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Writing Sample

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Includes "Harmonious Residences."

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Jeremy TIANG

Harmonious Residences

They found his decapitated body on the landing of the forty-first floor. His head travelled down in the lift and rolled out at the feet of two startled showroom girls, come in early that morning to preen themselves before the first customers. They became understandably hysterical and had to be given the rest of the day off, which would have been quite inconvenient if the police hadn't closed the site for the day anyway.

At first foul play was suspected, but close-circuit footage from inside the lift showed no one present apart from the man himself, staying back late to finish a particular job - nobody knew what, there were so many things to be taken care of every day. His hands full, he must have tried to stop the lift doors closing with his head. A faulty sensor meant the doors kept closing anyway, fatally trapping and then severing his neck.

I was on secondment to the HDB at the time, and had been sent down to the site as a kind of floating officer. These placements were usually uneventful, but I knew this incident meant it would now be seen as a test for me. Harmonious Residences was supposed to be a flagship project, an executive condominium with the kind of sleek, imposing design that wins architectural awards. It was in nobody's interest that the new buildings should be seen to not be safe.

Mercifully, the event was judged too macabre for punning headlines ('Construction A-head of Schedule'), and press reception the next day was sombre. The blood had been cleaned up as soon as the police left, and so the photographs could show nothing more gruesome than an ordinary lift landing - even if it was, as one of the friskier tabloids insisted on calling it, the 'Lift of Doom.'

The deceased was a construction worker from China, surname Chen. Not much was known about him; we don't really keep files on these people, so we only had the basic facts. 'At least there's no family to make a fuss,' said Li Hsia. When I pointed out that there must be a family somewhere, she amended that to 'No family with access to the media.'

Li Hsia was a scholar too. The HDB had sent her to Oxford to read geography, and now she was on a fast-track to the top. She would clearly not be spending a lot more time hanging around construction sites, but they always make you spend a bit of time getting to know people on the ground before you leave them behind. It's so that if you do well enough to go into politics, you can claim to have grassroots support.

She was quick off the mark, as you would expect, and arrived at work having already drafted a press statement on her blackberry. Meanwhile, I had been showing the police around and trying to get things back to normal. It was agreed that the chain of unfortunate events was clear enough and there was nothing to investigate, so we would start work again the next day. Of course, no one would use the lift until it had been safety-inspected again.

None of us wanted to talk to the workers, until finally Soong volunteered. He spoke Hokkien and Mandarin, and could communicate with them better because he was almost one of them himself - some evenings he kicked a football around the site with them, not something I could imagine myself doing. He said they were very sociable. I think he just told them some jokes, but it seemed to reassure them that it was okay to go back to work. They probably didn't miss Chen very much, he was new and didn't seem to have made friends yet.

Things had just got back to normal when Mr Seetoh phoned, ordering me to meet the widow. 'Your Chinese is not too bad, right? It's okay, you won't have to say much.' I imagined his round face with the phone clamped under one ear, ticking my name off his list of tasks. Before I could say yes or no, he had hung up, my assent assumed.

I was reluctant to go through something so potentially awkward, and tried to persuade Li Hsia to take my place, but she was busy dealing with Minister. There were bound to be more questions asked, in parliament and by the press, and he had to have all the facts at his fingertips, as

well as reassurances that the launch would not be delayed. She waved me away, preoccupied with the dossier she was compiling.

Mrs Chen turned out to be older than I imagined, or perhaps she hadn't slept much since hearing the news. She had come directly from the airport and was still clutching her luggage, an old trolley bag and various parcels. I hadn't had time to prepare for this, and found myself running through my repertoire of condolences far too quickly. My Mandarin vocabulary was not what it should be, mostly culled from TV drama serials I had seen over the years (people die with such frequency in these things).

It didn't help that she was entirely silent, and I could soon no longer extend my monologue. I found myself wondering if she had even understood what I had just said. Did people talk the same way in China? I didn't know the dead man's dialect group. Just as I was about to ask her if she wanted a glass of water, she said, without looking directly at me, 'I want to see his body.'

'I'm sure that can be arranged,' I said unsteadily, then remembered that we were supposed to promise nothing. 'I mean, possibly. I don't know if they'll need to carry out an inquest.'

'Where did he die?'

I mechanically pointed at the block where it happened, and described the circumstances in some detail. Fault couldn't possibly be attributed to our organisation, we operated under the most stringent safety regulations and he should never have been up there on his own. Searching for a positive note to end on, I managed, 'He died without any pain.'

'How do you know? Were you there?'

'No, of course not, Mrs Chen, no one was. That's how it happened.'

'So he died all alone.'

'Unfortunately.'

'What will happen next?'

Glad to be on safer ground, I began to explain about the compensation structure. He hadn't been working very long for us, so it wouldn't be as high as it could be, but there would be some provision for his family.

She interrupted me. 'I'm talking about his body.'

I blinked, finding this in bad taste. 'He'll be cremated in the next few days, once the coroner is satisfied.' Only I couldn't remember the Mandarin for 'cremated', so I said 'burnt'.

'No.'

'We have to follow the procedure.'

'He will come with me.'

'Mrs Chen,' I tried to imagine she was my mother, and softened my tone. 'You can't possibly bring the body back to China. It would cost far too much. Let us deal with this, and you can take the ashes back with you.'

'You can't burn him.'

'It's out of our hands.' And that seemed to be the end of it. Once the conversation got into ascribing blame, it was relatively simple for me to deflect it in other directions. The lift manufacturers, the various Ministries with a hand in this - though I stopped short of pointing the finger at Chen himself, even though to my mind he was every bit the author of his own misfortune.

She continued to be silent, and I considered that enough time had passed for our interview to come to a natural end. I stood up and headed purposefully for the door. 'It was good of you to come and see us, Mrs Chen. I'm glad I had the chance to speak with you. Do you know which way you're going? Is someone is putting you up?'

Without answering, she walked through the door I was holding open for her. I said something to cover the silence, and watched as she marched into the blazing sun, her bag trailing on the uneven ground. I thought of shouting goodbye, but it was far too noisy - all the machinery was once more going at full pelt, and the pile-driving for phases 3 and 4 was thump-thumping ahead even as we put the finishing touches on the first two blocks.

'How was it?' While I was preoccupied, Li Hsia had come up behind me. I knew it was her before she spoke, from her perfume - unlike everyone else on the site, she appeared not to sweat and would smell faintly of oleander all day long. When I turned, she was looking at me with an expression halfway between amusement and concern.

'Not too bad. She's upset, of course.'

'I'm sure it's all right. We just need to meet her, to show that we care.'

'I guess I'm just not used to dealing with members of the public.'

'Public?' She smiled. 'Wait till you're really dealing with the public, then you'll know the meaning of the word "difficult." Foreign workers don't count. Who are they going to complain to?'

'You're right. I don't think I was very helpful, though.'

'What are you going to do, bring her husband back to life?' She looked narrowly at me. 'Calvin, you mustn't care so much. You didn't cause the accident, I don't understand why you're feeling so guilty. These things happen.'

Her callousness was bracing. I found myself wanting to be like her, with her certainty and confidence. After all, everything she said was true - I couldn't argue with her. It wasn't my fault.

'Anyway, so what if she's not happy? Do you think she's going to write to forum page?'

'Her husband's dead,' I protested.

'Yes, it's very sad, but we can't stop everything because of one man.'

'Do you want to have lunch with me?'

A defensive colour entered her eyes, and I knew I had mistimed this somehow. Asked her at the wrong point in the conversation, or sounded too keen. Perhaps, as a pretty girl, she was always on the alert for invitations that carried too much meaning.

'I'm just going to eat at my desk. They want the revised schedule breakdown by this afternoon.' She smiled, softening the blow, and touched my forearm. 'But another time, okay?'

I watched as she walked away. She was a few years younger than me, and already so sure of herself that the last few moments had felt completely natural, as if nothing at all awkward had taken place. I already knew that the next time I saw her, neither of us would mention this, and her manner to me would be as cheerful as ever.

My head badly needed clearing, so I decided not to seek out anyone else but to go for lunch on my own. There were a few food courts and coffee-shops nearby - one of the estate's selling points was its proximity to these outlets - and I knew if I left now, it was unlikely I would run into any of my colleagues. As I walked through the gates, I noticed Mrs Chen across the road, struggling to get all of her bags onto a bus. She did not look in my direction.

Soong's distorted face looked pained as he shouted rather than sang into the microphone, but the audience seemed to appreciate it. He was gripping the mike in both hands, his hair floppy with sweat. I have never seen the appeal of karaoke, but on this occasion had agreed to go with the flow, because everyone from the office would be there. Although usually self-sufficient, on days like this one I felt the need of company.

The funeral had been earlier that afternoon. As a mark of respect, it had been decided to close the site and allow all the workers who wanted to go - and of course, those of us in the office had to turn up as well. No one had thought to bring clothes to change into afterwards, and we must have made a strange group, turning up to the bar all in dark colours, the men in ties and the women with hair slicked demurely back.

Nobody was feeling good after the proceedings of that afternoon. We had filed into a vast wooden hall in Mandai crematorium, and it was immediately clear that someone had booked the wrong space. It was far too big for the dozen or so of us, and we defensively clumped together on just a couple of the benches, making the space look even more dauntingly empty. Mrs Chen sat some distance off, ostentatiously alone. Some of the workers spoke to her afterwards in their rough, kind way, and Mr Seetoh said something during the ceremony, but she knew no one in this country and made us all feel it.

Later, in the viewing gallery, I couldn't shake off the feeling that we were somewhere unnatural, like an alien church. The high ceilings and sheer granite walls of the building loomed in all directions, presumably intended to give the occasion stature, but feeling only vast and comfortless. I couldn't help taking a sudden breath when the doors opened and the coffin glided cleanly into the aperture behind it; this was my first cremation, and I had not expected that the body would be burnt right there in front of us.

'Cause we might not - be the young ones - for long,' sang Soong, heartbreakingly out of

tune, the discord dragging me out of my reverie. His last note lasted even longer than the music, hoarse and flat. He got a respectable round of applause as he sauntered back to his seat, and a couple of the sillier showroom girls simpered at him. He had the casual swagger of the man who knows that it is in the delivery and not the tune that hearts are won or lost.

Li Hsia, I was glad to see, appeared indifferent to these antics, and was speaking soberly to Mr Seetoh about whether the office ought to send flowers to the widow. She seemed to feel we hadn't done enough. I approached them with a query about drinks, then slipped outside to order. When I came back, Mr Seetoh was at the mike belting out something in Cantonese. I took the opportunity to slip into his seat.

'You're not singing?' said Li Hsia. She herself had been one of the first up, drifting tunelessly through "Paper Roses," before declaring that she knew no other songs.

'I can't sing,' I responded. She seemed to accept this, and I knew for sure then that she was different from all the other girls, the ones who would have urged me to just try, be a sport, have a go - Li Hsia left me to myself, and sipped at the dregs of her orange juice.

'What made you choose geography? To study, I mean,' I said, after the silence had grown dense. I am usually a better conversationalist, but now on my third bottle of beer, I was feeling a bit fuzzy around the edges.

She shrugged. 'No reason. It was my best A-Level subject.'

'Did you expect to end up here?'

'In a karaoke bar?'

'On a construction site.'

'I don't mind it. I've met a lot of interesting people.' She flashed a smile at one of the better-looking sales staff, squeezing past us on his way to the toilet.

I was having to lean in quite closely to hear any of this above the noise of the singing (we had reached the stage of the evening when groups of girls were murdering Bananarama), and was able to casually rest my hand on her forearm. She didn't react, apart from just as casually angling her body a little so I wouldn't be able to touch the rest of her without actually lunging.

'Harmonious Residences,' I said.

'What about it?'

'I like the name.'

'I don't think it's anything special.'

I was saved from having to explain by the waitress arriving. She bent herself expertly to fit into the tight space, and laid our drinks out just so - the coasters parallel to each other, not spilling a drop of the icy liquid. I murmured thanks but she seemed not to hear me, focussing entirely upon her task. She was thin and very young, I realised, and looked utterly exhausted.

Li Hsia toyed with her straw, and I decided it was up to me to ask another question. 'Do you like working with us?' She smiled vaguely, and I realised she had already answered that. 'With me', I should have said, but then we had not spent that much time together in the office, what with her only having arrived a couple of weeks ago.

'What books do you like reading?'

'What?'

'Books. You.'

She shrugged, still smiling. I couldn't work out if she still hadn't heard me, or if she thought that was too odd a question for this context. I took a pull from my beer bottle, wishing one of us was close to finishing so I could offer to go to the bar again.

'He's quite good.' I indicated Mr Seetoh, currently showing himself to be unfazed by a long instrumental interlude, bobbing along in time to the music. 'I didn't know he spoke Cantonese.'

'Do you know him well?'

'No, I only met him on this project.'

She nodded again, graceful and contained. The room was not large, and all around us I was aware, despite the gloom, of all the other warm bodies contained in it, most of whom were splayed in attitudes of relaxation. One of the girls had actually fallen asleep. For all that there were so many people just a few inches from us, I felt enveloped in something claustrophobic and sticky, thickening in the air between me and Li Hsia.

'We should come out and have a drink sometime. I mean, just us. The two of us.' The English language was growing clumsy on my tongue. I thought how much more elegantly I could have put that, perhaps in German. *Uns beide*. Or even in Chinese.

She nodded, vaguely, non-committal enough to avoid rudeness without giving anything away. She seemed to be scanning the air to the left of my head, hoping something would turn up, and it was from there that I heard Mr Seetoh's voice.

I jumped up. 'I'm in your seat,' I began automatically to apologise, though really I was just pleased that someone else had flattened the jagged silence between us.

'Hock,' said Li Hsia, looking at him. 'I think we should go.'

'So soon?'

'I'm tired.'

He grunted and, without taking his eyes off me, tossed her the keys. 'You drive.' A breath of perfume as she stood up. He continued to stare, but his tone was friendly. 'It's useful that she doesn't drink. Such a good girl. It means I always have someone to take me home.'

My throat was too dry to construct a useful reply, but I think I managed to nod fitfully.

'See you at work, Calvin.' He patted me on the shoulder. 'Bright and early.'

I watched them walk away, wondering if she would turn back and smile at me. Not a meaningful smile, just something kind to take the sting out of the evening. She didn't, of course, she looked only at him. As they slipped through the door, I saw the tired waitress leaning against the corridor wall, her broom and tray beside her. As soon as we left, she would swoop in to erase the night's mess as quickly as possible.

As the door closed, I noticed Soong glancing slyly at me. He whispered something to the girls beside him, and they giggled like monkeys. I ignored them as best as I could, sat back down and picked up my beer. I would have to give Li Hsia and him time to get clear, and then I would leave. It wouldn't take them long, the car park was only one floor up. Five minutes. I began to count to three hundred in my head.

*

Mrs Chen came back to Harmonious Residences the night of the funeral. Dressed in old clothes and carrying a large styrofoam box, she convinced the night watchman that she was a drinks seller and he let her in. This would cost him his job, because the site was meant to be secure at night – but the men wanted food and drink, and were often too tired to go out to get it. As soon as she was out of sight of the entrance, she slipped round the side of the building, and punched in the security code she must have watched me entering that other day. The office had no alarm, and she was able to walk right in with no trouble. We found all this out much later, at the trial.

By the time the site supervisor called me, it was just after five and pitch black. I was lying face down on my bed, fully dressed. I briefly considered leaving just as I was, but that was too disgusting even for the way I felt, and I showered and changed. There was a dull throbbing in my head that would almost certainly become unbearable by lunchtime. I slipped some paracetamol in my pocket and left the flat, careful not to wake anyone else.

I have never had occasion to take the MRT so early in the morning – I got on the first train, the sky just lightening, and was surprised how few people were about. At some stations no one got on or off, and the doors did no more than a perfunctory shuffle. Everyone looked cold and tired, although no one quite as ill as I felt. I began working out the quickest way I could get hold of some coffee.

When I arrived at the construction site, everything was still, almost peaceful. With the great machines at rest, without the noise and dust swirling around everything, it was possible to see the buildings as their true selves. They were magnificent. In few months, defiled by human habitation, they would become commonplace: stained by polluted rain, sprouting drying clothes on bamboo poles and unmatched curtains from every window. But now, the first motes of sun just landing on their long glass surfaces, they stood proud of their surroundings like monuments, like tall and silent gods.

The security post was empty and I walked straight in, mechanically making a mental note to mention it later. They had told me where Mrs Chen was, but I felt the need to go to my office first, if only as a matter of routine. Entering the showroom, it became clear that Mrs Chen's visit had not

been a peaceful one. She had smashed everything breakable in the room – and there were many things, many mirrored surfaces intended to make the space look bigger. Because Minister had insisted on creating a gracious ambience, to reflect our cultured society and sophisticated clientele, we had engaged a local interior design firm to dot delicate lamps and vases about the room. Now, they were so many coloured glass fragments.

Picking my way through the scarred furniture, I was struck by how little this mattered. I would make some phone calls, and in half a day all this would be put to rights. Perhaps not all the glass would be replaced, but the debris would be expertly cleared, and we would be able to admit members of the public by lunchtime. For all her destructive efforts (achieved, we later found out, with no more than a hammer from a stray toolbox), Mrs Chen had achieved nothing permanent.

There was nothing to be done here, for the time being, and I made my way up the tallest tower, the one they were holding her in. The lift glided up the outside of the building on smooth treads, until I was clear of the surrounding clutter and could see the view that our lucky residents would be paying a premium for, as yet unimpeded by other buildings. I never grew tired of this view, the green sweep of East Coast Park and beyond it, the sea. It was a fine thing, in Singapore, to look out and see only earth and water, not people.

When the doors opened on the forty-first floor, I saw Mrs Chen on a plastic stool, the security guard's hand firmly on her shoulder. It hardly seemed a necessary precaution, she did not appear to have any fight left in her. She was slumped, barely upright, her hands limp in her lap, looking down as though her neck was broken. All around her was chaos, the walls defiled and the floor thick with debris. The guard nodded at me, as did the short Malay policewoman who was just putting her notebook away.

'She doesn't want to tell us anything. Do you know why she did this?'

'Her husband,' I said.

'Yes, I know sir, we read the papers too,' she had a patient voice, but was clearly very tired, perhaps at the end of her shift. 'But it was an accident, right? And she's getting compensation?'

'Maybe. We still have to have a tribunal to prove it wasn't his own negligence.' Suddenly I was tired of my voice. How could anyone possibly explain why this had happened? Mrs Chen would say nothing all the way through her trial, and remain silent as they sent her to prison. She had already said all that she possibly could.

'She refused to move from here. We're waiting for another officer to assist.'

'Her husband died here,' I explained. 'On this floor.'

She nodded. 'Do you know what this means, sir?' She was pointing at the walls, which were covered with wild slashes of paint (the styrofoam box, it emerged, had been full of spray paint – the guard had heard the clanking metal, but assumed it was drink cans). They were Chinese characters, not all of which I recognised. Chen's name. Something about retribution. Some dates. It was a statement of something, or maybe just her story. I would have to ask Soong about it later.

Thinking of Soong brought me down to what was in store for me later, after last night. Soong was incapable of subtlety, and what he thought of as innuendo would no doubt be crude and broad enough to ensure the whole office knew what had happened in the bar. I would deny it, of course, but people notice things, and I had been looking at Li Hsia a certain way all week.

'Sir?' said the policewoman. She was waiting for me to translate the writing for her. I didn't want to admit my Mandarin wasn't quite up to deciphering the rant of the woman from China, and took a guess. It was about the circumstances of her husband's death, I told her. It was about a man who came this country to earn money and ended up dead.

The policewoman nodded. 'But we heard all that at the inquest, sir. I remember reading about it. My colleague gave evidence. It was very sad, but these things happen.' She gestured around her. 'I don't understand people like this. Why would you do such a thing? How will she remember him now?'

It was then that I realised the dust we were standing in was not dust. We were in a pool of small grey particles, dotted with charred white lumps. She had tipped her husband's ashes out onto the very spot where he met his end, and when the lift doors opened for me, some of it had blown in. We would never get all of it out, it was so fine. There would always be a little of him here.

'She must be crazy,' the policewoman was saying. 'Why do these people behave like this?'

When my father died I was sad, but I didn't behave like this. These people don't understand.'

And it made sense to me, just at that moment, why you would want to leave your husband here, in this strange land, and not bring any of him back with you. I understood, but there was no way I could have told her any of this, I didn't have the right words. And already I was thinking: I am in the wrong place. There is nothing for me to do here. I should go downstairs, where there is coffee, and normalcy, and the day can begin as usual. It will be a difficult morning, but the fuss over the destroyed showroom will distract Soong from any mischief, and Li Hsia will be graceful as always and pretend nothing happened last night. I will be all right, I thought. Everything will be all right.

I told the policewoman that I would have to go and get the clear-up underway. She nodded. She had the situation under control. I pressed the button for the lift and we waited, awkwardly, until it arrived. At the faint ding of the bell, Mrs Chen looked up, suddenly, and her eyes locked onto mine. She had the wild stare of a cornered animal, trapped and furious, blazing with a helpless energy. Her lips moved, but no sounds came out. Her eyes were no longer human. I backed slowly into the lift, but could not break her gaze until the doors slid shut between us.

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