

Not to My Taste

Beep... beep. Chee Jun sat up, his body protesting against the sudden movement. He fumbled in the dark for the dispenser on his nightstand, fingers exploring the smooth metal until he found the fingerprint scanner. *Tan Chee Jun - SXXXX396E. 17 July, 2053. 0500 hours.* The dim light of the screen - AI-adjusted so as not to harm the delicate components of his eyes - displayed a confirmation message. His pills clattered into a cup he had placed below the dispenser the night before, on the incessant urging of the medi-computer strapped to his wrist. He peered into the cup. *Blue, yellow, purple.* The same colours he saw every day. With a sigh, Chee Jun shuffled off to the bathroom to get water.

Beep... beep. 7:00am. Second round of medications, courtesy of the dispenser, followed by a morning walk. Chee Jun gulped down an unappetising grey sludge, ostensibly packed full of vitamins. He glared at the dispenser briefly. “The least they could do is make it taste good”, he grumbled aloud. He went to the sink to wash his cup, grabbing a sponge. *Beep... beep.* He ignored the warning messages on his medi-computer telling him to stop, to place the cup in the dishwasher. *Warning - Dishwashing liquid harms skin cells.* He used to joke with Faith that if that were true, their hands would’ve been reduced to stumps a long time ago, when their skin was fresh and their eyes clear.

Even that small activity made him tired, a constant reminder of his age. In his head he was still broad-shouldered, with two small kids and a wife that meant the world to him... even though that was ages and ages ago. He sat in the living room, tried to turn on his TV. *Beep... beep. Screen time is scheduled for 7:00pm with your news channel of choice - CHANNEL NEWSASIA.* He threw the remote onto the couch in annoyance. He remembered a time before those blasted medi-computers were invented, and then a brief period when they weren’t mandatory for senior citizens. He’d wake up and turn on the TV while waiting for Faith to get ready; she always wanted to make sure she looked nice, even when there was no one looking. Then they’d head down for breakfast together at the coffeeshop - she always made fun of him for the regularity with which he ordered his kaya toast set. The medi-computers put an end to that, with their rigid schedules and inflexible orders. Messages like *Warning - carrot cake is not a nutrient-dense food. Recommendation - sliced fish soup.* They would notify your children too, if you rebelled - which is why Chee Jun obeyed their dispassionate, lifespan-lengthening instructions these days. No reason to make them worry.

Faith would tease him about the extra sugar he put in his coffee too. She always drank kopi o siu dai, forever the worrier.

Fat lot of good worrying did for her, in the end.

The medi-computer buzzed again, displeased that he hadn’t left the house. Under threat of his son’s cajoling and his daughter’s lectures, he put on his shoes. Leaving his two-room flat in Sengkang everyday felt like a chore at his age, especially since the medi-computer planned the route. You could

request for changes in the walking route for the sake of variety, but the AI would always settle on two to three variations of an “optimal” path.

Machines don't get bored.

Chee Jun began walking towards Sengkang riverside park, passing the coffeeshop that he and Faith used to go to, and what had been a Sheng Siong, now replaced by a FairPrice Nutra. He glanced into the store as he walked past, idly watching at the people browsing the shelves, trying to find the healthiest product for their body type. A DEXA Quicksan stood outside, part of the government's relentless drive towards longer lifespans and ultra-healthy living. *Five minutes of your day, and an endless lifetime of worry*, Chee Jun mused. He wondered how many had stepped into the machine to find out their physical and genetic composition, only to tearfully bid goodbye to foods deemed unacceptable for them, like chicken rice, or laksa, or kueh lapis. He himself hadn't eaten kaya toast in three years, a restriction handed down by the medi-computer to avoid “pre-diabetes” - predisposition to diabetes.

Come to think of it, he hadn't had a family dinner with his kids in a long time, due to the repeated complaints of the medi-computer about chilli crab and the artery-clogging effects of its gravy.

He continued along to the riverside park, taking care not to walk too close to the waterway. The path next to the waterway was decidedly off-limits, thanks to the 2047 resurgence of malaria and the medi-computer's paranoid warnings regarding cyclists. It was a shame, for he missed seeing kingfishers swoop and dive for their prey in the canals, or the quiet gliding of monitor lizards through the water. Nature was immutable, unlike Singapore's fast-paced modernity - but those sights belonged to young people now. The paternalistic AI housed in the medi-computer acted only to restrain the elderly, turning them along immaculate, predetermined paths in the name of health and safety. He supposed he should feel grateful.

And yet.

Beep... beep. Turn back. An optimal 30 minutes of exercise will be accomplished on your return. Chee Jun's body automatically moved to obey, as it had many times before, but today he hesitated. Finding a bench, he sat in the garden amongst the flowers, his aged joints appreciative of the respite. A yellow bird with vivid blue at its throat landed on a flower, poking and prodding for nectar. *A sunbird*, he recalled. Faith always loved them, for their bright looks and brighter song.

Warning - possible allergens. Warning - prolonged stay near water bodies carries malaria risk. He ignored the medi-computer. Irritated by its constant buzzing, he unlatched it from his wrist, placing it next to him. He closed his eyes, felt the sunlight on his face.

Brrrrrr. Chee Jun started, then slid his phone out to check the caller ID. *Jia Ying.* Damn it.

He should've known his daughter would call at the slightest sign of trouble. "Hi Jia-" He barely got the words out before her barrage of concerned questions came in. Are you okay? Where are you? What were you thinking?

"I was thinking about mummy."

Silence grew on the line, sprouting unsaid branches of conversation. He knew Jia Ying wanted to ask what that meant, simultaneously fearing what he would say. Just like how she'd been terrified that day, when she'd found him, sleeping pills in hand, ready to join Faith, wherever she'd gone. He'd never been religious, but he'd been prepared to take a chance that they'd be reunited.

The look on her face had been all it took to stop him. And afterward, he'd tried his best to preserve his life, adhering to the medi-computer's inane rules so he would live longer for his children. All the while ignoring the irony that no medication or diet could have saved his wife - cars don't obey the rules of biology, after all.

Jia Ying said something, stumbling over her consolatory words, but he was barely listening.

"I'm alright," he said, "I just feel left behind."

He heard a quaver in his daughter's voice as she apologised for not visiting as often, and she promised that she would drag her brother over soon. He didn't blame her, for the lapses in visitation or her inability to comfort him in his grief - how could a child ever be prepared to console one parent for the loss of the other? He had something else to blame, irrational as it may be.

The medi-computer.

Maybe it hadn't caused his wife's death, but it was robbing his memories of her, and driving a gap between him and his children. He couldn't eat the things he used to eat with Faith., nor have a nice meal with his kids. It controlled all aspects of his life - do this, do that, or you'll develop heart disease, or cancer. He'd felt an obligation to Jia Ying and John to keep himself alive and healthy, especially after Faith had passed.

But what he was doing wasn't really living.

"Ying, do you want to come over for dinner tonight?" There was a pause. "Yeah, of course Dad. I'll text John as well."

"Okay, buy the chilli crab that I like." Chee Jun stifled his daughter's questions about the medi-

computer, promising that it would be fine. That they could have their family dinners once in a while, and that he'd just hide away the medi-computer so it wouldn't voice its shrill complaints.

Then he stood, palming the medi-computer. He moved towards the waterway, imagining how the device would glint in the sun. It would strike the water swiftly like a kingfisher, except it would never surface again. When his children found out, as they eventually would, he'd refuse to replace it, no matter how many times they asked. No matter the legality, or the effect on his lifespan. He had had enough of safety nets and gilded cages.

As he walked along the bank, he thought about buying kaya toast on his way home.