

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

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My story is about blood. Not the casually spilled blood of war or the loving blood of family, or the meaningless crimson gore on silver screens, or the life-giving blood on the thighs of women or the blood oaths of the sacred and sacrilegious. It is about my blood. So perhaps it is about all of it.

It begins with a very old ceiling fan making its slow, whirring marks in the dusty air that smells of old cigarettes and antiseptic. This is what I'd just glanced at as I waited with my father in the hospital lobby, and we watched the ill and those who love them walk up and down the stairs. This is how I learned to tell those who had just heard good news from those who hadn't; I never looked at the person in the thin, white robe, I looked at the person holding their arm, their hand, offering their shoulder. About them, there was always a quiet, soft pride, as hateful as it was beautiful to see.

We sat there and we waited.

At this point, I remember my father's hand resting on my shoulder, keeping me from running up to people or from beginning to fidget. To display the unstoppable twitch that would betray my fear that this would be another day with the silent walk home to a hungry night, when there would be nothing I could do to alleviate the terrible weight I felt on my father, knowing that it was not my fault but wanting it to be so that I could apologise and make it better. We were here often, sitting near the stairs with other people who also looked hopeful and predatory.

We all clutched cheap, crumbly biscuits wrapped in wax paper. That was how I knew who I could talk to and where I could sit. Once in awhile, a nurse would come by and get one of us to walk up the stairs with her; she knew us all by type, and never needed to ask. It made things faster. I am O negative, not completely uncommon and easily unnoticed but always needed.

That week, it was my turn and my father was with me only because it was the festive season. Even in times like those, when memories of the war were still fresh and bleeding, when the Malayan Emergency had just been loudly declared with more than a small tinge of panic and there seemed to be

precious little to celebrate, the accident rate still had a tendency to rocket up, the same way gurneys rocketed through the hospital doors stinking of misfortune and surprise. Sometimes with those cases, they needed more than I could give.

No one liked us, and that was something that a child had to get used to. I once asked my father why no one ever smiled at us, and he'd sighed and said, 'People don't normally smile here. And people normally smile at people they like. They can't like people that wait for really bad things to happen to other people and that's what they think we are. It's what we are.' I couldn't see the truth of that... we were there to save lives, to help people who were alone, who didn't have enough ties to the world to help themselves. But the lack of smiles and the general ugly air of dislike proved my father right. I didn't ask him so many questions after that.

Instead, I requested stories. When my mother came with me, she could only talk about her worries, about how we didn't have enough food with my dad taking it with him, and about how she worried that each time he left for the jungles he wouldn't return. When I came with my sister, we played with our cheap tin cars or argued over interminably repetitive Snakes and Ladders games, and chose not to speak about anything. We allowed ourselves to be wholeheartedly, full-bloodedly children and to ignore the reason why we were there.

My father told me stories. While we were waiting to peddle our blood to whoever was lonely and dying and who needed it more than we did, surrounded by the desperate and the desperately denying, I sat at my father's elbow and listened.

That particular day, he told me the story of Sun Wukong. I remember leaning in, allowing my arm to touch my father's, enjoying that touch, that confirmation that he was here with me before letting the story take me away. I was nine on that day in 1949, and thought of it as an adventure story, complete with magic, clouds and kungfu. It would take me at least ten more years to know that the reason why my father knew the story so well was because Mao Zedong had long adopted Sun Wukong as part of his ideas and that this

hardworking, enthusiastically manic god had been entrapped in something more insidious, difficult and widely known than the mountain that was his prison in the story.

I already knew the tale of this trickster god born of a stone made from primal chaos, this errant Monkey King who went traipsing fearlessly about the Heavens, being put down and imprisoned by Buddha himself before becoming the atoning, battling disciple of Xuanzang, the priest on a quest. But with the instincts of a man not only born to believe but to inspire belief, my father knew how to make it interesting.

‘And every time he wanted to get out of trouble, any time he needed to be somewhere else, or to help someone or himself, he just pulled out his hair. Or hairs, depending. Don’t look at me like that, it’s true. He could change all of his hairs into anyone, and he could change himself into anyone as well, but they were empty, not really him. Or maybe they had something in them, no one really knows. So there could be a hundred thousand million Monkey Gods, and after, when he didn’t want them anymore, he changed them back. That was his power and it was easy for him. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’ He tousled my hair lightly, and glanced at the nurses’ station.

I had smiled, eager to please. ‘Oh, I’d never go to school. There would be so many of me, you and Ma wouldn’t know which one I was. No one would.’ Something about the story had bothered me though, and if anyone could fix it, surely it would be its storyteller. ‘But what if after, when he wanted to change them all back, he couldn’t find all his hairs? What if some of them just went on?’

My father had looked at me then in that way he had, like he was seeing me for the first time and I had to wait, sitting on that cusp that I savoured and feared most, the edge before I would know whether he loved or hated what he saw. It seemed to last forever, and in a way, never ended, because one of the nurses had walked over and said, ‘Come on’.

This was the only time I had ever listened to the business transaction, how I came to learn that my blood cost ten ringgit per 400 millilitres. I learned it then, understood it much later and could never forgive anyone for it. I'd never needed to know, I'd never even needed to see where my blood went. Previously, I'd just stuffed the notes or coins in my pocket after, and still slightly dizzy and munching a biscuit, I'd jaggedly run home so that my mother would be able to get to the shops on time. Today was different. My father had to negotiate, seemingly because the nurse was haggling with him.

'You know how much.' My father spoke, implacable and certain.

'Yes, but this is different, or I wouldn't ask. He doesn't have much money to give. There are other O negatives, I gave you this one because everyone knows you need the money.' Looking at the floor of that narrow corridor, I could still see the nurse out of the corner of my eye, those canvas shoes moving closer to me, one hand casually holding the needle and the bag. She seemed sure of victory.

'Yes, we need money, so I can't take less than 10. My boy's healthy, I could get 15.'

'Fine, you go get your 15. I'll get someone else.' There was a pause so loaded I couldn't have lifted my head if I'd wanted to. The shoes had stopped moving towards me. I didn't look, but my father must have nodded because she regained her cool, professional tone and said, 'Good. We need to go into his ward though, because there are no other rooms available.'

In the room, the smell was what struck me first. It's a smell I've recognised since, in alleyways, slumped on the floor, passing me on the street, sitting next to me on buses. It is not a bad smell; it is just unbearable. Pungent without being sharp, a scent reminiscent of old, old rotten roses and metal, wet leather and urine, of not caring and not being cared for, a smell that has years of darkness and light in it. You don't get used to it, you can't. It's the smell of madness.

It was coming from the man sitting on the bed at the end of the ward, slumped against the wall wearing a bright blue t-shirt stained with red rapidly turning brown. His head was bowed, and I couldn't see a neck or the wound, just masses of knotted hair in involuntary dreadlocks.

We walked towards him and for the first time I turned to my father and said, very quietly, 'I don't want to- Can I not?' My father didn't even break his stride, and the only indication he'd heard me or noticed me stopping was that his grip on my shoulder tightened slightly, and he almost dragged me for a step or two.

For many years, I chose not to remember that day. I barely looked at my blood draining into the bag- the nurse had given me a quick smile while she was looking for my vein but I couldn't even manage a glance at her- my gaze was fixed on the eyes of the man who'd be receiving my blood, who would be taking part of me in him, who would always have something alien circulating his body. He was only half-conscious, but he was muttering something about crabs and machines constantly and once in awhile, his head would move in a series of rapid tics to the left, like he was observing a spider jerkily stumbling across a horizon only he could see.

But his eyes never left mine. They were beautiful eyes, the only clear thing in the semi-darkness, with the old stained sheets pulled to give the four of us the illusion of privacy, immersing us in the billowy world of his presence and his stench. Eyes the colour of wet sand, bright and devoid of intelligence. The kindest and cruellest eyes I ever saw, content in his perfect loneliness and in his understanding that there was no other way, no *better* way, to be. Eyes belonging to a man who owed no responsibilities to anyone, who could do whatever he wanted, who truly did not care. I'd never been more scared of anyone in my life.

Seeing my blood swirl like magic through the murky late afternoon light into his arm, I wondered whether somehow my blood would always stay mine, whether they would remember the vessel they had left. Or whether entering this man's veins, they would become as he was. Mad, bad and dangerous to know. Would my blood somehow infect me, link me indissolubly to him, connect me

as surely and as intimately as any blood brother was ever bound to another? On that afternoon, looking at those eyes, steeped in the essence of the insane, it seemed more than possible; it seemed true. I could barely breathe the same air as him.

I thought of Sun Wukong and his hairs, dividing and recreating himself again and again, for his fun and gain. But he was a god, and I was just a boy. I couldn't control what I made, and I could barely understand what I was making. I don't have a clear memory of leaving the ward, or of speaking to him.

About a week later, my father left finally, to join the Malayan Communist Party officially, they of the blood red allegiances, to spend the rest of his life living an ideology, being responsible and faithful to his great love, never seeing us again and killing 10 people that we know of. He took most of our food and all the money.

I always said thank you. It was a habit I started as a child, and at 25, it was not something I could stop. Wei always laughed at me; she thought it was silly. But even when it was undeserved and unexpected, I thanked people because you never know when something they've done or will do will save you, keep you going, make you whole. I thanked them even when they had barely glanced at me as I said it, and even when that one quick moment of eye contact was enough to reveal that the sharp, sweet after-smell of last night's excesses, the muddy, red-veined eyes and bloated face all testified undeniably to someone not fit to be behind the wheel of the bus.

As his eyes flitted away from mine and he pulled away from the curb, I allowed Wei to get past me so that we could begin the tricky process of getting to an empty seat, pole by pole, grip by grip. As she brushed by, I inhaled the soft scent of her hair, vague wisps of coconut, vestiges of smoke and sweat. She glanced around and grinned at me over the sharp angle of her shoulder, and allowed the back of her hand to brush mine. I thought she was perfect. The faint sound of The Beatles 'Love Me Do' blared by briefly and we stood there and smiled at each other.

Then suddenly, in a cacophony of horns, surprised screams and the squeals of tires, the world seemed to stop and revolve in double time. I stumbled forward and for a wild moment, completely lost my bearings, as Wei had moved out of my way. I found myself swinging out into empty space, my gaze juddering madly around the crowded bus and its ladies carrying their bloody newspaper-wrapped parcels of what was going to be today's lunch.

Wei gripped my wrist finally and pulled me towards her. 'Are you okay?' she asked, studying my face. 'The man is crazy.'

The bus was currently being blocked by an irate rickshaw man, eyes and veins popping and voice almost hysterical, screaming at our driver who had almost run him down and who barely seemed to hear him. Glancing over his shoulder, our driver reversed and then pulled away from the curb again. As we passed the rickshaw puller, he spat at the side of the bus and hit it, a resounding, open-palmed slap.

He wasn't the only one who was angry. Some of the passengers were holding their wrists, knees, handbags, rubbing their foreheads and looking resentful. One woman muttered, 'We trust our *lives* to these people.'

Wei, still holding on to my wrist in her warm, damp grip, pulled me to a pair of empty seats. She smiled at me again, that irascible, suggestive curl at the corners of her lips making me feel instantly better. 'It's just not our lucky day, I guess-' she broke off her sentence, and wrinkled her nose, silently mouthing, 'What's that *smell*?'

I hadn't noticed it before, but now I smelt it and knew it for what it was. One gnarled, long-clawed hand was resting on the back of Wei's seat and although she wouldn't look, I turned around and studied the man who was watching us, whose eyes were bright and curious and nonsensical. The man whose life I was in some strange way responsible for.

I will never know whether he recognised me from some dim hazy image of his past, or whether it was the blood, our blood, that pulled it and us together. He regarded me with the easy and horrible understanding of someone who saw

something in me that I couldn't and I saw recognition in those eyes. 'Boy,' he said, and he grinned, baring his gums. 'Good boy.'

One of his unspeakably dirty fingers had started twirling a stray strand of Wei's hair, and a few caught on the ridge of his broken, black fingernails. The side of his finger stroked the back of her milky neck. She was looking at me now, eyes wide and close to accusing, and I barely heard her say, 'Can we move? I think we should move. Please.'

It wasn't her I needed to talk to, though. 'Stop it,' I said, knowing even as I said so that I couldn't order him around and he knew it. He may not have known anything else, but he knew that much. I was his as much as he was mine. 'Stop it, stop it,' I said, louder. Wei had stopped talking to me, perhaps understanding that in this moment, I was held by something she wasn't. She addressed him in a low whisper that sounded like a shriek, 'Please stop.' He did not. She pushed his hand away so roughly we could hear his fingernails smack against the stained glass, a move that had an anger and desperation that Wei never normally had. Her eyes never left my face and yet he behaved as if she'd done nothing. He persisted as if she had done nothing.

Wei had turned to look out of the window, and I could see how her lips-their sweet curl completely lost now- trembled. His index finger had started running down the side of her neck, the thick fingernail gently scraping her skin. He looked at me again, my infection, my liability, my life saved, my good deed, and smiled. 'Boy,' he said, softly, not stopping, never stopping.