

# Final Destination

The two men were of the same age and they were suffering from the same illnesses – diabetes, hypertension, stroke and multiple end stage organ failure.

Both of them were lying equally helpless on their beds, but their beds were quite different. One was lying on a ripple mattress, placed on a power-assisted, multi-position acute care bed, with split side-rails, headboard, footboard, restrain straps, 6 IV poles sockets, Foley bag hooks, and so on. He was warded in a private suite in one of the upmarket hospitals, one of those with impressionist paintings hanging on the walls of the corridors, objet d'art and leather chairs in the waiting rooms and rock gardens in the open spaces. The other was lying on an ordinary wooden bed, his head propped up with a pillow, in an old three-room HDB flat.

It was quite obvious that there was no chance of recovery for either of them. One could not even be sure that the patient in the hospital who was connected to the latest and most advanced life support system would survive longer than the other man lying at home on his own bed. The latter was wrapped in a diaper with a hot water bottle placed on his abdomen. Furthermore, the one in hospital was infected with MRSA.

There were so many tubes and cables connecting the patient in the hospital to bags, bottles, monitors and machines that anyone approaching his bed, if not careful, might knock or trip over them. All his visitors were standing at some distance from his bed. The gadgets around the patient were acting like silent sentinels forming a barrier to prevent people from going near his bed.

The hospital visitors in fact looked quite lost. Occasionally they would steal a glance at the patient and uncomprehendingly at the various instruments surrounding him. They spoke in whispers but only among themselves. A nurse was sitting at one corner. Now and then she would take a look at the patient and the machines before returning to her seat. The room was chilly and gloomy, the atmosphere depressing. The only objects in the room that appeared to have some life in them were the machines – the monitors with their blinking lights, the respirator heaving and sighing and the IV fluids trickling drop after drop from their containers.

The scenario was in marked contrast to that of the man who was lying in his own bed at home. Two of his visitors were sitting on his bed, one of them was talking loudly on his handphone and the other speaking to him in a rather animated manner. He was able to respond somewhat, although with difficulty. Unlike the patient in the hospital, he was not restrained and he had no tubes inserted or connected to him. Two grandchildren were playing at the foot of his bed and the TV was on.

The discomfort of both men was obvious but there was a difference. One could even discern a certain tranquillity in the face of the man lying at home. It was reflected especially in his eyes. They seemed to say, "I have reached the end of the road. What more is there to fear and to grieve? The final destination is the same for all, whatever our status." His acceptance of his fate had brought him some relief. He came into this world without any fanfare and would be departing in the same manner.

His conscience was clear. He had left nothing behind for his descendants to worry about, nothing to be ashamed of, no debt for them to repay and no fortune for them to quarrel and fight over either. His mind was at ease and this had compensated in a large way for all the physical discomfort of his illness. He would leave in peace.

In contrast, one could not fail to sense a great deal of sadness in the one lying in hospital. The anguish and the melancholia were more than what was due to his illness. There were a hundred and one things he needed to attend to but could not because he had run out of time.

He was despairing of the legacy of uncertainties and chaos he would be leaving behind. There was no peace in his heart. His business – he was not sure any of his children was capable of looking after. His assets – he did not know how to distribute them fairly. His will – he was not sure whether he had done it right. His children – he was not sure that they would be honest and supportive of each other. Would they take care of their sick mother and two handicapped siblings? Would they look after their half brothers and sisters who were in China? Would they be able to manage their own finances? Their past behaviour had not given him confidence and what would

happen to his companion and their love child.....

## EPILOGUE

The end came. Some cried and some did not. It was not possible to gauge the depth of a person's grief by the amount of tears he sheds. Outward appearances are often deceptive. One can at best only guess at the inner feelings of another person.

It was a simple send-off for the HDB dweller. The neighbourhood doctor was called to certify the death. The doctor knew the deceased and his family for years. It was he who managed the patient during his last illness and advised against hospitalisation. The family gave the doctor an *ang pow* and thanked him for all his trouble. The neighbourhood police was notified. The undertaker was called in and all the funeral arrangements quickly made. The wake was held for three days at the void deck. The deceased was cremated and his personal belongings taken care of.

The family, relatives and close friends gathered to have a meal in a neighbourhood restaurant. They reminisced over the deceased but nothing interesting really. He was an ordinary man, upright, good to his family and true to his friends, and who had lived a simple and ordinary life.

Not so for the man who died in hospital. They could not decide on where to hold the wake. The deceased lived with his sick wife, his two handicapped sons, the unmarried daughter and two maids. The daughters said it was the duty of the sons to hold the wake in one of their homes. The sons could not agree, each having his own reason – the children were having examinations, the flat was too small, the location not suitable, a newborn at home.....In the end it was held in a funeral parlour.

It was a grand funeral but was it more of a show? The mourners and the visitors mechanically performing all the rituals, mechanically going through the motions. If the area where the body was lying were screened off, a stranger might not know what the gathering was about.

The children were wrangling over the huge unpaid hospital bill, when they were called into the lawyer's room. All of them tense, anxious and grim faced. The pounding of their hearts against their chest walls was almost audible. ■