The Soul's Guide

For a long time everything that I knew about my family was second-hand. Growing up as the youngest in a family of nine, I had emerged as its United Nations Observer, party to multiple entries of disgruntled griping of so-and-so's 'unmentionable' atrocities to another so-and-so. Nothing seemed able to temper their disenchantment with one another: neither starry nights or soft breezes. Even the full moon failed to cool or blunt the pointed tongues that continued to wag even as their mouth held tiny red and black watermelon seeds in their grip. Then there were those public fallouts where permanent dark clouds of acid rain hovered over us as we ate with exaggerated interest in the steaming red snapper and still wriggling prawns now drunk from a bath of VSOP Hennessy. No escape was possible until the last morsel was swallowed and we were released from the 'happy family reunion'. But of my brother I had some first-hand knowledge since I was there for parts of his life.

Ning was third-born in the family but we never saw much of him since he was sent away to live with my aunty when he was five because we were too poor to feed another mouth. That was the reason I was given when I asked. My aunt lived in the countryside in those days when there were still acres and acres of land devoted to farming and livestock, land considered vital to the country's belly but always peripheral to the town center where we lived with our parents in a big shophouse.

Although Ning would visit from time to time in the fifteen years that he spent away from us, by the time he returned to the family to live with us, he had become a stranger in our midst, holding a ball of anger with him everywhere he went. His siblings did not make it easier for him. They regarded him as an outsider and treated him with hostility whenever he would dare to assert his rights for his share of things. Frankly, in those days, it was hard for me to penetrate through the haze of daily quarrels and fights to see who was right or wrong but I knew that my brother came to believe all this about himself. He lived as an exile in his own home, feared and isolated by his siblings, and with this feeling of rejection lodged deeply in his heart, he came to hate them with equal intensity. If Ning were just a little more simple, a little more 'tidak apah' or even a little more callous, he might have survived this unhappy childhood. After all, when I think about it, lots of people went through unhappy childhoods and survived. Uncle Ming's son went from depression to a big-time preacher and the charcoal neighborhood's son went on to marry and sired two sons who now helped him to run a provision shop. But not our Ning. He rejected religion. His mind was like a taut violin string that reverberated at the

slightest touch; most troubling of all, he wanted answers to his questions. In those chaotic days, our ma became the object of his interrogation but the poor woman had no answers. She was filled with guilt but there was little she could do to assuage the hurt in the boy's heart; every attempt to make up for the past was either too little or too late. He quickly entered a dark labyrinth of its own making. Within the maze, the mind turned upon itself like a drawn-out feasting of piranhas upon some unfortunate prey. Watching him fight his demons, I must say that I often wonder what good is the examined life? That was impressed upon me during the four years of my study abroad but I must now draw my own conclusions. That no matter what philosophers may say about the virtue of an examined life, to subject one's life to examination without the threads of escape is to enter the absurd and one's own private hell.

Not all was hellish though, at least not from the outside. For a brief period, Ning, after trying his fortune in the high seas, settled down to become a successful businessman wearing Rolex on his wrist and driving a Benz. He was also tall, good looking, decidedly masculine in his aura and attracted dozens of women. But all that was not enough to overcome the darkness that was slowly engulfing him. Every stride he too was quickly eroded by the incoming wave of sadness and darkness that swept him further afar into the recesses of the past. The successes quickly vaporized and his illness – it was the doctor who told us so – gripped the house like a miasma during this long troubled period.

Before I left for my studies overseas, he was already sickly.

It was the early nineteen eighties and the visits to the psychiatrist at the John Little's Building on Orchard Road were always secretive, even clandestine to avoid the neighbors. Psychiatry was shunned and a stigma then as it is today. In a society that refuses to acknowledge that people could fail or that life could find ways to outwit the most careful of plans, we felt that the failure was all ours. To resort to a psychiatrist was to admit to a congenital defect as if his disease was also ours, as if we were marked for failure right at the start. Worse of all, we felt that our gods had abandoned us. With the gods we had thought we had a deal.

In those days when even our neighbor Old Chang converted to the white people's religion because he did not want to give his Christian son and wife an excuse to turn him to the Old Folks Home, as nursing homes for the elderly were called then, it felt

as though our gods – the sky god, the kitchen god, the goddess of mercy and numerous others whose birthdays we always remembered to celebrate with roasted suckling pigs, uncooked chicken, ducks, sweets, gold and incense - had turned a deaf ear to our pleadings. We bore our shame like a letter branded on our forehead because there was nothing we could do to stop our brother from going out on his nightly walks in the neighborhood. Ning would circle the block round and round before he retired in exhaustion from the walking and from the great imaginary debates he had ringing in his head: the voices were many.

A pall fell over the house; whenever we were outside, piteous looks were thrown our way and our ears burned just to imagine what others must be saying and I, who had just returned with an overseas degree in tow, could only walk with my red face bent low when I passed the neighbors' houses or when Ning was due for his visits to the psychiatrist.

I remembered that schedules and discussions of Ning's condition – to this day I could only give it the vague name of depression - were always shrouded in some kind of fog with only occasional emissions of hisses and cries which, far from clearing the air, hung over our heads like a wreath. Trips to the psychiatrist's office were hushed-up events as if by such stealth, we could keep the neighbors from seeing us. And I, who could not have been more than fifteen, was taken along on these trips as though watching my brother undergo electric shocks was a matter of edification. And perhaps it was thought to be so.

In those days, it was of the opinion of psychiatrist that electrotherapy was something efficacious, even humane for the mentally tortured and their idea of safety, it seems, was to knock out and exhaust the patient by means of gradual atrophy. They – the psychiatrist and his helpers – would put my brother on a black bench, cuff his ankles so that they would not react too violently, and the same was done to his hands. My brother offered little resistance. He did not refuse treatment and he was always neatly dressed for those visits and as he sat at the back of the car with me, he seemed mildmannered and not like the raving, maniacal tormented soul he would turn into at certain times of the day. At the psychiatrist's office he always looked serene even after he was bound and prepared for the electric shocks as if this was some burial shroud he was preparing himself to wear. After each treatment – and this I saw for myself – he got progressively weaker as if the electrodes operated as a siphon of the vital force within

him. I felt that at some point during this time he gave up. He was being progressively destroyed, but it became only evident to me when I returned home from my stint overseas.

In the years that I spent away, no one had thought to prepare me for what I was to see for myself when I returned. "Everyone's fine at home" was the standard ending to each letter that in the pre-email days took weeks to travel from one end of the world to the other. There were no hints of the deterioration of my brother's condition, a matter that still causes me some regret. All I had to prepare myself with, on my arrival, was a two-second glimpse that I had of him when the car pulled up before the house. I saw a thin, gangly man seated on a stool; his arms were long and appeared as though they were distended, hanging loosely from his short sleeves. Hs legs – long and very thin – were curled up under the stool like brown braided dough. But going up close, I saw clearly the ravage to his physical form. His cheeks had hollowed, his jowls drooped; Ning had turned into an old man. His eyes had the look of some one overdosed with drugs so that he was not fully present even though he smiled broadly at me. He had been sitting there all morning, waiting for me, I learned later. The car stopped. He came forward with his thin arms thrown wide open – the only family in my memory to embrace me in this way. But instead of joy, a feeling of repulsion crept over me so quickly that there was neither time nor space to rearrange my face to hide my horror at the doppelganger coming towards me. For this was not the brother I had remembered before I left the country. The person who came towards me with his skeletal arms was more shadow than flesh, and though it is now easier to say, to justify that it was the smell of death that I had flinched away from when this body that I could no longer recognize held me in his arms, I knew too late that he – always so sensitive – would have interpreted this as one more familial rejection of him.

Looking at him, it is hard to imagine that he once walked twenty-five miles on foot because he couldn't afford the bus fare. In the last few months of his life, he was moving more and more slowly and though just 33 he might as well have been 93. Everything fell into slow motion and even masticating food became difficult. Uncomprehending – and I still berate myself for my act of cruelty – I would become impatient with him. Many times, I found myself wishing all this to be over, wishing him gone.

To this day I see Ning as clearly as though it were yesterday: my brother lying before me, the electrodes on his temples, the rubber bit between his teeth, buckled into

the cuffs that were riveted to the treatment table. In the last few months of his life, he was reduced to a vestige of himself with energy only to move from room to room. Of the knots that had convulsed him and visited him as a cacophony of voices in his sleep and waking hours, they tightened like a coil of snakes. His hatred, however, remained unabated though his attacks were less sustained because he would get tired, but whenever he could, he would remind our ma of the deeds of her past or subject her to long silences.

I had said earlier that there was little that my mother could do in the face of my brother's rapid decline. All that was true, for otherwise – I'll say this for certain - she would not have agreed to permit Ning to undergo the electrotherapy for so many years. But with little evidence of improvement or recovery that modern medicine had promised, she soon resorted to the occult which she felt could not fail her at this hour. On those occasions, I was the one who accompanied her to the dark, shadowy temples which were mostly shanty huts or modest establishments put together with planks of wood and corrugated iron in the most obscure of places - far away from the major temple routes - that could only be reached by travelling on unpaved roads among tall lallang grass. They were, however, star attractions in their own way and one could always count on the trishaw drivers to take us to these miracle hide-outs. For nothing short of a miracle was required for the problems that clients such as we would bring to the medium. Bearing incense, flowers, sweets, fruit, gold – anything for the gods! - we went from temple to temple and sought out mediums mostly by their reputation. Some were known for their misfortune-averting powers and luck-bringing potions; others for their ability to mediate with a troublesome ancestor, but the superior ones built their reputation based on their death-defying talismans, which in some cases, could strike names off the death registrar by careful negotiation with the King of Hell, failing which, alternative strategems by means of stealth and disguise would be offered. Such was the belief then among the Chinese who still clung to the old ways of their ancestral land. So Boon, the first-born in the family, was called 'pig' for much of his life, Ning was called 'dog' and a male cousin was dressed up in skirts up to five years old and still responds to his feminine name, 'Chrysanthemum'. In those days when it was still not unconsidered 'uneducated' or 'superstitious' to believe in the protective forces of gods, goddesses, and spirits, Yama King and his famously green face, red eyes and fang-like teeth was often invoked to cow children into acts of obedience such as eating up one's rice. People avoided the oceans

in the seventh month since Yama King was said to be gallivanting with his noose in that month. But it was also believed that Yama King is not always the impartial judge he is made out to be, and is, as a matter of fact, perfectly corruptible. It was by such means of bribery that the medium resorted to in the case of my brother.

My mother was assured by one such medium of fearsome reputation – measured by his fees and by his length of clients – rolex-wristed businessmen down on their luck, housewives with roving husbands, television starlets wishing to be stars – that a gold talisman, empowered by a marathon length of chants and spells, fire and water, could divert Yama's attention otherwise. And he added: a mother's sincerity could also move mountains. And my mother – ever the mountain mover – became determined to win the gods – the still uncooperative ones - over to her side. She became pious, went on long vegetarian pilgrimages, and on full moon days, fasted from morning to night. She used cunning; cajoling and threatening by turns to withdraw gifts and worship if the gods ignored her pleas.

Things at home more or less fell into a calm – however morosely so. Ning wore the gold talisman that my mother had procured for him and followed her instructions to keep the talisman with him at all times. In the meantime, I had found a job teaching at a local college. With a schedule of sorts to anchor day from night, I fell back into the rhythm of life in the tropics, waking to the chirpings of cowbirds in the morning and falling asleep to the deafening singing of crickets and the occasional mating calls of frogs after a thunderstorm. I slipped into the submissive silence of one overpowered by things incomprehensible; I no longer railed at the heat, but simply submitted to its scorching rays. In those days we tiptoed around the house as if this calm was brokered and temporary. We watched some television just to see how other people function in this world and we avoided friends and relatives. Others consoled us that such sickness could happen to anybody and we accepted these gestures of kindness like alms, but, privately, we did not really believe in any of it.

At home my mother would insist that I cheer my brother up. "Your brother loves you the most. He paid for your education in America, you know that!" was her constant reminder of the debt I owe him. My teaching job at a school in the western part of the island meant that I had to leave the house while the sky was still dark, and mother would insist that Ning accompany me to the bus stop. He would never refuse. To call those early morning walks idyllic might be an exaggeration, but given what we had been

through, it was as close to the pastoral idyll as it is possible in the tropics. Ning and I would leave the gates and as we did so, the family dog Wang Wang would bark until he could no longer hear our footsteps. Together, we felt our way in the dark, mindful of the uneven steps, the cracks in the cement that nobody had bothered to mend, the rubble in the unpaved alley. In those few minutes of darkness, not yet wrenched by light, the island sits on the cusp of possibility and my world – with my brother walking beside me – seemed safe. He would wait with me for the bus to come, not saying a word but contemplating the spark that would ignite and die at the tip end of his cigarette. In that brief second, I saw a face, calm and far, far away.

What went on behind that calm face I could only guess at. But one evening just a week before he died, I found him in an agitated state, moving back and forth in the garden as though by such movement the rage within could calm. I could not see his face except when it moved into the light cast by the street lamp, but the little was enough to reveal to me the anguish and torment within. And I thought with a shudder what capacity for suffering we possess. No amount of electrotherapy could help. All he said to me that evening was: "Don't ever become like your sisters." The simple command that almost crawled out from the base of his throat stopped me in my tracks.

"Not a chance," I replied, although I did not fully comprehend what he had said.

A series of events took place that fateful week: on Monday, the German Shepherd belonging to my eldest brother died; two days later, our mongrel, Wang Wang, which was barely two years old also died. Without Wang Wang's soft padding on the concrete pathway as she patrolled the house and her vigilant barks at anybody who came close, our house standing at a cul-de-sac entered a graveyard zone of silence. The neighbor's dogs for some strange reason also came under the spell. They greeted neither cats nor strangers and the trees were still and the night sticky and humid. In the midst of this great silence, a thief broke into the house. When morning came, the goods were checked; only the talisman was found missing.

That night I cooked supper. I was in a foul temper, though come to think of it, no more foul than usual, for the strain of adjusting to the tropical heat, the gloom at home, the rapid dissipation of a fresh start promised by a degree was beginning to tell on me. Angry me cooked an angry egg. Vegetables were left to simmer until they were yellow and rubbery. I could no longer remember where everyone else was that evening or why I was left behind to cook for my brother. I was filled with self-pity, but worse, at such times

when we thought no one else was looking, we surprise ourselves with our capacity to hurt. Saliva drooled down his cheeks when he ate and I ignored it. My anger grew to see his helplessness and I wondered again when this nightmare would end. All night, he lay on the sofa while I simmered in my own growing despair. I suppose I was really no different after all.

The next day, I left for work still despairing that this day would be no different from any other. I was at my desk during a lesson break when the call came. That day still comes back to me as yesterday. I entered the staff room to pick up the call; the receiver lay apart from the body of the black dial telephone, whose style had since gone into extinction. The Tamil teacher Mrs. Rajoo was eating her curry from her tiffin box, the Math teacher Mr. Tan – pocked marked and hunch-backed – was bent over his exam sheets, and two young teachers just fresh from the teaching institute were giggling over some party they had both attended. My reaction – I cannot recall what I had said – caused them all to freeze at the same time – Mrs. Rajoo with her spoonful of curry, Mr. Tan and his pen poised in mid-air as he turned his head and the young teachers openmouthed and wide-eyed. I felt as if an invisible hand had thrust a rag into my throat. I left the staff room refusing all eye contact, steadfastly rejecting the wave of pity and sympathy that I felt welling behind me as I walked out of the room with my head held up foolishly high while my heart hardened to the task of teaching the next class, even though the relative had said to come back immediately. In the few minutes of reprieve I had before the next class, I walked to the school's nursery garden which was located at the back of a classroom. From where I stood I could only see the backs of the students; through the slated glass windows, I see their pencils moving like Ouija pieces across their exercise books writing out a future in which I have no part. Above their heads the ceiling fan whirled itself into a tornado. There I stood waiting. Against the cool of the bleached walls under the striped awning, I sought refuge, conscious only of a numbness that had set in with the news of Ning's death. The garden was lush with red hibiscus, purple morning glories, yellow dandelions, light airy ferns and dark elephant ones, slender mango tree, and clusters of bananas whose weight gave the tree its sullen shape. From all this life, I was cut off. The bell rang and I made my way to the classroom where I debated with the class the value of a civil society. It occurred to me as I boarded the bus that the weekend was ahead and that I would not have to ask for compassionate leave. I did not expect the funeral to be prolonged.

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The bus became crowded as it picked up more students from the many schools
on the East-West route that runs across the island. Suddenly the air was charged with the unbounded energy of youth, the smells of their earth-tussled hair and sweaty bodies now pressed against one another as they heaved and pushed into the sardine-packed bus. Their bare legs carried the stains of mud and sweet grass; their eyes throbbed with life: everything about them radiated life. But none of this was sufficient to jolt me from the cold numbness within. As the bus trotted at a steady pace moving from the western end of the island to the east, the city reeled past in cinematic succession. The world had already moved on. The women pushing trolleys outside the department stores, the frenetic shopping inside, the men picking their teeth at the bus-stops. It's just another hot day for them.

At my stop, my legs ran while I thought 'what am I supposed to do?' The wailing
inside the house rose into a crescendo, my mother inconsolable and falling apart while two elderly aunties held her. I moved as though in a trance. I was assigned to bring the body home from the mortuary and before I left, father's elderly sister who still observed the old China ways pulled me aside and instructed, "Tell your brother where you are, if you're crossing the bridge tell him, this way, his soul won't get lost." I was too numb to protest. Such was the comfort of knowing what to do, what to say in a situation that is bereft of sense.

At the mortuary the mortician was just putting the finishing touches with a few
quick strokes of the powder puff. His face was ice- cold, even serene. He was placed inside a box. I sat beside him at the back of the van and I began, ""Brother, brother, we are leaving now, we're going home." The black truck navigated through the city center, moving and pausing with the traffic, and at these points, we – he and I - took in the sights of the city together and bearing in mind our aunt's words, I took on the role of a guide for his soul.

"Brother, we're crossing the Singapore River. It's the South River Bridge, Brother." The more specific the better, our old China aunty had said.

"Look, Brother, look, fire station on the left. See that red brick building? Yes, you took me there once before to borrow books. Crossing bridge now. The Medeka it is. Ah, see, see the green green padang in front of you!

"Brother, brother, look, smell the sea, feel the breeze. It's coming from the sea by Elizabeth Walk."

"You should have seen him on the tracks, man! Run…like the wind, round and round. So thin but so fast, this is why I was so shocked when I learned about this in the papers," Ning's friend from his army days had called when he came upon the obituary.

I tried to picture this new image of Ning, running and running, light and free, carried by the winds, but I felt somewhat cheated. How many other selves has he hidden from us and how many other selves have we hidden from him? Hide and seek we play, hiding the selves we want to hide and seeking a mirror image of ourselves in others until what we seek and what we hide become the thousand images in a trickster's mirror where game and life no longer could be told apart.

"Ning was real popular, can hold his drink, man. We thought he would sign on with the army. Very sorry to hear about your brother. He was a good guy."

He had sailed the seas instead. Couldn't wait to leave, to exile himself among strangers and the unfathomable oceans. "Brother, brother, we are home."