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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

HUMOR IN ASIA

Ha ha ha. Hey. Put the gun down.

After a horrible start to a comedy tour, and the cancellation of yet *another* humor column, I realized that my whole life had been a tragic mistake. I was doing the wrong thing at the wrong time in the wrong part of the world. As a humorist in Asia I had been repeatedly sacked, blacklisted and chased out of buildings. What a life.

Many people said they were not surprised. A widespread assumption was that Muslims, Chinese people, communist officials, religious police, self-interested business people and even Asians in general (in other words, my audiences and family members) had no sense of humor.

Worse, I was considered not just out of place, but *dangerous*. A big American newspaper summed it up in a profile which opened thus: “Nury Vittachi has something that scares China’s propagandists to their Marxist cores. It’s dangerous, subversive, and, in their eyes, a national threat. He has a sense of humor.”

My gigs were cancelled. My columns were banned.

I made a decision. It was time to give up and do something else.

And that, of course, was the moment when everything changed. I changed, the media changed, society changed and the world changed.

A year later, I was back on tour, back at the keyboard, back in my groove, having gone from one extreme to the other—now

communists were sending me jokes about communism, religious police were sending me some great lines written *by Muhammad the Prophet himself* and a million regular readers had materialized from nowhere. Muslims were hilarious, Hindus had me in tears of laughter, and communists had me on the floor. (But to be fair, Asia is a big, crowded place, containing four *billion* people, so a million is a tiny, tiny number, just the number of folk in the women's toilet queue at Pacific Place shopping mall in Hong Kong.

It was an intense, visceral year. In the space of 12 months, I had moved from being described by one critic as a "totally unknown Asian humorist" to being described by the same critic as an "almost totally unknown Asian humorist". Okay, so I still had a way to go, but every great journey begins with a single step, or, in my case, a stumble.

A NOVEL FORMAT

This is a novel for legal reasons. Why? Several authors have gotten into trouble for writing memoirs filled with things that never happened. That's utterly despicable, and I wish I had thought of it first. But I didn't, so this is the opposite. It's labeled as a novel, but everything in it is straight from life. Many readers will already have read most of this book in my online diaries.

The book is labeled a novel because I had to change names and dates. Humor in Asia, as you'll see, is *a very delicate subject*.

IDENTIFYING PEOPLE AND PLACES

After reading pre-publication drafts of this novel, some readers started guessing games to work out the real names of people and places in this book. You're welcome to try, but here's a warning. It's not much of a game, since it's actually rather easy. Many names are not disguised at all, or only very thinly disguised. For example, Christian Fardel is Christian Fardel, Wendy Ng is Wendy Ng, Danny Bait is David Tait, and so on. The Quite Good Noodle Shop

of Electric Road is based on a couple of eateries, one of which was the Quite Good Chinese Restaurant of Electric Road, now closed. Some characters have had their names more thoroughly altered because they requested it, or I made the decision for them. This writer is an inveterate diarist, so the conversations are based on real exchanges, the news stories and websites mentioned are genuine, and even the weather references are taken from life.

Yes, life is hard, but it's not a bad way to pass the time. When all is said and done, I recommend it.

Nury Sam Jam Vittachi

Hong Kong

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I.

THE WINTER OF MY DISCONTENT

Chapter One

THE SERIOUSLY BAD CAREER CHOICE

In which a postmodern vidushak finds himself with time on his hands

Hong Kong, Tuesday, January 1

There is something momentous about writing the very first sentence in a book of totally blank pages. Which is what I am doing right now. By ‘right now’, I actually mean ‘just then’, because that was actually the *second* sentence, of course. This one is the third. Or, if I insist on being boringly mathematically correct, the fourth.

But the point is this. I have decided to keep a diary this year. The reason? I have been feeling oddly philosophical of late. I expect this diary will contain Words of Wisdom and related items, assuming I can think of any. It will also feature an examination of the Big Questions of Life, ranging from the serious to the whimsical.

Why do men have nipples?

Why don't hens have nipples?

Which came first, the egg or the bacon?

Who am I? Where am I? What day is it?

Why do birds fall down from the sky when whoever it is walks by?

Wednesday, January 2

Popping into the bar on the way home, it occurs to me that our lives are driven by questions. Why should this be so? It's “because we live

in mono-directional time”, explains my mentor/bartender “Benny” Benares, a thinker of extraordinary virtuosity. “We can see the past but not the future, so as time proceeds, the intellectuals among us are driven by a constant search for answers to the key questions of life.”

Fascinating. Key questions of life race through my mind.

Why is Benny a barman?

What’s for dinner?

Who’s your daddy?

Thursday, January 3

Dear Diary, I am shocked and horrified when my agent tells me that I have no gigs or writing commissions this week, just like the week before, and the week before that, and, indeed, the past couple of months. In my line of work, business isn’t exactly booming right now.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am a *vidushak*, an Asian jester, or a *kamishibai man*, a traditional eastern storytelling entertainer. Those are my titles. As for my personal names, they reflect my history, as colonizee and colonizer, refugee and drifter: my Chinese name is Lai See, Muslim name Nury, Sinhala name Vittachi, Portuguese name Perera, pen name The Spice Trader and Anglicized middle name Sam Jam (which is Chinese for “Third Bus-Stop Dweller”). My skills as a *vidushak* are specialized but my timing is bad. I missed the peak period of Asian jester popularity by a couple of thousand years. Thus I have some time on my hands.

This bright, icy winter’s day I have decided to spend bonding with the offspring. Our soulless modern society assumes that only cash-earning activities can be classified as worthwhile achievements. But surely there can be no more valuable way for a father to spend his time than cultivating the values of the next generation? Among the excellent things that Confucius didn’t say, according to fact-checkers and other irritating pendants who curse my writing life, is

this: “To plan for a year, plant rice; to plan for ten years, plant trees; to plan for a century, teach children.”

To start with, I resolve to persuade my daughter to forego the usual Barbie princess she gets for her birthday. Instead, I will recommend that she donate the money to the Heifer Project to buy a piglet for a poor child living in some rural village in China or India. I will break the news to her gently tomorrow, a week before her birthday.

Friday, January 4

Second Daughter greets the idea with unabashed enthusiasm. “Oh yes yes yes, Dad, let’s DO buy a piglet,” she says, clapping her hands. “It can live under my bed.”

I hastily issue a correction. “No, you see, we don’t actually GET the piglet ourselves. We get a card thanking us for our donation, and a child in need gets the piglet, which she can breed to start off her own little farm.”

“But *I* need a piglet,” she replies, her tone of voice hardening to titanium alloy. “I haven’t got one. I’ve NEVER had one.” She says this with a pained look that indicates that she knows for a fact that EVERY GIRL IN THE WORLD has her own personal piglet EXCEPT HER.

I fold my arms to signify that I am being Very Serious and say: “You have a hamster.”

She folds her arms to signify the same thing and says: “A hamster is NOT a piglet.”

I go into a lengthy attempt to prove that a hamster IS actually a TYPE of piglet. She refers to Wikipedia and I resoundingly lose the argument. How did that happen?

Saturday, January 5

I end up paying for a piglet for the Heifer Project charity AND buying a Barbie Princess at the Toys R Us in Aberdeen fishing

village. “The kids are getting smarter than I am,” I confide to my wife.

“What do you mean, ‘getting’?” she says, raising one eyebrow.

There are three tough women in my family so I retire from the unequal fray and hide behind my ancient computer. In my email inbox I find a note from my agent. This informs me that with immediate effect, he is now my former agent. Clearly this situation needs careful handling. I decide to offer to raise his cut from 20 per cent to 30 per cent.

My wife, reading over my shoulder, vetoes the scheme, pointing out that 30 per cent of nothing is the same as 20 per cent of nothing. “Yes, but you must admit, it sounds better,” I argue. She doesn’t understand how agents think. She persuades me to delete my response, although I suspect it would have worked. Never mind. His loss, not mine.

Monday, January 7

Having lunch with my book industry colleague Eddie Hastedt today, I ask a philosophical question. “Why am I happy?”

“You are unhappy because you are a satirist in Asia, a place where satire is a statutory criminal offence and you have no job and no prospects.” He speaks in his usual cynical tone, without looking at me. Eddie is a good man, apart from being the incarnation of misery, and has never been known to smile. He is only happy when he’s miserable. When he’s ecstatically happy inside, his face brightens from “death mask” to “suicidal gloom”.

“Actually, my question was: why am I happy?”

Eddie breathes in and out slowly, and then looks into the middle distance for half a minute to think about that one. “Ignorance is bliss,” he says, eventually.

There’s a lot to be said for ignorance. It gets a bad rap in my opinion.

* * *

Later, as I walk the kids home after the first day of school this year, my mobile phone rings, bringing possible good news. It's a call from Eddie's secretary telling me to turn up tomorrow at The Venetian in Macau for a meeting with Fanny Sun, a top event organizer in the region, regarding a potential booking. I have to be there at noon. Clearly the purchase of the pig triggered a flow of good karma in my direction.

Tuesday, January 8

After an exhilarating hop from wave-crest to wave-crest by high-speed catamaran across one of the largest bays on the coast of the South China Seas, I'm at The Venetian, a glittering hotel-and-casino complex which is the biggest building in Asia, according to a brochure I read on the boat.

It IS massive, for sure. Inside, I wander the halls for an hour. I keep getting lost due to the curvature of the earth. But I remain sanguine, and even come up with a philosophical aphorism about this sector of the space-time continuum: "*Wherever you want to go in The Venetian, it's as far as possible from wherever you are, no matter where you are.*" Memo to self: Send it to Stephen Hawking.

At the end of a corridor several kilometers long, I eventually find Ms. Sun, a helmet-haired woman with lips so thin they look like a line drawn on a cartoon face. She refuses to look me in the eye. Instantly I know that the meeting will not go well.

"I recognize you," she says. "You're the guy with the mouth."

There's no answer to that. "Yes," I eventually respond. "I brought it with me. I like to keep it under my nose."

"You were caught making jokes about the leaders of the Chinese communist party or something, weren't you?"

"Yes, or to put it another way, I was commissioned to do a job and did it superbly."

“And weren’t there some sort of ‘international incidents’ or whatever they call them?”

“We don’t talk about those. For legal reasons.”

She spends almost a third of a second pretending to study my CV, then explains that I will not be suitable for the forthcoming engagement because it is sponsored by an Islamic bank. “They’re not going to want anything fun. These people don’t enjoy that sort of thing.”

“I see. They don’t enjoy fun. What do they enjoy?” Despite the fact that my full name is on the CV in her hand, she clearly hasn’t noticed the Muslim bits in it.

It’s her turn to have no answer to a question, so she cleverly pretends to receive an urgent message on her phone, despite the fact that it has neither flashed nor beeped nor vibrated. “Hey, maybe next time,” she says, glancing down. “Sorry. Gotta go. Busy busy busy. I’ll call you.”

One hour later, I am waiting at the Macau immigration counter on the way home, and another aphorism occurs to me, one that can be applied to anything from banks to supermarkets: “*The other queue moves faster.*” With Ms. Sun’s prejudices in mind, an Islamic saying pops into my head: “Who makes his companions laugh, deserves paradise.”

On the ferry back to Hong Kong, a more practical “key question of life” suggests itself to me: Can one get a paid job as a philosopher these days? If so, I wonder what the entry-level salary is like? Must check the classifieds in the newspaper next week.

Wednesday, January 9

Clearly, starting this diary was the right thing to do at the right time. While glancing over the news of a rise in suicides after recent stock market crashes, I have yet another Deep Thought. *Some people have found a way to guarantee they will not lose money in the stock market. This cunning scheme is called “Not Having Any in the First Place”*

and is widely used by teachers, social workers, nuns and comedians attempting to work under repressive regimes.

Thursday, January 10

Remarkable news! As well as a pig, I have a GIG. For actual MONEY. Arranged by MS. SUN. It's a comedy assignment at a telecoms conference in Beijing. I have to arrange my own transport for which I will be reimbursed. It must be said, I am more than a little surprised to get a call back from the event organizer after she gave me such a negative response in Macau on Tuesday. When I get to Beijing, I must track her down to ask her what prompted her change of heart.

Sitting in the travel agency waiting for my ticket to be issued, I turn from one depressing bit of reading, the list of airfares, to another: my bank statement. I feel another attack of financial philosophy coming on. *If you have a tiny, completely useless bit of money and you put it in a savings account and wait for a year, you find that at the end of the year it is still a tiny, completely useless bit of money, because all that stuff about compound interest making your money grow super-fast is a complete @\$%^ lie.*

Friday, January 11

It's a bitterly cold but gloriously sunny morning, with a sharp wind blowing south from Siberia, according to the TV weatherman. Oh yes, Dear Diary, even sub-tropical Hong Kong can get very chilly. The kids decide it is a two-bowls-of-breakfast-noodles day: yes, that cold.

Twenty-four hours to go until my Beijing trip. I wrap up warm and go with First Daughter to the bank to change currency. Five minutes later we stomp out. In the queue, I worked out that if you change your money nine times, you end up flat broke without actually having bought anything. Worse still, I realized that I change money on average at least 10 times a year. That means I can save time

and energy by just staying at home and burning my life savings. At least I would save on heating bills.

On the way home, my daughter asks me why I am cross. I tell her that I am going on a journey so I will need a different type of money. “In ancient times, when the world was young, and the Rolling Stones were only on their 43rd album, people decided that you would have to change one form of money to another whenever you crossed borders.” This was particularly bad news for people from South Asia, I explain. “The money where your Daddy started life was set at a very low exchange rate: one rupee was equal to one speck of dirt. Things went downhill from there. I moved to a different country, and changed my savings to a different currency—which immediately fell in value.”

As the bus, like my career, hurtles downhill, I tell her about my own father’s long face every time we used an airport money-changer. “We got a handful of dirt. And those were the GOOD days. Other times we just got a laugh.”

A gentle, thoughtful child, she nods sagely, so I continue: “Today, the various brands of rupee are still worthless, but thanks to decimalization, the situation is expressed far more elegantly. We now say 0.9897 rupees equals 0.9897 specks of dirt or 1.075 seconds of laughter, which I think you’ll agree sounds better.”

She continues to nod, or perhaps nod off. The bus gets stuck in a traffic jam, so I decide to take the opportunity to educate her about western currency as well. She doesn’t object, and sits quietly with her eyes closed in deep contemplation of my words, or asleep.

“In the old days, the most confusing currency was the Pound, a British banknote which was divided into shillings, pence, florins and penny-farthings, coins which were so large they were used in Britain as bicycle wheels.”

She opens her eyes wide. “Bicycle wheels?”

“Correct. I read it somewhere. The British also had a huge variety of coins, such as guineas, half-crowns, tuppences, quids, grands, optics, drams and snifters.”

Talking about money-changing reminds me of the first transaction I ever had on a visit to London, as a child. It went something like this:

ME: How much is that?

SHOPKEEPER: Two grand, a guinea-half-crown, three shillings, half a snifter and tuppenny-ha’pence-farthing.

ME: Oh. Do you accept rupees?

SHOPKEEPER: Yes, young man. That’ll be forty googillion rupees, but I will have to give you the change in dirt and sneers.

As we walk the final kilometer home, I finish my lecture: “Only after I became an adult did I learn how the system worked. I learned that the main world currency was the US dollar, colloquially known as the Greenspan. The Greenspan was divided into bucks, dimes, nickels, quarters, eighths, sixteenths, semi-colons, jots and iotas.”

As we reach our block, my daughter looks suspicious. “Why are you complaining about money so much? Does this mean you won’t be able to bring me back a present from your trip?” (Modern children can be rather sharp.)

“That’s right, so don’t expect anything,” I reply. (Adults can be rather sharp too.)

Saturday, January 12

The day of the Beijing expedition has arrived. By noon, I’m on a Cathay Pacific flight, walking through the aisle of the economy class cabin, looking for my seat. A flight attendant taps my arm. “Didn’t you used to be Mr. Jam?” she asks.

“No,” I reply. “I used to be Johnny Depp. Then I became Scarlett Johansson. I’m planning to be Mr. Jam next.”

She looks puzzled for half a second and then laughs. Who says Asians don’t get irony?

A Singaporean is eavesdropping. "You're Mr. Jam, izzit? I used to read your funny columns in magazines all the time-lah."

"I got sacked."

The flight attendant says: "I used to read you in the newspapers."

"I got sacked from them as well. I am proud to say that there is almost no media outlet which has not sacked me. I am very consistent."

The Singaporean continues: "Shame. Asian businessmen got no sense of humor. But we need jokes. What with the end of the world approaching and all that. Science has proved it, you know."

"So. An optimist."

It turns out that my seat is right next to him. My guess was nearly right. He tells me he is an *optometrist* (Latin for "octopus-measurer").

The Malaysian woman in the seat on the other side has an even sadder tale. "My husband ran off with a woman eleven years older than me," she says. "That makes me the most humiliated woman on this planet."

"Wow, you REALLY are," I agree sympathetically.

The octopus-measurer says: "Never mind. She'll die before you do."

"That's the plan," the woman mutters darkly.

During the flight I study my seatmates. The Singaporean, whose name is Tan (there's a legal requirement that 65 per cent of residents of that city-state carry that name), turns out to be a standard Singaporean yuppie: suit by Crocodile, shirts by Van Heusen, shoes by Bally, waistline by Bread Talk. He shows me the war crimes hearings, drug arrests and corruption crackdowns on the front page of his newspaper. "The news is so depressing," he says.

The world's most humiliated woman, a Penang-born doctor named Lok, cuts in: "We need more laughs. Laughter expands blood

vessels, decreases serum cortisol and boosts the immune system. A humorist can in theory boost your health better than a doctor.”

“You flatter me. You after my body?” I ask.

“Eww, no thanks,” she squeals, wrinkling her nose.

The fat Singaporean chuckles. (References to my Mr. Puniverse body always guarantee a laugh.)

* * *

Astonishing. Nine hours later, the vast crowd of telecom executives at the gala dinner actually laughs at my jokes. And no one looks angry. (I somehow manage to avoid joking much about senior Chinese officials, several of whom are present.)

“They’re drunk, you see,” my host, a Beijing businessman, explains afterwards. “They’ll laugh at anything.”

I thank him for his vote of confidence in my skills.

“No problem,” he replies.

I revise my earlier statement: SOME Asians get irony.

As I leave the ballroom, I spot the event organizer marching across the foyer and race to catch her. “Ms. Sun, may I ask a question? How come you hired me for this gig when you seemed to have a downer on me in Macau last week?”

“It was touch and go,” she replies. “The Chinese co-organizer wanted a comedian, but the western partners advised against it, saying that anything like satire was too dangerous. I suggested a compromise: an Asian comedian. Asians are not really funny. I suddenly realized that an unfunny comedian could be a hugely useful resource for me.”

“But I WAS funny. A bit.”

“We all make mistakes,” she says, taking her leave.

Sunday, January 13

It’s six in the morning and a new day is struggling to dawn in polluted Beijing. So what if the air is full of particles? Don’t you like to see what you’re eating? Anyway, however thick the fog may be