

My  
Toronto  
Life.

By Mike Lue



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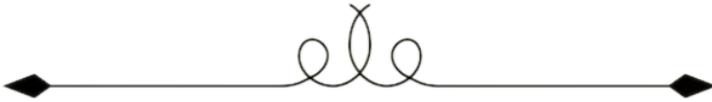
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# PROLOGUE



## FAMILY DAY

**I**t was February 20, this year's family day. Jason had just turned eighteen and sat on the couch in a daze. His father, Mike, sat across from him with his usual serious expression on his face. In Jason's memory, his father rarely had a sense of humor when he spoke. Every conversation seemed to be a sermon as if he wanted to impart a lifetime of experience all at once to his child.

The child was not impressed with the approach of being force-fed with indoctrination, as he deemed himself to be far from the age where such topics should be comprehensible. Additionally, the ideas espoused by his father were markedly distinct from those discussed by his teachers and playmates and divergent from his mother's everyday remarks.

Mike looked at his son, his only child, with a hint of sadness in his eyes.

"My boy, you're eighteen now; you're not a minor anymore. I've been waiting for this day for so long."

"Why?" He couldn't understand his father's anxiety and helplessness. In his view, there was no difference between turning eighteen and before.

"Now that you're an adult and no longer bound by family law, we can have some adult conversations," Mike continued.

Jason felt a little bit nervous, as all of this marked the end of carefree childhood years, and he would have to start thinking about the various troubles and worries of the adult world. He nodded gently and shifted his gaze at the Ragdoll cat, Snowball, who was lying on the other side of the couch.

When Snowball came to this family, she was only two months old and had just been weaned from her mother. Like all pet cats, leaving her mother meant goodbye forever; this new family was everything to her. The first time Mike laid eyes on the kitten, she had a snowy white forehead and a tail as thin as a single line. When Mike cradled her in his arms, he felt her tiny, delicate body relax against him, her soft purring filling the room with a soothing hum; the little thing started to doze off in a stranger's hold.

The kitten had turned into a ten-year-old senior cat; her black forehead resembled Batman's helmet, and the fluffy fur all over her body made her look old and decrepit. She spent most of her day lying on the couch, sleeping, yawning, and licking herself. Jason had never liked this cat, perhaps out of jealousy. When he was not around, Dad doted on her like a daughter.

Snowball unfurled her charming and curious eyes, watching the father and son in front of her, poised like a white angel, ready to mediate the imminent family

conflict.

Mike pointed to a stack of documents on the coffee table and said, "These are all the court documents, and they're all about access. I'm not that stupid; I've never even tried custody."

Jason glanced at the pile of documents, which was at least three inches thick, and asked in confusion, "Why did you guys have to go to court to solve these problems? Couldn't you just sit down calmly and talk things out? Mom is a very easy-going person."

Mike gave a bitter smile and did not answer. He stood silently and walked to the living room window, gazing outside. The entire backyard was covered with thick snow. It was the coldest time in Toronto, and the snow could last two weeks without melting. All the painful memories of these years gushed back into his mind, coldness, only coldness.

Mike turned abruptly and faced Jason directly, his eyes showing a determination never seen before. No force could change the decision he was about to make.

"Jason, I require you to return to this house every night for the next eighteen years."

Jason shook his head gently and sneered, "Dad, are you mad?"

"No, not at all." Mike replied, "I need your company; only your presence by my side makes me feel you're still my son. Without this companionship, you mean nothing to me."

Jason was stunned; he slightly opened his mouth, never realizing that his first adult conversation would be so serious. He gathered up his courage and replied sternly.

"You can't restrict me like that. I'm already an adult."

Mike didn't let up and continued to apply pressure.

"It's true that you're an adult, and you're fully capable of living independently. If you choose to reject my demands, you're free to leave this house immediately. You don't have to be my son."

Jason was totally shaken by his father's heartless and almost cruel words, and for a moment, he was at a loss for words. After steadying his emotions a bit, he confirmed once again that what he had just heard came from his father's mouth. He was not unaware of the pain his father had suffered over the years, but he had never realized that the pain ran so deep that it drove his father almost to madness.

"Dad, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were hurt so deeply."

"Well, my son, your mother brought you up; it's time to remove the femininity inside you and see how men deal with things."

Jason understood that the likelihood of his father making a compromise at this moment was slim. He had to find a smart solution to get out of the current predicament.

"But your request is practically infeasible. It makes no sense in the real world."

"Oh really? How do you know?"

"I've sent out many applications to different colleges. How about I go to college outside Toronto this fall?"

"Then don't."

"What?" Jason shook his head slowly in disbelief.

"I spent many years in universities as both a student and a staff member. While college life may seem desirable to you, to me, it is a fatigue of the senses. Toronto has many colleges that are more than

sufficient to satisfy your thirst for knowledge and ambition for the future."

Mike made his way back to the couch, sat down, and continued, "Jason, the years between 18 and 36 are the most important time of your life. You'll transition from a greenhorn youth into a seasoned man. I hope you stay close to me so I can offer you effective support if you ever face the same challenges I did when I was your age."

Of course, Jason wouldn't buy it. "Come on, Dad, don't lecture me with these clichés."

Mike smiled as he looked at his beloved son, silently accepting his mild rebellious tantrums.

"What if..." Jason hesitated with a bit of blush on his face. "What if I found a good girl and got married? You don't expect me to live under this roof after that?"

Mike's face contorted into an extreme displeasure, and the smile from earlier vanished without a trace. "Well, Jason, you won't get my blessings if that happens."

"Seriously?" Jason was disappointed and a little annoyed. "What are you talking about?"

"Marriage is a dying concept; it's the last thing you should do in your life. You have many options to start a relationship with a girl. I have been living with Emma for over ten years. She comes to this house four days a week. We have stuck to this rule ever since we met. We're not married; we're not even common-law partners. We have our own commitments between ourselves, rather than obligations that other parties could interfere with."

Seeing Jason sitting there dumbfounded, Mike continued, "Jason, pay some respect to warnings from older generations. Find the girl you love and the

commitments you both can accept. Don't put your fate in other people's hands!"

Obviously, these opinions were indigestible to Jason, and he still tried to justify his immature views. "Are you suggesting I live with a girl without a marriage? That's not fair to her."

"Oh, come on, my boy, you're the weak one. You're the one who needs protection."

Mike's unconventional comments shattered Jason's innocent cognitive system. He looked at Mike with puzzled eyes, expecting some words in line with common sense from his father. However, he would get none.

"I know these things are difficult for you to understand, but it's okay; it takes time, and they're not simple topics by themselves. First, let me ask you a simple question: Can you live without a girl?"

"No," Jason answered subconsciously.

"Of course, you can't. The testosterone God has put in your body will force you to go out to search, to hunt, for a female. But not the other way around. Women can live without men for years and maybe for their whole lives. This is the sexual advantage of women over men. Men pay hookers for sex, but sex is a mutual activity; why is there money flowing from one party to the other? You see men proposing on their knees; you can dub it as romance, but what is underneath is the sexual advantage people tend to overlook."

Mike didn't stop. "All male creatures in this world are underdogs in front of females. Humans are not exceptions. The physical precedence gives you the illusion that you are the stronger ones."

Jason was bombarded with a state of numbness,

and he was totally disoriented, lost in a sea of confusion.

Mike wasn't surprised by the child's bewilderment, nor did he show any mercy.

"Read these files, and you'll see what has happened in court for the past years. This will help you to understand better what I just said. Give me an answer of yes or no after three days. You're going to face the first important choice in your life."

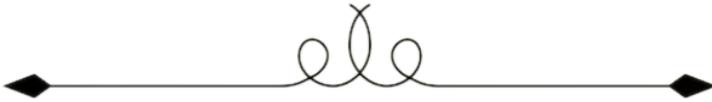


# PART ONE

We are all the progeny of migrants, of people who moved across continents and oceans and arrived in new places with nothing but an overwhelming determination to survive and prosper as they created new lives.

- DAVID SUZUKI

# CHAPTER ONE



## TWENTY YEARS AGO

**M**y name is Mike Lue, and I was 36 when I first set foot in Toronto. It was a hot summer day in August when my first cousin, Robert, picked me up at Pearson International Airport. As we drove from the airport to Scarborough, I got my first glimpse of what Toronto looked like, and it was quite different from what I had imagined. Having spent eight years in Germany, I was used to the European-style urban layout, and Toronto seemed a bit more rustic in appearance.

Rob placed me in a house close to where he lived. I lived in a small semi-basement room, and the rent was \$240 per month, which was considered very cheap according to the prices at that time. These semi-basement rooms are a popular form of housing in large cities, especially suitable for low-income groups and new immigrants.

Living in North America, a car is one of the most essential things. Despite its importance, not everyone owns a car due to its high running cost. The insurance premiums for beginners are unreasonably high, enough to deter newcomers without income. I had worked in Germany for a few years and had some savings, which was enough to support me for a long time. Therefore, I believed that no matter where I tried to cut costs, it could never be on the car. It proved to be an exceedingly wise decision in the years that followed, as the fortuitous experiences that came with driving had brought me immeasurable benefits.

The Ontario driver's license system is divided into three levels. The first level, G1, is essentially an identification card, while the second level, G2, is the actual license that allows me to drive. I was determined to drive my own car as soon as possible, so I managed to get it just one month after arriving in Toronto.

Next, I bought a run-down used car, but I had to face an awkward situation where the price of the car was much lower than the insurance premium. But for a novice, this was a painful stage many people had to go through. Having a car to drive was already enjoyable, as it could expand my range of activities to the maximum and subsequently increase my opportunities.

The truly meaningful opportunity arose much later when I urgently needed to find a job. The job market in Canada was demanding for newbies; almost all employers required Canadian work experience from applicants, which could only accumulate through actual work. This created a dead-end cycle for new immigrants starting from scratch.

Numerous social service organizations emerged

intending to help new immigrants acquire work experience in Canada. The assistance proved to be truly a lifesaver, given that newcomers to Canada were generally unaware of the country's social fabric and had limited opportunities to engage with society.

I applied for a training program offered by an institution located in the eastern part of old Toronto. The program provided a service to help students find job positions within local companies, under the condition that the position was unpaid, commonly referred to as a placement. You could gain the work experience that you urgently need, but the company would not pay you one dollar.

To participate in this program, applicants were required to meet a certain level of English proficiency. To obtain the proficiency certificate, I stayed at LINC for two weeks, a government-sponsored language service designed to help newcomers improve their English skills. While there, I had the pleasure of meeting many people with diverse backgrounds from various countries. One person in particular left a deep impression on me.

He was around my age, quiet and reserved. In our conversation, I learned that he had been here for a year and was planning to stay another year. His logic was honing skills before rushing into a job without adequate preparation. When I heard such a plausible viewpoint, an inexplicable sorrow gripped my heart, particularly upon hearing a teacher from an adjacent classroom speaking English with a rolling, guttural accent.

He was unlikely to be wealthy because rich individuals typically would not seek out free resources. Hiring a private tutor for interactive teaching and

learning might be a nicer option. Now that he was not of great means, he must be responsible for supporting his family or himself if he was alone.

When the working class arrives on this new continent, they are often faced with a stark choice between manual labor and office jobs. Once this choice is made, it can be difficult to change course in the future. Many people hold onto the hope of being able to work and study simultaneously to lay the groundwork for future career changes. However, the reality is that once they begin the physically demanding jobs, the daily grind and exhaustion can make it challenging to maintain motivation for continued learning. Additionally, physical labor jobs in Canada often provide decent wages, leading people to naturally fall into the rhythm of this lifestyle and accept it as their norm.

In the first one or two years after landing, the choices you make can have a significant impact on your future life in Canada. It's like a huge gamble where making the right bet can bring lifelong benefits. I greatly admired the courage of that brother who insisted on studying, as continuing to learn was always the right thing to do, especially in the early years. However, sticking to LINC for two years, to only learn English rather than the professional skills needed for future work, was something hard to accept.

English is an endless task, one that you can constantly improve and strengthen, but you can never reach the level of those who were born into it. Fluent English is never the employers' sole requirement; it's the skills you possess and can use to create value for the company. I see many big shots speaking English incoherently with strange accents on various media,

yet it doesn't diminish their shining brilliance. As long as you can express your thoughts freely, that's all that matters.

After obtaining the language certificate provided by LINC, I easily gained entry to that placement training program. At the end of two months of participation, all of our learners successfully found job placements as expected. The company I went to was a vendor of surveillance cameras. They urgently needed a website and chat software that could communicate with customers in real time.

I had my doubts about why they were selling such a product, and for a long time, I wondered how many people would actually use a camera. After many years, as I witnessed the widespread installation of these cameras in major streets, shopping centers, and residential areas, I finally realized its huge demand in the market. Accurate and timely market demand analysis is the key to winning the market.

I had never been good at predicting future trends. When I was pursuing my master's degree in Germany, my research direction was in artificial intelligence. If I had known that this field would become so popular today, I would have spared no effort in finding a job in that direction. In those days, artificial intelligence seemed like a pipe dream - a technology that was only achievable in the controlled environment of a laboratory and out of reach for practical use.

Another reason that led me to abandon the field of artificial intelligence without hesitation was my weariness with the academic environment. A Ph.D. friend once told me about the actual fact of academia: with the same amount of effort, one can earn only half the salary as in industry. This further influenced my

decision to pivot toward the industry when I had the chance to start everything anew.

Web design is a practical skill that is easy to learn and has many applications. When I say it's easy, I mean it's relatively uncomplicated to someone like me with many years of IT background, not to those completely unfamiliar with IT knowledge. Even with this advantage, I spent nearly half a year, combined with practical experience in the company, gradually understanding the intricacies of market requirements and relevant technical details. Soon after, with my resume polished and refined, I embarked upon my quest for the ideal position.

The interviews came as anticipated, but the quantity outweighed the quality. They were all with small to medium-sized companies, and almost all of them were phone interviews. After asking a few common questions, there was no follow-up. One day, a recruiter from a well-known headhunting firm called and asked me to sign a representation agreement with them. It seemed that I had some value to them. The head-hunter was located in Mississauga, and several interview opportunities they set up were held there.

The significance of owning a car began to reveal itself as I had the freedom to attend interviews at various locations, with the farthest one being in Hamilton. The Golden Horseshoe region was the most prosperous area of the Canadian economy; no wonder the recruiter could find so many opportunities for me. I grew tired of the constant traveling and finally moved to Mississauga.

Moving was nothing new to me. When I was in Germany, I used to move to places with weekend tickets. It felt just like I was reliving those days once

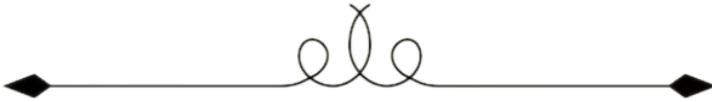
again. Plus, I was single then and could be relocated anywhere I wanted. After informing Rob of my decision, I moved directly to Mississauga. One immediate benefit was that I changed from the basement to the ground floor, which improved my living conditions and lifted my spirits considerably.

However, as far as the interviews were concerned, my situation remained unchanged, and the feeling of frustration continued to haunt me. The interviewers were very polite, occasionally even humorous. The conversation had grown increasingly detailed, tantalizingly close to an offer. Yet there were no more notifications in several days, and I knew it was another failure.

At this moment, a critical time point appeared: it had been one year since I got my G2 driver's license. According to relevant regulations in Ontario, the permanent driver's license, also known as the G license, can be obtained by taking the test at any time after one year. Without any delay, I went to an MTO office and passed the road test on my first attempt.

And then, my good fortune arrived.

# CHAPTER TWO



## MISSISSAUGA

**A**lthough I had only resided in the city of Mississauga for half a year, my love for it knew no bounds. The city's charm did not stem from its expansive streets, nor from the exquisite Marilyn Monroe building, or even the Toronto Pearson International Airport, the largest airport in Canada. It was not even due to the city's legendary and beloved Mayor Hazel McCallion, who had ruled the city for almost forty years. Instead, it was where my dreams began, a fact that made it even more special to me.

Everyone who arrived in the New World had their own American dream, shaped by their previous life experiences and circumstances. I was born during an era of extreme poverty in China, a level of deprivation unimaginable today. Five years later, my little sister was born into this family, and the four of us were crammed into a tiny ten-square-meter room. We all

slept on a single large bed, but due to its limited size, my dad had to construct a makeshift stand to support our pillows at night. Another small bed in the room was reserved for my paralyzed maternal grandmother, who had been bedridden for as long as I could remember.

Life was tough, yet blissful in its simplicity, for people of that time held no excessive desires. During the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese people were fervently immigrating to North America, searching for a better life in a different world, even if they were unsure if it would suit them. Those with technical backgrounds usually found success, although some had to abandon their previous professions and even switch to manual labor. But for those with cultural or artistic backgrounds, it often ended in tragedy. The chasms of culture, language, and custom were insurmountable, leaving them nowhere to stand. To make matters worse, they missed out on China's rapid growth over the last thirty years.

The technical background seemed appropriate, and I didn't have unrealistic aspirations. Finding a professional job and ultimately entering the middle class would be considered successful for my generation. Mississauga provided me with a timely push for this purpose.

When I browsed through job websites, I couldn't help but notice a certain type of advertisement seeking school bus drivers to serve their community by safely transporting children to and from school. I chose to ignore them because they were not aligned with my career goals or even full-time positions. As time passed, listings of professional jobs came and went, while the ads for school bus drivers seemed to remain

constant, always present, and never fading away.

I was curious and called their number. The receptionist explained their long list of requirements, among which I found the only mandatory requirement was holding a G license. So I went to their company, Stuart Transportation Ltd., located at the southwest corner of Mississauga, almost to the Oakville area. I quickly registered for a new training course, which was scheduled to begin in ten days.

I called Rob as well, telling him I was going to be a school bus driver, but I never gave up seeking a professional job. This was a part-time job and would not be too influential and decisive for my whole career. Rob agreed with me, but he insisted on me coming back to Scarborough, as he promised my dad before I came to Canada that he would take care of me, so it would be better if I lived close to him.

Stuart Transportation was a large company that had a branch located in Scarborough. I drove all the way to the Scarborough branch and talked to their staff. But a weird thing happened - their system was broken, and they could not register me for the training course that would start on the same day as in Mississauga. And they told me to come back the next day to register.

Oh Lord, how many times have you saved me in these treacherous situations? What if their computer system wasn't kaput on that day? What if I still had the energy and enthusiasm to drive sixty kilometers to Scarborough the next morning? But I didn't. In the days after that, I got another unsuccessful interview, which totally disturbed the plan of coming back to Scarborough. I was destined to go to that school bus company, which was located, to be more precise, in

Oakville, which was one of the wealthiest communities in the GTA, aka. Greater Toronto Area.

The day I went to attend the training course was a sunny day in October. When I arrived, I was told to go straight into the classroom. I thought there must be at least a dozen students in the class, but to my surprise, there was only one instructor and two students, including me.

Another student was a chubby middle-aged white woman in her forties with an approachable appearance and a lovely smile. She and I sat side by side behind a small table. My physique was robust and brawny, even among men. The two sturdy figures made the table and chairs particularly delicate and petite. I felt a sense of excitement like a primary school student on their first day of school. I had not received any education in Canada, and all my knowledge of website design was self-taught through online materials. The first time I was placed in a real classroom was so memorable.

Her name was Teresa, a mother of two kids. I surmised that she began working due to the increasing financial pressures of raising a family as her children grew up. We didn't talk much on the first day, as we weren't familiar with each other. Our teacher, Syed, a middle-aged Bangladeshi immigrant, was very knowledgeable and talkative, and he taught us a lot of theoretical knowledge necessary for operating large commercial vehicles.

In the days that followed, the conversations between me and Teresa became more frequent, and Syed started to show us the real school bus in the yard. The yard was a spacious rectangle plot; on the short edge, about twenty 72-seat Bluebirds were arranged in two rows, and nearly an equal number of identical

school buses lined up in a single row along the long edge. On the opposite long side, approximately fifteen 24-seat Chevrolet Micro Birds were also parked there.

I was amazed by how they aligned and asked Syed, "How did you park these jumbo vehicles so neatly?"

Syed laughed. "Don't worry, you can do it after the training."

I was very skeptical and looked at Teresa, who shrugged at me to express her disbelief as well, and it was clear that she had no confidence in it either.

We walked up to the closest 72-seat Bluebird to the office, and Syed skillfully opened the hood, revealing the full view of the engine. It was a mixture of wires, hoses, belts, filters, and containers all tangled up together, a sight that would make anyone frown upon seeing it.

"Open this hood for everyday pre-trip vehicle inspection. Remember, this is a commercial vehicle; you can't drive it casually like your personal car," Syed cautioned.

Teresa was apparently fidgeting. "I would be freaked out if I had to remember all the steps of vehicle inspection, and especially the names of all these parts." Her finger pointed at this jumbled mess.

"Oh, come on, Teresa, this isn't that intimidating." I interrupted while taking out my phone. "I can take a picture of this and google the names of the parts, and I'm an IT guy; this is just a piece of cake."

This conversation didn't catch anyone's attention, and nobody thought it was anything special until a few days later when Teresa suddenly asked me, "Mike, are you looking for an IT job?"

"Yes," I answered automatically. "How do you

know?"

"You said you are an IT guy, yet you're trying to be a school bus driver." Teresa continued, "My husband is a manager in one of the major banks in Canada; he's looking for a web designer. Can you send your resume to him?"

"What?" I stood there frozen for a while, "Are you serious?"

"Yes, please send your resume to Damien. He is the hiring manager now. I wish you good luck!"

I met Damien five days later in a face-to-face interview. Together with us was his friend and colleague Ryan. They both lived in Oakville, so the time was chosen to be after work hours, and the location was in a Starbucks coffee shop on Dundas Street in Oakville.

The atmosphere of that interview was unlike any of the previous ones. Damien placed my resume on the table but barely looked at it. Our conversation was very casual and focused primarily on my background and experiences in Germany. My German diploma provided me with significant assistance. Adapting to the Canadian academic system would have been far more complicated without it.

Ryan was a very academic-oriented technical person who posed me with two intelligence test questions. I answered one of them correctly, but for the other question, to be honest, I didn't even understand what he was talking about. My English level was considered good among non-native speakers, but inevitably, there were embarrassing moments of not understanding. Moreover, this was with Ryan intentionally slowing down his speech. Imagine how challenging it could have been for most

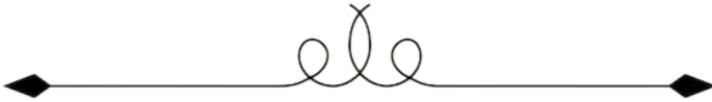
immigrants in their early years; life was never easy.

Ryan meant well; he didn't want to stump me, and Damien must have tasked him to ensure that the interview maintained its technicality. Many years later, when I heard the news that Ryan had been killed in a car accident while on vacation in the States, I cried. People leave you the most profound impressions during tough times, while they are often overlooked and forgotten during times of ease.

When the interview finished, it was already dark outside. I drove back to the place I rented in Mississauga and quickly fell asleep. This time, I felt something different; I was anxious but more confident.

A week later, I was invited to another interview with the technical lead of Damien's team in the downtown office. It all fared well. Damien gave me the offer after another week, I got the job.

# CHAPTER THREE



## WORKPLACE

**D**amien did not merely offer me a job; he offered me a new life. This stable employment opened doors to many things that followed, both joy and sorrow, and life has been different ever since.

Before commencing my employment at the bank, I had the pleasure of being a school bus driver for eight days. Although it was a brief stint, it brought me an immense amount of happiness, which I had not experienced since arriving in Canada.

All of my route was within the city of Oakville, and it was during the afternoon when the children joyfully returned home. Watching the children board the bus with excitement, I couldn't help but admire these carefree little ones. They grew up locally and would have good jobs in the future without having to leave their hometown and struggle in a totally unfamiliar cultural environment.

There has never been absolute fairness in this world, but if you feel content with what you have, that is the greatest happiness. I soon discovered the joy of being a school bus driver. On the road, the school bus was always the most respected presence. Every time I opened the door, the children would disembark one by one, causing traffic on both sides of the road to come to a stop, no matter how rushed the other drivers wanted to be. This feeling remains so beautiful in my memory, as everyone values minors' safety.

I still clearly remember my last trip and the last passenger. It was a little girl of French descent who was about six or seven years old. I inferred she was a French-Canadian because the school I picked up students from was a French immersion school.

In Canada, French's importance is equivalent to Spanish in the States. Historically, French influence was mainly in Eastern Canada and the Louisiana Colony, which later ceded to British and Spanish rule. Bilingual individuals are prevalent in Ontario and Quebec. Damien is also bilingual, as I found out from later talks.

The little girl spoke to me in very decent English when I approached her stop. "Can you stop in front of my house over there?" as she pointed at a house fifty meters away.

"Of course, we can stop there," I answered without hesitation. I knew it was against the regulations, but who would refuse a lovely, innocent girl like this? And the school bus was under my complete control at that moment.

The girl's angelic face resembled a movie star in a very old film, "Date with an Angel," which brought a sense of purity to my soul. How wonderful it would be

if I could have a daughter like her someday.

She hopped off the school bus and waved goodbye. I watched her enter the house and then left. She wouldn't see me again in the days to come.

The office building of the IT security department is located right at the foot of the CN Tower, Toronto's iconic landmark. It is my observation that in almost every city around the world, the central districts are typically occupied by major banks and other financial institutions, underscoring the dominant position of finance in modern society.

On the first day of my banking career, I was not able to perform any substantial job duties. I spent most of the time getting familiar with the environment.

At that time, the office was the only workplace, unlike today's flexible working arrangements, where people can work from home most of the time. This hybrid work style is now embraced by nearly all corporations where remote work is feasible. But back then, working from home was a sensitive topic and often considered equivalent to being unproductive or lazy.

Each cubicle in the office was like a second home to us, as we spent almost half of our lives there. These workspaces were decorated in unique and varied styles, reflecting the individual owner's personal tastes and perspectives. Many people placed photos of their loved ones on the desks, constantly reminding them of the importance of family in their daily lives.

Damien showed me around different cubicles to introduce me to colleagues who are relevant to work. They came from diverse ethnic groups, unlike the new immigrants I had met when I first arrived in Toronto.

These were IT professionals, and many of them grew up locally. They seemed more polite and certainly more knowledgeable in their field.

One of them was Alex. He later became my best friend in the bank and my mentor in life. He was excited when he heard that I could speak German, as his ancestors were from Germany. But his knowledge of German was limited to the basic greetings like "Wie geht's?" and not much beyond that.

He was about five years older than me, tall and white, the well-groomed mustache showing his rugged and masculine charm. I assumed he must have a beautiful wife and a bunch of lovely kids, but contrary to what I had imagined, he had a short marriage in his early thirties and remained single after that. He always complained to me that it was hard to find a soul mate.

Perhaps he had set too high expectations for his significant other, as he was always very strict about technical issues we dealt with daily. He was the technical lead of another team that was our client, an internal client. My work was centered around designing a portal website to address the security requirements that his team had drafted. His demanding work attitude kept me very busy in the early days.

Three months had passed quickly, and my probation period was over, which meant that my position was relatively stable then. Maybe it was not that important in most companies, but it was a psychological hurdle in my mind. Now that this timeline had been smoothly passed over, I planned to pursue the next big goal - buying my own house.

For this purpose, I went to Alex for advice. It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon, and we sat around a small

coffee table next to a glass curtain wall, looking out at the breathtaking view of Lake Ontario.

"Why the rush?" Alex was unfazed by my inquiry, "Buying a house is not a trivial undertaking, and maintaining it can also be very troublesome."

"I know you're not very fond of home ownership, but for us Chinese, it is a deeply ingrained desire in our blood. We're willing to forgo the pleasure of dining out, traveling, and leisure time. Owning a house makes us feel safe and stable."

"Is it worth the cost of a mortgage and giving up the flexibility of life?" Alex challenged. "I understand your desire to be a house owner, but weighing the pros and cons before making such a significant investment is important."

Alex was a staunch proponent of a nomadic lifestyle. He rented a spacious and comfortable apartment in the heart of the city, commuting by bike every day. He had a myriad of interests and hobbies, all of which involved immersing himself in nature. From fishing to hiking, kayaking to scooping, he sought out every possible opportunity to bask in the great outdoors. His biggest dream was to travel to all the countries in the world. If technology allows, he would like to drive a campervan around scenic areas, work online during the day, and embrace nature for the rest of the time.

I could no longer talk over houses because Alex had already slumped halfway into the small chair. He likely would have slid down onto the floor if I had continued.

"Alex, would you like to hear something interesting?"

"What's that?" Alex asked, mustering some energy

and sitting up a bit straighter.

I was not as anxious and apprehensive as I was three months prior. My colleagues were friendly and amiable, and the work environment was nothing short of tranquil and soothing. With Alex, I felt comfortable sharing all my thoughts and feelings, so I told him the story of how I came to work in this position.

Alex's eyes widened with a mix of excitement and astonishment. "I've heard stories about the importance of networking, and I'm witnessing one now. You are really, really lucky!"

"Well, Alex, there's something more. Hear me out before you make the judgment of who's lucky or not."

I deliberately teased him with a cliffhanger, and Alex sat up straight with his body slightly leaning forward, ready to hear my story attentively.

"Back to the time when I was a kid, the educational resources were very limited in China. Going to college was a luxury. We needed to outperform peers to get into the higher-ranking schools."

Alex was listening carefully, seemingly more captivated by this than the previous topics.

"There was a strange policy back then that you may never understand. Students with relatives living abroad were entitled to a bonus of 5 points out of 500."

"What? This doesn't make any sense."

I laughed and said to Alex. "I'm with you, and I didn't understand it either. But that's what actually happened. Maybe the Chinese government wanted to show friendship to other countries at a specific period. Whether you believe it or not doesn't matter. It's a part of history."

"Right, I believe you."

"My mom has eight siblings on her side of the family. My second aunt followed the retreat to Taiwan before the whole country was liberated in 1949. She was the reason why I could enjoy these 5 extra points."

Alex squinted his eyes and looked at me as if he could see through me and find out if I was fabricating a story. Making up a story is not that easy. If you don't do it well, there will be flaws everywhere. My story doesn't need any fabrication. Sometimes, I am even amazed by its dramatic nature.

"I used these 5 extra points when I went to the best junior high school in the district, the best senior high school in the city, and the best university in the province. Each time, my total score was just slightly shy from the admission line, but within 5 points."

Alex had already begun to feel restless, changing positions several times in his chair.

"What are the odds of that?" He marveled.

"The last time I used these points, my dad yelled at me. Can't you score just a little more? What can I say? I still had the ability to get close to the admission line. Those were the best schools in the region."

Alex nodded and laughed.

"Sounds like a coincidence, right? This God-given privilege saved my ass throughout my childhood."

"Now I see you're a fortunate guy." Alex was quite confident he got the point.

"Oh, really, this is not all of it," I continued.

Alex frowned; he couldn't imagine if there was something left unsaid.

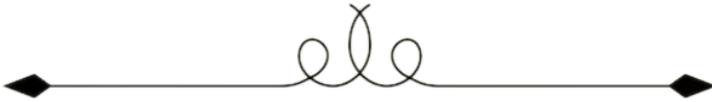
"Well, the real problem is I was never eligible for this benefit. Taiwan was never regarded as a foreign country in the eyes of Chinese people; my aunt's first contact letter was sent from Hong Kong in the 1980s

because of the cross-strait tensions at that time. Hong Kong was a British colony before 1997, and it was considered a foreign country."

Alex was silent, gazing out of the window, obsessed with the beauty of Lake Ontario; he seemed to be nonchalant to what I just said. His rigorous work attitude and reasoning methods were of no use here.

"My aunt passed away at the age of 92; throughout her life, she was never conscious of the fact her nephew's career was saved due to her sagacious action half a century ago," I added.

# CHAPTER FOUR



## HOUSE

**A**lex's comments did not extinguish my passion for a house, and I continue to pursue the goal that means everything to me.

After I started the bank job, I moved to the bustling downtown area to minimize my commute time. Although Mississauga had become a distant memory, the cherished moments I spent there still lingered in my mind, sweet and unforgettable. I rented a room in Chinatown, close to Toronto Western Hospital.

It only took five minutes to drive to my workplace from there. Several people advised me to sell the car and walk to work instead. I suddenly understood why Alex didn't own a car and used a bike for transportation. But that wasn't me. I couldn't live without a car - it was a part of my life. My car was no better than a heap of junk, and its value was much

lower than the insurance premium. Nevertheless, I insisted on driving it to the office daily and paying a \$10 daily parking fee for the underground parking garage.

That was just the parking fee for the workplace; parking in residential areas also required money. The city issued parking permits for residents in the downtown area, which cost \$90 for six months. I could stick it on the windshield and park anywhere in the neighborhood's street. But the problem was that I had to find a free space nearby to park my vehicle.

Once, there was a big issue related to parking. I had difficulty finding an empty space around, so I parked my car in another block a little farther away. My mind was perplexed that night, probably due to hard work during the day, and the next morning, I couldn't remember where I parked my car. I searched for half an hour without any luck, and in the end, I had to call 911 and ask for help from the police.

Two hours later, I received a call from the police saying that they had found my car. When I saw it, it was covered with police tapes. I had to explain to the officers that it was not stolen. I just couldn't remember where I had parked it. The officers laughed and told me that this was very common in downtown areas and that the police service was free, so I didn't need to pay anything for it.

Removing those police tapes was not as easy as I thought. There were still traces of them left on the car's body, which caused me another problem a week later. A police patroller pulled me over, and they accused me of stealing the car. It took me a lot of effort to explain the situation to them.

Being pulled over by the police in North America

is not a pleasant experience, especially when it involves car theft. If you do not comply with police instructions, you may be shot on the spot, and your life is not worth a dime. Luckily, nothing worse happened during these incidents.

I was completely tired of living in the downtown area, so I made up my mind to buy my own house in the more spacious uptown area.

The last time I saw Rob was when I drove from Mississauga to Stuart Transportation in Scarborough. I couldn't imagine what it would be like for now if I were still driving a school bus in Scarborough.

Rob's house was in the Agincourt community in Scarborough, close to the border of the City of Markham. Scarborough was amalgamated into the City of Toronto in 1998; before that, it was on the same administrative level as Markham.

I visited Rob's house on a scheduled weekend. It was 3000 square feet two-story house. I couldn't afford a house like this; a little more than half the size would be perfect for me.

I walked directly into the house's foyer without knocking at the door because I just called them half an hour ago. Rob waved at me.

"Hey, our lucky guy. Come on in. How's it going?"

"Not bad. How are you?"

As we strolled together into the living room, I saw two women standing up from the sofa. One was Sophia, Rob's wife, who had lived with Rob for over ten years in Toronto. The other was Lisa, the woman Rob mentioned in the call that Sophia wanted to introduce to me.

After exchanging a few greetings, Sophia and Lisa went to the kitchen to prepare some desserts and fruit.

Rob and I sat down, and he looked at me with a peculiar expression in his eyes, as things were quite different from the last time I had visited this house a few months ago.

"How's your new job? Are you happy working there?"

"Pretty good. The team is friendly, and the work they are doing is exactly what I had hoped for."

"Mike, you are really lucky! This is a scarce opportunity that people can hardly expect. You did meet the benefactor of your life."

"Sometimes, God's decisions are elusive and enigmatic!" I uttered a heartfelt exclamation.

Rob nodded in agreement. Unlike Rob and Sophia, who are Catholic and worship God regularly on weekends, I don't go to church, even though I firmly believe there is an almighty God who controls everything in this world.

I looked up and glanced around the spacious living room with a complex blend of admiration and longing. "Rob, I want to buy a house. Maybe not as big as this, but I need a place to call my own," I said in a humble yet confident tone.

"Have you made up your mind?" Rob's gaze was filled with doubt. "This is a big decision, and it will forever change your lifestyle. If you were to find a better job in another city or in the States, relocating would be difficult. Since you work in the IT industry, changing jobs is a common thing."

"I need a house," I answered affirmatively.

"Well, I respect your decision," Rob said with a light chuckle. "I have to say, your speed is breakneck. When we bought this house, it was five years after we came here."

"I have some savings from my previous job in Germany, and my parents can also provide some assistance, so it should be easy to come up with the down payment. My current job is very stable, and my colleagues told me that, even in the toughest financial turmoil, the bank has never resorted to layoffs. In fact, it could be the best time for me to buy a house now, and if I miss this opportunity, I will probably regret it for the rest of my life."

"You are right. The price for the housing market has been significantly higher than the time we made the purchase. The only potential direction is upward."

"Can you introduce a real estate agent to me?"

"I do have a friend in this market, and his name is Ethan. He can help you find a good house that meets your requirements. But keep in mind this is a very profitable market; it has many tricks. I can tell you one now; you can discover the others yourself when you go through this process."

"What's that?" His jittery remarks almost tickled me.

"As a buyer, you will inevitably be involved in a bidding war."

That was the first time I had heard the term "bidding war," I found it quite amusing. After all, it was just buying a house - was it really like a life-and-death struggle? This term has become a new norm in the Toronto housing market for the following years.

"You have to waive home inspection conditions when you place an offer," Rob continued, making a mysterious gesture.

"Isn't that supposed to be dangerous?" I scratched my head and asked.

"Kind of, but that's some risk you have to accept."

Let me explain it in this way. You like the house, you can't stop others from liking it, you'll have to offer a higher price to get it."

"No doubt about it."

"You should be aware that the price of a house consists of two parts: one part is explicit, appearing in your offer, and the other is a hidden portion. By waiving the home inspection clause, you are forfeiting your right to legally request the seller to make improvements after you acquire the house. The true condition of the house is known only to the current owner while you, as a bidder, are in the dark about it."

"Ah, I see."

"We went through similar experiences when we bought this house, so we are familiar with these tactics. Mike, now that you have decided, purchasing the property should be your top priority. Toronto's real estate market will continue to be hot. I'll ask Ethan to contact you ASAP."

"Okay," I replied. Rob's recognition and encouragement justified my enthusiasm for a house.

"By the way, what do you think of Lisa?"

"Oh, she looks nice. When she smiles, she greatly resembles my mom."

"I know," Rob laughed and continued, "That's why we want to introduce her to you. We've been going to the same church with her for many years. Mike, you need a family."

Ethan called me on Monday. I told him I wanted to buy a house in the Agincourt community with a budget of around 500,000. He also asked me some questions about other conditions, such as a swimming pool, rooftop, exterior cladding, construction year, etc.

After five days, I began visiting houses that Ethan had prepared for me. Each weekend, he would present ten houses that met my search criteria. While all the houses were beautiful and had their unique advantages and disadvantages, the final decision rested with me to evaluate their pros and cons.

On the third weekend, after seeing thirty houses, I made an offer on a house that was listed for 500,000. The four beautifully decorated rooms on the second floor left a great impression on me. Ethan managed to negotiate a deal for 495,000, and he congratulated me on becoming a new homeowner.

As I was basking in the joy of owning my own home that evening, I suddenly realized a problem. It dawned on me that the bidding war that Rob had mentioned never happened, and there was no mention of waiving any rights for home inspection. A sense of foreboding crept over me as I realized that something had gone wrong.

It occurred to me that, apart from the very small living room and the relatively large garage, there were no other rooms on the first floor - this house had a strange layout. As I thought it over, the house didn't seem as appealing as it did when I first saw it. An indescribable fear haunted me throughout the entire night.

The next morning, I called Ethan and expressed my dislike for the house, asking for a way to back out. To my surprise, Ethan casually told me we could use the loan terms to get out of the house - was it true? I could hardly believe it. Both parties agreed upon this deal. Could it really be that easy to back out? At that moment, I understood the importance of having a real estate agent.

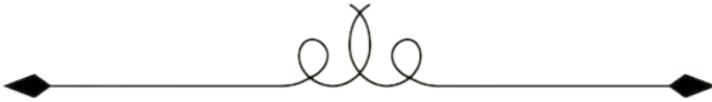
On the fourth weekend of house hunting, I encountered the situation Rob described. The house was listed for 400,000, and I offered 470,000, beating out seven other buyers. We also waived the home inspection, and it seems like we were on the right track this time.

The actual process was that Ethan hired a professional home inspector to examine the house when I expressed a strong interest in it. After receiving confirmation that there were no major issues, we felt comfortable waiving the inspection clause. As for the listing price of 400,000, it was a fictitious value aimed at attracting more buyers. Based on my experience of viewing forty houses, the true value should be around 450,000, so my bid of an extra 20,000 was completely reasonable.

Later, when I told Damian that I had to bid 70,000 dollars over the asking price to get the house, he called me crazy. Many years later, when the house price easily surpassed a million dollars, Damian and I couldn't help but marvel at how insane the Toronto housing market had become. In today's market, a 70,000-dollar markup is no longer worth mentioning.

Looking back at the first house we made a deal with, it had structural issues and some Feng Shui problems, although I was not particularly superstitious about it. It was situated on the main loop of a neighborhood and intersected with another small street, called "road rushing" in Feng Shui terms. The noise from the vehicles stopping at this intersection was unbearable. Without any experience at the time, I successfully avoided it, which was a kind of blessing from God.

# CHAPTER FIVE



## MARRIAGE

**L**isa moved in with me soon after. We didn't go through those typical romantic dates, dining out, watching movies, getting drunk, or having epic sex. All we had was plain and simple hangouts. She was one year older than me, considerate, accommodating, and always supportive and reliable when problems arose.

I left my hometown at the age of twenty-seven, and after more than a decade of wandering, I finally experienced a sense of home. I was not sure if it was due to Lisa's company or having a permanent place to live in, but this kind of sweetness was something I had never had in my life.

I trusted Rob and Sofia's judgment - they are worldly-wise and seasoned adults, and they wouldn't recommend a bad woman to me. Additionally, Lisa herself believed in God and regularly attended church,

so all these factors led me to lower my guard and believe that she would be the one to accompany me through life.

She took good care of me in those days. I never had to cook when she was around; the meals she cooked were very delicious and suited my taste. The only downside was that she never did the dishes. But it was fine; I was not a perfectionist. Sometimes, when I felt tired, she could give me a good massage, which would put me to sleep and into a good dream.

I was unaware of the concept of a common law relationship at that time. My innocent mindset was consumed with romantic notions and a vision of a blissful life. Little did I know that by continuing the relationship under these circumstances, the house I had dedicated my lifetime of hard work toward would unknowingly become co-owned by another person.

Days passed by in a blur until one day, I got the news from my sister that my mom was in critical condition - she had a medical accident.

My mom was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. If this happened today, it wouldn't be a big deal as many types of cancer are now curable with today's advanced medical technology. But back in those days, the mere mention of the word 'cancer' was enough to strike fear into the hearts of anyone who heard it. We didn't hold out much hope and thought she would leave us soon.

The wrong perception led us to make the wrong decision. The surgery that should have been done in my hometown Harbin was instead taken to Beijing, which resulted in tragic consequences later on.

The tragedy was the result of two unfortunate circumstances. Firstly, the cancer cells had taken root too close to the left cerebral artery. Secondly, the

attending physician made a perilous misjudgment by believing that the wound should heal on its own after surgery instead of using the commonly practiced method of administering intravenous antibiotics.

A contentious issue came to the forefront - the use of antibiotics. At that time, China faced a serious problem of antibiotic abuse, which directly contributed to a decline in the overall population health and created a social conundrum of weak resistance to viral infections. As a response, the Chinese government implemented a progressive policy to minimize or even prohibit the use of antibiotics, starting from Beijing, which resulted in my mom becoming a casualty of this new system.

The wound became infected on the fifth day after the surgery, and the left cerebral artery ruptured. My mom lost almost one-third of her blood; she was on the brink of death.

I boarded a plane bound for Beijing, accompanied by Lisa. It was her first time meeting my family, and we were both a bit nervous, unsure of how they would react to our unmarried cohabitation. Nonetheless, our primary concern was still my mom's critical condition. According to my sister's message, she had not yet stabilized and was receiving intensive ICU care.

When we arrived at the hospital, it was already late at night. My mom had improved slightly by then and was transferred to a ward. As we entered the room, I saw my dad sitting on a small chair, looking down silently. Exhaustion and anxiety had tortured him almost to the point of collapse. My mom was lying on a hospital bed with a nasal cannula inserted in her nose and a vein injection tube in her left hand. The IV drip had already used up half of the bag. She had her

eyes tightly closed; her face was deathly pale.

"Dad, how is mom? Is she all right?" I asked hastily.

My dad looked up and saw me. He sighed and said, "We thought it was just a minor surgery to remove the cancer cells from her throat, and that's all done. Who would have thought that the wound would fester and the blood vessels would rupture? Now she can only rely on the right cerebral artery to supply blood, as the left one has been completely cut off."

"So, it was the inflammation that caused the rupture?"

"Yes. There may be a new policy now that patients are not allowed to use antibiotics after operations, and inflammations should be self-healed by the body's natural power."

"This is absurd. How much natural power is left in the body of a 70-year-old woman?"

"This is what we argued with the doctor, but he wouldn't accept."

"But she's having the IV drip now," I said, pointing at the infusion bottle.

"Too late. She's been in the ICU three times. Her chest has been opened three times just to make the vessels seal. Thank heavens she's still alive."

Just at this moment, my mom woke up. Probably, she heard us talking amidst a dazed state.

"Mike, is that you?"

I walked up and held her hand. "I'm here; how do you feel now?"

"I thought I'd never see you again. How's your life in Toronto? After this small operation, I want to go to your place to see you. But..."

I could feel her hands trembling as she spoke

these words. Clearly, she never imagined the outcome would be like this before coming to Beijing. She had thought that this small operation could quickly fix her cancer cells, and she could happily go to Toronto to see me. But unexpectedly, this unwise decision resulted in a near-death experience.

She smiled to show me she wasn't in grave danger. At that moment, she saw Lisa. "Who is she?" she asked.

I never told them about Lisa. She only lived with me for two months, and I didn't think they needed to know that another woman was living in my house. I didn't share much about my past relationships with my family, especially my dad, who was a traditional, self-disciplined scholar type of person and strongly disapproved of unmarried sex. If I told them too much of my personal affairs, it would only be asking for trouble.

Before leaving Toronto, I had thought many times about whether or not I should bring Lisa to meet my family. This might have been the last time I would see my mom, and Lisa's presence could have brought her a great deal of comfort.

"This is Lisa; she lives with me now," I answered frankly.

All of a sudden, it seemed that Mom sensed hope. She gathered all the strength left in her and tried to reach out with her right hand, but she couldn't move it much.

"Does this mean that I can have a grandson? I want a grandson."

We stayed in Beijing for a month, and my mom was admitted to the ICU for the fourth time due to

blood leaking issues. Our emotions were up and down like a rollercoaster ride. After two weeks of uncertainty, the situation became more stable, and the doctor finally declared she was not in a life-threatening condition.

My mom's side of the family is a large group, and my second aunt, the one who went to Taiwan, is twenty years older than my mom. I have many cousins on this side, and about ten of them came to Beijing to take care of my mom. We rented a big apartment for our stay.

Lisa hit it off with my relatives and all the feedback I got told me that she was a woman worth having. We had sex twice during this month without protection. How could I take protective measures after seeing my mom's deathbed desire for a grandson during her dying moments? I was well aware of the consequences of not using protection; maybe I was being held hostage by some kind of moral standard, or perhaps I truly wanted a child.

Many people say that before you have children, you are always a child because you cannot understand the responsibilities that come with being a parent. So, strictly speaking, I was a child at that time. My mind was in a state of confusion, and my way of making an analysis was totally illogical. Moreover, the surrounding environment was noisy and complicated, and my daily schedule was unpredictable and disorderly. It was more accurate to say that I was following God's arrangements rather than making my own decisions. I was willing to bear all the consequences.

One month after we left Beijing, my whole family returned to Harbin as my mom's condition further

stabilized. Her life was totally traumatized by this medical accident, but amazingly, she was alive, and more surprisingly, she was not paralyzed; she could walk on her own.

Another month later, we received confirmation that Lisa was pregnant. At that moment, I truly realized that I was about to become a father and couldn't contain my excitement. I told my parents immediately. My mom was so overwhelmed with emotion that she could hardly speak. Perhaps this could bring her some relief and compensation for her misfortunes.

Marriage seemed to be unavoidable at the time. I didn't like this term, truly, and I thought at least half of the men in this world shared my viewpoint, yet it was the beloved dream of most women. It was said that during the wedding ceremony, the bride was the only one who felt extremely happy, while the groom was like a roast pig on a barbecue spit or a puppet clown being pulled around. Everyone else was just putting on a show, and the real purpose of the wedding was often seen as a means of socializing.

Our wedding was simple and modest. I was so poor at that time that I couldn't even afford a wedding ring. In fact, marriage has never been a game for the poor. I was holding only an entry-level position, and the full mortgage weighed heavily on me. There was no way to say that I had stepped into the middle class. Fortunately, Lisa was not picky about these things. On the wedding day, she was beaming with joy and looked more beautiful than any other woman. Most of the guests were her friends, and I was not good at socializing; only Rob and Sophia from my side were present.

We didn't go on any form of honeymoon trip, and

our lives didn't change in any way before or after the wedding. On the following Monday, I went to the office to work as usual.

I walked up to Alex's cubicle and greeted him. "Hey man, I got married." I was expecting blessings like congratulations or something similar.

"You what?" Alex stood up abruptly from his chair and said, "Marriage is a more serious word here than just saying hello to me."

"I know. Lisa is pregnant; what am I supposed to do? In our tradition, marriage is the best gift for the baby to come. Besides, Lisa is a Christian, and having a child without being married doesn't seem right."

"Well, congratulations, you're going to be a daddy."

As I joyfully reveled in the sweet blessings, Alex's countenance turned somber as he posed a question to me.

"Did you have any written conditions, like a prenup, signed up?"

Due to our close working relationship, Alex and I talked a lot daily. As conversations became more frequent, they might inevitably include personal matters.

"What is a prenup?" I was curious.

Alex almost laughed, and a hint of contempt appeared on his lips.

"You went into a marriage without any protection? Mike, you will face a lot of trouble in the future."

"Come on, Alex. We're going to have a baby together. You're being too nervous about this. How bad can a marriage get when there's a child in between?"

Alex shook his head gently, and I could sense his

restlessness as if he had previously suffered serious damage in this area.

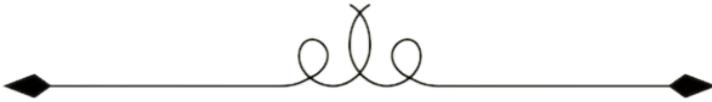
"Just wish everything goes well as you have hoped for," he said.

When people hear negative voices around them, they usually shrug them off and proceed in their own way. But I wouldn't do that. I respect every useful comment that people give me, and there must be a reason why they speak honestly to me.

I also had a vague feeling that something was different. Previously, Lisa always spoke to me with compliments, but from the wedding day, the wind began to change, and her words were filled with reproach and scolding.

Maybe that's the power of marriage.

# CHAPTER SIX



## CHILD

**W**e were required to perform the prenatal Down syndrome testing, also known as first-trimester screening, at around 12 weeks of pregnancy because Lisa and I were over 35 years old.

No one asked us why we waited until such an advanced age to consider having children, and all the healthcare professionals who performed the tests for us seemed to think it was a normal process and that in the future, the age for pregnancy may be further pushed back.

As someone directly involved in this situation, I couldn't help but ask myself, what actually caused this activity, which could have been completed between the ages of 18 and 28, to be delayed until the ages of 35 to 45? The simple answer is that most people find it difficult to achieve emotional and mental maturity before the age of 30, and as they continue to mature,

their life circumstances gradually become more stable. Even at the age of 50, I didn't feel secure and stable, so this isn't a good excuse.

People would always respond with "I'm not ready" when being asked to parent a child. Not everyone moved from one country to another like us immigrants, and most people spent their entire lives in the city they were born in. Nevertheless, the issue of not being ready seemed to persist.

I attribute this issue to the prolonged duration of education. I stayed in the educational system for almost 30 years, and look at our daily work now; how much of it is related to the knowledge we learned in school? As someone working in the IT industry, I hardly ever use any chemistry knowledge. It was a waste of my precious youth to have tried to understand chemical equations. Even if there comes a time when I need such knowledge, with today's advanced network and technology, I can quickly get it from relevant cloud services or internet searches. Spending years learning something that is totally unrelated is simply not worth it.

In my opinion, primary and secondary education should each be reduced by one year, and the age limit for minors should be lowered to 16. The duration of undergraduate and vocational education should each be reduced by one year as well. This would allow more children and young people to enter society earlier and adapt to the direction that suits them. Childhood is not as carefree as people imagine, and the greatest happiness comes from earning money that they can control through work.

Education experts would certainly criticize my point of view, but we must not forget that times have

changed, and adapting to change is a wise decision. The continuation of science requires the engagement of talented young minds who are interested rather than confining the youth of all children.

We went to a big hospital in North York for a 20-week ultrasound, which is a detailed scan of the fetus performed midway through the pregnancy. As we entered the examination room, the technician asked us if this was the first or subsequent pregnancy. We replied this was the first.

The examination process was meticulous and lengthy, leaving our nerves on edge with the fear of potential issues. It was not until she gently reassured us that the fetus was all normal that our hearts slowly calmed down.

Finally, she threw us a long-awaited yet sensitive question. "Do you want to know the gender of the fetus?"

"Is it legal to inquire about this..." I hesitated in asking.

"Come on, this is Canada; nobody will have an abortion based on the sex of the fetus. It's totally legal to ask about gender. The question is, do you want to know about it? Some parents will choose to see it during birth."

I looked at Lisa, and she nodded gently toward me. So, I said, "We want to know."

The technician resumed her long period of searching. After a while, she asked, "You want a boy, don't you?"

"Mm-hmm." I wanted to use some euphemisms.

Before I could even start, she smiled and said, "For the first-born child, everyone wants a boy."

Well, this saved me a lot of insincere courtesy.

I have been asked a similar question by a girlfriend before, "When you were to be reborn, would you choose to be a man or a woman?" She asked me the same question in different scenarios and when I was under different pressure. While my answer was almost always the same, I would choose to be a man.

This is a sensitive and controversial topic that cannot be easily ignored. If someone tells you that they would prefer their first child to be a girl, it is highly likely that they are not telling the truth.

Our civilization was created by men, even though the scope of women's social participation has expanded in modern times. If you were to found a religion with a female image as the almighty God, who would believe it? If nobody believes it, what's the point of creating such a religion?

There is no disrespect toward women implied. My mom, my sister, my female cousins, and all my female relatives and friends are all women, and they have their own specific social and historical roles. The question is, how would you decide if you were given the opportunity to choose?

Women are the most gentle and delicate gift that God has bestowed upon this world. They shine like dazzling flowers, and their fragrances can enchant and captivate any creature that surrounds them. However, flowers are too fragile to withstand the ravages of wind, and their time to bloom is way too brief and often passes by too quickly to be fully appreciated before they wither away.

On the contrary, look at the effective career span of men. An 82-year-old man marrying a 28-year-old girl can hardly hit the headlines. Look at those

Hollywood veterans like Clint Eastwood, Harrison Ford, and Kevin Costner, and they still play leading roles on the screen.

Certainly, as a man, you will never have the chance to experience the indescribable sensation of pregnancy, feeling the baby's movements and kicks from within the womb.

"From what I can see..." the technician's voice pulled me back to reality from my wandering thoughts.

Her tone was tinged with uncertainty as she said, "Probably it's a boy." Later, we learned that even if she had been certain, she would have conveyed the information similarly cautiously, as this was their professional protocol for communicating with clients.

My son was born on the family day of that year. I named him Jason LeBron Lue because I am a huge fan of LeBron James. Unfortunately, this middle name cast an unforeseeable curse on me, which took me many years to figure out how it was carried out. At that time, it was just a name.

When the doctor handed him over to me, he was so small and adorable. He quietly opened his eyes in my arms, and I was the first person he saw in this world. "Hey, little guy, I'm your father. Welcome to this world!" I murmured to him. His gaze lingered on my face for a few seconds, then shifted away as he began to survey the world. His skin had a slight reddish hue, and the elders told me it would gradually become lighter after a month.

We stayed at the hospital for another three days. The most unforgettable person during that time was the nurse who came to teach us how to bathe the baby. The way she held the baby with only one hand

was something we could never master. We felt it was not safe to use both hands, let alone with one hand. She must have held countless babies in this way, and for this reason, we have great respect for her.

To welcome the arrival of our baby, we purchased a new Dodge Journey crossover, and as a bank employee, Chrysler gave me a 10% discount. I sold my old car as scrap metal for \$200. That car had accompanied me through the difficult early years, and its final value may have been due to the precious metals contained in its catalytic converter.

That afternoon, we brought our new little life home, and it started to snow heavily. From Scarborough General Hospital to our home is about a twenty-minute drive; that was the most romantic journey of my life. There was almost no traffic on the road; all I could see was the snow swirling against the windshield. In a pure white world, our new white Dodge Journey was heading home. I peeked into the rear-view mirror; Lisa was smiling at me while breastfeeding our son Jason. Her neat and white teeth were shining brightly like gleaming diamonds. My God, she was beautiful, and that sweet smile touched my heart and gave me the confidence that I was the happiest man in the world at that moment.

When I was born forty years ago, I had to squeeze with my family on the only existing bed, while this child was born with a big house. He had enough rooms to choose from and enough beds to enjoy his dreams. We were kind of inclined to a retro flavor; the three of us shared the same bed in the first month when the little guy returned home. I moved him from his small crib to the big bed every night. I put his head on my left arm, with the wall on the left side to prevent him from

slipping off the bed. He was so small that I had to stay vigilant all night to avoid accidentally crushing him when turning over. The feeling of holding him was so beautiful that it was unforgettable for a lifetime.

In the later years, when Jason was not with me, I would also hold the Ragdoll kitten Snowball in my arms for quite a long time. Every time the kitten crawled out of the blankets and stared at me with her cartoonish pretty eyes, I vaguely felt she was the child I longed for day and night, even though she was just a furry little animal.

There were no paternity leaves in those years. After spending a month of endearing togetherness with my lovely wife and son, I had to go to the downtown office to work. During this period, Lisa started taking little Jason to various community-organized activities. Some of these activities were designed for babies within a few months old, while others were for new mothers, such as programs to prevent postpartum depression.

Community services and other similar social services are a double-edged sword. When you need help, they can provide you with the necessary assistance. However, don't forget that any social service is profit-driven, and everything they do is ultimately to receive funding from the corresponding government departments. If this behavior does not conflict with our interests, everything is fine, but once there are some undisclosed motives involved, ordinary people like us cannot see through it and often become tools for others to use.

I have always believed that any relationship between men and women requires the intelligence of both parties to maintain. If one party cannot see

through their situation, it is extremely easy to be manipulated by external forces. From that time on, Lisa began to trust various suggestions from social service organizations, laying the foundation for the future fate of her and our child. Of course, this also changed the trajectory of my life.

Tensions were built up from trivial matters in daily chores. I am very organized; I have strong abilities in managing and controlling resources around me. For instance, when I use a thin rope to tie something, I always cut off the excess ends with scissors to ensure they don't hang around and ruin the visual effect. When I add a new electrical appliance, I carefully wrap up any extra cables and hide them in a spot that's not visible in everyday life. You may often see me spending a lot of time completing a particular task, actually to avoid further ado on the same thing in the future. When I live by myself, I never have to tidy up my room because everything is already in the best place from the beginning.

But since I had dependents, the balance was disrupted. I spent the whole day working in the downtown office, and when I got back home, I had to tidy up the rooms. Almost every room was a mess, and I had to restore them to their previous state before I left in the morning. It was tough for me, and quarrels were hard to avoid, especially when I had to wash underwear and socks for Lisa. She rarely did the dishes and liked to pile up her dirty lingerie in the corner. What could I do? Ignore and do nothing? I had no choice but to wash them.

I admit that this behavior is very common among women, and Lisa is not the first woman for whom I have washed underwear. However, in a marriage, this

kind of friction can be highly damaging to morale and confidence, and over time, 'being together forever' can be turned into an unattainable myth.

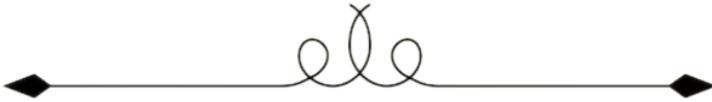
At this time, the message from my hometown, Harbin, slightly eased the tense atmosphere. My mom had recovered better than expected, and she was coming to visit my family in Toronto with my dad. In the following six years, they had visited me a total of three times. Although the second time had a deadly impact on my marriage, the first visit was very supportive and delightful.

They arrived when Jason was just two months old. The feelings were surreal when we finally met in Toronto. My mom was miraculously alive against all odds, and further, unbelievably, her dying wish for a grandson had come true in real life. We marveled at the blessings of God, and we cherished these moments of happiness.

My mom provided assistance in caring for the baby, while my dad was engaged in the household chores and cooking. Their presence was a tremendous help to us during the challenging times that we couldn't handle on our own. The two elderly grandparents loved their grandson so much that they couldn't get enough of holding and cuddling him, reluctant to let go.

At the end of the fifth month, they set off on their journey home, and I believe that period of time was probably the happiest time of their lives.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



## VIOLENCE

**L**isa hadn't been working since Jason was born, all the financial pressure fell on me. I had to find alternative sources of family income, so I turned to Alex for help. After I shared my recent circumstances with Alex, he appeared pretty unsettled.

"Why the hell are you the only one supporting the family?" Alex asked with a furrowed brow and a hint of reproach. "Mike, when I first heard about your marriage, I sensed that something was off. You should have made a lot of preparations before officially entering into a marriage."

I had intended to argue with him about how my relationship with Lisa was the result of multiple factors, such as my cousin's introduction, my mom's illness, and finally the birth of our child. But what he cared about was only the outcome, which was that I had rushed into marriage too quickly. It did not make any

sense to further explain the details to him.

"She used to have a job, but she lost it due to pregnancy, and now it's hard for her to find one. She always tells me that caring for Jason is a full-time job."

"Well, she's right; caring for a newborn is an incredibly draining responsibility. When it comes to finding a job, you shouldn't have too much expectation of her."

"Can you give me some advice on how to make extra money? You have been living in Toronto for such a long time, and you must have some good ideas about it."

Alex shook his head, looking like he really didn't want to get involved with this matter. "I really don't want to give you advice on investments, and you may hate me in the future."

At the time, I didn't understand the deeper meaning behind his words. I only felt that there was an opportunity to help me get out of my current predicament. "What investments?" I hastily asked.

"There is an ETF that is tied to natural gas. I have been tracking it for a while and noticed some patterns. When the weather is getting cold, the stock price tends to be high, and when the weather is scorching, it also goes high because many power plants in North America use natural gas. You can participate with a small amount, but don't play big on this, as the capital market has always been risky."

I followed Alex's instructions on trading this ETF, and the results were entirely satisfactory. After all, changes in the weather are visible to the naked eye, easy to perceive, and easy to predict. The gains from the capital market are divided into two halves, with half being taxed as personal income and the other half

being untaxed and up to you to manage. Over the course of a few months, the return was almost equivalent to one person's salary. Lisa was pleased, and there were naturally fewer arguments in the family.

Gradually, my appetite began to increase, and I forgot Alex's admonition not to play big. That winter was very typical, and the performance of that ETF was basically in line with the weather trends. There were many opportunities for me to profit from my trading activities.

On a sunny afternoon in November, the weather in Toronto was quite chilly, and the first snowfall had yet to arrive. As usual, I took the GO Train back from downtown after work. Since there was a considerable distance from the train station to our home, Lisa would drive to the station to pick me up every workday.

With a confident stride, I got off the train and walked directly toward the parking lot. Lisa was standing outside the car, breathing in the fresh air. Jason was still lying in his infant car seat inside the car.

"Guess how much I made today?" I asked as I approached her.

"Better be a thousand dollars," Lisa grinned and said, expecting a positive response.

"Over eleven thousand dollars."

"What? You're not kidding, are you?"

"Of course not. I planned it for many days; it's just that I sold it today."

Lisa was not as ecstatic as I had imagined. She seemed more puzzled and worried.

"How can it be so much? How much did you actually invest?" she asked.

"Come on, don't worry about that. This is a stock with double leverage, so high returns are totally

normal," I replied impatiently.

Lisa didn't press for more details. After all, having enough money is the eternal truth. Everything becomes a problem without money, whereas with money, many problems cease to be problems.

We went to a high-end buffet and enjoyed a superb meal that night. Watching the joy on Lisa and Jason's faces, I made a silent promise to myself to ensure that my beloved ones would live a life filled with abundance and contentment. I was so naïve that I believed every forthcoming day would be as wonderful as that memorable night.

In the blink of an eye, a year had passed, and Jason had grown from a small infant to a two-year-old toddler. Life had remained relatively peaceful, allowing me to fully revel in the bliss of fatherhood. From his tentative crawling to his first wobbly steps, every Jason's movement had been adorable and stirred my heart.

The first distinguishable sound my child made was "ra, ra, ..." and the first complete semantic expression he conveyed was a lively introduction to us about churches: "This is a church, that was a church," he chattered excitedly as we drove through the city. Perhaps it was due to his frequent experiences of attending church with Lisa.

As my child grew up, family expenses also increased. One harsh reality was that all the profits I had made from the stock market in the past slowly dwindled away. In fact, it was a very simple math problem - an individual investor's strategy could not compete with the rules of engagement set by capital, and there was simply no possibility of winning. Unfortunately, at that time, I couldn't see through this

deeply hidden truth and continued to be obsessed with this game that was destined to lose.

The quarrels between Lisa and me resurfaced, and Jason inevitably became the biggest victim of our fights. It reminded me of my parents' arguments when my sister and I were young kids. We felt very sad, but for some reason, those ups and downs eventually faded away with the passage of time. We grew up healthy and strong. However, here in Toronto, our tragic family had too many external factors, each one more deadly than the last.

That winter's climate couldn't be any more normal, but the ETF's price kept falling, plunging into an abyss. I couldn't shake off the depression by myself, so I went to Alex to seek answers.

"Mike, it's not looking good." Even Alex, who used to handle things easily, looked confused and uncertain.

"But why? The weather is turning cold, and all forecasts point to a colder winter than previous."

"This is the uncertainty of capital movements. The larger backdrop is the overproduction of natural gas in North America. Due to the shale revolution, the United States has become the world's largest oil producer."

"I've lost almost half of the money; if this trend continues, I'll lose all of it in a very short time."

"This is a stock with double leverage; you can make money quickly but lose it at the same speed. Mike, where did this money come from? Is it your savings or borrowed money?"

"It comes from the line of credit attached to my house."

"Sell what's left and get out of it, or your life will be ruined."

"I can't; I've lost too much; I have to count on the price coming back."

"Oh, please, cutting losses is the basic principle of the stock market. How dare you play this game if you don't respect this rule?"

If I had followed Alex's advice that day, things might not have spiraled out of control as they did later on. In fact, just as stock trading requires a stop loss, so does life. I was already forty-one years old at the time, yet I didn't even understand this basic principle of life.

It wasn't until I reached fifty that I my mind truly cleared. How many hardships do we have to go through to fully understand the teachings of the ancient sages and the wise counsel of those around us? Without being beaten down by society and the harsh lessons of life, making the right choices can be incredibly difficult.

That night, when I returned home and told Lisa about the current financial situation, as expected, she flew into a rage. To my surprise, she resorted to violence, hitting me with her fists. But in her fury, I didn't dwell on it too much, considering the harm I had caused was unbearable for any family member.

Her viewpoint was the same as Alex's - to immediately jump out of this vampire's den and return to everyday life. However, I was not willing to do so. It was now the dead of winter, and I simply couldn't believe that natural gas prices would continue to fall. There was bound to be a rebound, and it would be much better to act then than now. In theory, this seemed like a sound strategy, and the market presented opportunities for rebounds. But those involved in the situation often become deluded,

mistaking a rebound for a reversal. Timing the market perfectly is an ideal that cannot be realized in reality.

In the days that followed, Lisa and I had constant conflicts over whether or not to sell. It eventually escalated into another violent outburst. On that day, natural gas experienced another sharp drop, and when I returned home from work, I sat silently on the foam floor tiles in the living room. Those playmats were originally laid for Jason to crawl on, and they had never been put away since he began walking.

My emotions were totally unsettled by the losses in the capital market, and I had no time or energy to attend to household chores. When Lisa saw me sitting there alone in a despondent state, her anger reached its boiling point, and she made an unbelievable move. She kicked me in the face fiercely with her right foot.

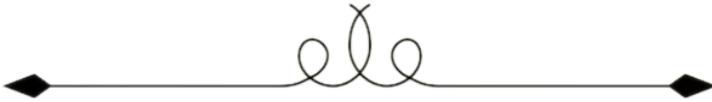
My head tilted to one side, and my glasses flew far away. When I picked up the glasses, I found that they were completely deformed. I was stunned by this sudden malice and instinctively touched my face to make sure there was no bleeding. Then, I rolled my eyes a few times to ensure my eyeballs were not damaged. Thank God they were intact.

This was not the first time that my eyes had been at risk. When I was in Germany, I had an accident while riding a bike downhill. I mistakenly used the front brake, causing the bike to flip in the air and me to fall heavily to the ground. The deformed glasses tore open my right eye corner, and a German doctor sewed it with five stitches. Luckily, the eyeball was not injured. If the legs of my glasses had moved forward just one millimeter more, I wouldn't have been able to work in the IT industry later on.

Every time God saves me from a dangerous

situation, I silently pray and thank Him for His grace. Since that malicious kick, I could clearly feel Lisa's malevolence toward me. We no longer had any intimacy after that incident, and our marriage became nothing more than a formality. I had a premonition that God would pass judgment on our dysfunctional family, but the unforeseeable series of events and the eventual outcome were beyond anything I could have imagined.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



## CZS

**T**he full name of CZS is the Children's Protection Society of Toronto. This is a term that strikes fear into the hearts of many Torontonians, as once this organization targets them, it is only a matter of time before their family is torn apart and they are left alone and helpless. Unfortunately, our encounter with CZS began with Lisa's enthusiastic invitation.

The first time I met Ashlark Ficken, the CZS worker, was at my home. She was a middle-aged white woman who spoke in a gentle and refined manner and appeared to be highly educated. She brought in a bunch of toys for Jason. These toys were from various levels of donations, some of which were quite new or still in their original packaging. Jason really loved those toys, and his excitement lasted for over several days; for a child, that was considered a long duration for specific toys.

At the end of her visit, I was asked to provide assistance in creating a CZS account, and Lisa told me that upon completion of this account, Ashlark would give us \$50 in cash. I was feeling low and didn't resist their requests, and soon the account was set up. When Lisa escorted Ashlark out of the room, I saw the \$50 note on the table, and my heart sank with sorrow, tears filling my eyes. I had lost a hundred thousand dollars playing the stock market, but now this \$50 looked so dear to me.

It was the establishment of this account that gave Ashlark the permission to carry out those immoral deeds that ultimately destroyed this family. Jason's life trajectory was destructively altered, while on the other hand, my life was miraculously saved. Should I be grateful to her? I don't know how many children she may have protected, but she certainly protected me, for sure, albeit ironically.

Another devastating factor to this Hollywood ending was my parents' second visit. The fond memories of their first visit had led us to make an imprudent mistake - we thought we could live together peacefully in one house like the first time. Besides, we were in a difficult situation, and perhaps their arrival could alleviate some of the existing pressure. It was wrong, totally wrong. Our circumstances had changed; our financial situation was not as good as before, and their appearance only added to our troubles.

Damien admonished me many times: "Don't put people from different generations under the same roof. That will never work." At first, I thought it was just a good-will parental warning that might not apply to every family. After years of painful experience, I gradually came to understand that this rule applies to

almost all families. Especially later on, when I heard the news of Damien and Teresa's divorce, I was utterly lost. Their separation had nothing to do with living together with elderly people, but the tragic ending of my most beloved and respectable couple shocked me for years. Family issues are problems that all adults have to face, and what I had experienced was just the tip of the iceberg - my experience was just a little more dramatic and even elusive.

One major conflict in my family was that my parents came here to take care of Jason so that Lisa could free up her time to work, but obviously, this was something she was unwilling to do. Taking care of children at home should have been something that most mothers like to do. Despite Lisa's reluctance and constant complaints that our entire family was ganging up on her, she still managed to find a part-time job.

Secondly, I extended my parents' visa for two years. Unlike the first time, where five months were short and quickly passed, two years were way too long. This meant Lisa couldn't see any hope of ending the suffocating atmosphere in the house, and it was indeed a serious mistake that I had made. So, at the time when Jason was two and a half years old, the situation finally broke out.

### *October 28, Morning*

It was a Wednesday, and I worked from home that day. Lisa went to work in the morning. Around 10 o'clock, my parents were planning to take Jason to the nearby school to play on its playground. When they were on the porch, my mom felt the weather was a little chilly, so she went back into the house to fetch

some clothes.

My dad had hearing problems due to long-term use of hypertension drugs, and he disliked being around people. It was complicated for him to hear our conversations clearly; over time, he chose not to care about what we were saying. At this moment, he walked toward the sidewalk. Perhaps something caught his attention.

Only God knows what he wanted to see and why he left Jason such a big distance away at that moment. The elderly couple could never have expected that their unexpected moves in opposite directions would change the lives of their son and grandson for good.

Jason was standing on the porch alone. The poor child started to cry.

My dad didn't even notice the child was crying. He was still fascinated by the stuff he wanted to check.

And then the VIP of our story appeared, an old white man walking his dog, passed by my house. He shouted at my dad,

"The child can't be left unattended, if you don't do anything to stop him from crying, I'll call the police."

My dad then realized something was happening, but he didn't understand what the old man was saying. He quickly ran into the house and called me out to deal with the issue.

I ran outside; the old man repeated what he said to my dad. I quickly figured out what had happened.

"Sir, there's nothing wrong. My mom went inside to get her coat; my dad couldn't hear well. Nothing is wrong."

**October 28, Evening**

The whole family was sitting around the dinner table, and I was teasing about the incident that happened in the morning.

"It's funny. This white neighbor is hard to understand. He threatened to call the police if Jason couldn't stop crying. Kids always cry."

I was so stupid. If I didn't talk, this incident would be buried in the dust of history and forgotten in the void. It wouldn't hurt anybody.

But there were five people around the table: me, Jason, my parents and Lisa. If only I kept my mouth shut, or I could talk over something else.

### *October 31, Separation Day*

It was a Saturday, around 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Another heated argument began as if it were a routine, and the focus of the problem was still on money. This seemingly unrelated thing to love often plays a more direct role in real life. Without love, the family can still function like an engine without lubricating oil. It can still work, only with low efficiency. But if the shortage is on money, there is no drive, and the engine will eventually shut down.

The argument escalated into violence without us realizing it. Lisa held onto my right arm and scratched my forearm with three of her fingernails. Blood gushed out as I made a painful sound. I had to use great effort to break free from her grip. Three long blood streaks appeared on my forearm.

"I'll call 911 if you continue to do this," I warned her in the harshest tone possible.

"Call it if you dare. I'll see if you have the guts to

do it." Her words were filled with contempt toward me.

I was quite familiar with this inevitable process of living with women. Some aspect of you must have moved a woman who can develop an intimate relationship with you at some point. But after spending a relatively long time together, there will be subtle changes. You become worthless in her eyes. She is so close to you that your shortcomings are amplified from every angle.

Lisa's underestimation of me was the biggest tragedy of her life. Before marriage, she tried to please me in every possible way, but after marriage, she got a sense of safety and exerted physical and verbal abuse on me. She often killed a mosquito or a small bug with her palm, showing off her strength in front of me and trying to make me feel intimidated. Oh, please, how could I be afraid of such a small gesture? What I feared was the disharmony in our family, the unhappiness of our child, and the resulting chaos in our lives.

Hence, at that unnerving moment, I had no choice. I took out my phone and dialed 911. While the operator was talking to me on the phone, Lisa quickly grabbed Jason and got out of the house.

Two hours later.

I heard a knock on the front door, and when I opened it, I found a police officer standing outside. Before I could say anything, Jason ran past me and into the house. Across the street, 50 meters on the right, I could see a police car with its lights flashing, and I realized that Lisa had been arrested. The officer explained some procedural details to me and then left.

Like many people who have called 911, I had no idea that it would lead to a legal process. In our minds,

we expect the police to come over, give us a warning, and tell us not to do it again. But in North America, things are much more complicated than we had anticipated.

Another two hours later.

Another police officer holding a camera entered the house and took several photos of my bleeding right arm. Jason made a face at the police officer, and the officer smiled back at the child. Everything seemed casual and peaceful, but there was a sense of tension and uncertainty in the air. The officer was fully armed; the first time I saw a gun in this house.

It was also this officer who gave me a detailed explanation of the legal proceedings that would follow. Lisa wouldn't be able to come back to this house anytime soon. The issue was not me pressing charges against her, but rather the Crown. I told him that this might have been a misunderstanding, and the officer gave me a sly smile.

"A lot of people have the same thought as you, but since the legal stage has started, you have to go through this judicial process to the end."

"How long does it take?"

"Usually between six to nine months."

I told my parents that the shortest time to get Lisa back home was six months. From that day on, we all looked forward to the end of that period of time so that Lisa could come home safely and Jason could see his mother as soon as possible. How foolish we were!

Domestic violence is a pervasive issue that frequently goes unnoticed until it is exposed to the outside world. Many women only call the police after being physically abused by their partners. Upon receiving a call for assistance, the police promptly

arrive on the scene and arrest the perpetrator. Regardless of whether the abuse was intentional or not, the trust in the relationship is broken, and the cracks in their emotional connection grow wider and wider. Separation is almost unavoidable.

Don't forget, in my particular case, the perpetrator was a woman against all conventional ways of thinking. She would spend this night in an ice-cold cell, enduring the ridicule of fellow inmates. The desire for revenge was akin to the pressure building before a volcanic eruption, ready to burst forth at any moment.

My nightmare had just begun.

### *November 5, Apprehension Day*

At around 8 o'clock in the evening, I heard someone knocking on the door. It was dark outside, and I couldn't see anything. When I opened the door, my gosh, four fully armed police officers, including a policewoman, squeezed into my house led by a white woman, our acquaintance, Ashlark.

"Mr. Lue, a neighbor called us and said you left Jason unattended on the porch. Was that true?"

How should I know that this was a carefully planned trap? Why must they deploy four fully armed police officers to catch a two-year-old baby? The sheer power of CZS is astonishing. The purpose of the three male police officers who stood behind was to intimidate me and lure me into their trap without me fully realizing it.

"Yeah, there was an incident about..." I was talking about the incident, while they wanted a confirmative sound.

At the sound of the word 'yeah,' the policewoman

rushed over like a well-trained soldier and snatched little Jason from my arms. Despite Jason's loud cries, this brutal apprehension continued without any mercy.

My parents and I were shocked, standing there dumbfounded, watching this group of armed people take our child away from our own home. It wasn't easy to believe that such a thing could happen in the highly developed Canadian society.

Ashlark gloated at me and said, "Jason will be in the custody of his mother, Lisa. If you disagree with this decision, you may ask your lawyer to start a lawsuit in Family Court."

This was the first time that I heard the term "Family Court," and it became the dominant theme of my life for the years to come. I envy those who never have to go to court for their entire lives, but on the other hand, the court experience has allowed me to see the true nature of humanity and to face life's harsh challenges with equanimity. It has tempered my willpower and bolstered my confidence. Stepping into the courtroom marked the beginning of an important stage in my life.

Ashlark was the last one to leave the house; before walking out of the door, she threw me a word in contempt.

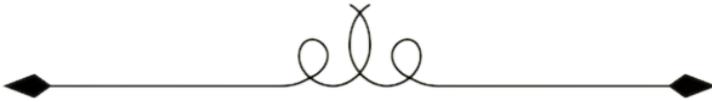
"Mr. Lue, see you in court."

# PART TWO

Law without morality is power without conscience.

- EDMUND BURKE

# CHAPTER ONE



## TRIBUNAL

**A** tribunal and a court are not the same, although they are both legal institutions that are designed to hear and adjudicate legal disputes. We can call a tribunal a quasi-judicial agency, and it can be seen as a flexible and specialized court targeting specific areas of law. Before I went to the family court, I started a lawsuit in the tribunal of the Child and Family Services Review Board.

Many things happened that led me to the review board, and it was only upon reaching that tribunal that I learned the truth about what had really happened. In the first year after Jason was taken away from the family, my mindset was not yet mature, and my ability to withstand pressure was quite weak. I was angry, I roared, and the deep longing for my child made me sad, anxious, and depressed. However, looking back, the decisions I made at the time proved to be the right

ones.

The first decision was divorce. It was a hundred times tougher than deciding to get married, especially when there was a child involved. It did not happen on the separation day, not on the apprehension day, but three weeks later on December 1. Anybody who has gone through divorce knows the truly important day is not the day of divorce but the day of separation, as many of the subsequent legal proceedings are based on the latter. The day of separation only holds meaning in the context of divorce. Otherwise, it is just an ordinary day.

I could still see my son sporadically during this period because Lisa took him back to the house. This may sound preposterous since she was charged with assault and signed a peace bond to be paroled out. According to the law, she was not allowed to be within two hundred meters of the house. But at that time, our whole family did not take the criminal charge seriously. We just thought it was a normal family dispute and the criminal charge was an overreaction after mistakenly calling 911. Even after Jason was taken away by CZS, no one thought it was a big deal, and everything should be able to return to normal when Lisa was allowed home six months later.

I still maintained regular contact with Lisa so that she and my son could come back home regularly. We even went together to the Ontario criminal court to explore the possibility of having the criminal charge dropped. The atmosphere wasn't that bad because we were still a family.

There was a chance that Lisa tried to lure me into sex, but I was really not in the mood. The family situation was already a mess, and the sexual activities

had stopped for over half a year. And suddenly, it was used to alleviate the current crisis, which I found too hard to accept.

The repercussions of my rejection were severe, and Lisa became unwilling to bring the child back home. It seemed that she had started to lose faith in the future of this family, and so had I. As a result, the only time I was allowed to see the child was on Saturdays from afternoon to Sunday afternoon, as regulated by CZS. This was cruel and became the final straw that crushed the marriage.

Jason was still a small baby, and he was a part of my life. Suddenly, being unable to see him made me irritable and difficult to control. Only those who have experienced the pain of missing someone can truly understand it. There used to be so many adults in the family who took care of him, but in the end, only his mother could. He had his own big house, but he was not allowed to live in it and instead was confined to a small rented room controlled by his mother and CZS. CZS claimed this was "in the child's best interest."

I couldn't understand it, nor could I change it. I could only wait quietly for Saturday to come so I could see my lovely son. Whenever I went to the agreed location to pick up the child, Lisa would always be fifteen minutes to half an hour late, and the uncertainty was truly a torment to human nature. Finally, after three weeks, I could no longer bear it and took the most decisive step. I filed for divorce.

Right after I filed for divorce, I could no longer see my son, as it triggered Lisa's life-long revenge against me. Please tell me this was in the child's best interest. Without any doubt, this was in Lisa's best interest. His mother and the government-funded agency abducted

the child's interest without any reasoning and without any mercy.

CZS changed the custody of the child based on a lie that my parents and I posed a threat to Jason's safety, but how can they explain the fact that I brought Jason back home alone and the child stayed with us on the nights of the 14<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, and 28<sup>th</sup> of November? Who gave CZS the right to barge into a civilian's home and snatch a child with the assistance of armed forces in the highly civilized country of Canada?

The second decision was that we proceeded to the tribunal's final phase of proceedings. The knowledge of the existence of this tribunal did not come out of thin air but rather from a very important person in the government, namely the then Premier of Ontario, Kathleen Wynne.

After I served Lisa with the divorce papers, I lost access to my son. Jason was used as a pawn by her to hurt me, and this situation has persisted until today. She didn't want to leave this family, nor did she want to leave me. From another perspective, it reflects that I am a good husband and a good father. She never looked inward to find reasons for why she was in such a difficult situation but instead vented all her resentment toward me. The poor child became a tool for her to seek revenge against me.

I tried every possible means to contact relevant people and organizations, including sending a letter to [premier@ontario.ca](mailto:premier@ontario.ca) at this address.

*Dear Kathleen,*

*CZS abducted my baby on Nov 5, which was the direct cause of my divorce application on Dec 1. The mother won't give me any access, and CZS won't help.*

*I haven't seen my baby for 15 days. The court date will be another 50 days. I will not see my baby for 70 days.*

*My MPP Bas Balkissoon recommended that I write a letter to Tracy MacCharles. He is now writing a letter to Tracy. I still don't count on any hope. CZS is like an untamed beast; no one has the guts to touch it. I talked to the media; they were all scared away. I can only turn to your help.*

*Thank you, Kathleen; I want to see my baby!*

This letter was sent on the night of December 14, along with others addressed to different recipients. You may wonder how I could remember all the details. Actually, they didn't come from my memory but from the logs I kept many years ago.

I habitually write things down, save them as files on my hard drive, and then back them up on the cloud, usually with two or three copies. As an IT professional, I have never lost any important information in my life.

From the day CZS abducted my son, I knew this was destined to be the most turbulent phase of my life. So, I started to record everything that happened in my own way. I kept a diary for my son, writing down all my feelings when facing these difficult situations without any access to him, hoping that someday in the future, he would have a chance to read it. Another log collected all the emails I wrote and received in one large file, with time precision down to every second.

Now I am writing this novel, I can pick the facts directly from the log and diary I kept many years ago. When I saw those naive and immature words that I wrote in the early days, my eyes became moist. I counted the times that I couldn't see my son in days. Who would have known that I would have to count

them in years and maybe even a lifetime later?

As expected, all the letters I sent out that night had no reply except one. I received a response from Kathleen Wynne on December 15.

*Thanks for your online message regarding your situation. I appreciate your taking the time to share your concerns with me, and I was sorry to learn of your difficulties.*

*In Ontario, the Child and Family Services Act provides children's protection societies with the authority and responsibility of investigating concerns regarding a child's safety and protection. Based on the outcome of an investigation, a children's protection society must take the most appropriate action to ensure a child's safety and well-being.*

*If you believe that a children's protection society has erred in its handling of a specific situation, you can contact the agency directly to discuss your concerns and access its complaints procedure.*

*You can also direct a complaint to the Child and Family Services Review Board by post at 1075 Bay Street, Seventh Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2B1, or by telephone at 1-888-728-8823 (toll-free). Please be aware that neither a children's protection society nor the Child and Family Services Review Board can consider matters currently before the courts or matters already decided by the courts.*

*Once again, thanks for contacting me. Please accept my best wishes.*

*Kathleen Wynne  
Premier of Ontario*

At least someone showed genuine concern for my case. Although this first letter was written in a formal

and lengthy manner, she conveyed her personal worries in her subsequent shorter replies.

I hastily filled out the form of "Request for Review of CZS - Child and Family Services Review Board Application" in the hope that justice could be restored and I could see my son again.

But after a week, on December 22, I read an article in the Provincial Politics section of the Toronto Star newspaper, which shattered all my hopes. The article had the title and subtitle:

*Premier ponders blowing up our CZS mess*

*Lacking government accountability, children's protection is bogged down in bureaucracy. The entire system should be blown up.*

No wonder my case caught the attention of the Premier. It appeared that a major internal struggle was taking place within the provincial government. No wonder my case was so tragic, it turned out that my child was taken away by a bunch of individuals who were referred to as a 'mess.' Especially when I saw this line:

*It's a \$1.5-billion system that not only fails to deliver value for money but fails to value a child's life.*

My heart sank. I was about to challenge the authority of an institution worth 1.5 billion Canadian dollars. I was not that stupid to believe that I could win anything. Instead, I should be more cautious to avoid them persecuting my other legal rights. I need to seriously consider that possibility.

If I stopped following this case and allowed their illegal infringement to go unquestioned, what should I tell my child when he grows up? I didn't have the

courage to fight for my legitimate rights, even though I had the right to do so. He will look down on me in the future. I wouldn't let that happen. I would continue to track this down; I would face the judge and ask him why this obvious injustice could happen in Toronto and Ontario. Of course, I should not go beyond that. I never had any illusions that I would win the lawsuit and that CZS would apologize to me. I was not crazy, nor was I stupid, and I was not a greenhorn anymore. Life's many adventures had made me more worldly and shrewd, unfazed by the ups and downs. So, I decided to go all the way to the final stage of the tribunal, and I wanted to document the entire legal process for my son to look back on when he grows old enough to read it.

Soon, a pre-hearing teleconference was held on January 25 of the next year. I retold the whole story during the conference, and the chairman of the Review Board stated that it was beyond their reach to determine whether CZS's actions were right or wrong.

Then I asked him, "So you don't care about justice?"

The chairman answered affirmatively and gravely, "We care about justice, but we have limitations."

The loose translation of his words was: There are no supervision on CZS actions because this review board is the only place where you can file a complaint. This also explained why those people were bold and reckless when apprehending my son. In a larger secret that was going to be revealed in the subsequent proceedings, CZS's actions were completely lawless.

The chairman asked me if I would accept any form of mediation. I knew it was a trick; if I accepted, the case would be dismissed, and there would be no

substantial change in the existing situation. I declined the mediation, and the final hearing was scheduled for February 19 from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m.

On that day in the morning, I went downtown with my parents as they were attending the final hearing as witnesses. The chairman and the CZS people were already there when we entered the hearing room. We sat on the left-hand side of the room. On the right-hand side were Ashlark, her manager, and CZS attorney. Three white women, a white chairman, an obstinate Chinese guy with his frail and sickly old parents, even with the boldest prediction, there wouldn't be much for the poor family to get.

The entire hearing process lasted for an hour. We were asked to swear that everything we said was the truth. My parents had firsthand experience of the whole incident and knew all the details. As they presented their evidence, I served as their translator. Since the whole judicial process was conducted in English, they couldn't understand it and had to wait for me to explain everything to them after the hearing was over.

This was a process of collecting evidence and opinions from both sides, so the entire process appeared calm, and the chairman didn't need to draw any conclusions. Only when I passionately denounced CZS's kidnapping of the child did my emotions get slightly agitated. My mom gently nudged me, indicating that I should avoid losing my temper, and I quickly regained self-control. The CZS side appeared relaxed and at ease, suggesting that this was not their first time dealing with such issues.

After the hearing, we sat in the central waiting area of the floor, and it was time for me to explain all

the details to my parents.

"It's very clear from the files that no neighbor was calling CZS about a crying baby. The whole thing was a setup by Ashlark and Lisa. They put a social worker up to make the fake call; the name recorded here was Sharon." I was pointing to the lines in the paper and explaining them to my mom.

"What? It's not right for them to do something like this," Mom exclaimed in shock at this startling revelation.

It was only until now we found out the truth. Ashlark and Lisa had always told us that it was a neighbor who called CZS, which forced them to take away the child. But in fact, the walking-dog old man only shouted a few times that day, and he probably didn't even know what CZS was. He never called CZS or 911. The whole thing was a carefully planned setup, and if we hadn't attended this final hearing, the truth would have never been known.

"As the files indicate, on that night Jason was snatched, Lisa was waiting at the Starbucks coffee shop close to our house to take over the child. She had planned the whole thing, but she never told us about this," I continued to clarify the contents of the files.

"But who told them the child was crying on the porch?" Mom suddenly realized something.

"Do you still remember it was me joking about calling the police for a crying baby at the dinner table?"

"Yes."

"Lisa was there too."

Mom made a bitter expression, feeling helpless, hopeless, and disgusted by this paradoxical situation.

"Mike, can you tell the chairman more precisely about what happened?"

"Don't bother, and he's got it all figured out. The problem is that he doesn't care at all. A tribunal has limited power on what it can do. They have a much closer connection to CZS than to us. The most likely thing to happen is that he'll give the green light to CZS and dismiss this case right after we leave this building."

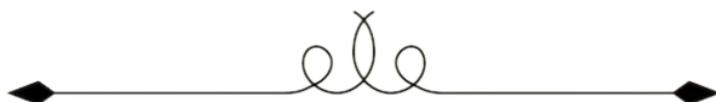
"Wow, I always thought Canada was a place where good people could find justice."

"Mom, this is not about justice. This is about the power of money. CZS is a billion-dollar initiative, and its power is superior to that of the Toronto police. You saw how those four police officers were manipulated by Ashlark like toys. They were desperate to break our family, and a broken family maximized their profits. The only thing we can do is to keep everything on the record so that Jason can accurately understand what happened when he grows up."

This is the end of my story about the Tribunal. Except for accepting and swallowing it, what else can I do?

Nothing.

## CHAPTER TWO



### DEEPLY MISSED

**M**y baby, I missed you so much. Jason was forced away from his home when he was two and a half years old, still a baby. Missing him in the early days and first few years was different from today. I am now used to the fact that he is not around, and I have become numb to the cruel reality of not being able to see him regularly.

It was unlike losing a family member or being separated due to a natural disaster or other uncontrollable factors. The tragedy of not seeing my own son was totally a man-made horror, a gruesome maze created by CZS, an unscrupulous mother, lawyers, and a lengthy chain of judicial procedures.

It was a prolonged process of learning and adapting, and as each day passed, I held onto the hope that the next day would bring something different. I hoped that the coldness of human nature would give

way to warmth and that everything would return to the way it used to be. Yet, when the next day arrived, no changes materialized, and I found myself starting the cycle of hope once again.

In the early days after losing my child, I often experienced a disorienting state of trance. I would frequently awaken from naps with an overwhelming feeling that my child was still in the house, prompting me to search every room until reality set in. Gazing upon the toys Jason once played with and touching the tiny garments he wore, tears would stream down my face silently.

My dad occasionally cooked some fancy dishes that Jason liked, just like he used to do when Jason was around. But only when the food was brought to the table did he realize that the child wouldn't return. My mom always murmured to herself, blaming herself for leaving the child outside on that day. I tried all the means to comfort her, telling her that since those people had made up their minds to take the child away, it wouldn't be much different if the child was left outside or not; excuses would always be found.

We contacted an elderly aunt who knew the whereabouts of Lisa and Jason. She told us Jason was attending a kindergarten in North York. We went to that kindergarten and implored the teacher to let us see our child, but we were met with a cold rejection. Despite our explanation that it had been a long time since we last saw the child, the teacher insisted that we could not see him without a court order.

We stood outside the fence of the kindergarten, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jason when the children came out for activities. Unfortunately, it was a bitterly cold winter day, and outdoor activities were limited,

particularly for babies who were vulnerable to catching colds. I watched my parents shivering in the wind and shook my head at them.

"Mom, this is not a solution. We have been standing here for almost an hour, and we can't just wait here all day long. Even if we do so, it will be for nothing if the children don't come out to play. It seems like the only option left is to go to court."

Mom nodded at me. This woman, who had gone through many hardships and misfortunes in life, now seemed desperate and helpless. Her father, my grandfather, was a rich landlord in old China before the Communist Party seized power. He had two wives and ten children. My mom was the youngest posthumous child of my grandfather, who was killed during the turbulent Mao era.

When I was young, I often heard my mom telling stories of the past, especially the horror and brutality of the land reform movement. In her descriptions, she had crawled over the bodies of executed landlords and rich peasants, which I didn't find strange at all. That was the price of revolution.

After entering the new millennium, life gradually became better and sweeter, but who would have thought the cruel medical accident would fall upon her. Her life was tough and tenacious, and she lived to the moment she held her long-awaited grandson in her arms. She could also touch the cute little one and feed him with her trembling hands. Everything was so beautiful and dreamlike, except it was too short.

We knew our child was inside this building, yet we had no way to see him. My mom had experienced all kinds of unimaginable tragedies in her life, and perhaps she had never expected that she had to suffer

the ad hoc pain of not being able to see her own beloved grandson.

However, this was merely the beginning of an odyssey of yearning and painful struggle.

We went back to the elderly aunt for more information about Lisa and Jason. She told me that Jason recently muttered to himself many times like this:

"I want to take a nap with Daddy, sleep with Daddy."

When I heard this, I quickly walked out of Auntie's house so that nobody could see me. I could no longer hold back my tears, and I cried out. I knew what this was all about.

The last time I could still see Jason was on November 29 of the previous year. Before I sent him back to Lisa, we had the sweetest nap ever on the large bed. The overnight stay was filled with joy and unforgettable moments. We both felt tired around 10 o'clock in the morning; he fell asleep in my arms. He was still a baby, and holding the warm little thing was so marvelous. Why didn't I feel the same way before the apprehension day? I took for granted that he would always be together with me because he was my son. Little did I know, family is a fragile entity; the internal and external forces can easily break it. Children are often the ones who suffer the most when a family falls apart.

The nap was so sweet that it lasted three hours. It left a deep impression on Jason's young mind. For sure, he was hungering for love from Daddy; for sure, he was missing me day and night during that time. I remember when I was a little boy, I slept in my dad's arms at the age of seven. Of course, poverty played a

significant role, as we had no other assets besides the sole bed in the room. But we were a family, wading through all the difficulties in the worst era of China.

Jason was born in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet he was deprived of his father's love just because a selfish mother wanted to use him to hurt me. I love my son deeply, and that is precisely why I am hurt the most.

It was also from the mouth of this elderly aunt that we learned Lisa had another marriage back in China, and the reason for the breakdown of that family was shocking: Lisa's violent behavior toward her ex-husband.

Overwhelmed by these revelations, I was left utterly speechless. A *déjà vu* or a doomed replay? A woman with violent undertones is already a rare sight in real life, and I happened to hit the jackpot. I recklessly ventured into the marriage too quickly, just as Alex aptly pointed out. I failed to get the most basic understanding of this woman, and I blindly let her become the mother of my child. I deserved all the bitter retributions that followed.

I got a call from a dentist, more precisely, from Jason's dentist. The receptionist informed me that Jason had a cavity in his tooth and asked me to bring the child for treatment. I told her on the phone that I hadn't seen my child for half a year, and I could hear the awkwardness in her voice. The call was quickly hung up.

There was nothing more heartbreaking than knowing that your child had health issues and being unable to do anything about it. Adding to this profound anguish was the even more cruel twist that I didn't even have the opportunity to see my child, even

for a second. We lived in the same city, yet it seemed as though we existed in separate worlds. The frailty of our system stood exposed, feeble and impotent when confronted by individuals devoid of compassion and moral rectitude.

I didn't blame the system, as it was not designed solely for my benefit. It was my own misfortune to encounter the wrong people and not adhere to my principles. I was thoroughly bullied and taken advantage of, making me the biggest victim in the entire ordeal. I felt restless and worried, exhausted by thoughts of longing for my child. However, on the other side, the child probably didn't feel the same way about me. He was too young to fully understand the true meaning of blood connection, family affection, and love between father and son. He lived each day in an environment surrounded by his mother's complaints and demonization of me, and a simple statement like "Daddy deserted us" would permeate his entire childhood mindset.

Every day, the yearning for my child tested the depths of my endurance and the bounds of my patience. Thankfully, my parents remained steadfast by my side, providing solace in the moments of loneliness. The pain of losing a child, exacerbated by the presence of solitude, would be an indescribable and intolerable wound. My parents, sharing the same way of missing our child, had also become targets of Lisa's vengeful schemes. Together, we had weathered the most challenging years of poverty, while in this relatively prosperous new era, we found ourselves enduring an unconventional form of torment. Missing our beloved, this was so hard to endure.

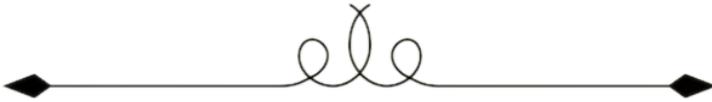
Since Jason was born, he had been afflicted by a

condition known as blocked tear ducts. Tears couldn't drain from the tear duct into the nasal cavity, so they often overflowed. When he instinctively rubbed his eyes, the tears would cascade onto the surrounding area, leaving the skin encircling his eyes to bear a light red hue.

Every time I missed my child, I would envision his tearful eyes, eagerly waiting for me to embrace him.

"My baby, I know you are now in Toronto, but where are you? How's your living condition? Are you happy with daycare? Daddy miss you all the time."

# CHAPTER THREE



## LAWYERS

**T**here has been a question posed: Judges have already unraveled the case particulars. Why do they still need the presence of lawyers? As someone without any expertise in the field of law, I don't know the correct answer to this question.

If it weren't for the issue of access to Jason, I would probably never have connections to the legal business throughout my life. I was compelled to get in touch with lawyers to find a solution to see my son. Although I had no interest in seeking answers to that seemingly meaningless question, I kind of got the answer through my interactions with them.

Who invited me into this area in the first place? It was Ms. Ashlark Ficken, the originator of this entire story.

I wrote to her and urged her to do the same as what she had done on Nov 5 so that I could see my

son immediately. I was so naïve. This was her reply.

*Hi, I cannot do anything about the Custody. You will have to complete this through court. I have nothing to do with this. You will both need to consult with lawyers to figure out a plan. I don't think that you can blame me or anyone else for the divorce. The troubles in the house have been the same for years. I will encourage access, but the best plan is to go through court so everything is on paper. Thx. Ashlark*

She had nothing to do with this. What a joke! When you planned this with Lisa and arranged for Sharon to make the fake call, you had everything to do with this. You are the mastermind behind my story. I am currently writing this novel, inspired by your exceptional directorial talents.

You can't do anything about custody, oh, ma'am, are you suffering from amnesia? You changed custody of my son on Nov 5; before that day, Jason was in my custody. You called upon Canadian armed forces to carry out this breathtaking operation.

If the child were in my custody, access would not even be a problem. But you gave custody to a parent newly charged with assault, whose mind was filled with revenge and vendetta. The interest of the child was doomed to be ruthlessly trampled upon. And you, as a worker for the children, seemed pretty good with this.

Many years have passed since this event. Do you believe you are safe with this? You may overlook one thing: as the biggest victim of this story, I am a highly-educated IT professional. I have a good habit of keeping records of important things in my life, and I possess a God-given talent for presenting complex

plots. I have the ability to write a book.

I had to hire a lawyer, otherwise, I would be permanently alienated from my son.

The first lawyer I retained didn't do much for me; on the contrary, he made a lot of trouble and further aggravated the difficulties in my case. However, everything has two sides. The chaos he caused made me perceive the chilling aspects of human nature on a deeper level and helped me understand that expecting kindness itself is a mistake.

His name was Brian, a tall, thin, white man in his 30s, a little bit too handsome for this profession. When he spoke, I could sense his shyness and lack of confidence. At the time, I knew nothing about the legal industry. If it were today, I would definitely not hire him. The reason for me to choose him was that the bank, being a major client, enjoyed some employee discounts with these private practitioners. He gave me a 25% discount on his legal fees, and I fell for the temptation of a small advantage, ending up paying a heavy price.

Money is always an issue, and litigation costs are exorbitantly high, making them unaffordable for most of the salaried class. If you don't want your happy life to be disrupted, you must steer clear of the courtroom and litigation procedures, as they can deplete your financial resources and inflict enduring psychological shadows on your spirit. Avoiding marriage is one of the most effective ways, as it eliminates the possibility of divorce. By sidestepping these pitfalls in life, we can truly appreciate the brilliance of our existence.

I was not that lucky. I had to face divorce and the access issue at the same time. Brian guided me into some failed motions in the Supreme Court located in

Downtown Toronto.

I saw Lisa in the courtroom, but she remained silent to me. Apparently, we became enemies in the end. The vows we exchanged on our wedding day now hung in the air like hollow echoes. "Till death do us part," this beautiful lyric appeared to be a painful irony of the millennium-lasting institution of marriage. Neither of us was even close to death, yet we had been torn apart, even though we raised a child together. There seemed to be a mysterious force at play.

If I were to say CZS is the mysterious force, it would be too simplistic and narrow-minded, as it merely acted as a catalyst. Many marriages end in divorce, and this trend seems to continue to rise. Will there be a day when the divorce rate reaches one hundred percent? I don't know, and I don't want to make a prediction on it. As for the power that separates men and women, it is not something that can be summarized by one or two isolated incidents. Perhaps it is due to the individual differences between men and women.

I once owned hamsters for the sake of Jason's presence. The staff at the pet store specifically told me not to keep two hamsters in the same cage. I asked if it would be okay to have one male and one female together. The answer I received was quite certain that it would be problematic. Hamsters are highly territorial animals, and putting two of them together would be disastrous.

I didn't believe this theory and placed one male and one female hamster in one big cage. In the first week, they were so loving that I envied them. They ate together, slept together, and the two little ones slept side by side, their bellies rising and falling in sync,

seemingly breathing to the same rhythm. However, one night, after the first week, I didn't sleep well, sensing some noise downstairs in the living room. I went downstairs to check, and my gosh, half of the female hamster's face was almost bitten off, with blood scattered all over the cage. The female one wouldn't have survived if I had arrived a little later. From then on, they had to be separated. The female hamster stayed with me until a year after the male one passed away. I buried them both in the same spot in the backyard, hoping that in another world, they would no longer engage in life-and-death battles.

Not all divorced couples fight fiercely in the courtroom; most of them have an amicable separation. Lisa forcefully dragged me into a legal fight, and if I didn't comply, I would never get to see Jason. I was extremely weary and disgusted with these court appearances in those first days, especially when Brian's legal expertise was shockingly inadequate.

The first motion was easily dismissed by Lisa due to the lack of proper legal counsel. I don't know what experienced lawyers can do in this scenario because the litigant has the right to obtain adequate legal representation. If your opponent plays this game, there is not so much for you to do.

In the second motion, Lisa didn't appear. She sent in a social worker to explain to the presiding judge that she was still searching for a lawyer for representation. The judge fined her \$400, which I later knew there was no way to enforce. Lisa wouldn't spare the least effort to look at that item in the endorsement.

It should be noted that each scheduled motion takes approximately two months. By the time the third motion came around, I hadn't seen my son for half a

year. I was infuriated by Lisa's brazen act of revenge, and I expected Brian to do something substantial in the third motion. But the outcome turned out to be messier for me.

On the day of the third motion, I met Ms. Wing, the formal legal counsel of Lisa, my nightmare in the following years. Of course, without her, there won't be this story, and there won't be this book.

Ashlark Ficken was the primary instigator of the whole story, and Ms. Wing was the second. If you continue to read, there would be a third who ignited my inspiration to write up a script on it.

Ms. Wing was a Chinese woman in her early 40s. She had a stern face that gave people a sense of intimidation, especially when applied with a thick layer of white powder. In her presence, Brian looked like a fledgling student who didn't even know how to behave himself.

The judge asked Ms. Wing first to present her attitude and arguments. Ms. Wing calmly walked to the central podium in the courtroom, composed and confidently delivered her impassioned speech. She listed my seven sins, and upon the first hearing, even I began to doubt if I was eligible to see my own son. Taking a moment to regain my composure, I carefully pondered her words. I gazed at her, wondering if there was any trace of fear in her eyes. Well, she did not have the courage to meet my gaze; perhaps she realized herself that her earlier words didn't sound like something from the mouth of a human being.

Next, my counsel, Brian made his appearance. I didn't know when it happened, but he had a colossal and weighty book in his hands, which seemed to be a law dictionary or a book reminiscent of an industry

bible. He briskly walked toward the central podium, perhaps due to his fast pace or the weight of the book, he almost stumbled. In that unnerving moment, I saw my mom rise from her seat in the back row. Could it be that she was about to lend a helping hand to our lawyer? Come on, even standing upright seemed to be a monumental challenge for her. After this clownish performance, my once confident enthusiasm dwindled by half.

He leaned against the podium, and I could see his legs trembling. It was beyond me to understand what really frightened him after years of hard work to obtain the bar license. Until he uttered his stuttered speech, which was completely gibberish to all the listening ears, I realized why he was so nervous: he did not even try to understand the client's case.

My case was indeed convoluted but far from being incomprehensible. He could have fully grasped everything that happened as long as he took the time to communicate with me attentively. He stubbornly employed his own immature and clichéd logic and rhetoric. No wonder the judge ignored my side requests.

Ms. Wing quickly recognized the weakening position of our side and promptly launched a new round of offensive actions. She demanded that I undergo a psychiatric evaluation on the grounds that I displayed signs of mental illness through frequent outbursts of anger in various situations. This accusation was completely unfounded; an experienced lawyer could simply disregard it and directly request my legal rights from the court. But my lovely counsel, Brian, advised me to agree to this unreasonable demand. His reasoning was that since I didn't have any

mental illness, it would be easy for me to obtain the report. This would put me in a very strong position during the next motion. What a shitty logic!

During that time in the courtroom, I found myself with very limited room to operate. Brian was my only trusted legal recourse. Given my lack of legal knowledge and experience with court proceedings, it was impossible for me to understand the intricacies involved. Apart from relying on Brian, I had no other options.

Hence, the final endorsement signed by the judge listed like these:

1. I pay the child support biweekly until the child hits the age of 18.
2. I will pay the spousal support for Lisa for the next three years.
3. I undergo a psychiatric evaluation in a court-approved institution.

After reading this, would you still dare go to court with an inexperienced lawyer? I fired this guy right after this motion. If I continued to use him, he would send me to hell. Cutting loss is always the number one principle in life. I had already lost thousands of dollars on this guy, and if I persisted in placing any hope in him, I would lose everything.

This was an obviously self-contradictory endorsement. They claimed I had a mental illness, which meant I was sick at that time. Nevertheless, they still took money from an alleged sick person. It was a flagrant and shameless mockery.

There was no particular fault or wrongdoing on the part of the judge in this motion. According to the current family law framework, mediation is always the

preferred choice. If both parties concede to a certain agreement, there is no reason for the judge not to sign it in the final motion order. Only when parties do not agree on a particular issue the judge will intervene. In my case, under the sagacious guidance of Brian the Great, I didn't even have the chance to urge the judge to arbitrate. All the legal rights on my side were lawfully castrated.

I learned a lot from this motion. I witnessed the cruel side of human nature when Ms. Wing effortlessly uttered those inhumane words. It truly opened my eyes and broadened my understanding. While she may excel as a lawyer, she certainly did not exhibit any good qualities of a human being. She used her expertise in law to extend Lisa's moral boundaries downward. She instructed Lisa how to use her own son to seek revenge against me, assuring her that these actions would not cross any legal red lines, even though they clearly fell well below the ethical standards expected of humanity.

This motion was my motion seeking access to my son. The judge would not force me to sign items 1 and 2 because they were irrelevant to the goal of the motion. I agreed to those two conditions voluntarily. Although these obligations are unavoidable, I didn't have to accept them in this motion. I could defer them to the next round of negotiations or motions. I was worried about Lisa and Jason's living conditions; they might be in desperate need of money.

Silly me, wretched me. I was also in desperate need of access to Jason, yet Lisa didn't give a damn about it. My rights as a person, she couldn't care less about them.

The world in which women live is fundamentally

different from that of men. From the moment a girl comes into this world, she receives the love and affection of her father. Parents constantly remind their sons to protect and care for their sisters, even older sisters, because they are considered weaker. As she enters the realm of family, she is cherished by her husband. Once the divorce process begins, which statistically tends to occur, it often appears that everything revolves around the best interests of women, despite slogans emphasizing the children's well-being. Many times, the best interests of the children are callously sacrificed in the presence of their mothers.

As a man, you must show your love, your chivalry, your devotion to all women around you. How much they care about your existence is seriously questionable. Physical advantages were history, especially in today's society governed by all sorts of regulations; they hold little value. Yet, the overprotection of women still goes on, and their sexual advantages will never fade away.

I may have known some of the historical origins of this overprotection. In the 1960s and 1970s, women were easily subjected to sexual violations. Victims were intimidated by street hooligans, which deterred them from seeking justice in court, allowing many perpetrators to escape their deserved punishments. This vulnerability and ineffectiveness drove the legal system to continuously reform itself. After half a century of development, sexual abuse is now recognized as a grave offense.

In the new millennium, extreme feminist movements around the world have turned a naturally justified demand for gender equality into an excessive

sensitivity. What used to be normal interactions between men and women have now become risky activities, where a slight misstep can impact a man's entire life. Within family affairs, there is a significant bias favoring women, causing men to be marginalized, and divorce becomes a daunting experience for men. Men's rights are being overlooked and suppressed. Perhaps some appropriate reforms are brewing, but we have yet to perceive them.

My story happened in the headwinds of a problematic era; safeguarding my legitimate rights as a man was extremely challenging. Considering that psychiatric appraisal requirement, everybody knew what that was about, but it was still written into the motion endorsement, thanks to the kindergarten-level IQ of my lovely counsel.

Temper control is actually a valuable and meaningful lesson for every man in this world. Women rarely encounter issues in this regard. When Lisa upheld a cell phone to videotape my outburst of anger, it was not just a form of humiliation but also a heart-wrenching memory. I stopped believing in love since then, since the vulgar image in front of me doing the meanest deeds without any shame and sorrow.

I started to approach things with a serene mindset. After a period of self-training, it became very difficult for me to be provoked by any form of disharmony around me. This included facing various hard situations in my work environment and encountering aggressive drivers on the road. And, of course, most importantly, in my relationships with women, I managed to maintain a significant level of restraint and composure.

Although obtaining that psychiatric appraisal

report took me a huge amount of time and effort, it was a memorable experience in my life, which I will elaborate on in later sections.

I still need to retain a lawyer in the place of Brian. Cheap lawyers did not perform well, so I had to find a good one with experience. I got one from an online search. His name was Mr. Hustle, and he claimed to have 40 years of professional experience.

I took one day off and went to his office, located in a commercial building on Yonge Street in the downtown area. His office was not spacious; a bookshelf and a massive desk took up half of the room. The desk was cluttered with many stacks of case documents, causing a slight wave of nausea to wash over me. Since family issues could end up in chaos like this, why did people willingly venture into families in the first place?

Mr. Hustle was a small white man in his 60s, bald from the top, full of energy. His thick glasses resembled the bottom of a bottle, a testament to his extensive reading. This appearance was strikingly different from Brian's, instantly instilling a sense of reliability and trustworthiness upon first glance.

He began to read my files as if I didn't exist. I sat in a small chair, facing the desk, quietly and anxiously waiting for his comments. But there was none. It felt like 20 minutes had passed, and still not a word was spoken. I couldn't wait any longer, so I broke the silence.

"I haven't seen my baby for half a year."

Mr. Hustle glanced at me with an expressionless face and then turned back to reading the files.

"You're not even agitated." I was not happy with his response.

He placed the files on the desk and looked at me with a smirk on his face.

"You were in court, weren't you? Did the judge say anything when you mentioned that you hadn't seen your child for months?"

"No," I shook my head.

"Did the lawyers inside that courtroom make a fuss about it?"

"No."

"Then why would I be surprised? Many kids can't see their fathers since their families break up. It could be years or forever."

My heart sank into a bottomless abyss. I closed my eyes, immersing myself in deep contemplation. I felt I was in a different world when I strenuously opened them again. I might never see my child again. Many fathers may give up at this point, but not me. There were tenacious genes in my blood, inherited from my parents and from my ancestors.

"My advice to you is to accept supervised access. In fact, you should have accepted it on the first day they took your child away, not six months later today." Mr. Hustle continued his preaching, but I still remained unwilling to make this compromise.

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong."

"The CZS document is your biggest enemy. The judge will believe CZS more than you. Besides, who was the presiding judge in your last motion?"

"What?" I had no memory of the judge's name; Brian should have taken care of these things.

"I know all the judges in the family court, and I am very familiar with the way they handle different cases. I can help you with your case."

In the next hour, he continued to prattle on about

his understanding of my case, primarily focusing on how supervised access works, which made me feel nauseated several times. His descriptions were incredibly detailed, including the arrangement of toys in the supervised access center and how children and fathers were monitored during the visitation. I listened to his speech with strong resentment, yet begrudgingly, I had to admit that what he had advised was the only feasible way to see my son.

Finally, he realized that I was a little tired, and he wanted to bring this conversation to an end. He fetched the files from the desk and pointed to the lines in the endorsement.

"There's something you need to do first. They require you to undergo a mental health evaluation. Seems to me you didn't control your temper very well."

"You don't believe I have a mental illness, do you?"

"Of course not. This is a very common trap that fathers fall into."

He didn't linger on this meaningless topic but rather went straight to the major point.

"Mr. Lue, my hourly rate is \$450. If you retain me as your lawyer, I can help you see your son."

This is a sky-high price for an ordinary employee like me, but the longing for my child compelled me to grit my teeth and haggle the price with him.

"Can you give me a discount? Say \$400 per hour? \$450 is just too much for me." I made a very reasonable proposal.

"No, I won't budge. I have 40 years of experience in this business; you will find it worthwhile for my expertise. Besides, you've hired some guy before me. Was he any good?"

There was no way that I could accept this price; I

would go broke if I retained him as my counsel. After I firmly gave him a negative answer, Mr. Hustle removed a giant calculator from the drawer.

"From the moment you were in my office, it's been one hour and a half. You need to pay me 762.75 dollars."

"What? You haven't done anything for me. You're robbing me of my money." I was shocked and enraged by this shameless robbery.

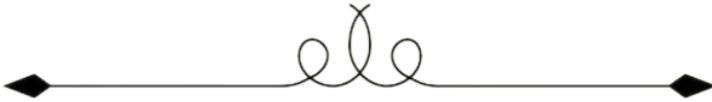
"Easy, Mister. You need to control yourself, or you're going to lose more. I can help you resolve your case, and if you had to go to the final trial, your legal fees could easily exceed 100 thousand."

I fled out of the money-sucking office and walked onto the street. There was quite a hustle and bustle on the so-called longest street in Canada. It was not rush hour yet; vehicles were moving at normal speeds.

I sit on the stone edge of a flower bed filled with blooming tulips, trying to relax my tense nerves. After filing for divorce, I did not have one good night's sleep. I struggled for half a year, not even close to seeing my son.

Toronto's early May was warm and charming. Pedestrians passing by were lightly dressed, busy but upbeat. There was a scene I was very reluctant to see: a strong young man walking by, carrying a toddler boy on his shoulders, with a beautiful young woman by his side. I couldn't tell if it was admiration or envy that hit me. It seemed so easy for a happy family, but for me, it was too far away to reach.

# CHAPTER FOUR



## SUPERVISED ACCESS

**M**r. Hustle was a good lawyer, but he was not an excellent negotiator. At that time, \$400 per hour was still a sky-high price, and he could easily make 30 grand out of me. My case was difficult for me, for Brian, but not for him. He could simply copy and paste from the case documents he had prepared for his other clients and make easy money from my situation. Sometimes, overconfidence ruins good opportunities.

I had to switch my focus to Chinese lawyers and found one in a local newspaper's yellow page website. Her name was Ms. Dough, a hardworking Chinese woman in her 30s. I could always see her left eye filled with bloodshot veins, wondering how much text she had to read every day. She had a reasonable price and a humble attitude, and we quickly reached a deal of employment.

Ironically, the first thing she did for me was not about legal proceedings but something bizarre and contrary to common sense. I somehow came to know that Jason had nutritional issues, which impeded his normal growth and development. He was noticeably shorter in height compared to children of his age.

I don't have the faintest memory of the source from which I learned about this. Definitely not from the elderly aunt I mentioned before. I skimmed through all my diaries and logs but couldn't find any written record of it. On the other hand, this proves my theory that if you don't write things down on paper, most of the details of life are destined to fade into oblivion.

I bought some high-quality vitamins suitable for kids, and the only way to get them into my son's hands had to be through a lawyer. It might sound absurd, but it was the only option available. I sent the package to Ms. Dough, who then forwarded it to Ms. Wing, and eventually, Ms. Wing handed it over to Lisa. All the shipping costs were charged to me, along with various written communications handled by the lawyer, making it one of the most expensive nutritional medicines ever.

Ms. Dough demonstrated great empathy for my situation. She patiently explained the strategy that our side should adopt, which aligned remarkably well with Mr. Hustle's perspectives. So, without any further ado, the first step was to get that psychiatric appraisal conducted.

Three months later, on September 21, I went to CAMH's head office, located on College Street. The full name for CAMH is Centre of Addiction and Mental Health. It provides free mental illness evaluation services covered by OHIP - Ontario Health Insurance

Plan, but a referral from a family doctor is required.

I have been on the waiting list since April, and my appointment date could be as late as next April due to the high demand for this service. Mental health is an indispensable part of modern society, as people experience anxiety from all kinds of pressures.

I called CAMH two weeks ago and shared my story with them. The receptionist was quite moved and added me to the cancellation list, which greatly shortened my waiting time. Good people can be found everywhere, and it is through their kindness that a healthy society moves forward.

Dr. Joel Goodman was my psychiatrist on that day. Before I entered his office, I was wondering how specialists in this field determine if a patient suffers from mental illnesses. Do they use some special devices to detect my brain activities or emotional fluctuations? Or do they set up certain scenarios for me to react to? All the weird thoughts flooded my mind.

His office was nothing like a hospital but instead had an old-school vibe. The entire diagnostic process relied solely on face-to-face conversations, without any connection to my previous whimsical thoughts.

He asked me why I was required to undergo this assessment, and I narrated my whole story to him. As I spoke, he listened attentively and took notes on paper, nodding to indicate his understanding. The conversation lasted for almost an hour. And then, he drew a conclusion in a written report.

*Joel Goodman M.B., FRCPC, DFCPA*

*September 21, 20xx*

*Dear Dr. Lai,*

*I saw Mike Lue today.*

*Diagnosis: No mental illness*

*Stress secondary to custody dispute*

*Treatment Recommendations:*

*No treatment necessary*

*Advised to involve Office of the  
Children's Lawyer*

*Full note to follow*

*Joel Goodman*

*CAMH*

You may believe that by obtaining this report, I would be able to see my child immediately. Of course not. It was just a step I had to complete thanks to Brian's stupidity. Lisa and Ms. Wing were well aware, more than anyone else in this world, that I did not have a mental illness. Besides, Lisa was receiving my money in the form of spousal support and child support with full confidence.

Ms. Dough sent an inquiry email to the other party.

*Hello Ms. Wing,*

*Since Mr. Lue has already completed a psychiatric assessment at the CAMH and there is no finding of any mental health issues, there is no need for supervised access. Mr. Lue suggests seeing his son every Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. After 6 months, access will increase to every weekend from Saturday at 10 a.m. to Sunday at 10 a.m.*

*Please advise if this arrangement is agreeable to Ms. Lin.*

I searched in my log thoroughly and could not find any reply to this petition. Either there was no reply at all, or there was a reply that Ms. Dough was very

unwilling to forward to me.

My parents' second stay in Canada was coming to an end. Although they returned for a third visit after two years, we all believed, at that time, that due to their age and health condition, they would never be able to come back to Toronto again.

I urged Ms. Dough to write to Ms. Wing to check the possibility that Lisa could allow my parents to see their grandson before they left Toronto. Without any doubt, there was no chance to see Jason. Here is the formal reply sent by Ms. Wing.

*Mr. Lue's parents have been bad-mouthing Ms. Lin in the community, and their historical contacts have been the friendliest exchange, to say the very least. Ms. Lin is not prepared to contact Mr. Lue's parents at this point.*

Throughout this case, Lisa's best interest was always at the center and top, and Jason's best interest was dwarfed to nothing.

Ms. Dough wrote back to Ms. Wing's previous comment.

*I am quite surprised that Ms. Lin is ready to take away two elderlies' last chance to see their grandson. I will seek Mr. Lue's instruction to bring a motion. If Ms. Lin does not wish to see Mr. Lue's parents, we can arrange third-party transportation, and the visit can take place at a public place, such as a restaurant.*

Within the context of legal proceedings, this paragraph was equivalent to saying nothing and could be easily ignored. We did try to bring a motion in the end, but it was interrupted by an unforeseen medical incident. My dad couldn't stop bleeding during

urination, and we were not sure whether a prostate issue or a kidney problem caused it. In such a desperate situation, I purchased two premium-priced tickets and sent them back to China. As a result, their return date was more than a month earlier than initially scheduled.

On the day my parents left Toronto, the autumn rain continued to drizzle incessantly, casting a gloomy and melancholic atmosphere. We arrived at Pearson International Airport two hours prior to departure. In the waiting hall, we bid farewell. My mom tried to stifle her tears.

"Mike, take care of yourself when we are not here."

I nodded without saying anything.

"We shouldn't have come here. If not for us, your life would have been the same as before; you would be happy with your family," she continued.

"There are many factors that have caused the family to break; don't blame yourself for it. Look after yourself, and we'll see the baby next time you come here." I forced a smile, not making this sad moment any worse.

"We don't want to see you alone."

"It's fine. Things will get better. Time can solve everything."

The old couple then walked slowly toward customs. Mom's awkward steps made this stretch of walk like a marathon. In the distance, Dad waved his hand, signaling that I should turn back, while Mom was clearly crying.

Time flew by, and before I knew it, November 29 came around, marking the anniversary. It had been a whole year since I last saw my two-year-old son. After my parents left Toronto, I had been the only one living

in the house. Once filled with laughter and happiness, the house was only an empty shell for a desolate soul. During the late nights, when I needed to go to the bathroom, I couldn't even bother to turn on the light. There was no living creature in this house except me. I fumbled in the darkness, searching for the right place. There was a time when I couldn't even comprehend the meaning of my own existence anymore. I felt as though I were a walking corpse devoid of purpose. Everything that once seemed within my reach vanished into the air in the blink of an eye.

The worst may have already arrived. When you unknowingly traverse through the rock bottom of life, the splendor of the next phase has quietly unfolded. Similar to the stock market, the lowest prices always occur in the deepest despair. As you become aware of a new market trend taking shape, some time has elapsed since the lowest point.

Ms. Dough sent an ultimatum warning to the other party.

*Hello Ms. Wing,*

*While I appreciate the fact that you are on vacation, access has been delayed for 9 months due to Ms. Lin's unwillingness to cooperate, and Mr. Lue is NOT able to see his own son for this holiday season. A motion will be brought on January 5 in the coming new year.*

This warning seemed to carry some weight. After another several times of deliberate delays, the final date was set for January 22 in the new year. It was supervised access rather than unsupervised access that I could take Jason home. Definitely not. Lisa cared the least about Jason's privacy; all she wanted was

revenge against me, and Ms. Wing was the facilitator to make all this happen legally.

It was a sunny winter day in January, warm and pleasant. I went to the Seneca site of the Access Center to see my son. The site was located right next to the Seneca College campus. It was a standalone bungalow building that resembled a kindergarten from the outside.

After 14 months of painful struggle and anxious waiting, I finally got to see my son. My emotions were in a state of turmoil, filled with unease and restlessness. I was worried that Lisa and Mrs. Wing might come up with new tricks again.

The security signed me in, and I entered the building with the toys I newly bought and some food that my son was fond of. A staff member guided me into a large room, she told me her name was Elaine, and she was the manager of this site. And then she left.

This major room for visitation was spacious, with tons of toys in it, just as Mr. Hustle had depicted to me 8 months ago. A black man was sitting in the room, and it seemed like he had been there for a while. He was in his 30s, and must be a young father to see his children. He approached me and greeted me.

"Hey, buddy, how's it going? I'm Marcel." He extended his right arm toward me.

"Hello, Sir, I'm Mike. How are you?" I replied, shaking hands with him.

"I'm good. How long has it been since you've seen your children?"

"Over a year, actually 14 months."

"You are the champion, man. I haven't seen my little guys for six months, and I'm mad. I can't sleep at

night."

"What happened?"

"I kind of punched that woman very gently." Marcel used his arms to demonstrate how soft and gentle his actions were.

I couldn't help laughing.

"And that bitch called 911 on me, claiming I used violence on her."

"In my case, it was the opposite. I called 911, and the assault was on me." I bared my forearm and showed the scars of the scratches.

Marcel's eyes widened. "And yet you are here to see your children?"

At this moment, a female staff worker led a boy and a girl, about 4 or 5 years old, into the room. Marcel leaned forward, embracing both in his arms, kissing and caressing them, tears in his eyes.

Another female staff worker appeared from nowhere, holding a notepad in her left hand and a ballpoint pen in her right. She stood next to Marcel, observing his every move, jotting down words on her notepad.

This was the so-called supervised access. Who the hell invented this anti-human approach?

I watched the scene of Marcel's family, wondering what it could be like when it was my turn to see little Jason.

After some time, I wasn't sure how long; Elaine came up to me and explained that because it had been 20 minutes past the agreed-upon time and the other party hadn't arrived, they had to cancel this visit and mark it as no-show.

I wasn't the least bit surprised. Over the past year, this situation has happened again and again, over and

over, time after time. Besides waiting, what else could I do? The ice-cold reality had transformed me from a quick-tempered and easily angered person into a patient, resilient and calculated mature man.

I did not make any complaints and started to pack my stuff. Just then, a little boy walked in, with a very familiar smile on his face, a water bottle in his hand. I hesitated for a moment, and then I realized that this was my boy, my son, Jason.

I quickly snatched Jason into my arms, tears welled up in my eyes as I muttered to my child, "I'm sorry, Jason, I'm sorry, it's all my fault, it's all daddy's fault."

A third female staff worker quickly appeared beside me, holding the same set of notepads and pens. I kissed and caressed Jason, with no time to care about her presence.

The room was so spacious that two families could play with their children freely without any interference. Each father was equipped with at least one recorder. Elaine patrolled the entire room as if there were felons inside.

The toy I bought for my child was an electronic train driven by batteries with flashing lights on all sides. As we were joyously playing with this toy, some chaos spread from the other side of the room.

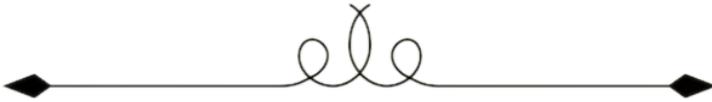
Marcel shouted, "Fucking bitch!"

His eyes were filled with rage as if blood was about to spurt out. The recorder quickly wrote something down on her notepad.

I looked toward Marcel, shaking my head vigorously, signaling him to stop.

The children continued to play like nothing had happened. Perhaps they were making fun of the foolishness of adulthood.

# CHAPTER FIVE



## MOTION

**T**he motion to get unsupervised access was totally unnecessary. But Ms. Wing wanted to make money, and Lisa enjoyed the pleasure of punishing me. I lost \$7,000 in legal fees even if I was the winner of the motion. As I mentioned before, everything has two sides, and by attending this motion, I had the opportunity to learn that the law is mighty and just.

January 22 was the most memorable day in my life, and I will never forget every detail that happened on that day. My boy was about to turn four years old, and due to his short stature, he was almost the same height as me when I crouched down. I kept kissing his cheeks as if trying to make up for all the love I owed him that one day. The child nestled against me, his little hand resting on my knee for support. I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, savoring the pure and

innocent essence exuding from the tender body of my child, basking in the joy of every precious second, moments that are often taken for granted in a normal family setting.

At that age, my child would have been captivated by various colorful toys. He probably didn't pay much attention to the few aunties around us. If, when he grows up, he still has memories of that scene, and if he understands what those women were doing, I bet he would feel overwhelmed and find it hard to get over with.

Elaine took a photo of us, where both my child and I were smiling, yet our eye rims were all tinged with a rosy redness. After enduring a grueling 14-month ordeal, I could finally embrace my own child, and I burst into tears for a full ten minutes. There was no force that could suppress the sadness I felt at that moment, and that was the reason why my eye rims appeared completely swollen and red.

The child's red eyes were due to a congenital ailment known as blocked tear ducts. In other words, over the past four years, the child's eyes had been repeatedly soaked in tears that could not drain into the nasal cavity, resulting in a bloodshot appearance that had become the norm. I couldn't blame Lisa for the child's inadequate care, as she had been exhausted taking care of the child alone and couldn't possibly attend to every aspect. However, her actions to obstruct any contact or care from myself and my parents, driven solely by self-interest, were undeniably disgraceful and unforgivable. If Toronto had a slum, would she bring the child along in there?

If my mom treated me like this, I would immediately sever all ties with her. This is a matter of

right and wrong, and there is no room for compromise or wavering.

I quickly contacted a pediatric ophthalmologist, and the lacrimal surgery was scheduled for February 22. After the surgery was completed that day, Lisa sent me a photo to prove that the child was doing well. Unfortunately, as a father, I couldn't even be there, solely because of the relentless game played by the trinity of Lisa, Ms. Wing, and Ms. Ficken. Perhaps the child believed that it was the immense maternal love that helped him overcome this plaguing disease; he might be totally unaware that it was his loving father who worked silently behind the scenes.

The Seneca site only supported visits every two weeks. We proposed changing to another site that accepted weekly visits, and Lisa's response was "not agreeable." After five months, when we gathered 10 visits with good access reports, we proposed changing to unsupervised access. Without the least doubt, the response from Lisa was "not agreeable."

I had no choice but to bring a motion. This motion was completely meaningless, and the likelihood of Lisa winning was extremely slim. I gradually understood that what Lisa cared about fundamentally was not winning but rather postponing the date for the child to return home. As for Ms. Dough's threat to seek costs for the motion, it held no binding power over Lisa; she had the least fear of it. Hence, there were hardly any feasible methods to prevent Lisa from dragging me into this motion.

When we proposed a date for the motion, it was Ms. Wing's turn to perform. Sometimes, she suggested postponing, while other times, she claimed her schedule was too tight and there were no available

time slots. Finally, she even used a family emergency as an excuse. When she used that term as a pretext for herself, did she ever consider the fact that my child had not been home for a whole 20 months? Did she ever realize that over the next 20 years, I never had the opportunity to spend any important holidays with my child, be it Canadian holidays or traditional Chinese festivals? What kind of family emergencies had I been facing all this time? If she were aware of this, would she feel any remorse or unease about it?

The motion date was eventually set for September 14. On that day, I dressed very formally, and so did Lisa. Ms. Dough and Ms. Wing both wore black robes as required by legal professionals in a courtroom.

With Brian's previous experience as a cautionary tale, I really didn't know whether I should fully trust Ms. Dough. However, the rules of the court are not subject to individual will. As long as you have legal counsel by your side, as a litigant, you have very little freedom to act according to your own preferences. Your lawyer will constantly seek your input, but the lawyer leads the entire process.

Judge Sunshine presided over the motion; she was a brown-haired white woman in her 50s. She commenced the proceeding.

"This motion is about the unsupervised access upon the request of the applicant father. I'd like for Ms. Dough to speak first on behalf of the father and then Ms. Wing for the respondent mother."

Ms. Dough walked confidently to the central podium, not a bit similar to Brian's jittery demeanor.

"Since the day CZS transferred custody of the child from the father to the mother, the child has not returned to his birth home. For the first 14 months,

the father did not have a single second to see the child. We have made tremendous efforts to negotiate with the mother, but all we received were denials or disagreements based on weak allegations. After supervised access began, the mother continued to make unfounded excuses to deny more reasonable unsupervised access. When normal access to the child is reduced to a tool for the mother's personal purposes, this case has become a tragedy of humanity and a violation of justice. Last but not least, Ms. Lin was previously charged with assault by the Crown before all of this started. Thank you, Ma'am."

Judge Sunshine cast a serious gaze upon Lisa, who was seated on her right side as the respondent.

"Ms. Lin, I read the peace bond you've signed. Shame on you!"

It was Ms. Wing's turn to speak. She approached the central podium with a mixture of hesitation and perplexity, devoid of her usual confidence and arrogance. With years of courtroom experience, she understood that today's case had little chance of winning. Faced with a female judge, favoritism toward the female party could be further diminished. But Lisa insisted on attending this motion, driven by the simple purpose of harming me. Ms. Wing had the chance to earn good money, and she took it gladly.

"As the CZS file indicates, the family has been in a long-standing state of instability. The couple has been involved in quarrels and violence since the child's birth. The father has lost over \$100,000 in the stock market and is no longer considered a responsible parent. Mr. Lue is consistently late during supervised access, and the access center administrator has issued him a warning letter. There have also been reports of

him giving the child coffee to drink and feeding expired food."

Upon hearing this, Judge Sunshine gave me a witty and sunny wink, which caught me off guard. Can a judge actually do this? Then, I quickly realized that everybody has the same common sense. The strained arguments regarding expired food were too amusing for an ordinary person to buy it, let alone for a judge.

I returned a gentle smile to Judge Sunshine as Ms. Wing continued with her speech.

"Therefore, my client's position is to maintain supervised access. Thanks, Ma'am."

Judge Sunshine then spoke to Ms. Dough. "Anything you want to add, Ms. Dough?"

Ms. Dough exchanged some murmurs with me, and then she stood up from her seat.

"Your Honor, I would like to clarify the reason why the father was late for the visits. Mr. Lue grows a specific type of beans in his backyard. The child loves eating them. Most of the time, it was the mother who was late, and if the father arrives too early, the child doesn't have a chance to enjoy the warm food."

Judge Sunshine did not give Ms. Wing a second chance to speak. She made her decision and uttered softly, "I am going to grant unsupervised access."

As she wrote up the endorsement, Ms. Dough whispered to me, "We won the case."

Judge Sunshine then read the verdict.

"Supervised access has been taking place for 8 months. Prior to that, there were occasions where the father had unsupervised access without problem. In my view, it is time for the child to have unsupervised interim access with his father commencing this Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. for four weeks, after interim

access increased to overnight from every Saturday 10 a.m. to Sunday 10 a.m., pickup and drop off locations to be arranged by counsels."

Ms. Dough stood up to speak.

"Your Honor. We've tried numerous negotiations with the other party, yet they still insisted on coming to this motion. We request the other party to cover up our legal costs."

Ms. Wing responded almost at the same time.

"Your Honor. Ms. Lin is unemployed, and taking care of Jason consumes all her time; please consider the challenging situation for the mother."

Judge Sunshine wrote down her decision on the paper and then read it out.

"The father, as the successful party, is entitled to his costs, which is in the amount of \$2000, payable at the time of the equalization."

That was the end of the motion. So be it; Jason was allowed to go home.

On September 16, Saturday, I took Jason home. After Jason got out of the car in the garage, I lowered myself down and embraced him in my arms. I kissed his forehead and caressed his slim body.

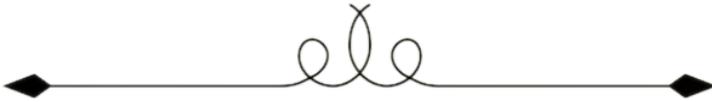
"My boy, you're home," I mumbled. This meant a lot to me, after 22 months of struggling, I finally got my son home.

Jason rushed into the house while shouting, "Where's my toy room?"

I followed him, smiling.

He actually remembered every detail of this house. I wondered at that time how much memory people retain from their childhood.

# CHAPTER SIX



## CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

**M**y story happened in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Let's assume it took place in China, and it might have ended differently. It was truly amazing that the same issue could be approached in distinct ways under different cultural backgrounds.

In those very first days, I felt disappointed and lost. The pressures of divorce, lawyer fees, and the long absence from my child overwhelmed me. I tried every possible means to reach out to all parties involved, seeking resolution and accountability. Among all the responses, the most important one came from the then-premier of Ontario, Kathleen Wynne. I thought I had found a lifeline, but nothing came of it. The separation of powers is not a mere joke; the judicial and executive powers are completely independent.

Imagine this, if it were in China, and if I had

received a favorable response from the highest official in the province, my case would have been resolved smoothly and promptly, without the possibility of dragging on for two years. Of course, in China, there wouldn't exist an organization like CZS. Many people criticize China for having too many cases of child trafficking, but my understanding is that it is because there is a market in China for receiving trafficked victims. In the Western world, even if you successfully controlled a child, there is no end-market to accept them, so it's not CZS's credit at all. As for why CZS still exists, I have no idea of the answer to that.

Another notable observation is that the moral boundary and the legal boundary are not the same. I used to believe that the law represented the minimum moral standard, serving as the bottom line for human morality. But reality has shown that this notion is far from accurate.

What the trio of Lisa, Ms. Wing and Ms. Ficken had done was far below acceptable human moral standards, yet it was still legally tolerable. Put this matter in China, it would likely be much easier to resolve. China is a country where the importance of family values is significantly stronger than the global average. The concept of respecting elders and caring for the young is deeply ingrained in people's minds. Lisa and Ms. Wing's inhumane actions of denying access would receive widespread criticism online. The internet holds significant influence in China, and people's views on many hot-button issues tend to converge, reflecting a strong shared moral standard within the collective.

Additionally, China has a wonderful tradition of supporting the elderly, and failure to fulfill this duty

can lead to legal consequences, which is unimaginable in Western cultures. For example, the term "filial piety" is widely used in Chinese literature, art, and daily life, being an extremely high-frequency vocabulary. While in the West, this term is rarely used by anyone.

I once tried seeking help from the media, but the English media showed no interest in my story. They believed that I should resort to legal action, as it was not a matter for the media to intervene. However, when I shared my story with a local Chinese media outlet, it quickly gained attention and was published. Within a matter of days, the story was picked up and circulated by overseas media outlets around the world, reaching an estimated one million readers. But what difference did it make? Ms. Dough constantly reminded me that only the court had the power to grant me access to my child. The various buzz in the media offered no real help in this matter.

She was right. Indeed, only the court could grant me access to my child. Many times, I complain about the leniency and powerlessness of the judicial system toward Lisa and Ms. Wing's despicable behavior. However, that doesn't mean that China's system is superior to the system here. It just means that each region has its own judicial and administrative systems that are suitable for its unique circumstances. Every system has its beneficiaries and its unlucky victims.

Take another extreme case, K Zhang, for example. He was executed at the age of 36. If he had been tried within the North American system, it was highly possible that the jury would not have reached a unanimous decision for the death penalty. He might have been sentenced to 20 to 30 years and potentially eligible for parole at the age of 50. But in China, his

fate rested solely in the hands of a single judge. Despite the efforts of the defense lawyer to employ the psychiatric clause to save him and the widespread sympathy and support shown by the entire country toward this 22-year-dormant mother avenger, the judge's resolution remained unwavering.

Ironically, the judge himself is now under investigation for corruption. Coming from the poorest peasant class, K Zhang would have been alive if he had even the slightest social connections. It was this vulnerability that the judge took advantage of. Clearly, in today's political arena, the judge encountered much stronger adversaries. If he had shown a little more compassion and respect for the moral values of ordinary people at that time, perhaps he wouldn't be in such a predicament today.

Corruption in China is a highly flexible political tool, often leading to direct convictions of morally corrupt officials and individuals, bypassing other judicial complexities. In contrast, certain activities such as corruption, prostitution, and drug use have been legalized to some extent in Western societies. This means that unless a wrongdoer crosses the judicial red line, they are unlikely to face substantial consequences or sanctions.

Many people say that morality holds little value in the presence of the law. It's difficult to judge the correctness of such a statement. But one thing is certain: I will never engage in any unethical practices. Even if I could, I wouldn't dare. In my belief system, God is always watching us. When confronted with unethical conduct, I always keep my motto in mind: just because I don't take action doesn't mean others won't; when others don't take action, it doesn't mean I won't

either.

I love Toronto, and I love Canada. This love does not diminish because I was once a victim of a certain system or institution. This love does not dwindle just because of some controversial discussions between moral and legal boundaries. Toronto is my second home, and it is where my son was born. It has given me a life that would be very hard to obtain in China or Germany.

I am fortunate to have lived in the three most powerful economic entities of my time - China, Europe, and North America - for many years each. I was born in China and lived there for 27 years, then in Germany for 8 years, and finally settled in Toronto when I turned 36. Toronto may not have the same cultural sense of belonging as Chinese cities, nor the tidiness and orderliness of German cities - often, it appears a bit worn and weathered. But it makes you feel at home. Once you adapt to its rhythm, you may never want to leave.

I have been to nearly all the major cities in China, Germany and Canada, as well as most of the major cities in Europe and the States. I have enough knowledge and experience to choose the place that suits me best. Toronto attracts immigrants from almost every country in the world. The reasons for this are not those abstract concepts of democracy and freedom, which are not tangible to the everyday life of ordinary people. If you don't vote, what is the meaning of democracy? Many people never vote. If you don't have money, what kind of freedom are you enjoying? A lot of people never possess a reasonable amount of enough money. I summarize the appealing aspects of

Toronto as follows: wealth, opportunities, diversity, and accommodation of ethnicities and beliefs.

For many people, it can be difficult to understand the phenomenon that despite China's rapid economic growth since joining the WTO and its position as the undisputed second-largest economy in the world, the trend of Chinese people immigrating to different parts of the world continues unabated. In just the past year alone, over 6,000 Chinese citizens were involved in migration activities from Central America to the US-Mexico border.

I have come across reports about these migration routes, and they depict a highly dangerous undertaking. However, once you enter the territory of the United States, it does offer a significant change in your circumstances. So, where exactly is the problem? Is China's economic boom just an illusion? Certainly not. It is an undeniable fact that the Chinese government has led its people toward prosperity, a remarkable achievement witnessed by the whole world. But China is a country with a vast population, and the unevenness of economic development is almost unavoidable. It is unrealistic to expect China to achieve income equality similar to that of Germany.

As of today, there are still many people in China with an annual income below \$1,000. Along with certain groups of dissatisfied people in urban areas, it is completely understandable that they have the desire to immigrate to developed Western countries. Imagine if your monthly income is 3,000 Chinese yuan, living standards can appear relatively tight. While if your monthly income is 3,000 USD or CAD, it immediately feels much more sustainable. And this level of income is achievable for the vast majority of Americans and

Canadians. I have never doubted that China will surpass Western societies comprehensively within 100 years, but the question is how to approach the next 50 years during my lifetime. This may be the genuine thought of many immigrants like myself.

As for opportunities, you have read the part of my story about meeting with Teresa. A similar thing also happened in Germany, but it is not easy to happen in China. Why? China and even all countries in Asia face significant issues of internal competition, where the emergence of an opportunity often results in intense competition among a large number of individuals with similar backgrounds. Ultimately, it is the overall societal issue caused by resource scarcity that cannot be fundamentally resolved. The situation is totally different in North America or Western Europe, where they occupy the top positions in the global industrial chain, maintain a relatively balanced population ratio, and provide appropriate labor resource protection while curbing discrimination and exploitation. As a result, ordinary people have a higher probability of obtaining good employment opportunities. I am not saying that finding a dream job in Toronto is easy, but relatively speaking, there are many opportunities available.

Diversity is the most fascinating concept of today's interconnected world. Before I came to Toronto, I had no idea about this concept at all. During my time in Germany, I would see the serious and reserved Germans every day and some Turkish people who had a slight Eastern influence. Faces from other ethnicities were few and far between. While in Toronto, you can witness the presence of almost every ethnic group. There are neighborhoods like Little Italy, Little Jamaica,

Little India, Little Portugal, Roncesvalles, Rexdale, Greektown, Koreatown, Chinatown, and many more, where you can see the thriving of diverse communities.

I am a part-time Uber driver, and thus, I am very familiar with the geographical names mentioned above because I have to take passengers to their desired destinations. I practically know the names of every major street in Toronto. My passengers come from almost every ethnic group and all different backgrounds. Half of my passengers enjoyed chatting during the ride. Through the conversations with them, I have gained a lot of knowledge and insights about this world.

Many people may not appreciate diversity until they experience its invaluable significance after losing it. I once had a terrible dream, in those days I lived alone in my house. The content of the dream was that I returned to my hometown in China and was not allowed to come back to Canada. At first, it felt pleasant as I could live in a familiar environment, but as time went on, I realized that every day I would encounter people who were just like me. Conversations were limited to a narrow range of topics, and English, as the universal language of the era, had no place of prominence. Monotony and homogeneity became the main themes of life. The colorful diversity of human skin tones, which I used to see every day, was no longer present.

When I woke up from the dream, it was already dawn. I walked out of the house and onto the street. A white couple walked past me, holding hands and walking their dog. And then, a black woman hurriedly passed by me, seemingly in a rush to get to work. Thank goodness, that was just a dream. From that

moment on, I gradually realized how important diversity is to my life.

The brilliance of diversity is achieved through mutual respect and understanding. I have never heard of racial tensions erupting in Canada, but I have personally experienced the dangers of racial prejudice in Germany. Unlike today's Scarborough, where Chinese supermarkets are everywhere, living in Toronto is no different than living in Beijing. Back then, in the city of Dresden, there was only one Asian store located at the HBF - main railway station, selling Asian groceries rather than specifically Chinese food. It was considered a luxury for me, worth making a trip to visit.

The streetcar was very old-fashioned, with disconnected compartments. As we approached HBF, a young man dressed in a black uniform and black boots entered the first compartment, where I was sitting. At a glance, I could tell he was a member of the right-wing neo-Nazi party. My heart immediately filled with fear. In the compartment, there were only myself and another young woman wearing a hijab. The young man looked at me disdainfully and then walked toward the Muslim woman, the sound of his boots striking the floor in a terrifying manner reminiscent of a scene from a movie. He put his hand in his mouth and let out a loud whistle. The driver was unwelcoming toward him and engaged in a heated argument in chaotic German, after which he got off the streetcar.

This was not a joking matter. We heard news that minorities were beaten to death near HBF by these neo-Nazi young males when they got drunk. Racial conflicts are deeply ingrained, and Europe is always at the forefront of combating them. Anyway, over 20 years have passed, and the situation in Dresden must

have made significant improvements. If I have the opportunity to revisit the place, I would not hesitate to go.

Toronto is a peaceful city where immigrants from all different ethnic backgrounds coexist harmoniously. This is largely attributed to Canada's excellent immigration policies and evaluation system, which prioritize high-quality immigrants. Different religious beliefs are respected, and the city is adorned with Catholic, Christian, and Orthodox churches, mosques, Buddhist temples, Daoist temples, and more.

It occurs to me that in Canada and even throughout North America, it is not possible to establish a legal framework based on a single racial or ethnic group's moral benchmark. It must be suitable for and accepted by all people coming from all ideologies. It is unsurprising then that my family law case was ultimately handled in a completely incomprehensible way to a Chinese person.

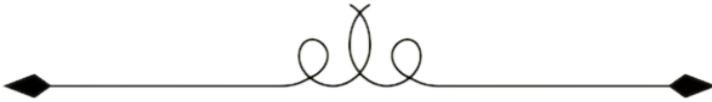
Sometimes I can understand Lisa's situation. She lost everything, and the only thing she could hold onto was my son, Jason. For the harm she caused, if she were to apologize to me privately or publicly in the future, I would definitely forgive her. But the question is, will Jason forgive her? Or whether Jason will ever realize that there was a problem in the whole event remains a mystery.

# **PART THREE**

Marriage, a paradoxical institution, often conceals the hypocrisy of societal expectations.

- FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

# CHAPTER ONE



## DANCER

I admire women. I enjoy the fragrance they carry, as if a flower lover bathing in a garden of blooms. I appreciate their slender figures and graceful curves, pleasing to the eye and intoxicating when embraced. During sleep, I delight in the warmth of squeezing her to the edge of the bed, on the verge of slipping off. I enjoy leaning against her chest and feeling the rise and fall of her breath in moments of sorrow and depression. Half of the world consists of women; if you cannot get along with them, it's difficult to believe that you have truly experienced the happiness of life.

I started dating women after that successful motion, which laid the judicial foundation for me to bring my child home every Saturday. Ms. Dough persuaded me to seek more access, which would result in paying less child support. I declined that suggestion. Based on Lisa's personality and Ms. Wing's working

style, the negotiation phase would be filled with repeated disagreements, and another motion was inevitable. I would lose another 10,000 dollars and endure endless emotional distress. If you knew what happened next and what is happening right now, you would support my decision at that time. Furthermore, after enduring two years of courtroom ordeal, going through tension and harm, I need to return to a normal pace of life.

Her name was Eva, she was 8 years younger than me. She was my first date after my divorce. As I mentioned before, living in Scarborough felt just like living in China. The entire area was filled with Chinese supermarkets, restaurants, food courts, and various services catering to the residents with Chinese backgrounds. I met Eva through a dating service on a Chinese portal website.

Our first conversation took place in a coffee shop of Tim Hortons, which is one of the most famous brands in Canada. As she stepped in the store and appeared in front of me, I was deeply enraptured by her beauty. She was almost the same height as me but much thinner. Her oval-shaped face displayed the unique elegance of an Eastern woman. She was more charming than in the photos, perhaps due to the merriness and confidence that radiated from her entire being.

She was a professional dancer, making a living by teaching people how to dance. Her students were mostly young, beautiful, and wealthy women who pursued a lifestyle full of passion and vitality. Their goal was to achieve a graceful physique through dance as a form of fitness. From any perspective, as an academic bookworm and a tech nerd, it seemed

impossible for me to find any common ground with her. While that's the incredible and wonderful part, she was the woman with whom I experienced the strongest spiritual resonance among all the women I have had relationships with in my life.

"Wow, you are a true Manchurian; you could have two children back in the old days." I initiated the conversation.

Eva belongs to the Manchu people, who were the ruling class of China from 1644 to 1912. Although they have changed their surnames to Han names, they are still recognized as an ethnic minority on their identification cards in present-day China. During the period of strict birth control policies, they were granted certain preferential treatment.

"On the condition that the other parent belongs to an ethnic minority as well." She answered. So that explained the policy clearly; only when both parents came from minority groups were they allowed to have a second child in that specific period of time, certainly not now.

After thirty minutes of talking, she suddenly stopped and looked at me quietly with an apparent pause, and then she chuckled. "You don't look like an IT person at all."

Of course, I didn't give her the impression of an IT geek. If I had, there wouldn't have been any story afterward. From the moment I first saw her, I felt the urge to embrace her in my arms. I found myself deeply in love with her. The previous courtroom experience made me exceptionally patient and strategic, and I became more inclined to observe and analyze people's verbal styles and facial expressions. A brief interaction was enough for me to realize that she had received a

very good education, and shallow and tasteless language would never touch her heart.

The positive aspect was that I possessed sufficient eloquence to meet the challenge. In order to learn authentic English, I spent a great deal of time watching over two thousand Hollywood movies with fully synced subtitles on the screen. This effort helped me improve my pronunciation and fluency in English, making my accent less noticeable and greatly benefiting my life in North America. Another unintentional result was that I acquired extensive knowledge of Western history and culture, allowing me to effortlessly engage in sophisticated communications with locals.

As for the Chinese side, I went through a similar process. It was like for a whole year, and I used an MP3 player to listen to all the works of the most famous storyteller in China. His works covered almost all aspects of Chinese history. Knowledge accumulation does not happen overnight; it relies on persistent and unwavering dedication over time. Choosing the correct media is also crucial, as watching movies and listening to digital audio are much more efficient than wading through volumes of books.

Eva quickly became enthralled by my articulate storytelling skills. I had traveled to many places, mostly by driving, which also added a rich and diverse range of topics. Our conversation covered culture, literature, expedition, and anecdotes mixed with a couple of jokes; no wonder she thought IT was not my profession.

Then, I told her another story to dispel her doubts. While I was pursuing my master's degree in Dresden, there was a course requirement to deliver an academic seminar. Most students didn't enjoy this particular

course, but since it was mandatory, there was no way to avoid it. The topic I chose was to explain a basic AI theory in the form of computational logic, and it was filled with all kinds of complex and elusive formulas.

Luckily, I had a special knack for presentations. I could explain a theory clearly, no matter how much complexity it involved, to an audience with all different types of backgrounds as long as I understood it first. After listening to my speech, Professor Reichel applauded me twice and gave me a perfect score for that course. On the second morning, he sent me to AMD Dresden Design Center, where I completed my master's thesis.

Eva had a hard time understanding how the letter 'R' was pronounced in German when I initially used a guttural sound, so I repeated it slowly using a rolling tongue for her. She giggled playfully at me. Her mesmerizing eyes were like crescent moons, and her impeccably white teeth sparkled under the fluorescent light. She had no manicure or long nails, and her makeup was very light, presenting a natural beauty before me. I couldn't contain myself anymore; my blood was burning in my veins. I did not quite remember what we said next.

One night after a week, Eva called me into her studio. Before this, I had visited this studio and watched her teaching students to dance. Her movements were precise, on point, and graceful. It was no surprise that her followers were willing to pay a hefty amount of money to learn from her. This was her means of livelihood.

That night was exceptional, as nobody else was in the studio. Everything was quiet. It was a world of just me and Eva. She placed me in a small dance room and

went out to fetch something in another room. I looked around this room, and it was about 400 square feet, not that spacious considering people dancing in it.

When she came back, she was dressed in an Arabic dancing costume, a sapphire lace bra gleamed in high-key lighting, and a flashy hip scarf set off her long and shiny legs.

I took a deep breath and asked, "What's this?"

Eva disregarded my question. She flicked a switch to play a melodious Arabic song with strong drum beats. As the music filled the air, her belly began to roll with controlled contractions and pulsations while her hips gracefully executed rhythmic circles and undulations. Undoubtedly, she was belly dancing.

I could feel my face growing warm, turning red, and my eyes becoming slightly moist. This was harem dancing, I knew it, especially as she danced so intimately beside me, her body scent permeating the air around us. I found myself completely enchanted by this unexpected private show, fervently reveling in the exquisite display of feminine grace and talent.

The music came to a halt. I swiftly pulled her into my arms, kissing her passionately. At this moment, all the loneliness and frustration of the past two years vanished into thin air. She was so delicate and slender, her weight almost imperceptible on my legs. I had no idea when the lights magically dimmed; the air was filled with sweet romance.

"Do you teach students this?" I teased her.

"Oh no, this is for you," she smiled, "I choreographed this dance about a year ago for a tournament; you're just the lucky one to enjoy it up close."

We were intimate for a while, and then I had to

bring up another matter.

"I'll go to the States next week."

"Why? For what?"

"My parents are in town; this is their third time here. My mom has a dream; she wants to see Hollywood. I can't just let them go with some travel agency; they're too old for that. So, I'll drive them there."

"You are not kidding me? You mean you drive from Toronto all the way to Los Angeles and all the way back, and you'll be the only driver, taking two 80-year-olds with you."

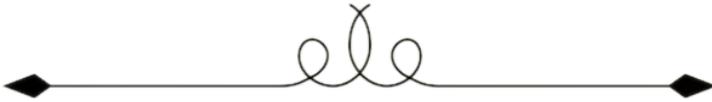
"Yeah, why not? Why do you guys always think I'm crazy? This is totally doable, and there's no better way for my mom to see Hollywood."

Eva sighed, and she knew she couldn't change my decision.

"I'll miss you and I'll worry about you."

"I know. I'll be back in 15 days. Don't worry, we'll come back safely."

# CHAPTER TWO



## INTO THE WEST

**M**om and Dad were back in Toronto again. They met with Jason at home every Saturday. The haunting melancholy and heartache of our last farewell were mere faint memories, replaced by an atmosphere of joy and celebration each Saturday. The journey to Hollywood was compressed into two weeks to ensure they wouldn't miss more Saturday gatherings.

The first stop was still inside Canada. We arrived at Niagara Falls, standing at the closest point to the Horseshoe Falls, feeling the awe-inspiring power of the cascading water.

"Canada is so beautiful!" Mom exclaimed.

"Hold on, this is just the beginning. There are many beautiful places ahead on the road. Do you see the falls on the other side? They are the American Falls and the Bridal Veil Falls." I pointed to the other side

of the waterway. "After we cross that Rainbow Bridge, we'll enter the U.S. territory."

I fumbled out three passports from my backpack - one blue Canadian passport and two red Chinese passports. This was also my first time entering the United States. Twenty years ago, I tried three times to apply for a student visa and was rejected for the same common reason - immigration intent. I haven't made any further attempts since then. I would have never believed that, eventually, I entered the States using my Canadian identity, eliminating the need for an entry visa.

My parents' visas were granted during their previous stay in Toronto. Visa applications from the U.S. consulate in Toronto are much easier to get approved than from mainland China. They never anticipated that I could directly drive them to Los Angeles; taking a flight would have been a more convenient way of traveling.

The first two days were mainly spent driving to cover the mileage, uneventful and mundane. We passed through cities such as Pittsburgh, Columbus, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Kansas City. Each time we encountered major cities on the road, we would venture into their downtown areas to admire the city skylines. I would share with my parents some origins of these cities and their roles in American history, although their interest and understanding were quite limited. They could barely remember the names of these cities. In their minds, the United States only consisted of New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, nothing else.

On the morning of the third day, when I set the GPS destination to Grand Junction, Colorado, it

displayed a distance of 1,300 kilometers. Fortunately, Interstate 70 was straight and flat, making the number less intimidating. And because we were driving toward the west, we got an extra hour of daylight. Mom sat in the passenger seat, continuously excited by the scenery along the way. Dad occupied the back row and appeared drowsy throughout the day.

Around 2 o'clock in the afternoon, we had finished about half of the mileage in the day. I noticed a large cluster of clouds in the direction we were heading. They were black, densely black, like a gigantic blanket hanging across the sky. Without a doubt, we were driving into a rainy area.

Before I could fully react, the rain poured down heavily. The highway was shrouded in darkness. It was pitch black, darker than midnight without moonlight.

"Mike, can you pull over to the roadside? I'm scared; it's too dark, and the rain is too heavy," Mom couldn't wait to express her concern.

On the right side of the road, there were vehicles parked with their emergency lights blinking.

"I can't see the condition of the roadside. Our speed is too high. The safer way is to follow."

The rain was getting heavier. The tail lights of the vehicles ahead became very faint. I had no choice but to follow at a speed of 100 km/h. I couldn't lower my speed either, for fear that the vehicles behind might rear-end us.

Our car advanced blindly for 20 minutes, and the dark clouds overhead gradually turned gray and white, finally allowing us to see the moving objects on the highway. It felt like coming back from hell.

This was my first time experiencing the immense power of Mother Nature so closely. The United States

is a country prone to frequent meteorological disasters. Compared to the tornadoes in the Midwest, hurricanes on the Southeast coast, winter storms in New England, lake-effect snow in Buffalo, scorching heat in the South, earthquakes, and droughts in the West, Toronto's climate conditions can be described as heavenly.

#### ***DAY 4.***

We were in the mountains. Actually, we were already in the Rocky Mountains after arriving in Denver the previous afternoon. On the fourth day, we entered the Colorado Plateau. The landscape changed dramatically, with red and white striped rock formations dominating, likely formed by volcanic lava from various geological eras weathered over millions of years. For about 20 seconds, we were completely surrounded by this type of mountain rocks for a stretch of drive. I beckoned my parents to look outside of the car; it felt like being on Mars, nothing like being on Earth.

In the middle of the day, we drove along Highway 163 southbound. We passed Mexican Hat and San Juan River, then I parked our car on the roadside, and we saw the majestic contour of Monument Valley.

"This is the place where almost all the famous Westerns were shot in the last century. John Ford was the director, and John Wayne was the star actor. They loved this place so much, now we can see there's a reason for it."

I explained to my parents while they were stepping on the gravel and enjoying the beauty and grandeur of this miraculously eroded landscape in the bright sunlight.

"This is also the place where Forrest Gump stopped running and returned home. I know you have no idea who Gump is, but he is the character who encouraged a whole generation of American people."

I couldn't help noticing that in this vast surrounding area, there was not a single soul except for my family and not even one vehicle passing by. What an eerily fantastic place!

### ***DAY 5.***

We visited Bryce Canyon National Park and Zion National Park, both incredibly beautiful places. But an even more stunning place showed up later that day, before sunset, when we arrived at Page, Arizona. Horseshoe Bend is a U-shaped curve of the Colorado River. From the observation point to the flowing river below, there is a drop of approximately 300 meters, providing a breathtaking aerial view. Like all the other visitors, we were deeply impressed by its grandeur and magnificence.

### ***DAY 6.***

This day was dedicated to the Grand Canyon. While we were marveling at this natural wonder, Dad asked me a question about the origin of the Grand Canyon. He believed it was a result of the Earth's crustal movements and compression, eventually tearing the surface apart. I quickly clarified the concept.

"Dad, the Grand Canyon was formed by the flushing and erosion of water flow, and this is the consensus among almost all scholars."

Dad looked at the vast expanse in front of us and shook his head.

"This does indeed go against conventional thinking," I further explained. "But considering this erosive process over millions of years, it becomes quite reasonable. In another million years, wind and rain will completely erase Monument Valley."

In the evening of the same day, we arrived in Las Vegas. After settling down at the hotel, we went out to drive along Las Vegas Boulevard, also known as the Strip. It was 10 p.m. local time, and there were huge crowds of people pouring into this street on both sides, with everyone wearing a happy smile on their faces.

Inside the car, Mom and Dad were enchanted by the dazzling light. They pointed to different structures and buildings through the window, expressing their joy. Throughout their lives, they might never have dreamed that one day they would have the chance to be in this legendary city. I always tell them that my little sister is the one by their side to take care of them, while I am the one making their lives splendid. I have taken them all over China and shown them around Western Europe, and now we are chasing dreams in the center of the world.

I am the best son they are proud of. I could have been the best husband, but Lisa gave me up so easily due to family turbulence and the advice of her wise counselors. I could have been the best daddy too, but Jason didn't have a chance to live by my side.

### ***DAY 7.***

Instead of heading directly to Los Angeles, we went south to San Diego. We didn't want to have any regrets for the future, and this beautiful naval port city was not to be missed.

We drove across the Coronado Bridge; from the island, we could have a panoramic view of downtown San Diego. A U.S. Coast Guard was cruising in the North San Diego Bay. And the U.S. Naval Base Coronado loomed in the distance.

"This is the turning point of our journey. To the south is Mexico, and to our west is the Pacific Ocean. We are heading home from now on," I explained to my parents.

That night, we stayed in Anaheim. Almost immediately after we had just put our luggage in the hotel, the fireworks started. We went out to see what was happening, and our neighbor happened to be Disneyland.

### ***DAY 8.***

We spent the entire morning in Universal Studios. When we drove back to downtown Hollywood, it was already 4 p.m. We pulled over to the curb just a little west of Highland Metro station. Dad stayed in the car so that we wouldn't get ticketed.

I got out of the car, and almost at the same spot, I stepped on the star of Jacky Chan; Mom came closer to check the stone. Then we walked along the Walk of Fame toward the Chinese Theater.

The streets were bustling with people, so many visitors came to admire this famous attraction. Out of nowhere, three figures emerged in front of us, Spiderman, Superman, and Mickey Mouse, all in their best costumes. They struck poses and put Mom in their center while I took pictures. Mom laughed happily; this must be the happiest moment of her life. Hollywood was right here.

I tipped the three guys and thanked them. Then

we drove along North Beachwood Blvd to get a closer look at the Hollywood sign. I explained to them that this gigantic sign had lost its four letters at the tail, transforming from a real estate advertisement into a spiritual concept, becoming a symbol of the city and an ideal revered by the whole world.

### ***DAY 9.***

We arrived at Lombard Street in San Francisco. Having seen it so many times on TV, it was finally our time to drive on it. The lineup was not long at all, and we slowly drove down the slope. The flowers on the curved sides were gorgeous, and the presence of swarms of photographers made this world-famous winding road even more extraordinary.

As we continued along Lombard Street, at the crossing with Columbus Avenue, we spotted a vintage streetcar lumbering by, with joyous people dangling on the side, a scene so typical of this dramatic city. While driving through the downtown area, I briefly narrated to my parents the history of this gold-rush city, a place that has been rebuilt from the ashes of countless fires and the utter devastation of earthquakes.

Soon, our car was heading northbound onto the Golden Gate Bridge. I couldn't help but exclaim with excitement, "Mom, this is the number one bridge in the world. No bridge is ever comparable to it in the significance or any other perspectives."

### ***DAY 10.***

We were driving on the cliffside road in Yosemite National Park. The mountains were incredibly steep, and I noticed that Mom's hands were unnaturally

straight due to the fear of heights throughout the day.

### ***DAY 11.***

We walked into the Central City of Salt Lake City, with our car parked in a nearby parking lot. Mom and Dad were amazed by how clean the city was.

"I love this city; it's so neat and tidy, and everywhere is in good order," Mom expressed her love toward this city.

"No, you won't. This is a place where men can have multiple wives," I responded with a teasing tone.

"In today's United States?"

I laughed but didn't give more explanations. It was too complicated to clarify with cultural clashes in the way.

### ***DAY 12.***

We arrived in Yellowstone National Park. This is a magical land on the northwest corner of Wyoming. It's a vast cauldron of simmering soup covered by porous soil, with steaming pools, springs, and potholes visible everywhere. If you get closer to the small to medium geysers, you can feel the dancing water spurts or mortar burps at a steady rhythm.

I explained to Mom and Dad that Yellowstone is actually an active supervolcano. Just because of the weird way of slow energy release, it hasn't erupted for thousands of years.

The Old Faithful Geyser is probably the most famous attraction in the park. As the name implies, this geyser erupts in a predictable manner every 90 minutes, with a deviation of give or take 10 minutes. Tourists sat in a large semicircle, and we also found our seats among the crowd.

Soon, water began to gush out of the smoking hole, shooting up to a height of about 130 feet. Mom and Dad followed along with the oohs and ahs from the audience; their smiles were the best reward for my hard work.

***DAY 13.***

We were at Mount Rushmore National Memorial. We were stunned by the majesty of the sculptures, so vivid, so close. Dad broke the silence.

"I could never imagine there's a place like this."

"Dad, I knew about this place thirty years ago when I watched the movie Superman. But I never expected we would be able to visit this place in person like this."

***DAY 14.***

We drove to the Badlands National Park in the early morning. They loved this place so much, even better than the Grand Canyon. I told them that this is not the only place with this type of landscape; there are similar sites in surrounding states, even in Canada.

I also briefly described the war between the local Indian tribes and the U.S. Cavalry about 150 years ago, along with famous figures like Chief Crazy Horse and General Custer. Mom was fascinated by the Badlands resistance stories and, of course, by the touching beauty of this barren land itself.

***DAY 15.***

We returned home at 8 p.m. safely. After settling Mom and Dad, I went to Eva's place.

It was still before midnight. Eva's moaning gave me the ecstasy of life. Her unique fragrance and soft

touch intoxicated me. Fifteen days of being bombarded by the concentrated beauty of nature left me unusually excited, and I was still in a state of hyperactivity. Lying in the gentle embrace of my most beloved woman, appreciating her stunning beauty, I wished for time to stop and for tomorrow not to come.

"Wow! This is what you gave me after driving 13,000 kilometers. You have good stamina. Weren't you tired without anyone backing you up?" Eva pulled a blanket to cover her body, leaning against the headboard cushion.

I sat in a chair, holding a bottle of water. I drank the water in big gulps to quench my parched throat.

"Of course, I was tired, but not as tired as it seemed to be."

"How come? It was like one day you needed to drive 1000 kilometers, and on the next morning, you had to repeat the same thing."

"Pretty much like that. As a professional driver, you know there are several important rules to follow, making driving easy and safe."

"Like what?"

"You never use the horn, the radio, and the inside rear-view mirror."

"Why?"

"For safety. And another most important rule is to keep your right foot on the brake pedal for no more than 5 seconds."

"What?"

"This is the most important rule to make driving as easy and cozy as sitting on your sofa. I don't feel tired in the first 6 to 8 hours of driving, largely thanks to this rule."

"No way, it seems much harder to do than to say

it."

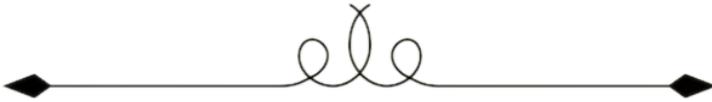
"Yes. You need some special training to coordinate the neutral gear and handbrake. It takes about a month to gradually get into the right rhythm. Almost all new cars are equipped with an 'Auto Hold' button to simplify this process."

"My car has it, but I never used it."

"Then use it and make your life easier. In fact, the principle behind it is to transform human fatigue into machine fatigue. Fatigue is the leading cause of accidents. By providing good education on driving habits, many innocent lives can be saved."

I live in Canada, and I love long-distance driving. So, I was not a fan of electric cars, at least back then.

# CHAPTER THREE



## SAVIOR

I lost Eva to a white guy who was also a professional dancer and who promised Eva that he would buy a dance studio. I knew how important owning a studio was to people in this dancing field. The last news I heard about Eva was that she moved to London, Ontario. I missed her for a very long time. She was so kind to Jason, and the happy moments when she taught Jason how to Hip Hop still feel like yesterday.

People always have their own choices, and I was no different. After some time passed, I started dating women again. It felt like within one or two months, I would have a new girlfriend. During that time, I even had a one-night stand. I used to think that as a tech-savvy guy, such encounters would be very unlikely, but still, it happened. They broke up with me using all kinds of euphemisms and excuses, most likely because I couldn't promise them one thing: marriage.

But soon, a new one came in. If you think it was because of my charisma or persuasive eloquence, then you are completely wrong. It was true that I gained experience and skills in getting along with women in each intimate relationship, while the genuine reason lay in the fact that I have a stable job. I own a house in Toronto, making me a bona fide landlord. These factors provided women with a great sense of trust and safety.

Land, a concept sought after by everyone who ever lived on this planet, particularly means a lot to me. I am fortunate enough to own a tiny piece of land in the urban area of Toronto. Many families refer to it as the backyard. It doesn't embody the essence of land if you don't cultivate things on it. And only if you cultivate things on it you know how productive the land can be. I managed to turn my backyard into a mini-farm, which allowed me to understand the true meaning of land. Every year, from the middle of April to the middle of October, I plant 1,000 beans, 200 cucumbers, and 100 tomatoes in my 30 by 30 square feet backyard.

The small parcel of land I own is very different from the fictional Dutton Ranch portrayed in the popular TV show 'Yellowstone,' which requires a large family to manage and significant capital to sustain its operations. I had the chance to visit Bozeman personally in the years after, I could easily understand the heroic spirit of the landowners as I immersed myself in the magnificent landscapes of Montana. "My land, my rules" is undoubtedly the best guiding principle in that scenario.

My land is petite, but it is inside one of the best cities in Canada. Urban life and land ownership are not

contradictory. On the one hand, I enjoy the convenience of city resources, while on the other hand, the boundless joy that land brings me enriches my life immeasurably. In the early spring, when I step on the soft soil in my backyard, breathing in the smell of the earth, I can feel the vibration of life beneath the surface, from the moving worms and invisible burgeoning grass seeds.

The early work of land reclamation was very arduous, unlike today's putting seeds in and waiting for them to grow kind of work. The first step was to remove the weeds that were as tall as a person, clearing their roots that went almost a foot deep. Then I got a truck to dump 20 tons of construction waste soil on my driveway. I used a wheelbarrow to transport the soil to the back. The purpose was to level the sloped terrain. I didn't want to walk on a slope every day in the future, so this was the only feasible way to make it flat and even. After a month, all the soil was sifted and pushed into place, and the wheelbarrow's axle was broken due to the enormous amount of weight. The height of the lower end of the backyard was raised only by about a foot or so, but it was enough to make the whole area look much flatter.

Next, I dug seven trenches in parallel, evenly spaced from the far end of the backyard to the edge of the deck. I replaced the construction waste soil with newly purchased black earth, and these seven ridges will be the major places where my plants grow.

I never use herbicides or pesticides because using chemical products on such a small plot of land would disrupt the organic atmosphere. I manually remove the newly sprouted weeds so that they don't have a chance to mature and spread their seeds. As for the

inherent weed seeds in the soil, they are entirely manageable within a controlled range.

There are two types of pests that are very difficult to deal with: pill bugs and earwigs. They pose the biggest threat to young seedlings. Throughout the month of May, every midnight, I use a special tweezer to catch them and place them into a container. Watching these nocturnal crawlers under the illumination of a flashlight often makes me think that this might be how God observes us humans. Maintaining reverence for the divine may be what we humans should do.

On a sunny morning in mid-July, at around 9 o'clock, Janice was leaving my place to go home. She leaned against a shoe rack and extended one foot in front of me. I crouched before her, painstakingly tying the laces of her red canvas sneakers. It was my tenth year living in Toronto, and the gray hair on my temples suggested I was not young anymore. While Janice was 18 years younger than me, her hair was long and glossy, reaching almost to her waist. It looked like a father preparing his baby girl for school.

"Why you girls always wear this type of shoes, the laces are annoying," I grumbled.

"What do you know, old-timer?" She made a cute face at me.

I walked her out through the garage and kissed her goodbye. She got into her car and drove away.

Just at this moment, Rob drove over. Apparently, he saw everything that happened in front of the house.

"Mike, what are you doing? How many girlfriends have you dated in recent years?"

"How many did you see?"

Rob was not happy with what I had replied. "You

have a child. This is not what God intended you to do," he said with indignation.

"Rob, whatever happens, is what God intended. There's a person taking care of my child exclusively, and I can't even access my son freely. What can you do about it?"

Rob took a long breath and said, "Sorry, Mike, I didn't mean it that way. I'm worried about you. You should have a steady girlfriend and a dedicated family."

"It's not up to me; it's not as easy as you may think."

Rob placed his right hand on my shoulder. We walked into the house.

"She's a single mother with a one-year-old baby girl. She needs my help in resolving legal issues with the baby's father." We sat on the sofas in the living room and continued our conversation.

"Are you kidding me? Your help on legal stuff? Are you a lawyer or a paralegal?"

"You underestimate the pressure of legal costs on an average person. Remember the motion I made several years ago? Judge Sunshine granted me unsupervised access to Jason; as the loser of the case, Lisa should have been fined to cover my legal costs. But in Her Honor's order, Lisa was only fined \$2,000, and not in the form of cash, but as a number to be deducted in the final equalization of the house."

"How much were your legal costs?"

"I paid \$7,000 for the motion; that was real money, my hard-earned real money.

"What about Lisa's legal fees?"

"She was on legal aid, and our tax dollars paid her lawyer."

"Wow."

"Now you know why Lisa always tried to drag me into court; the financial burden for her was zero. She refused to agree on anything at the negotiation stage and forced me to file costly motions."

Rob sighed and shook his head.

"So, let's talk about Janice," I continued. "She quit her job so that she could receive social benefits as a low-income person. But it was not that easy. To be eligible for legal aid, you must meet the minimum earnings requirement for consecutive years. Any idea what that means if you don't have the support of legal aid?"

"What?"

"This means in order to get the lawyers moving toward your goals, you will have to pay thousands and thousands of dollars out of your own pocket. And let's assume your lawyer won't turn a simple task into a complicated one." I made a funny face at Rob. "Are you scared? Then why not Janice."

"I got the point. But how come you can be of help to her?"

"I'm not a lawyer, but I know the basic rules of family law. I can tell her what's possible and what's not. To some extent, that's enough for her.

"I see. But..." Rob hesitated. "From what I saw, she is tall and pretty, how..."

"I know what you mean, Rob. Here's the thing. You have Sophia, and you have a happy marriage. But marriage did not do any good for me. I have many women in my life. I love them, I respect them, and I understand them. Women admire the strong; they are very sensitive to the emotions when being together with you. As long as you can make them feel

comfortable and happy, they don't care about a lot of things, like how you look, how old you are, and how tall you are."

Rob looked at me with strange eyes. "When we were young, you were not like this, Mike. You were shy around people."

"Things change as we grow, and the lessons we learned during the hard times made us strong. I stick to my principle: never let the beauty of life slip from my hand when I still have a chance to grab it."

Rob remained silent and looked at me as if it were the first time he had met me.

I ignored his perplexity and continued, "Janice is 173 centimeters tall, and I am 3 centimeters short of her. But who cares? I cracked her up, and I made her feel safe. When we walked on the downtown streets, we held hands. The passersby must have thought I was a millionaire."

I burst into laughter, and Rob seemed as if he had just woken up from a dream. "Well, Mike, you truly are a millionaire. I just checked the value of your house the other day, and it's now close to 1.5 million."

"I know, Toronto's housing market is really crazy now. Inflation leaves salary growth far behind, and property owners outstrip cash holders."

"It's true."

"Imagine this: if I had filed the divorce application today instead of seven years ago, I would have gone bankrupt already."

"What's that? Why?"

Clearly, Rob was a freshman in this area. He had no idea of the mighty power of marriage and divorce. I had to explain to him in more detail.

"Marriage is about wedding and welding, and

divorce is about departing and dividing. All the division procedures are based on a special timeline called separation day. On that day seven years ago, the net value for property equalization was less than \$360K; I just need to pay half of it in order to keep the house."

"Ah, I think I understood this. If the separation day were today, the net value for division would be over one million." Then Rob realized something. "Oh, man!"

"If the marriage lasted until today, I would have two options. The first one is to sell the house and give the money to Lisa. The second option is to increase my mortgage to one million so that I can keep the house. Which option do you think is more acceptable?" I asked Rob with a bitter smile on my face. "And because the marriage is close to ten years, I will be forced to pay Lisa lifelong alimony."

"In a sense, CZS zapped your marriage at the right time."

"Yes." I nodded.

"This is the biggest irony I have seen. CZS actually saved your ass in the end, my little brother." Rob added a touch of sarcasm.

"You're right. But..." I stopped for one second, "CZS did not just save my ass, CZS saved my life."

Rob furrowed his brow. He squinted at me, anticipating more answers. Today's talk felt a bit too serious and heavy for him.

"Remember? After I called 911, the original plan was to wait for Lisa to get acquitted and welcome her back home after six to nine months."

"I do remember this, and you told me about this a long time ago."

"That plan was interrupted by CZS's courageous

intrusion. If Lisa did come home as planned, you've seen how she used the poor child to get back at me. Think about this: life went on like nothing had happened, face to face, skin to skin. Was it possible for me to survive all the abuses she could've inflicted on me? I would be long gone from this world. Now, you might be talking to a ghost."

The conversation fell into a ghastly pause. Rob stared at me, wordless and motionless.

"CZS may have ruined Jason's life, but it did pull me out of a death trap." I broke the hellish silence.

We stepped into the backyard to take a breath of fresh air, washing away all the gloom from the old stories retold in the living room.

The backyard was completely different from ten years ago. The land had become flat, and the soil was black and shiny. On the left side, the big dent had been filled with tons of earth after years of laborious work, and now a 10-foot by 6-foot greenhouse stood tall in there. Through the transparent polycarbonate wall panels, cucumber vines displayed their graceful figures, with hundreds of yellow flowers in full bloom waiting to be pollinated.

Outside the greenhouse, there were 7 stainless steel wires stretching from one side fence to the other, 220 centimeters above the ground, supported by around 40 8-foot-8-cm vinyl-coated steel-core stakes. Turnbuckle fasteners were installed on both ends at the fences to adjust the tension of the wires. Nearly a thousand white cotton twine strings hung down from the overhead lines, evenly dispersed. A 10-inch bamboo skewer was hitched and inserted into the soil at the end of each string. The stickiness of the soil prevented the strings from being blown away by

strong winds.

On each vertical line, a bean plant climbed all the way to the top. Tiny white flowers bloomed in the ocean of green stems and leaves. Where the flowers faded, bean pods grew. The ground was so clean there was no trace of weed at all.

Tomatoes were close to each side of the fences, supported by much thinner vinyl stakes. I reserved half of one side of the fence for morning glories; the visual effect of a flower wall was impressive and endearing.

A three-in-one cherry tree stood on the closer side of the house. Yellow, purple, and red cherries glistened in the sunlight like twinkling stars. Lilies were planted in a circle around the tree in the shade of the canopy. Pink, peach-yellow, and coffee-black petals set off the tree like a lady's skirt.

Attached to the house was a wooden deck with a pergola. Two grape vines covered the pergola from different directions, with hundreds of clusters of green and black grapes hanging from the vines. At the far end of the deck, there was a patio table adorned with neatly arranged potted annuals and perennials: geraniums, petunias, impatiens, snapdragons, begonias, hibiscus, and what not, all in dazzling colors.

"It's so beautiful here!" Rob marveled.

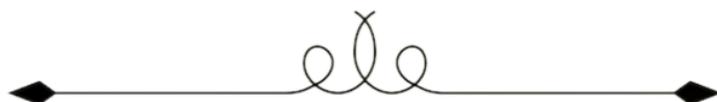
"I've always dreamed of having a piece of land of my own since my childhood. And here it is!" I pointed to the land. "Actually, it's even better than my best dreams. I never imagined a farmer's life could be so elegant."

I took out two small pots of plants and handed them to Rob.

"These are the high-zone grapevines you've asked for. They can survive the Toronto winter. I've been

taking care of them since cuttings, and now you can transplant them," I said.

# CHAPTER FOUR



## CAREER CRISIS

**I**t was not until I met Emma that the dating barrage gradually came to an end. My understanding of relationships and marriage fluctuated with the women I met. When encountering a wise and open-minded woman, I also become more receptive and progressive. If she had higher demands in emotions and details, discussions became complex and variable, and the pressure on my mind increased accordingly.

Emma was not as hot as Eva and Janice; her beauty lay plain and understated. She was four years younger than me, but her mindset seemed more sophisticated and mature than mine. After getting to know each other for a week, she fully understood what had happened to me, and we reached several informal verbal agreements. Time has witnessed that till today, we are still firmly carrying out those principles we agreed upon in those early days.

Emma doesn't have any children, and we have no desire to have one together. We won't touch upon marriage, nor will we establish any common-law relationship. We each have our own living address. Our destiny is in our own hands, and we don't want to leave any room for family law or social services to take advantage of.

The next principle is one of the hardest things in all relationships and the most challenging decision for both men and women: we won't interfere with each other's sexual experiences if there are any. We believe that exclusivity for sex goes against human nature. Moderate tolerance in this regard is good for the long-term and stable existence of our relationship.

In our third year, there was a period of time when she could only come to my place once a week due to a learning opportunity. I had a very discreet relationship with another young woman during that time. If I were bound by a marriage, that would be called an affair. But I was single in legal status. Was there any technical term for that scenario? I later told Emma about this, and she was not even surprised when she shrugged it off.

Her broad perspective comes from her original family; her parents are both high-ranking officials back in China. The influence of their worldview has been ingrained in her, sparing her countless earnest teachings. On the other hand, my parents are ordinary employees in a company. It was not until around age 45 that I established my own system of understanding the world through continuous learning and numerous painful experiences. I believe that many children from upper-class society probably grasped all essential knowledge by the age of 20, as they have access to

many more valuable resources than those from lower-end society.

"Can you take me to PEI?" Emma sat in a patio chair on the deck, sipping an iced cappuccino and enjoying the beauty of my backyard in the sunshine. She knew about the journey I took my parents to Hollywood and wanted to have one of her own.

"PEI is too close to start a journey." In my dictionary, a journey requires at least 8 days of driving or about 8,000 kilometers of distance, especially in the expansive continent of North America.

Emma looked quite disappointed and shifted her attention to the flowers. "Okay, okay, let's design a route for the eastern provinces." I wanted to cheer her up, and perhaps it was time for me to give her something significant, considering she had been my longest companion since my divorce.

We went to the computer room upstairs. I opened the browser and started the Google Maps web service.

"We'll go into Quebec, along the St. Lawrence River, and arrive in Baie-Comeau. From there, we'll go all the way up north, and we can reach Labrador City. Around here, we can see the beauty of Northern Quebec."

I saw the merriness on Emma's face. She was already imagining the vastness and desolateness of the northern part of Quebec.

"We drive across the Labrador Peninsular and arrive in Blanc-Sablon, from where we cross the strait and reach the Island of Newfoundland."

"Newfoundland?"

"Yes. It's a big island; from the place we leave the ferry to St. John's, I believe we'll drive the whole day."

Emma was excited. The mere mention of

Newfoundland was enough to spark boundless imagination. The once famous fishing grounds, the site of the Titanic's tragedy, and the floating icebergs, all of these elements infused this magical name with immense charm.

"And here's a French enclave called St. Pierre and Miquelon. Although you haven't been to Europe, this one is clearly a French territory."

"We go to France?"

"No, not France, but French territory, an enclave." I pointed to the place on the map for Emma to see. "See how close it is to Canada. It's not strange you don't know; many Canadians never heard about it either."

"Oh, really."

"There's no direct ferry line from there to Nova Scotia, so we'll have to take a big detour to Channel-Port aux Basques."

"Mike, you speak French?" Emma noticed that I could pronounce French names vividly.

"A little bit; I've been to Paris many times, and I can speak some basic French. If I could choose, I'd rather learn French over German because French is much more widely accepted in this world, especially here in Canada."

"That's true; many federal-level jobs require French as a must-have."

"I still remember those days when I worked in the university, a German colleague laughed at the pronunciation of French, with so many letters written in words but remaining silent."

"Ah, Mike, where's PEI?" Emma couldn't care any less about German or French. English itself is still a big issue for most of non-native speakers in Canada.

"Oh, yes. We'll take the ferry to enter PEI and leave this island via the Confederation Bridge. Then we'll head to the Bay of Fundy to witness the world's largest tides. Next, we'll enter the state of Maine in the U.S. The final stop will be Acadia National Park."

"Acadia. It sounds like a very commonly used name."

"This whole area is called Acadia. Have you ever heard of the Acadian Deportation?"

"No." She shook her head.

"In history, French people were not so good at wars all the time," I said with a hint of teasing; the German influence was still deeply rooted in my mind.

"Oh, really, what about Napoleon?"

I was taken aback by the unhindered answer from the woman before me. I gazed at her for seconds, then resorted to a cunning subterfuge.

"The question is, was Napoleon French at all?"

Two weeks later, at the office, Alex came over to my cubicle.

"Hey, Mike, how was the trip to Atlantic Provinces?"

"It was good; we went to many places," I answered absent-mindedly.

"You don't look good, what's going on?" Alex keenly discovered that something was bothering me.

I ushered Alex into a small meeting room and shut the door behind us. The meeting room had a round table and two chairs, suitable for one-on-one talks.

"Alex, I'm in big trouble now. I can't get along with the new manager of this team."

"How did that happen?"

"This manager is kind of strange in dealing with

things. He literally approves vacations."

"Oh, come on."

"You know this trip to the Maritime provinces? It's a 10,000-kilometer journey, and we planned it for a month. He approved at the last minute before we set out."

"No way. Who is this guy? This is way not Canadian." Alex showed a gesture of disgust.

"We're a security operation team, and he is so obsessed with manual work that he forces us to repeat a process hundreds of times even though I already have an automated solution for it."

"Well, he is the manager; what can you do about it?"

"And the more unbelievable thing is he forces the three of us to back up one another on all the work, that means we do the three-fold workload on one person's salary."

"This guy is a genius. You know what, Mike, you can report this to senior management."

"Kind of too late; he has already initiated the process of kicking me out of the bank. At first, I lost money, and then I lost my family, and then I lost access to my son; now I'm going to lose my job."

"Don't be sad like this; never lose faith in seeking a solution. Do as I've told you; the bank has the ability to fix it."

The best advice was given, but still, it was me who should carry it out. Should I discuss with my parents what I need to do next? No, never. They will cry and protest vehemently against any adventurous actions. Even when I lost this job due to my inaction, they will still insist that their cautious attitude was right. I had to do it proactively this time. I had to write to higher

management, even if it was a highly risky action. But in what manner?

Should I ask for compassion and beg for mercy? No, absolutely not. That would be suicide. For ordinary people, becoming a low-level manager might be a lifelong effort, let alone these high-level leaders who oversee all these managers. If I sent out a feeble petition, it would almost certainly be ignored or brushed aside. As time ticked by, the personnel evaluation criteria initiated by my then-manager would automatically take effect, and I would be kicked out of the bank as a result. I had no better choice; a do-or-die engagement was almost unavoidable.

At this moment, the knowledge I learned from Ms. Dough and Ms. Wing came into play. I didn't panic, nor was I afraid. I carefully analyzed the whole situation, deeply studied the weaknesses exposed by that manager, and wrote a narrative essay proposing a peaceful resolution that would be beneficial to all parties involved.

The nightmares of Lisa rejecting all my proposals and negotiations still lingered in my mind. However, the senior management was an exceptionally intelligent group, and such recollection and comparison were very unfair to Lisa. Soon, I received a notification that I could meet the vice president of my department to discuss how to resolve this issue.

In my memory, that day felt exceptionally long. By the time I returned home, it was already past 8 p.m. I sank heavily onto the sofa, releasing the exhaustion and mental pressure that had accumulated throughout the day.

"How did it go?" Emma asked anxiously, and I could tell she was also quite nervous.

"Not bad. The VP interviewed me and got a better understanding of the situation. He asked about my strong points and suggested that I join a new team for a one-month tryout."

"This is an opportunity to prove your ability."

"Alex was right; there's always the possibility of finding a solution. But I still need to do a lot to prove that I could be a good addition to the new team."

"You should thank Alex for giving you the advice."

"Yes, absolutely," I said as I fumbled in my pants pocket, and I pulled out a yellow parking ticket together with a white payment voucher.

"What are these? Why were you fined?"

"I paid for the parking, but I forgot to put the voucher on the dashboard."

"Oh, Mike, you're under too much pressure."

"I don't remember how I entered the office building this morning. Meeting with big shots is tough for us little people."

We looked at each other, and both laughed.

Three months later, on a usual busy afternoon, I received a message from the enterprise internal communication platform. It was from the group head of my new team, and it read:

"Mike, please come to my office."

I felt tensed up immediately. I had been officially part of this new team for three months; what could happen? I walked to Andy's office while trying to figure out all sorts of possibilities.

Andy, in his 40s, a white man with a stern face, sat behind his large desk. I took a seat directly facing him. Andy didn't rush into conversation; he gazed at me for several seconds, which sent my adrenaline soaring to the roof.

"Mike, you've been with us for three months. Based on the performance and the enthusiasm you've brought to this team; I'm going to give you a promotion."

"You what?" I couldn't believe my ears.

"Your salary will be increased to the next level's highest range. I like to see the surprise on your face." Andy laughed rarely.

"I didn't ask for it." I was still struggling to snap out of the trance since I entered this office.

"I know. You've been underpaid for many years. I can't undo the past, but I can correct it from today within my authority."

"Andy, you're my God."

"Just curious, you don't look like a guy without ambition; Chinese people are known for their diligence; you didn't even fight for it all these years."

"I had my understanding of this. You're loyal to one thing because you love it."

"Ok." Andy nodded but was doubtful.

"The bank offered me a job when I needed it the most. I bought my house eight years ago. I'd have to pay one million dollars more if I buy it now. We're all bank employees; we know what a one-million-dollar mortgage and its interest mean."

"I see what you mean."

"Besides, a higher salary means higher pressure; pressure is killing people all the time; I'm trying to find the balance point between life and work."

Here, I did not utter the whole truth. My professional laziness stems from my deeper understanding of this world. I can tell for myself that my abilities in the technical aspects are average. In which areas I excel, I believe that if you have the

patience to read this far, you already know. Making a lifelong effort in one's own mediocre aspects is the fundamental reason for most people's hard and ordinary lives. Michael Jordan dedicated his spectacular basketball skills to the world, making it a win-win situation for himself and the world.

"Well, that's also a thought," Andy replied without putting any pressure on me. "Anyway, enjoy this happy moment with your family. Oh, sorry, you don't have a family. Go with your girlfriend to a restaurant for tonight."

"Can't thank you enough."

"Don't bother, you've made your effort."

That night, Emma was not around. As agreed, Emma only stayed at my place four days a week. Andy specifically told me to go to a restaurant, and I also wanted to relax and relieve the tensions of the past few months. Therefore, I called Janice. We broke up, but we were still good friends.

I made a reservation at the Royale Fine Dining Banquet. That night, she wore a pair of high heels, and her graceful figure resembled a goddess. It had been over a year since we last saw each other, and she had aged a bit but still as charming as before.

"Congratulations!" She raised a goblet that was 1/3 full of wine, and a pair of gold chain drop earrings glimmered in the light, accentuating her pretty face becomingly. She was no longer the young girl in my arms with a simple, innocent look; her makeup had become more sophisticated and mature.

"Thanks. Any chance of meeting a good guy toward marriage?" I asked straightforwardly. Because we were quite familiar with each other, I knew what she had always been seeking.

"No, not in Toronto." She shook her head, and then she chuckled. "Seems they all evaporated from the earth."

"Good guys are always there; it's just that the concept of marriage scared them away."

"You got it right."

"Janice, you know, I live with Emma, but we're not together every day. Sometimes keeping some space is good for a relationship."

"I understand, but I can't do what she's doing. I need an environment like a traditional family; it is good for my baby's growth."

"I see. How's the baby? Did the father contact you?"

"No."

"I was thinking about your case the other day. Since the other party didn't make any response, we can simply file an uncontested trial. The court will make a simple judgment, and you will receive child support. If you're okay with this, I can fill out the form for you."

"Um, Mike, I don't want to continue this pursuit."

"How come?"

"If he pays the child support, then he has the right to ask for access. I don't want him to see my baby. She's mine. I used to think of money too much, but now I've got a new job. The current situation is good for me."

I was completely dumbfounded. I didn't even know how to respond. All this time, I had believed that Janice was a good mother, willing to sacrifice everything for her child. But now, I was faced with a situation I couldn't quite understand or explain. Were all single mothers like this? Or had I wrongly accused Lisa? I was utterly lost.

On the following Sunday morning, I brought Jason back to Lisa's place. They resided in a government-funded low-rent housing unit. In compliance with Judge Sunshine's order, Jason was supposed to stay with me overnight on Saturdays and return to his mother on Sunday mornings.

I pulled over in front of the building, where Lisa was already waiting. Jason sat in the passenger seat, engrossed in his mobile games. As the car door opened, he placed my cell phone in the cupholder by the gear panel. While he was leaving the car, I handed a stack of \$100 notes to Jason and asked him to pass it over to Lisa.

"I'll give you \$1,000 each month; buy stuff for yourselves."

"Thank you." After a brief moment of surprise, Lisa quickly realized that it was my goodwill.

"I'll go downtown to make some money."

The door was closed. I made a U-turn and headed back to the major street. An Uber decal and a Lyft emblem were affixed to the rear window of my car, visible to the mother and the boy.

As I turned the car, I looked through the right-side windows, the rear window, and then the left-side windows. There, standing side by side, were two figures - a tall adult woman and a half-sized minor, my son. My eyes were getting blurry.

What caused this once-happy family to fall apart? All parties profited from this struggling family - the stock market, CZS, social services, lawyers. The memories of the happy days in early marriage, the ecstasy of holding baby Jason in my arms, all come rushing back. What if money wasn't the driving force? Life could be leading to a different path. I couldn't hold

back my tears any longer.

I drove along Kingston Road. On the horizon, the CN Tower was visible. I then merged onto Eastern Avenue. The skyline of downtown Toronto was getting closer and clearer.

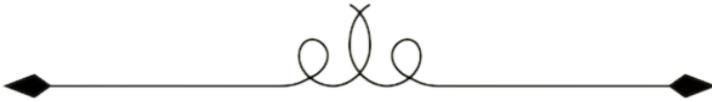
I stopped at the St. Lawrence Market, where I picked up my first passenger of the day. The iconic Gooderham Building was just 200 meters ahead of us.

# **PART FOUR**

Justice delayed is justice denied.

- WILLIAM E GLADSTONE

# CHAPTER ONE



TEN YEARS AGO

**K**obe's sudden passing shocked the world. I am a devoted fan of LeBron James. The potential rumored marriage between the young generations from two families also drew me to Kobe's fandom. But as LeBron's helpless cries of 'Bro' echoed at Kobe's memorial, all of this vanished into the wind.

You might think I'm an anti-marriage advocate, but why was I eagerly anticipating the union of the families of my two idols with a heart full of joy? To be more precise, I strongly oppose unprotected marriages among common people, much like what Alex cautioned me. When it comes to the concept of marriage itself, I prefer to maintain a neutral stance.

Firstly, marriage originates from history and culture, symbolizing the amalgamation of wealth and power between families. Looking back at the history of Europe, it was essentially a chronicle of alliances

among major royal families. Defying marriage is basically tantamount to denying history.

Secondly, marriage does indeed provide children with a relatively stable environment for their growth. However, if you insist on associating it with love, it is advisable to first sign a declaration that property co-ownership is not inherent to the marriage commitment. This last concern is not as prominent for upper-class wealthy people, unlike its potentially devastating impact on ordinary individuals.

Entering March, the COVID virus swept the world. Since then, I have been told to work from home. Downtown Toronto turned into a ghost town. This once-in-a-lifetime disaster decimated businesses in the PATH. We were just recently called back to the office, though not on a daily basis. Remote work has become a de facto trend for the future.

If the old working style were to persist, I don't know if I would have the opportunity to write this book. Writing a book requires a tremendous amount of time and abundant energy; a five-day-per-week in-office work mode would certainly leave me overwhelmed.

In May, bad luck struck me again, and it happened on Victoria Day that year. In the morning, we went to a Chinese supermarket to buy groceries. Surprisingly, it was closed.

"Have you ever seen this one closed before?" I asked Emma, who was sitting in the passenger's seat and looking at the empty parking lot.

"No, almost never."

"Have to go to another one in Markham. I don't feel good about this, something's going to happen."

"Seems like your sixth sense has worked before,"

Emma mocked me.

We were astonished by the surging crowd when we arrived at the other supermarket. It was evident that the traffic from both businesses converged into one. Everyone was wearing a mask, and that scene appeared suffocating.

While hanging out in the deli section, I felt a little push from behind. Turning around, to my surprise, I saw Jason and Lisa right there, and Lisa was glaring at me with furious eyes.

An ominous premonition shrouded me as a new round of retaliation was about to unfold.

"Address him as uncle." It appeared as if Lisa wanted to release a lifetime of resentment upon me.

Jason did not respond to Lisa's command; the poor child's gaze shifted to something else. The situation was awkward, and there was no good way to ease the tension. I had to leave with Emma from the troubled area in a very embarrassed manner.

Without the least doubt, I was prohibited from seeing Jason.

It was the following Saturday, around noon, I parked my car in the parking lot of a church close to Jason's residence and then dialed 911.

Approximately five minutes later, two police vehicles pulled into the parking lot. Likely due to the spacious area, the cars were positioned in a triangular formation. A white male officer stepped out of his car, and another officer, an Asian woman, emerged from her vehicle. Both were fully armed. I walked directly up to them, holding Judge Sunshine's order in my hand.

"Hello Officer, I have an order issued by Supreme Family Court, this is my access time, but my ex-wife refuses to hand over my son to me. Can you help me

to enforce this order?"

"They're in the church, right?" the white officer asked.

"Yes."

"We can't just go in and take your son out. I'm sorry, sir, we can't enforce this order."

"Why?"

"It's not that simple, sir. We won't take any action unless..." the female officer interjected.

"Unless what?"

"Unless there are explicit instructions on this order requiring police intervention in case of noncompliance. The child could be traumatized if we barge in and force him out."

Wow, traumatized; when CZS seized Jason out of his own home, they never considered the situation of traumatization. Jason cried hard when the policewoman snatched him from my arms, and he was just a baby then.

For a brief moment, I was lost in the past nightmare, but the words of the white officer quickly grounded me in the present reality. "I understand your frustration, and my advice is to go back to your lawyer and explore your options. As far as I know, getting police enforcement on order is extremely difficult; no judge would sign such an order. I haven't seen an order like that in all my years of service."

"So this order is useless if the mother refuses to comply?"

"Basically, yes," he answered.

Four months later, following a series of deliberate delays by Miss Wing, I finally arrived at the slow-moving progression of the judicial process, a case conference. By this point, thanks to years of diligent

studying, I had acquired the ability to represent myself in court. Therefore, I did not retain a lawyer.

During the COVID pandemic, legal proceedings were conducted through CaseLines, which is a virtual web application used by the Ontario Courts. All parties sat before their personal computers to make their virtual courtroom appearances.

Based on our prior interactions, I knew that this conference would not produce any results, given that it was still in the negotiation stage of the judicial procedure. Lisa and Ms. Wing were unwilling to agree to anything during this negotiation phase, leading me to incur significant expenses on motions. Ms. Wing could then benefit from this through legal aid. But this time, I made my appearance without any legal counsel, which came as a little surprise to them. It only saved me from legal fees and did not stop Ms. Wing from making money on her side.

You might wonder why I did not file a motion directly. The negotiation phase cannot be bypassed in legal proceedings; motions are booked only after failed negotiating conferences. Ms. Wing would certainly have taught Lisa these tactics, not to agree on anything. I had no other option but to endure this meeting and observe how Lisa and Ms. Wing played this game out.

The case conference was presided over by Judge Candid, a white woman in her 50s. After spending an hour trying to mediate, Her Honor finally realized that her efforts had been in vain. Undoubtedly, she understood what Lisa and Ms. Wing were up to. I believe this was not the first time she had encountered such an anti-humanity situation, but it was certainly one of the few instances in her entire career. After all,

from the atmosphere, I could already sense that she was getting somewhat agitated.

"I am sorry, Mr. Lue, I have tried everything. They simply do not agree. This is a case conference; I don't have the power to sign an order like in a motion," she explained to me.

I went through the entire mediation process and was infuriated at the impudence of the other party and the impotence of legal procedure. Over the years, I have cultivated a considerable sense of composure, but at that moment, I still couldn't control the eruption of my emotions.

"I just want to tell the Respondent mother that if you continue to do this, you'll be the ultimate loser of this game. The victim will not be me or the child, but you!" Fueled by indignation, I directly addressed Lisa, against all conventions.

"She'll be despised." Her Honor commented on the side. It was beyond my imagination that a judge could criticize one party in such a direct way, but that was clearly what I heard. Why should I be surprised? Judge Sunshine did the same thing in the motion years ago.

Tragically, I didn't believe Lisa understood what the judge had just said. Her knowledge of English was confined to the most basic level, and she relied on Ms. Wing's translation throughout the entire process. Apparently, Ms. Wing did not translate the last sentence to her. Besides, Jason couldn't speak Chinese well; how the mother and son communicate remains a mystery to me, even to this day.

Judge Candid's final remarks concluded the case conference.

"Mr. Lue, I understand how you feel now, but I can't give you any legal advice. I strongly recommend

you retain a lawyer; self-representation puts you in a very weak position. I will book a motion now. Parties can submit the motion materials to the virtual courtroom for records."

I couldn't help but notice that Her Honor stated twice that she could not give me any legal advice. My understanding of this was that even in the face of injustice, the judge couldn't intervene if the victim was pursuing the wrong legal path. So, what is the solution to this? The best option would be to have enough money to retain top-notch lawyers and receive the best legal advice. Unfortunately, this is not feasible for the hardworking middle class.

Two months later, it was time for the motion. Judge Pino presided over the motion; he was a white man approaching 70 years old. The old man wore a black gown with a wide red ribbon diagonally draped from shoulder to waist and white tabs hung from the winged collar. He told us that this was his last time to chair a judicial proceeding before his retirement.

I thought my lucky moment had finally arrived that the old judge would surely put a perfect and beautiful punctuation mark on his entire career. This should have been the time when justice prevailed. However, it turned out that I was completely wrong.

"Mr. Lue, I have read your affidavit, and you have made strong emotional statements in it; this greatly undermines your case," Judge Pino asserted as soon as he began.

"Your Honor, you know my story. I haven't seen my child for six months. And the Respondent mother has a history of denying my access to the child."

"We are aware of what has happened, but you don't need to present your affidavit in this manner. It's

unprofessional and biased."

I was not a lawyer, and English was not even my first language. It took me a huge effort to write an affidavit myself while he was claiming that my writing was unprofessional.

I was slightly annoyed and replied, "Your Honor, can we focus on the case itself, not how I present my affidavit? It's not right for the mother to deny my access to my son."

"There is no right or wrong in family law," he solemnly said to me, which left me utterly shocked.

"Oh, really? If there is no right or wrong, then why are we here having this motion?" I was furious, and I knew my response would turn this motion into a disaster for me.

Without any doubt, the remainder of the motion was a disaster. Every time I presented evidence, Judge Pino would subtly redirect it to a false alarm. I felt like a little mouse cornered by a bunch of big cats. I could almost sense the cunning smile on Ms. Wing's face on the side.

In the end, Judge Pino's final remark concluded the motion.

"I cannot make a decision today. I need more time on it. I'm unsure how long it will take; I will inform the parties of my decision later."

15 days later, I went to Rob's house for a visit. Unlike all the gatherings in this house, this time, we were not as joyous as usual. Rob frowned over the endorsement I had previously printed out for him.

"This is the decision he made after 15 days?"

"He made this decision in the first 15 seconds, yet he delayed it for 15 days," I answered indignantly.

"He's playing with you."

"You bet."

"At least he did not deny access."

"He didn't dare to do that. But the current issue is we still can't enforce it. Lisa continues to breach the law, and we can't do anything about it. We're back to square one after 7 months."

At this moment, Sophia walked into the living room with a platter of fruits. She placed it on the coffee table and said to me, "Mike, can you hire a lawyer to resolve this issue? Rob and I can help you with some money; we feel guilty to have hooked you guys up."

"Oh, please, Sophia, don't feel that way."

"We have known Lisa for years. I can't believe she's doing things like this now," Sophia continued.

"When people face difficulties and pressure, everyone reacts differently. Especially when the people around us harbor particular motives, it further complicates our ability to make sound judgments. I don't blame Lisa for the current situation; I also bear a big part of the responsibility. The question now is how we can solve this problem, for now, and for the future."

"How?" Rob asked subconsciously.

"I want to write a screenplay."

"You what?"

My words always sounded like those of a lunatic; my parents described me this way since I was a child. They thought I had eccentric and impractical ideas. It wasn't until recently that I asked my mom if there were any words I spoke out that I didn't at least try to bring to fruition. She couldn't answer my question. Then, there was Emma, who took quite a long time to gradually adapt to the way I spoke. And then Rob and Sophia.

I looked at Rob with determination and said, "I am

taking a tutorial on writing a screenplay, the same way I taught myself web design ten years ago."

Rob realized that I meant it seriously. "Mike, this is a big undertaking. It might end up as if nothing happened," he cautioned me.

"I know, but we don't have a better option. When I saw the way Judge Pino handled this case, I felt the urge to write the whole thing down. This definitely won't be the last time Lisa cuts off my access to Jason. We can go through all the toils to win the case in court, but then Lisa can easily initiate another round of alienation."

"Geez," Rob sighed.

"This is what we often refer to as low costs of committing crimes versus high costs of upholding deserved rights. Toronto is no exception."

"Right to the point. But you still need to go to court to fight this time, right?"

"Yes. I appreciate your help on legal fees, but I prefer to represent myself in court."

"Mike, we do want to help, and we also miss Jason."

"Last time I spent \$20,000 on lawyer's fees, Lisa didn't even lose one dollar; that's why she likes to play this game again and again. Do you know who's behind Lisa?"

"Who?"

"Legal aid. Our money is like nothing in the face of legal guns. Our lives could be sucked into this bottomless abyss if we continue to play this game. And her lawyer will be fed into a fatso."

Rob and Sophia exchanged a prolonged glance, and their expressions weighed with solemnity. Rob then spoke, "Mike, do what you believe is right, and

we'll always support you."

During that time, I conducted extensive research on the internet, with my primary focus being "law enforcement." I had some interesting findings in this process.

In two weeks, I prepared two legal documents: Form 31 - Notice of Contempt Motion and Form 14A - Affidavit General. I printed them out and then drove to the downtown courthouse.

Ontario courts offer free commissioning services to all residents in the province. I handed the materials to Peter, the Family Court commissioner who was somewhat familiar with my case. He carefully reviewed all the pages before adding his signatures and stamps.

"Good job!" He gave me a thumbs-up gesture.

I served these files to Ms. Wing and then uploaded the affidavit to the court. And then, there was silence until ten days later when I received a notification of denial from the court, explaining that Form 31 had to be served personally to the respondent instead of her lawyer.

Without any delay, I hired a delivery professional for \$150 to serve the form to Lisa at her residence. That same night, Ms. Wing sent me an email. She was going to release the child.

This stringent technicality reminded me of a character in the popular TV series Game of Thrones, Hodor.

Eight months after last year's Victoria Day, Jason came home with me on a Saturday. He sat in the car, playing with the cell phone.

"Jason," I asked him, "any idea why you haven't seen me for 8 months?"

"Mom said it was because of the virus."

Wow, kids are so easy to kid. The poor child had no idea what had happened during this period of time, what kind of difficulties I had gone through, and there was no direct way to tell him.

The situation returned to normal as if nothing had happened. I suffered a lot, while Lisa emerged unscathed. Perhaps this was why she loved to repeat this so much. When criminals go unpunished, it only emboldens them to commit the crimes again.

While I was preparing the contempt motion, I came across a case that occurred in the state of New York. It centered around a famous singer whose ex-wife was also denying him access to their children, similar in both extent and severity to my own situation. This led me to speculate that even though he was quite wealthy and could afford experienced lawyers, he still appeared to be at a substantial disadvantage.

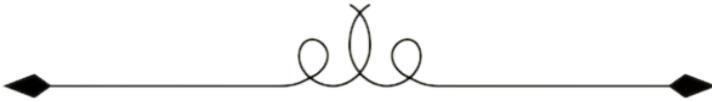
An intriguing observation was that his ex-wife had been held in contempt of court but was only fined rather than being jailed, as one would expect. Perhaps Judge Pino was correct when he stated that family law inherently lacks clear right or wrong distinctions. However, such ambiguous judicial discretion grants judges excessive latitude, increasing the possibility of the legal system being subject to man-made arbitrary decisions.

Furthermore, the absolute advantage that women possess in family law, whether it serves the best interests of children or facilitates the industry's smooth operation, is beyond the scope of what I should think about and discuss.

I am not a professional in the legal field, and I can only superficially contemplate what is truly right based

on my personal experience of injustice. If I consider the issue from another perspective, I hold that everything that has happened is God's will; perhaps all of this is right indeed.

# CHAPTER TWO



## ALASKA

I've always dreamt of going to Alaska since I was in primary school. Our education taught us that the Russians sold this land to the U.S. about 150 years ago, and in today's global context, they seem to have been the biggest losers.

As my knowledge of history has grown, I've realized that there were no losers in that deal; all parties were content during that specific historical era. Russia had recently lost the Crimean War, and if they hadn't found a buyer for that seemingly barren land, the English might have seized it by force. Selling it might have been the best choice at that time, and the money could have helped alleviate the deteriorating financial burden. From a strategic perspective, contracting the eastern frontier was also a wise tactical move; the Americans were regarded more favorably as potential allies compared to the English at that time.

When it comes to assessing the value of Alaska, nobody could have had the foresight to predict its abundance 150 years ago.

Alaska is not close to Toronto, but they are physically connected as they both belong to the same continent, making driving between them possible. After months of planning, we embarked on the biggest journey of my life.

I asked Jason if he had the intention to go on this journey before we started off. The child complained about being car sick. Maybe another reason was that he didn't like being together with Emma. The only time they were close to each other was when the Victoria Day event happened.

I didn't insist on bringing him along because the journey was supposed to be dangerous. It was planned to cover a distance of 25,000 kilometers, and anything abnormal happening on the road might have endangered our lives. He was just a child, whereas Emma and I were over 40, old enough to justify taking the risk.

### *Day 2.*

We were driving northbound on the Mackinac Bridge, and the joy at that moment was reminiscent of four years ago when I drove with my parents on the Golden Gate Bridge. These two bridges are also remarkably similar in architectural style and historical significance. While the noticeable difference is that the Mackinac Bridge is much longer and less renowned compared to the world's top-ranked bridge.

"On our left is Lake Michigan, and on the right side is Lake Huron; they are actually one giant water system. The state of Michigan is composed of upper

and lower peninsulas, and this bridge serves as the connection between them." I explained to Emma, who was sitting in the passenger's seat.

Emma was not just my travel companion; she was my backup driver. Unlike the journey to Hollywood, where I was the only driver, I was much more relaxed this time, even though the distance was almost doubled.

"We'll stay in Minneapolis for tonight, right?" Emma asked.

"Yes, it is the most modern city in the Northwestern United States. These states border our Prairie provinces, and they are not typically considered economically developed regions. But their landscapes and scenery are beautiful, and Montana is regarded as one of the most beautiful states in the United States."

"I can't wait to be there."

"We'll drive westward all the way to Portland, then head north. We'll pass through Seattle and Vancouver before entering Yukon. Yukon is the entrance to Alaska. Believe it or not, Yukon is also famous for its gold rush in history, although it happened fifty years later than the California Gold Rush."

"What is the gold rush anyway? Can they get rich overnight?"

"Of course, they can, but very few people had that kind of luck."

"What kind of luck?"

"If you found big stones in Klondike River containing a good amount of gold, then you sell it to the trading post in Dawson City, and you are rich."

"That simple?"

"Yes, that's simple. Do you think gold mining is as complex as today's geeky activities like coding?"

"Do we go to Dawson City this time?" Emma asked, not interested in either gold mining or coding.

"We'll be there. Emma, do you have any idea what this journey is for? We hit the road despite the financial pressures. The Russo-Ukrainian War has already doubled the oil prices, and our entire trip is going to cost an extra \$2,000 in gas alone."

"Yeah, the gas price is crazy now."

"We can't delay this trip to the next year just because of the surging gas price. I'll be one year older by then, and I am not sure if I still have enough energy to sustain such a long distance. We have to do it now. This trip is supposed to cover all the major cities along the way so that when we finish this entire journey, we can proudly say that we've been to all major places in Canada. These large journeys never fade into our memories. In the future, when there is any news emerging from anywhere in Canada or the States, we can jog our memories and recount our past experiences, keeping us connected to the outside world. Life is more colorful than if we were to stay at home all the time."

### *Day 11.*

We arrived at Glacier View, Alaska, an area that offers some of the best vistas of glaciers. We pulled over at a rest area on the south side of Glenn Highway. The vast mountain ranges stretched out in front of us like an exquisitely beautiful canvas. The formidable glaciers gleamed blindingly white in the warm sunlight. A couple of Alaskan bald eagles soared above the outwash plain, their enormous wingspans allowing us to feel the vastness of sky and land.

"Greatest glaciers ever!" I marveled.

"Better than the smaller ones we saw on the road."  
Emma nodded in agreement.

A drone ascended into the sky. We bought it in Toronto and have been carrying it with us. New technology has made consumer drones cheap enough to afford. I could see a panorama view of the glaciers on the phone, which was connected to the drone through the WIFI signal.

Emma approached and checked the drone image.

"Can we see Anchorage from here?"

"No, Anchorage is still 100 miles away. These mountains are among the tallest in North America, second only to Denali. How high would this drone have to fly to get around the mountain blockage."

"Where is Denali?" Her focus quickly shifted to even higher mountain ranges.

"It's on our way to Fairbanks."

That same day, when we arrived in Anchorage, happened to be my 49th birthday; coincidentally, Alaska was the 49th state to join the federation. This deepened my love for this frontier city in addition to the distance, despite the fact that most Americans consider Anchorage one of the dullest cities in the U.S.

The most attractive landmark for us was the Hotel Captain Cook. Our interest was not in the British explorer James Cook per se, but rather in the high-level Alaska talks between China and the U.S. We were wondering in which building that meeting took place, perhaps the tallest one. In the minds of many Chinese, it was the precise moment and location when China began to assert itself and say 'no' to the U.S. The strategic cooperation between China and the U.S. has gradually shifted toward strategic competition, which leads to a less harmonious global landscape than in

the past.

*Day 13.*

Fairbanks was a small city in the middle of Alaska with no city skyline and no distinctive, striking sceneries, yet it left us with an indelible impression. It was the midpoint of our entire journey and the farthest city we could reach through driving.

When we arrived in Fairbanks, it was already past lunchtime. I saw a Burger King store on the map and entered the address into the GPS. The GPS clearly indicated that we would pass through a restricted area, but we didn't pay much attention to it.

When we drove close to that restricted area, then I suddenly realized what 'restricted' meant; it was a military installation guarded by soldiers. What should I do? Should I drive up to the sentry booth and explain to the soldier that we were simply looking for a Burger King? That was a lame excuse; we could be mistaken for Chinese spies. If anything related to that kind of incident occurred, we could find a lot of trouble when we returned to Canada, passing the Little Gold Creek border control.

Was I overly cautious at that time? Many years ago, I made a playful remark at the dinner table about a crying baby and the need to call the police, and that joke was used by malicious people, which ended up ruining Jason's entire childhood. I had grown much wiser since then in light of such sensitive matters.

The decision was made within seconds, and the top option was to steer clear of potential trouble. Then came the action; I didn't have much space and time to make the U-turn because I had just entered the one-lane road, and the car behind us was only meters away.

My experience as an Uber driver in downtown Toronto came to my aid at that specific moment. I skillfully maneuvered to turn back in a very narrow space within a very short time. There was no time to reach the horn in case of an emergency, and no need to check anything in the interior rear-view mirror. That's why I never use them. When I was a school bus driver, the inside rear-view mirror was for child check, and it had nothing to do with driving.

After fleeing from the troubled area, we went to a Walmart superstore to buy some hot food. In contrast to the usual light blue hue, this supercenter had a dark yellow theme, which heightened the city's gloomy atmosphere in the remote wilderness. We parked our car in the giant parking lot and walked toward the building when we felt being followed.

As we turned our faces, a trailing sedan slowly stopped before us. The window rolled down, and a white woman in her 40s smiled at us.

"Hello, I was wondering if you guys are from Ontario?"

"How did you know?" Better not to be some FBI agent, I pondered silently.

"Your license plate."

"Ah, I see. We're from Toronto."

"You drove all the way here?"

"Yeah, we love driving."

"It's amazing. I lived in Toronto for 30 years. I moved here 10 years ago."

"For a guy?" That was the only reason I could think of at that moment.

"I got married here, of course, for a guy." She laughed. "I'm Lucy. How's your trip going so far?"

"It was good. We were in Anchorage yesterday,

and next, we are going to the Arctic Ocean in the north."

"You still have a long way to drive."

"Yes."

I looked at her more carefully; she was no longer just a passerby. She was sitting in a worn-out car but beaming with joy. What were the odds that a former Torontonians encountered two current Torontonians in this small central Alaskan city because she saw our Ontario license plate just at this specific moment in time? Almost never.

I was curious about her living conditions here, so I asked, "Do you like the weather here?" I pointed to the cloudy sky. "It's already chilly now; what about the winter? It must be long and boring here."

When I said these words, I momentarily forgot that many people believe Toronto's winter is already long and boring. Lucy was quite understanding of my question.

"Well, you are right. There are also weeks of polar night. If you decide to live here, you'll need to find your own fun," she said as she turned her body, revealing an Alaskan Husky on the passenger seat. "I have 13 sled dogs like this." Her voice was filled with evident pride.

Seeing this large animal, it was as if I suddenly understood the meaning of life for the people living here and their close relationship with nature and animals. "You must have massive lands for these big animals to run," I said.

Lucy nodded and explained, "Mushing, that's the term; it's similar to how you use vehicles for long-distance travel."

Just at this moment, a thunderclap shattered the

serenity overhead. As we looked up, four jet fighters in an echelon formation swooshed by and disappeared into the blurry clouds. It happened within seconds, and it looked like the deafening noise disturbed nobody in the parking lot.

"Eielson Air Force Base is not far away from here. You will see it on your way back to Canada."

"We'd love to see it; that sounds cool!" I exclaimed. That was the first time I had seen real combat fighter jets at such close range. If I remember correctly, they were the most advanced F-35 fighter aircraft. Compared to those dazzling flying toys in air shows, these were the real ones capable of performing the most sophisticated dogfights and equipped with superior stealth technologies, and these were the ones ruling the Arctic region.

Emma wasn't particularly interested in military matters. She asked Lucy something she cared more about. "Do you miss Toronto?"

Lucy paused for a while, looking around. As far as this shopping mall was concerned, it wasn't that much different from Toronto. As she slowly reminisced about the past, a trace of nostalgia hung on her face.

"It seems I'm not a Canadian anymore. I miss the smell of Tim Horton's coffee, and I was once a Centennial College student."

"The Scarborough one, right? I live on the next street to the campus," Emma said in excitement. We all laughed.

### *Day 14.*

Despite its name, the primary watershed of the Yukon River is still located within Alaska. We crossed this majestic river at Dawson City, which is in the

Yukon Territory of Canada. While on the ferry, we could see the iconic landslide on the city's northern edge, a prominent feature that any passersby couldn't overlook. The city was bustling with tourists from all over the world, drawn by its historical significance related to the Klondike Gold Rush. We didn't stay there for long but embarked on the most challenging stretch of our journey, the Dempster Highway.

### *Day 15.*

This is an all-season unpaved road, which means that even the strongest winter storms won't impede its use. If you add the stretch from Inuvik to the Arctic Ocean, it spans almost 900 kilometers in length. It evenly straddles both the south and north sides of the Arctic Circle.

On this road, we were enchanted by the exotic beauty of the Arctic tundra landscapes. It felt like stepping into a dream. The immense desolation under the cloudy and misty sky was beyond the wildest imagination of city dwellers like us.

As we passed the Arctic Circle landmark, I activated the drone's follow-me mode, allowing it to trail our SUV at an altitude of 50 meters. Our vehicle traversing the rugged Arctic terrain, with a long tail of stirred dust, provided the perfect vantage point for the drone's camera to capture fantastic videos.

At the road's northern terminus, we reached the small village of Tuktoyaktuk. Here, the Trans Canada Trail came to an end, both on land and in the water. We took photos at the big blue sign of "Arctic Ocean," together with the ragdoll cat Snowball, who had traveled with us all the way from home. The little creature shivered in the Arctic chilly air and examined

the exotic surroundings almost no cats get to see in this world.

We walked to the Beaufort Sea's shores, a part of the Arctic Ocean. The boundless expanse and profound desolation were poignantly beautiful. I extended my fingers to touch the water, feeling its ice-cold embrace. This consummated our Arctic odyssey.

On our way back, just outside of Tuk, we saw something spectacular: pingos. Two petite mountains rose from the barren Arctic tundra, resembling a woman's breasts. These formations are indeed icebergs because their cores are ice, though covered with soil.

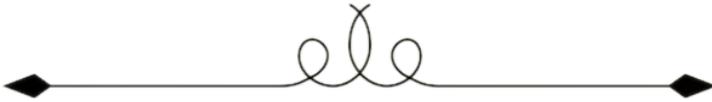
The drone rose and recorded the unbelievable landscape from above. The pingos were surrounded by water, or more precisely, by numerous tiny lakes. As the drone flew higher and higher, we could see a broader expanse of the Mackenzie Delta.

"Kind of a déjà vu. But where?" I asked.

"Labrador," Emma answered.

We returned home safely at midnight on day 25. Canada is so big; even with a daily coverage of 1,000 kilometers, it took us 25 days to come back. And this was only the western part of the country.

# CHAPTER THREE



## TOTAL ALIENATION

**T**he Saturday after returning from Alaska, I picked up Jason and drove him to my place as usual. When we got home, Jason gave me a gift that he had prepared for my birthday. As I held it in my hands and examined it closely, my eyes welled up with happiness.

It was a white cup, and Jason had used some colored markers to create a charming illustration on it. A red sun with a yellow corona and two patches of blue clouds adorned the upper part. Green grass embellished the bottom, and five golden stars were scattered across this side of the surface. In the middle of this space, Jason had written three words, "Best Dad Ever."

What did he know about me? Did he understand the truth about what happened to his family? From which perspective did he conclude that I was the best

dad for him? Was it simply a metaphor within his artwork, or did it represent genuine affection hidden within his subconscious?

In any case, I was proud of myself, and I was delighted to have such a wonderful child. Whenever I thought of him, I would take out this cup and silently gaze at it for a few minutes.

Four weeks later, Lisa sent me a short message. My access to Jason was cut off relentlessly. When I saw her wording "until further notice," I realized the third round of the no-access game had begun. Should I go back to court to serve as their game companion? No way. This was another do-or-die endeavor. Only a complete victory could bring Jason back to me; otherwise, I would lose this child forever.

At that time, I had spent three months on a tutorial about how to write a screenplay, and I was halfway through writing the first draft. Should I just abandon all that effort and return to court, which was just an endless, fruitless, and costly process? I was under unprecedented pressure. Each day without seeing my son only increased my anxiety. Should I follow my conviction to the end, even if it might yield nothing?

Everyone faces stress, but the way each person deals with it is entirely different. Many people choose to avoid it or harm themselves or unrelated individuals, and some even vent their pressure on the vulnerable. If I were to do any of these, my life would go downhill like running water. Throughout the years, I have confronted various forms of stress. Each time, I unwaveringly clung to my principles, firmly adhered to my beliefs, and kept faith in God's blessings.

I chose a cultural approach; my personal interests did not drive it. When I was learning to write

screenplays, I read many movie scripts related to legal matters. One of them was the movie "Just Mercy". In the movie, Bryan saved Johnny D.'s life not by strictly following the legal path but by making a video instead and featuring it in the local program called "60 Minutes". He was a Harvard elite, a legal professional, yet he still needed to rely on the power of the media. The judge, the DA, and the sheriff were all crystal clear that Johnny D. was innocent, yet they still insisted on sending him to death row. Compared to these actions, what Judge Pino did to me was nothing.

You might wonder why these people dare to take such actions. A simple answer to this inquiry is the lack of deserved punishment. If you were placed in a similar situation and didn't believe that any supernatural power was watching you, you might be tempted to do the same.

Another pressing issue for me to address was something I had never realized before. It arose during our journey in Alaska. We knew there would be potential dangers on the road before setting out, but what actually happened was somewhat different from what we had predicted.

While we were driving along the Dease Lake Highway in British Columbia, I had to urinate in the wilderness. During that moment, there was very little traffic around; a black bear came very close to me. Fortunately, I swiftly ran back to the car. But still, the size and the sight of the adult black bear left me quite frightened afterward. We even walked closer to bison, thinhorn sheep, and a yellow fox later, but it wasn't comparable to the horror of encountering an adult black bear.

The same sense of fear also haunted us on our

way to Whittier, a popular tourist destination in Alaska. The towering mountains alongside the highway were covered with massive nets, and any large boulder falling from above could pose a threat to our lives. Around Chicken, Alaska, the mountain roads were so slippery, curved, and steep that even a slight misstep in driving could lead to us falling into the nearby deep ravines. On the unpaved highway seven toward Yellowknife, our battles with swarms of mosquitoes and hornets were beyond the imagination of those accustomed to protected urban life. Without the shelter of a vehicle, I truly doubted if any human being could survive the harshness of nature.

Upon entering the province of Alberta, it felt like we had re-entered the civilized world. From that point on, as we headed back home to Toronto, I was constantly contemplating one question: What would have happened if something had gone wrong on the road?

Firstly, my only son, Jason, would inherit my house as my primary heir. Next, as Jason's guardian, Lisa would become the genuine mistress of this house. It would be a certainty that she wouldn't allow my parents to see Jason. In time, due to the allure of the house, a young, handsome man would move in. By then, Jason would have to live according to his whims and fancies. When all of this turned into reality, what would be the meaning of my existence?

Reflecting on this sent shivers down my spine. As we safely returned to Toronto, the pressure regarding this matter slightly eased, and I almost forgot about it. However, at the beginning of the third round of the no-access game, I keenly felt the pressure once again. I had to do something.

I went to a notary public's office and drafted a will in which I specified that all my worldly possessions would be left to my sister's daughter in case of any unforeseen circumstances. I sent this will directly to Lisa in response to her unethical actions of denying my right to see my child.

I didn't think too much about it. If there were any emotional fluctuations after sending the document, I did feel that the tense feeling in my heart relaxed a lot, and some of the pent-up frustration from years of depression was relieved.

But my mom and Emma soon warned me that my actions might be too impulsive and thoughtless. Jason could see this will as evidence of me abandoning him. He didn't know that this was just a makeshift measure, a temporary transitional precaution. Once he returned to my side, I could immediately amend this will.

I told my mom that the child would be brainwashed to stay away from me, whether he saw that will or not. Even if he had a chance to read the story I wrote, there was still a high possibility that he wouldn't believe that was what truly happened. My mom cried when she realized that we might lose this child forever.

How could I comfort her? Should I remind her that billions of people were brainwashed and killed in various ways throughout human history? Should I ask her if Jason was any different or unique among all the ordinary people? If he was shielded from the truth his entire life, perhaps we had no choice but to accept this harsh reality.

Maybe when he is old enough to comprehend the entire situation, he might be too grown for me to reintegrate him into this family. When he is 30, he

might be no different than any stranger on the street to me. And perhaps that is the notion of total alienation that many single mothers are after.

Or he might be battered by society or wounded by relationships with women. When he has to contend with a full-time job, he might come to understand just how challenging life can be to sustain. Alternatively, one day, when he becomes a father himself, he might suddenly realize that once upon a time, he had a father who loved him so deeply.

I completed the screenplay six months after the alienation began. Not much different from what I had anticipated, the screenplay wouldn't attract any investors. However, during my efforts to lobby for funding, I had the opportunity to converse with a prominent figure in the investment circle, Mr. Lee. He told me that trying to create a screenplay directly like this wouldn't work; he advised me to write it as a novel first.

When I heard this suggestion, I felt embarrassed. English is not my first language, and I lack confidence in every word I speak in everyday conversation. I fear that an improper preposition or wrong idiom usage might lead to misunderstandings for the listener or audience. Writing a screenplay, on the other hand, is a bit more technical; simple scene setup and informal dialogues suffice. With my somewhat shaky proficiency in English, I could barely manage.

But to write a novel required a whole new level of skill. Our discussions over that idea concluded there, and I dismissed it as an impossible mission in my mind. He was quite indignant about my story. When we talked about the potential one hundred percent divorce rate, he didn't hold back his opinions about

the biggest victims of this social dilemma: the boys. The girls fared much better, as we both agree. The worst thing for them was to redo what their mothers had done; the concept of alienating their children from their fathers could be repeated again and again, generation after generation. But what about the boys? They were deprived of the right to live close to their male parents, immersed in an environment filled with perfumes and long nails. What kind of men could they grow up to be?

His concerns deepened my longing for Jason even more. He directly accused CZS of wrongdoing, and what surprised me was that I didn't even mention that name; he figured it out by himself from my narrative. How many indecent deeds had CZS done to the people of Toronto, or maybe the whole of Ontario, to elicit such strong resentment?

On the night after the talk with Mr. Lee, I couldn't sleep. Should I let go and leave Jason's fate unfold on its own? No, that's not me. I'm not one to easily give up. But how?

God's hands present another gift at their fingertips: real, practical, and hardcore artificial intelligence. About half a year ago, the tech circle, social media, and news portals were all buzzing with the concept of revolutionary AI technology. A new type of chatbot emerged, surpassing any human in language skills. That's how this novel was written, with all my own words corrected and embellished by a machine.

Many years have passed since the beginning of the story. I have grown into a completely different man. I hope Lisa can also learn something from it. Female wilfulness and capriciousness should be restrained

and controlled. Bullets and violence are not the ultimate solutions to problems; reasonable negotiation and dialogue are what fundamentally resolve issues.

Throughout Jason's childhood, from the moment he was forced to leave his own home, the days we spent together were few and far between. On all holidays, whether Canadian or Chinese, including Christmas and the Spring Festival, not a single day was he by my side. For my parents, they could count the days they were together with the child on their fingers.

Jason, if you had a chance to read this book, I believe you are old enough to understand every detail of our story. It has been over a year since I last saw you on July 22. Come back to Daddy. I miss you day and night.