



CLOSURE

*Can there be resolution and reconciliation
over one scarring night of grave misdeeds
after so many years?*

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By Willie Cheng

Adverna sat at the table of the Chill and Thrill Bar, fingering the ice cubes tinkling in her glass of whisky soda—the melting, overturned cubes reminding her of that chilly, numbing night when her life was turned upside down.

A laugh from a neighbouring table interrupted her brooding. She looked up and saw that it came from a young couple playfully engrossed with each other. She looked around. The only other table taken was by another couple glued to their handphones. No one was paying her any attention. That was why she had suggested this drinking hole in Bishan Park when he asked to meet up. It was unlikely for them to bump into anyone they knew at this time of the day, coupled with the place being out of the way.

This was not a meeting she wanted. When he called out of the blue yesterday on her office phone to meet, she had asked “what for?” and he said “closure”. She had wanted to say, “What closure? We closed off three years ago.” But with her colleagues within earshot, she set up to meet here where she felt assured of privacy. With its meandering river and lush greenery shading the walkways, this elongated urban park was among her preferred places to bring her wheelchair-bound mother on their weekly evenings out. Among its smattering of eateries, she recalled seeing this café-bar generally not well patronised.

I should have cut him off. I should not have agreed to meet him again. It had taken her three harrowing years to pull her life back together, and now he was threatening her grip

on sanity again. They had made a solemn vow that night: To walk away and erase the memories. No more talking about it—to each other or anyone else—ever again.

Getting over it was hard, though. She sank into depression in the months after. She found it hard to concentrate on work or anything else. She stopped dating and withdrew into herself. Family and colleagues put it to a bad relationship, and some hinted how counselling could help. But gradually, she willed herself out of her dark thoughts. She threw herself into work, and the long hours helped her from thinking about that fateful evening and what he did.

It came as a surprise when Seng Hung, ten years older and her senior in the firm, proposed. She had thought those lunches and dinners were just work sessions. Seng Hung was not the kind of person she had imagined marrying. Straightforward and dependable, he was—to be honest—quite a bore. But she found him reassuringly uncomplicated. He was stable and steady, kind and considerate. Plus, there was no one else. She asked for more time for them to know each other beyond work. Despite her initial doubts, she gradually grew to love him. Most important of all, her parents thoroughly approved of him. She said “yes” nine months after he proposed. The wedding was two months away, and the invitations had gone out.

Seng Hung does not know about him—and should not know about him. Had he heard about the wedding? Why would he want to stop it? We were done!

She almost did not recognise him coming in through the door. The handsome, chiselled face that first caught her attention was there, but gone were the brash confidence and winning smile. Instead of the flamboyant ladykiller with the hawk-like gaze, she now saw a slightly bent, lanky man looking grim and haggard. In stark contrast to the gaudy clothes he wore that night, he was dressed in a simple black T-shirt and blue jeans, sporting a shabby, black knapsack on his back.

Their eyes met across the room, just like they did that night. But the surge of excitement and thumping of her heart she felt that first night were absent. He walked over to her table, not with the swaggering, seductive glide she first encountered, but the hesitant gait of a man unsure of himself.

“H-hi Adverna.”

She looked at him. The deep bronze tan was gone, his face no longer smooth and shaven, but discoloured and peppered with stubbles of wispy hair on his dimpled chin. She said nothing.

“May I sit down?”

She nodded. He pulled out a chair from across her.

The waiter came. “What can I get you, sir? A glass of whisky soda like the lady’s?”

“No—”

“No?” said Adverna. “You told me it’s your favourite drink.”

“I stopped drinking after that night,” he said matter-of-factly. Turning to the waiter, he said, “Can you get me a pot of chamomile tea?”

“Of course. And would the lady like a top-up?”

Adverna looked at her glass. It was nearly empty. “Sure, but make it neat,” she said in a defiant tone.

It’s you and this poison that ruined my life. Because of you, I’ve been trying to put what happened that night out of my head, and I’ve turned to the only thing that could make me forget the pain. How could you? How could you live with yourself?

She glared at him. He grimaced and looked forlornly at her. There was an awkward, dead silence between them. While they waited for the drinks to come, her eyes stared vacantly at him and memories of that night came crashing at her.

###

It was Vivian, a para-legal and self-appointed chairperson of parties, who suggested they celebrate Adverna’s promotion to junior partner at the Velvet Underground.

“It’s the latest hip place, opened two years ago,” Vivian had proclaimed. “An uppity nightclub within Zouk. For the suits and yuppies, it’s cash and flash, the place to see and be seen. Who knows, you might even find your dream date there.”

A dozen of the firm’s partners and staff descended on the Velvet Underground that Friday evening. For Adverna, it was her first time. The extravagant décor with its plush cushions and ball-shaped stools were dazzling. But what caught her eye was a dazzling young man, garbed in a bright purple shirt and black sequined-laced trousers, across the room.

Vivian, ever alert, whispered to her, “They call him ‘Bullet’. Fast cars, fast women, you know. Rich father. Works in the family business—if you can call it ‘work’. I would not go for him. Not a good catch. Probably an Ah Beng. Not your type. Good for a one-night stand, maybe.”

But he had noticed her too, despite her staid grey-flannelled business suit and modest pink blouse. He came over and introduced himself. “Hi, I am Goh Boo Lek. Friends call me ‘Bullet’.”

She tried to be witty. “Bullet? Is that because you run fast after women. Or fast away from them?”

“Actually, because I drive fast. As for women, it depends on the type.”

“Oh, what is your type?”

“Well, you don’t look like the type that would make me run away.”

How wrong he was.

They hit it off well at the club. He was not anything like what Vivian had said. He was definitely not an Ah Beng, even if his dressing would be considered loud by some. He was worldly. They had intelligent exchanges, although it was hard to hear above the din of the booming music. She introduced her colleagues, who were mostly lawyers. He fitted right in, like he had known them all for years.

Her friends had always said that she was too prim and proper. In school, they had teasingly called her “Adventurous Adverna” for reading and talking about adventures but never embarking on any. That label went away when she entered the corporate world, although she remained cautious and conservative in her outlook. But that evening released the wild in her. Was it the throbbing lights and thumping music? Or the intoxicating mix of alcoholic drinks? Perhaps, it was Bullet? He was a consummate party animal. He touched her, held her hands, arms, shoulders and waist, so naturally like they had been lovers forever. She felt lightheaded and dizzy on the dance floor. Taking the lead from his dance motions, she threw her arms and body to the beats as she had never done before.

It was just past midnight when Bullet said, “Come, you’ve had one drink too many. Your friends are not very kind. You are too much of a sport to their *ganbei*-ing. Let me send you home.”

“And you won’t take advantage of me, as my friends did?”

“Not unless you want me to. And certainly not when you have too much alcohol in your system. Whatever people may say, I am a gentleman.”

It suited her. She had left her car at the office because she had thought it safer to catch a cab or a ride home than to drink and drive. And even though he had several glasses, he was holding up much better than her.

“Careful,” Vivian hushed to her ear as the two were leaving. “Don’t do anything that I would, heh, heh. This could end up being just a one-night affair.”

How right she was.

Adverna had never been up-close with a Lamborghini before. As the car doors swung upwards, she flinched and took a step back.

“They are called ‘scissor doors’,” Bullet explained, “very useful for parking in tight places.”

“Cool. They certainly make a statement—even more so with the signature yellow.”

She slid into the passenger seat. Finding that it leaned too far back, she searched for a lever or button to put it upright. Bullet reached over, his breath on her neck and his arm brushing against her body. As he adjusted her seat, he apologised, “I am afraid this is a sports car. The seats are reclined for aerodynamic purposes. This is the best that I can do.”

“How fast can this car go?” she asked as they drove off.

“Let me show you.” He revved the accelerator.

“The speedometer says you are less than 100.”

“I have to stay within the speed limit.”

“Oh, so you are a very law-abiding citizen. Or is it because I am a lawyer? I can be your defence counsel, you know.”

“It’s not that. I already have 20 demerit points. If I am caught speeding, I will get suspended. Not being able to drive would be like not letting me breathe.”

“I see. Anyway, you should be turning off the AYE. This is not the best way to my house.”

“In good time. Just a bit more. There’s a stretch of road off this expressway at Tuas. It’s deserted. Very straight. No speed cameras. No lights on at this time. You will see how fast this car is there ... tighten your seat belt.”

It sounded risky and unsafe to Adverna. She wondered if she should ask him not to go there. But then again, maybe this could be the adventure she never had.

“Here we are!” said Bullet as he turned off the expressway into a completely dark road. He floored the accelerator.

Adverna could tell the car was going fast without looking at the speedometer. Her pulse was racing with the car. Her head was spinning. The combination of the high speed with the pitch blackness that surrounded them was both terrifying and exhilarating at once. Her eyes were glued to the front of the vehicle, where the car’s high beams flooded the road.

“Watch out!” she cried, seeing a dark object in the car headlights.

Bullet slammed on the brakes. The sudden impact threw the object in front into the air, and it landed behind them with a dull thud as the car screeched to a halt forty meters ahead.

“I-I-I think you hit someone,” said Adverna.

“No sane person would be here at this hour. It’s small—could be a monkey or a dog ...” Adverna detected a note of hesitancy in his voice, as if he did not believe it himself.

Bullet turned the car around and headed back to whatever it was he hit. They rushed out of the car. Under the glare of the car’s headlights, there was no mistaking that it was a small boy. He was in a black T-shirt and khaki shorts, lying face down with a black knapsack on his back. Bullet bent down on one knee and lifted the boy’s head with blood oozing from the forehead and nose. He felt the boy’s neck and wrist, and said in a hoarse voice, “H-h-he’s dead.”

Adverna drew a deep breath, stumbled back to the car, and fumbled for her handphone in her handbag. Without thinking, she started tapping it.

“What are you doing?” Bullet shouted as he put the boy down and rushed towards her.

“Calling the ambulance and pol—”

“Stop!”

“Why?”

“We just killed a boy.”

“It’s an accid—”

“Th-that’s not how the police will see it.” He grabbed her by both shoulders and glared into her eyes. “Look! I am loaded with alcohol. Way past the legal limit. The car was doing 180. Way past the speed limit. We’re not looking at demerit points and suspension. I’ll go to jail if this gets reported. You too.”

She drew in a stuttered gasp as she tried unsuccessfully to push him away. “Wh-why? Why me? Y-y-you are the one driving—”

“You’ve more alcohol in you. You are complicit. Did you try to stop me? You were enjoying the ride. You were egging me on. Your hand was on my thigh.”

“Th-that’s not fair. My hand ... that was an accident. I-I just came along for the ride. I didn’t think you would pull this stupid—”

“Listen to me!” he said as he squeezed her shoulders and shook her. Then, he relaxed his grip, pulled her towards him and said in a restrained, gentler tone, “If this gets out, think of what it would be like—for us. And for our families. My parents would be devastated. Yours too. Your father’s a judge. How’s he going to take this? The boy’s dead. No one can do anything for him now.”

She could feel her chest tightening as her mind raced for a solution. “Wh-what do we do? We can’t just leave him—”

“No, we can’t. We have to get rid of the body.”

He went to the car and popped open the bonnet. He removed the knapsack from the boy and gave it to her. It was still warm from the heat of the little body that lay crumpled on the ground. Though in a daze, she managed to pick up the boy’s shoes that had fallen off him on the ground and put them into the knapsack. Bullet lifted and carried the boy to the front of the car, carefully placing the tiny body in a fetal position to snugly fit the compact boot of the Lamborghini. She tried to but could not squeeze the knapsack into a gap beside the body, so she brought it into the car, clutching the bag to her chest as she slid into the passenger seat.

“Where are you going?” she asked as he got back into the driver’s seat.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Maybe you should drive to a police station. Just explain what happened. It’s an accident. They—”

“Don’t be an idiot!” Bullet lashed at her. “I already explained to you. You want to throw your life away?”

She bit her lip, her thoughts in a jumbled mess. *Come on, think.* She tried to focus, drawing in a few sharp breaths to clear her head.

He’s right, she concluded in her frantic struggle for clarity to the situation. The press would have a field day. The internet and blogs would be worse. She could see it: Two high

society hedonists ... high on alcohol and drugs ... zooming at breakneck speed ... in a flashy sports car ... looking for a secluded place to cavort and fornicate ... recklessly killed an innocent boy ... in a hit and run. *It's all his fault.* But she would be drawn into it.

Disposing of the dead body might be best.

“H-h-how can you get rid of the body? Throw him into a river ... tie some rocks to weigh him down?”

“No, it will eventually surface—”

“Put him in a garbage bag ... do two or three layers ... leave it at a dumpsite?”

“Package too big. Too conspicuous. The garbage collectors might open it and—”

“Then cut up the body into smaller pieces ...”

“And cook them in curry?” said Bullet biting, referring to the high-profile 1984 murder case where the victim’s body was chopped up into pieces and cooked in curry.

“Okay, smartass ... cremation then. It’s final. No evidence whatsoever left.”

“How are you going to arrange a crema— ”

“We are out of options,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut as she felt her eyeballs sagging out. “Why not bury him in a forest somewhere ... and ... and hope no one digs him up.”

“Yes, that’s it—burial! That might be the best—”

“Burial? As in funeral burial?”

“Yes ... as in a grave—”

“You want to put him in a grave? Where?”

“The Choa Chu Kang cemetery. It’s not far from here,” said Bullet as he turned the car into Jalan Bahar.

“Those graves are filled. You want to dig up a dead body and put the boy in?”

“There are usually a few open graves—”

“What’s that?”

“Graves that have been dug and left open ... for a coffin to go in the next day. After the funeral rites have been—”

“But if you fill up the grave with the boy, people will know.”

“Not if we bury the boy further down. Below where the coffin would be.”

Adverna closed her eyes and took deep, controlled breaths as her stomach tightened. *What's he saying? Use someone else's grave? How does he know all this? Had he done this before?*

As if reading her mind, Bullet said, "One of my father's businesses is a funeral parlour. When I was young, I sometimes accompanied him on his rounds. I saw how things worked."

Without any traffic on the roads at nearly two in the morning, they soon arrived at the Choa Chu Kang Chinese Cemetery. It was dark except for the gloomy glow of the moon in the sky. Bullet turned to the first lane and cruised down Path 11, the Lamborghini's high beams lighting the way. The endless rows of tombstones flanking the road were barely visible under the pale moonlight.

Adverna shivered as she felt the coldness of the night and the lifelessness of the graveyard. Her leg muscles tightened, and her throat constricted as the dark, eerie stillness and quietness of the cemetery weighed down on her. To break the tension, she asked, "Where are the open graves?"

"The authorities are very structured. The graves are sequentially allocated. The new graves would be next to the end of a row of existing graves. It would be an open plot where more can be added—"

"I can barely see the graves. How can anyone distinguish between old and new graves in this darkness?"

"Look for any sign of a tractor. They are used to dig the graves and fill them back ... There, I see one!" Bullet pointed to the ghostly silhouette of a tractor in the moonlight.

He drove to where the tractor was. Sure enough, there were about eight freshly dug rectangular graves awaiting the receipt of a coffin each. There were mounds of soil beside each of them, ready to be shovelled back in after the coffins were lowered. There were changkuls and spades lying next to the banks of earth.

"Come, let's bring the body there," said Bullet as he parked the car and released the car boot.

He carried the boy and said to Adverna, "Put the bag in the boot. I will get rid of it later."

Bullet put the dead boy down near a grave. He picked up a changkul and jumped into the grave. Adverna had always thought that graves were six feet deep, but this looked like it

was less than five feet as Bullet's head was above ground level. Bullet began to dredge the bottom and centre of the grave, throwing the earth to the side of the grave. After a while, he stopped to catch his breath.

Adverna felt breathless, too, as she watched. Shuddering, she could not believe that this was happening. One part of her desperately wanted to escape this nightmare; another wanted to get this over with. Without thinking, she slipped off her high heels, grabbed a spade and jumped down to help. Adrenalin overflowing, her energy surprised herself. Without exchanging words, the two found a rhythm to the task at hand. He loosened the ground with the changkul while she threw out the earth with the spade. Even though she felt the blisters forming in her hands, it was strangely comforting to be doing something.

"That's enough," said Bullet eventually, when the newly-created hole beneath the grave was nearly two feet deep.

Bullet carried the boy and gingerly placed him face up with his arms folded across his chest in the lower grave. She looked away, avoiding the gaze of his sightless eyes. She blindly shovelled the soil onto the boy when Bullet told her to. After a while, the boy was fully covered by more than a foot of earth. They took turns to fill and flatten the top of the lower grave with their spades. As far as Adverna could tell, the top grave looked the same as when they first saw it, at least in the moonlight. With muddied feet, dishevelled clothes and sweat mingled with the earthy scents of the night, they headed back to the car.

Bullet drove to her house. They spent most of the journey in silence, each wrapped up in their thoughts, she on the edge of tears, lost as to what she should do next.

Finally, when they were close to her home, he said, "Let's agree not to tell anyone about this."

"No one would believe me even if I did. I can't even believe myself that what happened, happened." She refused to look at him as she spoke. She clenched her hands and closed her eyes.

"Good, then we keep it to ourselves. We speak to no one about this ... not even with each other," he said, in the controlling tone he had been taking the whole night.

He wants to cover everything up. And I have no choice. I'm now just as guilty, going along with his plan. After what happened, it's the only option.

She kept quiet. After a wordless minute, he glanced at her and said in a studiously subdued tone, "Can you promise that?"

Pressing her lips, she said with frayed bitterness, “No more speaking about it. Not ever seeing you again. I can agree to that. Totally.” If there was one thing she could vehemently agree on was that she did not ever want to be reminded of this horrid ordeal.

When the car stopped outside her home, she did not wait for him to come over to her side. She heard a muffled “I’m sorry” behind her as she walked off in a huff.

Entering her room stealthily, she took a cold shower, scrubbed off the dirt and muck, and then carefully packed her mud-stained dress and shoes into a garbage bag and buried them to the bottom of the garbage bin.

The following Monday, her colleagues teased her. With knowing looks, they nudged her and hinted at her wild night out after the nightclub. Initially, she simply shook her head with a nervous smile when they asked for details. Finally, she told them that she had followed Vivian’s advice, and nothing had happened—Bullet was just not her type at all. And they stopped asking.

She scrutinised the newspapers for the next few weeks for any reports of the accident or the boy. There were none.

Neither she nor Bullet tried to contact each other. Both kept their vow of silence. That is, until yesterday, when he asked to see her for “closure”—after three long years.

###

“I am sorry ...” said Bullet, interrupting her flashback.

She saw that the drinks had been placed on the table by the waiter who was walking away.

Bullet continued, “I am sorry for what happened. I am sorry to break our vow of not ever speaking to each other again. I want to assure you that I have not spoken to anyone else about that night.”

“We had closed on what happened. What more closure do you want?” she said in a cross voice.

“Adverna, I have been very troubled by what happened. I cannot sleep at night. I wake up with nightmares. Frequently. I have tried to be a better person. I stopped drinking. I stopped driving. I stopped partying. I have not gone out with another girl since. I go to church. I have tried three different ones. Nothing helps. The nightmares keep coming.”

She gave him a clenched half-smile. The image of this over-confident, macho, fast-talking, fast-driving show-off whimpering like a tormented child evoked her pity. For a moment, she wanted to reach out, hold his hand and comfort him. But she caught herself. She reminded herself that she had suffered too—immeasurably. *It was all your fault anyway: Driving like a madman on a totally dark road. Showing off. Refusing to report an accident. Burying the body. Swearing me to silence.*

Steeling herself, she said with a hard edge of sarcasm, “Welcome to the club. I also have bad thoughts and bad dreams. Maybe you should do what I do?”

He looked at her dolefully as he waited for her to answer her own rhetorical question.

“I drink to stave off the hurt. When it gets really bad, I go for the heavier stuff—with the alcoholic poisons you taught me that night.”

“You should not hurt yourself,” he said sadly. “You could go to Alcoholics Anonymous for group therapy. I went. It helped me to stop drinking.”

“The AA? They make you share your story. You did that?”

“No, not our story. I only shared what I drink, how much I drink, and how I know it’s no good for me. I have kept our vow of silence. That may be why I cannot get rid of the guilt.”

“Well, you should have felt the guilt that night. Everything we did, we did because you wanted it that way that night.”

“Yes, I know. I am sorry.”

She leaned back and shook her head. Pity mingled with disdain for him welled up in her again. It may have taken her three years to recover, but the incident had made her stronger, more resilient. She was now able to take hard knocks and think more clearly under pressure instead of crumbling like she did that night. But the aftermath seemed to have done the opposite for Bullet. *That’s because he’s the guilty one. The guilt—deservedly so—had weighed him down. He’s such a broken man. Instead of repeatedly saying sorry, he should move on.*

“So, what kind of closure do you want now?”

“Final closure. Previously, we couldn’t do so with the boy or his family because we didn’t know who they were. Now we do.”

“We do?”

Bullet pulled out from his rucksack a small stack of papers with newspaper cuttings. “You heard about the collective sale of the Cosy Heights apartments?”

Of course, she had. It was well covered in the newspapers, and the case had generated a buzz in legal circles. Two months ago, the authorities changed the rules from 100 per cent previously to only 80 per cent majority consent of residents, making it easier for an en bloc or collective sale to occur. Up to the date of the rule change, the Collective Sale Committee of Cosy Heights had garnered over 85 per cent written consent to proceed. The Committee deemed that it had the mandate to proceed. However, several dissenting residents said the new ruling required a fresh mandate and showed signed withdrawals from some of those who had previously consented, which would result in a revised consent level of below 75 per cent.

“Yes,” said Adverna, “the debate in the legal fraternity is whether the rule change necessitates fresh written consent by residents. Or even if not, whether the first consent, having been signed, can be withdrawn in the transition period.”

“I can see why that might interest you, lawyers. But why do you think some residents changed their minds about selling?”

How is this relevant? “Why don’t you tell me?” she asked impatiently.

“It’s probably due to this couple, Mr and Mrs Tan Kok Leng,” said Bullet, pointing to a picture of a middle-aged man and woman in a *Lianhe Zaobao* article. “It’s not in *The Straits Times* or *The Business Times*. It’s a human interest story in the Chinese newspaper. Mr and Mrs Tan went from door to door to canvass the residents not to allow Cosy Heights to be torn down.”

“And why not?” *Where is he going with this?*

“Because three years ago, their nine-year-old son, Timothy, ran away. The father slapped him for being rude to the mother. They have been looking for him since. They are hoping he will come back to them. If they or the apartment are no longer there, the boy would not be able to find them.”

“Are you saying that this boy is the one you killed?”

“Y-yes,” said Bullet, wincing and pursing his lips.

“How could you be certain?”

“The date, place and his bag,” Bullet said in a choked voice. He stared at the newspaper clipping with watery eyes. “Timothy ran away from his home the Friday evening

of the accident. Cosy Heights is located in Jurong, not far from Tuas. The parents said that Timothy left with only a knapsack—the b-b-boy hit by my car had one on him. His parents said that his favourite comic character was Spiderman—there was a red and blue Spiderman soft toy inside the knapsack. Don't you see, Adverna? Timothy Tan is undeniably the boy we killed by accident.”

“We?” she exploded. Noticing that the neighbouring couple looked in their direction, she brought her voice down and hissed at him, “*You* killed the boy. I should have called the police then.”

“I'm sorry, Adverna. The point is that his parents are pining and waiting for Timothy to come home. And he will never come back. They will wait in vain. They need closure.”

That closure obsession again.

“So, how do you intend to achieve closure?” She asked quietly but testily.

“Two ways. First, I want to send an anonymous letter to Mr and Mrs Tan,” said Bullet as he pulled out a printed document from the stack and gave it to her.

Adverna read it in a soft voice: *Dear Mr and Mrs Tan Kok Leng, we read about your situation in Liahe Zaobao. We are truly sorry about Timothy. On the night that he ran away, my car hit him by accident in Tuas, and he died. He was wearing a pair of khaki-coloured shorts and a black T-shirt with the words “Avengers Assemble” on the front. He was carrying a black knapsack with three pairs of shirts and pants, three Spiderman comics and a Spiderman toy. He had a few dollars but no identification on him. We did not know who he was, and we could do nothing to help. We buried his body.*

Adverna shook her head. *That collective “we” again. You insist on dragging me through the mud with you. Is this a ploy to implicate me?*

“You sure you want to send such a letter?”

“Why?”

“I assume you do not want this letter to be traced to you or me?”

“Yes, it's anonymous. The letter is for their peace of mind, not to identify us.”

“Well, as a lawyer, I can tell you that it is poorly written in that regard. You do not need to provide information they do not need to know and which they or the police can use to track us down. For example, you need not say that the accident happened on that exact day. Or that it happened in Tuas. Or that you buried the body. And you should not say “we”—it opens this up to me. The number of people in the car is immaterial. However, it's

good that you are specific about what the boy was wearing and the description of the knapsack and contents, including the Spiderman toy. These would persuade them that the letter is authentic.”

“I can make those changes.”

She read on: *We know that we can never make it up to you for the loss of your son. I have enclosed \$100,000 to help you move on with your life. Again, we are deeply sorry for the suffering you have experienced. We did not intend it. Please forgive us.*

Adverna shook her head. “Again, you should use ‘I’ instead of ‘we’. How do you plan to give them the money?”

“I have it here,” said Bullet, as he pulled out an envelope containing ten crisp \$10,000 notes. “I will quietly drop the letter and money in their postbox at the apartments.”

“That’s risky. You should not send the letter or money yourself. Use Singapore Post—it’s very reliable. And you should not give the money in \$10,000 bills. The banks and money changers usually keep track of serial numbers of high-value currency notes for security purposes. Those bills can be traced back to you. Better to use \$100 or \$50 notes.”

“That would be bulky ... but I suppose it’s okay. Some parcels are also thick and bulky.”

He’s not thinking straight. He’s a high risk in this endeavour. He’s not going to let this go, but he will screw it up. I should take over.

“I tell you what, Bullet. I will split the \$100,000 with you. I will ante up \$50,000. I will change all of them into \$100 bills. I will make the changes to the letter as we discussed, and I will post it with the money.”

“Thank you for offering to do that ...” Bullet said hesitantly, his hands fidgeting with the envelope.

“You can trust that I will go through with it. You will probably read about the letter and money in the newspapers. After telling everyone that their son is alive and missing, the Tans would want to let the world know that it’s not the case. You just have to be prepared that they may say that they cannot forgive whoever killed their son.”

“I guess I will have to live with that.”

“We already are.” She snatched the envelope from him, pulled out five bills and handed it to him, “Here’s your \$50,000 back.” She kept the letter and envelope with the remaining money and put them into her handbag.

“Can we close on this now?”

“There’s still the second closure. It would be good if you can also be a part of it.”

“I thought the letter was the first, and the money was the second?” She was getting annoyed.

“Sorry, I counted the letter and money as one—closure with Mr and Mrs Tan. The second is closure with Timothy.”

“He’s dead. How are you going to close off with him?”

“By going to his grave and offering—”

“Do you even know where his grave is now? We were there in the dark of the night—and that’s three years ago.”

“I-I-I went back to that grave the next day. I have gone to his grave several times these past three years, Adverna. I went there to apologise to him. But now that we know his name, we can do it properly. Now that we know he and his family are Taoists, we ... I can go there and perform proper Taoist ancestral rites.”

“You are crazy, you know. Do you even know what Taoist rites are?”

“Yes, I have been reading about them. I have consulted on the details with those who conduct them in my father’s funeral business. Can you join me to perform the rites?”

“Must I?”

“You were part of the event that caused him to depart from this world.”

He’s guilt-tripping me again. He’s never going to give up until he gets his closure—no matter how insanely he defines it.

“Okay, I will join you, but *only* if you promise that this is *absolutely* the last thing we ever need to do for closure. After that, we revert to what we agreed before: no communication on this matter with anyone or with each other. Is that agreed?”

“Yes.”

“When do you want to go?”

“We can go now. I have all the necessary materials in my bag here for the ceremony.”

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They left in her BMW E39 M5. He said that he had taken a taxi to the park and everywhere else since he gave up driving.

She drove slowly, after setting her GPS for Choa Chu Kang Chinese Cemetery. They were silent throughout the trip, deep in their own thoughts, retracing their journeys since that night.

There should be so much to catch up on after three years. But she did not want to know any more about him. He was a part of her past—for just a night. It was a night she tried to erase but could not. The recollection of that night and what they had done would come back to haunt her periodically. That's when the drinks helped. Especially the whisky. It's like that Darrell Scott song *It's the Whisky That Eases the Pain*. But she had sought to limit her intake, especially around Seng Hung. She knew he frowned on her heavy drinking, but he had accepted it. He had never even suggested that she stopped or go for treatment, only that she should try to drink in moderation. It's good that he loved her so much, warts and all. For that, she promised herself that she would always be a good wife to him.

However, Bullet's desire for final closure was threatening the normality of the life she had rebuilt since that night. She was on the cusp of a new phase together with a man whom she was convinced she loved—and who loved her more. However, given how conservative Seng Hung was, she doubted if he could ever accept her involvement in a hit-and-run and the scandal that would ensue if what happened that fateful night came to light.

She was thus relieved that she had managed to close the gaps in Bullet's shaky plan for closure with Timothy's parents. He had agreed to the changes to the letter and the currency bills. She would take control of sending the letter and money so that it would not be traced to them. This cemetery visit for closure with Timothy should not be too risky. Even if there were people around at this late hour, the two of them would just come across as a grieving couple visiting a deceased family member or friend.

It seemed so incongruent, she felt, that Bullet could not now think as clearly as he did the night of the accident. In hindsight, he had, out of desperate necessity, found a way to commit the perfect crime—burying a dead victim beneath a legitimate corpse in a coffin in a proper grave. As a lawyer, she had to admit that it was utterly brilliant.

She had since researched on cemeteries, burials and human decomposition, and concluded that Bullet's spontaneous scheme was amazingly foolproof. To start with, when they buried the boy Timothy three years ago, there was no time limit to the burial period.

About a year ago, the government imposed burial limits of 15 years. However, even if the dead boy was exhumed after 15 years, he would be totally unrecognisable and untraceable given the decay and decomposition of a corpse in Singapore's ground and weather conditions—especially a corpse that was not even embalmed or protected by a coffin. In addition, the soil erosion underground would have moved the bodies so that it would not be clear as to which body was linked to which grave. That's why there was talk of introducing concrete crypts already in use in the US, Australia and other countries. With their concrete walls, floors and lids, such crypts would also be neater, making it easier for those attending and conducting the burial ceremonies. They were also reusable for the subsequent burial after an exhumation. Had concrete crypts been implemented here in Singapore, there was no way they could have buried one body beneath another ...

“We are here,” said Bullet, cutting short her reminiscences. “Take a left turn at Path 11.”

It was way past 7 pm. The cemetery was getting dark, a few dim street lamps barely lighting the paths and junctions. There was no one else around. Unlike the panicky state she was in three years ago, she felt calm and collected as she drove along the narrow tracks.

She followed his directions: left, right, left, left, right. He seemed to know the cemetery like the back of his hand, at least to where the boy's grave was located. She parked where he directed her, beneath a large Tembusu tree.

As she stepped out of the car, a furry brushing sensation at her ankle startled her, causing her to jerk her leg back. Looking down, she saw that it was only a mangy, black cat. Instead of being spooked as she likely would have been three years ago, she dismissed it without further thought and walked with Bullet to where he said the boy was buried.

The tomb was that of an elderly Chinese woman. Her photo, tiled art and Chinese words were engraved on the headstone of the tomb.

“By coincidence, this is a Taoist tomb. It makes our ritual easier,” said Bullet.

Adverna's eyes widened in a double-take as Bullet took out an A3-sized paper from his knapsack, unfolded it and stuck it with blue tack to the face of the headstone, covering up the Chinese characters and photo of the elderly woman. The words “Timothy Tan Teng Hock, 1987 to 22 November 1996” was neatly written with a black marker pen in the centre of the paper.

Her eyes blinking rapidly, Adverna gazed around her. *Luckily, there's no one around. Bullet has gone bonkers!*

He then brought out several plastic bags and paper plates from the pack. He took out chicken, fish and buns from the plastic bags, put them on paper plates, and placed them on the altar slab. He opened a plastic bottle of chrysanthemum tea and poured them into flimsy plastic cups, which he then placed on the altar.

To her surprise, Bullet took out a red and black Spiderman plush toy and put that on the altar. It suddenly dawned on her that the knapsack and the Spiderman figure belonged to the boy. She could again feel the sickly warmth from his dead body as she had clutched the bag that night. *You did not keep your promise to dispose of the knapsack and its contents.*

Bullet continued with the preparations. He lighted several joss sticks and slotted them into the incense holders between the altar slab and tombstone.

Finally, he kneeled on the hard, dirty stone slab, clasped his hands and prayed under his breath. She heard “sorry” among his sobs and mutterings.

He stood up. “Your turn.”

“I am not Taoist.”

“Neither am I. But we should pay our respects. Just say what’s on your mind. Timothy will hear you in the afterworld. Use his name. You don’t have to kneel if you don’t want to.”

She stood nervously in front of the altar. Taking a deep, pained breath and closing her eyes, she said softly, “I am very sorry, Timothy Tan, that what happened three years ago happened. It was not intended. Please forgive Goh Boo Lek for killing you. It was an accident. Please forgive us for burying you here. It was the best we could do. Please find peace in the afterworld ... and let us live our lives peacefully in this world.”

“Thank you, Adverna. Now, we burn the joss paper.”

“Is it necessary?”

“Yes, it’s part of the Taoist tradition.”

He took out three packs of joss paper from his knapsack. He walked to a nearby cylindrical drum adapted for burning joss paper. The top of the metal bin was open, and ventilating holes were punched in the circumferential wall. He fanned out the joss paper, placed them in the drum, struck a match and lighted the paper. Bullet picked up a long wooden stick from the ground and gave it to Adverna. She reluctantly took it and poked the

paper so that it burned evenly. He threw the remaining joss paper in, gradually, to keep the fire burning.

After the last piece of joss paper had turned to ash, Bullet said, "It's done. We can go."

She let out a huge breath. *At last!*

"We should clear and dispose of the food," she said.

"Yes, otherwise, people may be wondering who had been praying to the elderly lady at this tomb."

"Let me do it." She took the plastic bags and started putting in the individual items from the altar as well as the A3 paper on the headstone. He picked up the Spiderman plushie.

She brought the bags to her car and put them in the boot. "I will get rid of them. Give me the toy."

"I-I-I am thinking of reusing it when I next come to this grave."

"Why would you come again?" snapped Adverna. "Isn't this the final closure you wanted?"

"Yes, but Taoism requires that we ... I come and pay respects during Qing Ming. It's a Taoist tradition. Once a year, we have to come to sweep the tombs and commemorate those who have passed on."

There it is, that "we" again. Adverna's posture stiffened as her body tensed at the realisation that this would not be Bullet's last trip to Timothy's grave.

"But if you come every Qing Ming, eventually, the family of the old lady's tomb will wonder and be suspicious, plus goodness knows who else."

"I will be careful. I won't attract any attention. I have been coming here for three Qing Mings already."

He's really deranged. He wants to be caught! I don't want to be! "I am not coming with you!" she said emphatically, almost yelling at him.

"Okay. I know you are getting married ... but if you can find the time for just one day in a year, it would be good if you could join me. Otherwise, I understand."

How did he know I am getting married? Has he been stalking me? He not only wants to be caught, he wants to break up my marriage. He's never going to let go until we are both exposed!

She saw the hand jack for the car with the other tyre changing equipment lying in the boot. She had meant to stow them away, but now they were inviting her to use them. Her forearm muscles twitched and grew taut as she picked up the heavy metallic jack. As Bullet turned to go towards the passenger car door, she brought the jack crashing down on the back of his head with both her hands. He fell to the ground and staggered to get up. But she hit him again before he could. As he lay on the road, she dropped to her knees and kept pounding him with the car jack.

Closure. You want closure? I'll give you closure. You asked for two things. I let you have both. Now, you want more. You have destroyed your life. You now want to destroy mine. I will not let you.

She stopped when she was breathless. Stumbling back a step, she gasped and looked at him lying on the ground, bleeding ... motionless ... dead. She looked around and spotted the silhouette of a tractor in the distance. Quivering and still panting, her adrenalin kicking in, she lifted him by the armpits and heaved his head and arms into her car boot while his lower body and legs dangled limply outside the car boot. She then hoisted his lower body by the legs into the trunk, wheezing at the deadweight. She drove the car to where the tractor was.

Several open graves were there, ready for the next day's burial. She hauled Bullet's lifeless hulk from the car boot onto the road and dragged it to the nearest trench. Picking up a changkul and spade, she went down into the grave and started digging a second lower grave. It was a lot harder, doing it alone, but she found superhuman strength in her trance-like state.

It was déjà vu. She lost track of time as she kept going without rest, digging as if her life depended on it, muttering to herself how Bullet had this coming to him. After what seemed like an eternity, when the secondary grave was big enough, she lugged the dead Bullet down into it and clumsily covered him with earth. When she thought it was enough, she padded the soil with a spade so that the grave looked like it was before.

At last, it's all over.

Breathing heavily, with wobbly legs and buckling knees, she tottered unsteadily to her car. She sat inside, exhausted, gripped the steering wheel with her blistered hands, and closed her eyes as she took deep, rasping breaths. Having collected her nerves and calming herself, she was ready to start the car when she thought she saw a movement in the shadows

on the other side of the path. She peered in the direction of the disturbance and the surrounding environs for a good long minute, but the tombs and even the trees, plants and bushes stayed still. She dismissed it for a cat or some other creature that was adding to the eeriness of the night.

Adverna decided that it was time to finally go back to her life—a normal life and a happy marriage with Seng Hung—without any trace of the past to spoil it. She turned the ignition key, shifted into drive, and quickly drove off, relieved that she would never have to return to this cemetery again.

But lost in her task and thoughts, she had failed to notice the late-working cemetery worker. Attracted by the burning of the joss paper, he had watched the unfolding drama from his vantage point behind the fern bushes in unbelieving horror.

— END —

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