painful and can even lead to death. So that night, when I was suddenly woken up by a very deep pain
in my abdomen, I thought some black-clad ninja had just climbed in through the window and knifed me. The sharp pain was indescribable. It was definitely more than what my young body could take.

I struggled to get up from my bed and when I eventually did, I could feel the dark room I was sleeping in spinning slowly in circles like a musical carousel. I became very scared and confused. I did not know what had happened to me. All I knew was I felt very sick at that particular moment. Then I began to feel sharp nails scratching unrelentingly on the surface of my throat and clenched fists pounding furiously at the base of my esophagus.

With no time to waste, I staggered to the door and then hobbled to the bathroom a few steps away. I tried to vomit into the ceramic basin but nothing came out from my throat. I then sat on the toilet bowl but again, nothing came out from my anus either. I felt like a time bomb waiting to explode but was held back by something or someone hiding maliciously inside me.

Finally, out of desperation, I dragged myself to my parents’ bedroom and banged at their door with whatever might still left in me.

“Mom, Dad, open the door, quick……I feel very sick!” I pleaded with frightened tears.

How fortunate I was to have parents who were light sleepers! They jumped out from their bed at once and threw their door opened. They were shocked to see me slumped on the floor just outside their bedroom. Both of them rushed out and pulled me up to my feet again before helping me to their bed.

Mom quickly pressed her palm on my forehead and exclaimed in a panicky voice, “Gosh, what’s happened to you? You look so pale and your forehead’s so cold! I’d told you to bring along an umbrella yesterday afternoon when you went out in that drizzle but you didn’t listen!” And with this, she launched into a barrage of maternal nagging.
My brother who slept in the next room woke up on hearing the commotion and scurried over to see what it was about. Mom immediately instructed him to get me some aspirin and a glass of water. Dad dabbed some medicated oil on my forehead when I complained of feeling giddy. Quite some time passed but I did not get any better despite all the attention given. My parents became paranoid. Mom began to suspect that I had more than just a normal cold and stomachache. I saw her whispering something into her husband’s ears after which they began to look at me with suspicious eyes.

At this stage, I was unable to speak anymore and instead, trembled like someone in a trance. I feel myself standing outside my body but I could still hear and see everything that was going on around me. It was like you were being chased out of your own house by an intruder but you were allowed to peep inside from the window.

Mom could not take it anymore and broke the silence. She spoke in a very calm manner, “Hey you, please don’t disturb my daughter. Tell us what you want and we’ll give it to you. Go away and leave her alone. Do you hear me?” I did not respond to her but continued trembling with my eyes closed, very much like a medium in a trance that you see in a Chinese temple during the Nine Emperor Gods Festival.

Eerie howling from stray dogs outside the house filled the quiet street from one end to the other and this must have woken up quite a few sleeping souls living within the vicinity.

“Listen here, I promise to burn some gold and silver ingots on the roadside for you. I’ll offer food and drinks too. Just come and collect them tomorrow night and then leave at once, never to come back again, agree?” Mom bargained with the stranger who had taken over my physical body.

When I remained silent to her offers, she negotiated patiently a few more times. It was not an easy task for a human being to communicate with a spirit. They were, after all, entities of different dimensions. At last, I nodded my head slightly.
“Good, please leave her now, quick!” Mom urged on, glad that she had managed to get the spirit to leave me.

She could feel a gush of cold wind blowing across the room before everything came to a standstill.

Miraculously, the stabbing pain in my stomach vanished very quickly without leaving a trace behind and the trembling stopped at once. The giddiness went away as well. When it was over, I could feel my whole body extremely tired, like as if I had just done the most arduous job in my entire life. Not only was I totally exhausted, the most torturous part was the strong urge to throw up again and again. It was like a panicky intruder trying very desperately to flee from a locked house.

When I finally got myself back in one complete piece, Mom gently pinched my cheeks and asked in a gentle voice, “You’re alright now?”

I could hear her clearly but being in a daze, I was slow in giving her an answer.

“Mom, I badly want to vomit,” I replied in such an inaudible voice it was a surprise that she could hear me at all.

My mother, still visibly shaken by what had happened, and struggling to contain her composure, dashed off to the bathroom to retrieve the small red-colored plastic spittoon for me. In a split second, she was back with it and was by my side again.

“Here,” she said, pointing to the container tucked clumsily under my chin. “Throw up whatever you want to throw, don’t keep back anything you don’t need.”

I quickly grabbed it from her and tried to force out whatever I could from my throat. She slapped my back several times, quite hard, so that I could throw up more easily.

Instantly, the spittoon was half-filled with some white-colored mushy
looking substances that resembled residues from the dinner I had with the family hours before we went to bed that night. Shreds of chicken meat could be seen swimming in the porridge that was left undigested in my intestinal tract.

The violent urge to throw up again and again when there was nothing much left in my stomach made me cry out in frustration. In the end, my tiny frame could not put up with this kind of punishment anymore. Drained of all energy, I just collapsed back onto the bed with small drops of saliva dribbling down from one side of my mouth.

When Mom recalled that fateful night with me days later, she said, with my limbs dangling lifelessly over the bedside, and my long hair in such a terrible mess, I looked more like some child’s discarded doll lying by the rubbish dump than a robust young girl of twenty and in the prime of her life.

When all the throwing-up was done, the room was strangely quiet again. So quiet I could hear my own breathing and also the hanging fan rotating sluggishly above me. Obviously, Dad had not oiled it for some time. Even in my current condition, I found the noise a bit annoying to my ears.

From the corner of a pair of eyes that could not support its heavy lids anymore, I could see my parents sitting near the window. They had not slept the whole night attending to me. Fear and uneasiness were clearly written on their faces. Knowing there was nothing much I could do to cheer them up, I slowly closed my eyes to try to catch up with the sleep that I had lost that night.
Chapter Two

Neither Mom nor Dad talked about what had happened the night before. They just went about with their daily tasks.

As usual, Dad had a large pile of scissors to sharpen that day. He was seen bending over his workbench right after breakfast, stopping briefly for lunch and an occasional visit to the loo. He did not want to keep his regular customers waiting too long as he knew many of them needed their shears urgently and some of them came from as far away as Kuala Kangsar or Taiping for his service.

That afternoon after lunch, Mom and I walked to a shop called Har Choy Seng on Cockman Street which is on the same row as the Telecoms Building and Pasar Besar Ipoh. This shop sells all kinds of worship paraphernalia required by the Taoists. From this shop, we bought stacks and stacks of square-shaped papers with little gold and silver boxes in the middle and some joss sticks as well as white candles.

Back at Dad’s shop, we sat down to fold them into paper ingots to be burned that night. We managed to produce two big bags of ingots – one bag of gold and the other, a bag of silver. Mom also got ready some food like roasted pork, steamed white rice, pink-colored cupcakes, fruits of various kinds and of course, a pot of Chinese tea.

We were still occupying 188 Hugh Low Street in the daytime where Dad continued to operate his scissor sharpening business at the back portion of the shop. The front portion was leased out to a travel agency on Jalan Yang Kalsom to store stuff like tires and barrels of diesel. I took up a small corner to give tuition to a group of primary school students from the neighborhood. It was a good way to earn some pocket money while looking for a job. But we were not staying there at night. My brother had bought a medium cost double-story terrace house in a residential area near the limestone hills and each night, after work, he would fetch us back to his house in his car. The next morning, he would send us to town.
again before he went to work and this had become our daily routine.

That evening, we went back to my brother’s house earlier than usual. When the last ray of sunlight had left the sky, Mom and I spread out the offerings on the roadside outside the house. Squatting near a drain, we lighted up some joss sticks and white candles. Mom chanted some verses, evoking the spirit to come and partake of the offering for she suspected I must have offended some malicious and restless spirit lurking behind some corners of Ipoh’s old town when I went there for a job interview a few days ago. We then burnt the paper ingots until they became a pile of ashes. Then we cleared up the place.

After this was done, we went back into the house, had our dinner, watched some Cantonese series from Hong Kong on television and then retired to bed. As usual, Mom and Dad slept in their room, my brother in his and me in mine.

Half-way in my sleep, once again, I was woken by the same pain I had the previous night. This time, the pain was even more intense. Horrified, I screamed out loudly for my parents as I could not get up. I felt my body being strapped to the bed. Together with my brother, they quickly rushed over to my room. Mom had earlier told me not to lock my bedroom door in case anything should happen and I might need them in my room.

From the grim look on their faces, it seemed our offering at the roadside earlier that night had been in vain.

“Who are you and what do you want from us?” Mom asked the spirit that had got inside my body.

I began to tremble slightly.

“Come on, tell us who you are and what you want from us. Why do you choose to disturb my daughter in this way?” Mom asked again.

I could not give her an answer but stared blankly at the fan hanging above me.
“We’ve already given you some offerings of gold and silver ingots, and food too. Aren’t these enough for you? Why are you so greedy, coming back for more?” It was Dad’s turn to ask.

Still no answer came from my dry lips. The room was very quiet and a lizard could be heard trying to attract its mate on the wall.

“Alright, we’ll offer the same items again tomorrow night at the same place but make sure you collect them this time. After this, don’t come back anymore, do you hear me?” Mom warned sternly.

This warning struck the apex of my core and I found myself nodding my head voluntarily. It was all over within minutes.

After vomiting some white substance into the same spittoon which Mom passed to me, I could not hold myself up anymore and dropped down on the bed. Trembling from cold after this attack, I curled myself into a fetal position. Seeing this, Mom then gently covered me with a quilt before leaving me to sleep.

I could hear my parents and brother having a discussion outside my room. And the dogs, well, one or two of them were still howling sorrowfully outside the house but I was too tired to find it a bother.

Soon, I drifted off to sleep and had a dream that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

I saw a feeble old lady dressed in white, something that looked like a uniform from some institution. Her long flowing hair hung carelessly over her shoulder. In her hands were some items she was trying very desperately to put away under her long sleeve.

All this while, she was cringing in fear under a big tree. Mobbing her wildly was a group of fierce looking beings with protruding eyeballs and bulging bellies. Some of their long burning tongues were licking her face. One or two of them were trying to sink their fangs into her hands that were clutching tightly to her belongings.
Yelping loudly, she was trying to fight them off but they overpowered her in strength and number. In the end, all her possessions were forcefully snatched away from her, leaving her almost naked. Seeing this, she crumbled down like a piece of pickled vegetable and cried hysterically while pounding the ground with her bitter fists.

A moment later, she was gone from the spot and was nowhere to be seen, so too was the mob of demon-like beings. In their place was a wisp of white smoke.

I did not know who she was, for she had a face I have never seen before.

When I woke up later that day, I gave this dream a long and hard thought. I was trying to decipher what it meant. Eventually, I gave up because I really had no idea who this old lady was. Disturbing as it was, I did not confide in Mom about this strange dream as I did not wish to distress her further.
Chapter Three

Despite our limited financial resources, Mom kept her promise. The roadside offerings on the second night were more elaborate. Several sets of paper clothes, boxes of jewelry, stacks and stacks of hell bank notes of various denominations as well as many kinds of foods and drinks were offered this time. It was like we were having a banquet.

A few busybodies living nearby stopped their bicycles or motorcycles and asked Mom what the occasion was that warranted such a grand lay-out of food but she remained tight-lipped. Before long, some stray dogs and cats began to station themselves from a distance to eye the food laid out on the ground, hoping for an obligatory bite from us. Instead, Mom chased them away with a stick. After having cleared the area from prying eyes, she then invited the offended spirit to come and partake what we had to offer. This was followed by the burning of paper offerings. I helped by turning the piles of burning papers upside down with a stick to make sure they were thoroughly burnt to the last piece.

When it was done, we cleared up the spot and went inside the house, locking the door behind us. Mom said this was to prevent us from seeing the spirit feasting on the food, a sight that could be most frightening.

That night, we went to bed a little earlier. This time, we all slept in the same room for my parents were afraid the same thing would happen again. We kept all the lights in the house on, even those in the porch and backyard.

Not long after we had dozed off, some stray dogs began to assemble in front of the house, howling eerily in the quiet night. Very soon, I could feel the same sharp piercing pain in my abdomen. But this time, I could feel another type of pain as well. Hands, and many of them too, were tearing at my heart as if each wanted to have a piece of this vital organ. Again, I screamed out loudly and this woke up the rest sleeping in the same room with me.
Mom was the first to get up and rushed to my side. Kneeling down beside me, she stroked my head and asked worriedly, “Is the spirit here again to disturb you, daughter?” I could only look at her and nod weakly. I had lost my physical self again. It was very frightening and confusing. Tiny drops of tears began to roll down from my eyes and my lips quivered. I could see Dad standing beside me with a disturbed look on his face for he was rudely awoken by the commotion in the room and was in despair to see me going through this ordeal again. My brother was standing next to him and he looked equally stunned too. He could not do anything other than to shake his head in disbelief.

“This is the third time. What’s actually happening? Haven’t we offered enough food and money? What more does this spirit want from us?” Dad was getting very upset now.

Mom joined in. She was on the verge of tears. “We’ve given you so much but you keep disturbing our daughter. Tonight is the third time you’re here. What do you really want from us?” she asked in deep frustration.

I stared at her but I could not speak. My throat was locked up by a powerful force that almost crushed my voice box.

“Come on, who are you? Please tell us your name. I’ll burn more things for you tomorrow night and this time, I’ll put them all in a huge paper box with your name written outside the box so that only you can get it,” Mom tried to entice the spirit.

Again, no answer came from me and outside the house, the stray dogs’ howling grew chiller and chiller, piercing the quiet night and waking up our neighbors.

“Just tell us who you are, please, I beg you,” Mom pleaded on bended knees and shaking my arms. Seeing no answer, she tried again, “What’s your name? Let us know so that we can do something for you,” Mom persuaded once more, very softly this time, hoping this tactic might work.
It did. Slowly, I could feel the grip on my throat being loosened bit by bit until I could speak again.

“I’m Ng Mooi; and I’m very cold and hungry,” a voice that was completely different from mine came out from my throat. It was a female voice which we had never heard before. It sounded like it had come from a faraway place because it was very hollow and distant.

Nearly knocked down by such an unexpected answer, Mom went on hesitatingly, “Ng Mooi? I haven’t heard of your name before. Who are you actually?”

I did not answer her. I just closed my eyes and stayed very still.

Looking lost and clueless, Mom then turned to her husband and asked him nervously, “Have you heard this name before?”

Dad was in a daze. “Yes, when I was ten years old,” he answered finally.

“She was my father’s second wife. The one that was sent away to the mental hospital,” he whispered under his breath.
Ng Mooi’s plight actually began at the South China Sea on a steamer more than eighty years ago.

Nothing much was known about her background except that she had agreed to come to Malaya in 1930 to be my paternal Grandpa’s second wife.

Years earlier, circa 1915, my paternal Grandpa had fled from China to avoid political persecution and landed in Kampung Rawa, Gopeng, together with his first wife and a few brothers. They then started a business making and selling bean curd to the miners there.

In this business, you need a lot of hands to help out. There are many processes involved in making bean curd. You have to soak the soya beans in water for hours until they become soft, grind them with a giant stone mortar into a fine paste to get the soya milk, stir the milk continuously in a giant pot on a low fire until boiled, filter the liquid and finally set it into blocks of curd. You also have piles of firewood to chop, the working place to clean up and then you have to sell the finished products in the market.

With a wife rendered helpless by a pair of dainty lily feet and three young children to mind, Grandpa could not cope with the work alone and requested to have another wife to help him out. He was looking for a big-footed girl who could stand hard labor and long hours of work.

Reluctant to have another woman in her house but without other options, Grandma wrote a letter to her relatives in China asking them to help find a suitable girl for her husband. That was how Ng Mooi came into the picture. She came from a poor family and this was a way to escape from a lifetime of poverty in her native village of Nam Hoi in Kwangtung, China. She came on a steamer on a journey that took almost ten days to complete.
Leaving home for the first time and on such an arduous journey, she was accompanied by her male relative. But unfortunately for her, he could not contain his lust. He forced himself on her the entire journey, leaving her physically and emotionally ruined by the time she reached the shores of Malaya. He delivered her to Grandpa’s house in Gopeng but immediately boarded the same boat home without wasting any time for fear of repercussions from the husband of his protégée.

Grandpa consummated the marriage soon after her arrival and was furious to find out she was no longer a virgin. She did not bleed as expected and was fearful to be touched. That became her bane. Like most Chinese men at that time, Grandpa was very particular about such a matter. There was nothing he could do as she had arrived at his doorstep but his heart could not accept her wholly, for in his eyes, she was impure and had been tainted by another man. So great was his disdain that he distanced himself from her and treated her like a leper.

She was given a room of her own, enough food to fill her stomach each day and clothes to cover her body. That was about all she got from him. He did not show her any sympathy or concern any rape victim should get. All alone in a place far away from home, she locked herself in her room all day, talking, singing, laughing and crying to herself.

Dad said he was about ten years old when all this happened. One morning, Grandpa was at the market selling bean curd and Grandma was asleep with the children. Disgruntled at being so unfairly treated by this bean curd maker, Ng Mooi put together a heap of dried coconut husks which were used to cook bean curd and started a fire. The little wooden hut they were staying in was gutted to the ground. Luckily, nobody was hurt. But everyone was badly shaken.

When Grandpa got back from the market and saw what Ng Mooi had done, he could not contain his anger. This was because the wooden hut was not his house. He had rented it from someone else. In a fit of fury, he banished the poor woman to the mental hospital in Tanjung Rambutan which was run by the British at that time. It was also his way of washing his hands off a wife he was no longer interested to keep.
Several years passed but Grandpa did not visit her, not even once. Nobody knew how she fared at the mental hospital, when or how she died or where she was buried.

One day, the hospital sent Grandpa a letter written in English. Being illiterate, he could not read it and neither could Grandma who could only read Chinese; nor could Dad who was not educated yet. Finally, Grandpa found a use for the letter – he folded it into a small piece of paper and inserted it under a wooden table to stabilize one of its legs.

Both my grandparents had totally erased this unfortunate woman from their lives. Her name was not mentioned again. It was as if she no longer existed in this world.
Chapter Five

For the third time in a week, Mom and I went back to the shop called Har Choy Seng on Cockman Street to buy stacks and stacks of paper money, clothes, and accessories to be burnt at the roadside. This time, we even bought two large paper suitcases to hold all the items. We sealed them with a piece of yellow paper bearing Ng Mooi’s name so that, hopefully, these suitcases and their contents would reach her safely in the underworld. Again, Mom went to the market to buy roasted pork, pink-colored cupcakes, and fruits to be offered together with the paper items.

“Never mind about having to spend money, hopefully, she’ll get the things she want this time and will not come back to disturb our daughter anymore,” Dad told Mom when she asked money from him to buy all these items. Mom was getting grumpy because we had already spent several hundred dollars for the past few days just to pacify a spirit that kept coming back each night to torment me.

That evening, we went back to my brother’s house early and spread the offerings on the roadside as soon as the sky grew dark. Mom chanted some prayers before throwing a candle onto the paper items. I remember some neighbors came out to watch out of curiosity because we had been doing this for the third time in the same week and they could sense something was out of place. Of course nobody dared to ask anything further and we remained tight-lipped.

We had dinner and watched television as usual. Dad instructed us to act as if nothing had happened.

“I’m sure she’ll not come back anymore. Tonight, you can sleep on your own again and with the lights off,” Mom told me when it was time for us to go to bed. She was wrong.

Not long after the clock downstairs chimed to signal it was one o’clock
in the morning, I began to feel my hair standing on end. The pain swiftly came back to stab at my stomach and grab at my heart. Before the fingers came to close on my throat, I screamed out loudly for my parents. I did not lock my door and they barged in before switching on the light in my room. My brother too, came after them. That was when I began to tremble. Within minutes, my body was swiftly taken over.

“Ng Mooi, is that you again? Why did you still come back? I’ve already offered you heaps of money, clothes, and food. Haven’t you got them?” Mom asked angrily. That was the first time I saw the gentlest creature in the entire planet lose her cool.

This was the last straw for my parents. They could not contain their anger anymore and raised their voice to reprimand Ng Mooi harshly.

“I didn’t get them. They were snatched away from me,” the reply came unhesitatingly from my mouth.

“Who snatched them from you? I’ve already written your name on the lids of the suitcases,” Mom questioned further when she had calmed down.

“Everybody laughed at me and said I’m crazy but I’m not crazy. I’m not crazy at all. I’m just cold and hungry yet they still snatched my things away,” I heard myself wailing sorrowfully.

“Who are they, I mean, those people who snatched your things away?” Dad asked.

“They’re homeless and hungry just like me but they’re stronger and I could not fight them off. They’re very fierce and they’re all around me, beating me up and mocking me all the time,” the spirit inside me sobbed miserably.

“But those things bore your name, so how can they snatch them from you?” Mom was getting impatient.
“They’re too cold and hungry to care. They beat and kicked me and scorned me as a lunatic woman,” Ng Mooi bemoaned in a distressed voice.

Both Mom and Dad were speechless and helpless at the same time. They were at their wits’ end. They had done their part but it was all in vain.

“Tell us what we should do so that you can get what you want and then leave my daughter alone,” Dad suggested to her.

Silence engulfed the room before I broke down bitterly again. “I don’t know. I don’t know. All I know is that I’m very cold and hungry and my things were taken away from me,” I could hear these words coming out from my mouth very clearly. It was not my voice but that of an old woman.

“How about putting up a tablet for you in a temple?” he suggested further. To this, I kept quiet and nodded my head on Ng Mooi’s behalf.

Despite my parents’ promises to give her a proper resting place, Ng Mooi cried bitterly for all the injustice she had to endure. She refused to leave and only did so when dawn finally broke. By then, we were left totally exhausted by her visit. There was nothing I could do except to sleep the whole day. Also, it slowly dawned on me she could be the lady in that frightful dream.
Chapter Six

The next evening, after she had finished doing the house-chores, my mother climbed onto a little wooden stool, carefully took down the Chinese lunar calendar hung on the wall and flipped through its delicate pages with her fingers. To her horror, she saw that the seventh month was another day away.

“How time flies. In the blink of an eye, the Hungry Ghost Festival is here again. No wonder this woman has the liberty to come and go as she likes, it’s as if she lives in our house with us!” she lamented to Dad who was bending over his workbench sharpening the last pair of scissors for the day.

Anticipating more difficult days ahead for me, Mom then took out from her purse, a piece of yellow paper folded into a small triangle and handed it to me. There were some Chinese characters written in red ink on it. “Daughter,” she cautioned me, “You need to be extra careful this month. Here’s a talisman, keep it in your own purse and don’t drop it. I got it from a medium at Tow Boo Keong Temple during last year’s Nine Emperor God’s Festival. It’s to ward off evil spirits from disturbing you.”

Next, she took out from her jewel box a piece of jade pendant shaped like an ancient Chinese coin with a hole in the middle. It was the greenest jade I had ever seen. “This is from your maternal Grandmother’s coffin. She wore it when she died and it was buried together with her. I got it when we went to collect her bones for reburial. It’s supposed to deflect unwanted attentions. It’s yours now, wear it always, wherever you go,” she said as she put a silver chain through the hole in the middle of the jade pendant before placing it around my neck.

“Afterwards, I’ll get your father to hang the Tung Sing on the door frame of your bedroom. It’s a very old copy, from your paternal Grandmother, and it’ll protect you from evil spirits.” Tung Sing is also known as The Chinese Almanac. Some people call it All Knowing Book because
it contains all the information one needs to know before undertaking any important events in one’s life such as marriage, moving to a new house, starting a new business, and conducting funerals. Most Chinese have a copy at home.

Like a true-blue Taoist, Mom laid out food, drinks, and paper offerings on the roadside for all wandering spirits who happened to pass by our house at night. It was her way of doing charity for these homeless souls. She even called out Ng Mooi’s name to beckon her to come to get her lion’s share which was a few paper suitcases filled to the brim with all that she needed. “These will be enough to last her for a very long time,” Mom observed as I helped her to burn them on the roadside.

However, this failed to soothe Grandpa’s estranged wife. She still came back several times that month. When she came in the middle of the night to borrow my body so that she could relay her wishes to my parents, the stray dogs outside the house would howl eerily and endlessly, waking up the entire neighborhood. When she came, I could feel a sharp dagger parked inside my stomach and hands like giant tentacles grasping wildly at my heart. I would shiver badly and the voice that came out from my mouth was not my own but hers – very hollow and without a doubt, a voice from another zone. Of course I was conscious and could still see or hear what was going on around me.

Each time, she would complain about the same thing – she was very cold, hungry, frightened, being mobbed by other hungry ghosts who grabbed her belongings, and being taunted as a lunatic. This would be followed by bitter lamentations about her sufferings and obstinate refusals to leave. Only after my parents had promised to replace her losses would she agreed to go. And when she had gone, I would throw up so violently there was nothing to be thrown up anymore. Then I would collapse down in total exhaustion and sleep for hours.

When the seventh month was finally over, my ordeal came to an abrupt end. She did not come back to disturb me for the rest of that year. Both Mom and Dad were so grateful that I was given a brief respite.
Chapter Seven

The observation of *Ching Ming* in April the next year (1985) provided Dad with a chance to bring up Ng Mooi’s plight with his two younger stepbrothers who stayed in Grandpa’s house in Batu Gajah and continued the old man’s bean curd making business. We were there for lunch after a morning spent at the tomb of Grandpa and his two wives’. The three were buried together in the same plot of land up a hilly slope which commanded a scenic view.

Both his younger stepbrothers were the sons of Chan Kwan, Grandpa’s third wife. As expected, they refused to get involved because Ng Mooi was not their biological mother anyway. They would not want to spend money on someone they had never met or heard of before. And furthermore, none of their children was affected. “That’s your daughter’s problem, we don’t want to have a part in it,” said the wife of one of the sons who also acted as their spokeswoman. In their household, women spoke louder than men.

“It’s alright. I’m going to put up a tablet for her in a temple on a chosen day and also give her a ceremony to admit her into the family. You don’t have to pay a cent if you don’t want to but please make sure you and your children will attend the ceremony on that day. Don’t forget all of you are my father’s descendants too. Your attendance is required,” I heard Dad firmly tell his stepbrothers, their wives, and their children.

Dad was Grandpa’s eldest and only son by the first wife. My brother was Grandpa’s eldest grandson. Brought up in the Confucian way, both felt it was their obligation to do something for Ng Mooi. They wanted to give her what Grandpa did not and hope this would compensate her in some way. It was like making up to her for what she had lost out all those years.

A week later, through recommendation of a friend from his workplace, my brother found a Buddhist temple in Greentown hidden behind the
Ipoh General Hospital. This place was called Tung Lin Siew Juk. Tung means east. Lin means lotus. Siew means little while Juk means bamboo.

One Saturday afternoon after my brother came home from work, he drove us to this temple to make some inquiries. An elderly Buddhist nun in a brown robe stepped out from her private quarter to answer our queries. She hardly smiled when we greeted her. Dad told her why we were there. She took a hard glance at me and continued in an unfriendly tone, “After a person has died, it’s of utmost importance to give her a proper ceremony and burial regardless whether the deceased died at home or outside of it.” Barely looking at us, she continued further, “Then and only then, will that person consider her journey complete and proceed to start another cycle of rebirth, otherwise she’ll be in limbo forever and will come back to haunt the living.”

“But this unfortunate lady who was my father’s second wife, died in the mental hospital in Tanjung Rambutan. Nobody knew when or how she died. Most probably in the 1930s when I was ten years old, because that was the last time I saw her alive before my father sent her away. Nobody claimed her body after her death and she was not given any ceremony. We don’t even know where she was buried,” Dad explained to her.

The unread letter in English from the hospital’s administration to Grandpa which he so callously ignored and instead, folded into a smaller piece before inserting it under a wooden table to stabilize one of its legs suddenly came back to my mind. That must be the letter from the mental hospital asking him to claim her body but he never did because he could not understand its contents. And today, here I am, his favorite granddaughter whom he had doted on when I was very young, paying painfully for his folly, I thought to myself as I sat there listening to their conversation on that hot afternoon.

“That’s why she is now a hungry ghost – abandoned, homeless, restless, cold and hungry for so many years. As a hungry ghost, it’ll be rather difficult for her to be reborn again into the human realm,” the elderly nun revealed, shaking her bald head sadly.
“Why did she choose our daughter, why does it always have to be her?”
Mom was very curious to know. She was always perplexed why I was
the chosen one. After all, Grandpa had a big brood of grandchildren.
Why Ng Mooi didn’t choose them but me, she often asked but no one
could give her an answer.

“Well, perhaps the deceased has a special affinity for your daughter.
Maybe they’re connected in some way in their past lives. They could
be related in blood or they could be acquaintances. She felt only your
daughter could speak for her. It’s her karma, you see,” the nun tried to
explain further. In the end, we had no option but to accept her explana-
tion.

“Look like we have no choice other than to put up a tablet for her and
give her a ceremony to admit her into the family. We have already prom-
ised her this. Anyway, a promise is a promise,” Mom said with resigna-
tion. I could see defeat in her face. Always frugal, she was hoping for
something less extravagant, something simple that would not hurt Dad’s
pocket.

Dad and my brother agreed to shoulder all the expenses in the hope that
this undertaking would comfort Ng Mooi so that she would not come to
bother me again. An auspicious day and time was picked by the nun to
install a wooden tablet engraved with Ng Mooi’s name in the temple. It
was to be placed alongside many others in a hall specifically built for
this purpose. In life, she was not accepted by her husband and his first
wife but in death, we, their descendants, were now finally accepting her
as a family ancestor.

On that chosen day, about thirty of Grandpa’s descendants who bore his
surname gathered at the temple for the ceremony to admit Ng Mooi as
a family ancestor. Old and young, male and female, single or married,
we were instructed to come in white t-shirts and black long pants. We
brought along fresh flowers, fruits, cakes, and vegetarian meals to be
offered to her.

A team made up of ten Buddhist nuns in brown robes set up an altar
complete with rows and rows of offerings of food, flowers, incense, and candles. They chanted prayers for hours, from morning till evening, stopping only for a short interval to have a drink or a visit to the loo. We were required to bow solemnly to the wooden tablet engraved with Ng Mooi’s name and each of us took turns to offer her a joss stick and a cup of tea. The prayers were exactly like those chanted for a person who had just passed away. However, this ceremony was done for someone who had died more than fifty years ago and whose body was never claimed. Then the most senior nun took a brush, dipped it in red ink and dotted the wooden tablet to consecrate it before putting it into a glass cabinet that contained rows and rows of wooden tablets.

When the prayer session was over, we assembled at the temple’s vast compound to burn paper offerings for her. A huge paper mansion, a Mercedes complete with a driver, a pair of male and female servants, many kinds of electrical appliances, sets of clothes, trays of jewelry and of course, loads and loads of hell bank notes were burnt together. The paper offering was not part of what the Buddhist nuns had instructed us to do but solely my brother’s own idea. He wanted to make up to Ng Mooi for what our Grandpa did not give her. Better late than never, he reasoned. A vegetarian meal was later served to those who attended the ceremony. Altogether, there were about four tables, including a table for the nuns.

We all went home that evening with a feeling that we had done all that was required from us, albeit five decades late and hoped that we would not hear from Ng Mooi again.

But we were wrong. Despite spending thousands of dollars on this elaborate ceremony and getting her a place in the temple, Ng Mooi’s disgruntled spirit was still not at peace. She still came back to borrow my body. She never failed to turn up at my brother’s house during Ching Ming and the Hungry Ghost Festival for the next few years, much to my parents’ chagrin. We were back at square one. My family was at our wit’s end over this lady whom Grandpa had abandoned and treated so frivolously. I could see Mom’s and Dad’s anger and sadness at the same time over this matter. Their patience was getting thinner by the day.
One day not long after this, Second Aunt who was staying with us at 188 Hugh Low Street on the first floor came down to look for my parents. A famous dressmaker at that time, she was told by one of her customer that there was a much sought-after ghost-buster (known as mou san sifu in Cantonese) who lived in Chemor and his specialty was to catch unruly ghosts and have them locked up.

“Why don’t you just get the ghost-buster to catch this lunatic ghost and lock her up inside an urn? That way, she won’t be able to come back and bother your daughter again, and your problem will be solved once and for all!” she suggested.

We were momentarily dazed by her words. For a few seconds, it seemed like a very practical solution. But luckily in the end, our common sense, and more importantly, our conscience, prevailed.

Taoists and Buddhists believe in the concept of rebirth. Both my parents could not bring themselves to do something as cruel as denying a poor soul from taking another rebirth. Trapped, locked and sealed forever inside an urn means eternal condemnation. To do this to Ng Mooi would mean serving her the ultimate injustice.

I too, would not agree to this. Although I was still very young at that time and suffered greatly from these frightening intrusions, it did cross my mind that doing something like this to Ng Mooi would be totally gross. I would not hurt even an insect, much less a hungry ghost. And she was such a tragic ghost too.

“Serve you right then! In that case, be prepared to be possessed forever by this lunatic woman and suffer from it!” Second Aunt bellowed this into my face before storming off, offended that her suggestion was not taken up. Her curse reduced me to tears and made my parents sadder than ever.
Part 2

Two Intertwined Leaves

Siblings will take different paths and life may separate them but they will forever be bonded by having begun their journey in the same boat.

– Source unknown.
Chapter Eight

I do not know whether this is still true or not in the present day but at one time, if you are the youngest child or better still, the only son or the only daughter in the family, chances are, you are more privileged than the rest of your siblings. Mom will reserve the chicken drumstick for you and Dad will buy you any toy the minute you ask for it while the rest will have to wait their turn. No matter how much they would deny it, parents tend to practice favoritism to a certain degree, especially if they have a large brood of children to bring up and are struggling to make ends meet. With very limited goodies in their bags, they will give priority to the youngest child or the only child of a particular sex. The rest will have to share out what is left among themselves. In some extreme cases, the eldest child or the female child in the family will have to stop schooling and go out to work so that the younger or the male ones could continue with their education. Of course the last scenario did not happen in my family as both Mom and Dad prized education more than anything else.

In my family, there were five children – four girls and one boy. My brother, the only boy, and I, the youngest girl, were the apples of our parents and grandparent’s eyes. Both of us always got to eat the chicken drumsticks and go for a movie whenever Dad was given free tickets to the cinema. As for the rest of the other three girls, they were expected to accept whatever was given to them and had to wait for their turn.

Tracy is one of the other three girls. Sandwiched by the only boy and a baby sister, she was always struggling to stand out and be counted. While she dared not provoke our brother too much since he was older than her, she often made it known to me that I was like a thorn in her flesh. Every time we argued or fought with each other, Mom and Dad would have to step in and act as our referees. Their whistle was a classic Cantonese proverb – yau kam sang, mo loi sai – loosely translated into English, it means only in this lifetime and not anymore in your next. It was a common belief among Chinese people that fate brought families,
friends and even foes together.

“You have the privilege to be sisters only in this lifetime but not any-
more in your next, so learn to cherish each other!” they would remind
us, hoping we would calm down, shake hands and give each other a
sisterly hug.

While it quickly worked its magic on me, it had very little effect on my
erlder sister. She refused to accept our parents’ notion that it was fate that
brought us together as sisters. “I don’t need a sister!” I once heard her
snubbing Mom before she stormed off to her room, slammed the door
behind her, locked herself inside and sulked the whole day.

A true Merdeka child in every sense of the word, Tracy was born exactly
on the same day the British handed Malaya back to its people. Mom still
remembers vividly how she went into labor while outside the hospital,
fireworks after fireworks were generously released into the night sky
to celebrate the birth of a new nation. Apart from bringing home a new
baby a day later, Mom also brought back a hamper given by the hospital
to welcome Merdeka babies born there. Inside the hamper were a few
cans of milk powder which was considered a highly prized item some
fifty seven years ago. So how can you blame Tracy for bragging in later
years that she came into this world in style?

In very deep contrast to Tracy’s grand entrance, I came seven years later
into this world on a very wet, cold, gloomy and solemn night – in the
same month when most families were away at their ancestors’ tombs to
observe Ching Ming. Mom said the same maternity ward where Tracy
and other Merdeka babies made their impressive arrival years ago was
strangely deserted that night, for not many pregnant mothers would want
to give birth in such an inauspicious month if they could help it. All
around her were empty beds. It seemed I was the one and only baby born
in the ward that night. Just as I was making my entry, a power failure
occurred, leaving the entire hospital in pitch black darkness for hours.
Thunder, lightning and a very heavy downpour further dampened the
atmosphere. Besides having to push as instructed by the fierce midwife,
Mom had to ward off flies getting to her face from all directions inside
the labor room.

In those days, Chinese parents liked to give their children names of different characters, which after being joined together, would form another new and complete character, normally auspicious in meaning or simply delightful to the ears. Thus, a girl with the name of Mei would be likely to have a sister with the name of Lai. Put them together, Mei Lai means beautiful. Tracy’s and my name, when joined together, means fragrance. Besides giving us meaningful names, our parents also wanted us to grow up being close to one another, as sisters should. Mom even teased us as two little intertwined leaves. Our surname Yip means leaf in Chinese.

Alas, to our parent’s utter disappointment, and though our names bound us as one, our spirits were very different. We were like water and oil; or day and night. While nothing could faze me up as a kid, Tracy would create a big fuss over trivial matters. She liked to craft huge mountains out of tiny molehills, just for the thrill and attention she could generate from her antics. For this, Mom nicknamed her the drama queen.

Once, on the verge of giving up hope of ever seeing us getting along, Dad sarcastically said, “The two of you are like bones from two different persons kept inside the same urn at the columbarium, always low luen kuat tow.”

Apart from burying their dead ones, Chinese people also cremated them. After burning the body at the furnace, the bones were collected and kept inside an urn before leaving it at the columbarium. You can only keep one person’s bones inside an urn. Keeping two persons’ bones inside the same urn is a big no-no as the souls of the dead will fight forever, for space and privacy. From this taboo, sprang this Cantonese proverb low luen kuat tow.

I could still remember our first falling-out when she was fourteen and I was seven. We had a cupboard with five compartments – one for each child in the family. It happened one day when she decided she wanted my compartment as well. So she just tossed out all my stuff – toys and clothes onto the floor and insisted that my compartment was now hers.
Not satisfied with her usurpation, she grabbed a pair of scissors from the drawer nearby and furiously cut up some of my stuff into smaller pieces to spite me. Just when I was about to run off to tell my parents of her tyrannical ways, she yanked my hair violently, boxed me in the face and pushed me onto the floor. That day, I ended up with a bleeding nose and swollen lips. She warned me not to tell Mom or Dad or Grandma even though my bruises were so obvious and blood was staining my shirt.

Of course when Dad found out later, he strode over and swiftly gave her a slap or two on her face for being so bitchy to her younger sister. Once Dad had turned his back from us, and to get back at me for the punishment meted on her, she gave me another punch, this time in my ear. “I hate you, I hate you!” she hissed at me menacingly. “I’ve hated you ever since I came back from school on the day you were brought back from the hospital and saw Mom cuddling and kissing you in that back room!” she screamed at me before stomping down the staircase with fast and furious footsteps.

Tracy made no secret that she disliked and resented me immensely. In her eyes, I was an unwelcome rival for Mom and Dad’s affection. My arrival meant she was no longer the baby in the family. Unintentionally, I had taken over her place and reduced her to obscurity and this upset her terribly.

One evening, during Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner, everybody sat down together for a meal. As always, my only brother and I were each given a piece of chicken drumstick, the most cherished part of the fowl. All hell broke loose when Tracy, like our two elder sisters, was given a piece of chicken fillet. Feeling discriminated against and unimportant, she immediately flew into a rage. She threw the bowl of rice and the pair of chopsticks down on the table and went on to censure our mother on top of her voice, accusing how unfair Mom was. In the end, in order to restore peace at the dinner table, Mom quietly prodded me to give up my chicken drumstick to my elder sister which I gladly obliged. She promptly snatched the chicken drumstick from my hand and dumped the fillet onto my bowl. Only after this did she calm down and went on to finish her meal, much to the consternation of both Dad and Grandma.
They were frowning angrily at her for her outburst. As it was Chinese New Year’s eve, and she being a female child (Dad viewed female children as physically delicate), Tracy was spared the cane.

Despite her volatile nature and intense enmity towards me, Tracy grew up into an alluring young woman who was never short of suitors. Her long flowing black hair, curvaceous figure, well-shaped nose, seductive eyes and bewitching smiles easily won her the admiration of every man who crossed her path. Popular at her workplace, my sister loved to go on trips all over the country with her friends during weekends or on public holidays. Each trip would yield hundreds of photos for her albums and a collection of souvenirs like key chains, postcards, T-shirts or mugs which were generously distributed out to all except me. I was purposely left out. “I will only give you a piece of feces, nothing else,” I remember she often taunted me this way.

Tracy was not only a drama queen. She was a dancing queen too. A frequent party goer and self-taught dancer, she would spend hours honing her dancing skill in front of the mirror to the beats of gyrating music from the stereo-player. Her beauty and dancing skill helped get her the part of the queen (Aurora’s mother) in the ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty* that was staged by Muhibbah Cultural Dance and Ballet Association Perak to a huge crowd at the Ipoh Town Hall during one Christmas in the late 1970s.

Determined to look like a real queen that night, she decided to get herself an impressive robe and a glittering tiara. Tracy roped me in to help as both our elder sisters were married by then and were no longer staying with us. Since I had an eye for delicate things, I was tasked to sew shining sequins all over a velvet robe and glued new crystals to an old tiara while she practiced her steps. She promised me that after the dance, she would bring me for a movie! That was the only time she was ever sweet to me and at fifteen, I was so easily bought over. I worked round the clock for three days and two nights before she could have her regalia ready for the performance of her life.

That night, she did look like a real queen. Amidst deafening sounds from
the blaring trumpets and a rain of glittering confetti signaling their arrival, a smiling Tracy and the handsome king slowly strutted to the center of the stage to be greeted by thunderous applause from the audience. When the hall became quiet again and the spotlight was on her, she gently placed a baby doll wrapped in a golden scarf into a little crib and then broke into graceful steps to kick-start the christening ceremony of Princess Aurora. My sister brought me along to guard her bags in the changing room and told me not to move an inch away from her stuff but I did not listen and secretly watched her perform from the side of the stage. My heart swelled with pride seeing her shining so brightly in that stunning outfit.

Throughout the years growing up together under the same roof, my sister went to great lengths to make sure I grew up in her shadow and stayed in the background. I was not allowed to outshine her in any areas of undertaking. “Don’t forget I’m your older sister, so you should mind your position as the youngest in the family!” she never failed to remind me this from time to time.

In 1983, Tracy left home to work in Kuala Lumpur. Four years later, in 1987, many young men’s hearts were broken and their dreams were shattered when, after a whirlwind courtship, she married Harry, a young man from Johore who also worked in Kuala Lumpur. He worked as an executive in a shipping firm while she was a beautician in a cosmetics company. A year after their marriage, they were blessed with a baby son and bought a double-story house in Batu Caves, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

Despite being daughters of a poor family, neither of us was allowed to do any house-chores. Mom saw education as the only way out of our poverty and she would often say this to us, “Focus on your studies, leave all the house-chores to me.” In the end, we grew up knowing next to nothing about ironing shirts or trousers or even frying an egg.

Before long, Tracy, now a wife and a new mother, began to realize that there were many house-chores that needed to be done in the house but she did not know how to do them. She did not like to do them anyway.
House-chores would roughen her well-manicured hands. A beautician cannot sport a pair of rough hands, can she? Her rich clients would laugh at her.

When she came back to Ipoh for Chinese New Year in February 1988, I heard her telling Mom she was looking for an Indonesian maid but she was worried the maid would be lazy, would steal her money or worse, smuggle a man into the house for a rendezvous when nobody was at home.

In the end, she decided not to have one. “I’ll find a way to solve this maid problem!” she assured Mom with a very sweet smile.
Chapter Nine

One day in July 1988, while I was reading a storybook, Tracy called and spoke very excitedly to Mom over the phone, “I’ve good news for you, Mom! I’ve found a job for Frances in Kuala Lumpur! Persuade her to take up this offer and stay with us at my husband’s house. We promise to take very good care of her.”

“But how would you deal with Ng Mooi if she appears at your doorstep?” I heard Mom asked worriedly.

“Don’t worry. In Ipoh, Ng Mooi can come and go as she pleases because the altar in brother’s house caters to all the Yip’s family ancestors. But in Kuala Lumpur, she won’t be able to come and go as she pleases since the altar in my husband’s house caters only to his ancestors. Hence, Ng Mooi, an outsider, will not have access to his house. Therefore, Frances will be safe if she stays with us,” she convinced Mom with such a sensible sounding argument.

Both my parents were extremely impressed and pleased with that call. They thought marriage and motherhood had finally mellowed their difficult daughter.

The husband of Tracy’s best friend was the financial controller of a large and prestigious organization in Kuala Lumpur. He was urgently looking for school-leavers to work in his department as data entry clerks. So Tracy called him up and immediately got me a job. All I had to do was to report for work at once.

Mom turned to me and asked hopefully, “How about going to Kuala Lumpur to work? The pay there is better and the company is so prestigious. Moreover, you’ll have your sister and her husband to take care of you. It’s also a good way to avoid Ng Mooi. If you stay with them, Ng Mooi could not enter Harry’s house and you’ll be safe, then our problem will be over.”

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Dad nodded in agreement. “Yes, perhaps she’ll not be able to disturb you anymore when you’re in a new place. We would like you to give it a try.”

At that time, I was working as a temporary clerk in an insurance firm in Ipoh old town and earning a meagre income. I was saving hard to further my studies. Reluctant to leave my parents behind, yet desperate to improve my standing in life and to get away from Ng Mooi’s incessant visits, I packed my bags and headed for a new life in the capital city, not knowing what lay in store for me.

Dad’s parting words for me was in Cantonese and very typical of any father – man see yew yan. It means to stay calm in all sorts of situations. I nodded and promised him that I would.

Mom accompanied me to Kuala Lumpur. We travelled on an express bus along the old trunk road and four hours later, were met at Pudu Raya Bus Station by my sister and her husband. While Harry quickly rushed forward to take over our luggage, Tracy gave me a loving hug that took me by complete surprise. Then she cheerfully led us to their car parked at the basement.

On the way to their house, we stopped at Jalan Ipoh to have dinner. We had bak kut teh and stir-fried baby lettuce in oyster sauce which were Mom’s favorite dishes. Tracy was such a gracious hostess – she kept piling food on our plates and pouring Chinese tea into our little cups until we could not take in anymore.

“Look at you. You’re so skinny. You should eat more. People in Kuala Lumpur tend to look down on and bully skinny and innocent looking people like you, so you need to beef up yourself to be able to handle them,” my sister said laughingly.

She was so full with jokes and advices that night, Mom’s worries evaporated into thin air. Turning to me, Mom patted my hand and said reassuringly, “You’ll be in good hands, and Dad and I will not have to worry about you anymore.”
“Mom, you do not have to worry for Frances. We promise to take very
good care of her. In no time at all, she’ll get used to the exciting and
bustling life in Kuala Lumpur and will like it here. Ipoh is such a ghost
town. Life there is so quiet and boring. Here, she will have lots of new
friends to go out with and interesting places to explore,” Tracy contin-
ued smilingly.

Harry nodded in support of his beautiful wife whom he adored like a
goddess.

“So from now on, I’ll pass your younger sister to you. Both of you’ll
have to take care of her for me and for her father too,” Mom told them.
“Leave her to us,” they both echoed enthusiastically.

That night, Tracy told me to sleep early because I needed to get up early
for work the next day. “Don’t be late on your first day at work,” she said
kindly.

The next morning, Harry packed breakfast for us from an eating shop
nearby. Then he sent Mom to Pudu Raya Bus Station to catch a bus
home to Ipoh. After seeing Mom get onto the bus, he dropped my sister
and me at our respective working places before going to work himself.
Chapter Ten

Besides sending Tracy and me to our respective working places in the morning in his car, Harry also picked us up in the evening after work. Before going home, we also dropped by at the nanny’s house a few blocks away to pick up baby Michael.

Immediately after reaching home on my first day at work, Tracy was back to her old self again. She went straight to the refrigerator in the kitchen and took out some fish, and vegetables. Putting them into the sink, she ordered me, “You, come here. Now that Mom has gone back to Ipoh, I’d better be frank with you.”

Pointing to the food, she said, “From today onwards, we’ll not be eating out or packing dinner from the economy rice stalls anymore. Last night was an exception because Mom was here. It’s expensive and unhealthy to eat outside. Look, my hair has started to fall out from eating too much monosodium glutamate. With the baby’s expenses going up, we have to save. So you’ll have to do all the cooking for me. I don’t care if you don’t know how to cook. You’ll have to learn somehow!” With this, she went up to her room to play with her baby leaving me speechless.

Meanwhile, Harry went straight to his study room and stayed there. He was taking a business administration course via correspondence and he would study in the evening after work.

That evening, for the first time in my life and relying on common sense, I steamed a fish, stir fried some vegetables and also cooked some rice. It being the first time, I took almost an hour to prepare dinner. This made my sister furious. “Faster, faster, faster, my husband is getting hungry! Why didn’t you stand behind and observe Mom when she was cooking?” she shot me in the ears. She had forgotten neither of us was allowed into Mom’s kitchen when we were teenagers. Not even to wash the bowls and plates.

Finally, dinner was ready. After the first bite, Harry grimaced and Tracy started to scold. I had to admit the food had not turned out well. They were bland and overcooked. “What’s this that you’ve cooked? It’s tasteless! Shame on you! You must do better next time as you’re wasting our food!” she lashed
out, giving me an angry glare. I just nodded and kept quiet. I felt embarrassed and frustrated at my own inadequacy. After dinner, I was told to wash the dishes. From her room upstairs, she flew down and rushed into the kitchen where I was. “Hush, don’t make any noise with the bowls and plates while you’re washing them! You’ll wake my baby up with those clanking sounds!” she hissed at me. “And also do not turn on the radio or TV at night for the same reasons! I don’t want any noise in the house,” she added before disappearing into the bathroom.

Minutes later, she got out from the bathroom and tossed the clothes she had worn that day into the laundry basket. “Here, wash them manually when you take your bath after you’re done with the dishes. Listen – the washing machine is solely for my husband’s clothes, not for us women’s, as he considers us low and dirty. If you put women’s clothes together with his in the washing machine, all the dirt on our clothes with stick on his and he’ll get bad luck. My husband wants to strike lottery and he’ll blame you if he can’t strike any!”

Beneath the pile of clothes was her underwear and it was heavily stained with her menstrual blood. Flabbergasted and indignant, I shook my head and asked, “You’re not going to ask me to wash your blood too, are you? I think it is utterly disgusting to ask other people to wash your private discharge. Why don’t you wash it yourself?”

“I don’t need you, someone so much younger than me, to tell me what’s right and what’s wrong! When I said wash everything means you’ll have to wash everything, blood or no blood! Here, you just take orders!” she snapped back at me crossly and then went off to check on her baby.

An hour or so later, she marched down the stairs with a pail full of soiled diapers. “Here, wash these too!” she ordered and pushed them to me. There were more than ten diapers with a few of them stained with the baby’s feces. I had to spend almost an hour to remove the stains with the help of a few cups of Clorox.

When I was done with the washing, Tracy called me to go upstairs and pointed to a pile of clothes sitting in the laundry basket in her room. “Fold them neatly and put them away into their respective compartments. Then iron the clothes my husband and I will be wearing tomorrow. Do it quickly as I have other chores waiting for you,” she told me as she picked her baby up from his
crib for feeding. I did not know how to iron men’s shirts and trousers. They did not turn out as smooth as what you could get from the laundry shop. In the end, I got an earful for this from my sister and her husband.

Just when I thought my chores were finished, Tracy heaped another one on me. “Now, wash up all these feeding bottles and teats and then sterilize them in a pot of boiling water. After that, boil a kettle of hot water and fill up the thermos flask. I’ll need it to prepare milk in the middle of the night.”

By the time I had finished whatever tasks she had delegated to me, it was well past midnight. Exhausted, both from sitting in front of the computer in the office from nine to five and doing all the house-chores non-stop, I lay down to sleep but hardly had I closed my eyes when my sister barged into the room and said this to me, “You’re so lucky compared to me. You can sleep early while I still have to take care of my baby and he often wakes up in the middle of the night. What I want to tell you is this – from today onwards, this’ll be your daily routine once you get home from the office. Remember, you’re now staying with me, not with Mom and Dad, so you’ll have to do everything exactly as I say. Also remember this,” she said with her index finger pointing at my head, “I’m the one who got you a good job and you should be eternally grateful to me. If not for me, you’d be forever a nobody, a small town girl, a country bumpkin! You don’t even have a certificate or diploma, not to mention a degree. Don’t ever dream of landing a job in a big company without my help! Also, pay up your monthly rental and food allowance to me on time. Nothing in this world is free!”

She then walked off without another glance. I learned that I had to let Tracy win if I wanted to get some sleep.
Chapter Eleven

At Tracy’s house, Sundays were not Sundays when one could get up a bit late or simply laze around the house doing nothing except to read the morning paper or listen to one’s favorite songs on the radio, at least not for me. I did not have such luck. She had my Sundays all mapped out so that every single minute of the day was taken up doing house-chores for her.

Every Sunday morning, my sister would never fail to wake me up as early as five o’clock while it was still dark outside. After giving me instructions to remove all the sofa covers, curtains, bed sheets, and pillow cases, and have them washed manually, she would climb back into bed where her husband and baby were asleep while I would have to start work immediately.

Next, I would have to mop the floor of the living room, staircase, and all the three rooms upstairs. All the glass windows needed to be wiped while standing fans and furniture need to be dusted too. Then I had to scrub the tiles of the two bathrooms and the kitchen until they became shiny. Finally, I would have to sweep the front porch and trim the grass in the lawn and water the plants. When all these were done, I had to wash Harry’s car and wax it.

When the sun was up and after having slept to his heart’s content, Harry would go to the Pasar Tani near Batu Caves and buy the whole week’s supply of meat and vegetables from the farmers there. As soon as he got home with the purchase, Tracy would ask me to dress the poultry, scale the fish and sort out all the vegetables before putting them into the refrigerator. This would normally take me about two hours to complete. While I was doing all this work for them non-stop from morning till evening, they would lie around the house to relax and play with their baby. Neither of them would care to lift a finger to help lighten my tasks. Then, there was lunch and dinner to be cooked and the day’s laundry to attend to.
“Doing all these house-chores is your way to repay me, so don’t complain,” Tracy would remind me once in a while. “And don’t you dare go back and tell Mom and Dad!” she warned me.

Working in a big company had certain perks such as monthly trips to tourist spots or a night of fun at the pubs which are fully paid for by the employers. We called these treats organized by the company’s social club as *happy hours*. While most of my young colleagues would join these activities and have a great time, Tracy would not allow me to join them. She insisted I went home with her after work each evening or stay home during weekends to help her out with the house-chores so that she could play with her baby or have an afternoon nap herself.

When she was the same age as I was then, she had gone to Cameron Highlands, Genting Highlands, Langkawi Island, Pangkor Island, and Tioman Island with her colleagues for trips and took many photos of such outings to keep for memories. She had also attended many functions and parties with friends. But at the age of twenty-five, I was not allowed to go anywhere. It got to an insanely ridiculous point where she required me to get her permission first before going back to visit my parents each month!

By now, I had been staying with Tracy, Harry, and their baby for close to one and a half years. Having endured her domineering ways, my patience and tolerance were getting thinner and thinner each day. I felt I could not take it anymore. I was getting very depressed and miserable staying with her. I worked non-stop for her, yet got scolded all the time. She scolded me not because I made mistakes but because she liked to throw her weight around the house to show that she was the queen in her abode. By doing so, she could show her superiority as an elder sister.

Tracy was not one to use persuasion or reason to get other people to do her bidding. She preferred short cuts like screaming and threatening, and when these failed, she would use her tears. Worse, she had a husband who could see no wrong in his wife. In fact, he would encourage her to be aggressive and bitchy when dealing with just anyone. “That’s the only way you can survive in a place like Kuala Lumpur,” she once told
me. “That’s what my husband taught me,” she said. “You ought to do the same too,” she laughed mockingly. On hearing that, I just ignored her and walked away.

It did cross my mind a few times that I had to look for another place to stay. But whenever I brought this matter up with Mom and Dad, they just could not believe I was so badly treated by Tracy for she would behave so sweetly in front of them when she went back to Ipoh for visits. And Harry would treat Mom and Dad as if they were his own parents.

“Kuala Lumpur is a big bad place, full of untrustworthy people. It’s safer to stay with your sister and her husband,” Dad would advise me whenever I lamented my miseries to him.

“And don’t forget, she’s the one who got you a steady job, so consider it your way of repaying her by helping her out. Both of you are sisters only in this lifetime, you won’t meet again in your next, so learn to cherish each other more,” Mom chipped in to support her husband.

“I don’t mind helping her out with the house-chores but she’s such a bully that I can’t stand her bossy ways anymore!” I replied unhappily. “She often asks me to wash her underwear stained with her menstrual blood. I find it so revulsive.”

“Well, that’s a sin she has created for herself. What she sows, so shall she reap but you’ll rise above her when you display calmness in the face of adversity!” Dad tried to comfort me.

“Yes, it’s good to move out to stay on your own but you’ll have both your Mom and me worried for your safety all the time. You don’t want that, do you?” he asked. I shook my head.

“Moreover, for the last one and a half years, Ng Mooi didn’t come back to bother you anymore, so it’s good to stay on in Kuala Lumpur with your sister,” Dad concluded.

“Stay until you really cannot take it anymore. But in the meantime, learn
to be more tolerant. Your sister isn’t as mature as you are in terms of mentality,” Mom tried to reason with me. To my parents, I was always the cool head.

“We didn’t bring her up to be a bully. Hopefully, she’ll mend her aggressive and bullying ways as she grows older,” she sighed.
Chapter Twelve

One Sunday afternoon, one and a half years after moving in to stay with Tracy and Harry, a deep pulsating pain suddenly gripped one side of my head before travelling down to my neck. Not long after this, I found I could not turn my head and I had a strong urge to vomit. Since young, I was prone to migraine when the weather outside was very hot like how it was that day or when I did not have enough sleep. I had not slept properly for two nights due to the constant crying of my little nephew who was having a persistent fever. I was woken up by his mother who asked me to help sponge him in the middle of the night.

 Luckily for me that day, I had just completed all the usual house-chores heaped on me by Tracy. The headache was so severe that I decided to pop two aspirins and then went up to sleep so that once asleep, I could not feel the pain anymore. I would usually feel better after a short nap and some medication.

When I first moved in to stay with her, my sister instructed me not to lock the door when I slept because this room was actually a store room where she kept her baby’s belongings and she might need to enter it anytime to retrieve her things.

Hardly had I drifted off to a sleep when Tracy, who had earlier been rocking her baby to sleep downstairs, ran up the wooden staircase with heavy footsteps and barged into the cramped and dark room where I was sleeping in. Seeing me asleep on the mattress that was laid on the floor at a corner, she quickly rushed over and kicked me very hard on the shoulder as I was lying on my side facing the wall and with a pillow to suppress the throbbing pain in my head.

“Hey, you lazy pig, why’re you sleeping when there is still so much work to be done around the house and my son’s sick? Don’t forget you’re a daughter from a poor family, and a daughter from a poor family does not have the luxury to take an afternoon nap!” she barked into my face.
Like me, you are a poor man’s daughter too. But now, all that is behind you. You managed to get yourself a capable husband who lavishes you with much love and material comfort. Why is it that you can nap while I cannot, I thought this to myself.

“Get up at once! I know you’re pretending to be sick so that you can avoid doing the house-chores for me!” she screamed at me like a mad woman.

Seeing how I had cringed back like a frightened animal, she gave me another kick, this time at my rear. I quickly sat up, stared at her in disbelief and then let out a long miserable groan. I was in great pain. Why wouldn’t she allow me to take a short rest?

“You can get me to do all the house-chores for you so that you don’t have to lift your finger at all. I can endure your grumbling, nagging, criticizing, scolding, screaming, yelling, barking or cursing. But you cannot lay your hands or legs on me, understand? Everything has a limit and patience has its limit too,” I could not help but raise my voice at her. “I’m not an animal for you to kick and anyway, you’re not supposed to kick even a dead mouse!” I continued.

Startled at my words that stung her, she fought back defiantly, “Who do you think you are to talk to me like that? Remember this – I’m much older than you are. I deserve to be respected and have my words obeyed.”

“Even though I’m younger than you by many years, still, I deserve some dignity too!” I shot back at her, trying very hard to suppress my anger that was building up in my chest.

“When you’re nobody like you’re now, don’t talk about dignity to me! Anyway, this is my house and you’re staying in my house. I can do anything I like in my house. Like it or not, I’m the queen here! Move out if you dare and I’ll let Dad know how disobedient and ungrateful you are to me!”

I was at a loss for words. I just could not understand why I had such an
abusive sister. I wished I had a more compassionate and kinder one.

When she stormed off to the study room to inform her husband that I had stolen an afternoon nap and instigated him to give me a lecture as well, I just could not contain my tears anymore and cried as I had never cried before in my life. That evening, I did not go downstairs for dinner or to take my bath. Weak with misery from the crying which also resulted in me having my hair caked with tears, I dozed off to sleep.

Close to midnight that same night, and for the first time since moving to Kuala Lumpur, stray dogs from nowhere began to assemble in front of the house to howl eerily. This was strange because we were staying in a Malay neighborhood where no dogs could be found and cats were aplenty instead. Woken up suddenly by the mournful howling from the dogs, my heart missed a beat. Oh no, not again, I told myself. This feeling is so familiar; this is how it used to be like whenever Ng Mooi made her appearance. My instinct told me she would be here anytime.

I was right. Within minutes, I felt an extreme pain in the stomach. It was like I was being knifed by a dagger. Before I could sit up or shout for help, hands were swiftly closing in on my heart and throat. Very soon, my body was completely taken over by the second wife of my Grandpa. All I could do was to sob and tremble and secretly wish Mom and Dad were at my side.

Outside the house, the dogs’ crying grew louder and louder. Some neighbors were woken up by the noises and I could even hear them trying to shoo the dogs away or pelt them with stones. Some of the stones even hit our gate.

Tracy and Harry liked to brag to my parents how Ng Mooi could not reach me in Kuala Lumpur anymore thanks to the shelter they had given me. They had both heard of her visits from Mom and Dad but they had never seen it with their own eyes. So when they learned of Ng Mooi’s presence in their house that night, they got into a frenzy.

As befitting her nickname, my sister created a huge drama by calling up
my parents in Ipoh in the middle of the night, cried hysterically over the phone for their help and demanded that they come to Kuala Lumpur at once even though the two old people had no transport. To make the situation worse, their young son was so traumatized by all the commotion created from that visit that he cried loudly and refused to sleep.

Unlike my parents who could handle such a situation calmly, both Tracy and her husband were at a loss as to what they should do. Finally, instead of talking to Ng Mooi to pacify her as what my parents had instructed them to do, they quickly scrambled back to their room, locked themselves inside and refused to come out for they were extremely frightened by the very thought of having a female ghost in their house.

So that night, I was left alone with a female ghost inside my body. Ng Mooi sobbed endlessly for she had no one to talk to. On that particular visit, she had no one to ask her what she wanted, no one to listen to her lamentations, no one to make promises to her and no one to urge her to leave. She only left when the night drew to an end.

When daylight came, the stray dogs disbanded as suddenly as they had appeared the previous night. Light stole into the room through the curtains. As usual, I vomited many times before collapsing onto the mattress and feeling very fatigued, I could not move my limbs at all. I could not go to work that day.

Tracy, looking very lethargic herself, finally came over to the little room where I slept. Sitting down beside me, she mumbled in a hoarse voice, “Ng Mooi came last night and created havoc in my house. My husband said you have to go. He said you’re not welcome here anymore. You knew what happened last night, didn’t you? He was very upset that our baby could not sleep due to the continuous howling.”

I just nodded sleepily at her. “It’s alright, I understand. I’ll find another place to stay, so don’t worry.”

Then, turning my back to her and covering my head with a pillow, I went back to sleep. I was too tired to utter another word to her.
Chapter Thirteen

Immediately after work the following Saturday afternoon, I ran to the Pudu Raya Bus Station and hopped on the first bus available that would take me home to see my parents. Lonely, miserable and homesick, I was dying to hear Dad’s thunderous yet reassuring voice and fall into Mom’s loving arms.

I also wish to tell them about Ng Mooi’s latest visit. I wanted them to know the truth. As expected, they were devastated to learn that I still could not escape from her grip despite having left home for some time.

“If she wants to get me, she’ll be able to do so even if I’m hiding in faraway Timbuktu,” I told Mom who had a troubled look on her face.

“Don’t worry, I can handle it myself,” I tried to cheer her up but without much success.

I had lost count of how many times this deceased person had come to borrow my body. In fact, I had begun to get used to it by now. Her visits did not frighten me anymore, unlike in the early days when none of us had expected something like this could happen to me and thus, did not know what to do to get her to leave me alone.

Before leaving for Kuala Lumpur the next evening, I told my parents I had already signed up for a secretarial course which would begin in a week’s time. They were glad to hear this.

“Yes, go ahead with your plan,” I remember Dad’s reply, “It’s time to do your own stuff, to live your own life.”

After working for one and a half years as a data entry clerk in a large company, I had managed to save enough money to finance my studies in a private college near the place where I worked. The course started at six o’clock in the evening and ended at nine o’clock at night, three
times a week. It was a two-year course and once I had passed the final examinations, I could apply for the post of a secretary anywhere I liked.

Of course Tracy was very upset when she heard this. This was because on those nights that I had to attend the course, I would not go home with her and her husband. Instead, I would go to college straight after work. That meant there was nobody to do the cooking for her. As a result, she was forced to pack dinner from the economy rice stalls once more.

Like a true-blue drama queen, she made a lot of noise over this matter and hinted to me to give up the course but I stood my ground. After all, you cannot stop one from learning and improving, can you?

Whenever I reached home late, she would put on a sour face and bang things around the house to make me feel guilty. Not enough with this, she insisted that I did all the washing, ironing and other house-chores for her even though I was so exhausted and it was very late at night after I got back from college. This was to make up for the dinner that I did not cook for her. I was not allowed to sleep until I had finished all the tasks which normally took another hour or two to complete. On those nights, I hardly had four hours of sleep.

The next morning, I would be the first one to get up to prepare breakfast. In no time, my colleagues began to ask why I looked so haggard and my hands so rough and dry. It was a question I found difficult to answer.

Each time after class, I would have to walk to Central Market along Jalan Hang Kasturi to take a mini bus to go back to Batu Caves. Mini buses in Kuala Lumpur were notorious for being unreliable and dangerous. There were many nights when I had to wait for nearly an hour before one would appear.

Once I got onto the bus, it would be another hour of speeding and criss-crossing between traffic along Jalan Sultan Ismail, Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Pahang, Jalan Ipoh, Jalan Sentul and Jalan Gombak before it reached Jalan Batu Caves where I would get down at the last stop. The bus will then speed off to some remote villages on the fringes of
Batu Caves.

From where I used to get down, I would have to walk another ten minutes to reach my sister’s house. Big shady trees lined both sides of the road and most of the time, the street lamps were not working and thus, it was very dark when I walked back all on my own.
Chapter Fourteen

One night just before class was over, it rained cats and dogs. The sky simply opened up and poured without a care. As a result, there was a mad stampede when the last mini-bus arrived at Central Market. Within minutes, every inch of the little bus was taken up and I found myself standing precariously on the steps with the door out of order. Sheets of rain pelted at my face and in no time at all, I was pretty soaked from head to toe.

It was a bumper to bumper ride home. Two hours later, the rain dwindled into a drizzle. At the usual stop along Jalan Batu Caves, I pressed the bell and got down. All around me was dark and wet. A few cars sped past and the water from the puddles on the road splashed all over me. I did not curse them under my breath because I was thoroughly drenched anyway. All I wanted to do was to quicken my steps so that I could reach home to have a shower.

Hardly had I walked on for a few meters when suddenly, from out of nowhere in the dark, a motorcycle whisked past. Next thing I knew, the pillion rider tugged violently at my sling bag, taking me completely by surprise. Seconds later, he managed to yank it off from my shoulder even though I put up a struggle. To my horror, I found myself losing my balance and was dragged to the side of the road where I slipped on the wet grass and for the second time in my life, fell into a drain that was about four to five feet deep. Like the first time when I was a child of seven, I fell in feet first. To my amazement, the drain was completely covered in mud which had flowed from a nearby construction site and this mud had remained stagnant there for some time.

Despite being in a state of panic, I shouted for help. Two young Malay youths manning a burger stall at the roadside not far from where I was saw me struggling frantically in the drain. They stopped doing what they were doing and quickly ran to me with a wooden pole in hand. One of them passed it down to me and told me to grip it tightly so that I could
climb up. It was a struggle due to the slippery mud and it took some time before both of them, after using all their might, managed to pull me up again. By the time I was out of the drain and on my feet again, I was covered in mud and shivering with pain from bruises sustained on both my knees and elbows. The raw wounds were exposed to rain water and it was so painful I could hardly stand up.

My sling bag was gone. So too was the money which I was supposed to pay Tracy as food allowance and rental, identity card, bank account book, and ATM card. In a daze and shaking with cold, I slowly walked the rest of the journey in the light rain which thankfully, still managed to wash my tears away.

When she saw me in such a messy state, Tracy was not sympathetic at all but her husband was a bit surprised. After a long lecture of “serve you right, I told you so and you asked for it” from my sister, Harry drove me to the police station to make a report so that I could get a temporary identity card.

Later that night, I developed a running nose and a high fever. My limbs began to ache and my head was throbbing away even after taking two aspirins. I was about to go to sleep when my sister said coldly, “You don’t have to wash my baby’s bottles as I’m afraid you might spread your viruses to him but go wash his soiled diapers for me and iron the clothes.”

Appalled at her inconsideration for my plight, I had no choice but to wash them for her to avoid a quarrel as it was rather late and I was not feeling well. I was in no mood to argue with anyone after what had happened to me that night. After finishing the tasks, I went up to the room to sleep. It was almost two o’clock in the morning.

As I laid my feverish head down on the pillow, I heard some dogs barking loudly at the gate. When the barking turned into eerie howling, I knew the worst had come. It wasn’t a surprise to me anyway. I was very depressed and unwell that night, thus making my body an ideal host for a hungry ghost desperate to draw some attention to her own misfortune.
In my weakest condition, I could not put up any resistance at all. She just came and got inside me again, as simple as that.

Like on the first visit, Tracy, Harry, and their baby kept themselves in their room. My sister did not come over to see me or ask Ng Mooi what she wanted. For the second time, I was left alone with a hungry ghost who had something to say to us but there was no one around to hear her. There was nothing much I could do except to sob silently and wait for her to go away. She left as soon as she heard the cocks crowing in the early hours of the morning, leaving me totally exhausted and still in a daze over what had happened to me on the road the previous night.

When the sun came out and despite having bruises all over my limbs, I limped to the nearest clinic to see the doctor and got myself a few days of medical leave. It took me another three or four days to recover fully from the injuries that I had sustained from the fall that night.

“You were so lucky you did not fall headfirst, otherwise knocking your head against the hard wall of the drain might have left you in a coma,” the doctor told me.

I left the clinic grateful to know a guardian angel had actually watched over me that night.
Chapter Fifteen

“Tracy, can you get Harry to pick me up outside the mini-market along Jalan Batu Caves after class? I’ll call from the public phone once I get down there. This shop opens until late and usually there are some people around the premise, so it’s safer for me to wait for him there,” I suggested to my sister one night after I had finished ironing her husband’s shirts. That night’s snatching incident was still fresh in my mind and I was very disturbed by the possibility it might happen again.

After putting her son down on the floor to play on his own, Tracy gave me a piercing glare but she did not say anything. She went back to sort his toys into different compartments.

“This is better than the dark and dangerous bus stop further down where I’m usually the last passenger to get down and walk back to the housing estate,” I continued, hoping she would give this some consideration.

“Who do you think you are?” she began, “You’re not his wife, daughter or sister. Why should it be his duty to pick you up? You think he’s at your beck and call?” she asked in a mocking voice.

“But you promised Mom and Dad to take care of me,” I reminded her in all my innocence.

“Who asked you to take this course? You don’t have to take this course. Then you don’t have to come home so late on your own and get into this kind of trouble!” she sneered at me before turning away.

“It’s alright then. Another thing I want to let you know – I’ll be going home this weekend to celebrate Mom’s birthday. I want to take her out for dinner.”

Tracy marched to my side, put her hands on her hips and gave me another cold stare.
“Say that again! No, you’re not going anywhere this weekend. I need you around to do the house-chores for me. Next Monday, Harry will be sitting for his examinations and he needs more time to study. If you’re gone, he’ll have to help me out and this will prevent him doing some last minute revision,” she said in an uncompromising tone.

“For goodness sake, why can’t you do the house-chores yourself? Why are you so dependent on others to do your duties for you? I’m not asking your permission but merely letting you know I’m going home this weekend!” I began to raise my voice at her. Nothing angered me more than having somebody stopping me from going home to see my parents.

“You don’t have to purposely go back just to celebrate Mom’s birthday. You can just send her some money and make a phone call to her. How are those staying in faraway places celebrating their mother’s birthdays? You think they have so much money to buy a plane ticket each year and come back all the way from overseas just to celebrate their mother’s birthdays? No, they’ll also send their Moms money and wish them on the phone!”

“But I’m staying in Kuala Lumpur, not overseas!”

“It’s the same. Mom will be more than happy if you just sent her some money!”

“You’re wrong. Mom prefers my presence to my money. Don’t always think that money conquers all.” I refused to be cowed by her intimidating ways.

Apart from wanting to take Mom out for dinner and Dad too, I wanted to get away from that awful place. The mere sight of my sister, not to mention her bullying ways, distressed me greatly. By now, I had already made up my mind to move out as soon as possible. Mom and Dad gave me their approval wholeheartedly. They no longer insisted that I stayed with Tracy and Harry. They knew I could not take it anymore.

When I got back to their house in Batu Caves two days later after a short
trip back to Ipoh, I was shocked to find that all my belongings were dumped at the front gate near a large plastic dustbin. It did not take a genius to guess who had done it. It saddened me that my own sister would do something like this to me.
Chapter Sixteen

It was mid-August 1990. After coming back from lunch together, a few colleagues and I gathered in the office pantry to chitchat. We liked to talk about everything under the sun – from Hong Kong Cantonese series, the latest fashion trends, local politics, health foods, travelling and other topics worth gossiping about.

Like me, most of them were from other states and one of them, Corina, an accounts clerk from Muar, was telling us about her landlady who used to be a mah cheh or maid-servant from China in her early days. We were told that she still kept her long braid and remained unmarried with a handful of properties around Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong.

“Even though she is so rich, this old lady is very stingy. She refused to fix the broken pipes in the bathroom, thus making bathing and washing clothes a chore as the flow of water came in drips. Each night, despite being tired and sticky after coming back from work, my room-mate and I have to wait until almost midnight before we can collect enough water to use and yet, she has the gall to raise our rental starting from next month.” I had never seen talkative and cheerful Corina so upset before.

Then she continued, this time on a more optimistic note, “But not all is lost. This morning, on my way to work, I saw a vacant flat just opposite from where Christina and I are now staying. We thought we should rent this place and share it with others from outstations that are also looking for a place to rent, so is anyone here interested to share this vacant flat with us?”

I could not believe my ears, and my heart leapt with joy. “Let’s go there this evening to have a look, shall we?” I asked excitedly before we got up and walked back to our respective cubicles as the clock signaled lunch time was over and it was time to start work again. Corina nodded and gave me a wink.
That evening, after work, we took the town bus to the vacant flat which was ten minutes away from the office. You could even walk there if you wanted to. It was an old flat with a spacious hall, three large bedrooms, a verandah, a large kitchen, a toilet, and a bathroom. The landlady, a retired school teacher, also unmarried and elderly, stayed with her relatives downstairs.

“Okay, I’ll give you a reasonable rate and paint the whole place up and then you can move in by next week,” she offered generously. “I’m a very choosy person, I don’t simply rent the flat out to any Tom, Dick or Harry, but only to decent people and I knew instantly that you girls are very decent people.” I think she said this because she heard we were working in a reputable company and could be trusted.

Very pleased to find such a spacious place with a reasonable rental rate and so near to our working place, Corina and I agreed at once to her terms and placed our deposits with the kind and friendly landlady.

Luck was with me once again. A few days later, the phone at my desk rang and I heard Jason’s voice on the other end.

“Frances, do you still remember me? I’m Jason.”

“Of course I remember you. What makes you call all the way from Malacca?” I asked curiously. Jason, an Ipoh ACS boy, was Lilly’s boyfriend and Lilly was my former classmate in MGS.

“My employer has just transferred me to the headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. You remember I work at the National Electricity Board? I need a place to stay; do you know of any place to rent in Kuala Lumpur?”

“Hey, why don’t we share a flat together? I’ve just found a place!” I told him excitedly.

“Yes, that’s sound great. Let me tell you what, I’ll drive up to Kuala Lumpur this weekend to have a look at the room. Don’t you dare rent it out to others, okay? Wait for me!” he laughed happily before hanging
Jason drove over a few days later, fell in love with the place straight away and paid his deposit. I was so glad to have a male flat mate to sort of protect us girls.

When the vacant flat had been nicely spruced up a week later as promised by the landlady, Corina, Christina, Jason, and I collected the keys from her. We chose 31st August to move in as it was a public holiday and thus, we had plenty of time to unpack our things.

On the morning while the entire nation was celebrating its thirty third year of independence, I packed my things and informed my sister and her husband that I was moving out to stay with my friends in the city.

Harry reacted nonchalantly and went back to his study room but Tracy got hysterical. She was in a dilemma. Half of her wanted me to move out because of Ng Mooi’s visits but half of her wanted me to remain to help her with the house-chores. In the end, her need for my help overrode her fear of Ng Mooi.

She quickly called our parents and told them of my intention. She hoped they would help to dissuade me from moving out.

“Kuala Lumpur’s such a dangerous place for a girl to be staying on her own and there are a lot of big bad wolves out there. She’ll be swallowed up in no time, you folks just wait and see,” I heard her trying to create some fear in our parents’ hearts.

“Yes, she’d told me on her last visit that she planned to move out. I’d already given her my approval,” Dad told her coolly.

“In that case, if anything bad were to happen to her, don’t blame me! I’m no longer responsible for her safety!” she threatened him before slamming down the phone angrily. She was very mad that our father stood on my side.
Looking dejected because she had failed to garner our parent’s support, she came up to the room and knelt down in front of me, pretending to look very remorseful.

“My husband’s busy with his business administration course and our son’s still a baby. That’s the real reason why I got you this job hoping that you’d stay with us to help me out with the house-chores. I don’t know how to cope if you leave us so suddenly. Please don’t move out. This is your family too,” she begged me for the first time in her life.

“Harry’s your husband and Michael’s your son. No, this is not my family. It’s yours. You’ll have to find a way to cope, it’s not as difficult as you think,” I told her calmly. Suddenly, I felt a little sympathy for her.

“Look, I have my own life to live, my own path to follow,” I continued.

She was in tears because from now onward, she would have to do everything on her own and this prospect really depressed and frightened her at the same time. In between tears, she let out a deep sigh.

“You’re so ungrateful to me……..remember how I got you a job in a big company………..and now you’re leaving me just like that,” she accused me with a glaring stare to which I had grown so accustomed by now.

“I think I’ve repaid you enough, just take a look at my hands,” I said, and showed her my hands, so harsh and dry from all the washing and scrubbing which I took up on her behalf so that she could keep her hands silky smooth.

This was the same pair of hands I often hid from my colleagues who were curious why a young and single girl like me would have a pair of hands that resembled those of a maid or an overworked housewife.

“No, it’s not enough! You’ll never be able to repay me for the rest of your life!” she yelled back at me, stamping her foot angrily and drops of tears were seen dripping from her sculptured cheek onto her fine jaw.
Turning her head away defiantly, she refused to look at my outstretched hands but angrily brushed them aside.

“Anyway, I’ve helped you save two years’ of salary for an Indonesian maid and I know I do not owe you anything,” I told her as I zipped up my luggage before getting up to leave.

Stopping by the crib where my little nephew was sleeping, I placed a toy near his pillow. It was a plastic caterpillar with a string to pull along. I had bought it from a shop in Ipoh during my weekend trip back home.

“My son doesn’t need your toy, what he need is you to wash his soiled diapers and sterilize his feeding bottles!” she spoke scornfully at me before grabbing the toy and flinging it angrily down the stairs.

I did not bend down to pick it up. I just left it there.

Passing by Harry’s study room, I stopped at the doorway.

“Goodbye Harry, and thanks for the lifts to the office,” I told him but he did not look around to acknowledge me. Maybe I had spoken too softly that he could not hear what I was trying to tell him. Or maybe he was as mad as his wife to see me go which meant one less pair of hands to help around the house.

Tracy followed me to the gate with quiet sobs, still hoping that I would have a change of heart. Well, I did not.

“Don’t beg me to take you back if you’re not happy staying outside. I won’t accept you again,” she threatened me at the gate.

“I promise you I won’t, and take good care of your family,” I told her calmly before getting into Jason’s waiting car.

She quickly padlocked the gate and walked briskly back into the house before slamming the wooden door behind her.
Chapter Seventeen

For the first time after two very long and miserable years in Kuala Lumpur, I was able to breathe again. Now, my life and my time were completely my own. Living away from Tracy, I could go anywhere or do anything without having to get her permission first. I was not tied down by tedious house-chores anymore. I did not have to endure her endless scolding, yelling, screaming or cursing for little mistakes which sometimes were not even mistakes at all. I had denied her the pleasure of throwing her weight around.

On most weekends after work, I just hopped onto the bus and went home to visit my parents. I knew that I did not have to put up with a sour face or blatant hostilities when I came back or even find my belongings dumped on the roadside. I usually went home on the first bus and came back on the last one at my own whim and fancy. This put a smile on my lips. Hurray, what bliss to be free again! Freedom is indeed sweet for a single girl like me at twenty six.

When I did not go back to Ipoh during the weekends, I would spend it with my colleagues and flat mates. On Saturday afternoons after work, together with a few colleagues, we would go for a buffet lunch at our favorite spot – The Corona Inn behind Pavilion Cinema along Jalan Bukit Bintang. For RM9.90 per head, we could eat local and international food to our hearts’ content. After that, we would go window shopping around the same area. Before Pavilion and Times Square came along, the hot spots were Sungai Wang Plaza and Lot 10. Sometimes, I would buy a dress, a handbag or a pair of shoes that caught my eye. An outing like this would not be complete without catching a movie. At that time, cinemas like Cathay, Lido, and Pavilion were all located along the same stretch of street.

In a large city like Kuala Lumpur, Saturday nights can be very boring if you have no dates. To kill our boredom, Jason and Ah Chuan, his roommate, suggested that we all go disco-hopping. Dressed in our best and
with bottles and bottles of mineral water stocked up in Jason’s car boot, we would hop from one disco to another along Jalan Pinang without having to buy any drinks or spend a cent! In those days, entrance to discos was free. They earned our money through the drinks that they sold but this commodity could be very expensive. To save money but at the same time have fun, we brought our own water bottles and drank them at the car park before leaving for another disco nearby. We would dance until the disco closed in the wee hours of the morning. By that time, we could hardly open our eyes and hopped into bed once we got home. Forget about taking a bath, forget about washing the face and forget about brushing our teeth. We would do these later.

We slept through the morning and woke up late in the afternoon, in time for lunch. We would normally buy some vegetables and meat from the market nearby. Corina and I would cook a simple meal for everyone. The ones who were not doing any cooking would clean up the dishes and utensils.

The rest of the afternoon was spent watching television, listening to our favorite radio stations or simply taking a short nap. In the evening, we would walk to the Chin Woo Stadium nearby for a few laps in the public swimming pool to cool ourselves down. When we came back, we would go to the night market behind the Kenanga wet market to buy some popular hawker food like wanton mee, chee cheong fun, and fried kuay teow or pan mee for dinner. The rest of the night was spent watching more television before retiring to our respective rooms.

We would organize monthly trips to some tourist spots like Genting Highlands, Port Dickson, Malacca, Cameron Highlands, Fraser’s Hill or Pulau Ketam. There was one time when Jason drove us to Klang for bak kut teh and Pandamaran for sumptuous seafood. I enjoyed all these trips and took photos for remembrance. I was so happy to finally be able to go to places which were denied me earlier when I was staying with my sister. At least I was not a country bumpkin anymore.

My flat mates and I drew up a duty roster so that everyone would take turns to keep the place clean and neat. We swept the floor, cleaned the
toilet and watered the plants. I was very happy with this arrangement. Nobody got to be lazy. When you are happy, time seems to fly past. Before we knew it, a year had passed since I moved out from my sister’s house to stay with my friends.

By now I had got myself a roommate too. She was Evelynn whom I knew from my first job in an insurance firm in Ipoh. Evelynn was an accounts clerk and she moved down to Kuala Lumpur to work in a firm that produced sports shoes. Not that I could not afford a room of my own but because she was new to Kuala Lumpur and did not have other friends, I took her in.

Jason always teased us girls for not having a steady boyfriend. “Let me introduce a few guys to you girls,” he offered on many occasions. To match-make us, Jason would invite his friends whom he knew from his school or work place to our flat during Saturday nights. We would all go out for dinner, catch a movie and later, proceed to the disco. I was introduced to a few guys but somehow, none of them caught my eye. They were simply not my type. I knew because I could not feel any butterflies in my stomach.
Chapter Eighteen

I remember it was mid-1991 when I woke up one morning with a strange feeling that something wonderful was going to happen to me that day. I happily hummed a song as I dressed for work. Before leaving home, I took a look in the mirror and was very pleased with what I saw.

Upon reaching the office, I learned that both my lunch buddies had not come to work that day. Vicky was on sick leave while Joanne was at another part of the city to attend a seminar. That left me alone. Never mind, I would pack my lunch and eat it in the pantry with the girls from other departments, I thought to myself.

At one o’clock in the afternoon, I walked across to my favorite eating place – Lai Foong Coffee Shop along Jalan Tun HS Lee to pack my favorite lunch – wanton mee with stewed mushroom and chicken feet. The hawker selling this dish was from Taman Chempaka in Ipoh. Whenever people from Ipoh meet up at other places, they take great delight in greeting each other. “Wow, you’re from Ipoh too, so I just call you yee poh mui (Ipoh girl). You know, Ipoh is famous for pretty girls!” I remember he teased me that way the first time I patronized his stall and he had asked me where I came from as he had not seen me before.

After placing my order with him, I told him that I would return in ten minutes time to pick up the noodles. I wanted to go to the lane behind this coffee shop to buy sugar cane juice from another hawker. On the way to the sugar cane juice stall, I saw a smartly dressed young man with two pretty girls standing near a traffic junction. They were on their way to Lai Foong Coffee Shop too. I found this young man’s face very familiar, as if I had met him somewhere but I could not remember where. So I just gave him a smile and walked on to get my drink. I could see he was awed by my unexpected smile. He looked momentarily dazed and stood rooted to the spot. When I saw how his companions prodded him to move on, I let out a small laugh.
While waiting for the sugar cane seller to pack my drink, my memory suddenly came back. Now I knew where I had met him.

When I came back for my noodles at Lai Foong Coffee Shop, I saw the young man sitting with his companions inside the coffee shop waiting for their food to be served. Seeing me standing at the stall making payment to the hawker, he quickly got up and in a flash, was by my side.

“Hi, I think you look familiar but I don’t remember where I’ve seen you,” he said enthusiastically. I looked at him and flashed him another smile.

“Is it at Step’s Dancing Studio?” I quizzed him laughingly.

“Ah yes, that was the place! There were many girls there but I could easily recognize your large eyes and your green jade pendant!” he chuckled with amusement. I think he was referring to the green jade pendant I was wearing all the time. It was given to me by Mom to keep naughty spirits away.

“Hey, your two pretty female companions are looking in our direction,” I hinted to him.

“Oh, they’re my colleagues. Here is my name card,” he said and handed me one.

“Marco Polo Holidays, Marcus Liew – tour leader,” I read it quickly before dropping it into my purse.

“Sorry, I’m just a data entry clerk at that tall grey building opposite and I don’t have a name card to pass around,” I told him apologetically.

“It’s alright; please give me a call, no obligation to join any tour. I desperately want to be your friend. Don’t forget to call me, okay?” he replied happily.

“Okay, bye!” I gave him another smile before walking back to my office.
with the food I had packed.

“Oh yes, before I let you out of my sight, may I know your name?” he ran and called after me.

“It’s Frances!” I answered smilingly.

A year ago, a group of colleagues and I had joined a ballroom dancing class at a place called Steps’ Dancing Studio along Jalan Hang Kasturi in the evenings. It was run by Kim and Ken who were professional ballroom dancers. Marcus was their friend and they roped him in to partner the female students. It was they who taught him how to dance rock and roll and rumba. My colleagues and I went there for a month but left after we could not catch up with the challenging lessons. Learning ballroom dancing is not as easy as you think. Not long after that, Marcus too, left the dancing studio and became a full time tour leader leading tours to countries all over the world. When I met him that afternoon, he had just been back from leading a tour to China.

It was a week later when I suddenly remembered that someone by the name of Marcus Liew had asked me to call him. I had totally forgotten the name card he had given to me. So I took it out and called him. He was so delighted to hear my voice on the other end of the phone.

“You know, I have been breathlessly waiting for your call the past week. I almost gave up hope of ever hearing your voice again. I thought you would never call. It’s a miracle that you have called now. How about going for a movie and a meal this evening after work?” he asked enthusiastically.

“Okay, but today I am not working. I have just sat for my practical examination at Top to Toe Beauty Academy on Jalan Bukit Bintang. I borrowed three bags full of towels from the college and I need to take them home to wash. I have a problem hailing a cab home as this area is so jammed and the cabbies refused to stop for me. Can you hop over to give me a helping hand?” I asked him.
“Yes, of course and where is Top to Toe?” it was his turn to ask.

“It’s behind Lot 10.”

“Okay, I’m on the way there now,” he said and hung up.

He arrived at the beauty college right on the dot and helped me to carry all my things home. After I had taken a bath and changed into a new set of clothes, we went out for dinner on Jalan Alor. We had seafood noodles. Then we went to watch a movie at Pavilion Cinema on Jalan Bukit Bintang. It was *Sleeping with Your Enemy* starring Julia Roberts. I remember screaming out in one of the horrifying scenes and Marcus laughed at me. Before going home, we went to Swenson Ice Cream Parlor near Federal Bowling to have my favorite ice cream. While enjoying our dessert, we got to know each other. I told him about my background and he did the same with his.

Marcus was from Kuala Lumpur. “My parents were building contractors. They often went up to Ipoh to do renovations. My mother noticed Ipoh girls are so pretty and she used to tell my brothers and me to marry Ipoh girls when we grew up some day!” On hearing this, I broke into a gale of laughter. I found this guy humorous and easy going.

“And now I have met one Ipoh girl who gave me three smiles in a single day! It’s my good fortune! Tonight, I must go home and tell my mother that I have just met an Ipoh girl who has stolen my heart with her killer smiles,” he said happily. From where I sat opposite him, I could see he was a sincere and kind-hearted person.

Marcus went home after sending me back to my place. Before leaving, he gave me a surprise goodnight kiss on my lips and I could feel butterflies in my stomach. When I lay down on the bed to sleep that night, I finally understood why I was so happy on that particular morning a week ago.
Chapter Nineteen

Besides hailing from the same hometown of Ipoh and going to the same school, my roommate Evelynn and I shared the same birthday. She and I could get along very well despite the five years difference in our age. I could still remember how we used to devour assam laksa, popiah, chee cheong fun and kai see hor fun at Kong Heng Coffee Shop on Leech Street during lunch in those days when we were working for an insurance firm at Wisma U Meng in Ipoh old town. I had just finished school and was new to the working world. She was helpful and taught me many things in the office.

Evelynn was actually a very attractive lady. She had smooth fair skin, long curly black hair, sparkling white teeth, sexy lips and a sultry voice. But she often complained about her single-lid eyes which according to her, needed to be corrected. Eventually, she went for a minor cosmetic surgery to correct it.

If you ask me, I think the only problem with her was that she was too choosy when it came to getting herself a life partner. She confided in me that she wanted to marry a rich and successful man so she does not have to work anymore after that. Anyone lesser would not do. I wasn’t surprised that at the age of thirty five, she had yet to meet her Prince Charming. In fact, I had accompanied her a few times to match-making dates but they did not turn out successful. “He’s not rich or successful enough, simply not my cup of tea!” Evelynn would give me the same reason again and again.

“Evelynn, you should lower your expectations. Rich and successful men are not necessarily good guys. Regular ones like me are more reliable. Choose one who is sincere in his heart and truly loves you,” Jason, our flat mate advised her one day.

“Both yours and Frances’ birthday is coming up soon. Let’s celebrate it at a disco and I’ll bring some guys along for you to choose from. There
is one particular guy called Jackson who is still single and he’s the same age as you. He’s a bit shy and conservative; otherwise, he’s a good man. He’s an accounts executive and he’s from Klang. Who knows, maybe both of you will hit it off?” he teased her further. My roommate blushed and looked happy with this plan.

The next Saturday night, we all went to Tin Mine Discotheque on Jalan Sultan Ismail to celebrate Evelynn’s and my birthday. We brought along a big birthday cake to share. Evelynn was the star that night as it was her match-making night too. She looked so gorgeous that some men at the disco gave her wolf-whistles as she took to the dance floor with us.

Marcus did not join us as he was away in Las Vegas and San Francisco leading a tour. But this did not stop me from having a great time with my friends. We danced, we sang, we joked, we laughed and we drank that night. We partied until three o’clock in the morning. Since it was very late, Jackson decided to stay over at our place instead of rushing back to Klang. Two of his friends also followed us back to our flat. That night, they all crammed into Jason’s and Ah Chuan’s room.

Whenever we came back late from disco hopping, we would not bother to take our bath. We went straight to bed as all of us were too sleepy and tired to be bothered with the reek of sweat and cigarette smoke (although none of us smoke). Even we girls did not bother to remove our make-up. All we wanted to do was to sleep. We didn’t care if the sky was about to fall down on us!

Not long after we had all gone to sleep, the howling of dogs began to drown the loud snores that came from the guys’ room. It then grew louder and louder until one by one, we were awakened by the chilling sounds that came from the street below. I heard Jason come out from his room to investigate. “Why are those dogs howling so eerily?” he asked Ah Chuan who was awake too. They opened the door and went out to the verandah to look at the dogs gathered below. I heard Jason yelling at them to disband.

I could also hear Christina and Corina’s voices in the living room. They
too, had been awoken by the dogs’ howling. “What are all those noises coming from the street below?” Corina asked sleepily. “How to sleep with this kind of noise?” she grumbled.

But I could not get up like the rest. I was already locked by a powerful force that held my whole body down to the bed. All I could do was to tremble like someone in a trance. Evelynn was stunned to see me that way. There were eight other people with me in that flat that night but no one knew what had happened to me. When I slowly opened my eyes again, I could see confusion and fear in their faces. They had all gathered in my room, discussing among themselves whether I had drunk too much red wine and needed to see the doctor. I could only shake my head and mumble in a voice none of them could recognize or understand but only served to baffle them further.

“Strange, that was not her voice but like some old lady’s!” I heard Corina say to Jason. One by one, I could see them withdrawing from my room and going back to their rooms. Evelynn joined Christina and Corina in their room, leaving me all on my own. They could not sleep but were discussing what they had just seen.

I had to wait for dawn to arrive before I got back my body and the dogs began to go away. The next day, after sleeping for many hours, I told them what had happened to me. You can guess the looks on their faces.

Throughout the whole of the following week, other than Jason, none of my flat mates dared to speak to me. They distanced themselves from me and did not answer when I spoke to them. Never before in the last two years had I felt as lonely as I did in that week. It was as if I was living with a bunch of strangers.

When I opened the door of the pantry in the office, I could hear Corina telling the tea lady and a few other girls what had happened that night. They instantly stopped when they saw me entering with a mug in my hand. They too, fled the pantry as if a ghost had entered. My heart sank to see them this way.
That Saturday, I took the first bus home to see my parents. I told them what had happened – of how Ng Mooi came to the flat that I shared with a host of girls and guys and thoroughly scared them. There was nothing my parents could do for me other than to comfort me and tell me to stay strong.

When I got back to the flat the next evening, I was surprised to see the wooden front door locked as if everybody had gone out. I quickly got my keys and flung open the door. The living room looked empty and quiet. The tables and chairs belonging to my flat mates were gone. So too the television and radio sets that belonged to them. The doors to each room were open and I could see the rooms were empty too. There were no beds, no cupboards and no occupants. Everybody had left while I was away.

Then I walked into my own room. Only my bed, my cupboard, and my study table were still there. So too were my table fan and my stacks of books lying on the floor. I broke down and cried miserably. I knew Jason was going to move soon as he had just got the keys to an apartment he had bought in Bandar Sunway but where were the rest of my flat mates? They had just left without a word.

“Her roommate Evelynn suggested we moved to Pandan Indah and we managed to find a low cost flat to share among us,” I heard Corina tell the tea lady a day later as I was about to enter the pantry to have my breakfast. They instantly stopped and changed their topic.

Marcus got back that same week. I told him what had happened. “Don’t feel sad, darling. You won’t be alone in this,” he tried to console me.

“Some people enter your life and then vanish like a wisp of scent; some people enter your life and stay like a shadow that never leaves your body,” he said while wiping my tears away. Smile again, he told me, which I did.
Chapter Twenty

“Love alone is not enough. You must have the courage to accept her condition,” I heard Dad tell Marcus who was in Ipoh to ask him for my hand in marriage.

“I’m not afraid of her condition, Uncle. I promise you that for better or for worse, I’ll always walk beside her. It’s our destiny to be together forever,” Marcus replied confidently.

“Then I shall hold you to your words. I know I sound demanding but I want to make sure my daughter marries the right person. I don’t want you to tell me later that marrying my daughter is a big mistake or that she’s a burden to you. You must know what you’re doing. My daughter, despite being less ordinary, like all girls, deserves happiness too,” Dad continued.

Marcus nodded and smiled in agreement. Then he whispered into my ears, “Getting his permission to marry you is as tough as an ancient scholar getting his converted post in imperial China.” I almost giggled hearing how he phrased it.

Being a modest couple, we had a simple wedding reception in December 1992 followed by a honeymoon to Australia in July 1993 where we spent our first winter in the Snowy Mountains. We backpacked around Sydney and the Gold Coast for two weeks before joining a cruise along the Straits of Malacca. We had a happy start to life as husband and wife.

Once back from the trip, we went around looking for a place to call our own. We found an apartment for sale at Taman Miharja which is near to the flat we were staying at that time. Since it was within our means, we bought it straight away. As soon as we had purchased this apartment, the property agent whom we dealt with called us up to ask whether we were interested to let it out to a group of students who were studying in a college nearby. I said yes since the rental could cover the bank instalment
and we could even make a small profit.

We still preferred to stay at the rented flat since it was so near to our working places. The biggest bonus was that we did not have to get caught in Kuala Lumpur’s notorious traffic jam each morning and evening. We walked to work in the mornings and back home in the evenings. To make the task more bearable, we always reminded each other that we were blessed with a pair of strong legs to walk.
Part 3

Lessons My Lama Taught Me

If you can, help others;
if you cannot do that,
at least do not harm them.

– The 14th Dalai Lama
Chapter Twenty One

It was Ophelia and her husband David who told me about Karma Kagyu Dharma Society, a Buddhist organization in Kuala Lumpur. They heard about it from a close friend who had been there several times. Located near the old folks’ home on Lorong Jubilee which is behind Jalan Loke Yew, it was founded in October 1977 by the late His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa together with a few of his Malaysian followers.

*Dharma* is a Sanskrit word which means *eternal truth as taught by the Buddha*. *Gyalwa Karmapa* is an honorific Tibetan title which means the *one who carries out the Buddha's activities*. His Holiness was the spiritual leader of the *Kagyu* school, one of four different schools of Buddhism in Tibet. The other three schools are *Nyingma, Sakya* and *Gelug*. The purpose of Karma Kagyu Dharma Society is to bring the teachings of the *Kagyu* school to Malaysians. Tibetan Buddhism was still new in Malaysia then.

Not long after coming back from our honeymoon, I told Marcus about this place. He was very receptive and asked, “Shall we go there to have a look? Perhaps they can help you in your problem with Ng Mooi.” So the next evening after work and dinner, we went there.

It was a large single story bungalow built on a piece of private land and surrounded by some tall shady trees. Since its metal gate was open, we made our way to the entrance where we left our shoes on a rack.

We were greeted by a large golden statue of *Buddha Sakyamuni* in a sitting position with eyes half closed in deep meditation and lips smiling with compassion. We made three prostrations to the giant statue of *Buddha Sakyamuni* which was seated in the middle of the prayer hall with its back leaning against the wall. Gazing at *Buddha Sakyamuni’s* serene face while standing in the middle of such a spacious hall, I could immediately feel a deep sense of peace, one that I had never felt before in my entire life.
Looking around, I found the tall ceiling and pillars in this building covered in very colorful Tibetan motifs. The eight auspicious signs in Tibetan Buddhism – a lotus flower, a mystic knot, a pair of golden fish, a victory banner, a prayer wheel, a treasure vase, a parasol and lastly, a conch shell were beautifully and delicately drawn on the wall.

On hearing a male voice behind us, I turned around and saw the warm and smiling face of a Tibetan monk walking towards where Marcus and I stood. There was nobody else with him. This was the first time both of us had come face to face with a Tibetan.

“Hello, my name is Lama Khedrup. I’m the Resident Lama here. Lama means religious teacher in Tibetan. However, there is no dharma class here tonight. Is there anything else that I can do for you both?” he asked in English which took us by surprise.

Wearing a sleeveless saffron blouse inside matched with a maroon robe outside, and walking briskly on bare feet, the bald Tibetan monk beckoned us to his private quarters at the far corner of the hall when we told him we had a grievous problem and needed his help.

Once inside his private quarters, Marcus and I sat cross-legged facing the Tibetan monk who sat on a leather sofa surrounded by stacks and stacks of religious texts. Surrounding him too were framed pictures of Buddha Sakyamuni and other Buddhist deities hanging on the wall.

“In Buddhism, we believe all sentient beings will fall into six different realms called the wheel of life. They’re the deva, asura, manusya, tiryaka, preta and naraka realms. Our karma or actions done in our past or present lives will determine which realm we’ll fall into. Therefore, it
is right to say each of us is the owner of our karma; each of us is responsible for where we’re going to end up in. Whichever realm we’re falling into, it’s the same – we’re going to suffer, it’s temporary and no realm is perfect. In all six realms, we’ll be subjected to samsara which is the cycle of birth and death. When I say it’s temporary, it means we won’t stay in one realm forever, we’ll move among them.

Let me explain further. Devas are godlike beings who’re bestowed with great power, wealth and lives very much longer than humans. They’re so contented that they become blind to the sufferings of others, thus they’re devoid of wisdom and compassion. These devas are invisible to human eyes and they can move at great speed in the skies, like flying through the air.

The Asuras are like demons. They’re very jealous and envious of the Devas and thus, they like to pick fights and quarrels with the former all the time. They also like to feel they’re superior to everyone else, thus, belittling others and looking down on those weaker than themselves. They have no patience at all and would bully anyone who crosses their paths. But all the while, they would try to hide behind justice, honesty and fair play. Asuras are the most insincere of all sentient beings. You could be easily tricked by them if you’re not careful enough.

Manusya are humans. They are the only ones in the six realms who could actually escape from the cycle of birth and death but sadly, very few have the wisdom and faith to do so. Humans are also driven by passions, doubts and desires all the time.

Tiryaka are the animals. It’s their stupidity, ignorance, prejudice towards others and laziness that got sentient beings into this realm.

Preta are the hungry ghosts. Their insatiable hunger and craving for more of everything had caused them to fall into this pitiful realm.

Last of course is the lowest of all the six realms – the hell realm or naraka. It is the most terrible place to go to where anger and aggression rule the place. Those who are burnt with hatred and like to destroy others
would go to this realm. So do you understand now?” Lama explained at
great length when I asked him if there were indeed hungry ghosts.

If he had not been a monk, I think he would have make a good school
teacher or father, I thought to myself as I nodded my head respectfully.
He had the most compassionate and benevolent face I had ever seen in
a human.

“Lama, what do you think of the practice of offering food and paper
items like what my mother had been doing all these years and yet, could
not pacify the restless soul of this poor woman?” was the next question
I put to him.

“You see, hungry ghosts have throats as narrow and thin as needles. No
food can pass through such throats. So, all these offerings of food could
not help to satisfy their hunger. You are only making them greedier and
fight more among themselves. But luckily, they have large pores on their
bodies. Offer them plenty of prayers instead. Also, there is something
called kar sur in Tibetan which is actually cone-shaped incense that con-
tains fruits, cereal, holy water, honey, sweets and milk. It is an age-old
tradition to offer kar sur to alleviate the hunger of all spirits wandering
around us. It is good to burn a few of them in the evenings when you
recite prayers. The smoke emitted from the incense will blend with the
prayers. The pores of the hungry ghosts will absorb this offering and it
will bring them much comfort,” Lama Khedrup advised earnestly.

“Can you teach me how to pray then?” I asked eagerly.

He leaned back and broke into soft laughter before answering, “Of
course I can! For a beginner like you, just recite the universal mantra
or the six syllable mantra of Om Mani Padme Hum as many times as
possible and then dedicate it to your grandmother. This mantra is very
powerful and complete. It will reach all sentient beings in the six realms.
This way is much better than offering her food and paper money. You
can help to enlighten her and over time, she will leave the hungry ghost
realm and gain rebirth into the human realm. Isn’t that better for her and
for you too?” he bent down and asked me with a tinge of glee in his eyes.
I was so happy to hear this that my heart was flooded with hope. If there was anything that I wished for, it was for Ng Mooi to leave the hungry ghost realm and be born into a better one.

“In fact, you could also recite this mantra whenever you can and dedicate it to all sentient beings in the whole universe so that everyone, including those who hate you, or those who have hurt you before, will benefit too, not just your grandmother alone. The beauty of Buddhism is that, everyone, from the smallest ant on the ground to the mightiest king on the throne will not be left out from being blessed by this mantra. Tonight is too late for me to do anything and I don’t have flowers and fruits with me now. Come back tomorrow evening around the same time. Bring some flowers and fruits and I will conduct a puja or ceremony for her and also, for all those who are suffering mentally and physically, wherever they are,” he told me before showing us the way to the door and bidding us goodnight.

“Thank you, Lama. We’ll come again tomorrow evening with the things you have requested. I hope you can help alleviate the pain Ng Mooi has been suffering all these years,” I answered happily.

“I’ll do my best to help you both,” he nodded and smiled.

Marcus and I prostrated to the large statue of Buddha Sakyamuni three times again before leaving.

Back home, I called Mom to tell her about Lama Khedrup’s willingness to conduct a ceremony for Ng Mooi. She was very grateful to hear that and so was Dad.

“Remember to give Lama a hongbao as a token of appreciation for his help!” Mom reminded me.
Chapter Twenty Two

The next evening, we were back at Karma Kagyu Dharma Society with some fresh flowers and fruits for the Lama. He was busy setting up an altar in front of the golden statue of Buddha Sakyamuni when we reached there. He acknowledged our arrival with a friendly nod and a warm smile.

Lama then instructed me to light up two rows of butter lamps on the altar. I roped Marcus in to help. When Lama had finished arranging the flowers and fruits on the altar, he chipped in to help too.

“The purpose of lighting up these lamps is to brighten up the path of enlightenment for the deceased, in this case, your grandmother, so that she can reach it one day,” Lama explained patiently to us.

When this was done, we sat down in the middle of the vast prayer hall to start the prayer session for Ng Mooi. Lama sat in the middle flanked by Marcus and me on each side. Lama held a Tibetan bell in his left hand and a dorje or vajra in his right hand. A dorje (Tibetan) or a vajra (Sanskrit) is an instrument that symbolizes a diamond and a thunderbolt. Diamond means indestructibility and thunderbolt means irresistibility. Beside him, hanging from a hand crafted wooden stand, was a large Tibetan drum. Lama pointed out to us that these instruments are integral to any Tibetan Buddhism religious ceremony.

“Before I begin, let me tell you briefly what I’m going to do for your grandmother. I’m going to do Chenrezig puja and it’s to pacify her suffering soul. First of all, let me introduce you to Chenrezig,” he said in a friendly voice. He also gave me a small booklet with the title Chenrezig Saddhana to bring home to recite accordingly.

“Chenrezig in Tibetan means a great being who watches over sentient beings. He is the embodiment of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Compassion and wisdom are his greatest virtues and hence, he is looked upon
as a symbol of the most compassionate Bodhisattva. He is also known as Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit and Kuan Yin Pusa in Chinese. In the west, he is known as the Goddess of Mercy. Chenrezig has a special affinity with beings in samsara, which is the endless cycle of birth and death. He manifests into various forms to help beings who are in varying kinds of need. Chenrezig’s white body represents purity and flawlessness, his two front arms are folded towards the chest and clasping a wish-fulfilling gem, the other two arms are raised to shoulder level, with the right hand holding a crystal rosary which represents the continuous salvation of beings from samsara, and the left hand holding a white lotus which represents the four activities of the Buddha – pacify those suffering, increasing our wisdom, magnetize the good and destroy the evil. A doeskin drapes around the left shoulder, representing the compassionate pure mind. He wears a Five Buddhas Crown which signifies wisdoms of the five directions and he sits in a meditative posture which signifies the unshakeable stage of meditation. The mantra of Chenrezig is Om Mani Padme Hum. Other names for this very powerful and complete mantra are the universal mantra or six syllable mantra. It is used to bless and purify the bad karma, bad conduct and obstacles of beings of the six realms in order to leave samsara and approach the path of enlightenment. Chenrezig practice is easy to follow and is very effective. This practice is believed and practiced by many great masters and we should always recite this mantra which is suitable for all occasions and for all problems that we encounter in our daily lives,” Lama explained.

After this, Lama Khedrup lit up a piece of incense, closed his eyes and began to recite in Tibetan while gently shaking the Tibetan bell with one hand and holding the dorje or vajra firmly with another. Marcus and I sat and listened attentively with our palms pressed together in front of our chests.

Moments later after the prayer session had started, I began to feel something revolting inside my body. Instinctively, I knew it was Ng Mooi. My stomach cramped and my throat constricted. While my arms could still move a bit, I painfully made a gesture to signal to my husband. Uninitiated at first because he had never seen me in this condition before, he quickly got my message and alerted the Lama who was as stunned
as Marcus was to see me cringe before collapsing onto the floor. In seconds, the Tibetan monk quickly regained his composure and placed his rosary beads over my head and at the same time, quickened his recitation.

“I’m very cold and I’m very hungry and they’re beating me up, please, please, please help me out of this misery!” Ng Mooi’s shriek reverberated through the vast prayer hall of the Buddhist organization, sending the two men who were with me that evening scrambling to pick me up from the floor. Streams of tears flowed endlessly from my eyes but they were her tears, not mine.

I twisted, I rolled, I kicked and I screamed on behalf of a disgruntled woman who had been so mercilessly abandoned by the ones whom she had put her hopes onto. That evening, in front of the large statue of Buddha Sakyamuni, Ng Mooi, a hungry ghost for decades, released all the anger and fury she had harbored for more than fifty years. She cried and wailed and pulled her hair in utter frustration. She was totally inconsolable. It was sometime before her crying finally subsided into quiet sobbing and shallow breathing.

“Lama, why is it that a ghost dares to come into a holy place such as this?” I heard Marcus ask the Tibetan monk.

“That’s a good question. The answer is because Buddha Sakyamuni is so compassionate that ghosts are not afraid of him and could appear before him to voice their grievances. We believe ghosts should be tamed by compassion and wisdom, and not by brutal force,” he answered.

Then Lama Khedrup continued with another mantra. This one was to invoke Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom.

“This mantra – Om Ah Ra Ba Tsa Na Dhi is to call upon Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom. This Bodhisattva holds a scriptural text on one hand to enlighten beings while the other hand holds a sword to cut their ignorance. He will help all creatures caught in the prison of samsara, confused in the darkness of their own ignorance and overwhelmed by
their own suffering,” I heard him tell my husband who was holding me close to him.

Hearing this mantra calmed Ng Mooi down considerably. I could slowly feel normalcy coming back into my body which she had just borrowed. The pain in my stomach had gone and so too the tightness at the base of my voice box. I could swallow my saliva again. My body stopped trembling too and I could sit upright although I could feel extreme exhaustion.

“Now, I will end this prayer session with a mantra of Medicine Buddha or the Healing Buddha. This Buddha is dark blue in color like the lapis lazuli and in his right hand, he holds an aurora plant while his left hand holds a begging bowl from which nectar flows to heal all suffering creatures in the six realms, be they mentally or physically. His mantra is a bit longer, so listen carefully and memorize it in your heart – Tayatha Om Bekenze Bekenze Maha Bekenze Bekenze Randza Samugate Soha,” he said to me.

As soon as he had finished the prayer session, I sprang to my feet and vomited furiously onto the floor. Marcus grimaced and shook his head. He apologized profusely to Lama Khedrup and quickly ran to the toilet to get a pail of water and a mop to clean up the mess that I had created.

“It’s alright, it’s alright, don’t worry. Remember to recite what I’ve taught you tonight with faith and sincerity. It’ll take some time but eventually, after having gained wisdom, the deceased will give up her attachment for food and money and she will walk towards a better rebirth in the future. Help her if you can,” the Tibetan monk kindly advised me.

“And if you dedicate your prayers to others too, you’re helping them as well. Make it your calling to help those in distress,” he continued.

Lama then took out from his little wooden chest two posters and signed them with a red marker pen before passing them to me. On closer look, I saw that one was the picture of Buddha Sakyamuni and the other was Chenrezig. Behind both posters was the universal mantra or six syllable
The _mantra_ of _Om Mani Padme Hum_ written by Lama himself in Tibetan.

“For you to keep and hopefully they bring endless blessings to you and all sentient beings,” he said smilingly to me. I was so touched by his kind gesture that tears welled up in my eyes.

We left the _dharma_ center after I had a short rest and Marcus had cleaned up the place.

From that day onwards, each evening after coming home from work, I recited the three _mantras_ that Lama Khedrup had taught me and offered _kar sur_ too. Marcus and I attended Lama Khedrup’s _dharma_ classes whenever we managed to find the time. From him, we learned the Buddha’s teachings which greatly enriched our lives.

For the next two years, between 1993 and 1995, Ng Mooi did not show up during _Ching Ming_ and the Hungry Ghost Festival. My days went by very peacefully.
Buddhist Terminologies in alphabetical order:

\textit{Asura (Sanskrit)} – is a class of beings invisible to human eyes, living at the foot of Mount Sumeru, which is believed to be the center of the universe. They are the eternal arch enemies of another class of beings called Deva who dwell on the peak of the same sacred mountain. They are believed to be feuding over the longevity fruits that grew on the slopes of Mount Sumeru. Asura beings are always full of jealousy and easily get paranoid. They are forever angry with everyone; hence always starting fights and quarrels wherever they go. They always want to win in every battle, be superior over others, belittling those lower than themselves and rejoice in the defeat of their rivals. Violent in temper and fond of bullying others, these beings are very deceptive. They disguise themselves as the face of justice, honesty, kindness and friendship. They will stab you from behind or harm you without your knowing until it is too late.

\textit{Avalokiteshvara (Sanskrit)} – the Bodhisattva of compassion.

\textit{Bodhisattva (Sanskrit)} – Bodhi means wisdom, a Buddha to be.

\textit{Buddha Sakyamuni (Sanskrit)} – A prince from India, he spent a very long time meditating under the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya in India some 2,500 years ago before attaining complete awakening or perfect enlightenment on the morning of Wesak Day. On that day itself, Buddha saw all the beings of the six realms and the factors that contribute to their existence in each of these realms. Buddhism is the study and practice of his teachings.

\textit{Chenrezig (Tibetan)} – the Bodhisattva of compassion.

\textit{Dharma (Sanskrit)} – means eternal truth as taught by Buddha Sakyamuni.

\textit{Deva (Sanskrit)} – a class of beings invisible to human eyes who live on
the peak of Mount Sumeru. With godlike qualities, they can fly through the air, hold great power over other beings. They live in great splendor and have extremely long lives, approximately eighty four thousand years, due to their consumption of the longevity fruits which is their privilege. They are so contented that they have no knowledge of the suffering of others. Hence, they are devoid of wisdom and compassion. Like other beings, they too will die one day and will then be reborn into another realm.

Dorje (Tibetan) or Vajra (Sanskrit) – is an instrument used in Tibetan religious ceremonies. It represents the diamond and thunderbolt which are the symbols of unshakeable faith.

Gyalwa Karmapa (Tibetan) – is an honorific title in Tibet which means the one who carries out the Buddha’s activities. He is the spiritual leader of the Kagyu School.

Karma (Sanskrit) – means collective good or bad deeds done in present or past lives which will determine which realms beings will go next.

Kar Sur (Tibetan) – cone shaped incense that contains fruits, cereal, holy water, honey, sweets and milk, used as offerings to wandering spirits around us.

Kuan Yin Pusa (Mandarin) – the Bodhisattva of compassion. Avalokiteshvara, Chenrezig and Kuan Yin Pusa is one and the same Bodhisattva.

Lama (Tibetan) – means religious teacher in Tibet.

Manusya (Sanskrit) – means human beings and the only beings who can escape from the cycle of birth and death. However, only a handful has the faith, courage and wisdom to do so. The rest are clouded by passion, desires and doubts all the time.

Manjushri (Sanskrit) – the Bodhisattva of wisdom, responsible for removal of stupidity and ignorance from all beings.
**Mantra (Sanskrit)** – a string of sacred words used for recitation.

**Naraka (Sanskrit)** – is the realm of hell; beings will fall into this realm due to extreme hatred and anger and also as a result of having done some unforgivable deeds such as killing or raping. This is the most terrifying of all the six realms where hot is too hot and cold is too cold and one will go through unspeakable punishments.

**Nyingma, Sakya, Gelug and Kagyu (Tibetan)** – these are the four main schools of Buddhism in Tibet.

**Om Ah Ra Ba Tza Na Dhi (Sanskrit)** – the mantra of Manjushri recited to remove stupidity and ignorance.

**Om Mani Padme Hum (Sanskrit)** – the mantra of Chenrezig, Avalokiteshvara or Kuan Yin Pusa, also known as the universal or the six syllable mantra.

**Preta (Sanskrit)** – is a class of beings invisible to human eyes except to those who have the ability to see such beings. These are hungry ghosts who have big bellies and throats as thin as needles. They are always hungry and greedy, and very pitiful indeed.

**Puja (Sanskrit)** – a prayer session done with the accompaniment of musical instruments such as the horns, trumpets, drums, bells and cymbals.

**Samsara (Sanskrit)** – means the cycle of birth and death. Buddha Sakya-muni is the first being to transcend this cycle.

**Tiryaka (Sanskrit)** – this is the animal realm. They are here due to their stupidity, ignorance and laziness. In this realm, animals will devour one another for the sake of survival.

**Tayatha Om Bekanzhe Bekanzhe Maha Bekanzhe Bekanzhe Radza Samugate Soha (Sanskrit)** – this is the mantra of the Healing Buddha or Medicine Buddha.
Chapter Twenty Three

Margaret is Tracy’s best friend and came from a place called Tasek near Ipoh. She is the daughter of a bicycle repairer and used to work as an audit clerk in an accounting firm in Ipoh’s old town. In 1979, they met at the Ipoh Hash House Harriers Association and became fast friends. From then on, Margaret would spend most weekends at 188 Hugh Low Street so that Tracy could teach her how to dance. They would dance, gossip, joke and laugh into the wee hours in Tracy’s room. She was such a talkative girl and spoke in a booming voice that my father secretly nicknamed her Radio Peking after the Chinese Communist propaganda station which came on air twenty four hours non-stop during the height of the Cultural Revolution.

One day, when Margaret came to visit us, she brought along Charlie, her new colleague. He was a young man with exceptionally beautiful complexion. His skin was so smooth like porcelain and glowed with a pinkish hue it would put any girl to shame. Not only that, he had such thick black hair and a babyish face it was no surprise Margaret adored him greatly. Upon further inquiries from Dad, it turned out that Charlie was the son of my paternal Grandpa’s neighbor in Batu Gajah. His parents operated a little grocery shop where we had spent some of our happiest moments buying ice-creams, lollipops, and prawn crackers during our visits to Grandpa’s house back in the 1960s. Isn’t it a small world after all?

Not long after this, Margaret and Charlie got married and moved to Kuala Lumpur. They worked as audit clerks in the day time and took professional courses in accountancy in the evenings after work. Both of them were highly intelligent young people and they managed to graduate in a short time. Upon graduation, Margaret joined a prestigious foreign bank while Charlie worked for a large public listed property developer. It took them some years and much hard work before they reached the top position in their respective companies. Later, it was Charlie who roped me in to work for him in his department.
Margaret and Charlie then moved into a large double story bungalow house in Taman Tun Dr. Ismail which is a prime area in the Klang Valley. Over the years, the couple also bought many properties which were built by the company that Charlie and I worked in. Charlie the financial controller, along with other top executives in the company, was allowed to choose the best units before these properties were opened to the public. Best of all, they did not have to pay a single cent for down payment unlike other purchasers. These were perks the company gave them to secure their loyalty. Margaret too, had her benefits in the form of low interest rates for the bank loans she took out. So it was hardly surprising that Margaret and Charlie invested heavily in properties and made millions from this venture. Not surprisingly too, both drove luxury cars to work and they could go to Europe each year for holidays. Their two young sons were sent to international schools. This made Tracy quite envious of her friends. To her, they were small town boy and girl who made it big in the city and ought to be emulated.

“Frances, I’ve heard from Margaret that the company you’re working in has just launched some affordable shop-lots along Jalan Klang Lama, is that true?” Tracy asked over the phone one day in January 1996.

“Yes, this is the second phase. She and her husband have purchased a unit facing the main road for RM220K during the first phase years ago and they made a big profit selling it off soon after it was ready,” I told her.

“Margaret told me there are a few units left for non-executive staff and they are priced at RM180K. Do you have any plan to buy one?” she queried further.

“No, I can ill afford it,” I told her. “I’m only a data entry clerk and earning just enough to get by each day, so how can I afford to buy a shop-lot as investment?” I asked her.

“You’re the stupidest person I’ve ever met. You’re not making full use of the opportunities lying in front of you. It’s not that you cannot afford it. It’s because you’re not ambitious enough. If you remain playing safe
by keeping your savings in fixed account and earning a meager interest from it, I won’t be surprised that you’ll remain poor forever. Be brave! Be ambitious! Invest! Look at Margaret and Charlie! They’re what they are today because they have the guts to take risks,” my sister began to hypnotize me.

“But I’ve already bought an apartment,” I tried to reason with her.

“That’s not enough. The apartment is for dwelling when you retire. Buy a shop-lot to invest. Sell it once it is ready for a higher price and from this, you can make a handsome profit,” she advised.

“I really cannot afford it. I’ve just bought a car and I need to pay instalments for that car,” I told her firmly.

“You’re so foolish to buy a car that will depreciate over the years. You should have bought a piece of property, something like a shop-lot which will appreciate in the future and gives you a good return,” Tracy scolded me.

I began to feel uneasy. “Hey, I’m working now. I’ll talk to you later,” I told her and tried to hang up her call but Tracy was determined to talk me into buying the shop-lot.

“Look, Harry wanted to invest in property too like what Charlie did. He told me to ask you to buy a shop-lot under both our names – yours and mine. We’ll split everything into two. You pay the deposit and legal fees first. Once all the documents are ready, bring them over to my house and I’ll sign them. Then I’ll pay you back half of what you’ve pay first, is that okay?” she asked.

“Tracy, there are only ten units left and all of them face a river, not the main road. And they’re intermediate units, not corner lots. That’s why the company is selling them cheap. It’s a tactic to dispose these unattractive lots, do you understand?” I was beginning to get impatient with her.
“Never mind that they face the river. Never mind that they are interme-
diate units. According to Harry who had asked Charlie before I called
you now, any shop-lots in Klang Valley prized at RM200K and below
should be grabbed. You’re sure to make a profit from buying properties
in the Klang Valley. It’s better than buying shares. Look at the share
market now. It’s so unpredictable. So buying a property is the safest way
to make your money grow.”

“Let me consult my husband first,” I told her finally. “If I’m you, I don’t
need to consult my husband,” she answered scornfully.

“That’s your way, not mine. I like to consult my husband when it comes
to important matters and more so if it involves a great deal of money.”

“You better hurried up or else these units will get sold in the blink of an
eye,” she said before hanging up.

That night, I consulted Marcus about the shop-lots available to all non-
executive staff with a RM40K discount and also Tracy’s proposal.

“It’s up to you. You decide since it is a deal between you and your sister.
I hope you know what you’re doing,” he answered.

Tracy even got her best friend Margaret to call me in the office. “Charlie
said this is the last project where the company builds shop-lots. This op-
portunity for non-executive staff to own shop-lots will not come again.
In future, the company will focus on building holiday resorts or theme
parks, so grab it now, I only call up to tell you this since you’re the sister
of my good friend,” she said, trying to convince me to buy a unit.

A few days later, I chose a unit next to the one taken up by my supervi-
sor. I filled up the purchase form and paid the deposit. For the next few
days, I still could not believe that I had taken up such a heavy commit-
tment and kept asking myself what I had got myself into. Then I remem-
ber Tracy was in it with me and that she will help me shoulder half the
burden. That helped reduce my fears and anxieties.
Three weeks later, I received a call from the lawyer’s office. “All the documents for the purchase of a shop-lot at Taman Seri Sentosa along Jalan Klang Lama are ready for your signature. Please come over to our office to sign them and then take them to the other purchaser to sign as well. When that is done, bring the documents back to us for stamping,” the legal clerk told me. That night, after dinner, Marcus drove me to Tracy and Harry’s house together with the documents for Tracy’s signature.

“Remember to ask her to pay back half of what you’d paid earlier,” Marcus reminded me. He did not get down as there was no parking space available and so he waited for me in the car. I got down and walked towards Tracy and Harry’s gate. I rang their door bell many times before Tracy finally appeared. She wore an uninterested look on her face and appeared very grumpy.

“Here are the documents for you to sign regarding the purchase of the shop-lot. Sign them so that I can bring them back to the lawyer’s office for stamping. I’ve also paid the deposit and legal fees on both our behalf. You can pay me either by cash or cheque, whichever way is convenient to you. Or you can bank it into my savings account if you like,” I told her.

“I don’t want to buy the shop-lot anymore. Last weekend, Harry went there to have a look. He even brought a feng-shui master along. The latter said the place is not promising and told Harry not to go ahead. We’re too busy and forgot to inform you that we’ve changed our minds,” she answered nonchalantly.

“But I’ve already paid everything! If you had changed your mind, why didn’t you tell me earlier so I will not take up this heavy commitment,” I could not help but to raise my voice and scold her. I even felt like giving her a very hard slap in the face that very moment. My blood was boiling and my heart felt cold.

“You can just terminate the purchase,” she casually suggested as if this can be done easily.
“You think I can? If I do that now, all the deposit will be forfeited and I won’t get a cent back! That’s my whole life savings, you know?” I almost shouted at her. She remained silent and was shocked by my angry reaction.

“Then you just take up the whole thing yourself or ask your husband to share it with you. Next time, when you make a profit, both of you can enjoy it yourselves without having to share it with me,” she said sarcastically.

Seeing that it was futile to argue with her further, I walked away. I could see there was not a single tinge of guilt in her eyes. Never in my entire life had I been so angry with her before.

“She has changed her mind. She doesn’t want to buy it anymore,” I told Marcus who had seen everything from where he was sitting in the car. I saw him shake his head and roll his eyes in exasperation.

“Consider it your bad luck to have her as your sister. Consider it that you owed her something and it is pay-back time now, perhaps this way you can take it better,” he said before turning the key in the ignition and driving away angrily. I didn’t answer him. I could not as I was too angry for words. I did not expect things to turn out this way. In the end, we went home in total silence.

I called Dad and told him everything once I reached home. He was very upset too. Later he called me back. “I tried to call Tracy and her husband to verify this matter but they did not pick up the phone.”

“Never mind, Dad, I’ll handle it myself. It was my own mistake to have listened to her and Margaret,” I answered him.

That night, I could not sleep. Neither could Marcus. “As your other half, I will help you shoulder this unwanted burden. Don’t worry anymore, just close your eyes and try to get some sleep,” my husband comforted me gently.
Just as I was about to close my eyes, I could feel a pain in my stomach and tightness in my throat. Then I began to tremble. Minutes later, I broke down to cry miserably.

“Is she here, I mean, your grandmother?” asked my husband with a concerned look. I could only nod my head for I could not speak anymore.

“Go away! Leave my wife alone, do you hear me?” he said but I did not respond. “I’ll not burn paper items anymore nor will I offer you food, I can only offer you prayers.”

Marcus then recited the three mantras that Lama Khedrup had taught us before. The night seemed dreadfully long. It was sometime before Ng Mooi took leave from my body. When it was over, I vomited and felt utterly exhausted.

Now I know Ng Mooi does not only come during Ching Ming, the Hungry Ghost Festival or when I am sad or sick. She comes too when I am extremely angry. These are the times when my yang energy was at their lowest and hence, she would have no problem borrowing my body to relay her message.

“Don’t think about it anymore,” Marcus comforted me. I just nodded. Seeing how my eyes were swollen from too much crying, he passed me a bottle of eye drops. Feeling much relief after the application, I stayed up to read the little booklet Lama Khedrup gave me, hoping to find some solace in the midst of deep anger and utter disappointment. When dawn finally broke, I lay down and managed to get an hour or two of sleep before going to work.
Chapter Twenty Four

My sadness quickly turned into excitement when I found out I was pregnant on Christmas day in 1996. The news that soon we are going to be parents filled Marcus and me with such indescribable joy. I told myself that I must not be sad during the next nine months; otherwise this destructive emotion might affect the child growing inside my womb. I wanted to give birth to a cheerful baby, not a sad one.

When she heard that I was pregnant, Mom became worried. She was afraid Ng Mooi might take advantage of my delicate condition. I had to convince her that I will be alright. I ate a balanced diet. I did light exercise. I read up books on pregnancy. I went to a good doctor. I took great pride in my condition. I was so full of vitality that no one, not even a hungry ghost, could do anything to spoil my happiness.

A week before giving birth to our first child, I read in the newspaper that a financial crisis had just reached our shores. It was the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis which had crippled the economy of the whole Asian region. At the same time, I also received two letters – one from the developer telling me to collect the key to the shop-lot which was ready for occupation and another from the bank asking me to start repaying the loan which I had taken out. Defiant, I threw both letters aside. I forced myself not to think about them but instead focused on welcoming our baby son who was coming any day.

Nicholas was born a few days before the Hungry Ghost Festival in 1997. It was a *yin* month when evil spirits were believed to be roaming around freely. The Chinese believe confinement mothers are physically and mentally weak after childbirth due to the loss of blood. This condition means their *yang* energies are at their lowest, hence exposing them to unwanted intrusions but such thoughts did not bother me at all. I was busy catching up with the sleep that I had lost out at night and enjoying all the nutritious foods the confinement lady had cooked for me and also, breastfeeding the baby. Ng Mooi did not make any appearance and deep
down inside, I was very grateful to her for staying away.

After two months of rest, I had fully recovered and was back at work. The first thing I did was to collect the keys to the shop-lot and appoint a property agent to act on my behalf. I wanted to sell or lease it out immediately. I had no intention to keep it a day longer than necessary. For the time being, my salary could still cover the loan but there was nothing left of it after that. This left me very frustrated because I have no money left to spend on other things and also on the baby.

The company which I was working for took the opportunity of the financial crisis to retrench a few staff that were deemed too well paid or unproductive. This was the first round of retrenchment carried out. Those earning just a decent salary and those productive ones were retained but they were not given any increment in their salaries and one person had to do three or four person’s job. On my first day back to work after a long break, I found that I had to do the work of three persons for the salary of one. “Take it or leave it” was Charlie’s daily mantra.

As if this was not bad enough, the bank kept on increasing its base lending rate. A few months later, the loan repayment surpassed my salary. That was when my nightmare started. I began to receive warning letters to settle the loan and after the third letter, the one coming from the bank’s lawyer began to appear in my letter box. He even made threatening calls to my office and home every other day. It got to a point where my heart missed a beat each time I saw an envelope in my letter box or when the phone rang. Each day, I felt I was standing at the edge of a cliff. There were days when I really feel like jumping over. It was the thought of my husband and child that always pulled me back.

Try as he did, the property agent could not get anyone to lease or buy my shop-lot. In fact, the whole of second phase of this project stood unoccupied for the next couple of years. Such was the somber mood in the property market in 1997 after the Financial Crisis broke out. On the other hand, the base lending rate for loan repayment sky-rocketed until one wondered when it would stop or would it ever stop.
Marcus called the shop-lot the "coffin shop" out of frustration. He was equally affected by my mistake in buying that condemned piece of property. While I used up my entire salary to pay part of the loan, he helped by paying the balance so that I could get a proper night’s sleep. For average income earners like us, this misstep came like a tornado and in the end, we began to lose our footing. In order to keep up with the loan repayment and other payments such as assessments, quit rents and service charges, I had to sell our apartment in Taman Miharja which Marcus and I had bought not long after our wedding.

In the midst of this difficult situation, I was rewarded with another blessing – I was pregnant again with our second child in July 1998. Marcus and I were ecstatic. We had hoped to have another child to grow up side by side with our little son. My second pregnancy was equally smooth and I enjoyed every minute of it. I was glowing. Once again, in my heart, I was grateful to Ng Mooi for not showing up during those crucial months. I guess she knew there were times she was not supposed to disturb me, a new mother.

In January 1999, the property agent came back to tell me that someone wanted to buy my shop-lot and convert it into a dhobi shop. But the price he was willing to fork out was much lower than what I had already paid. This was expected in such bad times. Still, I was willing to sell because I could not hold on to it for another day. In the end, I had lost two pieces of property and made huge financial losses but I had learned a very bitter lesson that will last me a lifetime – never be greedy. And do not dabble in property investment if you are not flush with extra cash to keep yourself afloat. It is suicidal to do so.

Alexandra came exactly on *Ching Ming* Day in 1999. Normally, it was a day when Ng Mooi would appear but strangely, on that day whilst I was in deep pain in the hospital, she kept her distance. When Marcus saw the baby for the first time in the room where they kept all the newborns, he immediately and madly fell in love with this beautiful girl. His secret wish to have a little daughter was finally fulfilled on that clear and bright day. When she was brought to me to be fed, I could see she was such a beautiful sight that the nurse who brought her in asked what had I con-
sumed during pregnancy to get such a pretty baby. I just smiled. Nothing special, I replied proudly.

Dad called up Tracy to let her know about my financial woes. She refused to apologize, let alone extend any help. Neither did she call to congratulate me for being a mother twice over. She remained defiant, hostile and distant. She still could not find it in her heart to accept a sister nature had given her.

“Don’t force her to do something she doesn’t want to do. It’s meaningless,” I told Dad who had always wanted to bring us together as sisters.
Chapter Twenty Five

As usual, year-end is a busy time at the office. One day, in early December 1999, I was typing the year-end report for my boss when suddenly, I felt a very sharp pain in my forehead and momentarily, the room became dark.

Later that day, I went to see the company doctor.

“I think your migraine has come back,” Dr. Ting said while flipping over my medical record. “Take some medication I’ve prescribed here and have the rest of the day off, then you should be okay by tomorrow,” she said before dismissing me.

Three days later, the pain was still there. I could not sleep properly and I also lost my appetite. Whatever little food managed to pass down my throat could not stay long in my stomach. It all came back up in the end.

So I went to see the company doctor again.

“Yes, the medication I’ve prescribed the other day was rather mild,” she admitted. “Don’t worry, this time I’ll give you stronger ones and another two days off and that will do the trick!” she said, giving me a comforting pat on the shoulder.

Another three days later, I was back at her clinic again. This time, the pain was getting even more intense. It had traveled to the back of my head and heading towards the neck region.

“That was the strongest medication for migraine that I could possibly prescribe. I think it is best you go for a brain scan,” she advised.

She then wrote a reference letter for me. “Go now, no time to lose,” she told me in a voice filled with urgency.
With letter in hand, I went straight to Tung Shin Hospital (Western Medicine Department) at once and got the scan done. The two hours wait for the result was the longest in my life. I silently prayed for the best. When the nurse called my name, I almost jumped up. Dr. Ng’s nurse beckoned me into his office.

“Don’t worry, there is no growth inside your brain,” he said as he showed me the scan. I gave out a loud sigh of relief.

“Are you working in a very stressful environment?” he asked. “Sometimes, stress can lead to pain in the head and neck,” he said.

“Yes, I’ve been working for fifteen years in an office that at times resembled a war-zone,” I told him. “And I have to take care of two young babies at night for this past one year,” I went on.

“Hmm, that adds up why you’re in this state. Why don’t you consider going for some alternative treatments at Tung Shin Chinese Medicine Department?” he suggested.

That was a good idea but the problem is, my company does not endorse traditional treatments. It won’t stop us from seeking such treatments but it will not pay the medical bills or recognize the medical certificates issued by such establishments. We have to pay ourselves and take our annual leave to seek such treatments. But in my present condition, I really had no other choice but to give it a try.

By then, all my sick and annual leave was exhausted. I went to see my boss for two weeks of unpaid leave. My workload was piling high on the desk after one week’s absence, the phone ringing non-stop and nobody bothered to pick it up. My desk was a total mess.

How about his face? Well, his face was as black as charcoal and he gave me the “if you don’t come back soon, I’ll take another person to replace you” type of look. In the end, he grudgingly gave me one week instead of the two I asked for. On the way to the lift, a colleague I met at the lobby purposely told me that there was another retrenchment exercise.
going on. It did not bother me the way she hoped it did; all I wanted was to get this terrible pain out of my head! So, I just gave her a light smile and walked into the lift without a word.

Mom and Dad locked up their house in Ipoh and came to stay with me. Mom did all the cooking and washing. Every day, Marcus took the babies to a babysitter next door before he went to work. I spent the whole week seeking acupuncture treatment at Tung Shin Hospital. Besides having needles all over my head and neck and electrical current connected to each of these needles, I was given a specially brewed herbal concoction. The specialist from China who treated me told me to try this treatment for a week or two.

The prickling sensations from the needles did manage to numb my pain but the relief lasted only a few hours each day. By nightfall, the pain came back in full force. It was like having some sharp knives poking hard into the core of the brain. The pain was even sharper when I lay down; so I could only sit until morning came.

Mom was from the older generation. When western medicine could not do its job, she turned to other methods. She suspected that I had offended some spirits lurking somewhere because my condition worsened at night. In the end, out of desperation, she bought piles and piles of hell bank notes and burnt them every night outside the road in front of my house, much to the amusement of my neighbors. Mom even suspected it was the work of Ng Mooi but I was adamant she did not have a hand in this.

One morning, I looked into the mirror. I was horrified by what I saw. I was no longer the person I knew. I was like a zombie. I was like a walking skeleton. I broke down and cried and cried. I knew something was wrong inside me but I just didn’t know what it was. I was determined to find out. I just wanted this ugly pain to go away, I just wanted to get back my health, and I just wanted to take care of my young children again. I just wanted to live on because there was so much to live for.

That night, when everyone was asleep, I lay awake on the sofa, unable
to sleep. I noticed both my hands were trembling and I could feel my heart beating faster than usual. The pain in my head had reached a bursting point and I just couldn’t hold on anymore. Marcus who was sitting beside me asked gently, “Why don’t you go for a medical examination tomorrow? Get a blood test to see what is actually wrong.” We had both ruled out migraine and stress by now. I just nodded my head for I was too weak to think further. I had not slept or eaten properly for the last three weeks and I was on the verge of a breakdown.

Seeing the acupuncture treatment was not as effective as I had hoped for, I went back to the company doctor and asked her to give me another reference letter for a blood test. She obliged and I went for a blood test at Tung Shin Hospital again since it was the nearest to my house. I was too weak to travel far.

I waited for another two hours before I was taken into the office of Dr. Cheong who was a senior physician at the hospital. He gave me a concerned look and gestured me to sit down.

“Your TSH is extremely low but your T4 and T3 is, on the other hand, sky-high. From your blood test result here, I can conclude very positively that you’re suffering from hyperthyroidism and your extreme heartbeat confirms my suspicion.”

It was like a bomb had just landed on my ears but ironically, I was glad I had finally found the answer to my misery.

“Hyperthyroidism is a condition in which the thyroid glands make too much thyroid hormone. These hormones control your metabolism and too much of them will put your entire system upside down. Everything just goes haywire,” he explained to me in layman’s terms.

Yes, I got it now.

“Luckily you came today. A few days late and you’d suffer a major heart attack because your heart is beating as fast as that of a marathon runner who’s running a twenty four hour race non-stop,” he said.
“You’ve to be admitted at once for me to administer the medications to slow down your heartbeat and your thyroid gland’s production,” the doctor advised me and I consented immediately. I was in a daze.

I was admitted to the ward at once and given the relevant treatment. That night, for the first time in three weeks, I could sleep and also eat some light porridge. I could feel the hand’s trembling and rapid heart-beat lessen substantially. I felt much better and I could see smiles on the faces of my parents and husband for their lives were equally affected by my strange illness.

But my problem was far from over. When I was discharged a few days later, Dr. Cheong told me that I would have to be on medication for at least a year or two. He prescribed a medication called methimazole which was rather expensive. As a non-executive staff, I was not entitled to such medication which had exceeded the amount I was entitled to.

“Is there any other option for me?” I asked him. I had earlier turned down the other two – surgical removal of the thyroid glands or radiation treatment which really scared me.

“I’m afraid not,” the doctor said quietly.

“Okay, I go for a month’s medication first and see how I progress from there,” I told him and got myself discharged.

“Come back for a blood test as soon as you have finished the whole month’s medication,” he reminded me.

Back home, I went straight to the babysitter to visit my children whom I had not seen for days and missed terribly.

I told the babysitter about my condition.

“Oh, so it is *tai gang pow* that you’re having all this while, why didn’t you tell me about your symptoms, I used to have it too when I was your age!” Yoke Cheh, the babysitter, exclaimed.
“Oh really, what medication did you take?” I asked excitedly, hoping she would have some miracle remedy to share with me.

“Of course I did not seek western treatment like you did – it’s so expensive. A friend told me about a secret remedy, so I tried it out and I was cured!” she shared enthusiastically.

I felt I had found what I was looking for. I had been searching high and low for a cure and here it was – my children’s babysitter who shared the same suffering years ago now held the key to end my pain.

“Get me a very old female duck and I’ll tell you the rest of the secret remedy!” she challenged me.

I knew it was quite difficult to purchase a live duck in a big metropolitan area like Kuala Lumpur, especially an old one, but I still needed to try, right?

My husband immediately contacted his mother to enlist her help in hunting for an old duck for us. Meanwhile, my parents went back to Ipoh and I got back to work again. Things began to fall back into place. I could eat and sleep well, just like before. But the methimazole I was taking gave me some unpleasant side-effects. I told myself that I must really find that old duck.

A month later, after much searching and asking around, mother-in-law called up and said she had finally found that old duck at a friend’s house in Kuala Selangor. It was timely as my medication was running out, down to the last tablet. The poor animal was almost twenty years old, had seen better times and its days were numbered. It was my good fortune and its misfortune, I guess! Mother-in-law gave the owner one hundred dollars as a token and had it slaughtered, skinned and cut into halves.

“Now, get ten pieces of dried baby abalones from any Chinese medical hall and finally, a bottle of Guinness Stout, only Guinness Stout and no Carlsberg or Anglia or Anchor!” Yoke Cheh instructed us.
We got them all in a jiffy.

“Put the duck together with the baby abalones into a small ceramic pot. Do not add any water to it and seal the lid to prevent any water from getting inside. Next, put this small pot into a big metal pot filled with water. Light up a charcoal stove and bring the metal pot to boil for about 10 hours. Don’t let the boiling stop but just add water to the metal pot and charcoal to the stove during the process,” the old lady instructed.

“When the boiling has been done, remove the small pot and open the lid. You can see the duck and abalone extract. It tastes and looks like chicken essence. Pour the liquid into a porcelain bowl and discard the meats. When the liquid became lukewarm, drink it in one big gulp without any pause and then immediately followed by the bottle of Guinness Stout. Yes, finish both items in one gulp without any pause. Only this way, it will work. The same night, you will begin to burp non-stop. All the pent-up air inside your body will be released. I guarantee you will not have hyperthyroidism again for the rest of your life!” Yoke Cheh vouched on her magic potion.

We did exactly as Yoke Cheh instructed, right down to the last dot. The duck and abalone essence was simply awesome but the Guinness Stout part was …yuck! I had to hold my nose tightly and swallow everything in one single gulp. That night, true enough, I burped many times and after each time, I felt better than before, in fact so much better than when I took the methimazole.

You see, the Chinese have a very different approach to treating hyperthyroidism. While the westerners blamed the overactive thyroid glands, the Chinese attributed this to a build-up of anger, frustration and stress over a period of time – things I got plenty from my work place.

Since mother-in-law got me such a big duck, it made two portions and I consumed them both within the same week. A week later, I went back to Tung Shin Hospital for the same blood test – for TSH, T4 and T3. Armed with the result, I went to see Dr. Cheong again.
Of course he was amazed and utterly speechless when he saw my blood test result. My TSH had increased manifold while T4 and T3 had decreased to the normal level. Shaking his head in total disbelief, he asked curiously, “What have you consumed lately? This is incredible, just unbelievable!” The poor old chap almost fell from his chair.

I just smiled and kept quiet. I don’t think he would believe in the power of that old duck, a handful of dried abalones and of course, that bottle of bitter Guinness Stout as he was a western medical practitioner.

“You’re indeed a special patient. I never expect to see this kind of result from you until a year or two later,” he said.

“So, that means I don’t have to take that methimazole anymore?” I asked him.

“No, I don’t think so but you still have to come back yearly for your blood test, at least for a few years consecutively,” he advised.

“Back to my question just now, how did you get well so fast and so completely?” he was determined to find out.

“Well, just say it was a miracle!” I said, smiling, as I got up to leave.

He threw up his hands and gave out a roaring laugh that vibrated through the corridor of the hospital.

“And thank you for finding out my problem for me……” I said to him as I closed the door behind me and walked down the stairs, very glad that my ordeal was finally over.
Chapter Twenty Six

On my first day back at the office after a month of medical leave, I could immediately sense that the place was not the same anymore. It was so eerily quiet. I noticed that not many people had turned up for work. This was rather strange because it was now January 2000 and all the staff had already cleared their annual leave and should be back at their desks. I also noticed their faces were somber as they silently went about carrying out their tasks. Normally these girls were friendly and chatty but not today. They looked more like robots than a bunch of energetic young humans.

At the washroom later that morning, I bumped into Shirley who was the secretary of the general manager. She was a friendly lady without any airs despite her position in the office. Pulling her aside, I asked her a question that had been playing on my mind that whole morning.

“Shirley, what happened in the office while I was away? People are behaving so strangely now, they’re not how I knew them to be.”

“A lot of things happened while you were not around, my dear. Charlie your friend had just carried out another two rounds of retrenchment exercises to trim the company’s expenses. The first round was not so bad – those affected were given a two weeks’ notice and a month’s salary as compensation. But the second time was very bad – a twenty four hours’ notice and no compensation at all. Imagine how many people lost their jobs – from the construction site supervisor down to the tea lady and those in between. There was a lot of back-stabbing and character assassinations. Everything was so ugly that the office was turned into a battlefield. Friends were pitted against friends when their jobs were at stake. Now, in this office, you cannot tell who is foe and who is friend,” she said, shaking her head sadly.

“And as if this is not bad enough, I heard you girls have to come back to work every Sunday for the next two to three years at the marketing
office of our newly launched project in Putrajaya. No transport and food allowances are provided and no one is allowed to claim any overtime,” Shirley continued in a hushed tone in case anyone might eavesdrop on us.

“What, you mean we have to come back on Sunday to work without overtime, transport and food allowance and to such a faraway place? Did anyone make any noise?” I asked in disbelief.

“Of course no one dares to, not even your supervisor who is the most outspoken person in the office. What a joke, she who is so fierce and feared by all remained as timid as a mouse! Everyone is so worried they will be the next one on Charlie’s chopping board.”

“How about those in the executive level, are they affected too?” I asked further.

“Of course not, my dear! They’re so powerful no one dares to touch them except the Chairman himself. They’re safe. So too all their perks and benefits. And yes, they’re going to have their increments and bonuses as usual this coming Chinese New Year whereas we have nothing. All this is the work of Charlie! Isn’t he clever?” asked Shirley angrily.

If the secretary of the general manager who had served so well and for so long was treated this way, how about those lesser mortals like stenographers, clerks and construction workers? I cringed to think on this.

In my handbag that day was a letter I had written the previous night addressed to Charlie. It was my resignation letter. I think when your babies cling to you each morning when you hand them over to the babysitter and cry their eyes out; you know it’s time to stay home to attend to their needs. I had just recovered from an illness and I needed more time to recuperate. In the end, I just walked into his room and handed him the letter. He didn’t ask me why but just said, “Okay!” I think that was so much better.

After deducting my annual leave, I was able to leave four days later. At
five o’clock sharp in the evening on my last day there, I just switched off my computer, put away all my files and walked out the door without a word to anyone. My heart was simply not in that place anymore. That chapter of my life was over and done with. I went to collect my children and told them that from that day onwards, I would stay at home with them the whole day.

“You’re so stupid to give up a good job. You’ll feel useless staying at home. You’ll become penniless and then you’ll regret later,” Tracy hissed at me from one end of the phone that same night when Margaret called her to tell her that I was no longer working for Charlie. I just put down the phone and refused to entertain her call. Later, Mom called and asked me whether I knew what I was doing. Yes, I told her. I asked her not to worry for me.

It took me some time to adjust myself into a new routine. It was not easy at first but as time went by, I became more and more confident and efficient as a full time mother. And I began to enjoy it so much. I could play with Nicholas who was so active and I could also breastfeed Alexandra longer than I had planned.
Part 4

Candle In The Wind

Life is fragile, like the dew hanging delicately on the grass - crystal drops that will be carried away on the first morning breeze.

– Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche
Chapter Twenty Seven

Marcus found it increasingly heartbreaking to lead overseas tours after the arrival of our children. His long absence from home meant he would not be able to see them as often as he wished. As soon as the Chinese New Year celebration was over in the year 2000, he told me that he would like to *clip his wings* and get another job. According to him, leading tours was more suitable for single people, not married ones with a young family. He was actually trained as a computer technician after leaving secondary school. A month later, he got a job as a computer technician with a manufacturer in the Klang Valley. I felt relieved that from now on, the children would get to see their father every day.

Around this time too, things changed for Harry, Tracy, and my brother. Harry and Tracy met and teamed up with a few businessmen to operate a second-hand luxury car business on Jalan Klang Lama. They even managed to persuade my brother staying in Ipoh to come down to Kuala Lumpur to work for them. Tracy asked me whether Marcus would like to work for her as a second-hand car salesman. He promptly turned down her offer with a reply that left me slightly amused – “Thanks but no thanks, once bitten, twice shy!” He did not want to have anything to do with my sister or her husband anymore.

One night in May 2000, I came down with a high fever. A bad headache followed and before the night was over, I could feel pain in various joints. By the next morning, I had already vomited a few times, leaving me feeling rather weak. I thought I had caught a cold and went to the nearest clinic to get some medications. Dr. Tham suspected I might have contracted dengue fever. I remember being bitten by a mosquito that evening while feeding the children their dinner. Come back in a few days’ time if the fever persists and red rashes begin to appear on your limbs, he told me. A few days later, I went back to him and he advised me to go for a blood test. That evening, Marcus drove me to Hospital Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in Bandar Tun Razak and after the blood test result came out an hour later, I was admitted for fluid replace-
ment therapy. He then brought the children back to his mother and called my brother to tell him about my condition.

A night after I was admitted, my brother came to pay me a visit at the hospital after work. He drove all the way from Jalan Klang Lama to Bandar Tun Razak which was quite a distance, what’s more with traffic jams and road blocks everywhere. Since I was a kid, he had always been very kind to me. Knowing that I liked to eat porridge, he even packed some for me as supper.

“Did you tell Tracy that I was having dengue and was hospitalized?” I asked him.

“Yes, but she did not show any reaction or concern,” he replied solemnly.

“It’s okay then,” I told him and went on to eat the porridge he had brought me.

From his facial expression, I could guess he was already not too happy working for this couple. It doesn’t take a genius to guess why. I also told him not to inform our parents as I did not want them to rush down from Ipoh to see me. They were getting old and it was difficult for them to travel outstation.

I was discharged after spending five days in the hospital. Marcus collected the children back from his mother on the same day I came home because our baby girl was crying all the time looking for me. Nothing could pacify a child who had just been weaned from her mother’s breasts. She was getting very restless and wanted to be cuddled all the time but no one was free to offer her this luxury. I spent the following week recuperating at home and at the same time, resumed my role as a full-time mother.

Just when I was getting better, I received a frantic call from Dad telling me Mom was very ill. That call changed our lives forever. The next day, I rushed back to Ipoh and we took her for a blood test. The result came back a day later. It read *end-stage renal failure*. It was like receiving a
death sentence on Mom’s behalf. I can still remember the look of despair on Dad’s face when he held the slip of paper in his trembling hands and asked me whether I had misread anything. When we got home, he could no longer contain his misery and broke down to cry. I myself was too stunned for words. Dad sensed that this could be the beginning of the end for his beloved wife and it left him terribly upset.

Now we knew why Mom had lost her appetite to eat and appeared so lethargic most of the time. No wonder she looked so thin and pale lately. If only we knew this would be the consequence of her skipping her hypertension medications, we would not have allowed this to happen. It was our fault as much as it was hers. Anyway, it was too late now. The worst had already happened. And nothing could be done to reverse her condition. It was a matter of how much time was left.

She too, cried and asked nervously, “Am I going to die from renal failure?”

“No, but you will need constant dialysis, then everything will be under control,” I tried to comfort her.

There and then, I decided we would have to deal with her condition the best we could. There was no way we could run away from it. It would not disappear just like that. But in my mind, I knew the road ahead would be long and tough.

After having come to terms with her condition, we took her to a specialist who advised us to put her on hemodialysis. But before we could do that, we needed to bring her to a plastic surgeon to have a fistula (an opening) crafted on her wrist so that tubes could be inserted there from which blood could be drawn out to be cleaned in a machine and then returned back into her body.

We took her to a well-known plastic surgeon in Fair Park to have the procedure done and were told that hemodialysis could commence once the opening to the fistula healed. Unfortunately for my mother, the fistula became infected with pus and stubbornly refused to heal. This meant
she could not proceed with the hemodialysis unlike other renal patients. Next, we brought her to the Ipoh General Hospital to consult the specialists there. They told us another way to treat Mom was to put her on peritoneal dialysis where the cleansing of her blood would be done through her abdomen instead of her wrist. This treatment was only available in hospitals and not at dialysis centers. For this, she had to stay in the hospital from Mondays to Fridays as the treatment would take five days round the clock and she only got to go home on weekends to rest. Then the treatment would be repeated the following week and this would go on for as long as she lived.

On hearing this, Dad called up his three eldest daughters and told them that he needed their help in taking care of Mom at the hospital while she underwent the treatment. My eldest sister said she was only available for an hour in the morning when her daughter was away at school. The second sister said she could only spare an hour or two in the afternoon before her children came back from work. The third sister, Tracy, said she could not come back to Ipoh because she lived in another state and that she too, needed to send her sons to school. In the end, they suggested Dad employed a full-time Indonesian maid to take care of Mom in the hospital. Who would pay her salary; I heard Dad ask them over the phone. The three of them then remained quiet and finally, Dad gave up the idea of recruiting their help.

Turning to me, he said sadly, “Your children are still so young, otherwise I’m sure you will agree to come back and take care of your Mom. It’s entirely my fault that I cannot afford a maid to take care of my wife.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. I’ll go back to Kuala Lumpur and discuss with Marcus. I’ll get him to talk to his mother. Perhaps we can send Nicholas and Alexandra to her place. She has an Indonesian maid working for her, so maybe she will agree to take the children in,” I tried to cheer up my desolate father.

Since the doctors told us Mom would not live long and as Alexandra had been weaned off from breastfeeding, I decided to send the children back to Marcus’ mother so that I could stay at Mom’s bedside to attend to her
needs. The government hospital was understaffed and Mom began to lose the functions of some vital organs. She needed a twenty four hour personal care and the nurses told us they could not cope and so, someone had to be stationed at her side at all times.
Chapter Twenty Eight

Aft er placing the children with my mother-in-law and her Indonesian maid, I rushed back to Ipoh and headed straight to the Ipoh General Hospital to take up my new post – as a full-time caretaker for my mother.

I was very sad and angry even, to see her lying on the hospital bed wasting away – she had very quickly degenerated into a mass of skin and bones.

Due to her failed kidneys, a great amount of toxicity had built up in Mom’s body in just a matter of days, making her itch all over. She scratched herself so hard that her thin skin broke and bled. Eventually, the nurses tied Mom’s limbs to the bed so that she could not scratch herself anymore.

As if this was not torturous enough, she always wet herself and purged many times in a single day. Her thin watery feces were bluish black in color and the smell was so foul that those who walked past her bed would have to hold their noses.

If I depended on the few nurses to clean her up, my mother would have rashes all over her bottom in no time. So I decided to clean her up myself. I remember Mom hesitated at first when I undressed her but if I did not do it for her, who else would? I was her daughter. When I was a baby, she cleaned me up and now, it was my turn to do the same for her. The nurses agreed too. “Awak ialah anak dia, lebih elok kalau awak cuci dia sendiri, tak payah tunggu sampai kami senang,” they told me when I asked for their help. I could not blame them, considering the number of patients they had to take care of in each ward. They showed me how to do it once and from then on, I was on my own. It was rather difficult at first, washing an adult without moving her too much but as time went by, I became an expert at this task. Once, a nurse, after observing me working on Mom, joked that I was more skillful than she was!

In a place filled with sickness, pain, death, and despair, I began to spend
Mom’s last days with her – sponging her feverish body when her temperature climbed higher and higher, changing her soiled diapers whenever the need arose, comforting her when the pain in her abdomen was too much to bear, emptying her urine bag when it got to its full capacity, wiping her frail face each morning when she got up from her sleep, sweeping her limp hair into place so that she still looked presentable when the doctor came to see her, feeding her liquids when she complained of being hungry – I was on my feet the whole day without much rest. Catnaps became a luxury for me and there were days when I did not even have the time to bathe myself and change into a set of fresh clothes.

When she could not sleep anymore after having slept too much, we would chat about the good old days shared between mother and daughter. Sometimes when she was too tired to chat, we would just listen to her favorite songs of yesteryears. She was a great fan of oldies from Shanghai, especially those sung by Zhou Xuan and Ge Lan. I always had a Walkman with me so that both of us could listen and hum the songs together. Shanghai at night and When will you come to see me again? became our all-time favorite songs.

At night, when an empty bed was available in the ward, the nurses kindly allowed me to sleep on it until a patient checked in and I had to get up and give way even though it was in the middle of the night, and I was so tired. Otherwise, I would just sleep on a straw mattress rolled out on the cold and hard cement floor.

With mosquitoes all over my face and limbs, and the hanging fan rotating furiously above my head, sleep just could not come so easily. With nothing to do as Mom was heavily sedated and under dimmed lights that came from the corridor, I wrote down days we spent together into a diary which I carried everywhere with me. Many years later, these jottings were compiled into my first book, The Scissor Sharpener’s Daughter.

There was one night when an old lady in the next bed passed away. A doctor came to issue the death certificate and after that, the nurse just covered her from head to toe with a piece of white cloth. When I asked her when the body would be moved down to the mortuary, she told me it
would be done the next morning as the hospital attendants had all gone home. I sat next to a corpse that whole night and could not walk an inch away because Mom needed me by her side all the time – and all this with the lights off in the entire ward, the other patients asleep, and the nurses sitting far away at their counter at the other end of the ward.

Malay food, which my stomach was not accustomed to, became my daily diet as that was the only food available at the hospital cafeteria. Dad was sick at home and nobody packed food from outside for me. So I forced myself to get used to such food although I did get a stomach upset occasionally from all the hot and spicy food which I consumed three times a day.

Mom’s treatment was extremely painful. When I heard her screaming in pain as the doctor inserted the catheter into her abdomen for the peritoneal dialysis without administering any local anesthetic to that area, my heart burst into pieces. I could feel the sharp pain in my own abdomen too. We – mother and daughter – were so emotionally bonded that we could feel each other’s pain. It was very heart wrenching to hear her screams and there was nothing I could do except to stand outside the surgical room and pray silently for her suffering to lessen.

Although it was like she had gone to and back from hell with countless peritoneal dialysis treatments, three months later, I could see some improvements to her appearance. The color came back to her face and the hollowness of her cheeks was filled up with some flesh. She could eat a little bit of soft food like porridge, sit up and looked less tired. Best of all, she could speak again, albeit very slowly and softly. She had gained back some weight. Her limbs were fuller and the wrinkles on her skin were less visible. But she was still confined to the bed. It seemed all the endless nights of keeping a lonely vigil at her bedside had paid off.

Hope began to fill our hearts again. We made arrangements to have a fistula fixed to her other wrist for hemodialysis once the hospital stay and the peritoneal dialysis were no longer necessary. I wanted so much for her life to return to normal again.
She even told me to buy some new materials for the curtains and sofa covers at home as the year drew to a close and Chinese New Year was months away. I promised her I would. My mother was very particular about curtains and sofa covers – she wanted them to be made from the same fabric.

Mom’s stay in the hospital was not totally an unpleasant experience for us both. In this hospital, I got to witness with my own eyes how ordinary citizens of different religions and races could co-exist so harmoniously in a time when life and death were separated by a thin line.

All the Makciks (Malay aunties) and Achis (Indian aunties) who shared the same third class ward with Mom were so friendly and helpful to one another despite being sick themselves. They would smile and nod to Mom and asked how she was whenever they walked past her bed. When Mom got up from her sleep and complained of being hungry and it was not tea-time yet, these simple folks would not hesitate to share a cup of warm Milo from their thermos flasks and sweet buns kept in plastic bags tucked under their pillows.

When they saw me too exhausted from lack of sleep, they would offer to help keep an eye on Mom so that I could catch a catnap on the bench outside the ward. Their kindness warmed my heart and touched my soul tremendously. They were simply Malaysians at their best.

One evening while feeding Mom some porridge provided by the hospital, Marcus called me from Kuala Lumpur. According to his mother, our son, Nicholas, who was only three years old then, was having a high fever for a few days already and he was crying out for me. He had not seen me for the past seven months.

“Can you get one of your elder sisters to take your place in the hospital and come back to see the little boy?” he asked anxiously. I have no choice, but to say yes.

I quickly called Dad and asked him to arrange a replacement for me. “It is mid-November now. The year-end school holidays should have started
already. I will ask Tracy. She hasn’t come back to see her mother at all since she was admitted. It is time for her to come back and give a helping hand,” Dad told me.

The next morning, I called Dad again to see what the outcome was. “Tracy threw a big tantrum when I suggested she come back to help out. She said her sons need to attend tuition class even though school holidays had already begun. What is so important about tuition? Is sending your sons to tuition class more important than seeing your mother who is dying in the hospital?” he fumed over the phone. “Anyway, I insisted she come back and gave her no other choice. She slammed my phone so hard and refused to pick it up again when I called back to make sure she is coming back so that you can go back to see Nicholas,” my father told me, his tone angry and sad at the same time.

After telling Mom that I had something urgent to do in Kuala Lumpur and that Tracy would be back to take my place, I took a bus back to see my little son whom I could sense was missing me very much. The moment the little boy and his baby sister saw me, they clung to me so tightly and cried endlessly. My poor babies – how they missed their mommy! I spent the next two days playing with them before my father called me again.

“Is Nicholas better now?” Dad asked about his little grandson.

“Yes, his fever has gone, he’s actually having a throat infection,” I told him.

“Good! When can you come back again?” he asked and sighed. I could tell from his voice that things were not going too well in the hospital.

“Dad, is it Mom?” I asked nervously.

“No, it’s not your mother, it’s Tracy – she is picking up quarrels all the time with the nurses in Mom’s ward. She shouted at them and scolded them like they were her servants – asking them to do this and that when
she can easily do them herself. The chief nurse called today to inform me of their unhappiness. They were complaining about her. Mom is asking when you can come back because she cannot stand your sister anymore.”

Oh no, not again. This woman always makes life difficult and miserable for those around her and she seems to enjoy doing so, or is it her way to get out from having to take care of Mom, I asked myself.

“Alright, I’ll come back as soon as I can, Dad. Don’t worry and take care of your own health too,” I told him. Dad’s own health was not in good shape lately, worrying day and night for his wife who is lying sick in the hospital.

On the day I was supposed to go back to Ipoh, I waited until both the children were asleep and it was Marcus’ off day so that when they got up from their sleep and found me missing, at least they still had a father around to comfort and hold them, and also to play toys with them.

Tracy left for Kuala Lumpur on the same morning I went back to Ipoh. The moment I reached Mom’s bedside, the Makciks and Achis competed frantically with each other to be the first person to tell me my sister’s tyrannical ways. When all I could offer them was an apologetic nod and smile, they were left disgruntled. I knew Tracy like the back of my own hand and thus, did not find all these complaints about her too surprising; after all, she was just being herself.

The nurses too, were glad to see me back. “Betina garang itu kakak you ke? Cis, tak pernah nampak betina segarang macam dia! Nasib baik dia sudah pergi,” one of them said to me annoyingly.

Mom’s weary face brightens up when she saw me standing at her bedside again. I knew Tracy had put her through a lot of embarrassment for the past three days.

“Our, Mom, for putting you through all this – I went back to see Nicholas – he has a throat infection but is now okay,” I told her and she nod-
ded smilingly.

“Unlike you, your sister refused to handle my soiled diapers – she got the toilet cleaner to clean me up for a few dollars each time I dirtied myself,” Mom told me when I asked how she was kept clean while I was away.

“She also picked up fights with the nurses whenever she felt they were slow in response to her orders but never mind, you’re back now.”

With Tracy back in Kuala Lumpur, peace descended on Mom’s ward once more.
Chapter Twenty Nine

On the night of November 23rd, I went back to see Dad after making sure Mom was asleep in the hospital. She told me to go home and cook a dinner for Dad. It had been seven months already since my father ate his last home-cooked meal. Before leaving, I told her I would buy her favorite breakfast of Hong Kong chee cheong fun and century egg porridge. Mom loved to eat dim sum before she became sick and she missed these delicacies. She looked very happy on hearing this.

The next morning at around eight o'clock, I arrived with her breakfast still piping hot. I asked whether she had slept the previous night, but she shook her head and said no. She did not sleep at all. She told me sadly that she could hear the Grim Reaper in the form of a Taoist priest calling out for her to leave everything behind and follow him to another place far away. My heart sank on hearing this. Perhaps it was hallucination from too much medication, I remember telling her. She remained silent and looked remotely sad. Mom could not finish the breakfast I brought her. She was in no mood to eat at all, even though I fed her.

That same evening, the doctor told me Mom could be discharged and could go home for a rest. I packed her things and hailed a cab to bring her home for the weekend. Once home, I cooked dinner for Dad while she sat on the sofa. The television was on and it was around eight o'clock at night. While having dinner with Dad, I sensed something was not right because there was no sound coming from the living room. I quickly put down the bowl and chopsticks on the table and went out to check on her.

Sure enough, she was gasping for breath. Her face turned white and her eyes rolled up. Her hands were very cold and her fingertips had turned blue. She foamed at the mouth and urinated onto her sarong. Instinctively, I knew she was suffering from a massive heart attack due to overloading of fluid from the dialysis treatment and the blood transfusion she just had that morning.
I made a quick call to the hospital for an ambulance to come at once, but before I could finish explaining to the operator the way to our house, she was gone. She had left without a word of goodbye. In less than five minutes, we had lost her forever while outside, the world still moved on. Mom’s death came so swiftly and unexpectedly that it left both Dad and me in a state of total shock and disbelief – it was so surreal. I trembled with sobs while Dad grimaced with sorrow.

“How can this happen, surely this can’t be true?” my brain kept asking again and again. But it’s true. Mom had left us. Nothing in the world could bring her back to life or to us.

Sadly and tearfully, Dad and I laid her body down on the sofa. Dad then sat down beside her body and continued to weep bitterly. He had just lost a companion of fifty years. Unable to console him, I slowly got up and still in a daze, started to make phone calls to my siblings as well as to my husband. The residential area we stayed in was very quiet and dark as everyone had retired indoors. Not a soul could be found on the street. Only those staying next door to us realized what had happened and quickly came over to express their sadness as Mom was a very likeable person in the neighborhood. Everyone who knew her had only kind words about her. In all her seventy years in this world, Mom did not have enemies, not even one.

The night seemed dreadfully long as if time stood still. Stray dogs were howling from a far distance and gushes of cold wind swept into the hall from the limestone hills facing our house. Mom’s face was lifeless, but her eyes were closed and her lips curved into a slight smile. She looked like someone in a deep and restful sleep. Where her soul has fled to, I kept wondering sadly as I sat beside her still body.

Half an hour later, both my sisters and their families staying in Ipoh arrived, quickly dropped on their knees and crawled into the house one by one, calling out tearfully to Mom for forgiveness, as was required by Chinese custom. Those who were not at their elders’ bedside during the last moment will have to crawl in as a way to make up for not making it on time to send the deceased off.
Marcus was the first one from outstation to arrive three hours later. I ran outside to the gate and wailed sorrowfully in his arms when he held me close to him. Then, together with my two elder brothers-in-law, he transferred Mom’s body from the sofa onto a bed facing the front door. Her blanket was used to cover her body from head to toe and we lit up a long candle and placed it near her feet. This was to brighten up the path for her floating soul which had left her physical body. Dad’s two younger sisters living in Gunung Rapat and Ipoh Garden came the same night to comfort their grieving eldest brother.

When Tracy, Harry, their two sons, and my brother arrived around 3 am the next morning, they too, got down on their knees at the front door and crawled into the house towards Mom’s body. While Tracy let out a loud wail, the rest who came back together with her remained silently solemn.

Now, with all his children back at the house, Dad began to discuss the wake and funeral arrangement with his only son. The rest of us sat around to keep a vigil over Mom’s body. However, Tracy did not join us in doing so. After wiping her tears away, she quietly got up and mounted the stairs leading to Mom’s bedroom upstairs. Curious at what she would be up to next, I got up too and followed her from behind. From the door of Mom’s bedroom, I saw her open our mother’s wardrobe and began to search among her pile of clothes.

“Hey, what’re you doing with Mom’s clothes?” I asked her sternly. I was no longer afraid of her now, not like how I was when I was young and staying with her in Batu Caves many years ago.

“I’m looking for her pants. Harry told me to get a few and bring them back to Kuala Lumpur after the funeral to keep in our office,” she replied, still busy with the searching.

“Why do you want to keep Mom’s pants for?” I asked, but she did not answer me. She did not look at me too.

Slowly I began to comprehend her act. It was a Chinese custom for sons to keep the pants of their departed parents. In the Chinese language, pants
are pronounced as \( fu \) and the word wealthy is also pronounced as \( fu \). To have pants means to have great wealth. That is why superstitious Chinese businessmen like to keep the \( fu \) of their departed parents. It is all about harvesting some wealth luck from this belief.

“For goodness sake, don’t be so greedy, Tracy! Mom’s \( fu \) belong to her only son now, not to us daughters who all have been married out already,” I told her. “Don’t steal brother’s luck away!” I warned her angrily.

“Our brother does not need so much \( fu \). He is not a businessman anyway. My husband is, and he wants to get extremely wealthy!” she retorted angrily and gave me a very hostile glare.

“If each of us married daughters were to take Mom’s \( fu \) away, there is none left for our only brother. If you do not know it, let me tell you this – Mom does not have much \( fu \), she was so frugal all her life – she has only four if I am not mistaken,” I tried to reason with her but to no avail.

In the end, she pushed me aside, yanked two pieces away from the pile of clothes sitting in the wardrobe, leaving behind two \( fu \) for our only brother. She did not give me another word, slammed the door behind her and marched down to join her husband and sons sitting downstairs.

“What’s the commotion upstairs?” Marcus asked when he saw my sullen face.

“That woman – she forcefully took away two of Mom’s \( fu \),” I told my husband who rolled his eyes on hearing this. “A leopard never changes her spots,” I heard him murmur under his breath.

Brother, our two aunts, Marcus, and I sat with Dad until darkness left the sky and daylight broke through the window and the front door, throwing its rays onto Mom’s lifeless body lying in the middle of the hall. The rest went up to sleep as they could hardly open their eyes.

The first thing we did the next morning was to find a place to keep Mom’s ashes. It was her wish to be cremated after she had died. We called the
Paradise Memorial Park’s service center and an hour later, their representatives came to take us in their company vehicles to the memorial park situated in Tanjung Rambutan to choose a columbarium for Mom. We also chose a package that would include a casket made from teak wood, a Buddhist prayer service, the funeral service and also the cremation ritual. We chose a unit overlooking the scenic Korbu Range so that Mom could have a dignified final resting place. Dad’s columbarium was also chosen for him on the same morning so that when his time came, they would be placed together side by side.

Mom’s wake was conducted the next night after she had passed away. Relatives and friends came from all over the country after reading about her demise on the obituary column of several Chinese newspapers placed by the Paradise Memorial Park’s service center. Those that came were served soft drinks and a vegetarian meal included in the package. Four Buddhist nuns in grey robes came to chant prayers for Mom to guide her distressed soul on her journey to the next world. Her children and grandchildren were required to wear solemn colors such as black and white and sit together on a straw mattress beside her casket with hands clasped in prayer.

As I sat down and sadly folded some paper ingots to be burned for Mom, I saw Tracy get up and go to greet the relatives who came to attend Mom’s wake. She went from table to table like a much sought-after dance hostess in a cabaret. I heard her telling them how she and her husband took Mom and Dad for holidays to Cameron Highlands, Genting Highlands and Penang Island many years ago. She even told them our parents missed a cruise along the Straits of Malacca because they came down to Kuala Lumpur to take care of me when I was sick with hyperthyroidism a year ago. “It’s all her fault that Mom had missed the chance to board the Star Aquarius which my husband and I wanted to take her to,” she said to them while casting me a very hostile glare.

“There she goes again – forever the drama queen – even at her mother’s wake!” my husband whispered in disgust.

“Let her be,” I told him, tears flowing down, wetting the stack of paper offerings held in my hands.
I did not like to argue or fight with anyone. Not tonight, not on this sad occasion when I had just lost my beloved mother. I simply did not have the strength to do so.

“Mom likes to eat durian, perhaps we should get some to offer her at the altar,” I heard her telling one of our elder sisters as they discussed what food to offer for the funeral. I got up and just walked away.

The Chinese would normally hold two nights of wake for their departed ones. Mom died on a Friday night. If we held two nights of wake for her, this meant her funeral would be held on the following Monday morning. With friends and relatives working on Mondays, it would be inconvenient for them to attend Mom’s funeral. In view of this, we decided to settle for just one night of wake instead of the usual two. Anyway, Dad was in a terrible state of mind and we wanted to settle the whole matter quickly so that he could take a rest. His blood pressure went up and he was not feeling too well since Mom left so suddenly that night. It was the Chinese custom for a spouse not to attend the funeral of his or her partner. Dad was so distraught that he could not hold himself up. He stayed back in the house and was accompanied by his two younger sisters, both older than Mom in age.

Mom’s funeral was the saddest day in my life. After paying our final respect to her, we were allowed to view her body for the last time before the casket was sealed and placed into a waiting hearse parked outside the house. The hearse was led by her four sons-in-law carrying a red banner called “The Son-in-Law Banner” followed by two male relatives each carrying a large lantern with Mom’s name and age written in black ink. Solemn music was played by a band provided by the memorial park. Mom’s casket was taken for a short procession around the residential area with her children, relatives and friends following closely from behind.

All this was so surreal for me. Mom’s death came so swiftly that it was a complete knockdown for the whole family. Our hopes of her getting better and prolonging her life through hemodialysis were dashed forever. The void Mom left behind was so frighteningly hollow that I wondered how we were going to face the days ahead. Under the hot November sun, and still in a daze, I almost passed out, but was caught in the nick of time by...
Marcus. We were told to get onto a chartered bus which then took us to the cremation ground along Jalan Chemor.

More tears flowed as we watched Mom’s casket being taken out from the hearse for a short prayer by a Buddhist nun before it was transmitted by the conveyor into the furnace. The door to the furnace was then closed and we were spared the agony of watching her body being consumed by the angry fire. We then got onto the chartered bus which took us to a vegetarian restaurant near our house. Dad instructed my brother to give those attending Mom’s funeral a vegetarian lunch as a gesture of thanks before sending them home.

After lunch, we all got home to help clean up the place which was in a state of disarray. As I was sweeping the hall, I heard Harry asked Dad to divide Mom’s jewelries among her children. Dad was stunned by his son-in-law’s request. He was taken aback by this inconsiderate act and before he could say a word, I went over and said calmly, “Harry, Mom does not have much jewelry left. Did Tracy tell you when Dad closed down his coffee shop four decades ago, we hardly had anything to eat? Mom pawned all her jewelries to keep the family going. What she has now were a few pieces I bought her in recent years for her birthdays and to celebrate Mother’s Day. If you so desperately wanted a piece for your wife, I can give you one.” After having said this, I went upstairs to Mom’s bedroom and took out her jewel box. Then I selected a jade ring which I had bought for her birthday.

“Here it is, hope you are happy now and that it will bring you more wealth luck,” I said as I handed Tracy her share of jewelry from Mom’s collection. She promptly took it from me and threw it into her purse without another word.

“I don’t want to have any, I want you to keep the rest,” my eldest sister said when she saw this.

“Me too, I don’t want any. We have not done much to take care of Mom while she was sick in the hospital. You deserve to take all,” the second sister told me.
“Look, I did not come back to take care of Mom for the sake of her jewelries. I came back because she was my mother, because she was sick and because she needed help – as simple as that. I wanted to take care of her so that I could share her last days with her – and later, many years down the road, when my children have grown up, I have things to tell them of a grandmother they hardly knew, that’s all.”

With that, I walked off and continued sweeping the floor. Marcus helped me to sweep the porch. When the house had been spruced up, gloomy clouds loomed over the limestone hills. Before long, the sky opened up and shed tears that reflected the pain and sadness I felt in my heart that day.

Harry and Tracy wanted to leave for Kuala Lumpur after the rain had stopped. “Let your husband go back because he needs to work, but why don’t you stay back with your sons to accompany Dad? He is so lonely now with Mom no longer in the house. It is school holidays already, your sons don’t need to go to school for the next seven weeks, so stay back a few days to help comfort our father who is now so sad and lost,” Ophelia, the eldest sister proposed to Tracy.

Tracy looked very reluctant when she heard this proposal. Her face turned sullen and she pouted her lips to show her unhappiness at not being able to follow her husband home to Kuala Lumpur. In the end, she agreed to stay back with her sons for only a week since Harry would be back next week to attend Mom’s first week prayer to be held at Sam Poh Cave temple. “I can only stay back one week and not a day more!” she told Ophelia in a voice filled with displeasure.

Relieved that there were three more people besides my brother and me to keep Dad’s company, our two elder sisters and their families staying in Ipoh left not long after this. Marcus left the same night as he needed to work too.

Tracy and her sons did not come down to join Dad, my brother and me that night for dinner. They locked themselves in a room upstairs and did not come down until the next morning when all of us were required to go back
to the cremation ground to collect Mom’s bones and ashes.

Mom’s bones were stored inside a red porcelain urn. The urn was then placed in a columbarium at Paradise Memorial Park while her ashes were taken to the Kinta River and scattered outside her favorite temple – the *Sui Yuet Kung*.

As we watched her ashes being carried away by the swift current, a very light scent that resembled those of the chrysanthemum flower permeated the air and filled our nostrils. Some of us broke down into tears.

In the end, her serene face was the only consolation we could find. So rest in peace, dearest Mom.
Chapter Thirty

Who will chat with Dad? Who will cook for him? Who will wash his clothes? Who will bring him to see the doctor? Who will do the things Mom used to do when she was still around? These questions swirled in my head as I cleared her wardrobe and packed her things away. Nobody, it seemed. My siblings were too busy with their own families. I needed to send my son to tuition class, I needed to keep an eye on my daughter, I myself was sick too – these were some of the excuses they offered me.

“Dad is sad and lonely. Can I bring the children home to stay with him?” I asked my husband. I know he is a very considerate and compassionate man.

“Yes, do what you can for your father. Keep him company so that he will not be so sad. Some sacrifices must be made to lessen his pain,” he said.

With that, I moved back to Ipoh with my little children in tow. Nicholas was three and Alexandra, one.

Dad was delighted to hear this. He could play with his grandchildren and watch television with them. He would have warm home-cooked meals to eat and some people to eat together with him. He would have us to chat with him at night before he retired to bed. He would have someone to take him to see the doctor.

The days after Mom was gone were not easy. I had an old and sick father to look after, and two young children to take care of. I kept myself occupied because when I was busy, I did not have the time to feel the pain. It was tolerable in the morning when the sky was bright and the whole neighborhood came alive with people walking past our house on their way to school, the shops or the market which were nearby. Noises and activities kept me away from loneliness. But I feared the evenings when the sky grew darker and the whole place was so quiet. I felt very down and unhappy. By night, not a soul could be seen; sometimes a cat or dog...
just passed by. An idle mind is a devil’s workshop. It’s true. Staring at Mom’s portrait on the wall, I could almost hear her soft whispering. I could still feel her presence in the house. I dared not sit on her favorite chair. It was too painful. I wished she was still around to tell me what to do when the children got sick. I wished she was still around to teach me to cook some of Dad’s favorite dishes. There were many times when I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night and when my thoughts came to Mom, I found it hard to believe that she had died and would never come back again.

For the next four years (2001 – 2004), my life centered around three people – Dad and the children. Life in Ipoh was very simple for us.

Each morning, I would buy breakfast for the four of us. Dad liked to eat \textit{dim sum}. “I’m so old already. If I don’t eat my favorite food now, when shall I eat it?” he asked whenever I reminded him such food was high in cholesterol. Sometimes I would alternate this with fish-ball noodles, \textit{wanton mee} and \textit{chee cheong fun}. We would wash the food down with cups of thick Chinese tea.

After doing the daily laundry, I would leave the children with Dad at home and walk to the wet market to buy food Dad loved to eat like tilapia fish, smooth white bean curd, red spinach, Chinese dried mushrooms and fried chicken feet. Sometimes I would buy ingredients with which to boil nutritious soup.

When I came back from the wet market, I would spend some time to teach the children to read story books and to draw pictures. Sometimes we would play blocks. Between Nicholas and Alexandra, they had almost a thousand pieces of blocks which I had bought from the minimarket nearby. They could construct many things from these blocks such as castles, animals, and even cars. When it was time for me to prepare lunch, Dad would teach his grandchildren how to read and write in Mandarin and also, simple arithmetic.

In the afternoon, after lunch, we would sit down together to watch television and video tapes. Dad would play cartoons, sword-fighting movies
and Cantonese classical costume dramas on his video recorder. Being a true blue Cantonese and very proud of his dialect, Dad would teach the children some popular Cantonese proverbs, something which he was very good at. He even taught Alexandra to sing Cantonese opera. Although the house was empty without Mom’s presence, Dad slowly began to smile and laugh and I was so relieved to see him picking up the pieces again.

Tired after watching the movies, all of us would take a short nap. While Dad would sleep on the sofa since he could not climb the stairs anymore, I would bring the children up to sleep with them in the rooms upstairs. After their baths and dinner later in the evening, we would watch more movies before retiring to our beds.

Before going to bed each night, Dad would also share with us his younger days when the Japanese came in 1941 and made life hell for everyone. The days of having nothing to eat except tapioca, of bowing to the Japanese when you met them on the road, of being forced to study the Japanese language, of being forced to watch mass beheadings at the market square and of nearly getting enlisted to build the deadly railway at the Siamese border were repeated again and again until these events were deeply ingrained in my mind.

At the end of each month, Marcus would drive all the way up to Ipoh to spend the weekends with us. We really looked forward to such visits. We would go to the food courts in nearby Ipoh Garden East to have supper and shopping trips to Kinta City where Nicholas and Alexandra would get to buy some snacks and toys they fancied. We would also go to the park behind the house to play on the see-saws and swings. When it was time for Marcus to go back to Kuala Lumpur, he would take the children for walks until they got tired and went to sleep so that he could leave quietly without their knowledge. It broke his heart to see the children cry when they saw their father get into the car and drive away without them.

Every three months, I would bring Dad for his medical checkup at the Ipoh General Hospital. Dad had high cholesterol, uric acid, blocked arteries and also prostate enlargement. He would not allow anyone other
than me to accompany him to the hospital because only I fully understood his condition and could relay it properly to the doctors and also because he trusted me in managing his daily doses of medication.

Not long after the diagnosis of his prostate problem, it was discovered that the enlargement had become malignant which means it had turned cancerous. He was eighty years old then and suffering from blocked arteries. The doctor told me Dad could not be operated upon. It would be risky due to his heart condition. Instead, he was given a medication called Androcur which can inhibit the growth and metastasis of the cancer cells. I was dumbfounded when I heard this and I did not know how to relay this piece of sad news to Dad because he was so fearful of mortality. Finally, I asked the doctor to block this news from Dad to spare him the pain and heartbreak of finding himself having cancer at such an advanced age. Many different doctors I have met in the subsequent years graciously agreed to my request. They too saw no point in letting the patient know his real condition when nothing much could be done for him except to keep him medicated. They, like me, would prefer Dad to live out the rest of his days in blissful ignorance.

But I remember very vividly a certain lady doctor by the name of Dr. Khoo who refused to submit to my request to keep Dad’s condition from him during one of his visits to her clinic. She was the one and only doctor who insisted the truth to be told regardless of the outcome on the patient’s mental state. When she heard my request, she barked at me and banged her table fiercely.

“What, you ask me not to tell my patient his real condition?” she asked furiously and gave me an angry glare. Mind you, she was a young lady.

“What good does it bring to this patient if he learns of his condition but you can’t do anything for him? Will you take the responsibility if he takes his life as what some cancer patients tend to do?” I asked her calmly. In the end, she kept quiet and prescribed another three months of Androcur for my father.

Not satisfied, I even paid a visit to Dad’s regular pharmacist at Ipoh Gar-
den East and got him to cooperate with me in case Dad might show up at his store to find out more about Androcur. This was because he had told me he planned to ask the pharmacist for more details on the side effects of taking this drug.

Nicholas attended kindergarten a few blocks away and it gave Dad much thrill to send his little grandson to and fro on his bicycle each day.

We stayed with Dad until January 2005 when it was time for Nicholas to start Year One and Alexandra to go to kindergarten in Kuala Lumpur.

By then, I had even trained Dad to cook a few dishes and he had recovered from losing his beloved wife. With me and the children back in Kuala Lumpur, it was my siblings’ turn to take care of him. My brother no longer worked for Tracy and Harry immediately after Mom’s death. He got himself another job in Ipoh and came back to stay with Dad.

Did you notice that during the four years of taking care of my sick parents, Ng Mooi did not show up, not even once? I do not know why she did not turn up but I am grateful to her for letting me carry out my duties as a mother and daughter without any hindrances.
Chapter Thirty One

Vicky, my close friend and former lunch-mate, called me up one afternoon not long after I had moved back to Kuala Lumpur with the children.

“Frances, can you guess who I met at the Gleneagles Hospital along Jalan Ampang this morning?” she asked.

“Is this person one of our former colleagues?” I tried to make a guess.

“You’re right – he was Charlie, our financial controller. I saw him and his wife waiting to see the doctor. Margaret told me her husband had late-stage nose cancer. He was sitting in a wheelchair and he was so different from how we used to know him. I greeted him but he just looked away. Gone was his boyish face. Gone too was his thick black hair. Also gone was his smooth complexion that we girls envied so much and wished to have. He was like an old man now with a gaunt appearance. His hair was all missing, leaving his head almost bald. But what caught my eyes was his nose – his wife said it was removed and in its place was a huge bandage that covered up a good part of his face,” my friend revealed.

“Oh, my goodness, and to think years ago, he was the handsomest man in the office!” I couldn’t help expressing my sadness over Charlie’s misfortune.

One day a year later, I met Elaine who was Charlie’s secretary while I was on the way home after delivering lunch to my children at their school.

We bumped into each other at a shopping mall in my neighborhood. Since it was lunch time and she was on her own, we went to a café for a drink.
“I’m not working for Charlie anymore. Anyway, he is not working now. He couldn’t work as he was suffering from nose cancer. He is now at Stage Four,” Elaine said after we had ordered our drinks.

“Yes, I’ve heard of his condition from another former colleague last year. She saw him and his wife at Gleneagles Hospital. She told me he was in a terrible state,” I said.

“Margaret passed away six months ago from lung cancer and she was not even a smoker. I heard Charlie had withdrawn himself into a room and was not accepting visitors or taking up calls. He had an Indonesian maid taking care of him. His kids did not come back, they’re still in Singapore.”

“You mean his wife also had cancer?” I almost couldn’t believe my ears. Margaret was a non-smoker and she always looked so healthy. And she was only in her early forties.

“Both husband and wife suffer from cancer. They did not go to government hospitals. You know, they’re such rich and proud people. Anyway, the wait can be very long in these hospitals. It is not possible for them when they’re in such chronic stage. So they sold off most of their properties to pay for their treatments. In the end, they do not have much left; I think only the house they’re staying in remains. Their wealth has gone to the doctors now,” Elaine said sarcastically. From this, I knew then she hated him too.

“Yes, doctors are always the ones who will laugh all the way to the banks,” I echoed after her.

“Do you know how mean and ruthless Charlie was when he retrenched the staff six years ago? Many of those affected appealed to him but he just refused to meet them for negotiations,” Elaine recalled.

“I’ve heard that from Shirley. It all happened when I was away on medical leave for a month. How many staff were actually laid off by Charlie, may I ask?”
“Around two hundred – both from the construction site and the operational office, so can you imagine how many people lost their livelihood due to one man’s decision? It was all done so that those in the executive level could still enjoy their annual increment, bonuses and overseas trips,” Elaine said bitterly. She too was axed by her boss after a year or two.

That night, after some deliberation, I called Tracy to break the sad news to her. Tracy and her family had by then moved to another state and had lost contact with Margaret and Charlie.

“Your best friend Margaret died from lung cancer six months ago. And Charlie has been fighting nose cancer for the past few years. He is now at Stage Four,” I told my sister. She was completely stunned. “I’ll call Charlie tomorrow morning,” she said weakly and hung up the phone.

The next day, Tracy called back. “He doesn’t want to speak to anyone. His maid said this to me and she quickly put down the phone,” she told me sadly. I could sense she was very upset over the sudden demise of her best friend whom she treated better than her own sister. That was the last we heard of Margaret and Charlie, the small town girl and boy who struck gold in the big city but unfortunately, lost it all to cancer.

When I told Dad about the couple’s fate on my next trip home, he said life was like having a dream and then waking up from it. “One moment, you’re rich. The next, you’re a pauper. One moment, you’re alive. The next, you’re dead. It’s just like waking up from a dream when morning came and nothing of it remained,” he sighed as he got up from his easy chair to get himself a cup of Chinese tea.

I am sure, at the age of eighty eight, Dad knew what he was talking about. After all, he had been through two world wars and in his own words, "Ngor sik yim toh gor lei sik mai." It means he had eaten more salt than I have eaten rice!
Chapter Thirty Two

I had promised Dad I would go back to visit him as often as I could. That was why the children’s school holidays were all spent in Ipoh and nowhere else. Days before each school holidays started, Dad would be very impatient for our return. He would call me in Kuala Lumpur late at night and feign illness. “Come back quick and take me to see the doctor, I don’t feel well!” he would beg me. I knew he could easily get my brother or sisters in Ipoh to do that but he did not. The next day when we arrived at his doorstep, he would look as fit as a fiddle. I didn’t blame him because I knew that he missed the children and me and was longing to see us again.

One early morning during the school holidays in December 2006, I was rudely woken up when my brother knocked frantically at my door while I was sleeping with the children in our room upstairs. I jumped up and opened the door.

“What’s happening?” I asked him in a daze.

“Come down quick and see what you can do for Dad. He was woken up by a bad dream and appears very frightened,” my brother said worriedly.

My brother also slept downstairs to accompany Dad who could not climb the stairs anymore due to his legs that were getting weak. He was woken up by Dad’s groaning and rushed up to enlist my help. Immediately, I rushed down to where Dad was sleeping. Propped up by some pillows, he was heard groaning sorrowfully. Beads of sweat ran down his forehead which I quickly wiped away with his towel.

“What happened, Dad?” I asked gently. He slowly shook his head and began in a trembling voice, “I saw in my dream two tall and fierce looking men with huge iron chains in their hands. They came and dragged me away in those heavy chains.”
Here was a man who was not afraid of death when the Japanese soldiers came to drag him away in the middle of the night in 1945 to build the deadly railway at the Siamese border. He was not afraid of death when the fierce white police superintendent pointed a rifle at his forehead at an identity parade in 1948 during the Emergency. But now he was totally shaken by a frightening dream where two tall and fierce looking men chained him up before dragging him away. In his heart, he already knew what this dream prophesied.

I let out a small sigh and took a look at the wall clock. It was four o’clock in the morning and outside, I could see a full moon blemished by strands of white clouds hanging in the black sky. The street was very quiet and clear of stray dogs and cats.

I quickly recited the *mantras* that Lama Khedrup had taught me years ago while holding Dad’s trembling hands to comfort him.

“Don’t worry, Dad. It’s just a bad dream. Everything will be alright, you’ll see. Go back to sleep, it’s still early.”

Like an obedient little boy, Dad slowly lay down his rotund body onto the bed and I pulled the blanket over his shoulders and then gently stroked his white hair until he finally dozed off to sleep again.

My brother then beckoned me to the front door. “Do you know the meaning of his dream?” he asked nervously.

“Yes, I think the two tall and fierce looking men he saw in his dream must be the *Cow Head* and *Horse Face*, the two loathsome and dreadful generals of the *King of Hell*. The Chinese believe they will appear to those whose death is near. Death is a predestined event and no one has the power to prevent or alter it,” I told my brother sadly.

He looked grim.

“Before we go back to sleep, let’s light up some candles and joss sticks by the roadside to send them away,” he suggested. My brother, like Mom, was a Taoist.

In the small hours of the morning, squatting by the drain near the gate, we did just that. This act attracted some stray dogs from nowhere.
By the end of the school holidays when it was time to go back to Kuala Lumpur, Dad seemed to have forgotten his bad dream and we did not bring it up again for fear it might upset him.
Chapter Thirty Three

One night in early March 2007, the phone in my house rang. I could hear my brother’s voice speaking frantically on the other end, “Dad fell down in the kitchen after dinner while trying to get a drink. He was in great pain but still managed to shout for help. Some neighbors heard him and came over to help. They broke the kitchen window, climbed into the house, lifted him up and carried him to a chair before calling me. The ambulance is on the way now and I will accompany him to the hospital.”

I was heartbroken on hearing this. Deep down, I always knew this would happen some day and that day had finally come.

“Yes, get him admitted quickly. I will rush back first thing in the morning to see him,” I told my brother. Then the line went dead.

At age eighty seven, Dad’s feeble legs were fast giving up on him. He found it hard to stand steadily despite holding onto a cane. A fall would be fatal for him.

Early the next morning, I boarded the first bus home. Upon reaching Ipoh, I took a cab straight to the hospital and rushed up to his bedside at the men’s ward. When I saw him, his eyes were closed and he was groaning in pain. I greeted him and he quickly opened his eyes towards my direction. Like a lost child glad to find him mother again, Dad held out his weak hands and grabbed mine desperately. Then he began to weep sorrowfully.

“Dad, please don’t cry. It’s alright. I know you are in great pain. I will ask the doctor to give you some injections to lessen the pain,” I tried to comfort him. “No doctors came to see me or give me any medication this morning,” he complained bitterly.

Incensed over the hospital’s inefficiency, I quickly went to see the doctor and pleaded with him to administer some pain killers for my poor Dad
who had been left unattended since admission. The service at the gov-
ernment hospitals left much to be desired. You have to beg, plead and
finally, raise your voice before they give you any attention.

Each time he was hospitalized for heart problems, I was the one at his
side to attend to him. This time, I was to spend almost ten days with him
at the hospital.

Despite having been given the pain killers, he was still in deep pain
because the X-ray taken showed that his left hip was badly fractured. It
was broken and he required a major surgery to repair it. But there was
an obstacle – he had hypertension and heart problems. These conditions
ruled out any operations to be performed on him because the risks were
very high. The doctors told us to wait while they thought of an option.

One night, while keeping vigil at his bedside, Dad was seen whimper-
ing. I had to lean forward to hear what he was saying.

“Cook some rice. Steam some tilapia fish with bean curd. Boil some
lotus root soup,” he said in a voice that I had to strain my ears to hear.
I was surprised because I had just fed him some porridge which my
brother had brought.

“Are you hungry again so fast?” I teased him.

“No, the food is not for me. It is for your Grandpa, Grandma, Mom,
Uncle, and Aunties. I saw them. They are all here now and they looked
hungry. They are waiting at the table,” he whispered back.

I just kept quiet and though he must be hallucinating from all the pain
killers that were heaped on him.

“Go, cook now! Don’t let them wait too long,” he kept prodding me.

As far as I knew, these people were no longer in this world. My hair
stood on end. The ward was in total darkness and most of the patients
were fast asleep. Only both Dad and I were still awake. I took a look at
my watch. It was almost five o’clock in the morning.

“Okay, okay, I will cook for them but first, you must close your eyes and try to sleep – you’ll wake up the others if you continue like this,” I tried to pacify him.

This went on until day light broke. The hours went by very slowly for us both.

The next morning when my brother came to the ward to take over my shift, I was very exhausted. I could hardly open my eyes. I had not slept for a few nights and I was always on my feet during the day, attending to Dad.

I wanted to take a bus home to where brother’s house was, to take a bath and have a few hours’ sleep before going back to his side again. The bus came and I quickly hopped onto it. After paying the fare, I fell asleep in the bus. When I opened my eyes again and looked out of the bus window, I gasped in horror. The bus had already passed brother’s house and was on the way to Chemor! I had not got down earlier because I was asleep. I quickly pressed the bell and got down at the main road approaching Chemor. I tried to hail a cab home but there was none in sight. After standing under the hot glaring sun for a while, I decided to walk home. It took me almost half an hour of walking before I finally reached home. Utterly exhausted, I just collapsed onto the sofa and slept soundly the whole afternoon. I had completely forgotten that I had not eaten lunch yet.

Late one night after work, my brother arrived at the hospital to take over from me. Again, I took the bus home to his house to have a proper sleep. It was already eleven o’clock at night. When the bus reached Jalan Tasek, it started to rain heavily. Lightning and thunder across the night sky could be heard intermittently. Oh dear, I did not have an umbrella with me. I had to walk back home in the heavy rain after getting down from the bus, I thought to myself. As if this was not bad enough, the entire area had suffered a total blackout. Both the village and housing estate next to it were cloaked in complete darkness.
I was among the last passengers on the bus. When I reached the bus stop near the market, I got down and walked home which was about half a kilometer away, in the heavy rain and total darkness. Not a single soul or even a stray dog or cat could be seen. There were no shelters as there were no shops along the way. All were private houses.

When I reached home, I was completely drenched in rain water and shivering in cold. I quickly dried myself with a towel. The batteries in the torchlight had dried up, so I lit a white candle which I found in the cupboard and placed it on a table. The ambience was eerie as the flame kept flickering in the dark. All the eating shops were closed and there was no food at home, not even a slice of bread or a few crackers. The rain had reduced to a drizzle and I could hear some dogs howling from a distance. It was a wet, cold and dark night, and I was tired and hungry. There was nothing I could do except to go upstairs and sleep on an empty stomach.

A few days later, the doctors told us that there was nothing much they could do and advised us to have Dad discharged. He would limp for the rest of his remaining days, we were told. He had lost all his self-independence and from now on, would need special care twenty four hours. At the same time, his prostate cancer had metastasized to his lungs, making him very weak and prone to pneumonia.

My brother worked long hours and my sisters were busy with their own families. We did not have enough hands to take care of Dad. He was a heavily built man. To take care of his toilet needs, we needed at least two able-bodied persons to lift him up from his bed or wheelchair. After much discussion among ourselves and with his approval, we decided to place him into a good nursing home in Pasir Putih, near Ipoh.

We found a spacious and well-kept bungalow manned by a team of dedicated retired nurses. They were helped by a few Filipino maids. Dad was well taken care of by them. During our weekend visits, we could see him eating well-balanced diets, given daily massage on his legs and also, medications prescribed by the hospital. He had companions too as there were other old folks staying there. At the same time, we engaged
the service of a traditional healer to give him alternative treatment since his leg could not be operated on.

But a month later, his cancer spread like wild-fire. His lungs were badly inflamed and as a result, he suffered from acute pneumonia. Again, he had to be rushed to the hospital by ambulance. His condition grew worse by the hour. This time, he was admitted for a week and was given antibiotic drips round the clock but he was not responsive to the treatment. Tubes were all over him and he could hardly breathe. Dad drifted in and out of consciousness. Although he could still recognize us, he could not speak at all. All he could do was to gaze longingly at us as we stood beside his bed to watch over him.

We knew the end was near. “Dad, don’t worry for us. Go in peace. Have the rest you deserve. Go and join Mom in Nirvana,” I whispered softly to him. He nodded weakly and slowly closed his eyes after hearing this.

I stroked his soft white hair, caressed his wrinkled face and kissed his feeble hands gently. Tears just rolled down freely, knowing we were going to lose our beloved father any minute.

The *Amitabha Mantra* was played softly to his ears to comfort his suffering soul.

We were exhausted from the long vigil and went home for a rest. My brother, his only son, stayed back to watch over him.

At about eight o’clock on the morning of April 24th 2007, my brother called from the hospital.

“Dad is no more in this world,” he said nervously.

I let out a small sob when I heard the sad news. I regret I wasn’t at his bedside when he breathed his last.

“When I woke up just now to change his diaper, I found he was gone. I think he left quietly in the early hours of the morning without a word,”
my brother continued.

A flame had extinguished. He was free at last. With that, his pains and illness had ceased too. His eyes were closed and he had a slight smile on his lips. One would think he was sleeping peacefully. Dad was a free thinker all his life. At the end of his life’s journey, my eldest sister led him to the path of the *dharma*.

When Mom died seven years ago, out of ignorance, we cried and cried our hearts out. All that changed seven years later. As Buddhists, we now know we are not supposed to show our grief openly during the wake and funeral. This is because it is believed the soul of the deceased was still hovering around his body and any show of grief will further aggravate his sense of loss and also increase his attachment to life and his loved ones. Buddhists are supposed to let go of attachment which is believed to bring suffering. Therefore, we did not shed any tears despite our sadness. As the hearse carried Dad’s body away, we followed in mute silence, numbed in disbelief, but comforted to know he had lived to a ripe old age of eighty eight.

We did not stay back after the funeral. Marcus needed to go back to work and the children to school the next day. In fact, they were half way sitting for their mid-year examination. It was in the car on the way back to Kuala Lumpur along the Tapah stretch that I could no longer contain my sorrow and I broke down to cry my eyes out. When I lost Mom, I still had Dad. Now, with Dad gone too, I had lost both parents and the pain was indescribable. It was like a tree losing the final root which gave it support.

I was so weak with sorrow that when I reached Kuala Lumpur that evening, I was totally devoid of strength. I could feel Ng Mooi’s presence due to the sudden pain in my stomach that was so familiar. As soon as my head hit the pillow, all hell broke loose. Ng Mooi, through my mouth, broke into a sorrowful song which no one could understand but one thing was clear, she was singing a folk song and it took my husband and children by complete surprise.
“What song are you singing, Ng Mooi?” asked Marcus. He was totally taken aback when he heard this song that came out from my mouth.

“It’s a folk song, my favorite song when I was young, before I came to Malaya, and I love to sing,” I replied sadly on her behalf, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Why do you choose to come at this time? Don’t you know my wife has just lost her father two days ago and he had just been cremated this afternoon?” he asked further.

“I know. But I need to come to tell you that I need help. Please help me to get away from this terrible condition, please? I’m now standing under the tree outside your house and I’m completely drenched in the rainwater, making me cold and hungry. I’ve been boxed into this corner by a group of fierce spirits out to snatch my things,” she said before breaking down into sorrowful wails.

Marcus went out to the verandah to have a look. Yes, he could see that it was raining heavily outside but no, he did not have yin yang eyes and therefore, could not see Ng Mooi standing under the tree.

He came back into the room and said patiently, “Alright, alright….we’ll continue to recite prayers for you, until you’re liberated from the hungry ghost realm, is that what you want?”

I nodded my head automatically. Through my tears, I could see ten-year-old Nicholas and eight-year-old Alexandra standing beside me with bewildered looks on their young faces while their father gently wiped my tears away. Prodded by their father, they began to stroke my long flowing hair with their nimble fingers.

Marcus then whispered into the children’s ears and I heard them beg in unison, “Ng Mooi, can you leave our mommy alone? She has just lost her daddy and she is very sad now. Please, please, leave her alone, will you?” With that request, I found myself suddenly sitting up and vomiting furiously into a spittoon held out to me by the children. The next
minute, she was gone.

As drowsiness and exhaustion overtook me, I fell back onto the bed and then drifted off to a deep sleep where I was taken back to the days when I was a little girl sitting on Dad’s lap in the dark hall of Cathay Cinema and we were watching the movie *King Kong*. He even had a small packet of melon seeds in his hands and we were enjoying ourselves tremendously on a night out after he had closed the coffee shop.

When the movie was over, hand in hand, we walked home together along the quiet Cockman Street. No cars were in sight and all the shops in that vicinity have been closed. It was midnight and way past my usual bedtime.

"Do you like the movie we saw just now?" Dad asked me as we quicken our steps. I told him I loved it, especially the scene where the giant gorilla took the beautiful girl away and disappeared among the skyscrapers of New York. He nodded amusingly. I loved that part too, he replied smilingly.

When we reached the doorstep of 188 Hugh Low Street, instead of entering the house with me, Dad bid me goodbye and prodded me to go inside. Quick, your mother is waiting for you, he urged me. I was very surprised that he did not follow along. Turning my head around, I saw him floating away into the dark. Baffled by this, I ran out and called loudly after him, "Dad, where are you going? Please come back!"

Of course my father did not come back anymore except only in my dreams.....
Epilogue

I had just arrived home after a book sale in Malacca in November 2013 when Alexandra told me Ophelia had called several times while I was away for two days. When I returned her call, she sounded rather apprehensive.

“Did Tracy call you the last few days?” she asked worriedly.

“No,” I replied, feeling curious. “Why, something bad happened to her?”

Tracy and her family had moved to another state since 2004. The last time I saw her was during our father’s demise in 2007. Like always, she just looked away and did not talk to me, hence I did not get to tell her of our father’s last wish. She was busy bragging to relatives who attended the wake about her two sons who had just got into medical school. We then went our separate ways after the funeral.

“Tracy called me two days ago. She cried her eyes out over the phone. She has been suffering from anemia for the past few years but she didn’t bother to find out what was wrong. She was too busy making money to pay for her sons’ fees. Then last week, she noticed some blood in her urine and feces. Panicked, she went for a test in the hospital and was told it was colon cancer. Now, she is hysterical,” Ophelia revealed sadly.

For a moment, my mind turned blank. Oh no, not cancer again. Grandpa had lung cancer. Dad had prostate cancer. And now, our sister had colon cancer. Is our family cursed?

“How sad!,” was all that I could mumble after getting over the shock.

“Tracy said she’ll be going to Kuala Lumpur for an operation at a government hospital. She wonders if it is alright to stay at your place first before admission. You decide and then let her know,” Ophelia told me before hanging up.
I called Tracy that night. “I heard about your condition from Ophelia this afternoon. If you don't mind, do come to my place to stay before your operation. I’ll see how I can help you,” I offered her.

“Are you sure I’m not troubling you?” she asked meekly, her voice overwhelmed by a sense of utter shame and guilt. Never before had she sounded so humble than now.

“If it is, I wouldn’t be calling you now,” I said. “Don’t worry about the past. I’m not a person who bears grudges. Just come and have a rest at my place. Maybe I can cook you some nutritious food while you wait for the treatment,” I told her.

“Thank you very much,” she replied very softly and politely.

It saddened me that we were still talking like strangers even though we have been sisters for half a century, thanks to the wall she had put between us all these years. I wanted to tear down that wall as this had been Dad’s last wish.

Two days later when Tracy and Harry appeared at my doorstep, I almost could not recognize them. They were a far cry from the days when I used to stay with them at Batu Caves. Those days seemed long past. Gone were their youthful looks and arrogant demeanor. They looked very fatigued, especially Tracy. She was no longer the attractive and proud looking woman who was so used to throwing her tantrums around and having things done her way. Illness had taken away my sister’s physical beauty and aged her considerably. She was so thin and fragile looking that I’m afraid a gust of strong wind might topple her over. Two of her upper lateral incisors were gone and she did a bad job trying to conceal some grey hairs that stuck out so conspicuously from her head.

“Is there any pet shop around?” Tracy asked timidly when she stepped into my house and put her luggages down.

“Why do you want to keep pets all of a sudden?” I couldn’t help asking her.
“I want to buy some fish, birds, and insects to be released. Ophelia told me to do this to atone for my misdeeds done in the past,” she explained sheepishly.

“Yes, there are a few in this area. But you don’t have to go there yourself. I’ll get them for you. The walk there will wear you out since you’re so weak now,” I told her.

Having sat her down on the sofa and given her some warm drink, I walked to the nearest pet shop and got her hundreds and hundreds of crickets. In fact, I bought up all that was available in the pet shop, much to the amusement and delight of the pet shop owner.

“You need to recite some prayers for them before you set them free. Do you know how?” I asked her when I came back but she shook her head sadly.

“I’ve never prayed in my entire life, so I really don’t know how. Can you teach me?” She was on the verge of tears and I knew they were tears of helplessness or perhaps, tears of remorse.

“Never mind, I’ll teach you how. Just follow me. We’ll recite the mantra of the Medicine Buddha to bless these insects before setting them free,” I told her patiently.

After reciting the necessary mantra, I took her to the bushes behind my house to release the insects.

“Close your eyes, put your palms together and wish for their freedom and your own recovery,” I told her and she did accordingly.

That evening, I boiled some herbal and chicken soup for her. She drank this down gratefully.

“I’ve never drunk this kind of soup for ages. I was so busy working I neglected my health. It was no surprise I got into this mess. There are many things I’ve done in the past which I truly regret now. I don’t know
how much time is left for me,” Tracy lamented woefully.

For the very first time in fifty years, we sat down to have a proper conversation as sisters should. I was sad that it was cancer and nothing less that finally tamed this person who always used to think the whole world revolved around her.

“Have faith in yourself that you’ll overcome this obstacle. Rest well, eat well, discard your worries and fears, then everything will fall into place again,” I tried to cheer her up.

“I worry for my sons. I hope I get to live a bit longer so that I can see both of them finish medical school,” she said before breaking down in tears.

“I am sure you will. Just stay positive,” I patted her bony hands.

“Frances, can you forgive me for all the pain and misery that I have purposely inflicted on you when you stayed with us in the early days?” she finally gathered enough courage to ask me.

“There’s nothing to forgive, actually. I’ve already put all the unhappiness behind me. I have learned to let go. I admitted there was a time when I was very angry and bitter towards you but with time, maturity, and understanding; I’ve managed to find peace. I don’t want to live the rest of my days dwelling in anger and hatred. It won’t do me any good to live with that kind of mentality. Not good for my mind and my health anyway,” I told her.

“I’m so sorry I was such a tyrant before! Please let me apologize so that I too, can find peace. In a few days’ time, I’ll be going for a major operation and I don’t know whether I’ll wake up from it or not. At least, let me go in there with a peaceful mind knowing that you’re no longer angry with me,” Tracy cried tearfully. She was wailing like a naughty child about to be caned and begging for mercy.

“You’ve indeed caused me much misery and also a lot of financial hard-
ship. Remember how you left me in the lurch over that shop-lot? There were days when I wished I could run somewhere far away to hide or even end my life when the threats and pressures from the bank’s lawyers were too much for me to put up with. Then after having paid whatever we could, we had nothing left for ourselves and the children. We didn’t have money to buy milk powder for our children who were always crying from hunger. We didn’t have money to take them to the doctor when they were delirious with fever. We only ate one meal a day. You do not know the hell we have been through. Those were the days when I really hated you and asked why I have such a wicked sister like you. Those were really hard times but eventually, Marcus and I survived the storm. We even lost our apartment and car – we sold them off to pay the bank. Come to think of it, I should not be angry at you. I should be grateful for all the lessons we learned along the way. Like what the 14th Dalai Lama said – when you lose, don’t lose the lessons. Those lessons have made us stronger and wiser. I’ve learned to forgive you but you have to promise that you will erase all your nasty habits. There is nothing to be gained at all from treating other people badly. All the unhappiness you have created for them will come back to haunt you one day. So let this be your turning point,” I told her calmly. I should have scolded her but I didn’t. She hung down her head in deep remorse, then wiped her tears and blew her nose.

I went on, “Everyone makes mistakes. Yes, we all made mistakes but most importantly, we must learn from our mistakes and do not repeat them again, especially those that will hurt people around us. I hope you will learn to remove the six types of poison you have been carrying around all your life – pride, jealousy, attachment, ignorance, greed and hatred. Even one of these poisons is enough to ruin you completely. They will bring you nothing but only sufferings.”

“You know,” I continued, “a good way to remove them according to Lama Khedrup, is to recite daily the universal mantra of Om Mani Padme Hum. Om will help us to remove our pride. Ma will help to remove jealousy. Ni will help to remove attachment. Pad will help to remove ignorance. Me will help to remove greed and finally Hum will help to remove hatred. Recite it 108 times daily by using rosary beads to count.
Then dedicate your prayers to all sentient beings.”

Tracy tearfully nodded and took the rosary beads which I offered her. She followed slowly the mantra which I had learned from my Lama. At first, she struggled with the pronunciation which was very foreign to her as the mantra was in Sanskrit but after a few tries, she got it and could recite it on her own.

“Recite it with faith and diligence and you will find much peace and comfort,” I told her gently. I saw hope come back to her eyes when initially I could see nothing but hopelessness.

“Oh yes, another thing I wanted to tell you – months before he died, Dad told me he wished to see us on talking terms again. He said our names, when combined together, means fragrance. He wanted us to be close, like how sisters should be. Do you want to fulfil his last wish?” I asked her.

Amidst tears that rolled down from her puffing eyes and wet her sunken cheeks, my sister nodded eagerly. We finally gave each other a sisterly hug which could have delighted both Mom and Dad had they been there to see us. Harry, who was sitting beside his wife, smiled approvingly. “Does Ng Mooi still come back to disturb you?” he asked when it was over.

“The last time she came was seven years ago after Dad’s funeral when I got back to Kuala Lumpur. I was in deep grief at that time and that made me an ideal host for her to enter my body. But she hasn’t appeared anymore since that day.”

“Did you still burn paper offerings to her like what Mom did?” Tracy asked innocently.

“No, Lama Khedrup taught me to recite prayers instead. That’s a better way to comfort her – through wisdom and compassion,” I replied.

“Will she come again in future?” Harry pressed further.
“I don’t know. Nobody can tell what will happen in the future. Life is full of uncertainties. She’s so pitiful; I just want to help her. I hope one day, she will leave the hungry ghost realm and get to be born into a higher and better one.”

“Do you hate her?” my sister asked suddenly but I was not surprised.

“No, not a bit, despite all the pain she has caused me. Why should I hate her? Hasn’t she suffered enough? Why should I hate somebody who was so unfortunate and had suffered so much injustice? In fact, we must learn to show her compassion and understanding. Only then, we can accept this whole issue gracefully.”

“But she’s just a hungry ghost!” Harry scorned.

“Then all the more reason to help her and show her compassion!”

“Have you considered getting some ghost-buster or medium to lock her up so that she won’t be able to cause trouble again?” he asked ignorantly.

“Second Aunt had suggested this before some thirty years ago. If I wanted to, I would have got it done then but it was the last thing I would do to her.”

“Then you would have to spend the rest of your life reciting for her salvation. Wouldn’t it be a burden for you?” Harry asked again.

“If that is the only way, so be it. Helping a pitiful hungry ghost to gain her salvation should not be viewed as a burden. If I can do something as meaningful as helping her out of her sorrow, I don’t mind doing it every day of my life,” I said firmly.

Seeing how resolute I was, they could not say anything more.

“Oh yes, another thing, I’ve planned to write about the experience of being possessed by a hungry ghost. Can I write about us in the same story?” I asked Tracy.
“I don’t mind but I hope your readers will not judge me too harshly,” she replied nervously.

“The reason I want to include you is because you’re part of my story and there are lessons to learn from our mistakes – yours and mine.”

While waiting for the operation to take place, I cooked Tracy some nutritious food. She ate it all and in a matter of days, began to gain some strength. This was necessary because she had to face a major operation where life and death was separated by a thin line. At night when she could not sleep due to anxiety, we stayed up to recite Chenrezig and Medicine Buddha mantras to help calm her down. I told her what Lama Khedrup had taught me – that everything was impermanent and life is nothing but suffering. It took a serious condition like cancer to open up Tracy’s mind to the concepts of karma and samsara.

We also talked about Margaret and Charlie, her only friends so far. She had lost one of them.

“When you told me about Margaret and Charlie both having cancer, I was so traumatized. I didn’t know that one day, I too, would be inflicted. Only now I realize money is not everything. Yes, it is important so that we can live comfortably each day but it cannot buy us things like health, happiness and love. Margaret and Charlie have so much money, more than they can spend in their entire life but yet, they have lost something so precious – health, and she died so young…..” Tracy recalled sadly.

“The 14th Dalai Lama when asked what surprised him the most about humanity, answered ‘man’ because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices his money to gain back his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies never really having lived,” I summed it up for her.

She looked sad and just nodded her head. “How I wish I could turn back the clock!” she said, brushing aside her tears.
A few days later, my sister went for a major operation that took nearly ten hours to complete. She had a big part of her large intestine and her left fallopian tube removed. The operation went smoothly and she took a month to recuperate before starting on her chemotherapy sessions back in her own home state.

Like any cancer patient, she suffered badly from the side effects but she still managed to put up a brave front. Her hair came off in handfuls, her lips became dry and cracked, her skin wrinkled and shed like powder and her stomach cramped from time to time.

The only good that came out of this tragedy was that she was no longer the tyrant we once knew but a person grateful to be given a second chance to live. To her now, each extra day on earth is a bonus. There is nothing else I can do for her except to tell her to stay positive. “When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade,” said the get-well card I sent to her.

As for Ng Mooi, I have learned to accept her as part of my life. She started off as another wife for Grandpa to help in his bean curd business but now ended up as someone that I wanted to help to get out from her miseries. It was my duty to see her find peace again after all the pain she had gone through. She deserves it, no doubt about this.

Throughout the years, at Karma Kagyu Dharma Society, many great teachers from Tibet and Nepal came to teach dharma but it was the humble and friendly Lama Khedrup who left the deepest impression on me. I will always remember his parting words which came from Siddhartha Gautama himself – “Every experience, no matter how bad it seems, holds within it a blessing of some kind. The goal is to find it.”

These simple yet profound words have seen me through hard times. They lifted me up from depression, stopped me from giving up and gave me hope in moments of darkness.

He is now the Resident Lama at Karma Norbuling Buddhist Center in Bukit Mertajam where he teaches dharma to students who come from
all over Penang to learn from him.

On the night of 5th April 2014, Marcus and I joined some practitioners at the Buddhist center to recite prayers for all those who had departed from this world as part of our observation of *Ching Ming*. We were halfway reciting when suddenly, a young girl of about twenty years old got up from where she was sitting with her mother at the back row. She staggered unsteadily to the altar in front where fruits, flowers, and butter lamps were laid out for the departed. Throwing herself down clumsily on the marble floor, she bowed several times to the large statue of *Buddha Sakyamuni* in a very strange manner. Then she went into a fit. Instantly, I knew she was possessed by some spirit. Her mother quickly rushed out to hold her up but she put up a struggle and behaved like someone in a trance.

Marcus whispered into my ears, “She’s milder compared to you when we first came to see Lama Khedrup some twenty years ago.” I just nodded. This was the first time I saw another person being possessed by spirits. Now I know I was not alone in this condition or that I have been hallucinating. I have been told by friends and relatives who had not seen me in this condition with their own eyes that I was hallucinating. They simply could not understand or believe that some spirits can actually take over our physical body. Years ago, Second Aunt even accused me of feigning it to attract attention and to gain sympathy.

It has been more than thirty years since Ng Mooi first came one quiet night and changed my life completely.

“Now that you have finally seen with your own eyes another person being possessed by spirits, you should go ahead and write about your own experience,” my husband suggested.

"Yes, I think I'll do that."

I gave him a smile before continuing with the recitation.
If you're confused, a thousand words are not enough, if you're at peace with yourself, even one word is too many.

- Master Hsuan Hua

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