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A break from the norm

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Disclaimer

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised.

The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as "adult content": it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature.

If you aren't an actual grown-up then please don't read the Oddville Press, or at least, don't complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

December

by Ho Cheung Lee

Ho Cheung LEE (Peter), Ed.D., was born in Hong Kong. He is an ESL teacher, school administrator, curriculum developer, and writer. He earned his doctorate from The University of Hong Kong with a thesis on teaching reading. His short story "Midnight" has appeared in Miracle Magazine, *and his poems have appeared in* aaduna, FIVE Poetry Magazine, Miracle Magazine, Ozone Park Journal, The Interpreter's House, Wild Violet, *and elsewhere.*

December

December 1, Reggie's Studio. Audition for the last batch.

A sapphire-colored carpet lined the corridor and the walls exhibited artistically grained photographs of celebrated musicians and concert scenes, which gave nothing to the children but nervousness and anxiety. Amidst the obedient queue sat Thomas Bowkett, tagged 123, shifting in his seat. Dressed in shiny blue with fake crocodile-skin boots that were given to him by his uncle two days ago, he was warming an oval turquoise pebble in his wet palm, as if to hatch a bird from it.

Despite the presence of the sound-proofing devices, a thin layer of harmonious melody was still clearly notable, swimming in the air to blend with the heavy heartbeats of the candidates. Thomas knew the tune too well; he had been practising this at home, in the school, on the bus, and even in his dreams. It was initially his mother's idea that he enter the audition for the leading role in Reggie Angelou's newest musical "The Voice of the Prince." Yet, he had annoyed her with his incessant singing, day and night, of the same song. Thomas, a great fan of Angelou's, loved the plot very much. He knew this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get close to his dream: to be Broadway's finest singer. He had struggled through two music tests and three interviews to win a place here, to wait for the singing audition which, to make it even more nerve-wracking, was headed by the composer herself. Thomas was aware that he had already achieved something extraordinary, but he knew he could extend himself further, as he always could. He just needed a bit of luck today. He grasped the stone even harder.

"Something inside? Your fist," the girl next to him asked, hiding her unease.

Thomas released his tensed fingers slowly, revealing a shiny smooth pebble of bluish-green. It was a fine-grade opaque gem with a unique hue. Astonishingly magnificent. The stone almost glowed in their eyes, opening once more before the young possessor the door to his memory of how the precious item came into his possession, from a region one could only have heard of, from a man he could not have imagined before.

He never liked crowded places. He hated the place. The only positive thing was that the site was well sheltered, blocking the boiling sun of mid-September. People, local and from overseas, flooded the location. The alleys ran intricately across one another in such a way it was too easy to lose one's way, and day. It was a stretching labyrinth, under enormous dazzling pieces of cloth hanging above like over-sized umbrellas that could wave in the wind. On display were patterned clothing, ornate chandeliers, inlaid boxes, old- looking brassware and other traditional crafts. He smelled spices as well. It was a debating society; buyers played against sellers. The noise was overwhelming.

Khan el-Khalili was its name. A major market in one of the world's most populous metropolis: Cairo, Egypt.

His parents were ahead of him, visible, yet too far away to hear him. He never realized they could be so much absorbed into the Cairenes' cultural artifacts and the craftsmen's demonstrations. He did not have the interest today. He did not feel too refreshed this afternoon, walking with an annoying stomach; the meals had not been too friendly.

He approached his parents, wanting to ask when they could go back to the hotel, when an aged Arab on the ground caught his attention. The man sat on a square mat with torn edges, meditating. In front of him there rested seven tiny leather bags that each seemed to be holding a chicken egg. Head bandaged, a grey goat-beard wrapped in shabby, loose yellowish-white, the old man sat with his legs crossed. His arms drooped. The arms led to a pair of palm-less wrists. The elder had no hands.

The music ceased. Silence occupied the corridor of the studio. Thomas wrapped the stone again with his fin-

gers and prayed. None of the seven children was making any intentional noise. The young studio staff member went on to pace around, visually examining the postures and expressions of each of the candidates. Holding several sheets in her hand, she was not at all doing official assessments, though she must have felt like an assessor, enjoying a short-term power of decision-making.

The noise of door opening passed through the corridor. An older lady–blonde hair, oversized, with a staff card dangling from her invisible neck–came around the corner and into view. She received stares from the eight pairs of eyes, including the pacing staff member. She paused and gestured. The children stood up, packing up their belongings, flustered. Thomas placed the warm pebble back into his right trouser pocket. He gently pressed on it. The queue was calmly led down the corridor.

They walked into a medium-sized concert hall. Around them were empty seats, all coated in red velvet. The aged stuffiness in the air seemed not to be a problem to the newcomers as they marched down the stairs. Three judges were at a long table below, six meters in front of the stage, where several technicians were helping to adjust the audio devices. A few decent-looking adults were scattered around the place, holding piles of paper. Some were sitting, some preferred to stand, but all eyeing the youngsters on stage.

Reggie Angelou was dressed in plain but solemn black. In her late forties, the lines on her emaciated face were still visible in the distance, though she had tried to conceal them. The ladies sitting on either side of her seemed to be trying to start a conversation with this celebrity composer and playwright, yet received nothing more than a few brief nods. The children passing by saw the lady in the middle, and were all of a sudden afraid of her. Thomas, too, felt unease about singing in front of his only idol, for he could not afford to embarrass himself in the presence of such a musical giant.

Then the children were on the stage. The lady who led them there started briefing them. Thomas listened to each word, despite the disturbance from the deafening noise of his heartbeats.

They stood in a row, facing the audience, each with a number plate. They were first instructed to start voicing simple arpeggios. Then, they sang chorally a song they had practised. Angelou did not look up too often. A judge signaled to end the choral part and start the solos. On the judges' table, twenty-four sheets of participant profiles were arranged neatly, spread out for reference and for writing comments.

Thomas was stunned to hear his name called before any of the others. He stepped up, approached the long, thin microphone stand. Angelou lifted her head, her critical eyes locked with his. Yet, they were too far apart and the chief judge's expressions became mysterious to the child singer. The piano started. In the solid gaze of the composer, the twelve-year-old sang:

A voice too sacred
Carries passion in his songs
The voice of the Prince.

A young heart so pure
Born in skies, he is the man
To ride the great wind.

You are the brightness
That lights up my path, my days
Sincerely I yell.

You are the reason
That I have come to believe
God's alive and well.

"Can't you sing another one, Thomas?" his mother asked, checking the array of accessories she had bought from the market in the morning. "The play must have other songs too, no?"

The boy walked out of the bathroom, smelling of soap. He was wiping off the water from his hair. "Actually, they only gave me this one to practise."

Thomas drew near his mother to see the glistening collection spread in an orderly way on the elegant wooden table for display. Mr. Bowkett, his father, was sitting on the queen-size double bed with his semi-professional digital camera, appreciating the pictures he had taken during the day. He liked this country.

"Mum, did you see that man on the carpet?" Thomas asked.

"What man?"

"The old man, next to the basket shop."

"There are billions of basket shops there, boy." She kept on sorting out the jewelry and other small craftwork. She picked up a glass bottle to examine, paying little attention to her child.

"He's got no hands, Mum!" Thomas said, looking up at his mother, who was checking the surface of the glass meticulously.

"We'll go there again tomorrow morning, we've got to buy some more of this for your aunties," his mother said. She then turned to Thomas, "I will give you some coins for that beggar."

The next day, Thomas and his family took the shuttle bus from their hotel to Khan el-Khalili again. Upon arrival, Mr. and Mrs. Bowkett knew their destination clearly and commanded Thomas to follow them closely. There they entered the maze for the second time. Thomas walked down the same tourist-fed path. Right next to a rattan-ware booth, the hand-less elder was still resting on the same old dirty square carpet, in the flapping shadows of the hanging cloth waving above. Lying in front of him were still the seven tiny fastened bags. This time, driven by curiosity, the child walked near him. Thomas doubted that the man was a beggar, but he could not tell whether or not he was selling something.

The man lifted up his head and met the eyes of the boy. "We meet again, young man," the old man said in accented English, with a warm smile. His chopped arms, however, were invisible under the long sleeves.

"Er–" Thomas was too stunned to respond, unready to accept the fact that he was noticed by this shabby-looking Arab the day before. "Hi," he said, thinking it would be a safe response in any case.

"Offer me all the money you have with you at this moment," the old man said. "I can make your wish come true!"

"All my money?"

"That is with you now, not what you have in the bank." He sounded quite friendly.

"Oh, you–" Thomas now thought he was actually a beggar who had invented a creative way to beg. "All right, here you go." The youngster showed him the coins his mother had given him. "You have a bag or dish or something?" He knew the old man had no hands to receive the money.

"Is that all you have with you?" the old man asked, not feeling disappointed though.

"Honestly, sir. And sorry, sir."

"Very well, son." He smiled with hints of tears in his turbid eyes. "You are the only one in all these years who is generous enough to completely empty your purse for me."

"You're welcome, sir," Thomas said. He just found this man funny. He placed the coins on the mat.

"In return, son, pick a stone." The man leaned forward and pushed the tiny bags a bit, revealing his incomplete limbs.

Thomas crouched excitedly, as if a game was about to start. He had wished to know what was inside those bags and now he was offered the chance to choose one. He ran his eyes from left to right, imagining that he could tell what was contained in each. Engulfed by the noise and dust, a stream of people flowed by them without noticing their presence. Quickly he seized the one at the far right.

"Open it."

Thomas did what the man said and poured out a greenish-blue pebble onto his palm.

"Turquoise, exquisite," the old man said. "The stone of December."

A female helper was mouthing the song down stage, putting up large paper cardboards with the lyrics on them, for the participants' convenience. The children were indeed amazed that she failed to notice that they had already memorized every word.

The conductor was moved by the poignant melody; his hands were birds swerving in the air. The gray-haired gentleman made a final silky circular movement with his fingertips, and muted the choir. The pianist's hands floated up from the keyboard, the last chord faded contentedly.

This last song was not really for the selection of the leading role. The judges had already made their choice unanimously. The children were just asked to sing for the closure of this huge and tiring audition project. Those who were fortunate enough to get through to this round knew well that they would appear in the play no matter what. It was only their roles that had not been determined.

The young singers were still on the stage. Some started chatting with their neighbours now that their performances and pressures were over. They had become much more relaxed and less reluctant to make new friends. Thomas saw no one but the three heads at the judges' table discussing what seemed to be significant matters. Then, a younger male helper was beckoned by Angelou. He pressed on the table and looked closely at a piece of paper the composer was holding. They briefly exchanged words. Thomas looked intensely at the chief judge's lip movements but could not understand anything at all.

It was only Thomas and two girls who chose not to talk with other competitors. Thomas caught a glimpse of the worried look of the girl who had noticed his pebble earlier, but she did not glance in return. A moment later, the young man at the judges' table nodded. He took the wireless microphone from the table. He lightly patted the microphone's head three times for audio checking. All of the children turned to the head table.

"Will candidate number one-twenty-three please come forward for a word, thank you," he called.

Breathing noises and gulping burst from the little performers. Thomas had no time to join their discussion on what the purpose of this call might be, yet he sensed it was positive. *It would never be a bad call anyway,* he thought. He took a final glance at the rest of the competitors, who in some way or another showed expressions of deep admiration, jealousy, or envy, and moved forward to the stairs stretching down to the audience.

He had imagined this scene so many times, just as anyone who has a dream or ambition to win something major would prepare an acceptance speech. Of course, many have such imaginations even though they know they would not have much chance to have their dreams realized, and it often turns out that they do not hit their targets. Thomas was superstitious at times. He did not want to do too much mental rehearsal or to prepare a certain speech for the press upon the offer of the main role. He did not want to disappoint himself. And yet, he could not help thinking about it, picturing himself in exactly the same scene: being called to approach Reggie Angelou for a breakthrough in his budding career. The few steps from the stage to the judges took him forever. He found himself walking in slow motion, just as he had experienced in his vision. Unconsciously, he moved his right hand to his pocket, placing his fingers around the smooth oval object again. The table, covered in dignified red cloth, was just in front of him. The echoing clanks of

his footsteps reminded him that the people in the hall had frozen the moment his number was announced, and that behind him were worried youngsters who were trying to think up other reasons that this boy had been asked to approach the decision makers.

The gentleman who had called him pulled out a chair for him on the shorter side of the rectangular table, and seated him; the host's seat. Thomas's wet hands clenched together. He looked at the sheets on the table, each with a photo of a child and personal information and statements, and looked up at the ladies, who smiled at him with so much warmth that it almost made him feel unnatural.

"Thomas," said the lady sitting closest to him. "We are very pleased with your vocal quality and skills, your interpretation of the words, your expression and your enthusiasm for joining our project."

Thomas thought he had just heard the most beautiful sequence of words in any language he had ever known.

"We have come to the decision that you be our prince in this project," she added. "A lot more work is to come, Mr. Bowkett."

In bewilderment, Thomas looked at the lady in the middle, still thinking the whole thing was surreal.

"You'll sing in front of the Prince," Angelou said, beaming, and put down the profile sheet with a big tag number 123. "No pressure, my boy."

"That's lovely," Thomas responded.

"You have some luck, child!" the beggar commented, grinning, exposing his decaying teeth.

"I love its colour," the boy added. "It's like the ocean."

"Enclose it deep within your fingers," he advised with intensity, attempting to show a hand gesture of grasping, but showing little embarrassment when he failed to do so. "Whisper your dream to your heart; only to your heart. That which you dream will come true in the month for which it was born. That which comes true will last for as long as you deserve, son."

"You mean it's a souvenir of luck?" the child asked, puzzled.

"I didn't mean to be rhetorical, but it is what the ancient Masters had written," the elder said. "Hide it in your fist, and make a wish," the man paraphrased. "Your dream–"

"Will come true in the designated month of the stone," Thomas broke the line. "And it will last for as long as I deserve."

The old handicapped fell silent for a second, and nodded with a satisfying smile. "Make a wish."

Thomas eyed him, still thinking he was a funny kind elder, and closed his right fist with the pebble inside. "Done," he said. "How much is it, sir?"

"You've paid. It's yours now," the man replied. "Keep it safe. Return it to me when we meet again, and when your dream has come true."

"But we're leaving Cairo. We may not meet again, sir. I doubt if we'll ever meet again."

"Keep it anyway, for the wish you've made will vanish if you abandon the stone now." He started to pack up the tiny bags with his disabled limbs. "Off you go, son. Your parents are looking for you like mad!" He flicked his gaze to his left.

Thomas turned to his right and suddenly realized that his parents had gone deep into the crowd. "Oh, no, I must go!" He jumped to his feet.

But before he made his move, having the stone in his palm, he could not help but to turn back to the man for the final time. "What, may I ask, happened to your hands, sir?"

The man paused. He looked up slowly. "There's a cost for collecting these precious stones from their guardians," he answered airily. "I'm still looking for the remaining five, but am running out of body parts!" He showed him again the remnants of his limbs, the jagged wounds. The aged one forced a bitter laugh.

December 25, Frederick Bell Hall, City Central. A Night to Celebrate: Vilman's Christmas Concert.

Standing at the centre spot of the patterned stage–in front of a live junior orchestra, under an intense spot light like a thick laser beam piercing from heaven and creating a sharply formed silhouette accompanied by a few lighter figures–Thomas Bowkett heard the fading of the strings' voices, blending with the echoes of his. He opened his eyes and let in the view of hundreds of people in the live audience, three camera sets, and countless lights focusing on the stage like over-sized stars. Thomas smiled and bowed with satisfaction. A deafening applause and jubilation hit his ear drums. The back lights were on. He straightened only to see the rise of the entire audience, in a clapping and yelling spree. He did not want the show to end.

The host of the show–Marlon Vilman, aged sixty-seven–appeared from the side, wearing a dark tuxedo, clapping with a microphone in hand, and smiling widely. Vilman hugged and kissed the 12-year-old fair- haired boy on the forehead.

"Ooh, what an amazing talent, what a voice!" Vilman exclaimed. "How did you feel?"

"Umm, well, I–I–um–"

"Too thrilled to find a word, uh?" Vilman laughed. The happy crowd began to sit down again.

"Yeah, probably." The boy also laughed. "I was just too happy to be invited to this show and be a part of it, you know. I have seen this show on TV every year since I knew what a TV was, and–"

"Yeah, and I started the show when TVs first came out, yeah." Vilman sounded very serious, the crowd laughed. "That explains my age."

Thomas found this gentleman warm and humorous. He almost forgot that he was talking in front of hundreds of pairs of eyes in the theatre, and millions of pairs of

eyes at home.

"Tell me Thomas, you've been selected for the title role of Reggie Angelou's latest musical by the composer herself." Vilman opened up an expected interview. "What do you think of this opportunity? How did you get your part?"

"I really have no idea, Mr. Vilman." Thomas spoke from his heart. "I have no idea why Ms. Angelou picked me. I didn't ask, lest she would change her mind!"

Vilman laughed. He thought that this young man was adorable, and the crowd agreed.

"Everything just came all of a sudden. I'm not sure if I have been reacting well." Thomas thought of the day after his role was announced: the newspapers and magazine reporters had tried to contact him so badly. He had to unplug his home telephone and turn off his cell phone for half a day every day to avoid the calls. And no less than twenty people from all over the country had approached him, in person, to offer themselves as his manager or vocal trainer within the first week after the news was out. "I'm signing up for commercials, doing concerts here and there, and invited to talk shows. You know, the musical hasn't even opened yet. I just wonder if I deserve this, you know, popularity. You know what I'm saying?"

"Of course I do," replied Vilman. "I went through exactly the same kind of euphoria when winning a role in my school play *sixty* years ago. And it was a tree that I played."

Thomas joined the audience's laughter.

"Yeah, and all the plant-lovers in my neighbourhood came to me to advise me on the way to be a tree, you know," Vilman continued with his impromptu joke. "It was pretty hard to be in the centre of attention. I absolutely share your feelings, Thomas, no doubt."

"And–" Vilman re-directed himself. "You're now rehearsing every day at Reggie's studio?"

"Yeah, almost, but gotta spend some time with my family for Christmas, you know, so–"

"When exactly will the play be opened?"

"It should be around the Easter time. Yeah."

"For the re-opening of the Royal Theatre," Vilman added. "You guys will perform in front of the Royal Family. How thrilled are you?"

"Um–well–that'll surely be great pressure," Thomas said. "But it's a great honour as well. We'll do our best to entertain our audience. Hope they'll like it!"

"Of course they will!" said Vilman encouragingly. "The Prince is probably watching from the palace at this moment. Now look into the camera. Look–say hello, say hi! This great young fellow is gonna put up a wonderful show for you in a few months' time, Your Majesty. It's really gonna be something! Just wait and see! Ladies and gentlemen, Thomas Bowkett!" Vilman yelled at last.

The boy gave a full bow, blushing. The audience once again offered a thundering standing ovation as he exited. He waved joyfully at the people, and wished to know all of them in person.

Thomas joined the backstage crew amidst the orchestral music for changeover, receiving lots of "great show" and "well done" from staff. He got changed and was back in the make-up room when a lady handed him a note, saying it was from someone outside. Thomas took it and seated himself in front of a mirror, surprised to be receiving fan mail so soon. He unfolded the piece of paper and read:

Mr. Bowkett, the stone collector has come to retrieve the item you borrowed from him. It would be very kind of you if you could spare a minute to meet this poor old man waiting for you outside the theatre.

Thomas looked at himself in the mirror, pondering, and felt the stone in his pocket.

There was no sign or hope that the snow would cease. In the whispers of the wind the heavily-dressed Thomas walked down the stairs in front of the historical concert hall, leaving shallow footprints on the greyish layer of snow. His hand-made scarf curled around his frozen face, exposing only his crystal blue eyes. At the bottom, two dark figures were expecting the youngster. They did not seem to be threatened by the weather.

Thomas slowed his last few steps before meeting them. He eyed the old man but could not instantly relate him to the one he expected to meet: the aged looked much more decent, wrapped in clean thick clothing, exotically patterned, and Arabesque. His white head cloth was knotted. It looked as if he had no sleeves, thus his arms were nowhere to be seen.

"What a star," said the lady on the right. "We loved your singing."

Thomas looked at the welcoming expression of the lady, who was in her thirties, and wore light make-up. He was still trying to figure out what could have led the shabby old handicapped Arab in Egypt who had been sitting on a worn carpet displaying weird items to have such a huge change of appearance. Not to mention the addition of this beautiful young company. And he wondered why on earth they would actually come all the way to find him.

"You've really come for the pebble?" Thomas spoke through the scarf, his hood getting whiter, and cooler, as the evening snow accumulated on it.

"The turquoise, I believe, has fulfilled its job," said the old man, blowing out warm vapour, like smoke. "As said, it should be returned when we meet again."

"How did you locate me? I'm just curious."

"How could we not be able to? You've been in newspapers and magazines and on TV since the beginning of the month!" the man said. "Though it's a bit hard to get the tickets for Vilman's concert."

"I thought you were just a–a–"

"Crazy old folk joking with kids?" He laughed. "Maybe I am. Who knows?"

Thomas smiled too. He fumbled for the item in the pocket, and retrieved it with difficulty because of the thickness of his clothing.

"It's been with me all the time," Thomas said, feeling upset that it would leave him soon. "It's like my lucky star." It lay on his palm. Snowflakes fell on it and melted.

"I did not lie to you, did I?" said the man. "The turquoise did realize the wish you made as soon as the month it belongs to started."

Thomas suddenly remembered the wish he made when he was asked to hold the pebble in his palm. "My wish–"

"I guess you wanted to be a singer, or a star," the lady joined the conversation. "Everything went so smoothly for you, young man."

"Madam, you are–" Thomas looked at the lady, then turned to the Arab for an answer.

"My daughter," said the elder. "Who I thought was long lost. She found me, and forgave me." The daughter gently grabbed her father's arm underneath the robe.

"Wow, that's–that's amazing!" Thomas said in amazement. "Congratulations!"

"Fate finally did something good to me," sighed the old man. "Finally."

"I guess you're enjoying these days as much as I am!" Thomas said.

"The happiest period of my life!" said the Arab.

"Good!" commented Thomas. He handed him back the stone. His daughter took it for him as her father had no intention of budging.

Thomas smiled from his heart. "You know what?" Thomas said. "I didn't wish to be a star or celebrity or anything of that sort the moment I was given the pebble."

The two listeners went still. The man had a critical expression.

"I wished for you to have your hands back," Thomas said to the elder, feeling a bit embarrassed. "I'm so glad it has come true, in a way. I'm truly, truly grateful for that. You know, seeing you having a new life with your family, new clothes, good food, good shelter and stuff. I'm very happy tonight. Thanks for coming."

The lady looked at her father, feeling him shiver a little. He looked at the boy again, with a trembling smile. He breathed in slowly. "You will have a good life, son," he finally said.

The snow had stopped. Thomas waved goodbye to the two and walked back up to the main entrance. The lady supported her father and they turned around, slowly moving out, and dissolving into the dark side of the road hidden by the traffic.

Thomas looked over his shoulder once more to find them gone. His manager, who had been watching the exchange, escorted him back in and asked for the story, which Thomas was quite eager to tell.