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CHRISTMAS AT SINGAPORE CASKET
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(First published in the Straits Times, 25 Dec 2003 as part of its traditional series of Yuletide stories, the first paragraph ending with ...*dead as a doornail* is from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.)

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon the 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.

Mind you! He'd vowed that he would rise up from his coffin if anything were to happen to his company.”

“Imagine! To vow such a thing on his deathbed!”

“He's more Chinese than he thought.”

“The bugger for all his business acumen did marry a strange kettle of fish. A Chinese writer.”

“You don't say!”

This is when I walk up to them and flash my father's name card. The two old coots almost fall off their barstools at the airport in Heathrow.

“Cripes! Are you a member of the family?”

“I'm Mah-Li's daughter.”

I might as well set them right about my parents. The writer is my mother. She left my father, Mah-Li O'Connor, years ago. There's no Scrooge in my father's company. He had invented that when he started the company with Mother's savings. Why that name, you might ask. Because my father believed that his name, Mah-Li, was the Chinese version of the Irish, Marley. He had read Charles Dickens in school, and had been colonised by his English Lit teacher. As you can tell from his name, my father was what the racist Chinese in Singapore used to call *chap cheng* or mixed blood. He was half Chinese, but his Irish side had disappeared when his father left his mother and returned to Ireland for good. His maternal grandmother had

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named him, Mah-Li, Horse's Strength, at his birth. Admittedly, it was not an elegant name but a necessary one. My father was a sickly child. The Taoist priest said that he needed the strength of a horse to survive. *Loong-ma qin shen*, dragon-horse vitality. It was something that my father turned to his advantage later in life. His business cards read, Marley O'Connor in English on one side and Mah-Li O'Connor in Chinese on the other side. Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't his name that gave him his troubled personality. Mah-Li, Horse's Strength. A name that only a peasant would give to his child. My father, the workhorse, worked himself to death, and I'm flying home for the funeral.

Mother and Leonard will be waiting for me at Changi airport. Waiting and reading. The two things I remember most about my childhood. I did a lot of reading then. And still do, mostly legal books now. In my closet is a stack of Dr Seuss' books, grey and worn with use. I don't look at them any more. They are of no use to me. I could have given them away to some poor child except that inside each book, my father had written, *For My Darling Daughter, Michelle*. Every year, Leonard, and I received a book from him for our birthday and Christmas. No money for child maintenance. Just two books each year. My father was absolutely right when he told the divorce judge that Scrooge was not my mother's name and therefore not her half share of the company, Mah-Li & Scrooge.

My mother sobbed and raged. I can still see myself, a girl of ten, holding Leonard's hand. He's five, tired and irritable. We are waiting for our father. He is late again. He's always late. Sometimes hours late. Leonard is being tiresome again. He keeps pulling his hand away from me. He cries, so I smack him.

We spent weekends with my father, and stayed the night in his apartment. The routine seldom changed. After dinner, while he worked on his computer, Leonard and I watched TV. Sometimes my father's Filipino maid played with us. When I was ten, I didn't think it unusual that my father could afford a maid yet he couldn't afford to pay child maintenance. When Leonard

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went to bed, I stayed up to read or watched the late night movie on TV. Sometimes, my father sat next to me, eating a bowl of ice cream. On Sunday, he took us to church. He was very insistent on that.

“Your mother is a heathen and writes rubbish.”

His opinions and pronouncements on Mother are popping into my head above

the roar of the plane. I close my eyes and try to nap.

“Charles Dickens is the author for me. I make it a point not to read anything by a Singapore writer.”

My father waited for me to take his bait. Mother’s third book had just been

published. But I smiled. No comment. I’m just a lawyer. Who am I to stop a man from making a fool of himself? He used to hold forth and harangue Mother about how English should be taught in school, especially after Mother’s friends had visited us.

“Call yourselves English teachers? Your colleagues couldn’t even string a sentence together. Do they speak like this in class?”

“No, *lah!* Only among ourselves we speak like this.”

“Stop that! Don’t bring the *lah* and *walau* into my house. I don’t want Leonard and Michelle to pick up these expressions. And you shouldn’t either. You’re an English language teacher. You should be a model of good speech.”

Mother was silent in those days. Was she cowed by his “near native” English? Was that why she’d turned to writing? Because her spoken English could not measure up to my father’s standard? He used to send me long emails about Mother. I pressed ‘Delete’.

“Brain haemorrhage, very sudden.”

Leonard sounds matter-of-fact when he tells me about the nature of our father’s death. We are walking out of Changi airport. I’m holding Mother’s hand. She is glad to see me. I have not been home for four years.

“By the time his wife found him, he was brain dead,” Mother adds. “But they kept him on the machine for a few hours to make sure.”

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“You were there?”

“Leonard wanted me there.”

Leonard is taking me straight away to Singapore Casket. Mother is coming with us. I’m surprised, but I don’t show it. I wouldn’t go if I were her. By the time we reach the funeral parlour, it is one in the morning. The place is deserted.

“Christmas Eve,” Leonard says. “People go for midnight mass. Auntie Joan herself wanted to go.”

Auntie Joan is our father’s wife. She will get everything he owned now. My mother will get nothing even though it was her money that started the company. Leonard hands me a packet of juice. On the white-covered tables are plates of groundnuts and sweets, and several lengths of red thread.

“Take a red thread when we go home later. Your Grandma is still alive,” Mother says. “A red thread, symbol of blood, of life, the red that links us, the living.”

Mother walks towards the casket in the middle of the room. I hold back, unsure of what I ought to do. Leonard stands beside me. We watch our mother, two children watching over her as she gazed down at the man she has not seen or spoken with for more than twenty years. She is dry-eyed.

“Why did you marry him, Mum?”

It is two in the morning when this question pops out of Leonard’s mouth. There are just the three of us with my father’s body. Leonard is standing on one side of Mother and I on the other side. We have sandwiched her between us. Something we have done throughout our childhood to shield her from my father’s barbs. But now, she takes our hand in her own, her two children, her sweet children, who want so much to protect her. She leads us to our father’s casket. She bows her head. In death do us part; but here we are, the four of us, together at last after twenty years. A sudden intake of air rushes through me. My throat constricts. I try to breathe, but a sob escapes. Mother puts her arm around me.

“Your Dad and I were very idealistic. We wanted to marry and volunteer to serve in a Third World country. But things didn’t turn out that way.

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Life's like that, isn't it? He started a business. Went to Ireland. Then things changed. He wanted to make his first million before thirty."

"Half his company should be yours, Mum," I say.

But she gives no sign that she has heard, and yet, her phrase, *not a cent, not a single cent did he give*, was a constant refrain in my teenage years.

"He looks okay. Like he's asleep," she says.

"The mortician did a good job," Leonard adds.

I look from one to the other. Nothing they say makes sense.

"Dad donated his body to science. We found that out only at the hospital."

"Is that why they kept him on the life-support machine?"

"Ya, to keep him till they could get a team of surgeons to operate on him."

"What did they take from him?"

"The cornea of his eyes, all his skin, the heart, the liver and other things. I can't remember. We were in a daze. We had to say goodbye to Dad in hospital because after that..."

Leonard points to the casket.

"That's why it's closed up; sealed," he says.

The casket is completely sealed up unlike at other wakes where the body of the dear departed lies in an open casket until the day of the funeral. In Dad's case, only his face is visible through the glass.

"Shall we say a prayer for your father's soul?"

The three of us hold hands.

"It's Christmas Eve. He was a generous man in the end, your Dad. I didn't expect him to donate all his organs away. I guess it's something you two can be proud of. People don't do such things in Singapore. In death, your father was the giving man I once loved."

Mother falls silent. Leonard and I look at each other above her bowed head. We must have thought of it at the same time. Mah-Li & Scrooge. Our father was Scrooge, after all. Generous in the end.