

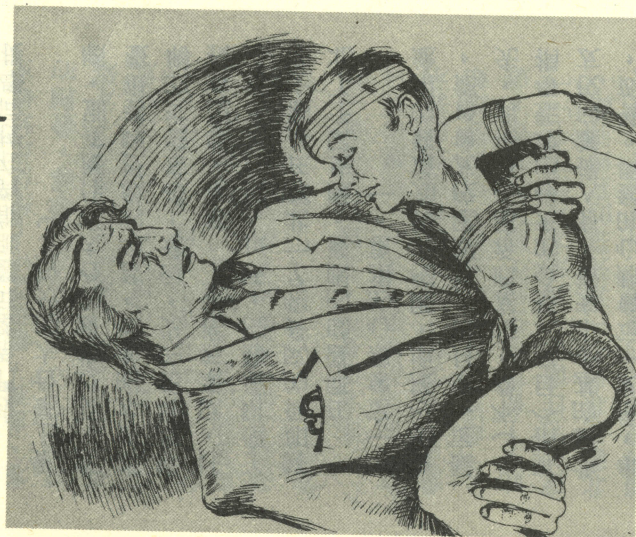
him a good-humored slap on his gluteus maximus. I signaled to a nurse nearby and after giving her instruction to find another on-call doctor to perform the lumbar puncture, I hurried towards the Casualty Department.

As I navigated along the short cut across the lawn, I was relieved to see that dark clouds had been shepherded into an assembly in the sky by trade winds from the South China Sea. It had been a rather hot June, the temperature constantly hovering around the mid-thirties. Everyone had been hoping for some wet weather. I took a glance at my watch. 4:48 pm. It looked as if I would be late for dinner again — the fourth time in a row for the week.

I entered the changing room adjacent to Operation Room No. 4 and started to change. I had a quick scrub and put on a sterilized gown — somehow during the five years in medical school no-one had ever told me why surgeons such an ugly green in the operation theatre.

The instant that I pushed through the double door of the operation room, I noted with satisfaction that everything was ready for me — as usual. A senior attending resident was there with two newly admitted interns. A trio of medical students was standing in a corner, apparently still not having learnt to enjoy their embryonic professionalism and yet eager not to miss anything. The anesthesiologist nodded from one end of the operation table. As the nurse helped to put my gloves, mask and cap on, one of the interns cleared his throat and started to read from a chart, "... This is a 12-year-old Mongoloid who was admitted after a traffic accident. Patient sustained multiple injuries in the thoracic region..."

As I digested the medical facts of my patient, I made a brisk but thorough diagnostic evalua-



Fait Accompli

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"Dr. Pang, Dr. Douglas Pang, Casualty please", the hospital PA system blasted out.

"Dame!", I cursed under my breathe and dropped the Howard Jones back into the tray as the paging was repeated. The startled patient turned his head and eyed me with bewilderment. "Alright, Young man! I've got to scam but someone else will do it for you," I said and gave

tion.

"... pressure is over 50 and pulse 170..."

Ever before I could make a final consultation with the X-rays and EKGs, the heart monitor unit shrieked and my eyes quickly darted to the screen. The fluorescent dot that had been dancing across the screen with every heart-beat was now an unwavering straight line. Cardiac arrest.

"Epinephrine!", I hissed through the mask. Feeling that closed-chest compression might be contraindicated by some intrathoracic bleeding, I decided within a fraction of a second — as if instinct and experience had long ago fused into one — on an open cardiac massage. I rapidly made an incision at the 5th intercostal space. The intern promptly separated the ribs with a rib-spreader. Upon entering the thoracic cavity, I found the heart asystolic — it was motionless, soft and blue with flattened coronary arteries. Ugly veins stood out like tentacles trying to squeeze out every drop of life out of the heart.

I grasped the heart and rhythmically compressed it through the intact pericardium against the sternum. Finding this ineffective, I cut open the pericardiac sac longitudinally. Gripping the heart by placing my fingers behind and the thumb anteriorly, I compressed the organ at a rate of 70 per minute, using a gliding motion from its apex to the base while permitting complete relaxation after each compression to allow for adequate cardiac filling.

I stopped to allow the resident to inject 1 ml of 1:1000 epinephrine directly into the right ventricle and then immediately resumed cardiac massage. The nurse administered intravenous sodium bicarbonate to combat metabolic acidosis.

All the resuscitative measures instituted did

not seem to bring back any spontaneous cardiac action at all. After 45 minutes, the resident took over and I shined a torch light into the patient's eyes. The persistent dilation of the pupils confirmed that I was right in having abandoned all hope. I nodded at the nurse and she noted in the chart the time of death as 1825 hours.

After all these years meddling with a lancet, I had become accustomed (or immuned, rather) to the loss of a patient but the heartache was still there. Sometimes, I just could not help questioning what the essence of life really was. You are compelled into it without being consulted and you cannot get out of it alive.

Then, something on the patient's (if you could still call him that) chart caught my eyes — Mother: Dora P.G. Chen. The name struck a deafening chord in my memory and I had to make quite an effort to prevent any betrayal of emotion on my face.

I took off the blood-stained gloves and gown and started to wash myself. And then, like the completion of a jigsaw puzzle, pieces of ancient memories started to come together and scenes of the yesteryears started conjuring in my mind...

It was thirteen years ago and I was still in my early twenties. I met Dora in a parish party and right after our first dance, I knew that she had a soft spot for me. That night I drove her home — as in the nights that followed. I never intended to be serious with her and she was meant to be just a conquest. But she was so very naive in every many ways and to her, giving up everything her body to me seemed to be the most natural thing to do in the world. The passions she felt for me soon started to scare me and prick on my conscience. I was not prepared to settle down yet and she had no place in my care-

fully charted future plans. After a six month affair, I left for Scotland without even saying good-bye. I did hesitate because I had found myself starting to care for her but once the 747 left the ground, I knew that I had decided to let time and distance erase Dora from my life forever.

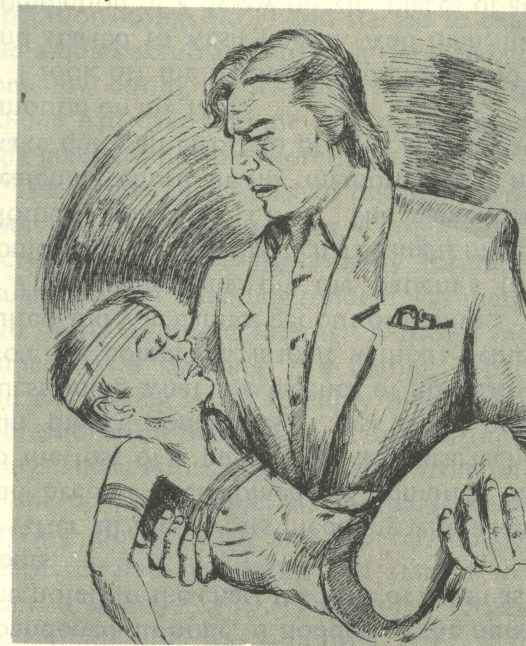
I spent five years in the medical school of Edinburgh University totally engrossed in my studies. The work was hectic but I was totally fascinated — for me, medical studies had always been a labour of love and a love of labour. I was never top in the class but somehow it had been smooth sailing most of the way. Sandwiched between the Jones and Smiths, I graduated in summer of '73 and went south to London to work for my FRCS in Guy's Hospital. There had been some casual love affairs, both in and out of bed, but I always made sure that there was a mutual understanding that I wanted no permanent string attached. I supposed I was too old for love already and the flame inside me had been extinguished for just too long.

Two years ago, I had a visit from Chung who had dropped by in London after a cardiology symposium in Dublin. We had dinner in the Swiss Restaurant in Soho and it did not take it long for him to succeed in persuading me to come back to Singapore to fill the post of Senior Surgeons in the new Changi General Hospital. The lack of surgeons in Singapore had indeed been coaxing me to return home for a long time.

I never tried to contact Dora after I was back, partly because I did not see any point in doing so, but mostly because I felt too ashamed to face her. The days in medical school and the years as a doctor had taught me to start understanding the feelings of others and I realized that even with my best skill I could never heal the

wounds I had inflicted on Dora. Furthermore, I had come from such a proud and stubborn stock that I could never give apologies. Now and then, as I laid my tired old bones down on a lonely bed, I could not help wondering if my celibacy during all these years might have been an atonement after all . . .

When the nurse told me that Dora was under sedation in another wing of the hospital, my



feeling was a mixture of relief and disappointment in equal proportions. I found the father sitting on a bench in the corridor outside the OR, his face buried in his hands. I gave a cough and he lifted up his head to look at me, his eyes pleading for the answer to a question he was too scared to ask. I shook my head and said softly, "I am sorry, we lost him."

For a while he just sat there with unseeing eyes, sorrow overflowing from the creases on his haggard face. I decided to break the silence by offering a cigarette which he gladly accepted. He seemed eager to have someone to talk to and I was ready to lend a listening ear — especially for news concerning Dora. I suggested going to the hospital cafeteria and he had no objection.

He decided on a beer while I had black coffee. The bereaved man began to tell me about his family. His face brightened up as he described his spouse. She was a jewel among women, a devoted wife with a tender heart — and a gorgeous body too, I was tempted to add. They had high hopes for Dennis, the remains of whom was now being wrapped up by the orderly. As I listened, reminiscence of the old times rippled in my mind with thoughts of what was and what could have been.

"Dennis was already two years old when I married Dora. I never question her about the kid and I had always treated him as one of my own blood and flesh."

At that instant, the intern's words echoed somewhere — "... patient is twelve years old ...". A rapid mental arithmetic flashed between my ears and I felt the whole world crashing down on me. I sprang on to my feet and almost knocked the table upside down. Ignoring the slight commotion I had created, I rushed towards the Casualty Department. Oh God, it can't be

true, it really just can't be true, my heart screamed out.

After some inquiry from the nurse, I dashed down the staircase for the basement, taking three steps at a time. I burst through the door of the mortuary and the first thing that caught my eyes was a body wrapped in white, lying on a cold concrete table. A woman was kneeling at the side of the table. Startled, she turned her head — it was Dora.

For an agonizing minute, there was the sound of silence. Our eyes were fixed at one another and the earth seemed to have stopped its rotation. This was the woman with whom I had shared the same bedsheet once upon the time. I realized that even after all these years, she could still easily excite me had we met under some other circumstances.

Still panting for my breathe, I asked weakly, "Dora, is he my ...". Somehow I just could not squeeze the last word from my vocal cords.

She turned away her head and gave a sigh, a sign that was to me the equivalence of a million full-length tragic novels, a sigh that killed every iota of my soul.

I walked unsteadily towards the table and with trembling fingers, I uncovered the face of Dennis. There was no mistake — the finely chiselled nose, the strong chin and the thick eyebrows that could only run in my family.

Like a cursed and condemned man who heard the death sentence he had long expected but prayed to be spared, I ejaculated a groan and fell to the floor ...

The monsoon rain panted down as if trying to drown the good earth. Arrows of lightning cracked the infinite abyss of the pitch black sky and thunders orchestrated while a broken man cried out, "My son! My son! ...