

Santa Course

Chi Tat Cheung

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Exegesis in part fulfillment of degree of MCW

Chi Tat Cheung

AUT University

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1. Synopsis

The fantasy novel *Santa Course*, begins with the main character, Leslie Florence, content, and living in Auckland. He has a good job as a civil pilot, a lovely wife Laura and a lovely son Jack. One evening, Leslie goes out to clear the rubbish. When he attempts to return to his house, the door is locked and the windows are closed. He eventually breaks into but finds his house empty. A stranger called Trinity appears. Trinity informs Leslie that he was knocked down by a car when he went out to clear the rubbish, and that the only thing that Leslie can do now is fly to the magic island Whantanu. Trinity provides him with tickets for the flight and tells Leslie that on the island he will be trained to be the next Santa Claus. Trinity promises Leslie that once he has become a genuine Santa Claus, a meeting with his beloved ones will be arranged. During his year in Whantanu, Leslie makes friends with Lung, another Santa Claus trainee. Together, they learn the skills necessary to be a Santa Claus. However, overtime it emerges that Santa Claus is in fact a fairy, and that being a fairy involves many rules, regulations and constraints. Flying, for example, involves more energy than swimming. Furthermore, fairies do not enjoy time traveling, they cannot foresee the future, or forecast the results of sports matches for the purposes of gambling. Fairies cannot create bank notes, because this would cause inflation. To complete the course, Leslie and Lung are assigned to an outward bound trip to an island called Nichigetsu where they are unable to practice their magic. They are given a task to find an immortal elixir using only their own ability and strength. In the end, the fairy management board decided to disqualify Lung's fairyship. Could Leslie complete the task of Santa Claus alone without the help of Lung?

2. Motivations

Two primary aims motivated the writing of my first English novel *Santa Course*. Firstly, being a novelist or a writer has been an ambition of mine since I was six. At that time, the

financial situation of my family was below average, and so for entertainment, I would go to the Hong Kong public library. Reading books was free, borrowing books was free, participating in activities was free, and the air conditioning in the hot summer was free. Hence, I went to public library a lot.

As I regularly visited the library, I started reading a lot of fiction. My literary level in both Chinese and English was limited, so I was unable to read many of the canonical works, which generally required a higher literacy level. As a result, I was limited to reading children's fiction or young adults' literature. These are the literary genres which have influenced me most.

As I grew older and my literacy levels improved, I started reading adult literature. My favourite writer became Murakami Haruki, a fantasy writer from Japan, who takes magical elements to an extreme. His novels often employed the technique of the parallel narratives. For example, in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985), the narrative is split between odd-number chapters titled "Hard-Boiled Wonderland", and even-number chapters titled "The End of the World". Haruki's parallel fantasy narratives are independent in the beginning chapters, yet eventually they merge together. As a reader, I enjoyed this narrative structure, however it was his use of fantasy that I was particularly drawn towards.

When I was twelve years old, my English as a second language teacher asked us to write an article titled "*My Aspiration*". I wrote about my aspiration to be a writer. However, she marked me as failed; her argument being that a writer is not an occupation. "Everybody can write, everybody can be a writer. Hence writing is not a career," she claimed. Her argument really hurt me, and I thought I should consider another career. A midwife, a psychologist, a teacher perhaps. To some extent, my childhood dream was broken.

When I was fifteen, I participated in a creative writing course during the summer vacation. It was a summer course organized by the School of Continuing Education of Hong Kong Baptist University. I was the youngest in the class. My final assignment was a love story. People teased me, "young boy," they said, "how much do you know about love?" However, when I

was in the university, I got a part time job as a screenplay writer for a soap opera in a Chinese TV station. This is the first time I had written something for money. Compared with other classmates in my course, my monthly income was at least three times what they were earning. Creative writing brought me a good income. Moneywise it was a good job. This was a good rebuttal to my English teacher's belief, that being a writer is not a career, not a profession.

In summary, *Santa Course* is a culmination of these motivations; the childhood desire to be a writer, the magical and fantastical worlds of Murakami Haruki and the fantasy literature of my childhood, and a dogged determination to prove my English teacher wrong - to show her that it was possible to carve out a career as a professional writer. *Santa Course* is also shaped by my screen writing experiences, in particular, creating the screenplays for Chinese TV Soap Operas.

3. The fantasy genre

Wadham and Wadham (1999) suggest that fantasy literature can be categorized into several different sub-genres. The most obvious definitions involve the dichotomy between traditional fantasy and contemporary fantasy. Simply speaking traditional fantasy is defined as “a tale that originated in a spoken form and has been handed down orally” (p.5), and “the original author is unknown” (p.5). In contrast, contemporary fantasy has a known author. However, Wadham and Wadham also suggest that there is a category in between traditional and contemporary fantasy, that is contemporary fantasy with traditional elements. My work *Santa Course* falls in this category. Wadham and Wadham said “contemporary fantasy often makes use of elements from traditional tales” (p.9). They suggest some examples such as Donna Jo Napoli (1995) retelling of “Hansel and Gretel” from the witches point of view, or Vivian Vande Velde's rewriting of Rapunzel as an advertisement for shampoo. My work rewrites the

traditional story of Santa Claus, which is originally based on the contemporary belief that on Christmas Eve, Santa Claus rides a sleigh pulled by reindeers to distribute Christmas gifts to good children. However, the main theme of my work is the protagonists Leslie and Lung has to complete a “Santa Course” to be a “Santa Claus”. The novel develops ideas about how the protagonists participate the course, and how they react and respond to the course and their ‘fairyship’. My work, hence, is a retelling the story of the contemporary Santa Claus myth.

Canonical Chinese Fantasy

Wadham and Wadham (1999) also categorise fantasy into a form called high fantasy. They state that “high fantasy is generally defined as fantasy taking place completely within an invented world, with no reference to the world we know” (p.9). This can be illustrated by Neverland in *Peter Pan* and the Wonderland in *Alice in Wonderland*. In Chinese literature there are also many examples of high fantasy. For example, *Flowers in the Mirror* written by Li Ruzhen (1827). *Flowers in the Mirror* involves the protagonist Tang Ao’s adventures and travels in the Nation of Girls, the Comity of Nation and other high fantasy worlds. *Flowers in the Mirror* is often compared and contrasted with *Gulliver’s Travel*, by Jonathan Swift (1726), in comparative literature studies. Both stories involve a fantasy world discovered through travel abroad. In my novel, the story takes place in Whantanu, which is also an invented island country in the Pacific Ocean. The protagonists also travel to another created land called Nichigetsu Island, also a high fantasy setting with fantastical animals. Whantanu and Nichigetsu are both creations influenced by the fantasy worlds of Li and Swift.

Another famous fantasy story in Chinese literature is *Peach Blossom Spring* (421) by Tao Yuanming. It centres around a fantasy world, in which a magical village of people live. They never grow old and time remains unchanged in *Peach Blossom Spring*. When I was young and studied traditional Chinese literature at school, *Peach Blossom Spring* was a compulsory text. In Chinese, *Peach Blossom Spring* has become a metaphor for a wonderful and fantastic utopian world which people admire and longed for. The immortality and utopianism of Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* is referenced in *Santa Course*, particularly in the characterisation of the Santa Claus trainees, who as immortals can live up to 999 years.

4. Settings

One other thing I learnt through the process of creating the novel *Santa Course*, is that the process of creating the story is just like planting a tree. There are many mature fruits on the tree and once they mature, they fall onto the ground. One can pick up these fruits and use the seeds to plant another tree. It became clear that this same theory could be applied to the process of writing *Santa Course*. When constructing the skeleton of the story, I sometimes developed what I considered were special ideas. These eventually grew and grew into mature and independent ideas. However many became so independent that they could be developed into new stories themselves. For example, originally the episode about the adventure to Nichigetsu Island was not that short. It involved not just one, but seven islands, and as a whole they were called Seven Skips Islands. On each of the seven islands there were different challenges. It eventually became clear that too much of my early drafts of *Santa Course* focused on Seven Skips

Island, which accounted for over 10,000 words. Hence I simplified it into a three-day trip of only one Nichigetsu Island.

“Here is the map.” Angel passes a map book to them. “Now you’ve to enhance the content of the fairies’ handbook. You have to go to the Seven Skips Islands. You have to use the water of the Seven Heaven Springs to wash the handbooks. Books get the saints and blessings from the fountains, words will appear on the books. Then you will have respective mana.” Angel says.

This dialogue is quoted from the unused part of the creative work, which, as mentioned, consists of over 10,000 words. I cut out this part and save it as another Word document, and I’m currently planning to develop it into another separate and independent story.

This removed section was set in an invented location Seven Skip Islands. An imagined location is somehow quite common in fantasy novel. For example, the classical fantasy story *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie (1911) was based on an imaginary island *Neverland*, Ursula Le Guinn’s fantasy series *Earthsea* (2001) was located in Archipelago, and Tolkien’s Rings series (1954-55) was located in Middle-earth. The reason why fantasy authors rely on imagined and fantastic location is because it can capture and sustain readers’ interests (Wadham and Wadham, 1999). These imagined worlds are rich, detailed and consistent, providing the readers with a sense of fictional realism. In *Neverland*, for example, children never grow up. This is the most distinctive aspect of *Neverland*. Being a child, parents and adults buy you toys. You can go to theme parks, playgrounds. You do not have to work. Being a child is free and leasurable. Children usually enjoy their childhood, though some may look forward

to becoming an adult, so that they can watch movies as they like, they can drive, and can be the boss.

So this is the point of fascination of Neverland. Barrie describes the children in Neverland as wanting to be young forever. They are not eager to grow up to drive, work, or be their own boss. In Barrie's description, children enjoy their childhood, hence they enjoy staying in Neverland. In my story, Nichigetsu Island is also an imaginary and fantastical setting. This was conveyed through the use of successive descriptive clauses of the islands external and descriptive features, as in the following example:

They leave the village and soon they come to the forest. They walk up the hill through the forest. Along the way there are many unique fauna and flora. On a tree there is a monkey with purple hair. Light green gas comes out from a big brown mushroom. A half horse half man is eating the grass on the ground... Everything on the island is unique and exotic.

Such a description enables the readers to visualize the island. As an alternative, I could have easily included an illustration of Nichigetsu Island. However, the concept of children never growing up is an abstract and subjective concept, which cannot be easily illustrated. As a result, when illustrations are included, such as in *Peter Pan*, they are the subjective views of the illustrator. This is why when we read the different illustrated versions of *Peter Pan*, we may find that the features of the picture of Peter Pan are different (see the illustrations below). However, for me, the creative power and the charm of the fantasy novel is that they often leave the construction of many aspects of the fantasy world up to the readers' imagination, and therefore I believe that illustrations are not required. This is the approach I have taken in *Santa Course*.



Peter Pan, illustrated by Rovira, F., 2001



Peter Pan, illustrated by Kincaid, E., 1990

The other idea I learnt from my mentorship is the choice of setting. Where should the story take place? The major setting of my story is based in a created island country in the Pacific Ocean, Whantanu. This subverts the traditional belief that Santa Claus

lives in Greenland, Scandinavian countries, or any part of the Arctic Circle. However, there was an amendment about the country of origin of Leslie the protagonist. Originally he comes from Canada. However my mentor advised me to change the location to Auckland, which is somewhere I know better. The argument for changing the background location was that the writer is able to add more informed descriptions to describe the geographical background of the protagonist:

The taxi uses State Highway 20. There are some small houses under the big trees along the road. Some workers are digging the road next to the highway. Soon SH 20 joins SH 1. Darlington is a quiet and cosy suburb near One Tree Hill.

Taking *Peter Pan* as an example, same theory applied in Barrie's story. The story based in an invented place Neverland. But the protagonist Wendy comes from Kensington of London. Barrie is Scottish, hence London is a city he would know very well. Making Wendy coming from Kensington helps the readers to understand her better.

5. Narrative Devices

The flashback

An important narrative device used in *Santa Course* is the use of the flashback. Flashbacks are regularly used in novels as one of the ways of developing the author's ideas, as well as the narrative of the story. The Chinese TV Soap Opera routinely uses flashback as a narrative method, and they helped provide solutions for the construction of my narrative. One of the major challenges in writing *Santa Course* was the inclusion of Leslie's wife, Laura. Originally Laura appeared only once in the first draft. However, after a discussion with my mentor, we decided that making Laura appear in

Leslie's memory might enrich the structure of the story, and helped characterize Leslie as well. The idea would be that he arrives on Whantanu Island, Leslie should miss Laura and Jack, and that the flashback could be employed to convey this sense of loss. Selgin (2007) suggests that a skilful writer can always develop a particular moment or moments of the story through the use of description, flashback, memories and reveries. However, both Selgin and my mentor suggest flashback or the depiction of memories can't be too long and too complicated. While readers like to know the detailed background and experience of protagonists, lengthy flashbacks slow down the narrative (and paradoxically the readers' interest). Another merit of flashbacks is that they can humanise the protagonist, for example, Leslie's sense of missing his family through the appropriate use of flashbacks helps enrich his character.

The use of flashbacks can also be found elsewhere in my work. Together, Leslie and Lung face a number of challenges and problems. Both are protagonists, though Leslie is more important than Lung. They take the Santa course together, they work in the music shop together, they go to Nichgetsu Island together. The story is not *Leslie on the Santa Course*, so I wanted Lung to play an important role as well. Hence, I employed the use of some flashbacks to describe the character of Lung, and develop him as a main protagonist. As a result in many scenes in my novel, Lung appears without Leslie. For example, he appears in Xian with Laura. Omitting Leslie sometimes helps enhance the importance of Lung and Laura. Lung and Laura are the second and third protagonists, not minor characters.

Foreshadowing

Another thing discussed with my mentor during the course was *foreshadowing*; the technique of implying the next step in the plot or chapter. This technique is very important in making the readers not feel they are being fooled. In *Santa Course*, the ending gives a way out and solution to the protagonist Leslie's completion of the Santa course. Eventually, the readers find that everything in the story only happened in Leslie's dream during a coma. The application of these techniques helps unify the tone and structure of the narrative. Foreshadowing helps rationalize the ending, and helps the readers to think about why the "uuu... beep" sounds appear constantly throughout the story. The sounds first appear in page 40. Leslie had just joined the fairicle, and he does not have magic powers yet. He is aware that he recently died from a car accident. He hears some strange sounds, which imply something to the readers. The sounds not only occur once, but more often in page 148 and 156. Furthermore, Leslie sees blurry images. A white shadow is working next to him. While, the surprising ending or denouement is very important to *Santa Course*, we have to rationalize the surprise elements, and assist the readers to expect the unexpected.

Constructing new words and terminologies

The construction of new words and terminologies to describe the imaginary world is an important component of fantasy fiction. For example, in Harry Potter's series, Rowling invented the word "muggle" to describe common people who do not know magic. Another example is Swift (1726) invented the word "yahoo" to describe a being who is filthy and has unpleasant habits. Within the context of these stories these words carry much meaning.

In *Santa Course* I have developed the word *Redcliffe* to describe people who do not know magic. *Redcliffe* can be disintegrated into red and cliff. The Battle of Red Cliff is something famous and important in Chinese history. It was a story about how a weak side won over a strong side in a civil war in China 2,000 years ago. Inventing the word *redcliffe* also reflects a wish that a small and insignificant writer such as myself can win over notable authors like J.K. Rowling. Another reason why *muggles* are referred to as *redcliffes* in *Santa Course* is to make fun of Daniel Radcliffe, the actor who plays Harry Potter. No matter how successful the book, the movie and the actor were, Radcliffe himself is merely a *redcliffe*, or *muggle*, in the end.

Besides inventing the word *redcliffe* to have the same meaning as *muggle* in the Harry Potter series, the word *fairyship* was also invented. It means having the identity and status of a fairy. If a story can be successful, a new word invented in the story can be as successful and as memorable as the protagonist.

6. Intertextual Influences

Intertextual references to popular fantasy genres play a pivotal role in *Santa Course*.

In the movie *Hook* (1991), there is a scene where the now grown-up Peter Pan (played by Robin Williams) argues with the children in Neverland. Peter Pan throws an empty spoon at one of the children, and food appears on that child's face. This scene is explicitly referenced in *Santa Course*. One of the fairies makes the comment that the Dutch do not like cheese. However Leslie argues the opposite.

"I am ignorant? I am a lad?"

“Yes, you are. You are a primary school pupil.”

“I am a pupil? Then who you are?”

“You have never been to the Netherlands. You know nothing about it.”

Leslie gets furious. He smashes the plate on Austin’s face.

“Listen. I am a pilot. I have over 1 million km flying experience. I have been to the Netherlands many times. Don’t argue with me! I say, The-Dutch-Love-Cheese!”
Leslie screams.

Austin removes the plate from his face. There is pizza on it!

Leslie has made use of his imagination power!

The film *Hook* is a rewritten and extended version of Barrie’s original story *Peter Pan*. The first time I watched the film was twenty one years ago, however, the scene where Peter Pan (Robin Williams) put an empty plate on the face of a child from Neverland is vivid in my memory. This scene is the critical point of the story. Peter Pan had left Neverland many years ago and had grown up. He had lost all his memories of the magical island and had also forgotten how to fly, or how to fight. As a result, he was unable to defend the children from Captain Hook. Peter Pan’s ability to regain the ability of imagination and fool the child that food is on his face is a turning point in the film.

Another example of intertextuality in *Santa Course* is the creation of new languages. The use of various languages can be found in Tolkien’s fantasy works. Tolkien was born in South Africa, a country which has thirteen official languages. When his mother died in 1903, he and his brother became orphans and moved to Birmingham, then to Oxford University. In 1925 he was appointed a Professor of

Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University. As his field was philology, Tolkien's knowledge of language meant he was able to invent his own for his fantasy works. According to Blake (2002), Tolkien "was inventing languages based on classical Greek, Welsh and Finnish, as well as Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian languages" (p.4). Although I was unaware of Tolkien's background and professionalism in language before I read his works, I also created a new language for *Santa Course*. For example, the herbs called Mishiboshikoshitoshi and Toyoborokolota. The formations of their syllables and the combination of vowels are based on my knowledge of Japanese. So is the name, "Nichigetsu Island". The use of a Japanese-like language implies that the island was culturally or historically influenced by Japan.

Chinese Soap Operas

When I was young, I attended an afternoon primary school. As a result I watched a lot of morning television, in particular the Chinese soap operas that were screened during that time. These television soap operas have naturally become an influence for my creative writing as an adult, particularly with regards to their narrative techniques. For example, the TV soap opera series *Men With No Shadows* (2011), which is a Hong Kong production starring Bobby Au-yeung, Tavia Yeung and Raymond Lam. It focuses on themes of life after death and the demon world. The main protagonist, Typhoon, alleges himself to be a demon, possessing supernatural powers, including the ability to resurrect the dead. However, throughout the whole story, the director implies that Typhoon is just a human with supernatural powers. Once every few episodes, one of the major characters will discover some hints or clues as to why Typhoon is a human, not demon.

Besides *Men With No Shadows*, other TV soap operas from China and Hong Kong, that have influenced *Santa Course*, also involve similar topics of life after death, angels and demons. One of them was *You Only Live Twice* (1981). It is a classic TV series which used to be very popular during the 1980s in Hong Kong. It talks about a poor guy (Fat Wong) who died, but was permitted to live twice as another identity. The demon (Sam Luk) helped Fat to live again as a rich business man (Chun-Yu Sheung). In order to monitor Fat's behaviour and activity, Sam came to the human world as well. However, Sam is quite different from the character Trinity in my work. Sam is humanized and has weaknesses. He cannot go to churches. He is afraid of taking flights because they fly too close to heaven. However, Trinity has no weaknesses, but he is not trustworthy. This is a demerit rather than a weakness.

The other work taken as a reference was *Double Fattiness* (1988). The main character, Siu Fung dies and the immigration department officer in the heaven permits her to live again. She is not allowed to disclose her identity to her family. Every time she tells them, they sneeze. She can only imply the truth to her husband in his dreams. However, her husband misunderstands her implications. He mistakes Ms. Chor for Siu Fung. And the development of the story and the plot starts from this misunderstanding. Personally I like this story and at one stage it directly influenced the writing of *Santa Course*. As I mentioned earlier, this occurred when I was side-tracked to write a long chapter about a person, whose appearance was Laura, but actually she was Cecilia inside.

Sometimes a novel, particularly in fantasy or children literature, will commence with a short episode or story independent of the main part of the narrative, but which still involves the protagonist. For example, at the beginning of *Toy Story 3*, nearly all Andy's toys are involved in a narrative episode, which involves a scenario invented by

Andy while he is playing with the toys. The episode has no relationship with the main body at all, but it functions to display the characteristics of some, if not all, of the toys.

Similarly, at the beginning of *Santa Course* I described Leslie's work as a pilot. It helps to inform some parts of the story later. Firstly, it helps to justify why Trinity selected him as the successor of Santa Claus. Secondly, when he was given a new identity and passport to Whantanu, Leslie forgot the name of his new identity, and Trinity joked, "That is the first time he has flown. Forgive him." which adds a humorous element to the narrative.

7. Characterization

Character Description

One area of the novel that I developed with my mentor was way in which I could vary the description of the characters. One common way of describing the appearance of a character is to describe them directly, as when Angel appears in chapter two:

She said she was 45 years old. Her skin was so wrinkled that she looked even older, perhaps 60. Her hair was dark and a little curly. Leslie thought her hair condition was very unhealthy and poor. She wore a black blouse and black trousers. She wore strong make up, strong eye lines and eye brows. She smokes.

Here, the description of Angel is completely different from the conventional image of a tooth fairy. Traditionally, we believe a tooth fairy should be everything positive, but Angel smokes. We believe a tooth fairy should be a young girl, but Angel looks like a sixty-year old woman. These characterizations will conflict with the readers' expectations and may enhance the comic effect of the narrative. Here, I tell

readers directly, rather than show them how Angel looks. I consider this the simplest and most basic skill in describing the appearance of a protagonist.

The second way to describe a character is through metaphor or a description of their behaviour - which is to show, not tell. Selgin (2007) suggests that showing, is superior to telling, because when we construct a character through showing, the author allows the readers to imagine, to think, and to develop that particular character. For example, in the characterisation of John, Leslie's colleague in the first chapter, I construct John as suggesting to Leslie that he could "have fun" with female colleagues. This behaviour provides suggestions as to how he looks. Through the description of his behaviour regarding a certain issue, readers are given space to imagine John's appearance.

The third way is leave the description blank, which is commonly used in the story. For example, the appearance, age and gender of the neighbours A-F is not mentioned. This is because the primary importance of these characters was to show that different people may have different responses and reactions towards Leslie's gifts. The focus therefore was on describing their behaviour and reactions, rather than describing their characteristics.

Minor Characters

The minor characters are also very important in the story. These include the black fairy cats, Charcoal and Ghana. They talk like humans, and are as smart as 10-year-old kids, however they routinely complain about the protagonists. This creates moments of conflict between the pets and the masters (cats and humans), which provides frequent

comical elements to the story. Such clashes and between minor and major characters are regularly employed in fantasy literature to drive the narrative forward.

In *Gulliver's Travel* (1726) by Jonathan Swift, for example, when the protagonist Lemuel Gulliver arrives in Lilliput, the miniature people's kingdom, he automatically becomes the "man mountain". Gulliver conflicts with the Lilliputians due to their vast difference in size, which is the driving force of the narrative. Later when the King set eight articles with Gulliver, when Gulliver has an interview with Reldresal, when he urinating on the fire of the palace, all these scenes based on the background setting of the story, which is the origin of fantasy of it. The nature of Gulliver is that he is a giant to the miniature people. The Lilliputians want to make use of his power to defend the country, but they have to find ways to satisfy the wants and food of Gulliver. The role of the Lilliputians is quite similar to that of that of the fairy cats Charcoal and Ghana in my creative work. The Lilliputians are comparatively weaker than Gulliver. However, Gulliver needs to food provided by the miniatures. Likewise in my creative work, Charcoal and Ghana are cats, privately they are fairy cats who can talk. But publicly they have to imitate a normal cat. Besides, on the one hand they help the protagonists Leslie and Lung to complete their Santa course, on the other hand, the cats know more about "fairyship" than the men. So sometimes the author can make use of the balance of power between the characters to develop the plot of the story.

The use of personification to create non-human characters, as is used to create the characters Charcoal and Ghana, is very common in fantasy novels. In *The Fir Tree* (Andersen, 1844), another fantasy novel based on Christmas, the fir tree is the main protagonist of the story.

The fir tree in the story has its own will, its own ideas, and its own characters. At the end of the story, the fir tree regretted that it didn't treasure the days in the wood. Regret is a complicated human emotion and this helped to personify the fir tree in the story. In my narrative, Charcoal, the fairy cat, has his own dignity. Dignity is as complicated a human emotion as regret. Charcoal asked Leslie not to treat her as a pet, but as a peer. She suggested to Leslie that they should support each other:

"Don't treat me as a pet," Charcoal says, "I am your peer. We are supporting each other. You have to learn to be a Santa Claus. I have to learn to be a human."

8. Themes

The novel as an expression of the author's opinions

Literary works are quite often used to convey the opinion of the author, and this is especially true with fantasy literature. The author can invent a fantasy world as a metaphor for the real world, and in doing so is able to provide a social or political critique. For example, in *Gulliver's Travel* (1726), Swift was commenting on the political environment and social ideology of Europe at that time. Grivil (2001) suggests that Part 1 of *Gulliver's Travel* "presents a detailed political allegory of the reigns of Queen Anne and George I of England" (p.10). Sewell (1999) also suggests that many of the leading characters in the story correspond with those from real life. For example, King George I is similar to Emperor of Lilliput; both enjoyed music and military parades. Moreover, the Whigs in the English parliament are referred to as Slamecksan in the novel, whereas the Tories are referred to as Tramecksan. It is clear

that Swift expressed his opinion towards the royal family and the politics of the day through the activities of the characters in the story.

Santa Course also provides metaphorical comments on society. In one scene, for example, Laura meets Lung at the service station. Laura takes the wrong bus, and ends up at Luoyang City, instead of Luoyang Street. Here, I wanted to highlight the fact that in China many street and places names are similar. Cities such as Luoyang, Chengdu and Zhongshan, are also used as street names in other cities. There is Zhongshan Road in Beijing, Chengdu Road in Luoyang, and Beijing Road in Chengdu. I am not trying to make a complaint about this confusion, but to make readers aware of the truth behind the depiction of Laura's experience. Another character, Dr. Han, makes a similar comment. He states that it is also common to find Edinburgh Street, Albert Street and Queen Street in Britain's ex-colonies. It is very confusing that we have seven Albert Streets and six Queen Streets in Auckland. My personal experience is expressed through Dr. Han's opinion. Hence, literary works can be employed as a medium to express the feelings, experiences or opinions of the author, such as my use of the experience of a created protagonist Laura, to express my experiences of China.

Another issue that the readers experience through the character Laura, is that sometimes the truth may not be as romantic and exotic as one thinks. Laura loves Anton Chekhov and as a result, she wants to visit Sakhalin to experience the place which affected Chekhov's creative works. However when she arrives Sakhalin, she finds that it was not as romantic and exotic as she thought. She is very disappointed and leaves soon after. This somehow reflects my own reading experience. The first work of Haruki Murakami I read was *Norwegian Wood* (1987). In the story, the protagonist Naoko, an emotionally fragile girl, stays in the mental health retreat asylum, after her boyfriend Kizuki commits suicide. Under Murakami's descriptions, the life in the

mental health asylum is carefree and romantic. I was deeply impressed by the descriptions in the book, that I chose to work in such asylum in Auckland. However, I eventually found that residential mental health centre is not as attractive and romantic as in *Norwegian Wood*. This inspired me to create Laura's journey and experience in Sakhalin, which was not as attractive and romantic as Laura expected.

Another underlying idea, that I want to convey in my novel, is that fairies are not almighty. Their magic powers are constrained under certain rules and regulations. For example, fairies cannot make money. Making money without good cause can lead to inflation. However, fairies are able to manipulate sports games and bet on the results, so they can win money from gambling. Nevertheless, ninetyfive percent of their earnings from gambling must be donated to charity. The idea I would like to convey here is if fairies are allowed to print bank notes, fairies may be greedy and squander. Hence, Leslie and Lung, the fairy trainees have to work every day, like humans, to earn money.

9. Conclusion

During the creative writing course, I intentionally and purposefully read and watched many fantasy works by other people about life after death, demons and angels, fantastical voyages and supernatural powers to develop a rich sense of the genre and enrich my creative ideas. Through classes, personal reading and mentorship, I developed many skills and techniques in creative writing. The most important thing is that these skills and techniques, not only help me in writing the creative project as my

dissertation for the Master of Creative Writing course, but also help me to do creative work in future.

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Creative work in part fulfillment of degree of MCW

Chi Tat Cheung

AUT University

2011 cohort

In the cabin of TH928, many passengers are waiting to land. Some sip a drink of water or juice, some are still watching movies, some are playing video games, and some sit still waiting to land. Flight attendants are walking along the aisle to see if anyone needs help.

The flight is from Vancouver, Canada to Auckland, New Zealand. After resting for a couple of hours, some passengers feel more tired than before. Suddenly, the screen of the TV pauses. There is a flight announcement.

“Good morning passengers. This is your captain speaking. First I'd like to thank everyone for travelling with Air White Hart TH928. We are currently cruising at an altitude of 9,000 meters at an airspeed of 600 kilometres per hour. The local time at our destination is 11:14 am. The weather looks good and with the tailwind on our side we are expecting to land in Auckland International Airport in approximately 20 minutes. The weather in Auckland is clear and sunny, with a high of 23 degrees for this afternoon. If the weather cooperates we should get a great view of the city as we descend. Please sit back, relax and enjoy the rest of the flight.”

“Mom,” an eight year old boy says, “Is it Christmas today?”

“No, honey,” the mom says. “We took the flight on Christmas Eve. We flew forward to another time zone. Now it is Boxing Day today. Daddy in Vancouver is having Christmas Day.”

“So Santa Claus will not come today?” The boy asks, sounding disappointed.

She does not know how to answer. She gives a smile.

At last the flight lands. “Ladies and gentlemen.” The voice broadcasts again.

“Welcome to Auckland. Thank you for flying on board with Air White Hart.

Unfortunately we are on a flight that made us skip Christmas. Our crew members have prepared a little gift for you. Please accept it when boarding off. Merry Christmas.”

When it parks at the terminal, passengers leave the cabin one by one. Leslie, the captain, is dressed as Santa Claus and distributing small gift boxes to every passenger.

“I know, I know.” The eight-year-old boy jumps and says, “You are not Santa Claus. You must be the captain. There is no such thing as Santa Claus.”

“You are right, I am not Santa. There is no Santa really,” Leslie says. “But I am happy to take on his role. Do you want a chocolate bar or a writing pad cube?”

“Chocolate!” He screams. “Can I?” He turns to his mom and asks.

The mom gives smiling approval. The boy takes a chocolate bar from Leslie. The mom nods her head and gives a smile to Leslie. She takes a little gift and leaves the cabin with her son.

“I am the last one to leave the plane. I am going to transit to Hamilton.” An elderly lady holding a small hand carry bag asks Leslie, “Will I be late?”

“No, you won’t be late. But the last one off the plane must clean it.” Leslie makes fun of the old woman.

“Oh you naughty, naughty boy.” The old woman uses a water bottle to hit Leslie’s

arm.

Then the old woman steps out from the flight. Leslie looks at the first officer with a smile.

The crew members leave customs with their own luggage. Leslie walks alongside with the first officer John.

“Leslie. Leslie.” A female voice says from behind him. It is Stacey, one of the flight attendants. “Mmm..., are you free tonight?”

“Not tonight.”

“Oh, when then?”

“Sorry Stacey. As I’ve said before. Jack’s uncomfortable with a woman he doesn’t know.”

“I’m not really a stranger, I have met Jack.”

“You know what I mean.”

She paused.

“Is it really about Jack?” she says, “or is it me?”

Leslie stops and put his hands on Stacey’s shoulder and says, “Stacey. You’re a good colleague. But both I and Jack are not ready to have a new member in our family.’

Leslie touches Stacey on the shoulders for a moment, then turns and leaves.

“You know what?” Stacey talks to Leslie at the back, “You are not a qualified dad.

You shouldn't tell a kid you are not Santa. You should undergo a Santa training

course!” She is jealous, and Leslie does not response.

“So how long have you been working for this company?” John asks.

“Twelve years this December,” Leslie says.

“Are you insane? How many girls have you rejected?” John asks.

“What do you expect? I’m a married man. We’ve got a son.”

“You can have fun with them even if you are not going to start a relationship.” John says. “You know? Have fun,” he says in a low voice.

“That’s why you are still single at the age of 35,” Leslie says disdainfully.

“You are wasting the planet’s resources. You rejected more than ten colleagues in twelve years.”

“Not that many.”

“But close.” John says.

“I just don’t want to be as casual as you.”

“I can see a halo above your head.”

“Keep it. Bye.”

“See ya,” John said. Then they go in different directions.

Leslie waves down a taxi and jumps into it. “Causeway Avenue, Darlington, please.”

The taxi uses State Highway 20. There are some small houses under the big trees along the road. Some workers are digging the road next to the highway. Soon SH 20 joins SH 1. Darlington is a quiet and cosy suburb near One Tree Hill.

Leslie arrives at his home at Causeway Avenue. He gets out of the taxi with his luggage. He lives in an independent house of two levels, four bedrooms, with its own yard. When he opens the door, his son Jack is reading "*Wuthering Heights*" on the sofa.

"Daddy!" Jack puts down the book and runs to give Leslie a big hug.

"Hello, dear. Did you miss me?"

"I missed you, Daddy. I was good while you were away. Auntie Adrienne prepared meals for me and I washed the dishes by myself," Jack says.

"Good boy." Leslie pats Jack's head. He walks upstairs to his bedroom, with one hand holding his luggage and one hand on Jack's shoulder.

"And I did not watch TV while you were away," Jack says, and he shows Leslie the book in his hand. "Look, I am currently reading *Wuthering Heights*."

"It is a good book."

"And I was elected as the captain of the badminton team. I am responsible for distributing and collecting the racquets and shuttlecocks." Jack says.

"Good on you. You have a wonderful life while dad is away," Leslie says while hanging up his jacket and unpacking the dirty clothes from his suitcase to the laundry basket.

"Do I deserve a Transformer?" Jack asks, with a little bit shy.

"Why?" Leslie asks.

“Because I was good.”

“Jack, don’t be proud. You be good because you should, not so you can get a Transformer.” Leslie gets changed.

“Why? Santa Claus would award Christmas gifts to good children. Why can’t I get my award from you?”

“I will buy you a Transformer or a new toy whenever I think it is an appropriate time, not now,” Leslie says. “And you shouldn’t see toys as a reward of being good. Keep trying hard. I will buy you a new toy one day.”

It is a cool winter evening. Jack had got changed into his pyjamas. Leslie is preparing to put Jack to bed.

“Dad,” asks Jack, “Can we ask Djinni to come over?”

“Djinni?” asks Leslie.

“Yes, Djinni in the story of Aladdin and Princess Badroulbador.”

“Mmm...” Leslie thinks and asks, “What do you want Djinni to do?”

“I want mom to come back,” Jack says.

“I’ve told you many times. Mom had left us and went to a remote place. She won’t come back,” Leslie says. “At least, mmm... not now.”

“Then can I have an elephant as a pet?” Jack asks. “I have been to the pet shop. They don’t have elephants. I know most people keep dogs and cats as pet. But I want an elephant.”

“Don’t be silly. There is no Djinni. Time for bed,” Leslie says.

“What about fairies?” Jack asks, “Are there fairies? Will a fairy comes to us and give us an elephant as a pet?”

“No, dear,” Leslie says, “There is no Djinni. There is no fairy either. Magic only happens in books and stories. We have to rely on ourselves. We should not rely on magic power to help us.”

“Yes, I will work hard. But I don’t know where to buy an elephant. I want Djinni to give me one,” Jack says.

“Think about your own strength. If you are good in school, good at biology, you can become a vet. Then you can work in the zoo, stay with elephants, giraffes and monkeys everyday. Wouldn’t that be good?” Leslie says. “OK, really late. Sweet dreams.” He retreats, turns off the lights and closes the door.

“I think a vet is not a good job. Mrs. Witherspoon said vets have to touch the poo poo of animals everyday,” Jack says to his Teddy, “I am talking about Djinni. Do you believe there is Djinni? I don’t think there is a Djinni. Or a magic rug either. They are stories. But there are tooth fairies. Last year I lost a tooth. I put it in a jar near my pillow. The next day, the tooth disappeared and there was a gift! I got a Transformer scarf! So there must be fairies, at least a tooth fairy.” Jack says, and tucks himself in the bed.

The next day is a weekday and Jack has to go to school. Leslie drives and escorts Jack

there.

“Is mum not going to come back anymore?” Jack asks in the car.

“Yes, she will. She is now seeking her music inspirations somewhere in Africa or Europe. Once she finishes her job, I think she will come back.”

“Will she come back this Christmas?” Jack asks.

“Not sure.”

“Will she come to my birthday party?”

“Not sure. She didn’t say when she will come back. But I believe when she’s back, she will bring us lots of good music,” Leslie says.

Jack does not follow up and ask more questions. He does not know why his mom has left and when she will come back. There is a moment of silence in the car.

The car arrives at school and Leslie stops near the entrance of the school. “I am going to play badminton after school today.” Jack leaves the car and leans on the window and says, “See you at four.”

“Bye, boy,” Leslie says, and then moves off in the car.

Leslie drives back home. At the traffic lights, he sees a couple quarrelling at the corner of the street. The man grabs the woman's wrist and she throws him off.

He thinks of the other day when Laura wanted to go.

Laura was standing outside their house with a handbag on her arm and a backpack and a guitar bag on the floor. She was looking out, waiting for a taxi.

“So you must go, no alternative?” said Leslie.

“I have told you so many times. My songs are repeating. The style, the melody, everything. I feel bored, my producer feels bored, and the singers feel bored. I need some inspiration. I need to go somewhere else.” Laura stressed every time she used the word “need”.

“Then we can go to visit your cousin in Wellington this weekend. Or, Kerikeri, Hawkes Bay, Gisborne, Hamilton, you name it.”

“I want to go to Greenland. Can we?” Laura turned back to Leslie and said.

“Greenland? Why do you want to go to Greenland? There is only Santa Claus,” Leslie said, opening his hands.

“That’s the difference between us. I believe Santa Claus is not necessarily in Greenland. But you learnt from books and believe he is in Greenland or somewhere in the North Pole. That’s the difference. You don’t have imagination but it is what I need for my life.” Laura kept looking out for a taxi.

“But Santa Claus is really in the North Pole,” Leslie said.

“Why can’t he be in somewhere else? Maybe... maybe a Pacific Ocean Island.”

A taxi came and stopped in front of them. The taxi driver came out and helped Laura load her backpack to the car boot.

“Laura. It is very irresponsible to leave us at this moment,” Leslie said.

Laura held the guitar and the handbag and jumped into the taxi.

“I promise I will come back when I finish my music,” Laura leaned out and said.

The taxi started and Leslie watched her go. He looked back and saw the main door was open. Jack was watching.

Someone behind sounds the horn. The traffic lights are green. Leslie comes back from his daydreaming and starts the car. He waves his hand to apologize to the driver at his back.

It is evening. The curtains of the Florence family are closed. But still the lights of the living room are on. Leslie and Jack are playing chess. “Mmm...” Jack uses his hand to support his cheek. “Checkmate.” He makes a move and presses the countdown clock.

The father looks at the board, he scowls.

“Yeah, I win!” Jack claps his hands and jumps up.

“Alright, alright. You are improving,” Leslie says. “Jackie is such a good player. But good players still have to sleep. If you do not have enough sleep, your head will turn silly tomorrow.”

“Ok.” Jack throws the chess into the bag and folds the board.

While Jack goes to bed, Leslie decides to clear the rubbish bins. He wears a hat, gloves and a big wool jumper and goes outside to clear the trash. When he goes back

to his house, an odd thing happens, the door is locked. He tries to knock on the door but no one answers. “Jack! Jack!” He calls, but still no one answer. How weird! He must be at home. How come he does not open the door for me? Leslie thinks.

Leslie walks around the house. It is chilling. He must find a way to go back inside as soon as possible. All the windows are covered by the curtains and closed except one in the upper floor. Leslie thinks maybe he could try to enter the house by breaking himself in through that window.

He uses the trash bin as a stepping stone. He is able to reach the rim of the window upstairs. He bends his forearm to lift up his body. Eventually he is able to climb into the corridor on the upper floor. He is amazed by what he sees.

Nobody is in the master bedroom. More accurately, nothing is inside the master bedroom. The same thing applies to Jack’s bedroom and the guest room. The whole upstairs house is empty. Nobody and nothing is there.

He goes down stairs at once. There is nothing there as well. All fixtures and whiteware have disappeared. This is my house, definitely. But why has everything disappeared? Where have they gone? Did I go into a wrong house? He thought.

He is shocked by what he saw. Oh gosh! What has happened? He goes out the house immediately. Yes this is my house but there is nothing inside. Leslie stares at the house, opens his mouth but can't find a word.

Leslie tried to recall what happened. “I left the house to dump the trash. I knocked

on the door and the windows. I climbed up into the house. Altogether I had only left the house for about seven to ten minutes. Even if some burglars came in the back door and removed everything, they could not remove everything in the house in that short period of time. Oh my God, it is as though the whole house has been abducted by aliens.”

While Leslie is still puzzled about what happened, he finds there is something on the floor of the hall, a booklet. Oh, it is a passport. In the passport there are some air tickets and a note. The note says, “Leslie Florence died. Now you are Donny Ngonflik. 12/25 Diciembre Ave, Phiphidhaii”. What happened? The Aliens have left me a passport! The name is Donny Ngonflik! Hold on a sec. I am... Donny Ngonflik?

He squats in the hall and looks at the passport. He still can’t understand what happened. How come everything has disappeared? How come there is a passport and air ticket to a place he has no idea about? How come there is a Whantanu passport with his picture but not his name?

Someone rings the bell.

It is raining heavily outside. Who is ringing the bell? He opens the door. There is a big man in the door. He is almost 6 feet 2-3 inches tall, as big as a boxer. He is a bald-headed African. He is wearing a long black leather coat. Amazingly, his body is not wet in the rain.

Leslie is astonished by the scene. “Listen, Les,” The man says, “Oh yes, now you are no longer Leslie Florence. You are Donny Ngonflik.”

“What happened?” Leslie asks, “Who are you?”

“Call me Trinity,” the man says. “I know you can’t figure out what happened now. I came here to help you solve your problems.”

“So... so where is Jack? Where is my home?”

“Do you have any idea?”

“They are not here, definitely,” Leslie says.

“Anything else you can tell me about what happened?”

“All the furniture is not here.”

“Good observation. Usually what happens to a house if the occupants and the furniture are not in the house?”

“They...,” Leslie pauses and says, “They moved out?”

“Good inference,” Trinity said. “If I say your family have moved out, what do you think?”

“How come the whole house can move out in ten minutes? I went out to clear the trash bin. When I came back, the door was locked. When I sneaked into the house, everything was gone!”

“You think you had just been gone for ten minutes?”

“Wasn’t it?”

“See what you have in your hands.”

Leslie checks what he has. Passport, air tickets, some petty cash, a note..., oh, there is an A5 size leaflet. “Sale! Sale! Sale! Owner out of town!” The heading said. Below is his house.

“My house is on sale? Jack has moved overseas? What happened?”

“Read it carefully,” Trinity says.

“What?” Leslie says. “Open home: 2-3p.m. this Saturday, 17th January? This Saturday is 17th January?” He stares at the leaflet.

“Yes it is.”

“But... When I left home to empty the trash bin... it was December!”

“So, three weeks has gone.”

“Wait, wait a minute.” Leslie asks, “I left home in December. I spent a few minutes outside and then came back home, but now it is January?”

“Time is just an arbitrary and abstract concept,” Trinity says. From the source of light outside the window, Leslie doubts if several days have passed – he has seen the sunrise and sunset a few times when Trinity was talking.

“So, I spent three weeks outside?”

“No, you spent three weeks in the earth.”

“Three weeks in the earth?”

“Read this,” Trinity passes a newspaper clipping to Leslie.

“Man killed by car when clearing rubbish on the road,” the news headline said.

“I, I was hit by a car?”

“Three weeks ago, you were pushing the rubbish bin onto the kerb of the road. The wheels of the bin hit a rock and it fell on to the ground. The rubbish bags came out from the bin. You tried to pick them up. Unfortunately you were hit by a car.”

Leslie stares at the newspaper and cannot speak.

“So my friend,” Trinity says, “I must admit the truth, you are dead.”

“No, no, it mustn’t be true,” Leslie says, “You are lying.”

“Listen to me, you are dead.” Trinity says, “The Selection Board thinks you are the right candidate to take up the role. Hence we grant you a new body and new identity. You are now Donny Ngonflik. You have been selected to take up the role.”

“Where is Jack?” Leslie asks desperately.

“It doesn’t matter to you anymore.”

“Does Adrienne look after him?” Leslie asks.

“No idea. They are redcliffe. I am only responsible for fairies.”

“What? Redcliffe?” Leslie asks.

“A collective noun to describe people who don’t know magic.”

“Oh, my God. I don’t get it. I died, and Jack moved out?”

“That’s the simple truth,” Trinity said. “What you have to do next is, pick up the new passport and air ticket, go to Whantanu, and take up the job offered by the Selection

Board.”

“You want me to take up a new job? I am dead. I am a dead person. Why do I have to take up a new job?” Leslie roars.

“Not exactly,” Trinity said calmly. “Leslie died. Now you are Donny. The Selection Board has a job for Donny.”

“Come on,” Leslie said. “What kind of Selection Board are you?”

“The Santa Claus Selection Board,” Trinity said. “You are the next Santa Claus.”

“What the hell?” Leslie yells, “Do you think I am a six-year-old kid? I am 42 years old already. Santa Claus? Please! I just want my family back.”

“If you want to see your family members, listen to me,” Trinity says. “Take up the job. It will bring you to see them.”

“You kidnapped them,” Leslie stares at Trinity.

“No.”

“You abducted them,” Leslie says. “You did.”

“No.”

“You said I can see them if I take up the job. You are extorting from me.” Leslie says angrily, pointing to Trinity.

“No, no, you misunderstood me,” Trinity says. “Even if you could go to see them now, they would not recognize you. You are Donny, not Leslie.”

“JUST TAKE ME TO SEE THEM. NOW!” Leslie says.

“As you wish,” Trinity says. “Bring along your air tickets and passport. You will need them later.”

They leave the house and jump into Trinity’s car. They go to see Laura and Jack.

“You know what? You are now Donny, not Leslie,” Trinity tells Leslie in the car.

“They cannot recognize you. So, what’s the point?”

“You don’t understand,” says Leslie.

“Listen. That is the rule,” Trinity says. “You died, you are selected as the successor of Santa Claus. Now we have granted you another identity and body. You are now a new person. No one knows you. No one recognizes you. You are not allowed to prove your identity. You cannot do that either.”

Leslie looks at the world outside. He does not listen to Trinity.

“You will regret seeing your family,” Trinity says.

“Give me a break. Stop bullshitting,” Leslie says.

They arrive at a house in a peaceful and cosy community. Trinity stops, and says,

“Here we are.”

“No,” Leslie says, “You stay here. You are not welcome.”

“Alright,” Trinity says, “Your choice.”

Leslie goes up to the door and knocks. Adrienne answers the door. “Hi,” she says,

“Who are you looking for?”

Leslie holds her hands and says, “It’s me! Leslie.”

Adrienne withdraws her hands and steps back. “Sorry, I am afraid have you got the wrong place.” Then she bangs the door shut.

“Adrienne! Jack! I am Leslie. They...” Suddenly Leslie feels very uncomfortable. He cramps, he holds his neck and cannot speak. He kneels down and sits on the ground slowly.

Trinity leaves the car and walks slowly to Leslie. He stares at Leslie, and gives a hand to him.

“Come on, my friend. I told you,” Trinity says, “You cannot tell her the truth.”

Leslie is still sitting on the ground, but is feeling better now. He coughs, and then tries to lean on the door and stands.

“Don’t stay here. She is watching you through the security eye. Don’t go in the door. She is going to call the police soon. Come on, let’s go,” Trinity says.

Leslie gives Trinity an unfriendly stare. “Go where?”

“Training camp,” Trinity said, “Santa Claus training camp in Whantanu.”

Everything seems, if not fated, at least precisely planned. Leslie spends a night with Trinity. They talk about the training camp, and the flight to Whantanu is just the morning after.

When Trinity brings Leslie to the airport, he finds himself to be an odd passenger – he has no luggage, not even a handbag.

“Wait, Trinity,” he bows his head to the driver’s window and says, “I am going to take a long flight to the Pacific Ocean. Should I carry some luggage?”

“Ah, yes,” Trinity says. “Your uniform will be provided when you arrive at the camp. But here is some luggage for you.”

Trinity unlocks the boot. He waves to Leslie to see.

Leslie opens the boot. He sees a big red bag inside.

Trinity gets out from the car. “Do you like it?” he says.

“You really treat me as Santa Claus.”

“Come on Father,” Trinity says. “Enjoy your trip.”

Leslie opens the bag. There are lots of wrapped gifts inside.

“Oh my,” Leslie says. “I shouldn’t have asked for luggage. Hey, I can go without luggage. I, I can.”

“No, you can’t,” Trinity says, “You are Santa Claus. This is your luggage. You have no choice.”

Leslie puts his hands on his waist and looks at Trinity.

Trinity goes to the baggage counter to check in the big red bag with Leslie. “Excuse me sir,” the customer service agent asks, “How do you pronounce and spell your name?”

“Donny uh,” Leslie replies. He can’t remember his new name.

“Ng-on-f-lik”, Trinity speaks slowly, syllable by syllable, “N-G-O-N-F-L-I-K. He is

so nervous. That is the first time he has flown. Forgive him.”

The customer service agent helps Leslie to check his bags in.

“I have to go,” Trinity says.” Our colleagues there will escort you. Enjoy your training.”

Leslie looks at Trinity helplessly.

Leslie picks up his passport, looks at the picture and his name.

“Donny Ngonflik. New Zealand Whantantuan. Wonderful,” he says.

Leslie is sitting in the economy class. The flight is going to land soon. The flight attendants are checking that every passenger has fastened their seat belt.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen,” a voice comes from the flight system. “This is your captain Chris Todd. Welcome on board with Air Whantanu. We will land at Dhandhanuui International Airport soon. The temperature is 27 degrees Celsius. To make sure of your safety, please stay in your own seat and stay buckled up until you are told to release. We wish you all the best for the rest of your journey.”

“But you have forgotten to tell us how long it will take to land,” Leslie murmurs.

“And the local time as well. Amateur.”

After a twenty-hour transit flight from Auckland to Dhandhanuui International Airport, Leslie is really exhausted. He has nothing but the big red bag on the trolley. He pushes the trolley out to the arrival hall. He expects someone to pick him up and take

him to the “training camp”.

However, he has been sitting by the trolley for almost an hour. No one comes to escort him. In order to pass time, he tries to read the free magazines from the booth of the Whantanuan tourism bureau. They show him what this Pacific Ocean Island country looks like. Now Leslie knows that there are many nice beaches in Whantanu. This country consists of 255 islands. But only 25 of them have regular habitants. Many (Leslie can’t remember how many) of them are holiday resorts for kayaking, snorkeling, windsurfing and other water sports. Leslie can’t concentrate on reading every article because he is still puzzling about what’s happening. He is still thinking about what happened approximately one and a half days ago. He can’t understand why and how he has been knocked down by a car and why he has been selected to be the successor of Santa Claus.

He can’t read because he can’t concentrate. He closes his magazine and puts it back on the shelf in the office. He looks at what he has: an address card and some Whantanuan money. “Shall I take a taxi to this place?” Leslie thinks.

He pushes the trolley out of the arrival hall. He waves to a taxi. When he tries to lift up his big red bag into the boot of the taxi, he sees a middle-aged woman with a cigarette approaching him quickly.

“Hey! Hey! Wait!” The woman says, “Are you Donny Ngonflik?”

Leslie shows a question mark on his face.

“Angel,” The woman says, and throws away her cigarette, “I am Angel L’atuff. I am responsible for looking after you.”

“Are you sure?” Leslie asks, “So you know Trinity?”

“I know who you are, from your big red bag,” Angel says. “Trinity asked me to look after you,” Angel says in a secretive tone.

“But don’t call me Donny,” says Leslie. “It only appears in the passport, call me Leslie.” Leslie is slightly amazed. “Are we going to live together?”

“No, no, no, no,” Angel says. “I am a dentist. I have my own house. I live at No. 11. You live at No.12. We live in the same block of units.” Angel helps Leslie to close the boot. They hop into a taxi.

“Let’s go to my place first. Later I will tell you more,” Angel tells Leslie in the taxi.

“Ferry pier please,” she tells the driver.

They go to the ferry pier. Angel goes to the box office to buy tickets. Leslie looks at her. She said she was 45 years old. Her skin is so wrinkled it makes her look even older, perhaps 60. Her hair is dark and a little bit curly. Leslie thinks her hair condition is very unhealthy and poor. She is in a black blouse and black trousers. She wears heavy makeup, strong eye-liner and eyebrows. She smokes. Leslie thinks Angel looks more like a witch. You look like the witch in *Snow White*. Don’t offer me an apple, please. Your apples are poisoned, he thinks.

Leslie and Angel remain silent on the ferry.

“You are a dentist. How can a dentist help me to be Santa Claus?” Leslie asks.

“Don’t tell anybody,” Angel says. “I used to be a fairy before I retired.”

“You were a fairy?” Leslie really can’t believe his ears.

“Listen, keep it secret. I used to be the tooth fairy when I was young.”

“Tooth fairy?” Leslie stares at Angel. “Serious? Tooth fairy!” Leslie raises his voice.

“Shhhhh...” Angel says, “We are not allowed to disclose our identity after retirement.”

“What? You retired from being a tooth fairy and then became a dentist?”

“Yes, that’s all I can do.” Angel says. “I have experience dealing with teeth so I chose to be a dentist when I retired.”

Leslie looks at her: he can’t believe it.

“What? I have a dentist license. You think I am illegal?” Angel says.

“So what do you expect me to do after I retire from the job of Santa Claus?” Leslie asks.

“Usually Santa Claus is an old man. So you may retire when you are 65 or even 70,” Angel says. “By that time you will be completely and genuinely retired. Then you don’t have to look for a job. How great!” Angel continued. Leslie seemed to be listening to her, but his face was dull and sluggish.

“Look at me. No adult tooth fairy. I retired at 14! I had to apply for high school and then university after retirement, simply because tooth fairies retire before adulthood. How lucky you are! You are Santa Claus. The older you are the more popular you

are.”

“Did your classmates know that you were a retired fairy?” Leslie asks.

“I am not sure but I think someone may know I was different,” Angel says. “You know what? I worked as a tooth fairy for about 100 years. But fairies grow slower than redcliffes. I really looked like a teenager when I retired. However, I think sometimes I talked and acted so old-fashioned. Sometimes like their granny. They really called me granny. Do I look old? I am still pretty. I think I look like 30 something now.” Angel carries herself as if very proud of her appearance.

What? Are you kidding me? 30? 30 years ago you looked like 30, Leslie thinks.

“Don’t challenge me.” Angel uses telepathy to talk to Leslie. “I know what you are thinking.”

“What?” Leslie is astonished. He never expected someone could read his mind. He nearly falls off the chair.

“This is one of our skills,” Angel says. “I will teach you later”.

Eventually the ferry arrives at Phiphidhaii Island. When Angel walks out from the pier to the car park, she waves to a plump man who seems to be waiting for her.

“Wait.” Leslie puts a hand on Angel’s shoulder and stops her. “Who is he? Peter Pan?”

“Don’t be silly. He is Mark,” Angel says. “He is not a wizard or fairy. He is my patient. He is here to escort us to our place.”

“Hey, Mark.” Angel approaches him and says, “This is Leslie. Hey Leslie, this is

Mark.”

“Hi Leslie, welcome to Whantanu.” Mark shakes hands with Leslie. Leslie replies with a smile. “Come on in.” Mark opens the door for them.

“I have rented a place for you.” Angel tells Leslie. “You live next to me. Please feel free to come to my place whenever you need help.”

“Your cousin is really very nice.” Mark looks at the mirror and says, “She is really a helpful and cheerful person.”

“Cousin?” Leslie looks at Angel.

“I promised Auntie Robyne I would look after you, didn’t I?”

Leslie knows what she means. He has no way out, except to look at the window outside.

He can see the landscape outside, it should be very beautiful, but at this stage he can’t appreciate it. The traffic is not busy. Quite often there are motorcycles on the road. Small, single or two-level houses are sparsely distributed. Some small shops are located on both sides of the main road. In front of some shops, he can see half-naked men lying on hammocks. He sometimes can see some children helping their parents with the chores of the grocery store. An old woman is eating watermelon.

Leslie was in Samoa approximately six to seven years ago. The environment there is quite similar to Whantanu today. Whantanuans seem relaxed, backward and quiet.

Mark and Angel accompany Leslie to his place. Not bad, all fixtures and whiteware

are included. However, thinking about starting a completely new life in a completely new place, Leslie feels kind of puzzled.

“Thank you very much, you are so lovely, Mark,” Angel says.

“De nada,” Mark says, “I have to go then. Enjoy.” He leaves.

“So, no matter if you agree or not, the Santa Claus training will start now,” Angel says.

“I know you are very uncomfortable at the moment. I understand. Hrrr... You have to face it.”

Leslie looks at his place, everything, without saying a word.

“So, don’t you like your place?” Angel asks.

“No, I don’t like this place. I don’t like this country. I don’t like this identity.”

“Well. At the very beginning when I was selected as tooth fairy, I was very unhappy too. I died when I was twelve. I was just a school girl. To be the tooth fairy?

What do you expect? My feeling was like yours now.”

“Why me? Do I look like a Santa Claus?”

“Somehow you do,” Angel says. “You are a really good pilot. You are very familiar with the world map.”

“Hundreds of geography teachers are familiar with the world map. Why not them?”

“Fate.” She says, “Fate is something beyond what we can explain and control.”

Leslie does not know how to respond. Fate.

“Alright, the first task of day one: tell your neighbours you are a newcomer. Give

them a gift each from your big red bag,” Angel says.

“What?” Leslie turns around and stares at Angel.

“Come on. You have to be a Santa Claus by next December. You have to learn how to distribute gifts.”

“I don’t know them,” Leslie says. “It’s crazy to give a gift to somebody you don’t know.”

“This is your business,” Angel says. “Remember, once you finish your course, you will become a genuine Santa Claus. Then we can arrange for you to see your family once.”

“Stop bullshitting,” Leslie says, “I have seen Adrienne, she couldn’t recognize me. I am Donny, not Leslie. What’s the point?”

“No, not exactly,” Angel says. “Didn’t Trinity tell you about the reward for being Santa Claus? He is so naughty. He should have told you that.”

“Huh?”

“Once you complete the course, the organization will let you meet your family members, once and only once,” Angel says.

“In my own identity?” Leslie says.

“Your kid will be happy to see you again. I promise,” Angel says. “But you have to follow my instructions during the training period.”

“You want me to be a helping hand in your clinic?” Leslie asks.

“Don’t be silly. You are not certificated and registered,” Angel says. “I will assist you

to look for a part-time job. You will receive my training after work. I will tell you how to be a fairy, a Christmas fairy.”

“So, to be Santa Claus is to distribute all the gifts I have? And you guys will allow me to see Jack?” Leslie asks.

“It seems you are brimming with confidence to do the job! Not bad!” Angel says.

“So, I just have to give somebody some gifts, how difficult is that?” Leslie says.

“Everytime I was on duty on the Christmas holidays, I gave gifts on behalf of the airline.”

Angel smiles.

“Hello, my name is Leslie. I am your neighbour. I just arrived in this place not long ago. Here is a small gift for you,” Leslie says with a nice friendly smile.

“So you are Telestars? Your staff came here yesterday evening. We use Phone World.” An old woman answers the door.

“Sorry? Telestars?” Leslie asks.

“Anyway, we don’t like salespeople. Sorry. Thank you.” Then the old woman closes the door.

“Hello, my name is Leslie. I am your neighbour. I just arrived in this place not long ago. Here is a small gift for you.” Leslie goes to the next door and says with a nice

friendly smile.

“Oh oh, you are so lovely,” a voice says behind a locked gate. “Thank you so much.

Please put it on the ground. Thank you.”

Leslie feels so pissed off. He puts down a gift box and then goes.

“If it is just a free perfume sample or a jack-in-the-box please keep it.” Neighbour A says.

“No, thanks, anyway, nice to meet you,” neighbour B says.

“Oh you are so nice. The Lord of Whantanu always encourages us to help our neighbourhood. Last time a cop came to us and introduced the neighbour watch concept to us,” neighbour C says.

“My son is not here at the moment,” neighbour D says. “Usually he is responsible for such things. Do you mind coming back in the evening when he will be here?”

“Oh great!” Neighbour E screams in delight and puts her hand to her head, “I won! I won! I won! The horoscope said I am fated to win a special prize this week! It has really happened! Wow!”

“Mmm... You are not in uniform,” says neighbour F. “Can I see your ID card or do you have a hotline number for me to call your supervisor?”

“The government is responsible to protect our safety and properties. However, sometimes neighbourhood watching is needed. It helps the police to look after the

suburb,” neighbour C says.

“My son is working as a special education school teacher. He will come back at five.

Do you want to come back at five?” neighbour D says.

“I won a special gift! From my neighbour, from my neighbour,” E sings happily.

“Yor-nay-Bar?” F said, “Haven’t heard about such company. Is it a food bar?

Chicken and chips? Come on, show me your menu,” F said.

“You know what special education schools do? Some children have learning problems.

My son said there is a six-year-old child. He can’t talk. He can only say ‘Do do’ and

‘Da da’. What a shame?” D says.

Leslie is puzzled and perplexed. He opens his mouth but cannot speak.

Eventually Leslie finishes distributing the gifts to his neighbor. He has an empty red

bag in his hand. He is walking slowly back home. His shoulders are down and his

back is bent.

Angel is holding a cup of hot drink, standing beside the front door when Leslie passes

by.

“Oh, great job. Quicker than expected,” Angel says, sips the drink and looks at her

watch. “It is only 9:30. Initially I expected you would not finish until tonight.”

Leslie stares at Angel.

“What? You are Santa Claus, not me!” Angel says in surprise. “It is your duty to

distribute the gifts to everybody.”

“But the people here do not seem at all friendly,” Leslie says with frustration.

“Did they send dogs to bite you?” Angel says.

“Worse than that. Many of them refused to accept the gift. I nearly went through the whole island to empty the bag,” Leslie says.

“That’s why you have to be Santa Claus,” Angel says. “Once you become Santa Claus, people will be friendly and warm to you, I promise.”

“Well. If this exercise is a warm-up for being a Santa Claus, you win,” Leslie says.

“Now I know it is not easy to distribute gifts. I know more about this suburb, as well as Whantanu.”

“We are on Phiphidhahi Island.”

“I don’t care. I am tired and hungry. Where can I find a restaurant? Is there something like fish and chips or a Chinese smorgasbord nearby?” Leslie says.

“Alright, you are on Diciembre Avenue, turn right to Filbert Street, walk towards the park. There are some takeaways near the park,” Angel says.

Leslie puts down the red bag and wants to go.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Angel says. She goes back home and puts down the drink. When she comes out again, she brings a little black kitten in her hands.

“This is your kitty,” Angel says. She puts the black kitten on the floor.

“What?” Leslie says in surprise.

“Every fairy has to keep a black cat. You are not an exception,” Angel says.

“I don’t keep cats,” Leslie says.

“You have to, according to the employment contract for fairies,” Angel says. “Keep it, train it, it will be your good friend.”

Leslie holds the black kitten in his hands and looks at it.

“They are not common cats, not ordinary ones,” Angel says. “They understand human languages. They speak what you speak. They are as wise as a ten-year-old human. Train it, be good to it.”

“What the hell?” Leslie says.

The black cat on Leslie’s hands turns to him and says, “Angel said fairies should not use foul language.”

Leslie stares at the cat.

Leslie sits on a small seat in the centre of the lounge. He is watching the little black cat slurping water at the end of the lounge.

“Don’t look at me like that, please,” the little black cat says, and then continues slurping the water.

“I must be dreaming. Darkie talks to me,” Leslie murmurs.

“Darkie? Who is Darkie?” the little black cat says. “Call me Charcoal. My mum calls me Charcoal.”

“So Angel is your mom?” Leslie asks.

“No, she isn’t. She is the master of my mum.”

“Ho ho, I should realize that,” Leslie says. “Every wizard or witch has a black cat. Angel has your mom. I have you.”

“That’s it. You got it,” Charcoal says. “But call yourself a fairy, not a wizard.”

“So what can you do besides talk like human?” Leslie asks.

“What?” Charcoal asks.

“Say, do you fly or swim?”

“Who do you think I am? David Copperfield? Harry Potter?” Charcoal says. “I am only an ordinary cat.”

“Ordinary? Does an ordinary cat talk?” Leslie says.

“Except I talk. Ok?” Charcoal says. “And remember, they said the fairies’ ordinance forbids us to use magic powers to make money. That would promote inflation.”

“Oh, really?” Leslie is unhappy, “Angel said you are just like an eight-year-old boy. You are not. You are as smart as an adult.”

“Ridiculous,” Charcoal says. “How can a cat compare with a human? She said I am a ten-year-old boy simply because I have the same self-care ability as them. Simple as that.”

“So you can take a bath for yourself? Or you are able to take a flight alone?” Leslie is still cross.

“At least I know some magic you don’t know,” Charcoal says, “That’s why we have to

work in partnership.”

“But I think your role is more a representative to monitor my training performance.”

Leslie waves his hands. “Sounds like you are the master and I am the pet.”

“I have been a fairy longer than you,” Charcoal says. “I am now three months old. I have been a fairy cat since I was born.”

“So being a fairy three months longer than I mean you are the master and I am the pet?”

Leslie says. “Then please give me a drink, I am thirsty.”

“A fairy is always supposed to be nice to everyone. No fairy complains,” Charcoal says. “You have to learn how to be a fairy, starting with your attitude.”

“My attitude?” Leslie says. “A cat comments about the attitude of a human?”

“Don’t treat me as a pet,” Charcoal says, “I am your peer. We are supporting each other. You have to learn to be a Santa Claus. I have to learn to be a human.”

“Human what?” Leslie asked. “Are you going to ... to mutate to Cat Woman?”

“The committee board will allow me to be a human in the next life, given that I pass the training with you.”

Leslie sighs.

“Many animals are fairies,” Charcoal says. “They are waiting for a chance to die and reincarnate to become human. Such as pandas and white dolphins. Many of them are fairies. That’s why they are going to become extinct. Their lives are shorter and their reproduction ability is lower so that they can reincarnate into humans as early as

possible.”

Leslie is not interested in fairies, pandas and dolphins. Who cares?

“Come on, let’s start. There is a pile of unanswered letters in the study room. They are all for Santa Claus. Most of them are written by young children. Read all of them. See which ones are true requests. Gather them, throw away the rest. Then write a report to Santa Claus about what children mostly want this Christmas,” Charcoal says.

“Then what? Santa Claus gives Gordon a transformer and Jennifer a Barbie?” Leslie asks.

“Just do what you have to do, don’t ask,” Charcoal says. “I will tell you what to do next.”

Leslie goes to the study room. There are three boxes of letters on the floor.

Leslie sits down, looks at the boxes. He tries to find something that seems easy to start with.

“Oh, Kiwi stamps.” He finds some letters from New Zealand. “Not bad.”

He tries to open the first letter. Reads it carefully.

“This little boy,” Leslie reads the signature, “Simon Reid. He wants his parents to take him to swim in the Caribbean Sea. Should it be considered as a true request?”

“Now you are the assistant to Santa Claus, not me. You make a judgement,” Charcoal says, licking her foot.

“How do I know?” Leslie says.

“Now you are a fairy, not a human,” Charcoal says. “Humans use eyes to read. A fairy uses its heart to read.”

“Heart?”

“Yes, heart.” Charcoal takes a deep breath. “Use your heart to read the letters. You will know who really needs Santa Claus.”

Leslie gently scratches his cheek.

“Go ahead before it is too late,” Charcoal says.

Leslie goes into the study room. He sits down and starts reading the letters again.

He reads one, puts it aside. He reads the second one, and puts it aside as well.

Charcoal goes outside. She walks through the corridor to the uncovered outdoor parking slot. She jumps up to the top of the postbox, and lies down there to enjoy the sunlight.

Time passes. Leslie finishes reading all the letters and files them. He stands up, goes to the kitchen. Great, there is some canned fish in the cupboard. Leslie opens a can and prepares a meal for Charcoal.

He brings the food outdoors. He uses a spoon to make a noise on the plate.

“Charcoal. Charcoal. Dinner time.”

Charcoal appears at the back. “Meow.” She tries to stand on two feet.

“Oh you are a cat, not a fairy.” Leslie says. “You can’t talk.”

Charcoal goes back home.

Leslie follows.

Leslie puts down the dish when he gets home. Charcoal starts eating.

“I have finished reading all the letters,” Leslie says. “How about you? Does the fairy turn back to a normal cat after sunset?”

“We were outdoors, there was somebody else, we were not alone, stupid.” Charcoal stops eating and says, “If I speak, our neighbours will be scared. Then some scientists will take me to the laboratory and check my vocal chords.”

“Oh,” Leslie says.

“You too. Never talk to me in public. Simply consider me as a normal cat, could you? I don’t want people to send you to the mental hospital.”

“Alright, as you say,” Leslie says.

“How’s your findings?” Charcoal asks.

“Well, if you really look carefully, you will find some letters are not genuinely written by kids,” Leslie says with confidence.

“Good, continue,” Charcoal says, and enjoys his dinner.

“For example, someone says he is eight. But he uses some difficult words that he should not know at his age. He must have written his letter with the help of adults.”

“Good,” Charcoal finishes her dinner. She licks her feet.

“The other tricky one is a boy who wants a toy robot. I’ve checked on the internet. It

is \$29.95. I checked his address on the internet. He lives in a five-bedroom house worth \$800,000 in a rich area. I think his parents would be able to buy him one.”

“Perfect,” Angel says. She is standing and listening at the door of Leslie’s home.

“You are really a good assistant for Santa Claus. Come to my place at seven. There will be a monthly meeting with all the fairies in Whantanu. I am going to introduce some new friends to you. Then you will know how to manipulate your imagination to make it come true.”

Leslie goes to Angel’s place at 7:10p.m. There are some guests there already. They are chatting, giggling and drinking.

“Oh, a new boy. You must be the Father-Christmas-to-be,” a short old man with a big belly says. He is wearing a party hat on his head and holding a drink. “Come on in.” He waves his hand to welcome Leslie.

“Ho ho ho! Mr. Santa Claus,” another guest says. She is a middle-aged East Asian woman. She has an empty paper plate in her hand. “My son wants a toy robot this Christmas. Can I jump the queue?” She speaks secretively and then giggles.

“Oh, you are here.” Angel comes out from the kitchen and says, “I thought you were not coming. Come, come.”

“Are they all fairies?” Leslie goes close to Angel and asks quietly.

“Yes, the one with the glasses is a flower fairy. The one with the big belly is the God of the Pacific Ocean. That lady over there is an apple fairy. That guy with the wool hat

is...”

“Ok, ok, ok,” Leslie speaks quietly. “I am quite slow at meeting new people. Give me some time.”

“Alright. If you don’t want to talk to them, stay in the kitchen. You can assist me preparing the food.”

“I prefer to stay in the kitchen,” Leslie says. “So, what’s next?”

“Pass me the flour.”

Leslie turns around. He picks up a box of flour. But the box is empty.

Angel is blending something in a big bowl. She turns around. “Yes, that one, the flour.”

“But there is nothing inside!” Leslie wobbles the box and lifts it up and turns it upside down. He tilts up his head to look into the box. Nothing comes out.

“Oh, no. Don’t be silly. You’ll make yourself dirty!” Angel says. She uses a cloth to wipe Leslie.

“I am fine! What are you doing?” Leslie screams. “There is nothing! There is no flour inside the box!”

“Use your imagination,” Angel says, and she shows Leslie the big bowl. There is nothing inside.

“Imagine what?” Leslie asks. “There is nothing inside your bowl. There is nothing inside the box.”

“If you do not have imagination, you can’t be a fairy,” Angel says.

“Sorry, I don’t.” Leslie opens his palms. “I can’t.” He says. “I can’t help you.” He goes to the lounge to look for a drink.

When he is having a drink on the sofa, all guests are having fun. Leslie usually can enjoy him in a new environment with new friends, but not this time. He tries to look around Angel’s house. The living room is not big, but at least it is sizable for the guests to enjoy themselves. There are eye-level-high bookshelves next to the sofa.

There are many classical literary works. *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo, 1984, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Wuthering Heights.*

Leslie remembers something that happened between him and Jack.

“Dad.” Jack said to Leslie when hiding something behind him. “Do you know how it looks when a snake swallows an elephant?”

“Like what?” Leslie was shaving in front of the mirror in the bathroom. “Big snake?”

“Guess. Use your imagination.”

“I can’t imagine,” Leslie said. “You must have an answer. What are you hiding behind your back?” And he paused shaving.

“Dung dung.” Jack showed his father his drawing. It was an elephant inside a snake.

He used a transparent point of view to see through the snake and display the elephant.

“It is from *Le Petit Prince*,” Jack said. “The author said it looks like a hat. Does it look like a hat?”

“Oh, good boy,” Leslie gets the picture, and he rubs Jack’s head.

Leslie looks at the picture. He looks up at Jack, then back at the picture.

Leslie must admit that he is a person with very little imagination. He feels uneasy about this at this moment. He knows this is a one-way road. He has to be Santa Claus. He can’t go back to become Leslie Florence the pilot.

Laura visits many countries after she leaves Auckland. She has been to Russia, China, India, South Africa, and then South America. She has been to Peru, Colombia, Venezuela. Now she is in Brazil, in a big city called O Rivaldo.

She locates a bar which has live music every night at San Macondo, a little suburb in north O Rivaldo. But the shows begin at eight, it is now seven. Laura wanders around in the busy streets of San Macondo.

To some extent San Macondo is similar to any city in South America. San Paolo is different from Lima. But little suburbs in Peru are the same as those in Brazil. Laura notices there are many interesting small shops. A souvenir shop sells key rings, and postcards are on the shelves next to the front door. Next to the cashier there is an electrical doll doing Samba dancing. Behind the shopkeeper there are T-shirts of many

kinds. There is a map of Brazil; "I love Brazil", scenes of beaches, Samba girls, T-shirts of many kinds.

Next to the souvenir shop she sees there is a Brazilian barbeque restaurant. Dinner time has not started yet. Some patrons are drinking beer. They have their cigarettes burning on the ashtrays. Yes, burning. They are enjoying the beer, not smoking. Laura never smokes. But she knows many musicians and pop singers smoke.

Laura walks aimlessly in the street. Suddenly someone puts a big hat on her head. He is a hawker. He has many hats in his bag.

"Vinte, Vinte," the hawker says.

"Sorry I don't want it." Laura puts down the hat and gives it back to him.

"Vinte, Vinte," the hawker says, and puts a hat on Laura's head again. "Good, good. Vinte, Vinte."

"How much is it?" Laura surrenders.

"Vinte. Do, do-cero." He raised two fingers on one hand and makes an O with the other hand.

"Twenty?" Laura asks.

"Yes, vinte," the hawker says.

Laura takes out her wallet and intends to pay him. She is checking for the best changes of notes for the hawker. She got many hundred dollars notes but she can't find a twenty dollars one. Someone is watching Laura checking her wallet. He

watches her money, he watches her face. He grabs her wallet and runs away.

“Thief!” Laura screams, “He robbed me! Help!” She gives back the hat to the hawker and chases the robber.

The robber runs for several blocks. Laura chases him. The robber runs, she follows.

At last the robber takes out all the money from the wallet and throws it onto the floor.

Laura is exhausted. She squats down to pick up her wallet and checks if the credit cards are still there. Alright then, she thinks, not a great deal of money. Fortunately I get back the wallet.

A car sounds its horn. She looks up. A car is moving towards her.

Everything becomes a beam of bright light. Laura can’t see anything.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Leslie can only see the bright light, and hears some strange sounds. He can’t figure out what is happening and what sound it is.

“Boy. Boy,” A voice calls Leslie.

He wakes up from his daydreaming. There is no more bright light and strange beeping sounds. He is still at the party. “Are you alright?” the old man says.

The old man comes to Leslie and sits beside him. Just like the other guests, this old

man is joyful with a party hat on his head and a plate in his hand, though there is nothing on the plate.

“Laura is in danger! A car is moving towards her!”

“I know what you are thinking. I can read your mind. It’s just a dream,” the old man says, “Sometimes you can dream something really happened. Sometimes your dream is just a dream. Why don’t you enjoy yourself, lad? Let me introduce myself. My name is Austin Flowers. I am the God of Flowers.”

Austin wants to shake hands with Leslie. Leslie unwillingly gives his hand and shakes it with a false smile.

“I can read your mind,” Austin says. “You were daydreaming, oh dear. You miss your wife so much.”

Dreaming? But it looked so real, Leslie thinks.

“You should enjoy this party,” Austin says. “Seldom do all of us gather together. Seldom do all of us have a day off on the same day. We meet once a year. Other times, work, work and work. Being a fairy is a hard job.” Austin looks at Leslie’s face, which is dull without any expression. “Oh sorry. I should not scare you, new boy. You are just a trainee.”

Leslie is still staring at nothing. He just does not want to talk.

“Have a pizza, it is cheese, bacon and mushroom,” Austin says and passes his empty plate to Leslie.

“I hate cheese.” Leslie does not want to explain. He admits that he has no imagination.

He can’t imagine there is a pizza on the plate. “Give me a break.”

“You don’t like cheese? You must be Dutch,” Austin says. “Dutch don’t like cheese.”

“Dutch love cheese,” Leslie argues. “The cheese market in the Netherlands is world famous.” I’ve been to the Netherlands many times. There are many cheese markets, he thinks.

“Yes, I have been there,” Austin says. “There is no cheese in the supermarkets in the Hague. But there are many big flower markets there. You know what? I always go there to help the flowers grow.”

“How come? Have you been to Gouda? Cheese markets are very famous in that city.” Leslie frowns. He really wants this old man to acknowledge that he is right. “You are just a lad. You haven’t been to many places,” Austin says. “I have been to many places in the Netherlands. I have not found cheese in any city. But the farmers grow lots of flowers there! Tulips, lilies, daisies, and roses as well!”

“Yes, I have been to many places in the Netherlands. Flowers are very popular, but the Dutch do love cheese.” Leslie opens wide his eyes.

“Don’t try to argue. Your ignorance is regrettable.”

“I am ignorant? I am a lad?”

“Yes, you are. You are a primary school pupil.”

“I am a pupil? Then who are you?”

“You have never been to the Netherlands. You know nothing about it.”

Leslie gets furious. He smashes the plate in Austin’s face.

“Listen. I am a pilot. I have over one million km flying experience. I have been to the Netherlands many times. Don’t argue with me! I say, The-Dutch-Love-Cheese!”

Leslie screams.

Austin removes the plate from his face. There is pizza on it! Leslie imagines there is a pizza on the empty plate and there it is!

Leslie has made use of his imaginative power!

In San Macondo, the car stops in front of Laura in time. She isn’t hurt. No one was hurt.

Laura had been robbed when buying a hat from a hawker. She chased the robber and he threw away her wallet. Laura picked it up in the centre of the road. She was nearly knocked down by a car. Fortunately it stopped in time in front of her.

“Are you alright?” The driver comes over and asks her.

“I am fine,” she said. “Someone robbed my wallet and took out all the money. Luckily there was not much and he threw the wallet away. Sorry, I don’t mean to give you trouble.”

“Watch out,” the driver says. “It won’t be that lucky next time.” Then he goes back

to the car and starts it up again.

Laura crosses the road. She opens the wallet and looks at the family picture inside. She, Leslie and Jack.

Honey, I miss you, she thinks. Smoothly and gently she caresses the picture.

She can't enjoy the live music show at the bar. She misses Leslie and Jack. Instead, she goes back to the motel and makes a long-distance call to them. No-one answers. Leslie and Jack are not at home. So she calls Adrienne.

"Hello?" Adrienne answers the phone after it rings a couple of times.

"Hi, Adrienne. It's me, Laura," she says. "I can't find Leslie and Jack. Are they alright? Is Leslie at work?"

"Now listen," Adrienne says carefully. "Laura, we really tried to find you before but, you know, there is always a problem. We don't know where you are. Even if there is something important that we have to tell you, we have to wait for your call."

"Yah." Laura can sense something is wrong. She really senses there is something wrong.

Adrienne tells the whole story to Laura. At the other end of the phone, Laura can't believe it. The handset slips down from her hand. "Oh my God." She covers her mouth with her hand, teardrops fall from her eyes.

Everyone stops chatting and stares at Leslie and Austin. Someone even continues

pouring drinks into another's cup. The drink overflows.

"Oh, my boss," someone says, amazed. "Our reserve team new guy fooled the veteran first-team player."

"What did you do?" Angel asks. "What... what did you do to him?"

Leslie sits down, surprised by what he has done.

"You used your magic to fool your counterpart," Angel says in a slow and careful way.

"Let's party!" cries one of the guests. The whole house is suddenly full of party decorations. Balloons at the ceiling corners, flowers on the table and shelves, rainbow coloured spiral confetti everywhere. Every guest has sticker tattoos on their faces and necks. A guest is wearing a tongue reversible tie. The white paper plates used by the guests become colourful ones.

"Good boy," Angel says. "With your imagination, nothing is impossible."

"So, wait," Leslie is still puzzled. "I have magic power, don't I? I, I created a pizza and put it on another person's face?"

"Give me a red rose," Angel says, "Then I will tell you."

Leslie thinks for a while, frowns at Angel. Then he clenches his fists slowly, puts the closed fists together, then pulls them apart slowly. A rose comes out from his right hand.

Angel watches Leslie. She seems satisfied with his performance. However, she wants to give him some more tests. Angel sniffs the redness of the rose into her nose.

The rose goes white.

Angel smiles. Leslie smiles back. His smile looks like a 100% copy of Angel's. He takes out a mirror from behind his back. Angel has a red rose on her nose. She looks at her nose with astonished eyes. Using her hands to cover her nose, she opens her hands, the rose is no longer there.

"You! You!" Angel is so cross that she can't find a word. Suddenly she turns soft.

"Oh dear, you've got the skills of magic." She kisses and hugs Leslie.

"So I've graduated?"

"No, no, no. Still a long time to go," Angel replies. "You have to get a bachelor's degree. Now is just like primary 5 or 6."

"So where can I apply for secondary school?"

"What secondary school?"

"You said I am now primary 6. When and where can I apply for Fairy Secondary School?"

"Oh dear," Angel grins with delight. "It is not true! I made it up. It's just an expression. It is a kind of metaphor. You should know more about literary techniques." Then she giggles. "Hey, I have a job interview for you tomorrow. As a human, you need a job to support yourself and cover your identity as a Santa Claus trainee."

"Job interview?" Leslie is surprised. "How come I had no idea about that?"

“Here we are living in a block of 12 units. You have neighbours. You will meet them every day,” Angel says. “If someone asks you what you do, how should you reply? Say you are the assistant of Santa Claus? Besides, you have to earn a living as well.”

Leslie is slightly shocked.

“Take it easy, man,” Angel says. “There is nothing to be worried about.”

“So, what, what kind of business is that?” Leslie asks.

“Universe’s Music,” Angel says. “The position you are applying for is salesperson.”

“Wow. Music sales,” Leslie exclaims.

Next day, Leslie attends the interview. Everything in Whantanu is new to him. He is taking a motortrike taxi to the interview place. It is a sunny day. Along the way he can see many palm trees on both sides of the road. Sometimes the taxi passes the beach. He can see coconut trees on the beach instead of palms. Some young boys are sitting in front of the grocery stores eating mangoes. Besides mangoes, Leslie can see people selling fruits of many kinds in the shops alongside the road. Galugalu island of Whantanu seems a small and leisurely place. There are no buildings more than three levels high.

At last he arrives at a busy area. The job interview is going to take place in a small music shop. As he is going to pay the taxi driver, he pulls out his money.

“So how many Benny’s Kitchen on this island?” Leslie asks.

“One, do you want me to take you there?” the taxi driver says.

“But we passed it twice,” Leslie says.

“Taxi drivers squeeze money from tourists as simple as bosses exploit staff. It is common and reasonable,” the taxi driver says in a helpless tone. “OK, if you want your money back, I give you a discount.”

“I don’t need a discount.” Leslie says. “Here you are, \$30, keep the change. And don’t fool any tourists next time.” Leslie gives the money to the driver and leaves the car. The taxi driver leaves without saying thank you.

Now he is standing in front of the music shop. Oh, they sell musical instruments. I presume they sell music CDs, Leslie thinks. The interviewer is a grey-haired older lady.

“Hi, I’m Nicky Bishops, the manager,” the old lady says. “So, do you have previous experience in selling musical instruments?”

“I am not sure. But I am very keen on being a salesperson. So I am applying for the position,” Leslie says. He looks around the shop. Electronic organs are displayed right next to the door. He thinks it will be easy for people, whether shoppers or passers-by, to touch them and to make some simple music and test the functions. On the left hand side there is a window shelf. There are many music books. Grade one, elementary and fingering, to grade 8, J.S. Bach, Mendelssohn, or Janacek. Next to the books on the shelf are some small instruments. Harmonicas, recorders and some tube-shaped organs he can’t name. Laura has told him the names and the features of

some organs. But I should have paid more attention to listen and memorize, Leslie thinks.

“Well, as you see we have instruments of many kinds here. We have Percussion, Strings, and Brass. Do you know anything about the characteristics and nature of different instruments?”

You are a fairy. Leslie thinks about what Angel reminded him. Anything you say will become true because you have magic power. But you cannot tell your personal history about your previous life. You are not Leslie anymore.

“Yes, I worked for 15 years in a primary school as a music teacher,” Leslie invents a working history and tells Nicky. No, he can’t say he knows music because of Laura.

It works. On the work experience column on the resume in Nicky’s hand, such an item really emerges.

“People in Whantanu come from all walks of life. There are many different races and ethnic groups here. How many different languages do you speak?”

Leslie is thinking. He is thinking how to lie again. “Five. Whantanuan, English, Spanish, Mandarin,” Leslie says.

“But you say five.” Nicky says doubtfully, “Whantanuan, English, Spanish, Mandarin, there are only four.”

“Oh, ur, Whantanuan, English, Spanish, AND,” Leslie emphasizes, “MAN-da-rin. See? Five languages.”

Nicky is affected by the magic, she clicks. “Oh yes, MAN-darin. Five, five languages.” She rotates her eyes and looks suspicious.

Leslie is happy with the effect of his magic power.

“Alright, Oky doky.” Nicky reads Leslie’s resume and says, “There is a growing demand for music. We are really in need of people. So,” she looks up at Leslie and gives him her right hand, “Welcome on board.”

Leslie shakes hands with her and smiles.

Next day, Leslie starts his work as a salesperson. There is no uniform, but he has to wear a company name badge on his chest. Most of the time he just has to stand straight and see if customers need help. Sometimes customers ask questions, which he may or may not know. He makes use of his magic power to help him introduce a particular instrument to each customer.

In the evening, Leslie finishes work. He walks happily down his corridor. He passes No.1, No.2..., when he passes no. 11, he sees Angel hanging clothes on the line across the patio.

“Oh, great! You have finished for the first day.” Angel says while hanging clothes,

“How’s things going?”

“Not bad.” Leslie stops and says, “Some people buy instruments, some just browse.”

“Good.” Angel finishes hanging clothes. She takes the basket inside, “Take a rest, and come to my place. I have something to talk to you about.”

Leslie goes home, drinks some water and goes to Angel's place.

"So, what's going on?" Leslie has a feeling that Angel is going to give him a lecture or a test.

"I know what you did today," Angel says. "You met many people. Fifty-six in total, weren't there?"

Leslie was shocked. "More or less." Even he can't remember how many people he met. He can only be sure that he closed three sales.

"One of them is our colleague. Which one?" Angel asks.

"What?" Leslie says, surprised. "I met a fairy today?"

"To be a good fairy, sometimes you need help from other colleagues. Likewise, sometimes you have to offer help to other colleagues," Angel says, "So you must have the ability to identify who is your colleague and ask them for help whenever needed."

Leslie can't think of a word to say.

"You have fifteen seconds to answer my question. Which person that you met today is a fairy? Which one?" Angel says.

Leslie looks anxious and worried.

"Ten." Angel is looking at her watch.

Many faces flash inside Leslie's mind.

"Five... four... three." Angel counts down.

Charcoal comes to Angel's place. Leslie looks at her. He remembers something.

“Two ... one.”

“Mrs. Syke. Tanya Sykes.” Leslie gives the answer. “She is a fairy.”

Angel remains silent.

“Yes, she is. She has a black cat,” Leslie says firmly, using his pointer to stress the fact. “She is a fairy so she has a black cat.”

“Excellent,” Angel says. “Continue your good work tomorrow. Work hard. You may go now.”

Leslie is quiet.

When Leslie goes back home, he feels extremely tired. He lies on the sofa. He sees Charcoal trying to put a newspaper on the floor and open it. She sits on the paper.

“Wait, wait,” Leslie says. “Are you going to pee on the newspaper? Your urine will seep into the carpet.”

“Do you have a problem?” Charcoal says. “Do you think I am really a cat? I always pee in the cat tray.”

“As you said, you are an ordinary cat,” Leslie says.

“Even an ordinary cat knows where to pee. It is common sense.” Charcoal is angry.

“Oh, I suppose you want to pee.” Leslie says.

“I have nothing to do, I feel bored,” Charcoal says. “I just want to read the newspaper. Can I?”

“No law forbids cats to read a newspaper. Enjoy.” Leslie says. “Er ... So what is the

weather forecast tomorrow?”

“Let me see,” Charcoal replies. “Partly cloudy.”

“Oh, not bad,” Leslie says. “You know my habits. I go jogging every morning. It is difficult to do that on rainy days.”

“When that is your job, no such thing is difficult,” Charcoal replies. “Consider when you become Santa Claus one day, you may have to deliver Christmas gifts on stormy snowy nights. So no matter how difficult, you still have to complete your job. What happens if a kid receives his Christmas gift on 26th December?”

“I know, I know,” Leslie says and waves his hands, “No need to give me a lesson.”

“No joking. Time to do your job, Mr. Assistant Santa Claus,” Charcoal says. “Go and sort the letters for your boss.”

“Alright, alright.” Leslie raises his hands and surrenders, “You are right. I will do it, no worries.”

Leslie goes to the study room and starts reading letters. For every letter he reads, he first reads the sender’s address on the back. Charcoal keeps reading the newspaper.

“Dear Mr Santa Claus,” Leslie reads, “My father is a pilot. For some reason he left us almost a year ago. Can you bring him back? And also, last time when I visit Hamilton I left my book *Wuthering Heights* in the motel. Can you buy me a new one? Jack.

“Oh! Jack! It’s Jack’s letter!” Leslie suddenly stands up and screams, “Jack wrote

a letter to Santa Claus! He said he wants his father back! He wants me back!”

“What’s going on?” Charcoal looks up and asks.

“Jack wrote Santa Claus a letter! Jack!” Leslie screams, and he raises the letter.

Charcoal goes to Leslie. Leslie kneels down and lets Charcoal read the letter.

“But you are not his father anymore,” Charcoal said. “You are a Santa Claus trainee.

His father has died. You can’t contact him as his father.”

“So your son is Jack Olsen from Calgary?”

“Jack what? Jack Olsen?” Leslie is disappointed. He grabs the letter from Charcoal, read the sender’s address carefully. Jack Olsen, 300 Hobson Avenue SE, Neilsen, Calgary, T3T 4S4. Oh dear, it is not him. It is not him.”

Charcoal is looking at Leslie. He sits down on the chair.

“Jack, Laura. I miss you,” Leslie mumbles.

“Are they no longer missing me?”

“Well, who knows. You died in an accident. They moved away. They don’t know you have become Donny. They will never know. Now they have started a new life. Maybe they are trying to walk out from the pain without you.”

“So they are forgetting me?” Leslie asks.

“This should not be your business,” Charcoal says. “Concentrate on your present work.”

“You know what? You are just a black kitty,” Leslie says, “You know nothing. You

just know to eat and sleep and lick your feet. Ah yes, you are different, you can read your toilet.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Charcoal is patient towards Leslie. “Anyway, you can’t change anything.”

“I can’t change anything? I can do anything. Starting from today, I am not Donny Ng... Ngon... whatever, anymore. I am not going to read those stupid letters. I am not going to do any stupid survey. OK?” Leslie cries. “I QUIT! I WANT A REST!”

Leslie goes upstairs, gets changed and goes to bed.

Charcoal looks at him, and lies down.

Laura pulls her big suitcase with one hand and holds her guitar in the other hand as she walks out of the arrival hall of Auckland airport. Adrienne and Jack are so happy when seeing her. Jack runs up to Laura. Adrienne rubs her nose.

“Oh dear, Jack.” Laura bursts into tears, cuddles Jack and says, “Mom was wrong. Mom shouldn’t have left you alone with dad. I am sorry, I feel so sorry.”

“It’s OK, mom,” Jack says, “Auntie Adrienne looked after me while you and Dad were away.”

“Oh dear. We shouldn’t have left you.”

“Mom, don’t cry,” Jack says firmly, “I am fine. We have to stay strong.” Jack steps

back and Laura releases him. He puts his hand on Laura's shoulder firmly and says, "Strong, Ok? Strong. Auntie Adrienne told me I have to be strong."

Laura is surprised by Jack's attitude. Adrienne tries to help Laura with the guitar. Jack carries her handbag.

"Yes, he has been very strong, as I told him to be after the incident." Adrienne says.

"Come on. Let's go to my place first. You two have lots of things to talk about in my car." Adrienne holds the guitar. Laura holds the luggage in one hand and Jack's hand in her other hand. They leave the arrival hall.

Adrienne brings them back to Causeway Avenue. Their house has been abandoned for just less than a month. When they enter the house, everything is the same as if Leslie were there, as if Laura had not been on her trip yet.

There are several photos on the rim of the fireplace. Laura picks up one with the whole family in the picture. This one is different from the one in her wallet. Everyone smiles happily in the picture. It was taken last summer at the Tawharanui beach. She and Leslie were wearing sunglasses. That time the whole family spent the whole day playing water sports and having a picnic there. He was very happy on that day because he loves beach sports. Leslie said he wished one day he could move to a big house with a view of the beach.

"Les." She wipes the picture tenderly and says. "I shouldn't have left you. But why did you leave us?" She wants to cry, but the tears condense in her eyes and can't fall.

“Adrienne, I am ready.” Laura wipes her eyes and says, “Let’s go to see Les.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to take a shower first?” Adrienne asks.

“No, I am fine,” Laura says. “Les wants to see us.”

They jump into Adrienne’s car. She drives them to see Leslie.

“Today we are going to park at Lion Rock Avenue. Usually the hospital car park is full at daytime. We have to walk, but won’t be far away,” Adrienne says. “Laura, no one wanted to see this happen. Maybe, yeah, Jack is right. Be strong.”

Laura wants to cry, but she tries not to.

“Les, why?” Laura says.

“Laura, we are a family.” Adrienne grabs Laura’s shoulder and says, “You’ll never walk alone. You know I am busy with my own business. But I can help you to look after Jack any time you are not free. Just let me know whenever you need help.”

“Mom, I am ten. I can go to school by myself. I can make toast and pan-fry eggs to make my own breakfast.” Jack says.

“Jack.” Laura bends down. She nearly wants to cry.

“Mom, are you crying?” Jack says. “Don’t cry. Dad doesn’t want to see any of us cry.”

Laura rubs her nose.

“Mom, I want to hear you playing music,” Jack says. “You have been to many places.

You must tell me where you have been. That would be very interesting, right? Why

don't you play some music to dad?"

"Jack is so smart. You are right," Laura says. "We can play music to dad. We can tell him mom's stories about Africa and South America. Let's come back another day. When we get home I am going to show you what I've brought back from the trip. Jack, what do you want to know first?"

They exchange some ideas while Adrienne is driving.

On the other side of the world, it is another day in Phiphidhahi Island. The sun is shining as warmly as a heater through the window.

Leslie gets changed, walks downstairs to the kitchen.

"Morning," Charcoal says.

"Morning," Leslie says. "Do you want some breakfast?"

"Yes, please," Charcoal says. "Did you have a good sleep last night?"

"Yes," Leslie says. "But I have a slight headache."

"So, do you remember what you dreamed last night?" Charcoal asks.

Leslie tries to think. He opens his mouth but cannot find the words.

"What did I dream last night?" Leslie says and thinks. "Can't remember. It seems like I had no dreams last night."

"You are turning into a fairy," Charcoal says.

"So fairies have no dreams?" Leslie asks.

“We have fewer dreams than redcliffes,” Charcoal says. “And most of all, we always forget the unhappy feelings from last night after sleep. Do you remember what happened last night?”

“Last night?” Leslie says when opening the lid of the canned fish for Charcoal.

“Amazing! I really can’t remember what happened last night!”

“You were very angry about one of the customers you met. You were so angry that you threw the trumpet onto the floor and broke it. You had to think about how to report it to Mrs. Bishop,” Charcoal says, making up a story.

“Oh my God,” Leslie hands the food to Charcoal. “Did I really do that?”

“No,” Charcoal says, “I fooled you.”

“So what happened last night?” Leslie asks.

“I won’t tell you.” Charcoal has her breakfast and says, “This is fairies’ customs and merits. You will forget everything unhappy.”

“Oh.” Leslie is surprised by what Charcoal says, “So, will I, will I forget Laura and Jack one day?”

“I am not sure,” Charcoal says. “I am learning to become a human. I am a fairy trainee like you. My knowledge of your question is limited. Maybe you could ask Angel.”

Charcoal finishes her meal, starts licking herself.

Leslie sits on the sofa, he is thinking about what Charcoal has said.

“I think you are still puzzled by what I have said, right?” Charcoal says. “Ask the computer. Ask it to print out the ‘Fairies’ Handbook’ for you.”

“‘Fairies’ Handbook’?” Leslie queries.

“Didn’t Angel tell you about that? She is very sly.” Charcoal says. “Every fairy has a handbook. It is our service provision framework. There are rules, regulations, contract terms and conditions about us being fairies. Go and print one out from your computer.”

“Was it stored in the C drive? In *My Documents*?” Leslie browses the computer and asks.

“No, it is the # drive.”

“What? Sorry? S drive?” Leslie looks back at Charcoal. “There is no S drive.”

“No, #. # drive.” Charcoal repeats.

“Don’t fool me. There is only C, D and E drive.” Leslie looks at the computer and says, “C and D are the hard disk. E is the DVD RW Drive. Come on, tell me. Where is the soft copy of the Fairies’ Handbook?”

“# drive.”

“My tolerance is limited.” Leslie complains, “There is no shark drive. Tell me, is it in C, D or E drive.”

“# is pronounced SHARP, not SHARK.” Charcoal jumps up to the sofa and lies on the cushion. “Do you know anything about music? # is a musical symbol, which means

raising a note by a semitone. Anything you don't understand, just click into the # drive."

"But there is no # drive." Leslie turns back and looks at Charcoal.

"But me no buts." Charcoal says. "But you don't believe there is a # drive. If you don't believe there is a Fairies' Handbook, then you will never find it."

"Crazy. I am talking to a crazy cat." Leslie stands up and leaves. "Talking to you for one more minute is wasting two more minutes. Completely insane."

"Mom, you look like a little different today." Jack says. He is standing by the door to the garage, ready to go.

"In what way?" Laura asks

"You never tied a ponytail before," Jack says.

"Oh, I didn't wear make-up today." Laura says. She is wearing a sports track suit top and cotton sports trousers. She has her guitar in her hand. "Make-up is not a must. Cosmetics are invented for special occasions only, like balls, banquets and weddings. Wearing make-up everyday is just like wearing an evening dress when shopping in the market."

"Then why did people invent cosmetics?" Jack ties his shoe laces and asks.

"For money," Laura says. "All cosmetics are redundant. They were invented for the manufacturers to make profits. So-called new formulas just cheat the consumers,

making them believe using cosmetics is a must. Cosmetics on humans are just like cows wearing shoes. It is completely redundant. I've been to some primitive tribes in China. They have never heard about moisturizer and hand cream. Their world has no Nivea, no Neutrogena, no Loreal. But they still live well! Some even live until 90 years old. Now I don't wear make-up unless I have to attend special functions." She puts her guitar on the back seat and jumps into the driver's seat.

Jack gets into the passenger seat, "When will there be a special function?" He buckles up and asks.

"Such as the year-end pop music award ceremony," Laura says. "I want to have at least two songs entered by me entered in the top ten finals." And she starts the car. Laura says experiencing different emotions and feelings can enhance and enrich her inspiration. Will she get some inspiration while she visits Leslie?

"Mom, does it really work if we sing to dad?" Jack asks while Laura is driving.

"Of course, he can hear us," Laura says. "If my music is good enough, he will wake up."

"Should we ask Yayleen to sing to dad?" Jack asks. "She is nice. She bought me a computer game for my last birthday."

"She is one of the most popular singers. She is very busy. I can sing. We don't need and shouldn't ask someone to help us sing."

"Will Yayleen buy me a big Christmas gift this year?"

“You better send a letter to Father Christmas to ask him.”

“I want Santa Claus to give us a pill for dad to take so that he can wake up,” Jack says.

“Good idea. What else can we do?”

“Besides writing to Santa Claus, we can write to Djinni.”

“OK, now we have to sing to daddy. We will write letters to them when we go back.”

Can music heal? Psychologically, yes. What about physically? Someone believes but someone does not. It's like someone believes God created the world but someone believes it was created by the Big Bang. No need to argue, neither side can prove it. However, Catholics say that God created the Big Bang which created the world. Scientists won't say the Big Bang created God.

In Leslie's world, he stands at the door and looks at Charcoal again. Charcoal doesn't seem to want to give any more clues. He goes next door. He knocks on Angel's door. She opens the door.

“Hi, good morning. I just want to know if you have the Fairies' Handbook?” Leslie asks with a smile.

“It is in the * drive of your computer,” Angel says. “Didn't Charcoal tell you?”

“Sorry? Hang on a sec. He says it is in the # drive. What did you say?” Leslie asks.

“* drive.” Angel repeats.

“Asterisk drive? You mean, a star?” Leslie asks.

“You have to believe there is an * drive,” Angel says. “You believe it, you’ll see it.”

“Come on. Please, don’t copy Charcoal. He is a nonsense cat.” Leslie waves his hands.

“Come over here, I will show you,” Angel says. She leads him inside.

Angel grabs a mug from the dining table and shows it to Leslie.

“What can you see inside the cup?” she asks.

“Nothing,” Leslie replies. “Just water.”

“No,” Angel says. “There is a bee surfing.”

“A bee surfing?”

“Use your imagination. Tell yourself, there is a bee surfing,” Angel emphasizes. “To be a Santa Claus, or any fairy, you have to learn how to manipulate your imagination. Your imagination can be so powerful that it can make something impossible happen, just like you made a pizza appears on a man’s face the other day.”

“I am not going to talk to you. You are insane as well,” Leslie says angrily and leaves.

“I am going to quit; completely, entirely quit your insane training.”

Leslie goes back home angrily. He bumps into the sofa. He crosses his arms. He is still angry with Angel and Charcoal. He switches on the TV with the remote.

“Hi, my name is Mei-Ling Waterview. I am the Lost and Found Fairy. I live in Singapore,” a middle-aged Asian lady on the TV says. “Nice to meet you, Leslie.”

Leslie is amazed by what he is seeing - the TV is talking to him!

“Look! There is a spider at your back!” Mei-Ling points to Leslie and screams.

Leslie immediately stands up and looks back. There really is a big spider! Leslie picks up a magazine and rolls it into a cone. He uses the cone to hit the spider.

The spider soon escapes and hides behind the sofa. “Why a spider? This place really sucks.”

“The spider never existed. It is your imagination,” Mei-Ling says.

“What? I am absolutely fed up with your imaginationism.” Leslie waves his hands. He switches off the TV.

However, Mei-Ling comes out from the TV. She pushes out her head, and slowly steps out from the TV.

“Don’t be silly, little boy,” Mei-Ling says. She comes out from the TV and stands in front of Leslie. “I said there was a spider. You believed it. Then it existed. It only existed in your imagination. Look.”

Originally Leslie was lying on the sofa. He just wants to ignore Mei-Ling, an unwelcome guest. Now he turns to her and looks at her to see what she wants to do.

Mei-Ling closes both her hands. She rubs them. When she opens them again, there is the spider inside her palms.

Leslie is not interested.

Mei-Ling closes her fists. She puts two closed fists together. She makes a big circle

in the air. A hula hoop comes out.

She puts the hula hoop on the floor, and then raises it up again. There is a round shaped curtain covering what is inside the hula hoop. When she drops the curtain, Jack comes out from the hula hoop.

Jack throws himself onto Leslie. “Jack!” Leslie cries. He gives him a big hug. “I am Angel,” Jack says. When Leslie pushes her away, she is really Angel, not Jack. And Mei-Ling has disappeared.

“So you see. Everything is in your imaginations.” Angel sits down on a chair and explains to Leslie, “If you believe there is, there is. If you believe there is not, there is not.”

Leslie can’t find a word to say.

“C’mon, Les,” Angel says. “You have already known the trick and skills of your magic power. You should also understand the truth, that everything within the fairy circle can be the product of magic power.”

“You are a member of the fairicle,” Angel continues. “I am, so is Charcoal, Austin, Trinity. There are many people in the fairicle with us. You have to face the truth that Laura and your family and identity no longer belong to you. You are a member of the fairicle, they are redcliffes.”

Leslie leans on the wall and looks up to the ceiling. He is very unhappy and disappointed. He misses Jack.

“I am in the fairicle. They are redcliffes,” Leslie mutters.

“Stop murmuring,” says Angel. “No time for reminiscence. Now think how to achieve # drive on your computer.”

Leslie sits still and tilts up his head to look at Angel. Leslie moves out from the sofa. He is still sitting, but on an office chair solve out from the sofa. The chair moves automatically to the computer desk. Leslie is facing the computer. The computer mouse moves into the air and reaches Leslie’s hand. It brings his hand up onto the mouse pad on the desk.

“Now listen,” Angel says, “find the # drive on the computer, and find the Fairies’ Handbook.”

Leslie tries. He clicks into “My computer”. There are “local disk (C:)”, “local disk (D:)”, and “DVD RW Drive (E:)”, but there is no # drive.

“There is a # drive,” Angel says.

“There is no # drive,” Leslie says.

“There is a # drive.” Angel says.

“There is C, D and E drive. But there is no # drive,” Leslie says.

“Do you want to be Santa Claus?” Angel asks.

“Yes, but what is the relationship?” Leslie asks.

“If you want to be Santa Claus, then there is a # drive.”

“No, there is not.”

“Yes, there is. If you want to be Santa Claus, then there is.”

“There is?”

“Yes, there is. There is A # drive.”

“There is?”

“There is.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“There is, there is a # drive.” Leslie says, and stares at the monitor. Slowly, there a new icon appears in the “*My Documents*” window - # drive.

“Yes, there is,” Leslie says calmly, “there is a # drive. So, click on the # drive and print out the Fairies’ Handbook?”

“Or do you have any suggestions?” Angel sips a cup of coffee and asks.

“So where is the printer?” Leslie looks around the computer and tries to find one.

“Same logic applies here.” Angel’s tone is as if she is enjoying the sunlight, beach and sea wind on the coast of the Caribbean Sea.

Leslie clicks on the print button of the “Fairies’ Handbook” document. “The computer is not connected to a respective printer. Please check if your printer is connected and turned on.” The screen pops up a notification.

He murmurs, “Check if the printer is connected?” He checks around the computer to look for the ports and terminals. If I can find the respective port, I’ve got the gold

medal trophy, he thinks.

He looks around the house. Where is the printer? How to connect it with the computer? Suddenly he stands up and walks towards the kitchen. He looks around every appliance. Microwave? No. Kettle? No. Dishwasher? Definitely not. At last he looks at the toaster and smiles.

Leslie seems to have found the way to print the book. He plugs in the toaster, puts two pieces of bread in. Then turns it on. He goes back to the computer and clicks the print button. Immediately, two books pop out from the toaster. Leslie goes to pick them up. They are “Fairies’ Handbook” volumes one and two!

Leslie shows the books proudly to Angel. “See! I got them.” He is showing off to her.

“Then why did you have to put two pieces of bread into the toaster?” Angel asks.

“There is no paper in the printer,” Leslie says. “I have to put some paper into it.”

“You lose.” Angel sips the coffee and pauses.

Leslie shows he does not understand.

“You haven’t put ink into the printer.” Angel holds a bottle of jam. “The colors of the words in the book are too light to read.”

Leslie turns to the book immediately. He really can’t read the words.

However, he finds a line in the first page of the book.

“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

He believes there should be more in the handbook. He stares at it, tries to use magic power to make the words show. However, no matter how hard he tries, the words can't form a paragraph.

Leslie doubts if he has lost his magic power. He stares at a sock on the sofa. He makes it float up in the air, reverses it inside out, and it becomes a vase. Leslie has tested his magic power. No problem, it works.

He goes back to the handbook. He tries to make the handbook readable. But his magic loses power on it. The book is made of something special that magic can't affect.

"If you can't read the handbook, you will not know the dos and don'ts of being a Santa, or a fairy in general. Hence you will make mistakes; you will accidentally violate the fairies' ordinance. So, you must read the book before we start lecturing you," Angel says.

Leslie twinkles his eyes strongly and closes his lips tightly. He is trying hard to do magic. His magic works. The fixtures and the objects change to words. However, the book does not.

"You may take a rest and try later," Angel says. "That's what I would recommend you to do."

Leslie sits on the chair, sighs, feeling exhausted, and breathes deeply.

"What have I done?" he asks himself. "I, I feel exhausted. And hungry."

“This is normal,” Angel says. “The more difficult the magic, the more energy it takes. You rode a mountain bike for three hours. How would you not feel exhausted and hungry?”

“OK, then, I’ll go and buy a meal box,” Leslie says. “Do you want a hotdog or something?”

“No, thanks,” Angel says, “I am fine.”

“Are you sure? I am going to the takeaway at the end of the street.”

“Sure. Enjoy. You will find someone you want to see.”

“Huh?” Leslie is putting on his shoes outside the front door. He raises his head and asks her.

“Oh, Oh ... you will find something you want,” Angel said, “to eat.”

“Alright, bye,” Leslie says, and leaves the house. Angel leans on the door and watches him leaving. As it is a little bit windy outside, he zips up his jacket and walks to the fast food store at the end of the street. It is very close to where he lives, just two minutes walk. Printer, printer, ink, what else do I need? He thinks.

Leslie is standing in front of the takeaway fast food shop. He looks up at the menu to see what he should have. The chef looks at him and waits for his order.

“How’s your cat?” the chef asks.

“It’s fine, except sometimes a little bit bossy,” Leslie replies. Suddenly he realizes something odd, “Did I tell you I have a cat?”

“Oh, yes. You did.” The chef is a little bit shy. He starts mopping the front desk and gets some chores to do to hide his embarrassment. “Last time you came here you told me you had been pissed off by your black cat.”

“I told you. Mm... did I come here before? This is the first time I have come here.”

“Yes, you did. Last time you bought a steakburger combo. You wanted tea instead of bottled fizzy drinks.”

“Maybe you are mixed up. I have not been before. It is quite common for a customer to ask for tea,” Leslie says firmly.

“Then how could I know you have a black cat? You came last time and told me.”

“Maybe, mmm... my cousin told you?” Leslie says, and he changes the topic.

“Anyway. Doesn’t matter. I want a deep fried chicken leg and fries combo.”

“OK, won’t be long.”

Leslie carefully looks this person up and down. Right, many Chinese are good chefs.

But why does he sometimes looks askance at me when preparing the deep fried chicken

leg and fries? He knows I have a black cat. He is not a Redcliffe. He is testing me,

Leslie thinks. A few minutes later, the food is ready. The chef passes the food to

Leslie.

“Here you are.”

“Thanks.”

Leslie takes to food back home. Angel is smoking in his yard.

“What?” Leslie is a little bit angry and surprised. “Should you smoke? You are a fairy, tooth fairy. Fairies shouldn’t smoke.”

“It is you commoners who always have prejudice and bias towards fairies. Who says fairies can’t smoke?”

“Nicotine rots your teeth. If you care about your teeth you shouldn’t smoke,” Leslie complains.

“Bullshit. Stop normalizing your bullshit. Thinking as a normal human hinders your creativity. Fairies without creativity are redcliffes. Redcliffes say cigarettes cause death. I say everything causes death. Cheese, milk, shampoo, washing powder. In the long run, we are all dead. It doesn’t matter whether we smoke or not.”

“What is the relationship between creativity and fairyship? Bullshit.”

“The Godmother helps Cinderella to become a princess. She made a pumpkin into a coach and mice into horses. This is what we call creativity.” Angel says.

“Stop fooling me,” Leslie sits down and starts eating the food.

He opens the wrapping paper and enjoys the deep fried chicken leg and fries. He stares at Angel a little bit resentfully while eating. She looks at him with a satisfied smile and crosses her arms. He sips some tea and finds some figures on the paper cup.

(bowl + chopsticks = bowl with noodles and chopsticks; bun + sausage = hotdog)

Leslie looks at the figures and eats. He scowls. What does that mean? What does that mean? He thinks again.

Oh! Yes! He understood. He puts down the food and wipes his finger tips. He goes straight to the kitchen.

He finds a knife and puts some jam on the bread. Then he puts the bread into the toaster. He rushes back to computer. Clicking at the computer, he rushes back to the toaster with hopeful eyes. Two books come out. He flips through. The books have words.

“Words! Yes! Words! See! Now I’ve got the Fairies’ Handbook with words!”

Leslie shouts, with his eyes like rainbows.

“So now you know why the Godmother needed a pumpkin to magically create a coach,”

Angel says. “You need jam as the ink to print your handbooks. Now waste no time.

Study the book and know what a fairy can do and what you can’t.”

“‘Boundaries of magic power’, ‘Why magic can’t travel time’, ‘Notable fairies in history’...” Leslie flips over the book and reads out the headings of the chapters excitedly.

“So remember to thank Lung,” Angel says. “He gave you hints.”

“Who’s Lung?”

“The fast food shop owner.”

“Oh, he’s Lung. Ok, Ok. Will do,” Leslie replies perfunctorily. He is so into the booklet, the booklet in which he magically created the words. He scans the book while leaving Angel’s place.

On the Phiphidhahi island of Whantanu, it is a hot summer. People are wearing sandals, singlet and shorts. There is a fireball burning in the sky. Thankfully, the sea wind reduces the temperature. Many people are wearing T-shirts or swimming suits playing beach volleyball on the beach. Some people are sunbathing. The whole beach is as happy as a summer carnival. However, Leslie is not here. He is busy in fairy class.

Leslie sits on the sofa at Angel's place, flipping over the Fairies' Handbook. Angel is smoking in the dining room. Lung approaches.

"Oh, Mr. Chef," Leslie says, puts down the book and stands up. "Well, welcome. Day off today?"

"I am your partner," Lung says. "I mean, I am another student on the Santa Course."

"Another student?" Leslie is surprised, "Angel did not tell me I had a workmate. Shouldn't there be only one Santa Claus in the world?"

Trinity comes down from upstairs. "Do you think you can finish distributing all the gifts to all the children by yourself in one day?" he says. "You two will be responsible for different areas of the world for the coming Christmas."

"His experience is the same as yours." Trinity sits down on the dining chair and says.

"Originally he worked as a vehicle mechanic in China. He died, I picked him up and gave him a new identity and new body, and asked him to come to Whantanu to be a chef."

“My name is Lung. I died and they gave me another identity, Fei Lee,” Lung says.

“You must think it is ridiculous, and I think so too. They kill somebody and force him to work for them.” Lung pauses, “As a so-called fairy.”

“No, no one killed you.” Trinity says, “Your life was meant to be end and we escorted you to the fairicle and granted you another chance to live again. You should be proud to be a member of the fairicle.”

“I still can’t understand why,” Leslie says. “Why don’t you ask Santa Claus to teach us? No, I don’t mean anything against this lady. She is a good tooth fairy, perhaps. But why don’t you assign a person with experience as Santa Claus to be our tutor?”

“Santa Claus is not a department,” Trinity says. “You are just on a course, and Angel is your course leader. She is employed as the lecturer of the Tooth Fairy Department and is assigned as the course leader for Santa Claus. There are only two students, hence you cannot form a department.”

“Then why her?” Leslie says. “I mean, I have no bias against her but is there no better choice?”

“Tooth fairies deliver gifts to children the same as Santa Claus.” Trinity says. “So the Faculty decided to assign an ex-tooth fairy to be your course leader.”

“You are the boss. You are the authority,” Leslie says, and he picks up a magazine from the sofa and flips it over. “From the very beginning we have not had the right to say that this is an unequal treaty.”

“Right! Unequal treaty,” Lung says. “Good word. Man, give me five!” They high-five.

“Every employment relationship in the world is not a 100% equal treaty. You should have known that before you came here,” Trinity says. “Now you know each other, shall we start?”

Leslie and Lung look at each other. “Angel. Can you stop smoking? Come. You have to give a lecture to these gentlemen,” Trinity says.

Angel puts out the cigarette and empties the ashtray. The Santa duo come with their booklets and sit on the dining chairs.

“Bye guys,” Trinity says. “Work hard.” He leaves. Leslie and Lung are happy about Trinity leaving because they don't like him very much.

“Alright. Lecture 1: Introduction to Fairicle – basic characteristics of Fairies,” Angel says. Both of them swallow a mouthful of water. They are waiting for the class to start.

The lecture lasts for about three hours. Leslie and Lung are so tired that look like two cubes of wobbly jelly on the sofa after the end of the class.

“So after working for ten consecutive years, we are allowed to take a break for one year,” Angel gives Leslie a lecture on the sofa in the living room.

“We are so lucky. We do not have to work the whole year. We work only during

Christmas, basically a few weeks a year. However after working for ten consecutive Christmases, we can enjoy one year's holiday. So sweet," Leslie says, and puts his hands at the back of his head and leans back.

"Not exactly," Angel says. "Throughout the whole year you have to pay attention to the children who write to you asking for gifts. Everyday you have to observe their performance. The good ones will be awarded a Christmas present and the bad ones will not. Hence you don't only work during the Christmas break."

"Oh, he's making a list, and checking it twice. Go to find out who's naughty and nice." Leslie sings. "So, what can I do during one year's break? Can I travel round the world?"

"Yes, if you have the money to do so. That's why we have to have jobs as redcliffes," Angel says.

"Money? Yes!" Leslie pulls out a tissue from the box and makes it become a bank note. However, it becomes tissue paper immediately. "How come?" Leslie wonders.

"We are not allowed to magically create money. This would promote inflation," Angel says.

"I know. We can predict games results and make money." Leslie points to the TV, which is broadcasting a horse race.

"Fairies are not allowed to travel in time," Angel continues. "We cannot go to the future, or even predict the future. Fairies have greed and selfishness. Once we know

what happens in the future, we would spend money on the stock market, foreign currencies, or even bet on horses and sports games. This would cause chaos in the financial markets and betting companies.” Angel gives Leslie a lecture on the sofa in the living room.

Leslie and Lung are disappointed. Leslie thinks fairies should enjoy the ability to time-travel just as high ranking government officials enjoy the opportunities to be bribed.

“I used to have the privileges to buy air tickets are one-tenth discount,” he says.

“No, we can’t magic money. But sometimes fairies use magic to control the results of sports games, so that they can make money from betting and investment,” Angel says, “Sometimes our colleagues will bet on sports games and manipulate one or more players. Three hundred and sixty angels are involved in the World Cup 2014 preliminary rounds. They bet on different items. That’s why some matches have surprising results in terms of the final score, the number of yellow and red cards, number of corners, etc.”

Leslie frowns. Lung has a question.

“But you have to apply for a permit first,” Angel adds. “Provide a proposal and reasoning to the authority as to why you have to manipulate the game. And 95% of the money you gain has to be donated to a charity or church. You can only take home 5%.”

“So, for every \$10,000 I win from betting, I can spend only \$500? Manipulate a football match and earn 5% from winning ... sounds like what the underground bankers do,” Leslie says.

“You are right. Some fairies use the identity of underground bankers to bet,” Angel says.

“Ridiculous. So Frank Costello is actually Vulcan or Cupid?” Leslie jokes.

“Who is Frank Costello?”

“The Departed, an old movie from last decade. Such a classic. Haven’t you watched it before?”

“Completely no idea,” Angel says.

“It was the movie of the decade! You have no idea? At that time you were busy collecting children’s teeth so you did not watch it?”

“I have no idea, either,” Lung says. “It can’t be a big movie.”

“Right. I don’t think it is a famous movie at all. Movies are one of the eight forms of arts. There is no such thing as right or wrong. Whether it is good or not is very personal. An Award-winning movie isn’t necessarily everybody’s favourite,” Angel says. “Anyway, class is dismissed. We are going to discuss more regulations and rules for fairies tomorrow. Tomorrow’s lecture will not be at my place. Please go to lecture theater AC 301 at the University of Whantanu.”

“We are not going to study alone, are we?” Leslie says.

“Yes, you are going to meet other fairies as well,” Angel says. “You'd better go with him tomorrow. The lecture hall is on the campus of the University of Whantanu on Galugalu Island.”

“Tomorrow I have to work in the music shop,” Leslie says.

“So what time do you start working?”

“Eleven in the morning,” Leslie says.

“The lecture starts at nine. You can make it.”

“So it lasts for only one hour? How can I make it?” Leslie is really doubtful. It is like someone asking a builder and his team to build a stone cathedral in eight hours. He supposes a mass lecture should last longer than an hour.

“Time goes slowly in the lecture hall,” Angel says. “Very simple. Take the ferry at 8:30a.m. from Phiphidhahi to Galugalu. I am 100% sure you can arrive at the lecture hall before nine. Take a three-hour lecture there. When you finish, it will be around ten. So you still have plenty of time to go back to Phiphidhahi Island to start your work at eleven.”

“Wow,” Leslie is amazed by Angel's mathematics. “So I better not go out for a cup of coffee during the lecture break. Time flies inside. I spend five minutes outside having a break, they have a one-hour lecture inside.”

“Good calculations. You've got the concept,” Angel says. “But you won't have a break.”

“I am fine without a break,” Lung says, “what about you?”

“I have no choice,” Leslie folds his arms and says. “You are the chef, and we are the food. You are manipulating us always and we can't say no.”

“You are not food,” Angel says. “We just don't want the episode you mentioned to happen. That is, someone comes out from the lecture hall. Five minutes later, the time inside the hall has gone faster than outside. This causes time chaos.”

“Well, well, well.” Leslie waves his hand and exhales, “You are always right. No matter what you say you are always correct.”

Leslie tidies up the study table. He walks out with Lung to the fast food stall to look for food. A car passes them while they are walking. It is a Mitsubishi Mirage J, navy blue. The same model and colour as Leslie's car in the past. The car parks next to the food stall. There is a rubber toy duck on the driver's panel. This makes him think of how he met Laura. He stares at the rubber duck. The car he rented on the day he met Laura has had a similar duck.

On a sunny Sunday, the traffic was very busy in Beijing. Many cyclists were stopped at the traffic lights. Some hawkers were selling food of many kinds on the street. One sold water melon slices, one sold corn, one sold tofu. Every hawker's face was so unforgettable to Leslie, even though it was fifteen years ago, because that was the summer and the place he met Laura.

Leslie was working for Air Highbury as the second officer at that time. He was on a job in Beijing at that moment. He rented a car while he stayed there. There was a rubber toy duck on the driver's panel. Leslie was very unfamiliar with left-hand drive cars. He was trying to park his car on the roadside. He was backing slowly because he was worried he would knock the car behind.

Along came Laura. She had come to Beijing for a business trip. The Beijing 2008 organizing committee was preparing a music concert for the opening and closing ceremonies. Many musicians from all over the world were invited to the symposium. Laura was one of them.

When she finished the symposium, she was enjoying walking in Bailu Road in the city. Suddenly, she saw something interesting. A stupid guy was parking clumsily. He was trying to reverse into a car park. Leaning out from the window, looking back, he was reversing carefully, trying not to hit the car behind. He noticed Laura.

"Hi lady," He waved his hand and yelled to Laura. "Could you do me a favor?"

She stopped, scowled, and cocked her head.

"Sorry, I know it is embarrassing," Leslie said. "I am trying to park here. But I am not confident. The space is too small."

"Do you have a driver's license?" Laura asked. She was doubtful.

"Yes," Leslie said, "but this car is left-hand drive. This is my first time parking on the right."

“Sounds fair. OK,” she said. And she moved to the back of Leslie’s car to help him.

“Move, move, still plenty of space.”

“Are you sure?” Leslie said. “I can see from the mirror I am very close.”

“Yes, plenty of space.” She was watching the back of Leslie’s car and says, “Enough for a bus.”

Leslie felt uncomfortable. Enough for a bus? Come on, don’t exaggerate, not funny, he thought.

At last, Leslie parked the car successfully with the help of Laura. He stopped the engine, came out and locked the door.

“Thank you lady,” he said. “Thanks for your help.”

“You are welcome.” He turned to go.

“I don’t think you should drive,” Laura said. “You won’t be that lucky next time. I guess you are a tourist, huh? It is not shameful for a tourist to take public transport. But it is troublesome if you are a driver who can’t park.” Then she smiled and began to leave.

“Miss,” Leslie stopped Laura. “Yes I am a tourist. But why do you think it is better to drive in a foreign city than take a bus? What makes you think public transport is better than a private car in a foreign city?”

“Well, I can enjoy looking at the city from the window,” Laura said. “I can read the map first, locate the bus route, and observe the route on the bus and simply ring the bell.

To drive, you have to memorize the route in your head and then drive to your destination. It is not easy for me at least.”

“Sounds fair,” Leslie said. “Um, do you...”

“I prefer to walk or take a bus,” she stopped him, “rather than ride in a stranger’s car in a foreign city.” Laura closed her eyes for a while and opened them slowly. Oh, she had turned him down.

How could she know what I am thinking? Is she an angel? He thought.

“Your intention is so obvious that I know what your next step is going to be.” Laura said. And she winked at him and walked away.

Oh, how good it would be if I can give her a lift. Maybe we can enjoy a few days together before I fly back to Auckland, he thought.

A few days later, Leslie was on the return trip from Beijing to Auckland. He looked smart in his uniform.

He entered the console room with the captain and the first officer. They checked the status and conditions of the machines before they departed.

Laura was one of the passengers. She entered the cabin with her handbag and her guitar. Her guitar was very important to her. Though big, it could not go as baggage.

Hence she carried it with her. 22, 23, 24, 25, ok, 25H, that’s my seat. She put her handbag into the overhead locker, then she went to the end of the cabin and asked the crew to help her put the guitar behind the last seat.

The plane soon started. Every passenger was sitting quietly in their seat. ‘Ding.’

The seat belt notification light was off. Everyone unbuckled their seat belt. Someone was crying. A child, Laura could hear a child crying. She stood up to see where the child was. She left her seat and went to the child.

“Hi sweetie,” she said. “What’s wrong?” It was a five or six- year old boy crying.

The lady next to him should be his mother. She was trying to make him happy by encouraging him to do some colouring. She was a young mum. She didn’t know that a five or six- years old wouldn’t like the colouring book provided by the airline.

“Did we bother you?” the mum said. “Sorry.”

“No, no, no. I am fine,” Laura said with a lovely smile. “Just wanted to see if I can help.”

“If he is too noisy I apologize. I am so sorry.” The mum said.

“It will be fine.” Laura’s lovely smile was still there. “Let me try. Hey, sonny.”

She turned to the boy and said, “Come with me. Come. Let me tell you how bunny finds the honey.”

And she winked to the mum, giving the mum confidence that she could help. She held the boy’s hand, brought him to the end of the cabin and got her guitar. The boy was still crying.

Laura sat on the floor and took out the guitar. She played and sang.

You are my sunshine. My only sunshine.

You make me happy when skies are gray.

You'll never know dear how much I love you.

Please don't take my sunshine away.

It didn't work. The boy was still sad. Laura tried to use the same melody to make some new lyrics. Here she sang.

You are my honey. My honey bunny.

You get me honey from the field.

You look so funny while you are hungry.

Please don't put the ham on the grill.

"Wow. Amazing, eh?" Laura stopped playing the guitar and asked, "Who is going to grill the ham? I have made the song up when I am with you. Are you the honey bunny? Or are you grilling the ham?"

"I am sorry miss," a flight attendant interrupted. "Your music is beautiful, we are happy to have you on board. However..." Laura looked at the flight attendant. Her uniform was a little different to the others. She knew this meant she was the team leader. "Please don't play music here. You will disturb others," the young team leader said.

"But if he continues crying he is also disturbing others," Laura said. "Bad A and Bad B, choose one." And she continued to play her music on her guitar.

The team leader picked up the intercom. "Captain." She went to the cockpit and

reported what had happened to the captain.

“Sorry madam,” a few minutes later, an officer from the control console came out to talk to Laura, “but I advise you not to play music here now.” Laura was still sitting on the floor. She looked up. Oh, she laughed. It is Mr. Stupid Parker.

Oh, what a coincidence. It is Miss Bus Parker, Leslie thought. “It’s you. Can’t imagine how we met again on my flight,” he said.

“Your flight?” Laura joked with him. “You own the business or are you the captain?”

“I am the second officer,” he said. “I am inviting you on behalf of our captain not to play music on the plane.”

“Sonny. This is Jesper the Clown.” Laura patted the boy’s head and said, “Last time I saw him he couldn’t park his car. Do you think he can park a BIG BIG plane?”

“When we park the plane, there is a CCTV camera watching the front wheels. We can see if the wheels align with the line correctly,” Leslie said. “Do you know what a CCTV is? There is one.” He pointed randomly somewhere in the cabin and showed it to the boy. “We have a camera watching you crying. The captain has asked me to tell you, if you are good for the whole trip, we will give you a toy.”

The boy quietened down.

“Do you know what the toy is?” Leslie said, “A model aeroplane. Do you want a model plane?”

The boy quietened down more, trying to stop crying.

“Good boy,” Leslie said. “Now go back to your seat. Tell your mum you won’t cry.

So this lady need not sing songs to you, and you do not disturb others.”

The boy listened to Leslie, and went back to his seat.

Laura put back her guitar.

“Good job, captain,” Laura said.

“Thanks. I am the second officer,” Leslie said. “Leslie Florence.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said. “Laura Mitchell.”

“Er, I’ve to report to the captain,” Leslie said. “Talk to you later. I will be back soon.”

Laura’s smile was always lovely and adorable. That’s how they began.

Lung opens the lock on the front gate. After the gate is the counter. He opens the counter and goes into the kitchen. He wears an apron and turns the stove on.

“Like last time, steamed snapper and ten hot pot mussels?” Lung asks.

Leslie is puzzled. “Did I order those last time?”

“Then how do I know your favorite food is steamed snapper and hot pot mussels?”

“Oh, anyway, how much?”

“\$14,” Lung says, and starts preparing the food. “Won’t be long.”

“Can’t you offer me a free lunch?” Leslie asks. “We are peers.”

Lung leaves the food in the stove and turns to Leslie.

“I know physiognomy. I can tell your fortune from reading your face and palm.

Wanna try?” Lung says.

“Are you serious?” Leslie thinks for a while before he replies.

“Just a try, for fun.”

“Alright then.”

“Give me your left hand,” Lung says. Leslie shows Lung his left hand. Lung reads it and Leslie’s face as well and says, “You did not marry. If you did, you must have divorced or separated from your wife.” Lung says.

“Wow.” Leslie is astonished and withdraws his hand. “How accurate.”

“You should have a long life,” Lung continues. “You should live up to eighty to ninety years old.”

“But unfortunately I am dead,” Leslie says.

“But your lifeline is very long and looks good,” Lung says, “and your earlobes are long as well. These denote long life.”

“Then how come I died when I am 42?”

“The coincident that the length of lifeline reflects one’s life is proved by science research, won’t goes wrong.”

“Oh, I don’t believe it,” Leslie says. “Why don’t you be a fortune teller rather than running a takeaway business?”

“I am Chinese. Palm reading, physiognomy and astrology have a long history in China. Many Chinese know some basic things.”

“You are not a beginner. You don’t only know the basics. You can tell my past accurately.”

“I read lots of books in this area,” Lung says. “I am really interested in it. I used to be a vehicle mechanic by the motorway, in a small town in China. It was a boring job. Much of the time I had to wait for customers, because we were located between the city and the town. So I read lots of books, particularly physiognomy and astrology.”

“Oh I see. Can you tell my future then?”

“What do you want to know?”

“I am a Santa Claus trainee. Will I succeed?”

“No.” Lung smiles, “I mean, I can’t see the future. The future is in your hands. I can only tell the strengths and weaknesses of your character. You can avoid committing to your weaknesses and work hard on your strengths, so that you can move closer to success.”

“Sounds like what Angel said. Are they siblings?” Leslie thinks.

Lung gets the food ready and passes it to Leslie.

“See you tomorrow,” says Lung.

“See ya.” Leslie picks up the food and goes.

The next day Leslie wakes up is to a usual day. He washes his faces and brushes his

teeth. He changes his clothes and pours some milk in a dish for Charcoal.

“Do you want to read today’s paper?” Charcoal asks.

“It would be nice if you could go out and pick me up one,” Leslie says when preparing breakfast for himself.

“Firstly, I am not a dog. That is a dog’s job. More importantly, you did not order a paper.” Charcoal rolls over on the ground.

“Can’t a cat pick up the paper? Can’t a cat be trained?” Leslie complains.

“I’ve told you. I can’t do something beyond the boundaries of an ordinary cat when I am in public. I can’t let people know I am a fairy cat.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Leslie says. “We are extraordinary and we can’t let ordinary people know we are extraordinary. Angel told me to be a creative fairy. Why can’t you be creative and pick up the newspaper?” he says in a sarcastic tone.

“If you don’t believe me, read the fairies’ handbook,” Charcoal says. “Chapter One, Item Three says: Fairies are not allowed to let redcliffes know they possess magic power, neither can they disclose their identity. Once they try to do so, their buccal cavity will cramp, to stop them continuing. If they try to continue, they will temporarily lose their eyesight. Their temperature drops. If they try to disclose more, they will die by acute heart attack.”

Leslie has his breakfast while listening to Charcoal.

“So keep your secret between us. Only you, me, Angel, and the fairies you met the

other day,” Charcoal says. “The redcliffes are outsiders.”

“The redcliffes,” Leslie repeats.

“Here comes one,” Charcoal finishes slurping her dish of milk.

“Hi, is Angel here?” Mark comes over and stands outside the front door. He is holding a thermos flask in his hand. What does he want? His smile always indicates an ulterior motive. This sometimes makes him less trustworthy. But Leslie knows Mark is a sincere person, he thinks.

“Isn’t she next door?” Leslie puts down the spoon and wipes his lips.

“No, she isn’t,” says Mark. “I presume she is here.”

“Maybe she is at her dental clinic,” Leslie says.

“No, I don’t think so,” Mark says. “She said she had a cough yesterday. Unable to work. So I have brought some porridge for her breakfast.” He shows the container in his hand. “With salmon mince, her favorite.”

“Sorry about that but I really don’t know where she is,” Leslie says. Charcoal comes over and scratches his ankle. Leslie looks at her. She uses brain waves to communicate with him. “She’s at Lung’s place,” Charcoal telepaths to Leslie.

“Oh, oh, you can try Lung’s fast food store. Perhaps she is buying food there,” Leslie tells Mark.

“I see.” Mark seems startled. “I will try.”

Then Mark leaves.

“Why did he appear like that?” Leslie asks Charcoal after Mark leaves. “Have I said anything wrong?”

“No, you did not,” Charcoal replies. “The truth is he is jealous.”

“Jealous of what?”

“It’s a secret.” Charcoal says quietly. “He adores Angel.”

“What?” Leslie screams. “That old witch has someone adoring her? Her teeth are yellowish. Her skins are so wrinkled.”

“It’s a secret! Don’t say it so loud!” Charcoal says. “I think he is jealous of the relationship between her and Lung. Keep quiet.” She closes her eyes. “I am reading what’s happening in the store.”

Leslie closes his eyes too. Through sky-eye, they can see and hear what’s happening between Mark, Angel and Lung.

Charcoal’s magic power is more powerful and skillful than Leslie’s. Leslie can only see some blurry sepia images.

“The weather is very bad these days,” says Angel, with a paper cup of hot lemon tea in her hands. “It has been raining since Tuesday. And it has kept on raining for the rest of the week. How boring.”

“Rainy days make the whole of Whantanu wet, cool and blue,” Lung says when preparing the food. “I don’t like rainy days, always poor business. People are less willing to buy takeaways.”

“Don’t complain about the weather. No excuse.” Mark appears and says, “Why don’t you do some market research to see how to improve your menu and cuisine style to help enhance sales, rather than complain about the weather? All fast food stalls suffer on rainy days, not only you.”

Mark knows Lung and Angel are close friends. However, he doesn’t want that to happen. He worries one day she will be Lung’s girlfriend. So, Mark is sometimes very aggressive and rude to Lung.

“Don’t be so rude to Lung. Have you lost your mind? Do you know how to respect others? Are you educated? So stupid,” Angel scolds Mark as if he is a son who spent the money for food on buying a toy robot.

At Leslie’s place, Leslie is watching what’s happening as a movie with Charcoal.

“Wow. She is really furious at him,” Leslie says.

“Yes, she is a female chauvinist,” Charcoal says. Instead of using sky-eye to see what is happening, Leslie and Charcoal put two fingers of their left hands on their temples, making the scene appear on the TV. They sit on the sofa and watch what is happening in the fast food stall. They share a box of popcorn while watching.

In Lung’s store, Mark is ready to quarrel with Lung.

“What do you want to order for lunch?” Mark asks Angel.

“She has sweet and sour pork rice,” Lung answers when making the food.

“Did I ask you?” Mark says rudely.

“Yes, I have sweet and sour pork rice. Can’t he answer for me?” Angel says.

“Yes, yes he can. Don’t be so angry.” Mark tries to comfort Angel.

“I won’t be angry if you are not that stupid, OK?” Angel says.

“Then I want another order of sweet and sour pork rice,” Mark says rudely. Angel stares at him. “Please.” Mark adds.

“OK, won’t be long.” Lung says.

A few minutes later, the food is done. Lung uses a transparent plastic container to box the food. Mark looks at it.

“Hey, why does my box have so little pork and so much rice?” Mark says in fury.

“Let me take a look,” Angel says and looks. “I don’t think mine is any different to yours. Don’t complain.”

“This dude means to fool me.” Mark looks at Angel but points to Lung.

“Don’t get too personal,” Angel says.

“I don’t want it. I want my money back,” Mark says.

Lung is lost for words.

“You are so provocative! Stop that!” Angel roars.

“This man is dishonest!” Mark says. He opens his lunch box. “See! There is a little part of a cockroach!”

“I have had enough. You keep your provocation,” Angel says and then leaves.

“Angel! Angel!” Mark cries. He glares at Lung and chases after Angel.

“Oh, ‘The End’,” Leslie says. He “switches off” the screen on the wall.

He feels there is something wrong. He stands up. “Oh, oh, hello? Hello?” Leslie rubs his eyes. Charcoal is watching him. “What happened?” He keeps blinking and rubbing his eyes.

“What happened? Charcoal, where are you?” Leslie asks. He opens his arms, trying to search for Charcoal.

“No worries, I am here.” Charcoal sits on Leslie's feet.

“Why I can't see anything?” Leslie asks. He squats down and cuddles Charcoal.

“You overused skyeye.” Charcoal says, “Normally we can't use skyeye more than 120 seconds, or else our eyes get burnt. No worries, you will be fine if you let your eyes rest for about five to ten minutes.”

“Come on. What kind of magic power is that? I can't see anything.” Leslie blinks and blinks.

“Every magic power has its own defects.” Charcoal says, “We are neither omniscient nor almighty.”

Leslie cannot find a word.

“Alright, Les, sit down and take a rest,” Charcoal says, “You will be fine soon.”

A few minutes later, Leslie is getting better. He keeps blinking and rubbing his eyes.

“Feeling better now?” Charcoal says, “As I have said, no need to worry.”

“Hoo...” Leslie exhales, “Who wants to be a fairy if every magic skill has defects or

disadvantages?”

“Well, I have no idea about that. Let's go to visit Angel. Their quarrel has not ended.” Charcoal says. “Mark will always dislike Lung. It is a universal truth.”

“Mark doesn't like Lung because he presumes Lung loves Angel. But it is not the truth,” Leslie says.

“How did you know?” Charcoal says.

“I know, that's why I know.” Leslie says, “You wanna bet?”

Charcoal waves her hand to say, “Go ahead.”

Leslie goes to Angel's place.

“Oh, how lucky you are. Help me to finish this lunch box,” Angel says, while having the porridge with salmon mince prepared by Mark.

“How come?” Leslie pretends he does not know what happened in Lung's store.

“I bought a lunch box from Lung. This stupid guy suddenly popped up and brought me porridge.” Angel says, “Help me finish the pork rice.”

“Why don't you finish the lunch box from Lung and let me have the porridge?” Leslie asks.

“The porridge is made by this idiot,” Angel says, “Don't want to see it go to waste.”

“If you like my food,” Mark smiles sweetly, “I am happy to do it for you every day.”

“Who wants your food, idiot?” Angel puts down the spoon and says, “I have your salmon porridge because I am sick. Do you want me sick every day?” Angel is a

little bit cross.

“No, no, no,” Mark replies immediately, “I want your youthfulness and longevity of course.” He is wreathed in smiles.

Angel resumes eating the porridge.

Leslie approaches Mark and bumps his shoulder. “Let her finish her food. We can go out for some fresh air.” Leslie winks at Mark. Mark knows Leslie has some secret plot.

“Ok, ok, enjoy,” Mark says to Angel and then goes with Leslie.

Leslie leads Mark to his place.

“Come on, man,” Leslie says seriously, “You're a good man. You've a good job, everything. But why would you love such a witch? She's an old witch.”

“Oh really?” Mark says, “I, I don't think so. She's not pretty but she's, she's... do you feel that she is kind of charming of her age?”

“But, do you think...” Leslie says.

“If you're going to say anything bad about her, that's enough,” Mark interrupts, gesturing to him to stop.

Leslie moves back and leaves the house. Oh, there is something wrong. He looks around.

“Seems this is my house.” Leslie says. And Mark leaves unhappily.

Charcoal looks at Leslie after Mark has left. She sneers.

“What?” Leslie asks. “What is the problem? I just want to help him. Helping other people is not a sin.”

“Follow me. I will prove to you that you should help Lung rather than Mark. Lung is your teammate but Mark is not,” Charcoal says, then she leaves Leslie’s place.

They walk to Angel’s place. Angel has just finished the porridge. “You silly boy,” Angel complains. “Mind your own business. You are not in charge of my love life.” Leslie is at a loss for words.

“I am your mentor. I was a fairy,” Angel says. “I know what you talked about to Mark.”

Leslie looks awkward.

“Ok. So, where to start, lads?” Angel says.

“Just a moment,” Lung says, and he whistles. Another black cat comes in. It jumps up on Lung’s knees.

“Hi, my name is Ghana,” The black cat says. “I am Charcoal’s sister.”

“So he pretends to be a chef in the evening, and studies magic during the day time. And he has a black cat as well,” Leslie says. “The selection board is not that creative at all. Every fairy has the same life.”

“I think I have to arrange another job for you, Lung,” Angel says. “Ideally both of you finish working at approximately four pm. So you can spend the evening studying together.”

“Sounds fair,” Leslie says.

“So I am not going to work as a chef anymore?” Lung asks.

“Well, someone will take your role soon.” Angel says. “We arranged for you to work in the fast food shop temporarily because there was no vacancy in the music shop. Next week there will be a new fairy trainee coming to Phipidhaii Island and we will let him start working in the fast food shop.”

“Oh dear,” Leslie says. “Another victim.”

“Don’t consider yourself a victim,” Lung says. “In Chinese we have a proverb ‘jì lái zhī , zé ān zhī’. I don’t know how to exactly translate it into English. To some extent it says, as it comes, just be peaceful with it and accept it.”

Leslie understands what Lung means. But he can’t accept such a concept.

“So, starting from this moment, never consider yourself a victim,” Lung says. “We can’t change the circumstances. You can’t turn the clock back to become a civil pilot and I can’t turn the clock back to become a vehicle mechanic. Why not enjoy the present?”

“Enjoy the present,” Leslie says. “Hope the children will enjoy their presents.”

“We have to work together every day soon. Think positively.”

“You’ve forgotten us.” Ghana says.

“Yes, we can look after ourselves while you are studying,” Charcoal adds, “We will walk along this area to observe how human beings behave, and learn to be humans.

You only have to prepare breakfast for us before you start your day, and dinner after you finish.”

“Wow, sounds easy to keep cats,” Leslie says.

“This is because we are fairy cats,” Charcoal says. “Not ordinary ones. Hence we are easy to keep.”

“Don’t ramble to the seashore,” Angel says. “Where are we? Where to start, lads?”

“What about telling us how to drive the sleigh?” Leslie asks.

“It will be the topic of module five,” Angel says.

“You are trying to say we are still at Level One,” Leslie says.

“Level One has passed. For both of you,” Angel says. “It was the introduction to fairies and elementary magic.”

“Then what’s at Level Two?” Leslie asks.

“No hurry, the teachers and lecturers will help you,” Angel says. “First of all, I would like you to build rapport. Today’s theme is for you two to know more about each other.”

“No worries,” Lung says touching Leslie on the arm, “We will love and support each other.”

Leslie shivers. He moves a step away.

“Now I will leave you two here. You spend some time together,” Angel says.

“Where are you going?” Leslie asks.

“Just one,” Angel says, and shows the cigarette packet in her hand. Then she leaves.

Leslie is speechless. He still can’t accept a smoker as a tooth fairy. Does Austin the Fairy of Flowers pee in his garden to fertilize the plants, he wonders?

Laura put a pair of Brazilian sandals into her bag. These were something Laura had bought in Brazil. Leslie said he wanted to live in a place near the beach one day. So Laura bought him a symbol of the beach in Brazil. There are palm trees, beach and sea patterns on them. After fixing the sandals, Laura brings along her guitar and is ready to go.

Laura has prepared some new music with exotic styles, despite the fact that the instrument she uses is still the guitar. A guitar is easier to perform, compared with an electronic organ which needs a plug. Next time I could try the harmonica, so small that I can put it in the pocket of my jeans, she thinks.

“Mom, did you attend formal classes to learn music during your trip?” Jack asks when they have finished visiting Leslie and are walking to the car park. Laura has not worn make-up, and is wearing a pink Playboy cap with a pony tail. She holds the guitar in one hand and the car keys in the other hand.

“No, but sometimes it is not necessary to learn arts from a formal class,” Laura says.

“No matter if it’s music, literature, dance or any other genre of arts, once you have the basic knowledge and fundamental skills, all you need to do is to observe other people’s

work. Sometimes it is better than learning theories from books or lectures.”

“So how do you observe others’ music?” Jack asks.

“It is a long story. It happened in South America, Africa and Asia.”

Since she was Leslie’s wife, Laura could enjoy 90% off air tickets from Air White Hart and its allies. She started her journey of seeking for music in Asia. On her first stop, she went to Sakhalin Island in Russia. This was a place she had longed to visit since two years ago when she started reading Anton Chekhov’s works. Chekhov was one of the greatest Russian writers in history. Laura knew that he spent three months in Sakhalin interviewing thousands of convicts and settlers for a census. Laura read lots of his works. *Ward No. 6, The Black Monk, The Literature Teacher, Three Years, The Peasants...* Laura loves Chekhov. She would like to spend all her money on sponsoring someone who could make a time machine for her to go back one century to meet Chekhov. So she chose Sakhalin as her first stop to see how and why this place so deeply affected Chekhov’s life. She considers the trip a pilgrimage. Was the island the same as his? No, over one hundred years had gone by. Time changes, places change, people go. Laura’s Sakhalin was different from Chekhov’s Sakhalin. But she was still completely fascinated by this island on the Russian Pacific coast. She was so familiar with this place it was as if she was brought up there. This place inspired his literary ideas a hundred years ago, it could inspire my musical ideas today, she thought.

She went to many cities Chekhov had been to. However, her pilgrimage was not as successful as she thought it would be. Time changes, places change. Sakhalin could not inspire her as she expected. Sometimes when she was drinking hot coffee in coffee shops, reading Anton Chekhov's works, she found it difficult to concentrate. She took out her wallet and looked at the family photo in it. Oh dear, I miss you. I really want to go back to Auckland to be with you. However I can't go back without a result. If I can't make good music I have ruined the trip. But Sakhalin really is not a good place for music, even for other genres of the arts. How can a brain work innovatively in such a cold place? How could Chekhov have so many ideas to create his stories here? If he were born in this century, I believe his works would be plagiarism from other people's blogs. I don't believe human brains can function well in such a cold place, she thought.

So, time to move to the next stop, Xian of China. She took different means of transport, transiting a couple of times to get there at last.

Laura was on the flight to Xian. There were many Chinese on the plane. When the flight landed, many passengers opened the lockers and took out their luggage and handbags as soon as possible. Many Chinese men on the plane were wearing the same style, a polo shirt with a suit jacket. Perhaps this was Chinese style formal dressing for men. But it didn't match. A suit jacket should go with a shirt and tie, a polo shirt is for golf and should go with tracksuits, she thought.

Laura was not in a hurry, she was reading a pile of papers. She printed out something from the computer. It was the details of the events at the Xian Music Cultural Festival. Some events were highlighted. As she was reading it, she smiled, and flicked the paper.

Before she started the trip, she browsed lots of websites and read many books about world music. Xian is a good city to learn music. Historically it was the centre where east China met west. Many Chinese dynasties settled on Xian as their capital. And the music festival was going to commence five days later. So this was the best time to come here, she thought. Besides the festival, she was going to meet a local musician. He was an expert at Northwestern Chinese music.

She could hardly believe she was now in Xian, somewhere she had decided to visit three months ago. During these three months, she was excited about the trip. This is another pilgrimage other than that one in Sakhalin.

She was in Xian. She saw many Chinese faces outside the airport. On the journey from the airport to the hostel, she saw many Chinese characters on road signs and billboards. Even the plate numbers on cars used Chinese, English alphabets and numbers. Many people were riding on bicycles.

She took a taxi from the airport to the motel. It was a small, low-class one. To save money she could only reside in motels or lower grade places. The corridor from the lift to the rooms was dark. To save power, they did not turn on the lights in the

daytime. There was no carpet on the floor, just tiles. The bedroom was not nice at all. The curtains were old and torn. Laura thought that they were as old as the motel, which could be over forty years. There was a cup of tea on the desk. The room attendant did not clean the room thoroughly. There was no fridge (because a fridge works 24 hours and uses a lot of electricity). The TV could only receive local channels. Forget about the TV. Laura had come to Xian to learn about other people's music, rather than watching Manchester United Vs Barcelona on Sky TV. Well, the conditions and facilities of the room are not good. But if I just stay here at night time and whole day out, the standard of the room doesn't matter. Laura thinks. Yes, after putting down the big bag, the first stop in Xian is to learn other people's music, at the Xian Academy of Performing Arts. There she was going to meet Dr. Han, an expert in Mid-Asian music.

Dr. Han was a middle-aged man, approximately forty to fifty years old. He was wearing a fresh, clean shirt when Laura came to see him. He had a short mustache, making him look older than he was. He had studied music in China and France. Hence he was an expert in Mid-Asian and Balkan peninsular Gypsy music. Last time he and his colleagues from the academy went to Canada to attend an academic exchange seminar. There they met Laura and other musicians.

"I am really happy to see you, Laura," Dr. Han said. "But what I would recommend you to do is to attend the activities of the Xian Music Cultural Festival. There will be

lots of good performers in the opening ceremony.”

“I really appreciate that. Besides that, is there anything else you can show me?”

Laura said.

“There will be a traditional Mid-Asian music class on Friday afternoon,” Dr. Han said.

“We are going to talk about a melody type used in Uyghur music called Myqam. This is a popular music style in Mid-Asian music. I know as a popular musician in New Zealand you already know the basics of Chinese music. This form of music is quite different from the usual, so I really recommend that you go.”

“Friday?” Laura was thinking what she should do on Wednesday and Thursday.

“You can go sightseeing for the next two days, and come back on Friday afternoon.”

Dr. Han turned back to see the timetable on the wall. “2:00p.m., lecture hall at Main Building east wing 211.”

“What about meeting your students privately?” Laura knew it was a presumptuous request but she really wanted to use the time, rather than wasting two days visiting the city. “Say I meet them and listen to their work. Is that OK?”

“If they don’t mind, I am fine with it.” Dr. Han said. “But you are not a formal or official visitor, hence I cannot arrange for you to meet the students officially. I run the risk of disciplinary action by the department if they discover me doing so. So, what you can do is go to the studio by yourself, and ask the students for a private talk.”

Laura was disappointed about the unhelpful attitude of Dr. Han. What’s the difference

if I know nobody here and walk into a studio and listen to students' music? I know him but he still can't help me meet the students officially. This is typical Chinese, everything has to be legitimized and rationalized. If you need a paper to draw a circle, make an application. If you need one more paper to draw a square, make another independent application.

Laura wonders what Dr. Han wants.

Laura had nothing to do when she left the Academy. She wanted to take a bus back to the motel. The bus route details on the bus were in numeric form, with Chinese characters and a Romanized name of the final destination. She couldn't read Chinese characters, but she knew her motel was in a place called Luoyang Street. She boarded a bus going to Luoyang Cheng. Should be the same, I don't mind walking a little bit if I go wrong, she thought. When she came from the motel to the academy, the fare was \$1. But the return ticket was going to be \$34! How come there was such a big difference? At first she hesitated a bit. But when she looked inside the cabin, she found that it was much neater, tidier and more comfortable than the previous one. The \$1 one was dirty and old. This one was clean and as nice as an airport shuttle bus in Auckland. Maybe the 34-fold price difference was worth it, she thought. So she got into the bus with her guitar. Several passengers with big handbags went into the bus after her.

In order to make sure she could get off the bus at the right stop, Laura told the driver

when the bus started. “Luoyang Street,” she spoke slowly.

“*Dui, Luoyang.*” He replied in Chinese, meaning “Yes, Luoyang.”

Laura found a seat. There was not enough room for her to put her guitar on the luggage rack above the seats. So she put it on the floor and put one hand on to hold it.

Hold on. Why did this bus have luggage racks above the seats, she wondered.

Forty-five minutes later, Laura found something was wrong. She wasn’t on the express highway when she went from the motel to the academy. Why were they using it to go back? The first thing she did was try to talk to the driver. But the driver did not speak English. “Luoyang Street, Luoyang Street,” Laura repeated. The driver seemed to understand what she was asking. He pointed to the road sign above the road. “Luoyang City 230km”, the sign said. Oh dear. The bus was an intercity coach to Luoyang City. This explained why there was no stopping bell on the coach. It stopped automatically at every stop.

What Laura could do was get off the bus at the next stop. It was a service station. There was a petrol station, fast food chain store, convenience store and tourists’ kiosk. Next to the service station there was a vehicle mechanic. This garage was not situated with the other shops.

Laura tried to talk to the people in the service station. She talked to seven people in different shops. No one spoke fluent English. Laura just wanted to know when and where to take the return bus back to Xian. But no one could clearly explain to her.

So, the mechanic was the last option.

The shop was nothing special, a typical mechanics shop. The only difference was that the shopkeeper was playing the guitar. He was a mechanic in a shop near the service station on Lian Huo Express Highway.

“Hi,” Laura said to the man. “Do you speak English?” She spoke slowly. She hoped this time the person in front of her could understand her.

“*Zor-lee.*” The man used simple English to reply. “*No, Ing-gay-lees.*”

This is what Laura expected. What can I do here? She thought. “When? Where? Bus, to Xian?” Like the previous trials, she tried to talk to the man in simple English.

“Bus to Xian?” the man asked. “Oh, bus to Xian.” He pointed to the clock on the wall. “One hour. There. (He pointed to the bus stop where Laura got off the bus) Bus. Xian.”

She followed his directions, went out to the bus stop and looked at the timetable. This was a bus terminal where Eastbound coaches to Luoyang and Westbound coaches to Xian stopped and dropped off. Passengers could also take a break and go to the toilet at the service station. The timetable said the next bus to Xian departed at 5:00p.m. at stop X2.

Laura went back to him. “Thank you,” she said. And he smiled at her.

Oh, he has a guitar. She pointed to it.

“This?” The man asked. And he played a short song.

“Wow, amazing,” Laura said. She had her guitar with her as well. She played a song to show him.

“Where did you learn your music?” she asked the man.

He smiled. Oh, he did not understand.

“Music. Where?” She used simple English to ask again.

“Here. No car.” He said. “No busy. Many time. Music. *En-eng-eng.*” He pretended to play the guitar and voiced some sounds.

“Happy?” Laura asks.

“Me? Happy!” The man's English is limited, but he shows that he listen and play music happily. Music can be a medium of fun, something people enjoy. Is it necessary to always produce “good music” to compete for the year end music award? Laura thinks about this seriously. If music is simply a hobby, just like this man, we don't always have to consider how other people rate our music. But what should I do if I am not a pop music producer? Laura is finding an answer.

Laura really liked this man. Though they couldn't communicate verbally, music was their common language. They played guitar together happily while Laura was waiting for the return bus.

“Oh gosh.” She stopped playing, put back the guitar into the case and said, “Time to go. But I am really happy.” And she stood up and got all her stuff to go.

The man made a halt signal. And he took a cassette tape from the shelf. Oh, what

year is this? Still using cassettes? I know why. They have a box size cassette, radio and CD player combo in the workshop. It must be used to play the radio or music while they are working or waiting for customers.

“Good good. Me, do it.” He passed the cassette to her and said. Then he used both hands to pretend he was playing guitar, and pointed to the cassette player, and showed the cassette again. Oh, she understood. He wanted to say he played the music and recorded it onto the cassette.

“Thank you,” she said. “I will listen carefully. But I really have to go. Nice to meet you.” Then she walked towards the bus station. Here was the bus. She boarded the bus. She found a window seat and waved goodbye to the man.

He was an insignificant vehicle mechanic on the Lian Huo Express Highway. But he loved music. Not many mechanics can play good music. However, many mechanics listen to music or the radio while working, as commonly as chefs gamble during meal breaks.

At last, Laura went back to Xian. The next day, she visited Dr. Han at the Academy again.

“So you got this cassette in a service station in between Xian and Luoyang?” Dr. Han examined the tape in his hand.

“It wasn’t a lovely experience,” Laura said. “How come there is a place called Luoyang City and a Luoyang street in Xian? It is misleading for tourists.”

“Miss, both Luoyang and Xian are big historical cities,” Dr. Han said. “I believe there is a Luoyang Street and a Xian Avenue in every province in China. I promise.”

“How come?” Laura said. “It is confusing.”

“You come from New Zealand, don’t you?” Dr. Han asked. “That is a commonwealth country. Just like Edinburgh Street, Edward Street, Queen Street and Albert Street. I guess it is very common in your country, right? Same theory applies here. Every city in China has a *Jiefeng(Liberation) Road* and *Renmin(People’s) Road*.”

Laura was frustrated. She did not know how to respond, and sighed. Laura has lots of expectations about learning something in this trip. She never expected to be spending time distinguishing between Luoyang City and Luoyang Street. But this is the side dish, which always comes with the main course.

They are middle-aged, 40-something-years-olds. But they have to attend lecture classes together. They go to the lecture theater AC 301. Are they all fairy trainees? Leslie and Lung can see over two hundred people waiting in front of the lecture hall. Some are trendy and punk. They can see a guy with smoky eyes and over ten piercings on his face. Some are old, like a lady with grey hair walking slowly. No, Angel is not the only fairy smoker. They can see another young lady smoking, leaning on the wall next to the entrance. She is playing with her Iphone on the other hand.

Leslie can't find any commonality with any of them. Every fairy trainee here has their own character. Maybe we should not have any prejudice towards fairies. Just like secondary school teachers. Nowadays many female teachers wear heavy make-up and long earrings to attend school. Teachers and fairies are not necessarily pure and simple. This is stereotyping. We are going to have a three-hour lecture with these people. And we are all fairies. How amazing, Leslie thinks. After being attracted by the crowd at first, they find themselves in an ordinary university campus. Outside the AC building is an open square. It is surrounded by six different independent buildings. There are lecture or administrative buildings at the north, east and south of the square. The west of it is the exit leading to a passage connected to another group of buildings. Before they start the lecture they walk around the square. The shortest building has six or seven levels. The tallest one has ten or twelve levels. Each of them is named after some kind of celebrity, who perhaps donated money to build the lecture building. This is the science building; those must be the laboratories. This is the arts building. Maybe next time we can go to the music room to hear some music students play piano. This is the library. Cellphones are prohibited. But still many students talk on the phone there. Leslie looks around the campus, and giggles.

“What so funny?” Lung asks.

“Now I know what you mean by *zi zi and zi zi*.” Leslie says.

“G G and G G?” Lung asks.

“You mentioned an old Chinese saying, something zi zi and zi zi,” Leslie shows a contended smile, “which means you should be happy with your status quo.”

“Oh, jì lái zhī , zé ān zhī,” Lung says, “Why you mention this at this moment?”

“I just found that I am satisfied and settled with what I have and what I have to at this moment,” Leslie says, “I started enjoy my life being a fairy trainee.”

“Sounds perfect,” Lung says.

It is 8:55a.m. Someone opens the doors of the lecture hall from inside. Now that Leslie comes close to the door he can see what is on the sheet on the door. “Whantanu International Film Festival – Exhibitor: China/Vietnam, Film: The Final Party. No admission after the show begins at 9.” Leslie and Lung are not surprised by the “lecture title.” The management must make a cover to rent the lecture hall from the university and organize such a kind of mass lecture for all the new fairies. Why don’t they use examinations for certain kinds of professional certificate as a cover? If someone feels interested in a Chinese film and opens the door and sees so many fairies doing magic, everything will come to an end. If they invent the name of an examination, no passer-by will accidentally feel interested and say, “Hey, I want to participate in the examination as well” and then smuggle themselves into the hall. Is the fairy management too ignorant about this issue? Leslie thinks so.

Students pile up to enter the hall. Soon they fill up the lecture hall. To be polite, Leslie and Lung nod to the students next to them.

“Lung, Santa Claus trainee.” He shakes hands with the one next to him.

“Thomas, God of Interior Decoration trainee.” He shakes hands with Lung. “Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, there is the God of Interior Decoration,” Leslie says. “No idea about it before. By the way, I am Leslie. Same as him, a Santa trainee.”

“We are a team of seven.” Thomas says. And some other students next to him wave to Leslie and Lung. “We are not the odd ones out. We met the God of Carpenters in the entrance. There are seventeen of them.”

“Wow, big group aren’t they,” Leslie says. “We are a minority, just two.”

“Oh, I presume there are over one hundred Santa Clauses in the fairicle,” Thomas says.

“How can two people deliver all the Christmas gifts?”

“I’ve asked my mentor this question,” Leslie replies. “It is because of the wealth gap in the world. The poor children do not have the chance to be educated. Hence they can’t write letters to us. The rich children have plenty of toys, computers and games. I received a letter from a boy in New Jersey and he said he wants a Wii. But when I investigated I found he had PS3 and computer already. I don’t know why I have to work for the children in the rich world. They have a surplus of resources and don’t need us.” He pauses and sighs. “Oh, well.”

“Shame, eh?” Thomas says.

“And you, what do you do?” Lung asks.

“I just started my fairyship not long ago,” Thomas said. “In orientation week my mentor showed me some video about what my ancestors did. Our job is to inspire people doing interior decoration. Like remind them to use the same color for the same wall. Pacify the arguments about decoration ideas between partners. And so on, things like that.”

“Sounds meaningful,” Leslie keeps on nodding his head.

“But never as popular as you,” Thomas says.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” A voice from the system broadcasts. “Welcome to the Introduction to fairyship lecture. My name is Jason O’Marco,” the voice comes from an old professor. He is about seventy, with a pair of rectangular glasses. Is he a fairy? He looks like a retired coalminer with long-term problems in his respiratory system.

Another lady closes the doors. She must be his assistant. She looks more like the tooth fairy than Angel. At least she is wearing a clean suit. I guess she should have clean, white teeth, Leslie thinks. The crowds begin to calm down once the doors are closed.

“First of all,” Professor O’Marco says, “Welcome on board. Welcome to the fairicle, to being part of us. First of all (another first of all? Is he OK? Leslie thinks), I would like all of you to switch off your mobile phones, and don’t try to get online, or connect with the outside world by any means. Once the door has closed, the time speed here is three times slower than the outside world. We are going to spend three

hours in this lecture, but the time speed in the outside world is just one hour. Hence if you try to contact the Redcliffes outside, they will find you speaking three times faster than usual. Understand?”

His announcement causes a bit of an uproar. Someone switches off their phone immediately. Some whisper and discuss.

“Quiet. Quiet.” Professor O’Marco says. “Anyway, we have applied magic in this room. Mobile phones and internet can’t function in this hall.”

Lots of students tease him. If you have put a spell on this room, you don’t have to ask us to switch off the phone. The announcement is redundant. Stupid.

“Never mind,” Thomas said. “Many professors in the real world are stupid. They are only experts in their field, but they have no common sense. Absolutely none,” he stresses. “I knew a professor in my uni who mixed up David Beckham and Robert De Niro.”

“Luckily he did not mix up David Beckham and Nicole Kidman,” Leslie says.

“He won’t,” Thomas brings out a notebook (a paper one) from his bag and says. “But no one knows if he will.” He points at Professor O’Marco.

The assistant starts distributing some handouts to the students. She uses both hands to carry a big box of lecture notes. She walks upstairs to the beginning of each row. Then she puts the box down on the floor and picks up a pile of notes and passes them to the first student, so he or she can pass to the rest of the row.

“Hey doll,” a young man with a Red Sox cap yells. “Do you need my help?” He blinks his eyes, and all the lecture notes come out from the box and fly to every student, so that everyone has one. Many students stand up, clap and whistle. They are all happy with this great idea. Why hassle to distribute the notes row by row?

“Order, order, order!” Professor O’Marco cries. And many of the students cool down and sit down. “My fellow students, we do not use unnecessary magic. Please sit down.” He calls the Red Soxer to sit down.

“Now listen.” Professor O’Marco continues. “Magic is our tool. It is our job. We use magic when we work. Do we use magic to fry an egg? Do we use magic to bake a cake? The answer is definitely no. Can you hear me? No. No! No!!” He speaks louder and louder, what has happened? Leslie, Lung and Thomas look back. The Red Soxer is still using magic to distribute the handouts. Suddenly he twitches and he can’t do magic. The notes in the air fall. He shrinks and becomes a young baby, a toddler of two or three years old. His clothes are too big for him,, so as is his cap.

“Please observe what we told you in the Fairies’ Handbook,” Professor O’Marco says.

“Everyone has been allocated a mentor, and your mentor had guided you to find your own Fairies’ Handbook. I guess every one of you should have read that. So, please don’t violate the rules, if you don’t want to be,” he uses his index finger to point to the Red Soxer, and says, “him.” His magic makes Red Soxer return to his normal shape.

“Now, my fellow students,” he continues. “Learning magic is the same as learning martial arts. Kung Fu masters perform Kung Fu on appropriate occasions, such as public performance or martial arts competitions. They don’t use Kung Fu to bully others. As a fairy, please be reminded you always use magic in your job, not for fun.”

And he stared at the Red Soxer again.

“Any more questions?” Professor O’Marco asks. “If not, class commences.”

At last, the class finishes. The work in the music shop finishes. The day finishes. Leslie goes back to his home at Phiphidhahi Island. Before that, he sees Angel smoking at her yard.

“Hey boy,” Angel says, and she puts off the cigarette by magic, “come to my place. There is something I have to inform you.”

Inform? Sounds serious, Leslie thinks.

Both Angel and Leslie grab a seat. “Now, Christmas is coming. The management board are always watching your performance, and they are thinking about the possibility of letting only one Santa Claus to be responsible for the role this year.”

Leslie is listening carefully. “So?”

“So, let me tell you the truth: the manager is very disappointed with the quality and quantity of the letters to Santa Claus this year. I am 90% sure only one of you will be accepted is Santa Claus. Hence one of you will not be given immortality and will have

to vanish. So, try your best.”

“Did the manager tell you that?”

“As your mentor I always have to meet management. Recently they made a seasonal assessment of the performance and progress of both of you. Santa Claus is not a tooth fairy. There is a regular demand for tooth fairies every year as there is always the same amount of children losing their teeth. But the workload of Santa completely relies on the amount of letters we get from children. Hence the workload may vary.”

“So one of us can’t be Santa Claus?”

“If any of you can’t make any progress in the future, he can’t be a fairy, he has to vanish.” Angel put down her cup and plate. “However, the management promise if both of you perform well in the class, both of you could be selected as Santa Claus.”

“I better help him, I should,” Leslie murmurs to himself. “It is very lonely to work alone for the next eight hundred years.”

“That’s why I say be good to him,” Angel says. “If he fails, you will be the only Santa Claus in the world. If he passes, your work load will be halved.”

“I see. Sounds fair,” Leslie says. “So I should assist him to pass every test.”

“Naturally.”

They remain silent for a while. At this moment, Lung comes in.

“Hello.” Lung stands in front of the door and knocks.

“Come on in.” Angel waves at him.

“Sorry I’m late,” Lung says.

“So, what is the agenda for today?” Angel asks.

“I’ve read the course handouts,” Leslie says. “Today’s agenda is ‘How to find a nice kid who deserves a Christmas gift.’”

“Let him answer, let him show off. The manager is watching.” Angel coughs, she talks to Leslie by telepathy.

Leslie bows his head and coughs.

“What? What made you both cough?” Lung asks.

“Tea, the tea is too sweet. Sputum,” Leslie says. He points to the tea cup on the table.

“Yes, sputum,” Angel says.

“You two drink from the same cup?” Lung asks.

“Ah...” Angel can’t find an answer. She looks at Leslie. “My fault. I refused to wash one more cup. I asked him to use my cup. I am lazy.”

“Oh, right, lazy.” There is a sinister smile on Lung’s face.

“No more fun.” Angel changes the subject suddenly. “Let’s start today’s training. So, how can Santa Claus find out who is eligible for a Christmas gift?”

Lung looks at Leslie. He wants Leslie to answer. Leslie looks at Lung with a shy smile. He wants Lung to answer because he wants Lung to show off himself.

“We can use sky-eye to watch the Christmas gift applicant. We can see if he behaves

well most of the time,” Lung says.

“Yes, but you can’t watch all children all the time. You don’t have that much time to do so,” Angel says.

A moment of silence.

“On average a Santa Claus is able to deliver twenty-four gifts every Christmas, plus travelling time, regardless of the location of the children. However, you will receive over 5,000 letters from all over the world requesting Christmas gifts.” Angel says.

Leslie and Lung listen carefully.

“Therefore, you have to observe the behavior of 5,000 children to choose twenty-four of them. So you can see it is impossible for one Santa to do it.” Angel says.

Lung rotates his eyes to do the calculations. Leslie nods his head.

Leslie flips over the handbook. He seems want to look for something but even he doesn’t know what he wants. Lung is a little bit nervous, somehow annoyed, he rubs the mug gently.

“Another thing is, as a Santa Claus, you have to be physically and mentally fit and ready to take up challenges. You have to finish distributing all the Christmas gifts in one day. And the children are scattered over the whole world. You have to be punctual and precise about locations. Clear?” Angel says.

“So, next lesson is to teach you climbing,” Angel adds. “Who do you think is the best cliff hanger in the world?”

“Please don’t tell me you are talking about Spiderman. I can’t believe he is a member of the fairicle.” Leslie says. Then Angel stares at him.

“Yes, but he is not a fairy. He is a Redcliffe with supernatural power,” Angel says.

“Now we are going to let Koalaman be our guest speaker.”

“Koalaman?” Leslie and Lung look at each other. “Someone from Toyworld or Disneyland?” Leslie says.

In the middle of the living room comes a hula hoop, with a hole of approximately one metre in diameter. A Koala climbs up slowly from the hula hole. He is a man approximately 140-145 cm tall with a koala face. This makes him look funny. When he stands on the floor, the hula hoop disappears.

“Hi, I am Mr. Koala.”

“I can tell,” Leslie murmurs.

“Koalas are expert in climbing. We can sleep on the trees with hands and feet holding on the tree. So I am invited to teach you climbing.”

“First of all, let’s use magic power to make ourselves invisible,” Koalaman becomes transparent soon after. “We are going to practice outside the house. In order not to scare our neighbours, we have to be invisible.” He gets two Christmas hats from his tool bag and passes the hats to Leslie and Lung.

“Wear this,” Koalaman says, “It will makes you invisible.”

Then Leslie and Lung wear the hats and become transparent.

“Now come over here.” Koalaman leads them to the unit outside.

“When you deliver a gift to a child, you will ride on your reindeer cart and arrive at the roof of the building where he lives,” Koalaman says. “Then next, you have to climb to the unit he lives in. Now we are in the era of skyscrapers. No more chimneys, modern Santa Clauses do not enter children’s houses through chimneys. Hence you have to learn how to climb.”

Lung and Leslie listen carefully.

“We have to use the eight-point-method to climb. The eight-points contacting the surface are your hands, elbows, knees and feet. Make use of the eight-points to generate friction with the surface so that you won’t fall,” Koalaman continues. “Let me show you.” The transparent Koalaman climbs on the wall. He moves quickly and climbs up to the first level of the house and quickly enters in the window.

He leans out of the window from the bedroom on the first floor and says, “Can you see that?”

“You move so fast,” Leslie says. “Can’t see.”

Koalaman jumps out from the window back to the ground floor.

“Appear,” he says. Then he, Leslie and Lung appear.

“Now, listen,” Koalaman says. “To climb on the wall or any vertical surface, the essence is not to fall. When you fall, you can’t climb up.”

“Bullshit,” Leslie says.

“So jump up to catch a point by your right hand and right elbow. You will fall. Before you fall, use your left hand and left elbow to grab a point higher. At the same time, fix your knees and feet at some points to support your body. Repeat the above steps, then you can climb. The main point is: speed. Climb higher before your body falls off.”

“Sounds easy, theoretically. But how?” Leslie asks.

“Try these on.” Koalaman removes the gloves from his hand and passes them to Leslie. They are Koala gloves, two thumbs and three fingers. “They will help you grab the surface.”

Leslie puts on the gloves. “Oh! How amazing! I can feel my hands’ shape changing. I have two thumbs! See!” Leslie shows his hands with two thumbs.

“Now you will find it easier to climb,” Koalaman says.

“Let’s see,” Leslie says. He jumps up and uses his right hand to grab the wall. He is able to fix himself in the air with only one hand on the wall. But soon he slides down back to the ground.

“Give me back the gloves, I’ll show you,” Koalaman says.

Leslie takes off the gloves and returns them to Koalaman.

“When you hold your body on the wall by using only your right hand to grab the surface, you will fall,” Koalaman explains and demonstrates. “Before you fall off, use your left hand, left elbow, knee and feet to climb up higher, like this.”

“Before you fall, you climb. Before you fall, you climb. Eventually you will climb up to the first floor.” Koalaman illustrates with movements. At last, he climbs up to the first floor.

“Your turn,” He removes his gloves and throws them to the ground floor. Lung gets them.

Lung puts on the gloves. He climbs carefully and slowly. He follows Koalaman’s instructions, climbs higher before one limb falls off. At last, he climbs into the first floor.

“Hey, your turn,” Lung removes his gloves and throws them to Leslie.

Leslie puts on the gloves and climbs up as Lung and Koalaman did. He climbs to the first floor. When he jumps off from the window to the bedroom, he loses his balance and falls. Lung steps up to help him by holding him under his arms.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m OK.” Leslie shivers when they are so intimate. He gives an embarrassed smile. Then tries to stand without Lung’s help.

“At this moment, the service user will be sleeping. What you do is put down the Christmas gift beside his bed. And don’t forget to find out the respective adult in the house. Put a ‘memory stick’ into his nose,” Koalaman says.

“Memory stick?” Leslie asks. “128GB USB driver?”

“This is a memory stick.” Koalaman brings out a 10 cm long, 2-3mm diameter stick.

“Put it into the adult’s nose until it disappears. Then he will have the memory of buying and putting down the Christmas gift. Hence, the next day when the kid wakes up, someone will be able to explain to him how and where the gift came from.”

“I presume it is a USB driver sponsored by Lenovo,” Leslie still makes fun.

“Leslie!” Koalaman shouts, “Where do you put your gifts for other children when you are delivering a gift to a particular child?”

“Leave them in the big red bag?”

“I know. But where do you put your big red bag?” Koalaman adds.

“Put it on my back?” Leslie asks.

“The load of gifts will increase your weight, makes it harder to climb. What if the bag breaks and the gifts fall from the 38th floor? You should leave the bag in your sleigh.”

Leslie feels bad.

“Next time when I am teaching, no more jokes, unless you think you are the best Santa Claus ever, who doesn’t need to listen to the lecturer.” Koalaman is mean to Leslie.

“That’s Ok, don’t mention it.” Lung pats Leslie’s head and puts it on his shoulder.

“So, remember the procedures. Park your sleigh on the roof of the target building. Determine whether to climb down from the roof or climb up from the ground, depends on which way is faster. Make yourself transparent, bring the respective gift and fix it on your back. Then climb into the kid’s room. Put down the gift, and put a memory stick into the adult’s nose.” Koalaman repeats the steps again.

“Will there be any mock practice for us before Christmas?” Leslie asks.

“Good question.” The eleventh of August will be the birthday of a young girl called Lisa, in Chicago. Bring a present for her, but pretend it is from her mother.”

“That is next Thursday,” Leslie says. “We have less than a week to practice.”

“So both of us are responsible for delivering a gift to her?” Lung asks.

“No, she lives in a skyscraper there. You have to try to deliver a gift to someone in an apartment. And Leslie will be responsible for this. You will go together and observe,” Koalaman says.

“Then will I be assigned some place for mock practice?” Lung asks.

“Yes, next day in Edmonton,” Koalaman says. “This time you have to deliver another birthday gift to a boy called Graham. He lives with his family in a house there. You don’t have to climb. But you will have to follow other procedures for delivering a gift. And Leslie will go with you and observe.”

Leslie and Lung look at each other.

“Take your time, practice skyscraper climbing. You must pass your mock test,” Koalaman says.

Life goes on as usual. Lung and Leslie have their routine job. They sell musical instruments as usual. After their ‘human job’ they go practicing wall climbing together. Basically they master the skills and techniques of wall climbing. However, they still need more practice to improve their skills. So every morning they go together to the

city area of Diment Island where they can find skyscrapers and practice their climbing skills there. While practicing, they make themselves invisible. Only they can see each other. It is not an easy week. In the evenings they go to different locations to try climbing different surface areas. Before training each of them has their own role, their own job. So after they finish work every day they feel exhausted and fatigued. Both Lung and Leslie lie on the sofa at Angel's home after finishing work in the evening.

"It isn't easy," Angel is washing the dishes in the kitchen. "I learnt climbing skills when I was young. That's why I know it is not easy. As a tooth fairy, I had to deliver gifts to children as well. When I was an intern I had to go to school at day time and practice in the evenings. Hence I understand what you feel."

"Why can't we fly to that child's home? Why hassle to climb?" Lung says.

"It is the rocket era. Men live on Mars. Santa Claus uses a reindeer sleigh and climbs barehanded. Kids who see us will tease us," Leslie says.

"You want to fly? OK. Go ahead. Show me how to fly upstairs." Angel finishes cleaning the dishes and dries her hands.

"How easy," Leslie says. He tries to fly through the air. He starts by playing tricks in the air. He acts as if he is very relaxed about flying in the air. Nevertheless, he does not fly upstairs. On the contrary, he falls onto the floor.

"Now you should know flying is not easy. It takes a lot of energy." Angel prepares a

cup of coffee and says, "Walking is easier than running, running is easier than swimming, than climbing and than flying. So flying uses more energy than climbing. That's why Santa Claus has driven a reindeer sleigh for thousands of years."

"I presume I can enjoy flying." Leslie breathes deeply.

"You can do it if you like it. But flying is not as easy as Superman." Angel sips some coffee.

Full time work and study after work is not an easy life, especially when study is something physical and practical. They try climbing different skyscrapers. They infiltrate the building and mock up the process of delivering a present.

"Seems easy," Leslie says one day when they have finished practice, "Just like doing lab experiments. If you follow every step carefully, you won't get lost."

"I don't think it is easy at all." Lung says. "I am not you. I don't have any experience doing experiments at school."

"So you were an arts stream student in high school?"

"I just finished primary. I am not well-educated, so I can't find a good job. I was a vehicle mechanic in Xian."

"Don't pretend. You must be joking," Leslie says. "Your English is pretty good. I thought you must have attended uni."

"I don't speak English," Lung says. "But I think you speak good Chinese."

"No," Leslie says, "I don't speak Chinese."

“How come? I can hear you speak Chinese but you can hear me speak English. But actually both of us are speaking our own languages.”

“Oh, they call it fairicle,” Leslie tries to explain. “Maybe because we are both inside the fairicle, we can understand each other.”

“Or as we are fairies, we speak and understand all languages. All languages which go into our ears become our own language. Sounds reasonable, right?”

“I am thinking of something interesting. Why don’t we take the reindeer to travel to a foreign country? Let’s try to talk to people there, see if we can communicate.” Leslie is suggesting something bad. He should not use the reindeer for work to do something private.

“What, so redundant,” Lung says. “We are now in Whantanu. You don’t speak Whantanuan. I don’t speak Whantanuan. But still we can communicate with local people. This proves we have magic power to use foreign languages.”

“Not really,” Leslie replies without thoroughly considering Lung’s suggestion. “What about if these islands are within the fairicle, so that we can talk and understand different languages? This magic may vanish if we are outside the fairicle. What do you think?”

“Well, as I have said, I don’t care.” Lung opens his hands and says, “I don’t have the curiosity to prove anything.”

“Sure?” Leslie asks. “Don’t you want to find out why I speak English and you speak

Mandarin but we can communicate?”

“Because the Tower of Babel hasn’t been built yet,” Lung walks away without looking back at Leslie. “If you want to go proving it you go ahead. I’ll pretend I know nothing.”

Leslie looks at Lung’s back. Lung does not look back. He seems determined not to join Leslie.

The next day, Leslie and Lung are working in the music shop. The shop is not busy. They stand by the piano. Leslie is giggling.

“Did someone tell you you look like a jerk when you are giggling about nothing?” Lung asks.

“Yesterday I went to a village in Papua New Guinea. I talked with a villager. Guess what I’ve got?” Leslie is still giggling.

“It was eight p.m. when we finished building climbing yesterday,” Lung says. “Are you crazy? I was exhausted when I got home. But you still have energy to do something redundant.”

“Hah. I saw him selling papayas in a grocery shop. I asked for one. He was so happy that he shook hands with me. Then he got all the money from the till,” Leslie gets out some PNG money from his pocket.

“What? How dare you!” Lung says. “What did you do to him?”

“No, no, no,” Leslie says. “I did nothing. I just asked him in English, how much is a papaya. Then he turned to the till and withdrew all the money for me and then pushed me out.”

“You find it very funny.”

“No. The funniest thing is, magic is nonsense. We can only apply magic within the fairicle, in Whantanu. That man in PNG didn’t understand what I was talking about.”

A customer waves his hand for help. Lung goes to help him.

“You,” Lung turns to Leslie, points to him with reproving eyes.

“It’s so funny,” Leslie talks to himself. “I should go to other islands next time. Ho ho ho.” And he takes out the PNG money from his pocket again.

That’s the night Leslie has to go to Chicago to deliver a gift to Lisa.

In Lisa’s house, there are two bedrooms. She sleeps alone in the small room. Her parents sleep in the master room.

Leslie and Lung land from the reindeer sleigh on the roof of the building.

“So, let me help you to refresh your memory,” Lung says. “What is Lisa’s birthday tomorrow?”

“Her 12th birthday.”

“You have to use the memory stick. Let a family member be the one to send her the gift. Who is the target member?”

“Her mom, Mrs. White,” Leslie says. “No worries. I really don’t need to double check. I can remember all the job details.” And he starts to climb downstairs.

“Wait a minute,” Lung says. “Last question. Who else is in the target location?”

“Her father. They are a family of three,” Leslie puts his hand on Lung’s shoulder and says. “Come on. No worries. I can do it in fifteen minutes. And then let’s go for a Mongolian barbeque downtown.”

Here Leslie puts on his koala gloves and climbs down. When he arrives at Lisa’s place, he is surprised by what he sees from the window. There is a man sleeping on the sofa. Wait. Isn’t it a three-person family?

He sneaks into Lisa’s place carefully. He investigates the man on the sofa. He goes into the master bedroom. Correct. Lisa’s parents are on the bed. Then who is this guy? Leslie squats down. He uses his index finger to touch the man’s temple. A vision comes out. He can see the man pushing a luggage trolley walking out from the airport lobby. And the man hangs out with Lisa’s family. He paid the dinner bill. So now Leslie knows this man is her uncle. He has come to Chicago for a vacation.

“Oh, he is generous,” Leslie talks to himself. “He buys Lisa everything.”

While he is wondering why there is a man not on the target information list, he forgets to make himself invisible. Mr. White comes out from the bedroom and sees Leslie standing next to the uncle. He goes back to the bedroom and wakes the mom up.

“Honey. Honey,” Mr. White says. “Wake up! Someone has sneaked into our home!”

“What?” Mrs. White wakes up immediately and follows him to the hall.

They hide in the hall, observing what Leslie is going to do.

“This is a generous uncle,” Leslie says. “Why not put the memory stick into his nose and pretend the gift is given by him?” Then he puts the stick into the uncle’s nose.

However, the stick comes out. Leslie tries another nostril. It also does not work.

“He has put something into Paul’s nose!” Mrs. White whispers.

“Sh...hhh,” Mr. White says. “Don’t alert him. Or we might get hurt. Come.”

And he leads her to the bedroom.

“It seems he is not here for money, not hurting us,” Mr. White says. “Listen. He is putting some drug into Paul’s nose. He is a drug dealer.”

“How come? Sneak into our house and put some drug in Paul’s nose?”

“He is your brother’s bad company,” the father says. “Last time he came to visit us, he got drunk in a bar and involved in a fight. I have told you that he is a bad guy. You know what? He is not sleeping. He let the drug dealer come in and now they are enjoying the drug.”

“Then let me kick him out.”

“No.” The father stops her. “They are intoxicated. They are confused. They don’t know what they are doing. Let’s go to sleep. He will go when the drug finishes.”

Leslie tries again to put a memory stick into Paul’s nose. However, he can’t.

“Hey, what is taking you so long?” Lung telepathies Leslie. Lung talks on the roof, Leslie can hear in the flat.

“The job details were wrong,” Leslie says quietly. “There is a guest in the living room. I tried to put the memory stick into his nose but I can’t.”

“Follow your plan,” Lung says. “They asked you to put the stick into the mom’s nose. Just follow suit.”

“What about the guest?”

“Ignore him,” Lung says. “Go to the mom.”

Leslie goes to the master bedroom. Mr. and Mrs. White pretend to be sleeping. Leslie tries to put the stick into Mrs. White’s nose. She thinks it is a drug, but she doesn’t want to alert the burglar. So she rubs her nose to expel the stick.

Leslie feels awkward. He steps back and thinks. Then he tries to do it on the father. When Leslie approaches the father, he turns to the mom, grabs her cheek towards him and kisses her. Their noses are facing each other so that Leslie can’t put the stick into anyone’s nose.

Leslie gets pissed off. He stares at the stick, it bends into a U shape. Even though Mr. and Mrs. White’s noses are close to each other, Leslie is able to put the U shaped stick into the mom’s nose. He did it. He goes back to the living room, gets the gift and puts it under Lisa’s bed. Then he climbs out the window and climbs back to the roof.

Lisa wakes up for the toilet. She rubs her eyes and gets down the bed. She sees a gift

next to her bed. This is a Barbie set, and she unwraps it.

“Mom.” Lisa goes to her mom’s and dad’s room and says. “Is it my birthday present?”

“Do you like it?” Mom and dad get down from the bed. The memory stick functions.

Lisa hugs mom and dad.

Leslie gets back to the roof.

“Hoo.” He sighs. “Nearly failed.”

“I know. I watched you by Sky-eye,” Lung says. “You shouldn’t have hassled the uncle.”

“But he is a big spender,” Leslie says. “A visiting uncle buying his niece a big birthday gift sounds more likely.”

“Come on man,” Lung can’t agree. “He was not in the job plan. The memory stick was designed for the mom. That’s why you couldn’t put it into his nose.”

“You will never know if you don’t give a try.”

“I would advise you to follow the commands and orders.”

“That’s the difference between you and me and between Kiwi and Chinese,” Leslie says.

“What you had was subordinated education. Teachers told you to say yes, yes, yes.

You are just like ducklings following their mum. Quark, quark, quark.”

“Anyway.” Lung still thinks it is an excuse like a pupil who says he was late because the bus was late.

A 30-year-old lady is standing on the top floor of another building. The lady is wearing a purple one piece dress with a yellow scarf. She has her index finger on her temple. She is sky-eyeing.

The next day, Lung has his mock practice as well. Everything goes fine. He follows the job order and completes the task.

A few days later, Leslie and Lung have a lecture after work.

“There is something essential to your job, besides climbing skills,” Angel says. “The reindeer are your transport. Their maximum flying speed can be around 4420 km per hour. However, they need a lot of food to supply their energy. So you have to plan your route well, feed them every time after you deliver a gift.”

“So what do they eat?”

“Fuel Fruits.” Angel magics a fruit into her hand. It is a small yellow and purple round thing, as small as a tennis ball. “1-2kg Fuel Fruit is enough for a reindeer for the whole day.”

“How many reindeers do we have?” Lung asks.

“Four is enough.”

“And where can we find the Fuel Fruit?” Lung asks. “Each of us needs 8kg.”

“Now I know why they chose us to be the successors of Santa Claus,” Leslie says, “You were a vehicle mechanic. I was a pilot. Both of us have to calculate the maths

between distance and fuel. Just like now. But definitely I prefer to be a pilot more.”

“I’ve told you before,” Lung says, “jì lái zhī , zé ān zhī’ . Enjoy and satisfy with your present.”

“I have a family in Auckland. I enjoy family life.” Leslie says.

“Don’t fool me,” Angel says, “As a pilot you always have to stay outport. How can you enjoy family life?”

“That’s what I am thinking,” Leslie says, “A flying job is not suitable for me at this stage.”

“Alright guys, we’ve go too far,” Angel says. “Here, I have some seeds. Plant them in your backyard. Now I have two missions for you: a. take care of the fuel flowers; b. build rapport with the reindeer.”

“Fair enough,” Leslie says.

“After we’ve planted the foodfuel seeds, what should we do next?” Lung asks.

“Basically the Fuel Fruits are common fruits. Give them sufficient sunlight and water.

That’s it,” Angel says. “The only difference is: you have to talk to them, confess to them what you have done wrong during the day.”

“Confess to a plant?” Leslie says. “Are you serious?”

“Foodfuel flowers like listening to people’s confessions. This helps them grow better,” Angel says.

“What will they do besides grow better?” Lung asks.

“No worries. Flowers do not have vocal cords. They won’t tell others,” Angel says.

This time Leslie is responsible for watering the flowers. He looks around and makes sure nobody is around before he waters the plants. “You know what? Since the first time I met Angel, I have privately called her the witch. No, no, no, don’t be misled. I never told anybody, not even Lung. I have called her witch in my heart,” he confessed to the flowers.

Next time Lung was responsible for watering. “I really didn’t like Angel at the very beginning. Well, now it’s better, for the first time I know her I really don’t like her. Someday a few weeks ago, she came to my stall and ordered chips. I added some dandruff into it,” Lung says. “She asked me where I purchased the table salt. She thought the dandruff was salt.” Lung says in a sly tone.

The next evening, Lung has just finished having a shower. He is rubbing his head with a towel. Along comes Angel.

“Hey, Lung,” Angel says.

“Yes, what can I do for you?” Lung says.

“Come to my place after work. I have something to talk to you and Leslie about.”

“About what?”

“You will find out then.”

After he finishes work, Lung goes to Angel’s place as promised. Leslie is already

sitting on the sofa.

“So, both of you are here. I want to hear your explanations. One calls me witch.

One added dandruff to my chips. Do you still see me as your mentor?” Angel is really cross.

“You said the flowers can’t speak! How come you know what I’ve told them?”

Leslie is puzzled and astonished.

“I will tell the children. The Tooth Fairy is a liar.” Lung says.

“You are the stupidest Santas in the world,” Angel says, and picks up a small device from the soil. “See? Eavesdropping device. And I have to remind you. I am no longer a Tooth Fairy. I’ve retired.”

“So evil. A former Tooth Fairy using eavesdropping device to spy.” Leslie says.

“Santa Claus trainee use dandruff as salt on chips. So evil,” Angel copies Leslie’s sentence structure.

“OK, we admit we were wrong. But you shouldn’t use something to spy.” Lung says.

“Suspension. Time out. 72 hours for being rude to your mentor.

Wa-gee-ma-gua-lee-gee-mair-zho!” Angel puts a spell on them.

Suddenly, they shiver. Something is wrong. Angel disappears. They look at each other.

The next day Leslie wakes up. He gets changed, brushes his teeth, washes his face,

and then goes to Angel's place for training.

"Sorry, suspension started last night. No class today," Angel says.

"Why? Don't take it too personally, just a joke, for fun only," Leslie says.

"May I warn you about one more thing? You guys have to copy the fairies' handbook out as punishment. If you can't finish before suspension ends, you will become redcliffe forever."

Leslie opens his mouth but can't find a word to say.

Lung comes along at this moment.

"What? Class hasn't started yet? Why are you standing here?" Lung asks.

"Come on, we got to go. She is serious this time," Leslie says.

"Go where? For what?" Lung asks.

"Come, let's go." Leslie grabs Lung's arm and pulls him out of Angel's place.

They go to Leslie's place.

"Listen. She means it this time. She suspended us. We have to copy the fairies' handbook out as punishment or else they will turn us into redcliffes, forever," Leslie says seriously.

"What? What punishment?"

"Remember yesterday evening she found us bad-mouthing her. She put a spell on us. Now we have to copy the book out or we will turn to redcliffes, understand?" Leslie says.

They have no other choice, except do the copying work like a primary pupil. Leslie is very unhappy about this punishment. This should be punishment for ten-year-old kids, not adults. Unhappy, he is grumpy at this arrangement.

During the 72 hours suspension from class, Leslie and Lung do not have to attend their Santa classes, but still have to work in the music shop. Today is not busy, so they talk about their previous life while polishing the piano.

“So you don’t have many toys in China?” Leslie asks.

“Not much, at least in my childhood.” Lung says. “I came from a poor village. The family of some classmates can supply them with toys, but not me.”

“What do you do in your childhood?” Leslie asks.

“I remember there was once a boy in my class comes from a rich family. His father was the general secretary of a department in the city council. He collected cartoon stickers. For each packet of sticker you purchase there are six at random. You would never know what you would get when you buy. So sometimes you would get something duplicated. Whenever he got an identical sticker, he would give the repeated one to me. So my favorite toy at childhood is collecting cartoon stickers.”

“Oh,” Leslie says, “It is girlie hobby. That’s why you are so sissy.”

“At last when I had my first love, I gave all the stickers to my girlfriend.”

“A sissy man as you had a girlfriend?” Leslie says, “Sounds amazing.”

“I know what you’ve said to Angel. You thought I was gay, didn’t you? Remember I

have sky-eye and telepathy. I can read your mind. I am not sissy, not gay. I am 100% a man.”

“Oh, Oh, I mean any harm,” Leslie is a little bit embarrassed. Why don’t you clarify yourself earlier if you know I was wrong?”

“I am not worry about how other people see me,” Lung sighs, “Now I can read other’s mind. From now on I know who likes me and who doesn’t, who is good to me and who is bad. Then what’s next? Will I be happier than a redcliffe? Now I know you misunderstood me. It makes me unhappy only. So what’s the point to have fairyship?”

“True True.” Leslie stops polishing the piano and sighs.

After the suspension and the punishment, the lectures resume. Leslie and Lung have an evening lecture at Angel’s place.

“To be a genuine fairy, immortality is essential,” Angel says. “The management board is going to grant you immortality, so that you can live up to 999 years old.”

Leslie and Lung look at each other.

“So, eternal life or up to 999 years old?” Leslie asks.

“Up to 999 years old,” Angel says. “Now this is a test of your wisdom and courage. You have to go to the Springs Fountain on the Nichigetsu Island to drink from the fountain water. Also, you have to collect the Heaven Herbs from the cave. They are the ingredients of the immortal elixir. The elixir can slow down people’s metabolism

by ten times. A typical man can live from seventy to ninety years. After taking the immortal elixir, one can live 700-900 years,” Angel explains to Leslie and Lung.

“Are there any dragons, monsters and demons on the island?” Leslie asks, grinning at Lung.

“Not only that,” Angel says, “Sometimes you will meet some immortal monks. They will set a task for you to complete, so that you can get access to the fountain and get the herbs.”

“Wow, immortal monks,” Leslie makes fun of that. “What should we call ourselves? Dynamic Duo or Adventure Bros?”

“Enough for today, Leslie,” Angel says. “Go and get prepared. The journey starts tomorrow at 7 a.m.,” Angel says.

“So, what’s next?” Leslie asks. “Should we load some gear? Swords? Three litres of water? Food? Or a first aid box?”

“No need,” Angel says. “The island used to be occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War. They named it Nichigetsu Island because half of it looks like Nichi, which is the sun in Japanese, and half of it looks like Getsu, which is the moon in Japanese. Above Nichigetsu Island, there is a Red Crown Cloud. Magic is ineffective under the cloud. If I were you, I would take something as simple as possible, and finish your trip as soon as you can. You will be given seventy-two hours to complete the task.”

“Not even prepare some food and drink? We will turn into redcliffes on the island.

We need food,” Lung says.

“There will be a food and beverage supply on the islands. There are fruit trees,” Angel says.

“So do you have a map of the island?” Leslie asks.

“Map of the Nichigetsu Island, here you are,” Angel says, and she magics a rolled map.

Leslie opens the map and reads.

“Nichigetsu Islands lies on the Pacific Ocean. Scientists say there was an undersea volcano which exploded millions of years ago. The magma cooled down and formed the island.” Angel tells the myth about the Island while Leslie is reading the map.

“We will provide a boat to take you from Galugalu to the island. However, transportation back to Galugalu is not guaranteed. You have to swim, or make your own transport,” Angel continues.

“I can tell how difficult it is before it starts,” Leslie said.

“That is to test your persistence and perseverance. And courage and wisdom as well,” Angel says. “If you can’t pass, that means you are not ready to be Santa Claus. You have to vanish.”

Leslie and Lung study the map carefully.

“C’mom boys. Sleep well tonight,” Angel says, “Kick start tomorrow morning is at six.

Kitties, follow me.” And Charcoal and Ghana follow her.

“Promise me,” Charcoal asks Leslie. “Come back safely. It is still a long way for us to go to learn how to be human. We need you.”

“It sounds like we are heading to some place seriously dangerous,” Leslie says.

“Do you think so?” Ghana adds.

The next day Lung and Leslie dress up as if going camping in the wild. They bring along a torch, lighter, jackknife, rope and three litres of water. They march to the pier and jump onto the boat. Leslie rows and Lung navigates.

“Originally the man who calls himself Trinity asks me to be a Santa Claus. He did not say I had to go on such an adventure, or even feed a cat,” Leslie complains.

“Don’t complain. It is a privilege to be selected as a Santa Claus. This adventure journey is to test our tolerance and persistence.” Lung stands up and lifts his hand to Leslie, asking to swap the roles.

“I think the so-called selection board is watching us, for fun,” Leslie says. “They have such almighty power to know everything. They must be hiding somewhere watching how awkward we are. They are going to tease us, make fun of us, watching us being embarrassed. They are enjoying nuts and beer while watching.”

“The management are always merciful and benevolent. They won’t tease humankind,” Lung retorts. He sweats while rowing. He wipes away the sweat on his forehead with his arm.

“If they are omnipotent, they are omniscient, then why do they create starvation, famine, wars and natural disasters of all kinds? Are they teasing human beings?” Leslie continues complaining.

“Wars are created by humankind, not by the Fairy Management Board,” Lung says.

“Then how about floods, earthquakes and others? We did not create them. God does.”

“Everytime the management board creates a disaster, they also create a lifeboat and a new land for us. This has happened from antediluvian to modern days,” Lung says,

“Yes, some innocent people may be killed, but most people will be led to a prearranged place. There they will start a new life. We were told in the class last time, remember?”

“Sounds familiar. Who said that before?” Leslie murmurs. “Ah, yes. Laura. My wife Laura said something similar when we argued about this topic.”

“Why mention her?” Lung says, “We are not allowed to disclose our personal facts. Not allowed to talk about our past life. I learnt this from the Fairies’ Handbook.”

“Then I’ll zip my mouth.” Leslie uses his hand to zip his mouth.

“Zip,” Lung does as well.

At last, they arrive at Nichigetsu Island. They land, take out the map and look around the beach. Transport back to Galugalu Island is really not provided. Their boat soon decomposes into branches and leaves after they land. They walk through the bush

towards the town.

The town is not very busy. It is really a backward town with no vehicles at all. People use bicycles and carriages. Hawkers are selling food and basic necessities at the road sides. Leslie remembers he has been to somewhere similar in South East Asia, perhaps Thailand or Laos. People are selling tropical fruits, meat buns, sugar canes, chestnuts and dumplings. Lung was told that Hainan Island in South China has markets like this. It is summer in Nichigetsu Island. People are wearing summer clothes, such as singlets and shorts.

“Hi,” a man who has been observing Leslie and Lung’s behaviour for a while says.

“Are you visitors on this island?”

“Yes,” Lung says. “How do you know?”

“Your clothes are different from ours.”

Nichigetsuans are wearing colourful short sleeves. Leslie and Lung are wearing dull colours. Leslie has a grey T-shirt and dark brown pants and Lung has a black top and dark blue jeans.

“What makes you come here?” the man asks.

“We are looking for the immortal elixir,” Lung says. “Do you have any idea where it is?”

“You are so lucky that you met me,” the man says, “How about you come to my house. We can do a trade.”

“Trade?” Leslie doubts, “What trade?”

“My name is Alan,” the man says. “Come to my place. I can give you the immortal elixir you want.”

“What can we trade? We don’t have money,” Leslie says. “I mean, we have a torch, jack knife, sleeping bag. But all are essential for the rest of the journey. Can’t give you anything.”

“Sometimes Nichigetsuans ask for something invisible,” Alan says. “You can provide us with courage, wisdom, good memories and things like that to trade for goods.”

“What? What do they want my wisdom for?”

“Then the trader will become as smart as you and you will become a fool,” Alan says.

“If you trade your eyesight, you will lose your eyesight. If you trade your voice, you will lose your voice. That simple.”

“I have to lose my voice forever to trade for an immortal elixir? Too costly! I can’t do that!” Leslie says. “What about trading ... hair? The growth of my hair. I am willing to sacrifice the growth of my hair forever to trade for the seeds, how’s that?”

“No one says forever. Sometimes they only want your eyesight or voice for a short period of time, say one day or a couple of hours,” Alan says.

“So you are not the eighth pawn shop,” Lung says.

“What is the eighth pawn shop?” Leslie asks.

“It is a mythical story in China. People can trade something invisible there. The

eighth pawn shop will never redeem the goods you trade,” Lung says.

Gradually they entered the market of Nichigetsu Island. They can see people from all walks of life walking and shopping in the market. It is quite a busy street. There are many shops and temporary stalls.

“The eighth pawn shop?” Leslie wonders.

“It is controlled by the God of Darkness,” Lung explains. “There you can trade anything for a great deal of money. Your eyesight, voice, wisdom, good memories. You can provide them anything invisible to trade for a million dollars. However, once you have traded you cannot claim back your collateral. Never.”

“Sounds evil. Someone willing to lose his good memories forever to trade for money?” Leslie asks.

“Some do,” Lung says. “That’s why the eighth pawn shop can survive for hundreds of years.”

“I live in a small house over there.” Alan leads them to his place.

“This is my wife Lorna, and my daughter Yvie.” Alan says. “Lorna got a serious fever when giving birth to Yvie. Since then she has been blind.” In the house there is a young lady and a five-year-old little girl.

“I feel sorry about that,” Leslie says.

“Is it you, Alan? The lady stands up and asks.

“Yes, I’ve got two foreign friends from the market. Leslie and Lung have come to

visit us.” Alan turns to them and continues, “This is what I want to trade. One of you gives your eyesight to Lorna, so that she can see what our daughter looks like.”

“I don’t want to be blind.” Lung says.

“No, we don’t want to be blind.” Leslie adds.

“I won’t want your eyesight forever,” Alan says. “A few hours are enough. I will give you some immortal elixir. How many hours are you willing to give?”

Leslie pulls Lung over and says, “I will do the trade. We can go back to the Galugalu Island tomorrow morning. It is only about one pm today. We can stay in his place overnight and start early tomorrow. I think I can do the trade and take the time for a rest. What do you think?”

“Do you think it is too risky? We have never traded invaluable and invisible things before. No one knows the potential risk,” Lung says.

“No risk! Only if Alan is not an honest person,” Leslie says. “If there is any risk in such trade, Angel would have warned us. But she did not. Nichigetsuan are peasants and fishermen. I think they are trustworthy!”

“What about trading eyesight? I don’t want you to take the risk. I am worried about you.” Lung holds Leslie’s wrist.

“Save it man. There may be some more challenges ahead that you can take the role in. What if trading eyesight causes pain? How could you bear it?” Leslie says, “Trust me. I will do it.”

“Hey Alan,” Leslie turns to him and says, “We have compromised. I will give my eyesight to Lorna for twelve hours. You give us 1 kg of elixir. How’s that?”

“Fair trade,” Alan says, “Deal.”

They do the trade. Lorna and Leslie sit facing each other. Alan sits between them. All of them have closed their eyes. Alan uses his hands to rub Leslie’s eyes. He gets something glittering from them. He puts the thing on Lorna’s eyes and rubs. Soon the radiance disappears.

Both Lorna and Leslie open their eyes. Lorna looks at Alan and says, “Alan! Alan! I can see you! Where is Yvie?”

Lorna was standing besides the front door initially. When Yvie hears her mom’s call she runs to her.

“Mom!”

“Yvie! My lovely baby. I can see you now.”

Leslie and Lung hold each other’s hands.

“Leslie, I am here. Can you see me?” Lung says and waves his hand in front of Leslie.

“I am fine. Just twelve hours. Pretend I go to bed earlier today,” Leslie says.

“Yvie! You are such a lovely baby.” Lorna cuddles her daughter and says. “Thanks for your help.” She turns to Leslie and says in a thankful voice, “Thank you. I am so glad that I can see my lovely angel.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” Leslie says.

“Honey, come over here.” Alan calls Lorna over to have a private talk.

“How do you feel?” Lung asks Leslie.

“I try to open my eyes to see something but I can’t,” Leslie says. “I know my eyes are already open but I can’t see anything. No matter how hard I try I still can’t see anything. It is a little bit odd.”

“We are going to stay here overnight. We will leave tomorrow morning. Be patient,” Lung says.

“What are they doing? I can feel that they are arguing about something,” Leslie says.

“Sort of. Forget about them. What couple never argues? We argue. None of my business,” Lung says.

Alan finishes the secret discussion with Lorna, turns to Leslie and Lung and says,

“Welcome, our honourable guests, to the Nichigetsu Island. We must get some good food for you. Hey, do you want to go to the market with me to buy some food for tonight’s dinner?”

“Do you mind going by yourself? I want to stay with Leslie,” Lung says.

“You have to go with me to choose your own food. I don’t know what your favourite is. You better choose by yourself,” Alan says. “Moreover, we are going to buy a lot. I need you to help me to carry the food.”

“But...”

“Come on. Let Lorna spend some time with Yvie. She will look after your friend as well.” Alan holds Lung’s wrist and says, “Let’s go.”

“Then you take a rest. We need energy for tomorrow’s journey,” Lung reminds Leslie before he leaves with Alan.

Leslie lies on the bed. He tries to sleep but he can’t. He can hear that Lorna is playing with Yvie in the house. The little girl says she is going to show mom her art work from school. Leslie doesn’t want to interrupt them. So he stays on the bed. He can’t see the clock. He can’t see the length of the sun’s shadows changing. He doesn’t know how long Lung and Alan have been gone. Some time later, he falls asleep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Leslie can hear repetitive sounds in his dream, regular, continuous and mechanical.

Leslie tries to open his eyes. He can see some blurry images. There is white light on the ceiling. Something is covering his nose and mouth. He can’t move, but he can rotate his eyes. He looks around. He can see something is connected to his arm. But all the images are too blurry. He can’t be sure what they are.

Some noise wakes him up from the dream. He hears some footsteps coming from outside.

“Honey,” Leslie can hear Alan whispering, but he can’t see if Alan is really there. He pretends he is sleeping and listens to them carefully.

“Is this fellow sleeping?” Alan asks softly.

“Yes, hey honey. I feel guilty,” Lorna says.

“Let’s talk after we leave,” Alan says softly. “Yvie. Come.”

“Hey. Where are you going? Where is Lung?” Leslie says.

No one answers. The family’s footsteps grow fainter. He calls out again. He steps down from the bed. However, he can’t see. He knocks on the door frame and walks slowly to the door, feeling his way along the wall with his hands.

“Alan! Lorna! Where are you?” Leslie cries in the front yard. “Lung! Lung! They are gone!”

Leslie can’t see anything. All he can do is stand in the front yard and wait for Lung.

A few minutes later, Leslie hears Lung come back. He can smell roast chicken and lemon.

“I got lost with Alan in the market. Has he come back?” Lung asks.

“They are all gone! Alan came back and took Lorna and Yvie away. They do not intend to return my eyesight to me!” Leslie says.

“What an evil guy,” Lung says. “Let’s go, go and get’em. They must be going to the pier to try to leave this island.”

“No, I can’t see the way,” Leslie says. “You go. Quick.” So Lung goes by himself.

When he arrives at the pier, Alan and his family are boarding a small ferry.

“You! Stop! Give my friend’s eyesight back!” Lung shouts to Alan.

“My wife had been waiting for five years for a pair of eyes. I am not going to give them back to you!” Alan says.

He is still standing on the pier. Lorna and Yvie are on the ferry.

“How dare you!” Lung rushes towards Alan. Alan retreats towards the ferry.

Lorna is scared by the fight between them. She moves backward and backward, loses her footing and slips off the edge of the ferry, down into the water.

Alan turns and cries, “Please, someone save her. I can’t swim!”

Lung jumps into the water immediately. He swims towards Lorna. Soon he pulls Lorna back to the shore. They come to the shallow water. Lorna is able to walk to the shore. She sits on the beach and breathes deeply. Alan gets a big towel from the ferry for Lorna.

“Are you alright?” Lung asks.

“Thank you very much,” Lorna says. “We treated you like that, and you still saved my life. You are such a kind person.”

Lung sips his lips and nods his head. He watches Lorna to check if she is fine.

“Honey, why don’t we give back his eyesight?” Lorna says. “I have been blinded for five years. I am fine if I can’t see for the rest of my life. I feel more than happy for this half-day that I have seen Yvie.”

“Lorna!” Alan protests.

“True,” Lorna says. “Twelve hours time is too much for me. I am happy to give back the eyesight to him. Without his help, I might have died. What is more important than life?”

The couple look at each other. At last, Alan surrenders. They go back to Alan’s house. Leslie is sitting in the dining room.

“Les.” Lung says. “Alan says he is willing to give back your eyesight.”

“What happened?” Leslie asks.

“A long story,” Lung says. “Will tell you later.”

“Come over here. Now I will give back your eyesight.” Then he does the change of eyesight spell again. The process is similar to that when Leslie passed his eyesight to Lorna. Leslie is so happy, he presumed he was going to be blind for the rest of his life. When he opens his eyes, it is a little bit too bright. He has to open them slowly. He sees Alan and Lorna. He knows it must be they who exchanged his eyesight back to him. They are not as bad as he presumed. Lung tells him what happened on the ferry pier.

“Thank you. I feel sorry about Lorna,” Leslie says.

“I am fine,” Lorna says. “I am used to being blind.”

“We have to go, we have to continue our journey.”

“It is getting dark. Better go tomorrow morning. I promised to accommodate you

tonight. I will keep that promise. Come to my place. Lung, you have to dry yourself before you go, right?" Alan asks.

"I believe they are not going to harm us this time. He is so gracious. Come on. I am getting hungry." Leslie says.

"Alright then." They go with Alan and his family.

The next morning, Alan prepares breakfast for Leslie and Lung. When they are having breakfast, Alan opens the map and shows them where they can find the elixir.

"Here is the 'Brightness and Darkness cave'. You must go through it to collect the elixir." Alan says, and he shows them a book. "Animals and plants in Nichigetsu Island."

Leslie opens the book and reads out the article. "Nichigetsu leaves. Irregular and changing shapes. Grow in complete darkness in the Brightness and Darkness cave. Whenever it sees the sunlight, it will melt and disappear. It is also called immortal elixir because it can help people slow down their metabolism."

"So what you are going to do is enter the cave when it is completely dark. You kneel down to grab some grass and soil. Put it in your bag. Then one of you walks out to the brightness and takes some of the grass out to the sunlight. If it disappears, then this is what you need," Alan says.

"Why does one of us have to stay in the cave?" Leslie asks.

"Say you grab some grass at point A. You don't know whether it is Nichigetsu leaves

or not, until you see it disappears under sunlight,” Alan explains. “If it does not, you have to go back to somewhere next to point A to grab another specimen of grass, and test if it is Nichigetsu leaves. So one of you has to stay in the cave as a marker.”

“You are so stupid,” Leslie says. “We can put a can of energy drink at the position we tried.”

“Not applicable,” Alan says. “Firstly, you have to try many different spots in the cave. You don’t have sufficient cans to set marks. Secondly, there is a kind of magic rock called ‘Imitator’ in the cave. It can change its shapes to imitate any object inside the cave. However, it doesn’t talk, you do. So one of you has to stay in the cave to tell the other one which area of grass you have tried.”

“Doesn’t sound easy.” Leslie says. “How did you know?”

“I just know the information from this book,” Alan says.

“So the feature of the grass is a. it has an irregular shape...” Leslie says.

“... and its shape always changes,” Lung adds.

“And b. it mutates to smoke and gas when it encounters sunlight,” Leslie continues.

“So how can it help us be immortal if it is so unstable and fragile?”

“The water from the Nichigetsu fountain will help,” Alan says, and he shows Leslie and Lung where it is on the map. “Use the water from the fountain to wash the grass which will make it stable.”

“So what does the map say?” Lung asks. “Where is the cave?”

“Let’s see,” Leslie takes out and opens the map. “Now we are at the south side of the island. In front of us there is a wood. Through the wood there will be a cave at the end.”

“Yes, the immortal leaves are there,” Alan says.

They pack up their backpacks and are ready to start their journey.

“Thanks for your help in locating the elixir,” Leslie says.

“It should be me saying thanks to you for offering Lorna a couple of hours of eyesight and saving her life,” Alan says.

“Hope we will see you again,” Lung says.

“You are always welcome to visit Nichigetsu Island,” Alan says. “Nice to meet you,” Leslie says and shakes hands with Alan. Then they leave and wave goodbye to Alan’s family.

They leave the village and soon they come to the forest. They walk up the hill through the forest. Along the way there are many unique fauna and flora. On a tree there is a monkey with purple hair. Light green gas comes out from a big brown mushroom. A half horse half man is eating the grass on the ground... Everything on the island is unique and exotic. Leslie thought they had been in a fairy tale - somewhere like Alice's Adventure in Wonderland, or Laputa in Gulliver's Travel. This is fairyland, not Whantanu. In Whantanu we have to work in music shop. It is a place for

semi-human-semi-fairy. But Nichigetsu Island is so exotic, which is completely a place for fairies.

“See, that is the hole, the cave,” Lung says.

“So, let’s go,” Leslie says. And they enter the cave.

“Put on a helmet first,” Lung says. “The cave is completely dark inside. It gets smaller and smaller and the ceiling gets lower and lower as we go inside. So we need a helmet to avoid hitting the ceiling.”

“Is it necessary?” Leslie asks.

“Better to do so. Trust me,” Lung says, and he puts on a helmet. Leslie follows.

Then they enter the cave. The cave is rocky rather than muddy. The walls are dry and solid.

“I remember Alan said the Nichigetsu leaves are deep inside the cave,” Lung says.

“Just walk, until we come to the end.”

“To the end!! How deep is the cave?” Leslie says, astonished.

“No idea. But walk slowly, move slowly. The cave is an irregular shape,” Lung says.

“Open you arms wide, touch the walls when you are wandering around to help locate yourself in the darkness.”

“And we better keep talking. The echoes help us to locate each other and reflect the size of the cave,” Leslie says.

“Good observation,” Lung says.

They go down two tunnels, beneath a stone arch, keeping away from the dripping water, the stalactites with their sharpened spines. They come upon a large open chamber, where the Nichigetsu leaves are located.

“Now we are here,” Lung says. “Remember what Alan said, the leaves will vanish in the light, then we’ll know it’s the miracle grass. They can’t stay visible in sunlight. Now, I am going to grab some leaves and bring them out of the cave and test them. You wait for me here.”

“Alright, I will listen for you.”

Lung grabs some leaves from the ground and puts them inside his bag and walks out.

Leslie stays in the cave. It is completely dark. Leslie had experienced the same feeling before. He can see nothing in the cave. He has nothing to do in the cave, while guarding the leaves. He tries to sing songs to kill some time. After about six or seven songs, Lung comes back.

“Leslie! Leslie!” Lung yells to notify Leslie. “No, it is not the one.”

Then Leslie kneels down and grabs a specimen of another grass. Lung goes out again to test it.

Leslie sings other songs while waiting. He is a true fan of Simon and Garfunkel. He sings *Scarborough Fair* and *Mrs. Robinson*. After another six or seven songs, Lung comes back to announce a disappointing result.

Leslie grabs another specimen. After he sings six or seven songs, Lung has still not

come back. He feels tired and doesn't want to sing. When it is completely silent and dark in the cave, he can hear some continuous uuuu sound.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

This is the second time he has heard the same kind of mechanical sound. The sound is repeating regularly. He stares into the dark, puzzled.

He closes his eyes. He can feel he is lying on a soft bed. Something sharp pricks into his arm. He can feel that there is something substantial pricking into his arm. A white shadow does that. It does it quickly and stays next to him for a while, does something else and then leaves.

"Leslie," a voice says.

"Leslie," the voice repeats.

Is it the white shadow's voice? Leslie thinks. He wants to reply to the voice but he finds it hard to open his mouth. He feels too weak to move.

"Les," the voice says.

"Les, where are you?" Now he can recognize it is Lung.

Perhaps it is a mythical cave that gives people illusions. I am here, waiting for Lung, he thinks.

This time Lung comes back with a disappointing result again.

“Let me do it this time. You take a rest here,” Leslie suggests.

“Are you sure? I am still fine,” Lung says.

“This time I’ll go out and test the leaves,” Leslie says. “If you feel bored in the cave alone, sing some songs.” Then he goes.

Sing songs? Good idea. Lung thinks. He used to be an amateur musician in China.

He sings eight folk songs while waiting for Leslie. Not long after, he can hear Leslie come back.

“Ok, we’ll take turns,” Lung says. “Let me go out and try this time.”

Leslie thinks this is a good idea. He stays in the cave and sings some *Simon and Garfunkel*, and some *Beatles* as well.

However, after singing ten songs, Lung does not come back.

After four more songs, Lung has still not come back.

Leslie is still waiting for Lung inside the cave. Leslie starts feeling nervous and restless. He is thinking about whether he should go and to find Lung. Staying in a completely dark environment alone for one hour is not easy.

Five more minutes later, he really wants to go, but at that moment he can hear a weak sound.

“Lung? Lung? Is it you?”

The weak sound is approaching him.

“Lung? Lung? Is it you?” Leslie can hear the echo of his voice in the cave.

The sound comes closer and closer.

“Leslie. Leslie. Are you there?” Lung’s voice is approximately twenty meters away.

“Yes, I am here. Are you alright? What took you so long?” Leslie says, and he opens his arms to search for Lung. Eventually, Leslie finds him.

“Lung, what happened?” Leslie asks.

“My eyes are blinded and my ears are deaf,” Lung says, “When I took the leaves out of my bag, I could see them turning to gas and disappear in the air. Suddenly I saw a bright light in the air. It was so bright that it blinded my eyes. Then I heard an explosive cracking sound. It was so loud that it deafened my ears. It took me longer to get back to the cave and back here.”

“Oh dear, I was blinded yesterday, now it's your turn,” Leslie says. “Let’s leave the cave first. Let’s go, follow me.” However, Lung does not move because he can’t hear. Leslie catches Lung’s hand, and spells “G-O” on his palm. Then Leslie puts Lung’s hand on his shoulder.

They walk through the cave and back to the entrance. Then they get back to the boat.

Leslie opens the handbook to see if there are any solutions.

“No? No? Why there is no solution to blindness and deafness caused by the Nichigetsu leaves?”

“I can feel you are looking through the handbook,” Lung says. “Are you looking for

the solution to blindness and deafness? Remember? The Nichigetsu Island is under the Red Crown Cloud. We are redcliffes. We do not have magic. I think it is getting dark. Let's go back to the village and find Alan before darkness falls."

Leslie looks at Lung. He does not refuse. He is worried about Lung's health.

"Come on. Let's go," Lung says. "We have to leave here before dusk. I am OK. We can do it. We can."

So they go back to Nichigetsu village. Since Lung is blind and walking slowly, it is dark when they get back to the village. All the villagers' huts are made of simple tile and brick. Their doors are all closed. Lung and Leslie are very hungry. There are many people in the main street. Some are old people and some are young. There is even a pregnant woman with young children. There is a man who looks like a merchant, since he has some goods with him. The old merchant watches them for a while, and gives them a smile.

"You are foreigners, aren't you?" the old merchant asks.

"Yes, we come from Whantanu," Leslie says and gives a smile.

"Your peer seems to have a little problem, doesn't he?" the old merchant continues.

"His eyesight is damaged by sharp light. His ears are damaged by loud noise. He is temporarily blind and deaf," Leslie says.

"You come from Whantanu. There are many fairies there," the old man says, "You must be one of them."

Lung can't hear. But Leslie is startled.

"Ho ho ho! It is regrettable that you cannot use your magic power under the red crown cloud. Or else you could solve your problem." The old man continues, "Come with me. I have some universal medications that can cure every disease."

"Help me to carry my stuff. Follow me," the old man says.

Leslie wants to tell Lung what happened. But he knows it is no use. Hence he puts Lung's hand on his shoulder, letting Lung know to follow him.

Leslie carries the old man's big box and follows him to his place. It is a simple hut. No bedroom, but there is a dining table in the centre of the room, with four chairs. Next to the table there is a single bed. On the other side of the hut is the kitchen. There is no extra fixture in this house. What Leslie can see at first sight after entering the house is there are boxes and props piled up irregularly and untidily.

"Are you sure you know what we need?" Leslie asks, "I don't mean to doubt you, but, this place really looks like a slums."

"Let me introduce myself first," the old man says. "I am Unohoo. I have been living on this Island for eight hundred years!"

"So you are a fairy?" Leslie wonders.

"How impolite you are!" Unohoo complains. He uses his stick to hit the floor and says, "I don't even know who you are."

"I am Leslie, this is Lung."

“I am not asking your name. I am asking your title, your working title.”

“We are, Santa Claus. Santa Claus trainees.” Leslie pauses at every word.

“Then you must see me before you graduate,” Unohoo says. “I have taken the immortal elixir. You will become how I am after you take it.”

“Why do you have the elixir? How do you know we need it? Who are you? Are you a retired fairy?” Leslie asks.

“How can I answer so many questions?” Unohoo says.

“Are you a fairy? Or a retired one,” Leslie says.

“Nope.”

“Who you are?”

“I am Unohoo.”

“I know,” Leslie says. “I am not asking your name. I am asking your occupation, your identity.”

“I am a doctor. I am the only doctor on this island. I am not that busy at all. Hence I buy and sell goods as well.”

“How do you know we have the elixir?” Leslie asks with an aggressive tone.

“Angel told me,” Unohoo says. “You will have met Angel before. We are good friends. I go to the Phiphidhahi Island once a week to visit her.” Unohoo is so hospitable. He gets some shortbread and tea for his guests.

“So, do you really have the medication for Lung’s problems?” Leslie asks.

“It takes time to prepare the herbs,” Unohoo says. “It is late at night. You better take a rest tonight, and the prescription will be ready tomorrow.”

Leslie still doubts the authenticity of this stranger.

“No need to worry. I am Angel’s good friend. Her friends are my friends,” Unohoo says. “I have the solution to your eyes and ears.”

“Now you have given me a challenge.” Leslie says, “Difficult to tell Lung.” He holds Lung’s hand and writes on it, “S-T-A-Y-H-E-R-E-T-O-N-I-G-H-T.” Then Lung nods his head.

Next day morning, Unohoo wakes them up. “Here comes breakfast. Wake up guys.”

Leslie wakes up, and wakes Lung up as well. They approach the dining table. The breakfast does not look nice. It is something muddy and mushy. It looks like porridge, but is grey in colour with bubbles coming out from it.

“I call it Mishiboshikoshitoshi.” Unohoo says. “This is something unique here. You can’t find anything similar outside here.”

“It is edible?” Leslie says.

“I can smell it is good,” Lung says.

“My nose is not as sensitive as yours, I can’t tell,” Leslie says.

“This one is especially for you.” Unohoo passes a bowl of Mishiboshikoshitoshi to Lung. He catches Lung’s hand and helps him to hold the bowl.

“Oh, thank you,” Lung says. Leslie assists Lung to sit down.

Lung takes the porridge. “It’s nice, sweet,” he says. “Try some,” he tells Leslie.

“This one is for you.” Unohoo passes another bowl to Leslie.

Lung relishes the porridge. This eases Leslie’s doubt. He starts eating it as well.

Suddenly, Lung does not feel well. He stops eating the porridge, and feels unrest in his chest. He holds his chest and starts breathing rapidly.

“Are you alright?” Leslie asks. “What did you give him? He is suffocating,” Leslie complains to Unohoo. He is smiling but does not reply to Leslie.

Suddenly, Lung’s face turns red. He closes his eyes and mouth. Red smoke comes out from his ears. He opens his eyes, there are tears. His face gradually turn less red.

“I feel so good. Hello? Hello? It seems I can hear now,” Lung says.

“Can you? Can you hear me?” Leslie tests him.

“Yes I can. I am feeling so good. I am glad that I can hear now,” Lung says, “Where are we? What have you given to me?”

“We met Dr. Unohoo in the main street. We are now at his place. He is a medical person and he knows Angel. He has allowed us to stay overnight at his place. In the morning he gave us some porridge for breakfast. You can hear now after taking the porridge,” Leslie says.

“What kind of porridge is that? It tastes nice,” Lung says.

“It is Mishiboshikoshitoshi,” Unohoo says. “I used some herbs to prepare it.”

“Thank you doc,” Leslie says. “Then what about his eyes? When will you give

medication for his eyes?”

“It is still being prepared in the furnace. Wait until the afternoon,” Unohoo says.

Leslie and Lung look at each other.

“The prescription is ready.” Unohoo brings out a bowl to the dining table. “It is Toyoborokolota. It is for your eyes.” Leslie looks at the bowl. There is something that looks like feces in it.

“Do you want him to eat it? It is not medication,” Leslie says.

“Really? But it smells good,” Lung says.

“You say everything smells good.” Leslie says. “Is there anything you would say smells bad?”

“Ok, Unohoo. I will try it.”

“Are you crazy? It’s a trap!” Leslie warns him.

“The Mishiboshikoshitoshi cured me. I believe Toyoborokolota will too,” Lung says.

Lung uses a fork to eat the Toyoborokolota. He eats and eats but nothing seems to happen. Suddenly he feels his eyes burning. He uses his hands to cover his eyes.

“Oh, so painful. God!” Lung cries. He keeps his hands over his eyes. Red smoke comes out from the gaps between his fingers. He releases his hands, he is crying.

Lung blinks his eyes. Tears run out from them. He rubs his eyes and he can see something blurry. The more he blinks his eyes, the clearer he can see.

“I can see. I can see!” Lung cries. “Thank you. Thank you Dr. Unohoo.

Originally I thought it couldn't be cured, because there is no magic in the island. How come you can help?"

"It is not magic. It is herbs." Dr. Unohoo says, "Nichigetsu Island is not only a place for you to collect the stuff you need to be Santa Claus, but also to test and challenge your faith, cooperativeness, courage and wisdom. Now you have passed the exam here."

"It's good that you couldn't see before you ate. You ate feces," Leslie says indifferently.

"What?" Lung looks at the bowl. When he sees feces in it, he runs to the toilet and wants to vomit.

"So long!" Dr. Unohoo waves goodbye from the shore to Lung and Leslie on the boat. Lung rows and Leslie looks back and waves to the doctor.

"He is so nice," Lung says. "He cured me. And he gave us Spring Fountain water to wash down the elixir."

"And he gave us this boat as well," Leslie says. "But if you ask me to become an old fairy like him when I get immortality, I would rather die."

"Don't be so mean."

"He looks so ugly and wrinkled," Leslie says.

Darkness soon comes. They do not stop rowing in the dark.

“Do you need a rest? I can do it,” Lung says while Leslie is rowing.

“Not yet. I have rowed less than fifteen minutes. How long have we been rowing?”

“It is 11:45p.m.” Lung looks at the watch and says, “We had rowed for almost six hours.”

“I am afraid we are going to be late. We still can’t see Galugalu.”

“I don’t know why,” Lung says. “We are Santa Claus trainees. We are trained to manipulate our magic power. But now they won’t let us use it. I don’t get it.”

“Sure. Why can’t we use magic power to row? Simply because of the Red Crown Cloud? No magic under the cloud? The manager is an idiot.”

“Hang on,” Lung says, “Not, not exactly.”

“What?”

Lung looks up at the sky.

“Maybe we can have a try,” Lung says.

“Try what?”

“Look at the sky. We are no longer under the Red Crown Cloud. That means we are no longer restricted from using our magic power,” Lung says. “Give me the water bottle.” Leslie passes him the bottle. Lung opens the cap. “Give me the banana skin.” Leslie picks up the banana skin on the floor. Lung puts the end of the banana skin into the bottle, leaving the rest of the skin out. He blows on the object, the bottle becomes an engine and the banana skin becomes the propeller!

“See,” Lung says, and winks at Leslie.

He puts the propeller at the end of the boat and starts it. Not long after, they arrive at the pier at Galugalu.

“We must let Angel know what we have achieved,” Leslie says.

“Not now,” Lung says. “It is still early in the morning. We have to wait at the pier for the first ferry to Phiphidhaii.”

They return to Phiphidhaii. First of all they visit Angel.

“Hello?” Angel is sipping a cup of hot coffee when she hears someone calling at the front door.

She puts the coffee down on the tea table. She goes to the front door and answers it.

“Who’s that?”

“Immortal duo,” comes Leslie’s voice.

Angel opens the door. She sees the immortal duo, Leslie and Lung. Leslie is wearing a straw hat and Lung is wearing sunglasses.

“Souvenir for you.” Leslie puts his hat on Angel and Lung gives her his sunglasses.

“We didn’t forget you during the journey. Here are some small gifts for you.”

“Don’t fool me. I have been to Nichigetsu Island as well. There is no such thing.”

“Great! See! I told you. She is not stupid at all. You can’t fool her,” Lung says.

“You bought them from the ferry pier in Galugalu?”

“By magic.” Leslie says, “The straw hat is made from some straw off the ground...”

“And the sunglasses are made from broken glasses, aren’t they?” Angel says.

“No, they are made from feces!” says Leslie, and he giggles.

“What?” Angel takes off the sunglasses immediately. “You stupid idiot!”

“No, he’s fooling you. He made it from sticks and an empty beer bottle. Don’t listen to him.”

“And are there any souvenirs for us?” Charcoal asks. She and Ghana appear at the front door.

“Oh dear,” Leslie says. “No, sorry.”

“See, I told you,” Ghana says. “Human beings call this manners, or courtesy. One should not ask others for gifts. It is impolite and now you have embarrassed yourself.”

Charcoal feels unhappy and lies on the floor.

“Come on girl,” Lung says. “No need to feel guilty.”

“You are bold after coming back from Nichigetsu Island,” Angel says, “What are your findings?”

“Well, the immortal herbs are not that easy to find,” Lung says.

“No, being a fairy is not that easy and funny as fairy tales describe,” Leslie says.

“So, go and take a rest. You must be very tired.” Angel turns to them and says, “You go back and have a shower. Tomorrow I am going to talk to you.”

“Goodbye Angel,” say Leslie and Lung. Then they leave.

Next morning, Leslie and Lung knock on Angel's door. Angel opens the door for them.

"Today is when you share your findings from Nichigetsu Island," Angel says, Leslie and Lung sit on the sofa.

"We got the Nichigetsu leaves from a friend," Lung says.

"Right, from a person called Alan," Leslie says.

"These are physical findings. What do you gain spiritually?" Angel asks.

"As expected before we started the journey, our courage, wisdom, cooperativeness, persistence and perseverance were tested and strengthened," Lung says. "I think we improved ourselves in all of the above aspects."

"That's good," Angel says and sips some black coffee and says. "You have completed several modules. Introduction to fairies, basic magic, fundamental knowledge of Santa Claus' work, climbing and gift delivering skills, now you have gained immortality."

Angel puts down the cup and continues. "Now work in the music shop as normal redcliffes. The management board will release comments and assessments on your progress within a few days."

It is four o'clock in the afternoon. Today's shift in the music shop finishes in the afternoon.

Lung has nothing to do. He is reading the fairies' handbook at his place.

“Hi,” Trinity comes in.

“Oh, hi!” Lung is surprised by Trinity. He puts down the book and comes up to him.

“What makes you come here?”

“Oh, well,” Trinity says with an indifferent tone. “The management have something for you. Do you have time?”

“Yes. What’s it about?”

“Well, I mean, could you follow me to see them. Bring along a support person.”

Lung can feel there must be something wrong. Something serious and disciplinary.

He puts down the fairies’ handbook and drinks some water. Ghana looks at him. He cuddles her into his chest. Then he follows Trinity to a park near his home.

Two people, a fifty-year-old man and a thirty-year-old lady, are sitting on the park bench.

The lady is wearing purple one-piece dress with a yellow scarf.

“Please be seated,” the young lady says. She waves and a stone on the ground becomes a chair.

Lung sits down, putting Ghana on his knees. Trinity stands beside the management people. The park becomes a small office. There is an office desk between Lung and management. On the desk there is a computer. Next to the computer there is a phone and a calendar. There is a bookshelf with some books and files on it next to the desk.

“You may not have met us before. I am Hayley, the Fairies Resources Manager. He

is Rodger, the Operations Manager,” the young lady says.

“So the cat is your support person?” Rodger asks.

“Yes, she is a fairy cat,” Lung says.

“What’s your name?” Rodger asks Ghana.

“Ghana. You named us. Don’t you know?” Ghana can feel these two people have not come for something good. Hence she is hostile and unfriendly to them.

“Now, today is the eighteenth of December. Next week will be the Christmas. We have observed your behaviour for the whole year. We know that you have been spending lots of effort in preparing for your job. The management appreciates every effort you have made and I would like to say thank you on behalf of the whole team.”

Rodger says. Hayley nods her head.

“At this stage the mailing centre has received loads of letters to Santa Claus. To respond to every request made by the children, we really need more manpower to deliver all the gifts,” Rodger continues, and Lung nods his head. “However, after several meetings and discussions among the management board, we think that, at this stage, we would tend to rely on only one Santa Claus to complete the task, rather than letting an unqualified intern help out the other.” Rodger phrases his ideas precisely and carefully.

“So you mean I am the one who is not qualified?” Lung says. “Are you going to suspend me for a year?”

“You don’t need to be so sensitive. This is an open discussion. We are not going to make any decision and then notify you. We are here to try to make a compromise together,” Hayley says.

“Then make it simple. Who is the subject of this discussion? Me or Leslie? Who are you going to suspend?”

“Yes, we really want to suspend one of you. But...” Hayley says.

“No more ‘yes, but’. Let me know your decision,” Lung says.

“At this stage, after discussion among the management board, we intend to suspend Leslie for one more year, and that you take up the role of Santa Claus solely this year,” Hayley says.

“What? Suspend him? Why?”

“The purpose of this meeting is not to discuss why Leslie is going to be suspended. We are consulting you, if you are ready to be in charge of delivering the Christmas gifts solely this year,” Rodger says.

“I am not taking up the sole charge role if I do not know the reason,” Lung says and crosses his arms.

“He always jokes and makes fun in class. He does not always respect the lecturer, mentor or guest speaker. We expect an employee to always pay attention to what the tutor says, not to make fun at inappropriate times,” Hayley says.

“He just uses a little bit of humour. I don’t think he is disturbing the class,” Lung says.

“When Koalaman taught you the skills of wall climbing, Leslie suggested the possibility of flying instead of climbing. He tried flying again, showing he did not have full understanding of the scope and boundaries of his ability and skills. He shouldn’t do that repeatedly.” Rodger says.

“Then it is my fault, I did not warn Leslie that flying takes too much energy,” Lung says.

“When Mr. Koalaman asked him to do a mock practice of delivering a gift, he did not follow the instructions of management and the job order,” Hayley says.

“It’s not fair!”

“I’m afraid it is.”

“You gave the instructions to us.”

Hayley smoothed out the ruffles in her skirt.

“Those are the rules.”

“That was WE who did not follow the instructions of management, not him alone!”

Rodger and Hayley are shocked by Lung’s reaction. They exchange ideas in telepathy: they look at each other and exchange some ideas without saying.

“Now, management has decided to defer the release of its final decision. Hence at this stage neither of you will be suspended. We will summon you to come for a meeting with us later, and let you know our decision,” Hayley says.

“Yes, you may go now. But since the decision has not yet been made, I would advise

you not to let Leslie know the content of today's meeting, since this may affect his loyalty and morale," Rodger says.

"I know what to do. But please be fair to him, and please acknowledge his effort and contributions," Lung says.

"We will. Are there any more questions?"

Lung stands up and leaves. He stops at the roadside near the park and looks back. He wants to say something, but he knows it is no use. He takes off his jacket and put it on his shoulder. He is very unhappy. He doesn't want to see Leslie suspended.

Lung goes to Leslie's place. He is using the notebook for his research work to play computer games on.

"Leslie Florence! See what you are doing!" Lung complains to Leslie.

"Just a while, a while longer," Leslie says. "After I pass this stage I will stop the game and do some studies."

"Why don't you spend some time studying rather than playing games?" Lung is still cross about Leslie's laziness. "Next week will be Christmas. Why can't you do some more preparation work?"

"I know next week will be Christmas," Leslie says while playing games. "That's why I need something to help me relax. I need to play games to refresh my brain. You know? Too much pressure will affect my performance on that day."

"Stop! Now!"

“Wait... let me... save, yes, quit, exit, yes. OK. Done.” Leslie says every step slowly when he is saving and quitting the game. “So, I’m finished. And I am going to work now. Playing games for a little while before work is not a luxury, right?”

“Come on, please. Can you be more serious about your work?”

“My business now is to go and do some studies. I am going to the beach, better atmosphere. I’ve got to go now. Close all the windows and the door for me when you leave. I am going,” Leslie says. He grabs a mat and puts on the sandals, takes his book and goes.

“Les! Les!” Lung cries but Leslie does not respond or look back. “When will you end your slovenly ways?”

Leslie walks to the beach. It is summer at the end of the year in Whantanu. Leslie is wearing a colourful T-shirt, shorts and sandals. He could go surfing if he had a board. But now, he has brought along a mat and the fairies’ handbook with him. He wants to study at the beach under a tree.

He studies quite a long time. He sits in many different positions. At last, he lies down to read the book and gradually he closes his eyes. He can still hear the sounds of sea waves, and he can smell the sands in the wind.

Gradually, the sounds and smell become weak. He falls to sleep. There is complete darkness in his dream.

He tries to open his eyes. But he can only open them a little.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep.

Weird. Leslie can hear the sound from the machine again.

He can feel something cold touching his body. That object stays in the same position on his body for a few seconds and then moves to another position and stays there for a few seconds.

“Everything is normal,” a man’s voice says. “You do the rest.”

It is completely dark in Leslie’s dream. He tries to open his eyes but it is very difficult.

It seems that his eyelids are as heavy as an elephant.

At last, he opens his eyes a little bit. He can see something but the image is very blurry. It is a white object standing next to him. The object is moving, but he can’t be sure what it is doing. It could be a human, in a white hat and white clothes.

Uuuuu... Beep. Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep. Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep. Uuuuu... Beep.

The strange sounds become more rapid. The white person stops his work. “Oh my God!”

Leslie’s eyelids become so heavy that he has to close them again.

He wakes up from his dream. He opens his eyes, and finds he is still at the beach.

Maybe I studied too hard and fell asleep, he thinks. He breathes deeply and rapidly.

Meanwhile, Lung is worrying about Leslie. At night, Lung can't sleep well. He turns over and over.

"They are going to suspend you. What should I do?" Lung thinks. Many scenes from his memories with Leslie flash into his mind. He really can't live without Leslie. Meanwhile, Leslie is playing video games. With the imminent approach of Christmas day, the two Santa Clauses are thinking differently.

The next day, Lung is ready to start work in the music shop. At that moment, a visitor, Trinity comes.

"Hi, no need to work today. Management wants to see you," Trinity says.

Lung stands up. He and Leslie look at each other.

"Let's go," Lung says.

"Do you have to bring along Ghana to support you?" Trinity says.

"I am prepared to receive any verdict. I am stronger than you expect, I can handle it by myself," Lung says.

Trinity does not say anything. They go to the same park as last time. Hayley and Rodger are already there.

"Hi, how are you today?" Hayley says.

"Please take a seat," Rodger says. This time Lung magics his chair. Rodger magics the same office as last time.

“Today we are going to discuss with you about who you think should be taken out from the Christmas gift delivery work this year.” Hayley says.

“Now, last time you mentioned that you also take responsibility for the mistake and faults Leslie committed. Today we want to hear what you think about these,” Rodger says, “Do you still think that Leslie should not be solely responsible for his mistakes?”

“We are a team. He is my partner. I should be responsible whenever he is wrong,” Lung says.

“The Director has a note for us: due to the shortage of quality letter requests for Christmas gifts, the workload of Santa Claus is so low this year that we do not need two. So this meeting is to let you know that we are going to suspend one of you,” Rodger says.

“At this stage we have some ideas as to who and why one of you should be suspended. However, we want to hear your ideas, why you are better than Leslie and should be retained.” Hayley says.

“Me? No, I am not a good intern, and will not be a good Santa,” Lung says.

“Redundancy? Sack me. As mentioned last time, I did not warn him not to fly, I did not warn him to follow the instructions when delivering the gift. I am an unqualified fairy. A failure. Fire me.” Lung uses a categorical tone.

“We know it is hard if one of you has to be made redundant. However, it is also a hard decision for us to decide which of you has to be sacrificed,” Rodger says.

“I’ve told Trinity. I am stronger than you think. I am ready for any result. Before I died and was given this shitty identity, I used to travel to many cities and towns in China alone. I wandered in many provinces. I managed to maintain my life. So why couldn’t I face being sacked by you?”

“The word ‘sack’ is inappropriate,” Hayley says. “The new identity after your death was given to you without any requirement for compensation. That is you can still use this identity for the rest of your life.”

“I’m alright with that,” Lung says, and starts playing with the stapler on the desk. “I went to Xian because I wanted a better income and better life. Now you have brought me to this lousy island and offered me a good job. Why should I not accept it?”

“However, you will no longer enjoy the privileges or powers of a fairy. That is, your life expectancy will be same as for a redcliffe. You will not enjoy immortality. You will lose your magic power and be like a redcliffe.”

“Oh, thank you so much. Now you’ve given me another identity and asked me to work in a music shop, I really appreciate that. I can enjoy my music and have a good standard of living. That’s what I have longed for.”

“Here we have an official letter to you. It explains the decision of management and the changes to your fairicle membership,” Rodger says, and he passes Lung a sealed envelope.

“That’s all? Thank you for your kind attention, sir and madam. I’ve got to go and

start working if you've nothing more to say. I have to support my living as a redcliffe." Lung says, and takes the envelope.

"We wish you all the best for the future," Hayley says. She and Rodger stand up to shake hands with Lung.

"Take care," Rodger says, and shakes hands with Lung. He pats Lung's shoulder. Lung stands up and leaves.

He does not go to the music shop as he said. He walks along the main street alone.

The main street in Phiphidhaii Island is not that busy. Cars go past Lung but not very often. He wants to be alone, not to be disturbed. From now on, they have to drift apart. Leslie will continue his fairicle life and Lung will turn back into a redcliffe.

Lung is weak when facing the facts that he has to separate from Leslie. He opens the envelope, opens the letter, folds it, and puts it back into the envelope.

"Lung! Lung! Are you there?" Leslie knocks on Lung's door and asks.

"Yes, I'm here," Lung replies. "Just magic in."

Leslie magics his finger to be a key and opens the door. He finds Lung sitting on the floor.

"What happened to you? You look so upset," Leslie says.

"Les, are we friends?"

"Of course. Come on, I'm in a hurry. I've got to do my study after dinner. Let's go and have Thai food together tonight."

“How long will this friendship last?”

“They say fairies lives approximately 800-1000 years.”

“What if I have to leave soon?”

“What are you talking about? Is there a problem?”

“They sacked me. I am turning into a redcliffe soon,” Lung says indifferently and passes the envelope to Leslie.

Leslie opens the envelope and reads the letter.

“You are turning into a redcliffe? So I will have sole charge of the Christmas work this year?” Leslie asks. “Why did they make such a decision at this crucial moment? Nonsense!”

“I am a redcliffe. I am a music salesperson. I will be a salesman as Lung for approximately twenty more years and die, as a redcliffe.”

“Did you defend yourself to them?” Leslie asks.

“No point. Their decision is supreme and ultimate. They already had this letter printed and enveloped. That meeting was not to consult me, but only to inform me of their decision.” Lung is looking at the clock on the wall when he speaks.

“Fake democracy. Fake consultations,” Leslie says. “Is there any final appeal court where we can overthrow their decision?”

“I am going to accept this end result. Losing fairyship is no big deal. I was a redcliffe before I died. Nothing to lose,” Lung says.

“Don’t say that. You do not deserve to experience the hardship of living again. You did that. You should have died. It is them who brought you back to this mortal life but gave you an immortal life as reward. Now they have taken it away again. It is not fair.” Leslie complains.

“There is no such thing as fairness in the hierarchical system of an organization or company. When you work in an organization, the authorities determine what is fair. The boss’s word is supreme. There is no balance of power between the governor and the commoner. That’s why I prefer to work as freelancer, be my own boss, both in the previous life and this life,” Lung says.

“But you’ve tried very hard in the learning process. You’ve made progress. Can’t they see and appreciate your contributions?” Leslie says.

“As I’ve said. They are the management, we are the employees. There is never a balance of power between both sides. When they make a decision, no one can change it,” Lung says, “The most important thing at the moment is that you are not affected. You can still perform the duties of Santa next week. The kids need your gifts,” Lung says, and pats Leslie’s shoulder.

“Maybe you are right. Employees have no right to reject every decision made by the authorities.” Leslie sighs, “So what are you going to do next? Work in the Universe’s music here?”

“I will. There’s no point for me to move. I can make good money here. Why

should I go?”

“Will you help me out for a few days?”

“I can prepare your lunch and dinner every day. That’s what I can do. I am not in the fairicle. I can’t do anything for you Mr. Santa Claus.”

“Still friends?”

“Forever. At least till you move to another city twelve years from now,” Lung says.

“You’re immortal. You will not get old. What a clumsy thing that you have to move to another city every twelve years to avoid your immortality being discovered by redcliffes. See me? I can stay in this lousy island as a music shop salesman until I retire.”

“But your body is fifty-something-years-old. You can do ten to fifteen years more at most.” Leslie points out the truth.

“Anyway, work hard for the children. Don’t be affected by me,” Lung says. “If you fail, many children will be disappointed.”

“I will.”

For the next week, Lung prepares lunch for Leslie and takes it to work every day.

After his work in the music shop, Leslie is very busy. He is busy using the sky-eye program on the computer to final checks if the children are nice.

At last, Christmas Day comes. Leslie is checking the address list and the respective order of gifts. He is very serious and precise in every detail. The kid’s name, address,

street number, street name, suburb, country, and the present he or she should get. He is examining the order of every gift, to see if they are put into order according to the route.

“I am so excited to see how Santa Claus works,” says Lung. “Must be very interesting.”

“Sorry I can’t. The sleigh is one-seated. The foodfuel for the reindeers is precisely calculated. One more passenger will cost more food,” Leslie says, “If you have a child, one day you can help him send a letter to me. I can bring him a Christmas gift.”

“You know I am single,” Lung says. “I wish I were a child. You know what? When I was a child, we didn’t have stories about Santa Claus, fairies and wizards in China. We don’t celebrate Christmas because China is an atheistic country.”

“I am a Catholic. The priest said Easter is more worthwhile to celebrate than Christmas because the resurrection of Jesus is more important than his birth,” Leslie says, and tightens up his gift bag. “Anyway, I have to go. Merry Christmas.”

“Good luck,” Lung says, “Merry Christmas.” His face starts cramping.

“What? Are you alright?” Leslie asks.

“I, I am fine. Just a little bit of a stomach ache,” Lung says with difficulty. “My intestine seems to be cramping. Give me a glass of water and I will be fine.”

Leslie goes to the kitchen and gets a glass of water for Lung. Lung drinks the water, and starts gasping heavily.

“I’d better call the ambulance,” Leslie says.

“No need to worry about me,” Lung is struggling. “I will call the ambulance. Go to your job. It’s getting late.” His face turns pale.

“Yes, we need an ambulance.” Leslie talks on the phone. “12/25, Diciembre Avenue, Phiphidhahi Island.”

Angel appears in the doorway.

“He failed,” she says. “The Manager has to end his life.”

“What happened? I don’t get it,” Leslie says.

“Every fairy trainee is given a one year internship for training. One year later, if he passes the training, he will be promoted to a part-time fairy. If he fails, the manager will take away his life, he will die again.”

“It has been nice to be with you during this period in another identity. Sorry I have to go...” Lung says, and he begins vanishing.

“No, Lung, no, please.” Leslie sees Lung disappear and cries, “Angel! Help! Please, I implore the manager, save his life.”

“He is losing his immortality. He is no longer a fairy. So we have to end his contract.” The manager’s voice comes from somewhere.

“Sorry Les. I really have to go.” Lung disappears and becomes smoke, and the smoke becomes a robin and flies away.

“Lung, Lung.” Leslie says and weeps, “So, take my life too. I don’t want to be a godforsaken fairy, Santa, whatever, I just want to be with Lung.”

“You have to go and distribute the gifts,” Angel says.

“No, no Santa this year. No gift this year. Santa Claus is on strike.” Leslie says indifferently, and wipes the tears.

Leslie starts to suffocate. He becomes weaker and weaker. Breathing deeply, he tries to move but he can’t. He lies on the floor.

Uuuuu... Beep. Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep. Uuuuu... Beep.

Uuuuu... Beep. Uuuuu... Beep.

Leslie feels himself falling into a bottomless abyss. He tries to catch something but he can’t. He can hear his heart beating faster and faster. And his breathing is getting faster and faster. “Laura! Jack! Laura!” he cries.

He can hear his heartbeat. Thump. Thump. Thump.

A doctor leans over Leslie, with a cardiopulmonary resuscitator.

Leslie is falling. “Laura! Jack! Laura!” He cries.

“360, clear.” A group of doctors are using the machine to stimulate the heart beat of Leslie. Tubes are connected to his body to help him breathe.

Memories flash back. Leslie see those days he was in Galugalu island. He met other fairies at the party; he worked as a music sales; he went to the park with Lung.

“Stable. Observe 10 more minutes.” The attending physician said.

Leslie is on a white sandy beach. Although all images are blurry, he can sure it is not any beach in Whantanu. This beach is much more beautiful than any beach in Whantanu. He is bare feet in the water. Here comes a man in white suit and trousers. A 70-year-old friendly man with grey hair and mustache. He does not say anything. He simply waves Leslie to follow him into the water.

“Leslie, Leslie”.

Someone is calling him.

“Leslie.”

Someone is calling him. He decides to go back down the tunnel.

Leslie opens his eyes slowly. “Awake! He’s awake! Doc! Doc!” a female’s voice says.

“Angel, why you are here?” Leslie whispers.

Lung comes, wearing a physician uniform.

“Lung?” The physician has a name badge “Lung”.

Lung gives a general examination of Leslie’s health.

“Everything is fine,” Lung puts down his stethoscope. “Stay here under observation for a couple of days and you should be ok for discharge.”

“Thanks. Doc,” Angel says, and then Lung leaves.

“Angel? Why you are here?”

“Oh dear. He must have heard our conversations during his coma,” Angel says. “He knows who I am. I’m Angel, Laura’s friend.”

“Angel?” Leslie is doubtful.

“Yes, you can call me Angel, or Madame Tuff,” Angel replies.

“You are Angel,” Leslie points to her and tries to figure out the truth. Angel smiles.

Leslie can see her teeth. So white! How come?

Leslie hears a sound coming from the doorway. Laura and Jack appear, they stare for a moment at his open eyes then swarm to Leslie and cuddle him.

“Honey!” says Laura.

“Dad!” says Jack.

“What happened?” Leslie asks.

“It’s so great to see you wake up! You have been in a coma for one year.”

“Me? Coma?”

“This time last year you were knocked down by a car, while clearing the trash. Miraculously your body did not get hurt or injured, except your head. You fell into a coma. Adrienne called me and we didn’t know what to do. I went to church and prayed for you. In the church I met Angel. She referred me to Dr. Lung. Dr. Lung is the authority in brain surgery. So we transferred you to Whantanu.”

“Am I in Whantanu?” Leslie is still puzzled.

“Whantanu is an island country in the Pacific Ocean, somewhere near Papua New Guinea. We are in one of the islands called Phiphidhahi.”

“Whantanu, Phiphidhahi.” Leslie tries to look around the ward. There are many other patients. Above each bed, there is a number. He turns around and looks at his. 25.

“I am on level 12 am I?” Leslie tries a wild guess.

“How do you know that?” Laura and Angel are amazed too. “Do you have magic powers or telepathy?”

“Magic powers?” Leslie tries. He points to the apple on the portable table on his bed, “fly!” He wants to make the apple fly, but he can’t. He is amazed and looks at his hand.

He rubs his hands together and opens them. Nothing comes out. He tries different magic. However, nothing works.

“Are you alright?” Laura asks. She puts her hand on Leslie’s forehead. “Should we ask Dr. Lung to come back?” she asks Angel.

“Maybe he is so happy to see you again. No big deal,” Angel says. “The most important thing is your whole family being together. No more overseas trips alone.”

“No more magic,” Leslie whispers. “And Lung is my physician.”

“Are you alright?” Laura asks. And Angel shows she is worried.

Leslie closes his eyes. When he opens them again Laura is still there. He takes a

deep breath, nods his head.

A week later, it is Christmas Eve. Leslie has been discharged. Leslie, Laura and Jack go shopping in a mall. Far away in the atrium there is a Santa Claus distributing balloons to children. Jack runs to him to get one. His parents follow him.

“Hi, Merry Christmas,” Santa Claus says.

“Merry Christmas,” Leslie and Laura say.

“Traditionally, we believe Santa Claus lives in the North Pole. Some people say he lives in Finland, some people say he lives in Iceland or Greenland. We understood that Santa Claus must live in the Arctic Circle. Where do you think Santa Claus comes from?”

“Mmm... Is it Greenland?” Laura asks.

“Yes, Greenland, or Finland,” Leslie adds.

The Santa Claus takes out an A5 size piece of paper from his pocket.

“Not exactly. We have a Santa Claus training course in Tunglowan, a small country in West Africa, which is the country I come from. You only have to pay \$4,500. You can go there for one week to experience how to be a Santa Claus,” Santa Claus says.

“Hi, Trinity,” he says.

Santa Claus stares back at him. He winks at Leslie.

“We will think about it,” Leslie says, and quickly takes Laura and Jack away from

Santa.

Leslie and Laura walk on. They see an ice cream stall.

“Can I?” says Jack.

Leslie reaches into his pocket for his wallet. Jack buys an ice cream and walks on with his balloon.

“The music trip wasn’t as romantic and fruitful as you expected.”

“No, you know that. I am not that kind of musician.”

Leslie turns to Laura.

“So,” he says, staring down at his shoes, then back up at her, “Where are you off to next?”

Laura takes a long breath, bites her top lip. She shakes her head.

“You know,” she says, “I can get a job teaching music here in Auckland.”

“I know you really love working with children,” says Leslie.

Laura looks across at Jack.

“Maybe it’s time to stop travelling,” she says. “How about you?”

“Maybe I will too,” says Leslie.

She reaches out a hand to him and they walk on through the atrium, Jack leading the way, holding his balloon on the end of its string.

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