The Billion Shop

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The expression on his face is not peaceful, warned an ex-classmate who had already viewed the body, his fingers tugging at the white plastic sheet that served as the tablecloth, stretching a small bit of the material until it became a translucent membrane. He was one of a group of guys who'd already been at the wake for a few hours by the time I'd arrived, and peanut shells and empty packets of lemon barley drink littered the table top.

I wanted to say, but of course his face is not peaceful. Why would it be peaceful? Instead I just nodded, said I'd be back in a few minutes. This remark about the unpeaceful expression, prompted by my saying that I would go view the body now, was actually the first time anyone had referred to JJ since my arrival. Prior to that, they'd asked me all the usual questions: when had I arrived in Singapore, when would I head back to Chicago, who else was in Chicago and when had I last seen everyone. Rather banal stuff, especially given the circumstances, but this time the Q&A felt strangely comforting, the recital of dates, places, names signalling a world where everything was in its right place.

The coffin was in a kind of alcove formed by yellow tarpaulin sheets hanging from a steel frame, giving some measure of privacy to JJ's body despite its being placed in the void deck of his block of flats. The void deck is something that's quite unique to Singapore, I believe: it's the open-air lobby that takes up the whole ground floor of a Housing Development Board block. Some of the newer blocks have fancy features like miniature gardens or Chinese chess tables, but most, like JJ's, are just expanses of cement, criss-crossed only by residents going to and from the elevator banks. The only time a large group of people really hangs around a void deck is when there's a Chinese funeral or a Malay wedding, the space temporarily acting as an extension of the hosts' homes. I've sometimes wondered why Malays don't mind holding such an auspicious ceremony in a place that has hosted so many corpses, but perhaps they are immune to such superstitious fears because they did not believe in Chinese spirits but in Allah.

JJ's funeral was small and quiet compared to most I'd seen: no monks, only seven tables, and not a single memorial blanket or floral wreath. You couldn't expect a 19-year-old bachelor, with no children, to have a grand Chinese funeral,

not if his family was as traditional as JJ's. This was also why there were only a few aunties and uncles sitting in a corner playing *sikipuay*, murmuring to each other in Hokkien while handling their cards, and why his parents were not present. It is not done for a father and mother to pay respects to their child, even when he is dead.

The funeral portrait they were using was an enlarged passport photo, taken at least a year ago, as his hair had not yet been cut for national service and he was wearing our school uniform, the emblem pinned on the collar. Below the portrait, draped over the back of a chair and held up by plastic laundry pegs, was his school soccer team jersey with his name and number, a folded pair of jeans placed on the seat and, completing the outfit, a pair of sneakers on the floor. I recognised the sneakers; he had worn them almost every day during the last two years we were in school together.

A rotund boy of about eight or nine, a calabash swaddled in a primary school PE T-shirt, offered me a joss stick as I approached the foot of the coffin, where two candles stood to either side of a metal urn. I know some Christians would say I'm not supposed to take part in stuff like this, not supposed to worship anyone but God, but I was brought up pretty liberal for an Anglican. So long as you don't really, you know, believe in spirits and stuff, I figure there's no harm going through the rituals out of respect for the dead, or at least the family of the deceased. So I lit my joss stick, held it for a while and bowed, before sticking it into the urn to join the other half-burnt sticks.

To tell the truth, I had been bracing myself for some hideous death grimace, given my old classmate's warning; but the first thing I noticed was his skin, which appeared to be the colour and texture of a suede peacoat I had in Chicago. For a moment, I was even struck with the conviction that they had hidden his body somewhere else and were presenting for public viewing a JJ-shaped replica made of non-human materials. A standard procedure, because obviously they couldn't just lay a corpse out for everyone to gawk at—seriously, why would humans do something so macabre?

This disorienting feeling passed as quickly as it had come, though. Like a slide snapping into focus under a microscope, I saw it really was JJ, dead and covered with a thick layer of make-up, his lips gleaming dully like candied cherries. His expression wasn't "not peaceful", but it wasn't serene either. It was more blank than anything else.

I wouldn't even have found out about the funeral if I hadn't gone into Starbucks that afternoon—that's how out of touch I was with most of the people I'd gone to school with. I'd been feeling vaguely nauseous ever since returning to Singapore for summer break about a fortnight before. My mother blamed it on the heat and got our maid to make me flasks of *liang cha*, urine-coloured herbal tea

with supposedly heat-expelling properties, which I was instructed to carry around and sip. It wasn't the heat, though, but the light. Singapore uses a lot of overhead fluorescent light, white and harsh and interrogative. On the MRT train, I had to stand in the unlit linkway in between carriages, just to escape the damn light.

That day, I was headed to the library on Victoria Street, but after getting out of the station I popped into Starbucks at Raffles City, which with its mellow orange lamps and soothing muzak was decked out like all the other Starbucks in all the other cities in all the world – the perfect place to ward off awaysickness, or whatever sickness it is that is the opposite of homesickness. I got an iced latte and plonked myself in an armchair someone else had just vacated. Lying on the table in front of me was a copy of *The Straits Times*. And there JJ's photo was, smack on page one, "above the fold" as they call it. NSF officer killed in ship collision.

The article gave the bare facts but the details were hazy—typical, given anything to do with national service, that Singaporean male rite of passage that is at once so ubiquitous and secret. JJ, a second lieutenant, had been taking part in a naval training exercise on the RSS Valiant at 6am yesterday when it collided with another Republic of Singapore Navy ship in the waters off Pulau Sudong, according to the statement from the Defence Ministry. Somehow, he fell overboard. A search and rescue was launched immediately, and he was found and taken to Changi General Hospital. He was pronounced dead at 10 am.

In a daze, I retrieved the other section of the paper from the news stand and turned to the obituaries. That was how I ended up at the void deck, sitting under the glare of fluorescent lights at a plastic-covered table, chatting with old classmates I had not thought about in a year. It was surreal, yet less awkward than I would have expected. Most were girls, since they didn't have to be in camp; the guys who had made it were the few allowed to book out by sympathetic commanding officers, or who had deferred NS by getting a government scholarship. They teased me, "the American", who escaped the two years of NS through the dumb luck of parents who were in Boston doing their graduate studies when I was born. I kept my US citizenship even when we returned to Singapore, but when I turned 18 they said I had to either serve NS or give up my permanent residency. I did the latter; I already knew I would never again want to stay in Singapore longer than the span of a tourist visa.

Unsurprisingly, people started asking all sorts of questions about my life in the States. That's the problem with chatting with people you don't really know but with whom you have a shared history—conversations inevitably turn into interrogations, false familiarity mixing with utter ignorance resulting in people believing they have the right to probe into all the details of your life. This was when things got a bit tricky: I didn't know whether they know I'm gay. I'd known since I was 12 or so, but like so many gay youngsters around the world, I felt I had to hide it. Going

abroad to college was thus a big deal for me—I threw myself into the traditional coming-out rites with gusto, joining the GLBT association, experimenting with painting my nails and eyelids, learning how to smoke seductively, discarding my various virginities. I reviewed some gay-themed films in the school paper and there are incriminating pictures on the usual online social networks. Still, it felt odd to discuss my new American life with these witnesses to my closeted, celibate Singaporean life.

But to give my old classmates credit, they're decent, largely tolerant or at the very least, polite. Everyone maintained deliberately casual expressions as I plunged into a story about "this guy I was dating for a while", a fairly complicated tale that ended with me sleeping overnight, alone, in a waiting lounge at O'Hare Airport as an electronic feminine voice admonished me every five minutes to watch my luggage at all times. I decided to steady myself by focusing my gaze on this one girl, Emma, a thin, sallow cellist now studying in New York who'd been at primary school with me, and who'd always struck me as a fairly open-minded sort. I think she sensed my nervousness, because she smiled encouragingly as I related the story and laughed readily at my attempt at a punch line. Being Singaporeans, everyone else joined in obediently.

"That's not too bad, at least you got rid of him," said one guy, dark and imperially slim, the former captain of our school's hockey team, who then shared his own story about a stalker he'd once had. I couldn't really pay attention though, because I was so relieved. It's not like I suddenly felt all buddy-buddy with my old classmates, but it felt like I'd passed some kind of test.

I'd been at the wake for maybe an hour when the evangelists came. Although his family was Taoist, everyone knew JJ had "found" Christ a few years back, thanks to the group that would sit every morning before assembly at the small amphitheatre near the school's back gate to sing hymns, accompanied by acoustic guitar. The girls wore pastel hair ties and the guys wore their trousers high on the waist. Non-believers and less exhibitionist Christians like myself dubbed them the swayers and the clappers.

These evangelists had now apparently arrived to give their departed brother a Christian send-off. Clad in deceptively ordinary Singaporean funeral garb—casual clothing in white, black or grey, paired with flip-flops—they gripped photocopied sheets as they arrayed themselves in two rows just outside the tented boundary of the funeral. A skinny guy with a mask of acne raised an arm, and they launched, *a capella*, into Amazing Grace: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me... I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see ..."

Through the six stanzas, those of us sitting at the tables gaped quietly, caught between bemusement and horror. One of the uncles unleashed a particularly pungent

curse in Hokkien but was shushed by his cronies. In the silence that followed the hymn's conclusion, an ancient auntie, the skin of her face sliding towards her chin like melted wax, got up from her chair and shuffled over to them. She said something in Hokkien and they stared at her gormlessly, not understanding what she was saying, although her gestures made it clear they weren't welcome.

A knowledge of Chinese dialect isn't common among people of my generation, after the government decided in the 1970s that all ethnic Chinese children should learn Mandarin as their "mother tongue". I'm an exception, because my grandparents have lived with us since I was a baby, so I picked up Hokkien naturally. I mean, I can't discuss politics with them, but I can say things like "Have you eaten yet?" and "It's time to eat", which are the only things one says to grandparents anyway. So, because I didn't want the two sides spending the night staring at each other, I went over and translated into English: "She's saying you have had your chance to sing and could you not do so anymore."

A petite girl wearing a grey tank top and black yoga pants spoke up: "JJ was a Christian. He would have wanted a Christian goodbye." Her voice trembled, although her features were calm as a Sphinx's. I recognised JJ's girlfriend.

The auntie turned to me, her cloudy blue-rimmed irises sitting in the whites of her eyes like century eggs in congee: "Tell them they are making noise and upsetting his parents."

I repeated this and added, looking to the girlfriend: "Please, be reasonable. Don't give us Christians a bad name."

I'd thought I would be appealing to some shared sense of Christian consideration for others. But like a stone hitting the surface of a lake, her small face suddenly screwed up and she spat: "You – talking about what's Christian!"

I was so surprised that all I could come up with was a weak "Whoa… cool it." I knew she was referring to my sexuality. I wondered how she knew.

The auntie said again: "Tell them to stop being a nuisance or I will call the police."

"She's going to call the cops if you don't stop."

The group exchanged looks and murmurs. Some looked fairly mutinous, but basic decency must have prevailed because finally one of them said: "We'd just like to pay our last respects. Then we'll go."

The uncle let fly another string of expletives, and was again hushed. The evangelists walked to the coffin in single file, pointedly avoiding the urn with the joss sticks. JJ's girlfriend had her left hand on her breast as she approached the coffin. Then she brought both hands up to cover her face.

At dinnertime, a caterer appeared to uncover a spread of rice and various soggy side dishes in metal trays. The foul-mouthed uncle invited me to join their game, probably in recognition of my Hokkien prowess. As I was in no mood to lose any money to these card sharks, I demurred and asked if I could help out in any other way. That was how I ended up going to buy dinner for JJ's parents, cloistered in their flat upstairs. So absolute was their isolation from the funeral of their son that they could not even partake of the food served there.

Emma offered to accompany me out as she was off to an appointment. We each took a strand of red thread from the paper plate at the centre of the table, to prevent JJ's ghost from following us home, then headed for an eating house across the street. Around us, blocks of flats rose in neat rows like tin soldiers, each identical to the one we had just left. Away from the incense and headache-inducing fluorescent lights of the void deck, standing at the stoplight in the dusk watching the blinking lights of cars, actually felt relaxing.

I could smell the clean scent of Emma's hair amid the car exhaust, like brushing against an invisible cool current in the sea. Her hairstyle was the same as it had been in high school, shoulder-length, neither long nor short; but I remembered that back in primary school, she'd had it in two prim braids, like a 1950s Chinese communist poster girl. I felt a sudden rush of goodwill towards Emma. I had always thought well of her; now I wondered if I would have fallen in love with her if I were straight. Then, if she had liked me too, we could have become a high school couple. I could have attended her orchestra concerts and she could have worn my sweater in the freezing lecture theatres. We could have attended JJ's funeral as a couple and we could have been standing here as a couple, waiting for the light to change.

"Sorry about what Lynn said to you," Emma said, breaking my pointless fantasy. She was referring to JJ's girlfriend.

"Sorry for what? You have nothing to be sorry about."

"Some Christians here are really homophobic," she continued, as she absent-mindedly wound the red thread around her index finger, making its tip flushed and bulbous. "I don't know if you've been keeping track of what's going on here, but last October, there was a movement to repeal the penal code that makes gay sex a crime. But the government kept it, in the end. They said it was because older Singaporeans are conservative, but really, people say it's because of the Christian fundamentalists."

"Whatever," I mumbled. I'd rolled my own thread into a tiny ball between my thumb and forefinger, and now I flicked it into the gutter. Honestly, I felt so little attachment to Singapore that it really didn't matter to me. She could have been talking about somewhere far away, like Uganda, not the land we were standing in. "You know, Jesus doesn't condemn homosexuals. I did research online, and talked

to some people at college. People like me...we're still recipients of Jesus's grace. So I don't care what other people say. It's between Him and me."

And that's true. I mean, I can't say I am a No. 1 upstanding Christian, and I haven't exactly been going to church regularly, but I do believe Jesus loves and accepts me, naive as that sounds. When my family came over to Chicago for the holidays, we attended the Christmas Eve Eucharist at an Episcopalian church off Michigan Avenue. As we sang carols and took communion at midnight, I felt this powerful sense of peace descend upon me – so strong I actually teared up at one point, during "O come all ye faithful" – because I was sharing my faith in God with my family and with so many others in the midst of this vast, kinetic city.

The elevator of JJ's block, which for some reason was lined with collapsed cardboard boxes, smelt like wet trash bags. His flat was near the end of a corridor cluttered with potted plants and bicycles. As in the case of many HDB households, its front door had been left open for ventilation, with the doorway secured by a locked metal grille. To its left, a plastic rack sagged under a pile of track shoes. I didn't feel it was appropriate to yell, so I stood on the scuffed doormat, featuring Mickey and Minnie Mouse cavorting before their enchanted castle, and rang the bell.

A voice answered indistinctly, then a woman in samfoo strode out of the gloom. She was not that old—perhaps in her early 50s—and still handsome. She was tall, taller than me by about an inch. Her skin was the warm gold colour of tea with condensed milk, and her hair was greying but thick. Her nose was sharp and just slightly too big for her face, and she had large, very dark eyes with long lashes. Her physical resemblance to JJ was so great that I was taken aback.

"Thank you. Come in, please," she said in the slow, emphatic English of her generation as she unlocked the grille, after I had stammeringly introduced myself in Hokkien.

I had intended to just give her the two packets of *char siew* noodles and leave, but I couldn't very well decline her invitation, so I kicked off my trainers and followed her in. The small flat had an economical layout, narrow and long, built back in the days when having your own apartment with an indoor bathroom was a big deal. You entered a living/dining area, with an archway at the far end leading into the kitchen. Next to the archway, an ancestral altar stood at chest level on a wooden shelf, two black-and-white visages peering sternly out from behind a pyramid of oranges. On the right were two doors leading to two bedrooms—presumably one was JJ's and the other, his parents'. He had been an only child.

"So sorry to intrude, auntie," I said as she steered me to a table with a faux-marble pattern on its plywood surface.

"No need to say sorry. You are doing me a favour, I was getting lonely." She was opening the styrofoam food packets in the kitchen; most people would have just eaten straight from them with the disposable wooden chopsticks provided, but she transferred their contents on to china plates. She took one and stepped briskly into a bedroom, moving with a slightly off-kilter grace. "Teck ah, one of Johnny's friends has brought us dinner. Eat this, ok," I heard her say. I didn't catch any reply. There were some clattering sounds as she moved things about the room, then she emerged, shaking her head. "My husband, whole day stay in bed. So I only have myself to talk to." As she handed me a pair of lacquered chopsticks and a porcelain soup spoon, I realised I was expected to stay for dinner. "I hope you are hungry, because I am not."

"You must eat, auntie. To stay strong," I replied quickly. I don't know where I pulled that corny response from—my grandparents? Hong Kong TVB dramas? She had a disconcerting gaze, not penetrating but the opposite; I thought of black holes, event horizons, a gravitational pull so strong not even light can escape.

Stay strong? Why should an old woman like me stay strong when I have no child to care for?" No tears, no beating of the breast. She said this chidingly, as if I had just uttered something incredibly stupid. Which I probably had.

"You mustn't say that, auntie..." I muttered, racking my brain for a more intelligent response, and this time neither my grandparents nor TVB came to my rescue.

"I work every day, never take sick. All for Johnny. Now he's gone."

I had no adequate response to this, and so we sat in silence for a bit pushing slivers of spongy meat around our plates.

"Sorry boy, I recognise you from Johnny's school photos, but I didn't hear your name," she said suddenly. Her irises were so dark they seemed to lack pupils.

"I'm Sam."

Her chopsticks toyed with a bean sprout. "Ah, so you are Sam." My heart leapt for a moment – did JJ talk about me? – then she continued, "You wrote my son a letter."

A red heat crept up my spine and flowed over my skull. I tried to answer, but the sound that came out sounded more like I'd been kicked in the balls.

I have the letter in front of me now as I sit at my computer, recalling these things that happened one day in a city now so distant from me in space and time. Five pages of foolscap printed with our school's crest, and written on both sides in blue ballpoint, the force of my nib leaving indentations in the paper like Braille. I had written it the day before I left for Chicago, at my boyhood desk still stacked with

A-level notes and the 10-year series. It was pouring like crazy when I headed out to the post office, an August monsoon, the raindrops exploding onto my umbrella as they completed their long blind fall. The packet of quarter-folded foolscap stuffed into the onionskin envelope felt swollen and overwrought; I was surprised when the post office scale showed it weighed almost nothing at all.

"I found it when I was sitting in his room just now. He has a lot of things..." JJ's mother said this with wonder and a kind of disbelief, like talking about life discovered on another planet. Then she smiled. It was a familiar smile. "You don't mind if I smoke? You want one?"

We ended up sitting in the near dark of the living room, the only light coming in through the doorway from the corridor, and from the wavering tips of our cigarettes. Over cans of stout, we chatted for several hours, she mainly talking and I, answering her questions. The alcohol made her speech languid; in the dim glow I could see the sensuous young woman she must once have been, with her heavy lashes, her practised pout as she exhaled. She asked me what I was studying, what living in a dorm was like, what and where I ate, how many clothes I had to wear during winter, whether snow was heavy or light, hard or soft. She asked if Chicago had many Chinese people, and if the Chinese people there acted more Chinese or American. She asked if Americans were friendly, if it was easy for me to find a boyfriend, if people stared when I held hands with a boy in the street. She seemed worried when I said I intended to stay on in the US after college: "Won't you miss your family?" I told her I planned to return every year for the holidays, and that every few months my parents sent me care packages of things they think I might miss—oil-drenched bak *kwa*, tins of Milo, ginger tea sachets and *pei pa koa* for sore throat, although I'd told them I could get most of that stuff in Chinatown.

She also asked about the wake, and I wrestled a bit with whether to tell her about the evangelists; in the end I gave an abbreviated version. She pursed her lips as she flicked ash off her cigarette, but she wasn't offended. "They just did what they felt they had to do," she said. "Everyone has their own customs to follow." She told me about her father's funeral a few years ago, how she and her siblings had spent a thousand dollars on a magnificent mansion made of paper and wire, "taller than even Johnny", which had been equipped with five servants, two cars, crockery and cutlery and a swimming pool, all made of paper too. All this had been set ablaze – the means of conveying them to heaven so that their father's spirit could live there in comfort. "Nowadays people talk about global warming, but we had to burn all these things for him. Otherwise, we would worry that in heaven, he has nowhere to live."

It was close to midnight by the time I got up to go. Before I left, she fetched something from JJ's room and pressed it into my hand. It was as light as air.

One afternoon about a week later, I received a call at home. It was JJ's mother, asking if I could drive her somewhere.

I was surprised, to say the least, and rather apprehensive. The night we'd spent talking had moved me, but it was one of those experiences you want to put under glass and keep whole and separate forever, like an intense one-night stand. You share so much, make yourself so vulnerable, because there is to be no second act, no consequences. I didn't know if I wanted to see her again. I didn't know where she wanted to go and why she wanted me to help her.

It felt strangely like waiting for a date as I sat in the car park beside her block. She arrived with her hair wet, and had put some colour on her lips and cheeks. She told me to drive her to a New Town on the other side of the island, a good half-hour away even with smooth traffic. She didn't say much except to give directions, and after several attempts to start a conversation, I too fell silent.

She was obviously familiar with the estate, weaving confidently through cramped walkways lined with shops selling sticky Chinese goodies and cheap underwear, bursting with screaming children and elderly folk moving at 1km/h, until we got to a small shop sandwiched between an Indian barber and a furniture store. Belying its humble dimensions was the large red signboard hanging over the doorway, with gold letters spelling its name: The Billion Shop. Although I'd never been to such a place before, a glance at the merchandise made it clear who it catered for: the dead.

Piled on the wall-to-wall shelves, so close together there was barely room to turn, was a department store of paper food, paper outfits, paper jewellery, paper appliances, and, of course, paper money, the denominations in the billions. For things made to be burnt, the craftsmanship was exquisite: a paper necklace cut to look like filigree and studded with papier-mâché gems; a cardboard iPod finished with a convincingly glossy surface; Hell bank notes with intricate, mysterious patterns and fearsome portraits of the Jade Emperor printed on them. Most of the items were of comparable size to their counterparts in the mortal realm, but the clothes looked like they were made for babies.

"I know the mother is not supposed to make offerings to the child," she said, cradling a palm-sized cardboard shoe with a Nike swoosh. "But who else will make sure my son is okay in heaven?"

We found a public brazier, orange with rust, in a field at the foot of some housing blocks, a distance away from a playground where children screamed and kicked up sand. We unwrapped the care package and placed its contents inside the cylinder, then JJ's mother produced her lighter. The paper money and goods burned quickly, their gaudy reds and golds curling to black. Small flecks of ash darted about like fireflies. It was a hot day made hotter by the fire, and sweat ran down our faces as we watched the smoke rippling up into the air, willing it to find its way to JJ.