

Seven Secrets of the Universe

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with
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To my Beloved
who gets everything done with love



PROLOGUE

“Children? How can we trust children with this mission? They are so unreliable.”

The Keeper of the Earth stood in front of the arched window at one end of the Council Room, considering this sudden twist of events. He stood as if on watch, a stance he had held for all time. His face, chiseled like granite, held unyielding stony grey eyes. White hair fell down his back like snow covering the Himalayas. His cape was iridescent, shimmering with mineral flecks of gold, copper and zinc.

“I know it is hard to believe, but they are the only ones who can do it,” the Keeper of the Water soothed.

Her flowing appearance was a stark contrast to his fixed demeanor. As she moved, her aquamarine cape rippled around her like ocean waves. The fringe was as white and fluffy as sea foam and floated across the surface of the floor as she walked to the window to stand beside her old friend.

“Because humans are destroying it, they must be the ones to restore it,” the Keeper of the Air offered breezily. The room freshened; her ethereal presence was felt more than seen.

“But why children?” blazed the Keeper of the Fire. “Surely there are more qualified candidates among the human race.”

Mother Nature could not hold on much longer. The destruction of the mountains for minerals, the forests for wood and the soil for agribusiness had weakened the Earth. The extraction of oil from beneath its crust had left the Earth pockmarked and depleted. Trillions of tons of human waste and radioactive material thrown into the once sparkling ocean had poisoned Water. Earthquakes were common as Fire's magma shifted tectonic plates. The planet's protective ozone layer had been so weakened that the fire of the sun scorched the land. Air was contaminated with cancer causing toxins, and carbon dioxide emissions were making the air unbreathable in many parts of the world. Plant and animal species were becoming extinct. Life on the planet was perilously out of balance. Human beings fought greedily for shrinking resources and struggled to survive. Having lost the truth of their natural state they no longer lived in harmony with nature, themselves or each other.

The Divine Power, the Overseer of all things physical and metaphysical, had explained. "Mother Nature has called you together to prepare for the regeneration process." His presence was invisible and his voice was a whisper, but it filled the room with power.

"Although you know the planet will never be destroyed," he continued, "the time of harmonious living has ended. The footprints of billions have worn Nature to her lowest state."

The Keepers had watched over the years as successive attempts to regenerate the world had failed. Humans lost energy or became disheartened and frustrated with each other. The result was war. Eventually people gave up. Lulled into a state of coping, they accepted this degraded state as normal.

Anxious as the Keepers were to restore balance, they were told they

must await the results of a mission that would determine the fate of the human race.

“Some humans sense the need for change, but they do not understand that the planet requires regeneration on an unprecedented scale,” said the Keeper of the Earth. “How can children possibly comprehend what is required?”

“The children still believe in a better world.” The Keeper of the Air’s lilting voice was like a breeze as it wafted through the room. “Their faith in the future is the last remaining trace of humanity’s original pure nature. Their optimism will motivate them and protect them and give them the power they need to keep going when they are challenged.”

“Excellent. I’m ready now,” flamed the Keeper of the Fire. He savoured the thought of hot lava renewing the soil.

The Keeper of the Water hesitated, knowing she would have to cover the earth to cleanse it. “I will be ready when it’s time,” she said quietly.

“Fine,” conceded the Keeper of the Earth finally. “How will we know which children to choose? There are so many of them.”

“I have been looking.” The voice of the Divine Power was quiet and final. “I have found them.”



The CHOSEN

Raj

The butler quietly entered Raj's bedroom through the mahogany doors, pushing a tea cart, intent to ease the young man into his busy day of travel. Raj slipped out of the cool silk sheets and shuffled into the ensuite bathroom where a hot bath had been drawn and awaited his arrival. The butler returned with freshly pressed clothes precisely as Raj stepped from the tub ready to get dressed, the timing of this carefully choreographed daily ritual perfected over the years.

Typically only a special festival would have the power to pull Raj from his bed at this early hour, but today was special for another reason. After waiting for over a year, today he would finally be flying to China. Every male member of his family had been educated abroad, and for Raj this voyage represented his first steps into adulthood. In Beijing he would attend a prestigious international school where he hoped to expand his geographic, cultural and social horizons. His intention was to become an international businessman like his father. China was to be his

global training ground.

Leaving India was a blessing. It had held him smotheringly close, locked in family duty and demands. His sister Ramita, recently married, had left the family home in a flurry of dowry items to live with her in-laws on the outskirts of Delhi. As children Raj and Ramita had stayed up late into the night under a blanket canopy of their own making, talking for hours. Raj let out a sigh, thinking of how their relationship had changed over the years as her interest in men and marriage had taken her deep into a realm of her own and away from any meaningful connection with him.

Ramita's absence left Raj alone with his parents. Until his sister had a baby, he would be the singular focus of his parents' attention, in particular his mother's. How he wished his sister would get pregnant soon. A new grandchild would take the pressure off him. In the meantime, this year in China would give him a break.

He checked his hair in the mirror and with an authoritative swipe of his wet palm, flattened the small unruly fringe over his ears. The pink collared shirt he had chosen for the journey was clean and crisp. He tucked it into his blue pressed pants and tightened his belt, feeling the cold marble floor beneath his feet as he reached for his socks. He had recently packed away his slippers along with his five pairs of shoes, each reassuringly black or brown in patent leather or suede.

He stared at the floor for a moment, wondering what his new

home would be like and whether it would be as comfortable as this house. He shook his head at the silly thought. Of course it would be as comfortable, if not more so: he was going to live with Auntie and Uncle, the Indian ambassador to China.

Raj descended the marble stairway and walked to the dining room where he sat between his parents at the breakfast table. As he unfolded his napkin the maid brought him his usual light breakfast, a plate of toast and jam with mango and pineapple slices. She poured him a cup of chai and smiled at him dutifully, clearly not expecting a response. As usual, he fulfilled her expectations by not acknowledging her presence.

“Raj, I beg you, please take care of yourself,” his mother said. He looked up and saw that her forehead was puckered with worry, as it often was when she spoke to him these days. He was her baby, and the thought of him going so far away left her flustered and anxious.

“Do whatever Auntie and Uncle ask of you,” she continued. “You are to treat them as parents. You know I will speak with them often, so please mind them well.” He watched the red dot on her forehead dance as her expression changed from worry to love and back again. The gold bangles on her delicate wrists clanked together like spare change as she waved her hands. Wrapped in an orange sari shimmering with silver threads, she was a constantly moving display of colour and sound.

“Yes, Mummy,” he replied respectfully but without looking up from his plate. His father sat silently at the other end of the table,

reading the day's newspaper. Raj preferred his father's quiet, non-involved presence to his mother's constant deluge of care and concern. His father ran a successful export business that sold religious relics to Western countries. He monitored the business pages closely.

When it was time to leave for the airport Raj leaned close to kiss his mother on the cheek. She pressed her hand into his and spoke with urgency. "It would be better not to mention your father's company by name when you are there, Raj. We don't want another incident." He pushed her hand away. She stepped gracefully backwards to make room for his father. Father and son shook hands firmly, making eye contact only briefly. Raj understood that men of power, like his father, did not bother with unnecessary displays of emotion.

Raj nodded a polite farewell then entered the limousine and left without looking back.

When he entered Beijing's clean, modern airport, Raj saw his name written on a cardboard sign held above the mass of people milling around the arrivals area. He focused on the sign as though it was a lighthouse, helping him navigate his way around silver-haired Chinese grandmothers with bodies permanently bent, eager children peering through the crowd and young women awaiting their husbands. There were many young and middle-aged men dressed in similar outfits of dark pressed trousers and light shirts talking anxiously on their cell phones. The crowd,

although large, was quieter and more orderly than the one he had just left behind in Delhi.

The chauffeur took his luggage cart and pushed it briskly through the terminal out to the waiting limousine. Raj sat tall in the back seat, enjoying his first moments of freedom and absorbing the reality of a new life.

The limo transported Raj through a collage of red temples, open meat markets, street merchants, bicycles and exotic smells. When he arrived at his uncle's downtown suite, he was greeted at the door by two people he recognized but did not know. The physical similarity between his uncle and his father was striking.

His uncle greeted him with a warm handshake and stepped close enough to whisper in Raj's ear. "News of the scandal in your father's company has not spread this far. No one in Beijing will hold you accountable, Raj."

"They shouldn't have held me accountable there either," Raj muttered under his breath. He remembered the painful sting of Amar's fist as it split his lip, while the other boys crowded around, held him down and jeered at him, calling him the son of a "dirty" businessman. He wouldn't easily forget the look on his mother's face when he arrived home from school that day, his face bloody and his uniform covered in dirt.

People are jealous of success, Raj thought. Men of power like my father will always be criticized and even attacked. He gave his uncle a small smile. Unlike his father, Raj's uncle had decided to follow the footsteps of Raj's grandfather into humanitarian work. *What*

does he know about the challenges of the business world? Raj thought.

Auntie offered to show Raj to his room. He sat on the bed and caught his breath, relieved to be alone. He watched as the housekeeper unpacked his clothing and each familiar cardigan, shirt and undergarment made its way, neatly folded, into the dark, antique, wooden Chinese wardrobe. The bed was piled high with exquisite red and gold silk cushions and the floor was decorated with an ornamental Chinese carpet that stretched to each corner of the room. He nodded, pleased with the grandeur and royalty of his new home, then changed his clothes and joined his aunt and uncle for tea.

Emily

“Hey, Em, time to get up,” yelled Tess as she bounced on the mound of comforter somewhere between head and body. Emily’s little sister was already dressed and ready. “Wake up, sleepy head!” she sang. “Time to get ready to go.”

Emily sat bolt upright and looked at her clock. 5:30. *Woah! I better get moving*, she thought as she tried to disentangle her body from the blankets.

“Get off, get off!” Emily said, excitement shooting through her long limbs. Tess tumbled onto the floor in a noisy heap, her red hair tussled and her pink sweater bunched at the neck, making her look like a fluffy stuffed animal.

Today was the day of their big move to China. Only a few weeks ago, Emily’s father had announced news of a job offer he

couldn't refuse. He would be managing a massive damn project in the western region near Tibet. When he had asked the girls to come Emily knew instantly that she would accompany him, but Tess had lingered over the decision, unsure if she wanted to leave their mom and all her friends.

The many conversations leading up to their departure had been coloured by Tess's vision of Imperial China, filled with details from children's stories she had read with their mom. Emily half hoped they would find themselves in a world of silk gowns, red lanterns and dragons, in spite of what she knew of modern China.

Whatever it was like, she knew it would be a huge contrast to the comfortable little Canadian seaport city of Halifax where she had lived the fifteen years of her life. She was eager for a change and was especially looking forward to the international school she and Tess would be attending in Beijing.

She quickly brushed her hair and teeth. Then, as she pulled on her black yoga pants and a favourite blue sweater, she took a final mental snapshot of her room. She would remember the lilac walls, the tubular bed, the ornaments on her bookshelf and the butterfly kite hanging from the ceiling. She looked through the window and past the broad leaves of the maple tree onto their little backyard. She could see a sliver of the ocean in the distance. She would miss the smell of sea air.

But she knew her childhood room would await her return at Christmas. Until then, her mom would be alone in the empty

house, a keeper of the past, like mothers everywhere.

The banister offered a swift ride to the front hallway. Emily dismounted quickly in case her mother noticed and walked nonchalantly into the kitchen just as her mom entered from the other side.

“Good morning, sweetheart.” She pulled Emily into a big hug.

“Hey, Mom.” Emily allowed herself to be squished in her mother’s embrace. She loved her mother’s smell, a mixture of spring and soap.

“You’re going to have a fantastic year,” said Mom as she poured a cup of coffee. “Give my regards to the Great Wall.”

Tess bounced into the kitchen. “You’ll come and visit, won’t you, Mom?”

“We’ll talk on Skype as often as you want, okay?” Mom caught Tess as she leapt into her arms and gave her a long hug. Tess pulled away and dragged her bag to the front door, which opened to reveal her father.

“Hey, girls!” he called brightly. “Are you ready?”

Tess jumped into her father’s outstretched arms, squealing. Emily followed closely and stood on tiptoes to hug her dad. A light rain had sprinkled the collar of his shirt and her cheeks were moist when she pulled away.

The girls’ parents exchanged a momentary glance, acknowledging the significance of the moment. Before the divorce they had travelled the world together as a couple and later as a family. After the divorce Mom decided to make a home base for

the girls and dedicate herself to the nursing profession. That was when their dad started travelling on his own and finding work in other countries.

Emily turned to hug her mom goodbye. Thankfully it was only a few months 'til Christmas. Tess held onto her mother until the last minute, when Dad yelled for her to hurry up. They got in the taxi and slowly drove away from their snug little house. Emily waved goodbye to the only life she had ever known.

Emily swung her feet to the floor beside her bed, only to discover them dangling in midair. It was then that she remembered she was sleeping on the top bunk of the bed she now shared with Tess in their new apartment in Beijing. *So much for space and privacy*, she thought. She dropped to the floor and pulled a fresh T-shirt over her groggy head.

While Emily patted her hair flat with both hands, Tess bounced on the lower bunk and shouted, "Hurry, Em, hurry."

Tess had seen the shimmering backs of goldfish in the courtyard pond when they arrived and she was determined to visit them. Emily dragged her feet as she followed her sister out of their bedroom into the open, marble floored space that was their new living room. Massive jade plants lined the room, standing like sentries in ornate red and gold lacquered pots. The windows revealed a dizzying height and an indistinguishable view of the cityscape.

Emily was glad to see Tess's enthusiasm but her internal clock

was stuck twelve hours behind, telling her that it was time to sleep. "Give me a minute, Tess," she said. Pushing past her fatigue, she followed Tess to the elevator, down thirty-three floors, through the lobby, past the uniformed doorman and out into the hot dry air of Beijing.

Her senses were assaulted by the dust and the unfamiliar smells and clamorous sounds of the city, none of which she had noticed through her jet lag the night before. Twenty-four hours of continuous white noise in airplanes and airports had numbed her senses. The taxi ride from the airport to the apartment had been a potpourri of blurry images mixed with diesel fumes until the moment when her head hit the pillow and she fell into a heavy sleep.

As she stood beside the kidney-shaped pool and watched the goldfish swim in circles under floating lotus leaves, her pores opened, drinking in the atmosphere and the potential of a new life.

Solomon

Solomon stood in the kitchen with his mother. She was arranging coffee cups on the special tray used only for the traditional coffee ceremony. Solomon's younger brother ran into the room.

"Mom, Mom! There's a letter for Solomon!" Ben yelled with excitement. He was out of breath, having run from the post office.

"What could it be?" she asked, smiling.

When she saw the Chinese characters in the corner of the

envelope she knew immediately that it was the confirmation letter they had been waiting for. It was the last step in their preparations for the big move to China. Ben's letter had arrived earlier in the week and now, with Solomon's letter, everything was in place for them to leave Addis Ababa and begin their new life.

Solomon's dream was to become a teacher like his father. His dad had created and served as the director of an international school in Addis until he had been asked to work with the American embassy. He had spent the last years of his life developing scholarship funds for Ethiopian kids to go to international schools around the world. Solomon was bright and had received one of the scholarships. After his father's death, the embassy had offered his mom a staff position in their embassy in Beijing.

Solomon lifted Ben up so he could reach the cupboard and get the breakfast plates. Their young cousin, Fantu, entered the room. "Auntie, the coffee is ready for you to pour."

Solomon helped Ben carry the tray of porridge and injera, the round thin bread made from teff flour, out to the back of the house where the powerful aroma of incense and coffee greeted them. Fantu had spent most of the past hour preparing coffee. First she had spread fresh grass on the concrete floor then made a charcoal fire and placed a small roasting oven on it filled with fresh coffee beans. Bits of broken incense sent up little clouds of smoke as they sizzled in the fire. Finally she neatly placed the crushed, roasted beans in the coffee pot.

Solomon's mom came from the coffee growing region in southwestern Ethiopia. She loved the ritual of coffee making and Solomon watched as she took the pot from Fantu and began to pour the coffee. *She is like a queen holding court*, he thought, as they settled in to discuss their upcoming journey. The faint breeze from the highlands moved the air.

His mother looked at him intently. Her eyes sparkled when she looked at Solomon, her eldest son, the man of the house. "Will you be all right, leaving your friends behind?" She continued before Solomon could answer. "You know this is a good work opportunity for me, and the scholarship will provide a good education for you, just like your father would have wanted."

"I'll be okay, Mom. Don't worry." Life had been so much easier when his dad was alive. His mom worked so hard now, yet her salary barely covered their basic costs of living. Life was not easy for a single mother in Ethiopia. Although he wanted to help, no one wanted to hire a fifteen-year-old boy part time when so many young men needed jobs.

"You wear your name well, Solomon," his mother said. "You have always been a king in my eyes. Your father would be very proud of you."

Solomon had quickly filled the role his reliable father had once played, helping around the house and taking care of Ben. His father's death had been sudden, following a short and painful bout with cancer. The family had little time to mourn as they pulled together, bound by the extra effort required to keep the

small household going. The move to China represented a new start, a new life, and would put some distance between them and the combined burden of economic hardship and painful memories.

"I'll finish packing," Solomon said as he finished his coffee. He slipped into the back room of their small row house and wondered what this new chapter of his life would hold.

The doorman took their suitcases from the taxi and placed them on the luggage trolley. The hotel was a new building, flat and wide like an industrial warehouse but with a bright red facade and an entranceway framed with two white marble columns.

The lobby screamed with bright lights and Solomon rubbed his jetlagged eyes. Red leather couches were clustered in sitting areas surrounded by bamboo plants and small fountains. The background music sounded universally familiar, like the music in the airport and in the department stores in Addis.

This hotel would be home for the first couple of weeks until Solomon's mother found them a suitable place to live. The embassy would help them find a good apartment with the inevitable *ayi* as they would need someone to cook, clean and shop at the market for them.

"Hey, Solomon, let's eat!"

Ben pointed to a sign indicating the breakfast buffet and pulled Solomon to follow him, leaving their mother to check in. Ben's eyes widened when he saw the sea of fresh fruits, pastries,

custards and cakes.

“We can’t now, Ben. We have to wait for Mom and get our luggage up to the room. Besides, how can you be hungry after sitting so long and all that food we had on the plane?” He thought of the pastry that had bent in his mouth like cardboard.

“Do you think it will be here tomorrow too?” asked Ben, his face falling at the thought of leaving so much food uneaten.

“I think it’s here every day, Ben. I think we’ll get to know this buffet really well. How ‘bout tomorrow I challenge you to see who can find the sweetest bun on the pastry tray? And then we can try a different one every day until we know which one is really the best of them all. Are you up for it?”

Ben looked up at his big brother with a mixture of glee and adoration.

“Yes, Solomon,” he said earnestly. “We’ll try each pastry until we know which one is the best.”

“Boys, come.”

The brothers quickly walked through the lobby to join their mother at the elevator that would take them home.

Mei Ling

Mei Ling stood on the small balcony of her family’s apartment and looked out at the Beijing skyline. It stretched like a blurry line across the horizon, punctuated here and there by tall apartment buildings and construction cranes. She was silent, quite separate from the noise and confusion below.

Mei Ling was born in Vietnam. Her family had moved to Beijing when she was four years old. They lived near the old city, the hutongs, and watched daily as the old buildings were torn down to create space for the luxury apartments of the newly wealthy middle class.

As an only child, Mei Ling lived a carefully structured life, planned by her parents whose priority in life was to see their daughter succeed in a region where competition was fierce. Like many Asian students, Mei Ling's evenings and weekends were devoted to tutoring.

Her parents hoped that her math and science marks would one day be high enough to guarantee her a position in a foreign university. Or allow her to compete for a good position in a multinational software company like the one where they both worked. Mei Ling carried the weight of her parents' hopes on her shoulders, and she worked hard to fulfill their expectations.

She sat on one of the two white plastic chairs that shared the tiny balcony with a laundry rack, air conditioning unit and a storage closet. Her parents worked late most nights and she had decided to take a short break from practicing her violin. The air conditioner whirred next to her, purring like an overgrown kitten while tiny streams of water dripped along the side, forming a small pool at her feet.

Mei Ling would be entering grade ten this year at the international school she had attended all her life. Familiar with its rhythms and culture, she knew all the teachers and students,

having observed them carefully over the years. Although her shyness and tight tutoring schedule limited her social life, the return to school each year brought the excitement of potential new friends. She smiled quietly to herself in eager anticipation of this year's batch of new students.

Daring to take a deeper breath than was healthy in the polluted city air, she wiped a thin film of sweat from her forehead. As she reached to slide open the patio door she saw the reflection of her flat Asian face and bowl cut hair. She whispered aloud her mother's often repeated pronouncement, *Mei Ling, beauty is finite, while knowledge is infinite*. Then she went inside to finish her practice time.

During the week before school Mei Ling lost herself in organizing her school supplies, sitting in her room labelling each binder, folder and notebook with her name, her grade and a small drawing to indicate its intended use. Arrayed on the floor around her were notebooks for science, math, English, history, Mandarin and biology, each placed next to its respective binder. She hadn't chosen physics this year, much to her father's dismay, but she had pleased him by choosing advanced math and biology instead.

This total focus on school was a way of life for Mei Ling; it was only in meeting non-Asian students at school that she realized this was not how everyone lived. Many of the other students enjoyed free evenings to socialize, hang out at the mall or spend time online. Mei Ling, on the other hand, had extra math tutoring on

Monday and Friday nights, violin lessons on Tuesday and Wednesday and English tutoring on Thursday. The weekend was dedicated to spending time with her parents and more tutoring.

She wondered what her classmates did when they went to the mall after school, but she knew her parents would never allow her the freedom to find out. Her sudden longing for social connections was beginning to cause tension in their relationship. Her request for permission to go to the mall one day after school at the end of the last term was greeted with a resounding no. This simple act of seeking greater independence had intensified her parents' apprehension about her future and their constant vigilance of her time.

She arranged her Little Kitty pens and erasers in their matching pencil case and attached a small plastic kitten ornament to the zipper handle. With a smile of satisfaction she placed everything in an orderly pile on her desk in anxious anticipation of the first day of school and the possibility of a new life filled with friends.

As Mei Ling prepared her school supplies, Raj toured the city in the back of his uncle's limousine, Solomon helped his family settle into their temporary home and Emily investigated the streets around her apartment complex with Tess. Each of them was filled with hopes for the future.



SCHOOL

On the first day of school Emily stood in front of the mirror, wearing a dark green polo shirt with black pants, her new school uniform. She was trying to fix her hair in a way that would soften the hard outlines of the uniform.

Emily noticed Tess in the mirror, standing behind her. “I hate this uniform. We both look exactly the same.”

“I think that’s the point, Em,” said Tess, ever wise, as ten-year-old girls can be. “It’s supposed to take away class differences and make us all look the same.” Tess smiled, happy to look like her big sister.

As she boarded the bus—one of a fleet of sixty minivans sent out by the school to retrieve students from around the city—Emily was uncomfortably aware of the boxy green shirt hanging over her waistband and wondered how it could look so much better on the other girls she saw on the bus. She studied them carefully, noticing that one girl had twisted the bottom of the shirt to make it hang on a diagonal, and another had tucked it in and made it

billow above the waistband of her pants. These were fashion modifications foreign to Emily, whose wardrobe had relied heavily on sculpted T-shirts and jeans. Defeated, Emily settled into the box she was wearing.

The international school was situated in the countryside several kilometres outside the city. After the hour-long ride, Emily was happy to stretch her stiff legs.

Solomon noticed that he and Ben were the only ones entering the school with the brown skin of Ethiopia. He looked everywhere, his radar attempting to detect other similar faces, but they were mostly white and Asian. Instinctively he put a protective arm around Ben's shoulder, letting it fall when his little brother ran ahead with the new friend he had met on the bus. Solomon walked slowly toward the school and wished, not for the first time, that he was as carefree as his brother. As he entered the school he caught a quick glimpse of another dark face emerging from a limousine.

Raj watched the buses arrive from the back seat of Uncle's limo. As the students disembarked he could see by the variety of skin and hair colours that they were from many different countries. Although he had attended a prestigious private school in Delhi, this was the first time he would attend school with people from different cultures.

Mei Ling arrived alone; her father left her at the front door where he would return to pick her up after school. Their schedules were coordinated like a finely oiled machine. Although

she lived as far from the school as many of the other students and was entitled to ride in one of the minivans, her mother insisted she drive to school with her father. For her parents this daily ritual enshrined the importance of her education. For Mei Ling it was just another lost opportunity to make friends.

The first day of school followed the predictable pattern. Homeroom assignments were announced, punctuated by shrieks of joy from friends who discovered a shared homeroom and moans of misery from those torn apart. This was followed by the semester's rotation of classes, then locker assignments and a quick tour of the building. Finally the morning ended with a school assembly.

The hallways teemed with nervous energy as students filed into the auditorium. Their restless eyes flitted from face to face, searching for friends, new and old.

Raj sauntered to the auditorium. A natural order had quickly established itself around him, and he was followed by a handful of boys who had been drawn immediately to his authoritative presence.

Emily was amazed by the number of different languages she heard spoken that morning. She waited in line next to the other new girl in her class and they laughed quietly together. Her name was Laura and she had just arrived from Denmark for her first year in an international school. Laura was as lost as Emily when they met in homeroom and a natural affinity had led them into

easy conversation.

Solomon stood out in line, taller than all his classmates except for one, a boy with a surfer tan and sun bleached hair. When he noticed Solomon staring at him he loped across the stream of students to say hello, a warm smile on his face.

Mei Ling waited in line next to Chen, another Vietnamese girl in her class. They had been assigned the same homeroom several times over the years and had formed a quiet solidarity, one that required no effort to maintain. With the same all-consuming focus on academic achievement they hadn't spent much time together over the years, even though school cliques were usually formed around language of comfort.

The second day of school was the first day of classes. Raj was particularly curious about math class, his favourite subject. But as he entered the classroom he cringed with disgust at the walls lined with hockey sticks. Clearly Mr. Brown was a fan.

The teacher gesticulated with enthusiasm as he explained his new methods for teaching math. Raj rolled his eyes when Mr. Brown asked them to display their calculations on the whiteboard desktops. *Why can't we use the old method and work in private?* wondered Raj. He recognized a kindred spirit when the Chinese girl sitting directly across from him rolled her eyes as well. She quickly lowered her head when he looked at her.

At the start of second period, Raj was worried that he would encounter another "new age" teacher like Mr. Brown. He was

relieved when he met his biology teacher. A short, round, elderly Indian gentleman with big dark-rimmed glasses, Mr. Mathews started the class by saying, "Now, my dear friends" and continued in a fatherly manner to describe his more traditional methods for teaching biology. *Ahhh*, thought Raj, *now that's more like it.*

After years at the school, Mei Ling knew all the teachers. So when she entered Mr. Wilson's history class for second period, her trepidation was well-founded. Mr. Wilson's reputation preceded him, and she was nervous to be sitting directly in front of him.

Mr. Wilson was the grade ten history teacher. He was a renaissance man, a jazz musician at night and a font of knowledge about obscure historical facts during the day. He often burst unexpectedly into song as a way to make a point or would ask students to do something equally intimidating, like stand in front of the class and reveal everything about last night's homework assignment.

During the first class he informed them, "Attendance will count for thirty per cent of your grade, and the rest will be based equally on class participation and your final assignment."

He paused for effect. "Of course, the majority of your mark for participation will be earned in October when the entire grade ten population will spend the day walking the perimeter of the school property to re-enact Mao's eight-thousand-mile Long March."

Mr. Wilson's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, but the day-long learning journey didn't sound like much fun to Mei Ling.

By lunch Solomon was exhausted, although happy with his teachers and classes. In particular he was looking forward to the Long March. *What a great way to learn something that would have been pretty boring otherwise*, he thought as he entered the cafeteria.

When he saw Ben bounding toward him he pulled a small stash of money from his pocket. His mom had given him enough to buy lunch for both of them, a temporary measure until they had an apartment and could make lunch at home. He gave some money to Ben so he could buy his own lunch and sit with his new friends.

Solomon looked around the cafeteria, aware that this was one of those make or break moments, where the choice of where to sit could be a curse or a blessing for the rest of the school year.

“Hey, Solomon! Come on over.” He turned to see Shane, the tall, blond-haired guy he had met outside the auditorium. He was sitting at a table filled with what was evidently the school’s basketball team.

Emily bumped into a tall black student as she entered the cafeteria in search of a place to sit.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, fumbling to put change in his pockets. She smiled at him, taking in his height and soft nervous smile; it was she who should have apologized.

“No problem.” She stepped out of his way, adjusted her bag over her shoulder and looked around the cafeteria anxiously.

She noticed that some of the girls were fidgeting with their cell phones in the food line, pretending they knew the routine, not

wanting to appear nervous, uncertain where to sit. She felt equally self-conscious. But she refused to let it show as she glanced around the room, considering whom to sit with. After several seconds she recognized some people from her homeroom and walked over to join them. She smiled when one of the boys welcomed her by sliding along the bench to make room for her to sit.

After lunch, Emily set off in search of her math room. As she rounded the corner outside the classroom she bumped into an Indian guy who was talking on his cellphone, waving his hands as he spoke. She couldn't help but notice his large silver ring.

"Watch where you're going," he growled at her.

"Sorry," she mumbled, caught off guard.

Rather than returning a smile or a friendly gesture to let her off the hook, he just stared at her, his sneer erasing his good looks. She stared back for a moment, caught in the intensity of his smouldering, dark eyes.

"Sorry," she said again and slipped into Ms. Dodd's math class a couple minutes late.

Once Emily had taken her seat, Ms. Dodds started the class with something she called a "mad minute." The students were given sixty math questions to answer in one minute. Emily successfully completed only two of the sixty questions and wondered what her good math grades in Canada were worth here. She hid her results and felt even worse when she saw that most of the students had completed at least fifteen questions.

Emily forced a smile. She noticed the tall guy she had bumped into at lunch sitting across the room; he had the same discouraged look on his face.

At the end of the day the school lobby looked like an airport departure lounge as students sat in small groups surrounded by their schoolbags, waiting for the minivans to depart. When the bell rang signalling departure time, they shot out the door.

Exhausted, Emily trailed behind them to the bus, searching the crowd for Tess's distinctive red curls. There was the tall guy again, with his arm around a boy who had to be his brother.

Mei Ling held her books close to her chest as she navigated through the throng of students to find her dad's car in front of the school. She noticed a limousine parked next to him and wondered who would be coming to school in such style.



THE HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Early October brought cooler days and longer nights. A natural rhythm had been established as students settled into the demands of school life. The homework load steadily increased as did the pressure to perform. The international school in Beijing, like its companion schools, was designed to prepare the “elite athletes” of international academics. The high standards of the Asian countries meant there were extra demands for achievement, a fact that Emily was becoming uncomfortably aware of. She was working harder than she had ever worked at school in Canada and was still only just keeping up.

One day, the tenth grade students were called to the library to receive instructions for the legendary Grade Ten history assignment. Mr. Wilson waited calmly as the small army of students arrived, some settling in to sit while others stood, fidgeting with binders and bags and shifting their weight from foot to foot.

“Okay, here it is, the big assignment,” Mr. Wilson said once they were mostly settled. “It’s got the potential to be pretty interesting if you put your minds to it.

“Now, we know there have been prophecies of ‘end times’ for as long as people have told stories,” he said. “Some of the oldest known stories predict the end of the earth or the end of the human race. Even recently, we have the example of the Mayan calendar, which predicted the end of the world would come in 2012.

“You will be required to produce a two-thousand-word paper about prophecies of the end times from your own part of the world.

“Some of you may find it difficult to uncover such prophecies from your own culture. Search diligently in your home country, perhaps in a cultural group other than your own. You will find legends of interest, I promise you,” he said, his enthusiasm untouched by the bland faces in front of him.

“This assignment is about source analysis, so I want to see your reading list by the end of November and your thesis and outline before Christmas break. The finished paper is due May twenty-seventh, just before final exams.” He paused. “Any questions?”

Silence.

“What are these teachers thinking?” Beth asked Emily as they stood in line at the cafeteria. “Are they piling on the stress just to toughen us up?”

Emily thought Beth’s British accent made her sound

particularly intelligent. They had met the first week of school at volleyball tryouts and hit it off when they kept pace with each other during the warm up run around the gym.

“Maybe it’s a conspiracy to see if they can break us,” Amelia said, joining them in line. Amelia was the volleyball team’s best setter. “Apparently only the ones who do well on this assignment make it in university. It’s your research skills they’re testing,” she continued. “As long as you have a lot of good sources, you’re okay.”

For some reason Emily was excited about the assignment. “I think it’s kind of interesting,” she said as they turned to find three seats together.

When Emily got home from school, she opened her laptop to begin researching. She knew there weren’t many stories of end times from Canada, at least none that she knew of. She remembered her parents telling her about Y2K in the millennium year, but that wasn’t particular to Canada. She didn’t know much about the Bible stories of Armageddon as church was foreign to her. She had heard the recent stories about the end of the five-thousand-year Mayan calendar, which some thought signified the end of the world. But, like all the other events, it came and went and the world was still intact.

Solomon was uneasy about the assignment and procrastinated, hoping to delay his research until the last minute. *I don’t understand why we’re doing this*, he complained to himself. He

didn't need any more stress in his life. He already had enough to take care of with his mom and brother and adjusting to this new country.

Going online only made him feel worse. He searched for "end times," and it took ten minutes to get past the sites for Biblical references. He found a site that looked promising, but it turned out to be the title of a newly released rock album. There were Internet sites for survivalist groups, fantasy fiction novels and computer games.

"Finally!" he exclaimed when he discovered a number of sites about the Mayan calendar. The Mayans believed in something called the "Calendar Round" that tracked time as a cycle. *This is interesting*, he thought, and he read for a while until he remembered that the Mayans had no relationship with Ethiopia and he would have to keep looking. By dinner time, the Internet had revealed nothing useful. He decided he would have to search the school library to find a relevant book.

Raj knew this assignment would require him to read *The Mahabharata*. The famous Indian epic of the final war between good and evil had attracted him from an early age. He loved the theatrical renditions of the story he had seen as a child, with the final battles that were fought in order to re-establish a world of goodness, but the size of the book killed his desire to read it.

The story told of a time when corruption ruled the world, when good people lived with constant fear, stress and loneliness

and when war and chaos were normal. *A lot like the world today*, he thought. He sighed and left his room to ask Auntie for her copy of the big book.

I'm not getting anywhere, thought Mei Ling, as she scrolled through websites that were mostly alarmist and frightening. *Where are the myths and cultural stories?* she wondered. She decided to ask her dad for advice on the way to school the next morning.

"End times?" he laughed. "You mean like now?"

"I don't know," she said, startled. "What do you mean, like now? You think these are end times?"

"Well, the entire world economy is crumbling, North Korea has nuclear capacity, unpredictable pandemics continue to erupt. Sure sounds like end times to me."

Mei Ling wasn't sure whether he was being sarcastic or just honest.

"Um, well, I guess." She looked at him with concern. "Dad, are you okay?"

"Well, some people say the world is getting better. I don't see it myself." He turned to smile at her, his silver rimmed glasses reflecting the morning sun.

Mei Ling felt like she had just stepped into her parents' room when she shouldn't have. She wondered if all fathers had a dark inner world they kept hidden from their children. *Maybe this is what happens when kids get older*, she thought, *and we're admitted to the world of worries.*

“Thanks, Dad,” she said uneasily. She got out of the car and headed to the library, hoping she’d find a good book there.



THE BOOK

The school library was arranged like a modern bookstore with soft chairs for lingering and open spaces that wrapped themselves around towering bookshelves. The only thing it lacked was a cafe.

Although after school time was usually spent with friends and schoolwork, Emily loved to curl up with a book. Today she was waiting in the library while Tess tried out for the badminton team. The library was a welcome refuge from socializing and trying always to be at her best.

Her two fingers flew across the keyboard as she typed a subject search for myths and prophecies about the future. A list of titles appeared on the screen, including *Tales of the End Times from all Cultures*. Many of the myths were Greek or Indian. There was nothing obviously Canadian, except for a series of First Nations legends. She decided to begin with these. As she scribbled the call numbers on a scrap piece of paper, another book attracted her attention. *New Beginnings; that sounds hopeful*, she thought. She

noted the call number and went to search the shelves.

She gathered the legend books before finding *New Beginnings* in the end section of the nearest aisle. It was much smaller than the other books. Its cover was a royal purple with gold print for the title and its pages were filled with dense text and several tiny coloured pictures, embossed with metallic paint. It smelled like the incense sticks her mom sometimes used at home and was crisp and clean to the touch. She checked it out at the front desk and settled into one of the library chairs to read.

The subtitle of the book was *The Seven Secrets of the Universe* and its premise was simple. There were seven secrets that, when understood, would unlock a person's consciousness, transforming their understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world. After a quick review of the table of contents, she flipped to the beginning and read without stopping. The book began with a chapter entitled "The Jewel of Eternal Life" and ended with "The Final Secret." Emily was intrigued by the possibility presented in both chapters that endings were illusions and simply doorways to new beginnings.

Mei Ling found *New Beginnings* and finished reading it quickly. She had taken the book home from the library and kept it hidden inside her desk drawer, unsure why she didn't want her parents to see it. Somehow it felt private and secret, especially given its optimism and her dad's obvious cynicism.

It was much more interesting than she had expected. She was

feeling more positive about the future of the world, although she was worried about wasting her time with a book not directly required for the history assignment.

She liked the idea of seven secrets that could change human consciousness. She was particularly intrigued by the secret called “The Wheel of Powers,” which described the inner powers required to transform the forces of negativity, greed and anger in the world.

She remembered learning about hard and soft power in humanities class when they examined leaders throughout history. Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King were offered as examples of soft power because they used values, principles and the integrity of their character to motivate and inspire action. Leaders like Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini were used as examples of hard power because they used fear and force to dominate and control. She wondered how ordinary people using these powers could change the world.

There were no details about the book’s cultural origin, but she knew it wasn’t Vietnamese. *Now I need prophecies from Vietnam*, she thought, and she thumbed through the books she had found on Southeast Asia.

Solomon waited as long as possible before visiting the library to research the assignment. He finally found a book that sounded interesting, but when he went to find it on the shelves he discovered he would have to put his name on the waiting list for

it.

Several days later, when it was his turn for *New Beginnings*, he read without stopping, surprised to find it so compelling. He was most interested in the sections called “The Feather of Truth” and “The Family Tree.”

“The Feather of Truth” described how a memory of every action and experience was stored in the subconscious to form consistent patterns of behaviour in a person. Ultimately this shaped their character. He liked the idea of the law of karma, as it was called in the book. This simple system of justice ensured that all actions, good and bad, were returned to a person, balancing relations like a math equation.

Solomon loved biology, so when he read the section called “The Family Tree” he imagined the tree of humanity as a warka tree, the giant fig that once grew wild in Ethiopia. This section suggested that the virtues of peace, love and happiness were the roots that held humanity together.

Although he enjoyed the little book, he knew he would have to find stories from Ethiopia, so he returned *New Beginnings* to the library.

Raj was in the library to search for short stories from India. After spending two hours lost in the detailed names and characters of *The Mahabharata*, he knew he would have to find an easier story. The plotline was as complex as the historical and tribal grievances of today’s news stories. *It’s not very hopeful if it all ends in a war*, he

thought.

A search on the library computer revealed a book entitled *New Beginnings*. When he couldn't find it on the shelf, Raj asked the librarian for help.

"Oh this has become quite a popular book," Ms. Jessom said. "This week alone I had three people wanting to sign it out. What's so special about it?"

"It's for a homework assignment," said Raj, "and it sounds like it would be a little more hopeful than the other books. Who else wanted it?"

"I can't tell you that, but they were probably Grade Ten students. After all, it's time for Mr. Wilson's prophecies assignment. Every year the Grade Ten students get depressed or scared about the future. It's not my favourite assignment but it's better than the year he made them study genocide." She paused while punching keys on the computer keyboard. "Interesting," she said. "No one has ever signed out this particular book before this year."

The phone rang and she turned from the computer to answer it. Raj looked at the computer screen and made a mental note of the names of the other students reading the same book. Emily, Mei Ling and Solomon were listed on the screen in that order.

"Okay, Raj," Ms. Jessom said when she returned. "I'll put your name on the list."

He was surprised and a little flattered that she knew his name already. They had only been at school for a few weeks.

When he finally read the book he was most interested in the section called "The Cup of Life." He remembered the first time his mother had drawn a picture of time turning like a wheel when she tried to help him understand how the past could become the future just as the future, once lived, became the past.

"The Silent Voice" section puzzled and intrigued him as it was quite a different description of a Divine Being than anything he knew.

Although it was an enjoyable read, he saw no use for the book. He returned it to the library and continued to search for short Indian myths.



THE REAL ASSIGNMENT

“I love this show,” Shane said as he and Solomon waited in line outside the auditorium.

Giggles, squeals and chatter filled the school hallways as students walked to the auditorium in anticipation of the day’s entertainment.

“Yeah, me too,” said someone standing behind them in line. “Last year’s hypnotist was amazing! Do you remember how he got everyone on stage to dance a square dance, and half of them didn’t even know what a square dance was?”

“I wouldn’t want to go on stage,” said Solomon. “I don’t want anyone messing with my mind.”

Raj was intrigued when he read the posters for the visiting scholar, Dr. Ravana, neuroscientist and illusionist.

Emily was excited to attend her first show with a hypnotist. These shows were common in Canada but only for senior school students. Mei Ling, on the other hand, was terrified of being

called up on the stage. She waited as long as possible before taking a seat near the back of the auditorium.

The headmaster of the upper school, Mr. Helmsby, stepped onto the stage to the microphone. He wore the usual headmaster uniform, a shirt and tie with a V-neck sweater. His tone was casual and folksy as he chatted with the students while everyone took their seats.

“This year we have a special guest,” he began. “She comes with a remarkable blend of skills and expertise. She is a neuroscientist as well as an expert in psychology and a trained illusionist. Which means,” he continued, “that she can blend the best of brainwork with the understanding of the human psyche to create illusions that convince you that what you are seeing is real.”

The guest suddenly appeared next to Mr. Helmsby. If she had walked across the stage to join him, no one had seen it. She was suddenly just there.

“Uh, good afternoon, Dr. Ravana,” Mr. Helmsby said, obviously shaken by her unexpected arrival. He extended a hand in greeting.

She did not respond. He waited. After looking him directly in the eye, she disappeared, only to reappear on the other side of the stage. Walking toward him, she extended her hand in greeting and smiled as if nothing unusual had happened.

The headmaster was clearly disoriented but put on a good face and greeted her with a smile. The students laughed and clapped, already impressed.

“Welcome, Dr. Ravana,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Helmsby. It is a great pleasure to be here,” she said, looking out to the audience with a big smile.

Dr. Ravana’s clothing was unusual. She wore a man’s suit that was tightly tailored to fit her female form. From a distance it appeared black and shone like metal. As she moved the fabric rippled around her body, flowing like silk, but when she stood still it became rigid, outlining her form like a suit of armour.

Emily listened intently as the doctor explained the basic tenets of neuroplasticity, the brain’s ability to adjust and adapt in order to re-establish functioning of the body when brain cells have been destroyed. She was captivated by Dr. Ravana’s smooth confidence and knowledge.

The word *evil* sprang to Raj’s mind as he watched Dr. Ravana onstage. *No, Raj thought, it’s not evil; it’s something else, something altogether more interesting. Power, he thought. Yes, that’s it. She is a master. She owns the stage and everything on it. She has complete authority over Mr. Helmsby.* Raj hoped one day he would have such power.

“We understand that the neurons that fire together will wire together over time,” Dr. Ravana said, “creating neural pathways that are fixed. In other words, when you think a thought over and over again, it establishes a neural pathway that then becomes part of your brain pattern.”

She smiled out at them as she repeated this basic concept. “This means that you begin to see the world through the neural

networks you have created with frequent thoughts.”

Woah, thought Emily. *Our thoughts can change the world, or at least the way we see it?* She was fascinated by the idea.

Solomon looked around at the other students, expecting the usual bored expressions. Instead they were spellbound, their eyes riveted on Dr. Ravana. He wondered if they were under a spell, captivated by her shiny presence. He felt the seductive quality of her quiet, certain voice and her strong declarations. He appreciated the wisdom in what she was saying, but instinctively he didn't trust her.

Mei Ling was frightened. There was something horrifying about this woman. The illusion of smoothness hid a dark energy, something she couldn't quite identify but that made her stomach knot as she watched.

“Of course this is very useful information when working with illusion,” Dr. Ravana continued. “Illusions are easily created by manipulating perceptions, sometimes through optics only and other times in more subtle and profound ways, through feelings. I will need volunteers to illustrate what I mean.”

She looked out at the audience, her suit sparkling in the overhead lights. Students were out of their seats and rushing to the stage so quickly that Mr. Helmsby barely had time to order them to stop.

“How many students would you like?” he asked Dr. Ravana.

She looked out at the audience where only a handful of students remained seated.

“I would like those still sitting to stand please. Yes, these are the ones.” She nodded, looking directly at Mei Ling.

Oh god, thought Mei Ling. This was her worst fear. She could not resist the woman’s eyes. They bore into her as she got out of her seat and moved slowly toward the stage.

Raj was delighted he had waited in his seat and stood instantly in response to her command, happy for the opportunity to study this woman more closely.

Solomon remained seated until the students around him pushed him to get up. He noticed Shane was also walking toward the stage.

Emily, mouth still open in awe, slowly shook her head as if coming out of a trance and got to her feet to join the small group moving toward the stage. Her volleyball friends Beth and Amelia walked with her. Amelia was giggling with nervous excitement.

“Yes, please, come and sit,” Dr. Ravana said kindly, motioning them to sit on the chairs that had been brought from backstage. There were twenty students in total seated before the school assembly. They looked around at each other, equally mystified that they were here on stage when it was clear they shared a common desire to stay seated in the audience.

“Let’s begin with a simple illusion and we will see who is able to detect it clearly. Those who can will stay until we have just the right number for our final demonstration.” She smiled at them, although to Solomon it looked more like a sneer.

An image appeared on the screen behind them. Dr. Ravana

walked along the row of students asking each to say what they saw on the screen. It was a black and white image of two vases that also appeared as two women's faces touching nose to nose, depending on whether one focused on the white or the black.

Dr. Ravana motioned for some of the students to leave the stage after they had given their answers. It was unclear how she made her choice to deselect them. Sometimes she asked them to leave if they saw the faces, and other times when they saw the vases. In total only ten students remained seated when she was finished.

"Excellent," she said, smiling broadly. "Next I will give you a more subtle illusion. Few of you will see it clearly, but those who do will have the great good fortune to stay for the final act.

"I would like you to write on this paper what you see in the next illusion," she said, handing each student a pad of paper and a pen. "In this way you will not be able to influence each other's answers."

She motioned and a new image appeared on the screen. It was a collage of images so densely packed that it was hard to detect a predominant theme.

"Look closely," she said encouragingly, like a teacher expecting great results.

They looked. Emily squinted to see more clearly, hoping an outline would appear from within all the details. Solomon closed his eyes for a minute then looked again. Raj stared at the screen, willing himself to see something. Mei Ling looked at Dr. Ravana,

too afraid to look at the image and possibly get the right answer. She was wondering how she could get off the stage.

They wrote their answers on their notepads, and Dr. Ravana walked slowly from student to student, looking at what they had written. Then she looked at each of them, deep in the eyes, before motioning for several of them to leave the stage. There was a mixture of relief and disappointment on the students' faces as they left.

Then she came to Solomon. She looked at him first, then at his pad, then back at him. She handed him the pad and said, "Stay."

Solomon groaned internally. *I don't want to be here*, he thought. When she was finished there were only six students left on stage.

"Now please stand and let us know your names," Dr. Ravana commanded.

Beth gave her name, smiling shyly. Shane said his name with a laugh. Then Raj spoke. Emily said her name clearly. When Mei Ling said her name, her voice was so quiet it was barely audible, even to those on stage next to her.

"Please speak louder," commanded Dr. Ravana.

Mei Ling, startled, barked out her name and the kids in the audience laughed.

Finally Solomon gave his name. Raj recognized it from the list he had seen in the library and noted the other two students on the list were also onstage.

"Now I would like you to sit comfortably in your chair with your feet flat on the floor so we can begin the final

demonstration,” said Dr. Ravana, quickly taking charge. They stood stunned, unable or unwilling to sit.

Raj was the first to lower himself into his chair, keen to participate in the doctor’s experiment. Beth’s nervousness made her slip slightly off her chair as she sat. Emily followed, then Shane and Solomon sat at the same time. Mei Ling was the last to sit when she realized she would be more comfortable sitting than standing alone on stage.

“I want you to let your body relax but be alert in your chair,” Dr. Ravana said, her voice dropping to a lower tone.

“Now, take a deep breath in, hold it, then let it out slowly.” She stopped, waiting for them to settle.

“As you breathe in, imagine you are breathing in fresh energy, and as you breathe out you are releasing tension and tiredness from your body.” Again she waited. “Feel your body relax.”

Her voice was incredibly calming, and Raj could feel himself slowly relaxing. He wasn’t familiar with this sensation, but he enjoyed it.

Mei Ling felt herself resisting the instructions; she did not want to be hypnotized and dance the square dance in front of hundreds of people her age. She kept her breathing shallow in a deliberate attempt to stay tense.

“Now bring your attention to your head where the brain is. You can imagine a tiny spark of life energy in the centre of your forehead where all the thinking happens. This is the living being, or the software inside the brain’s hardware.”

What she's saying makes no sense, thought Solomon, but he could feel a tiny dot of concentrated energy behind his forehead, between his eyes. He didn't want to follow her instructions, but her voice pulled him in the same way a strong current pulls a boat downstream.

Emily noticed her thoughts were slowing down. She wondered if this was how her mom felt when she went upstairs to meditate every evening.

"Now imagine there is a room inside your head," Dr. Ravana said. "A big, bright, clean room, and you are sitting inside this room on the most comfortable chair you know." Her voice dropped an octave, like the sound of a flute transforming into a bassoon.

"You are very comfortable sitting in this chair and you settle in, relaxed and cozy."

Is this what it's like to be hypnotized? Raj wondered. He found the sensation rather pleasant.

"Imagine in front of you, where your eyes are, is a big screen, like in a movie theatre. Imagine that you are hearing my voice coming into the room through speakers, one on each side of the room where the ears are."

If velvet made a sound it would sound like this voice, thought Mei Ling. She was having trouble resisting and finally surrendered herself to the strong pull of Dr. Ravana's commands.

"Now imagine on the screen of your mind a scene begins to unfold, like a movie."

Suddenly the scene in front of them changed. They were standing in the school library, at the centre of the room where the dictionaries were displayed on podiums.

Solomon looked around, recognizing this place reserved for complete silence. He often came here to be alone. Raj recognized the Chinese girl from math class. Emily recognized the Indian guy who had been so rude to her in the hallway on the first day of school, but she saw no sign of Beth. Solomon turned to talk to Shane, only to discover he was gone. Mei Ling looked at the others, seeing their faces clearly for the first time.

"It looks real," Solomon said.

Raj turned to look at Solomon, their eyes met in search of comprehension. Although they had seen each other in the hallways, they had never spoken.

"It's an illusion," Raj announced as if to clear up any confusion.

Dr. Ravana appeared from behind the bookshelves. She spoke with the same commanding tone she had used onstage but without the smile or the velvet. "Now that I have you here," she said, lingering without finishing the sentence.

Mei Ling surprised herself when she spoke. "There are only four of us. What happened to the others?"

"You are the ones." The doctor's face was taut and polished like metal.

"Is this an illusion?" asked Emily directly.

"No, it is not an illusion," Ravana snarled in response.

Emily looked at Solomon and Mei Ling, registering their faces

from the cafeteria. She sought support in their eyes and Solomon returned a thin smile. Raj moved quietly away and stood slightly apart from the group.

“You are here to receive the real homework assignment, the one that has been reserved especially for you. Whether you accept it or not is up to you.” Dr. Ravana spoke with a harsh tone, any veneer of kindness gone.

Mei Ling looked around the room, hoping to see evidence that this was in fact an illusion.

“Your real assignment is quite simple,” Dr. Ravana continued. “You must discover the seven secrets that will change humanity’s relationship with this world. In the process you must change yourselves. When you have changed and are ready to live in a better world, this old world will be destroyed.”

She spoke in a monotone, as if she was announcing the weather, and looked at them with disdain. Clearly she didn’t want to be here any more than they did.

“What? Don’t be ridiculous. What kind of joke is this?” spluttered Raj. His demeanour hardened as he looked at her, awaiting a response. It was clear he was ready to challenge the authority of this woman who had enthralled him only minutes before.

“There is no joke,” she said, more softly. “But it’s unlikely you will succeed so you need not take it seriously.”

There was a pause as each of them struggled to comprehend what was happening.

“Destruction will continue as predicted whether you succeed or not,” Ravana continued. “The world has reached the point of self-destruction anyway.”

She stopped to allow her words to sink in. Her smile was unpleasant, unnatural. Obviously the thought of world destruction pleased her enormously.

“Unfortunately I am bound to state the truth in this short time we are face to face,” she said, clearly unhappy with these terms. “You have five minutes to clarify your assignment, after which time I am no longer bound by these rules.” She looked at her silver wristwatch as if she wished she could make time move more quickly.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am,” said Solomon respectfully, “but where are we really? And what are you talking about? Is this part of an illusion?”

Ravana ignored his direct questions. “You have been chosen for this assignment on the basis of your inner qualities. The secrets will be revealed to you, if you can understand them. You will only succeed if you can see through the veil of illusion that I will try to weave around you.” She smiled at this thought. “Even the finest minds would not succeed. Thus my surprise to see that you are the ones who have been chosen,” she said curtly.

“Well that’s encouraging,” said Emily sarcastically. There was something about this woman that provoked aggression. “Why would we accept an assignment doomed to failure? I mean, if we aren’t likely to succeed and if destruction is going to happen

anyway, then what's the point?"

"My part is to convey the message," said Dr. Ravana. "I am not obliged to explain anything further. It was considered important that you meet me in order to know the form of resistance you will encounter during the assignment. I will do everything possible to stop you, as I love this world in its current state: full of greed, anger and desire. I thrive in corruption, chaos and conflict."

She stopped for a moment to rearrange her hair, adjusting a silver clip with a loud snap. Her entire physical appearance was slowly beginning to change. A metallic sheen covered her body as the illusion of humanness faded. Mei Ling saw that the illusionist's face was very different up close. Although her eyes were dark and appeared beautiful at first glance, seen more closely they looked like steel balls. They were rimmed with false eyelashes that reached up past the border of her eyebrows, far beyond where normal eyelashes would go. Her nose was bent at an angle, taking up too much space in the middle of her face. In fact Mei Ling was shocked to see that the face that had appeared beautiful from a distance was ugly and disproportioned when seen more closely.

Mei Ling gasped and the others stood and stared.

Then quietly, through tightened lips, Ravana said, "I may have understated the possibility of success, but my job is to limit your chance of succeeding. That being said, if you do succeed, humanity will be renewed with the rest of the planet."

The possibility of success prompted Mei Ling to make good use

of their limited time. "Okay then," she said, trembling slightly, "what do we need to know to succeed?"

Ravana frowned at this request and responded with a scowl. "The secrets are hidden between the worlds; you will have to find your way there to discover them. There are seven secrets, you must understand them all and you must believe in each other. That is it." She stopped speaking abruptly, as if exerting an enormous amount of self-control.

"How do we get 'between the worlds' as you call it?" asked Raj.

"It is a matter of intention and concentration. I doubt you will be able to do it. You will have to experiment." Her response was evasive.

"What kind of secrets are they?" asked Mei Ling.

"This I am not bound to tell you," Ravana responded, obviously delighted to deny them this information.

"How will you try to stop us?" asked Solomon.

"At first my methods will be obvious, but as you get closer my methods will change. However, you will not see me again in this form. And should you succeed in this assignment, I will be forced to leave." She hesitated for a moment, then added, "For a time." Her smile was sickening.

"One final word," Ravana said. "You will not fully succeed unless you trust each other completely. And remember, everything I said onstage is true. Okay, time's up," she said with obvious delight and disappeared in a flash of bright light, her

silver hair clip clattering to the floor at their feet.

“That was beyond weird,” said Emily. She stepped forward to pick up the hair clip. As she held it up to look at it more closely, it vanished.

“She’s scary,” Mei Ling said quietly.

“Like her namesake,” said Raj.

“What do you mean, her namesake?” Solomon asked.

“In India, Ravana is the demon that causes sorrow through illusion.” Having been raised in a world of deities and demons, Raj spoke as if from a textbook. “Of course the other Ravana has ten heads.”

“Well she was pretty creepy, even without ten heads,” said Emily.

“I don’t get it,” said Solomon. “Why would we be chosen? The assignment about prophecies has clearly led us here, but why us?” He tended to chatter when he was nervous. “And is this real?”

“Why us?” Raj mimicked. “Maybe we’re smarter or more talented or have better minds.” He looked again at the others. “I know we’ve all read that *New Beginnings* book,” he said. “In fact, we’re the only ones who have ever read it.”

Solomon took in Raj’s smug, know-it-all expression and suppressed the inexplicable irritation he felt rising in him. He turned to the others and changed the subject. “What did you guys see in that last image she showed us?”

Emily had completely forgotten about the image, but was suddenly curious to know what the others had seen. “I saw a

mountain broken in half," she said.

"I saw a huge wave of water," said Mei Ling.

"Great," said Raj. "And I saw airplanes dropping bombs."

"I saw a rainbow in a field with a pool of water and a golden pavilion," said Solomon.

"Okay, this is even weirder. How did that get us here?" asked Emily.

"And why did he get to see something beautiful?" Raj asked, gesturing at Solomon.

"I remember seeing those images in that *New Beginnings* book," said Mei Ling. Out of view of the others, with her hands below the table, she was twisting the strap on her backpack, trying to calm her pounding heart.

"But what would the book have to do with this?" Solomon asked.

"I don't believe any of it. I'm out of here," said Raj, and he turned to walk out of the library.

Emily, who wasn't used to not liking people, felt a surge of annoyance as she watched him walk away.

"Hey, what if it's true?" she yelled to his back. "I mean, she was pretty convincing."

"Well she is an illusionist after all, isn't she," said Raj, not turning around. "She obviously hypnotized us and led us here. I don't know how, but I'm not interested." He continued walking, a slight smirk on his face, his fine black leather shoes clicking dismissively as he left.

“Maybe we should just try to forget it,” muttered Mei Ling.

“I’m expecting the curtains to close on the stage and everyone to burst out in applause,” said Emily. “Aren’t you?” She looked at Solomon and Mei Ling.

Solomon nodded.

But there were no curtains. They stood in the library for another few minutes totally bewildered. Not able to make sense of it, they exchanged phone numbers and decided to go home.



SURRENDER

The next day there was no mention of the hypnotist. There were no jokes told by snickering students in the hallways about how silly they had looked on stage dancing and singing. There was no back slapping in raucous appreciation of the entertainment value they had provided, nothing. When they saw each other in the hallway, Raj, Mei Ling, Emily and Solomon turned the other way, secretly afraid that making eye contact would confirm the truth of the experience they each hoped was an illusion.

During the week that followed, Mei Ling's eyes hugged the floor as she walked through the hallways. More than usual, she was afraid to face people, especially with the humiliation of what she may have done onstage under hypnosis. Raj, on the other hand, held his head high as he walked down the hallway, proud that he had been one of the chosen ones to be on the stage. Emily was confused about what had happened and decided to go on as usual, keeping busy with volleyball practice and spending time

with friends.

Solomon watched people closely, wondering what illusions they had witnessed from the audience. But as the week progressed, he slid into his daily routine and tried to forget about the hypnotist.

He couldn't. After a week, Solomon decided it was definitely odd that no one had said anything about Dr. Ravana's session. Standing at the lockers one day he turned to Shane and in as nonchalant a tone as possible asked, "So, what did you think about that hypnotist last week?"

"What hypnotist?" Shane asked, as he rummaged through his locker to find his math textbook. "Man, I'm late again," he mumbled, looking up at the hall clock. He slammed the locker door shut and began rushing down the hall. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said over his shoulder. "The hypnotist comes at the end of the year when we're ready to let loose a bit."

Solomon sent a message to the group.

Solomon: Guys, we have to meet. Nobody else saw the hypnotist. There was no hypnotist! Ask around if you don't believe me.

Raj's response was immediate.

Raj: Why? There's nothing to talk about. It'll all blow over. We just have to leave it.

Solomon: Nothing to talk about? Watch the news and see for yourself.

Solomon watched Raj's icon disappear, then he tried to reach Emily and Mei Ling by text.

Emily was in the change room after volleyball practice. Beth, Amelia and Laura were laughing as they stood in a row in front of the big mirrors brushing their hair and putting on their makeup. Emily's movements were slow and thoughtful; she had something on her mind. Unsure of how to start, she decided to be blunt.

"Did a hypnotist come to the school last week?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Beth. She momentarily stopped applying mascara to look at Emily.

"Did we have a hypnotist come to the school? You know, and do a show?" Emily was starting to get worried about what they might say.

Amelia looked at Emily, her face a beautiful blend of light chocolate coloured skin from her Antiguan mother and fine features from her Thai father. "Usually the hypnotist comes at the end of the year. Only the Grade Twelve class is allowed onstage though."

"It's kind of like their last hurrah," added Beth, "and it's great for the rest of us to see because it takes them off their thrones."

Oh my god, thought Emily. Now she was really confused.

"What's wrong, Em?" Laura's Nordic blonde hair swung as she turned to look at Emily.

"Nothing," said Emily. "I can hardly wait to see it."

Raj tried to ignore Solomon's message, but it became increasingly difficult to do so. He saw a copy of *The Times of India* on his uncle's desk. The cover story was about a growing swell of anti-corruption sentiment that was sweeping the country. Regular citizens were demanding the government punish corrupt businesses. Raj feared his father might be targeted. The next day there was a severe earthquake in a remote part of India and the embassy in Beijing was bombarded with urgent demands for information about loved ones. His uncle didn't return home for dinner the rest of the week. There was an unexpected meteor shower over Russia, another deadly car bomb in the Middle East and a major stock market crash. *Is the world falling apart in a spectacular way this week or am I just being sensitive?* he wondered.

Then the school was suddenly closed down after the foreign media reported news of a global pandemic that had started in China. All the downtown shops and restaurants in Beijing were closed as people stayed home, afraid to interact with others. Those people still in the streets wore masks to cover their faces, and schools stayed closed until they could ascertain the severity of the virus. When they finally returned to school, students were made to stand in lines in the parking lot as teachers, their faces covered with masks, applied antiseptic gel to their hands.

Raj was not about to stand in line with all the other students and expose himself to possible infection. He waited comfortably in the back seat of the limousine as long as possible. *Maybe Solomon is right*, he thought begrudgingly as he finally pulled on

his face mask and opened the limo door to join the line.



COMMITMENT

Later that day Solomon received a text from Raj, saying he would consider the possibility of meeting them but was only free Thursdays after school. So two days later, Raj, Mei Ling, Emily and Solomon met in the library near the dictionaries where they had met with Ravana.

Emily arrived first, thinking she would use the waiting time to catch up on a reading assignment . She knew if she caught the early bus she'd just have time to finish it tonight. Within minutes the others arrived.

The collar on Raj's shirt was as stiff as the look on his face as he sat across from her.

"Either we're in an illusion or the whole school is," said Raj. "Both are pretty hard to believe."

"We must have been hypnotized and led to the library," said Solomon, "but no one remembers a hypnotist being here."

"Is it possible this is a shared illusion?" asked Emily. "According to Raj, we all read the same book. And we're the only

ones who seem to know about the hypnotist. Maybe there was something subliminal in the book that affected us subconsciously and Ravana worked with it.”

“I think not knowing is the best reason to start and see what we find out. What do we have to lose?” Solomon asked.

“I agree,” said Mei Ling quietly. “I think we should try and see what happens.”

“Why would we accept an assignment from someone who doesn’t exist?” asked Raj.

Solomon looked at him. “Have you seen what’s happening in the world? These past couple of weeks would be pretty good evidence that Dr. Ravana is right about the world being on the path to destruction.”

“Just because it was a bad few weeks doesn’t mean she’s real,” contested Raj.

“So you’re hallucinating now?” Emily frowned at him.

“Maybe it is true and everything will just keep getting worse until we do something,” suggested Mei Ling, looking up from behind her thick black bangs.

Emily smiled at Mei Ling. “Maybe we should at least give it a try and see what happens.” She paused. “What were the instructions again?”

“She said we had to find seven secrets and understand them,” Solomon said. “She must be referring to the ‘seven secrets of the universe’ from the *New Beginnings* book, do you think?” He looked at Raj who sat in stony silence.

“Yeah, makes sense,” said Emily. “And we have to find them somewhere between the worlds, whatever that means.”

“If we *were* going to do this, where would we even start?” asked Raj, not wanting to spend more time than necessary with these people.

“Good question.” Mei Ling looked at Raj, accepting his question as commitment.

“Sorry, but I have to go now,” said Emily, gathering up her things. “Let’s meet here next Thursday and figure it out. We should bring the book.”

“I will,” said Solomon.



THE JEWEL OF ETERNAL LIFE

The school was quiet and the hallways deserted when Solomon arrived in the library and sat quietly to wait for the others.

Emily arrived minutes later. “Did you bring the book?”

“I tried to find it,” he said. “I even asked Ms. Jessom for help. She looked through the database but it wasn’t there. The weird thing is, she said she’d never heard of it before.”

“Woah, that is weird,” said Emily.

Mei Ling arrived in time to hear the last bit of their conversation. “That means we only have Dr. Ravana’s instructions to help us,” she said as she sat in the chair closest to Emily. She noticed that Emily and Solomon interacted with the ease of people who had known each other for years. She felt excluded, as usual.

“Something is very wrong if Ms. Jessom doesn’t know about the book,” said Raj, joining them in the circle of chairs. He had been lingering, listening to their conversation and remembering his extended interaction with the librarian. He hung the long strap

of his book bag over the back of a chair and sat, crossing his arms and legs tightly in front of him, a statement of disinterest.

“Oh well. I guess we just have to try to recall what Dr. Ravana said and see if that works,” said Emily.

Raj mimicked Dr. Ravana’s steely, dominating voice. “Now breathe and relax.”

“No, I mean it. Seriously, Raj, we should do it properly.” Emily found his prim aloofness so annoying.

“Okay, let’s piece together what we can recall. Mei Ling, what do you remember?” Solomon asked.

Mei Ling’s voice trembled as she spoke. “I remember she told us to relax and imagine a room in our heads.” She looked at Solomon as if he was the only one who could be trusted to listen.

“Let’s get this over with,” Raj interjected, pressing his hands to his knees as if to leap forward. “I’ll start.”

Solomon stiffened, resisting Raj’s dominance. Emily shrugged and turned to Mei Ling who had already closed her eyes in cooperation.

Raj spoke slowly, imitating Dr. Ravana’s voice and commanding nature. After a couple of minutes, Emily said, “This isn’t working. I can hear everyone breathe, and Raj, your voice isn’t very relaxing.”

“Maybe we could try walking and see if it helps us concentrate a bit better,” said Solomon.

“But that’s not how Dr. Ravana did it onstage,” said Raj impatiently.

"I know, but maybe it will be easier to concentrate if we move a bit. We can walk slowly, like we're looking for something," Solomon persisted.

"Fine," Raj said through pursed lips.

They stood and began walking slowly, each starting at the end of a separate aisle, converging at the dictionary stand. During the first attempt Mei Ling began to giggle, which provoked Emily's laughter. Raj insisted angrily that they start again.

During the second attempt Raj stumbled when his foot caught the lower edge of a bookshelf. He stopped himself from falling but the atmosphere of concentration was broken when they heard him curse under his breath.

Finally Emily said, "How will we be able to save the world if we can't even get this right? It's impossible to get four people to concentrate on anything at the same time."

"Maybe we should just sit down and see if we can relax again," Mei Ling offered. "Then we can try to see the screen in our minds and wait, the way we did onstage."

Once they were settled, Mei Ling said, "What if we're trying to arrive at a state of mind and not a place?"

Raj turned to look at her as if noticing her for the first time.

"You're right, Mei Ling, we need to create a state of mind," he said, a hint of respect in his voice. "Why don't you lead us?"

Pleased to be asked, Mei Ling gave it her best effort. Her quiet voice reminded them to breathe, relax and focus inwards on the screen of their minds. There was a palpable change in the

atmosphere as they succeeded in relaxing. Emily felt her thoughts slowing down. Mei Ling felt a little ball of power in the centre of her forehead. Solomon noticed that his vision was blurred and soft around the edges. Raj was quiet.

In the silence that followed, each was completely absorbed in their own experience, unaware of the others' presence.

Suddenly the scene changed and they were in a misty place. The sky overhead was dark. A black cloud had completely covered the sun, which could be seen only as a dull glow. The heavy sky shone with an unnatural metallic glare. Everything around them was blurry, as if they were standing in thick fog. Emily could see the others' bodies as dark blobs surrounded in mist. There was no sound here, it was dead silent.

Emily stretched her hands out in front of her and could see their outline as she wiggled her fingers, touching her thumbs to the index fingers. There was no sensation in her hands, she couldn't feel anything. It was as if her senses had been muted. She could see the faint outline of a head, then she heard Solomon's hopeful voice.

"We aren't in the library," he said. His face came into focus and she could see that his lips weren't moving as he spoke. "We did it."

"Your lips aren't moving," said Emily, "but I can hear you."

"Yeah, I can hear you too," said Mei Ling. "What's going on?"

There was the faint outline of something stretching across the area in front of them. It was barely visible through the thick mist.

“What’s that?” asked Solomon, pointing at the thing in front of them.

The mist parted slightly as if in direct response to his wish to see more clearly. Stretching across the horizon, as far as their eyes could see, was a wall. It must have been made of glass or something transparent because they could see through to the other side where a field stretched into the distance. The sun shone brightly and the field was covered with sparkling objects that glittered in the sun like dewdrops. Their sparkle spread misty rainbows of light in all directions. Emily walked toward the wall; the others were close behind her.

It’s beautiful, thought Mei Ling as she looked through the glass.

Emily squinted, trying to see the objects more clearly. There was a collective gasp as they realized, simultaneously, that the field was full of diamonds.

“Unbelievable!” Raj exclaimed.

Solomon stood perfectly still, his feet planted to the ground as if they had taken root there. His eyes were wide, his mouth was partly open and the look on his face was distant. “I love it here, it’s so peaceful,” he said. “I’ve never felt so calm. I don’t want to leave.” His mind was trancelike, slow and saturated with silence.

“I like it too,” Mei Ling responded. “I feel as if my thoughts have almost stopped.”

“It’s like we’re in a slow motion movie,” Raj observed.

Emily stared across the diamond field in front of her. She felt drawn to touch the wall. Gingerly, she reached out her hand and

watched as it went through to the other side, disappearing as it crossed.

The others could feel her surprise, but they couldn't feel any fear from her. She was not afraid. Before anyone could say anything, Emily stretched out to walk through the wall. As soon as she crossed to the other side, her body collapsed to the ground where the others were standing. Mei Ling reached down to touch her body. It was completely limp and inanimate. Through the glass wall they could see a diamond hovering in the air where Emily's head would have been.

"Emily?" Mei Ling reached her hand across the glass.

"Wait, Mei Ling, don't do anything stupid," shouted Raj, but even his distress was buffered by the silent stillness of the place. The mists of light whirled through their thoughts, softening them.

Mei Ling retracted her hand.

"I think that diamond must be Emily," Solomon stated.

"Guys?" They could hear Emily's thoughts and feel her presence.

"Where are you?" asked Solomon.

"I'm over here." Emily's thoughts were coming from the floating diamond.

"But how are you talking?" asked Solomon.

"It's amazing that we know it's Emily even though her body isn't working," said Mei Ling.

"It looks dead," said Raj, looking down at Emily's body.

"Maybe that's the illusion," Mei Ling said. "She appears dead

but she's not."

Solomon walked up to the wall next to the place where Emily's body lay on the ground.

"It looks like a costume someone took off in a hurry and threw on the floor between acts in a play," he said.

He passed his hand through the wall and watched as it disappeared. On one side of the wall was the physical world and on the other was a world that appeared to operate according to different laws. He walked through the wall and the others watched as his body dropped to the ground next to Emily's. A second diamond appeared, hovering next to the one they knew to be Emily.

"It's like flying," Solomon said. "There's no weight to drag you down." Raj and Mei Ling could hear his thoughts just as clearly as before.

"Yes," said Emily, "it's like floating in a pool. It's very relaxing."

Raj and Mei Ling looked at each other, curious. Together they crossed through the wall, leaving their bodies lying next to the others. Hovering above the field of diamonds they sensed that the diamonds beneath them were alive with personalities.

Suddenly in a swirl of light the other diamonds began to rise. Slowly at first, then in one synchronized movement, they formed a giant constellation of stars spiralling upwards. The diamond cluster hovered for a moment, illuminating the field below. Emily experienced a magnetic pull toward them but willed herself to

stay with the others.

Still in their diamond form Emily, Solomon, Mei Ling and Raj watched as the swarm of diamonds disappeared, leaving them behind. They remained in the field, aware of their bodies on the other side of the wall.

Raj: I don't get it.

Raj watched his words appear on the computer screen as he typed. He was sitting at his desk in the apartment complex in downtown Beijing. He had just arrived from school and the experience in the diamond field. From his room the skyline was barely visible due to the thick cloud of smog that hung over the city. He thought the air of Delhi was dirty, but the air of Beijing was even cloudier.

The shape of the skyline changed every day as new buildings sprang up. Most of the new buildings were uninspiring to look at, square, brown and stone, built for functional purposes not for beauty. As he stared out the window Raj found himself longing for the colour and chaos of India with its temples and deities strewn with flower garlands. He was surprised to be missing India; he had been so keen to leave, but now its vibrance seemed appealing.

Auntie had invited him to the temple this evening, but he had asked to stay at home. He discovered very quickly that living with Auntie and Uncle was much the same as living with his parents. Just this morning as he sat in prayer with them his uncle's

cellphone rang, prompting Auntie to deliver the same scolding look his mother often gave his father. Raj had to leave early for school and hoped he wouldn't receive the same disapproving look for cutting his prayer time short.

He blinked when he heard the "beep" of a new message and turned from the window to see that Emily and Solomon were online.

Emily: I don't get it either, but I have to say, that was the coolest experience I've ever had.

Solomon: No kidding! But I wasn't expecting the first secret to lead us to death. If that's what death is like, it wasn't so bad.

Raj: But we didn't die.

Emily: Seems there is more to us than our bodies. I figure the diamond must be our spirit, you know, "the jewel of eternal life," from the first chapter of *New Beginnings*.

Raj: And what? We stay like that forever, floating around and hearing each other think?

Emily: It's funny, I remember the titles of the chapters in the book and some of the details, but I don't remember the book connecting all the ideas into a full story.

Solomon: Maybe that's what we have to figure out. I wonder if this is how it will go, we have a weird experience then it's over and we have to understand it.

Raj: Why isn't Mei Ling online?

Solomon: She has extra tutoring. Her parents want her to get top marks.

Emily: So do mine, but I still have free time.

Raj: Well you're from Canada, life is easier there, standards aren't as high.

Raj heard a knock at the door.

Raj: Dinner time. Gotta go.

Solomon: Me too. See ya.

My standards aren't lower than other people's, Emily thought to herself. Raj was always acting so superior. It infuriated her. She switched on the lamp on her desk and the light flashed off the silver pendant draped over the side of her monitor. She blinked, momentarily blinded.

Later that night Solomon found his mom hunched over the kitchen table, her head in her hands. She sat up quickly and smiled a weary smile when she heard him enter the room.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hello, dear." Her voice was heavy, her eyes were red and she looked tired. She had been working extra hours, trying to settle into the new job.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"It's a big change," she admitted. "Things work in such a different way here. Sometimes I wonder if I will ever figure it out."

Solomon thought for a moment. "I guess school is school for us," he said. "It's probably a bigger change for you." He knew she had sacrificed a lot for this move. "Maybe it's culture shock, Mom.

I mean, you probably have more contact with Chinese culture than we do.”

She stood up and straightened her skirt. “I’ll be okay. I don’t want you to worry, Solomon. I will learn and it will be fine.” It sounded like she was reassuring herself as much as him. She reached out to pat his hand. “It’s late. You should get ready for bed.”

“Mom, can I ask you something?” He hesitated, not wanting to add to her burden.

She looked up at him expectantly, her smile encouraging him to continue.

“I know you have always believed in God, but have you ever thought about what the soul might be? You know, practically?”

“What are you thinking?” she asked, sensing he had something to say.

“Well, I just wonder if you think the soul could exist separate from the body, you know, like its own being?”

He realized he had never spoken to his mom about her beliefs. Although he and Ben had accompanied her to church on Sundays back in Addis, his interest was limited to the singing and quiet time. Now he was very curious to know what she thought.

“Yes, son, I think the soul is the spark of life that makes the body work. Why are you asking?”

“I just wonder how knowing this would help.”

“Help what?” she asked.

“Help us deal with life.”

“If we truly believed it, we’d be able to let go, we wouldn’t hang on so tight to everything, including our bodies. What’s got you interested in this?” she asked again.

“No reason.” He stood and gave her a hug. “Thanks, Mom. Good night.”



THE SILENT VOICE

That night, before going to bed, Mei Ling tucked away the little drawing she had been working on instead of her math assignment. She slid it under a book in her drawer, away from her mother's curious eyes, and settled into the chair facing the window. She was tired and confused about their experience in the diamond field and had been drawing as a way to relax.

Now she took a rare moment to lean her head back in the chair and let her thoughts drift, undisciplined. She noticed an especially bright star in the sky and wondered if it was a planet. As she stared at it, she remembered the field of diamonds and the delicious experience of being bodiless, of floating free from pressure, tension, stress and worry.

"That is your true form." She heard a voice as if it was inside her head but its clarity and power told her it was not her own thought. *"This body is a costume; you are a diamond star, a sparkling being of life energy that inhabits the body."*

In spite of the strangeness of hearing a disembodied voice, Mei Ling found its presence very soothing. The brief experience of silent communication with the others in the field of diamonds made this ethereal contact comfortable.

"Who are you?" she asked aloud, unsure what to say. In that moment she felt herself surrounded by a warm glowing energy, like being wrapped in a blanket.

"I am the Silent One." The room was filled with light and pulsated with power. *"Although I have many names in many languages, I am the One they call God."*

Mei Ling could hear her heartbeat, steady and slow. She wasn't sure she believed in God. "What are you doing here?"

"Sweet child, I am here to give you the knowledge and power to create a better world. If you make the effort to understand the secrets, they will change you. As you change, the world will change. But do not fear. I will be with you the entire time."

Silence lingered after the voice was gone. Mei Ling sat quietly for a long time.

Tess was complaining of a sore stomach. She was lying on the sofa when Emily's dad arrived home from work. He often had to work late, which left the girls alone with the ayi after school and into the evening. When he saw the look on Emily's face he knew she needed a bit of space.

"Hey," he said to Tess. "Why don't we go out and get a DVD from the corner store?"

Tess perked up instantly. She loved movies, and the corner store had hundreds of pirated DVDs for sale at low cost.

“Okay.” She leapt up and pulled her coat down from the stand.

“Do you want to come, Em?” Dad asked.

“No, you guys go ahead,” she said, grateful to her dad for reading her mind. She knew they’d be gone for awhile; it took Tess ages to choose from all the options. Emily pulled out her homework, happy for a chance to focus on it without feeling she was abandoning her sister.

Dad and Tess returned half an hour later with a movie about a brave young girl, and Tess went off to bed with no more complaints of a sore tummy.

In the middle of the night, Emily was awakened by a sudden blast of cold air. When she brushed her fingers through her hair they came out wet. The room was dark and she stared up at the ceiling, blinking to clear her eyes and dissolve the image she was seeing. But it would not disappear.

Across the ceiling, painted like a Michelangelo mural, was set of eyes. They were kind and inviting, and when Emily looked into them she felt like she was falling into a deep pool of peace. Serenity blossomed in her mind.

Suddenly the eyes were replaced by a myriad of scenes, flashing one after the other in front of her. Bombs dropped from the sky in firestorms, destroying everything below. Natural calamities – floods and tidal waves, earthquakes, erupting volcanoes, storms of every kind – wreaked havoc on the scarred

face of the earth. Humans and animals ran wildly about. On all sides there were wails of pain and horror, rivers of blood, panic, desperation and death. Rain poured down, waves of rushing water filled the streets, covering the houses. Buildings toppled as vast cuts opened in the earth.

“Do you hear their cries?”

She heard the voice before she saw the speaker, a human body, barely visible, outlined in white light, coming toward her.

Then suddenly, souls, like diamonds, flew upwards in millions, like a swarm of fireflies.

The man of light reached out to give her something. It appeared to be a crown of light. *“Wear this. It will help you understand the secrets.”*

Both the crown and the speaker vanished. The next thing Emily knew, Tess was shaking her awake to get ready for school.

Emily replayed the dream in her mind all morning. Somehow it seemed important to remember the details; the images were so similar to the ones she had seen onstage with Dr. Ravana that she knew they were relevant for the assignment. Although she wanted to tell somebody about it, she couldn't think of anyone who would understand.

She stood at the sink in the girls' washroom, washing her hands and staring at her face in the mirror. Beth was standing at the sink next to her talking excitedly about their volleyball game after school. Emily was only half listening when she noticed Mei

Ling behind her, gently pushing her way through a group of girls to get to one of the sinks.

“Hey, Mei Ling.” Emily turned, shaking her wet hands to dry them.

Mei Ling looked startled, clearly not expecting anyone to speak to her. She shifted her weight from foot to foot nervously, as if ready to run at any minute. She had never spoken to Emily outside of the library, except for the diamond field.

Emily noticed Mei Ling’s discomfort. “Where are you going next? Can I walk with you to your next class?” she asked.

“Um, sure, I guess.” Mei Ling nodded and washed her hands while Emily waited. They left the washroom together and walked slowly down the hall. Mei Ling’s head was bent over her books, protecting her from the sea of people. Emily, on the other hand, held her head high, scanning the crowd for familiar faces.

“I have something to tell you, but I don’t really know how to start,” Emily said, then paused, waiting for a reaction. When Mei Ling did not respond, she continued. “I had a weird dream last night and I think it’s important, but I’m not sure how.”

Mei Ling stopped and looked at Emily, uncertain if she should share her own unusual experience. “What was in the dream?” she asked quietly.

When Emily shared the details of her dream, Mei Ling recognized the same voice from her experience. Before she could tell Emily about it, they arrived at Mei Ling’s classroom.

“I had something happen to me as well,” Mei Ling said.

Emily nodded encouragingly. "Tell me during lunch. I'll meet you in the cafeteria."

"Do you think it really was God?" asked Mei Ling. She and Emily were sitting at one of the corner tables in the crowded cafeteria.

"God? I don't know about that." Emily unwrapped her chickpea salad as she spoke.

Mei Ling was relieved that Emily had not reacted with shock or disbelief when she told her about the voice while they waited in line.

"When I was a kid," continued Emily, "I thought God was an old man with a white beard in the clouds." She took a forkful of salad.

"Buddhism teaches about karma and rebirth and giving up desire to end all suffering," said Mei Ling. "There is no mention of God."

The noise in the cafeteria was reaching a crescendo as students swarmed around them, their trays loaded with milk boxes, steaming noodle soup containers, soft drinks and French fries. A silver fork clamoured to the floor at Mei Ling's feet and she bent to retrieve it, passing it to a young girl with curly, blond hair who smiled in gratitude.

"God is supposed to be stern, demanding and sometimes angry," Emily said, digging up her childhood impression of God. "Not really someone you'd want to get close to."

"Well that's totally different than the sweet, gentle voice I

heard," said Mei Ling. She stared off into space as she recalled the experience.

"It was in the book as the second secret, remember?" Emily asked.

"That's right," said Mei Ling. "The chapter called 'The Silent Voice.' Do you think we should tell Raj and Solomon?" she asked.

"Let's wait a bit," Emily answered. "Raj would just laugh at us if we told him. If the Silent Voice has spoken to each of us, maybe it will speak to the boys as well. Let's let them experience it for themselves."

Mei Ling nodded and they settled into a comfortable silence as they ate their lunch.

That night Raj spoke with his sister on Skype.

"Hey, Ramita. How are you?" he asked, smiling at her image on his computer screen.

"Oh Raj, this house is wonderful. And my mother-in-law is so kind. She is happy that I continue working. For now, you know, until the baby comes," she gushed. Her bangles jangled as she pushed her hair back from her face.

"And how are you, Raj? What is Beijing like? How are Auntie and Uncle to live with? How is school? Tell me all!"

Ramita had initiated the call, and Raj was happy to reconnect with her. He had almost forgotten how close they used to be.

"It's okay. Auntie and Uncle are a lot like Mom and Dad. School is the same, except there are a lot of kids from other

countries, of course. Apart from that, the city is brown and dirty and the air is even darker than in Delhi. I might even miss the place a bit," he admitted sheepishly.

"Aha! So the one who was so keen to escape is finding the grass is not greener!" She laughed, making fun of him, like old times.

They talked for a few more minutes about silly things, about baby names and the food in Beijing.

After a brief lull in the conversation Raj tentatively asked, "Ramita, how is Dad?"

"Mummy says he comes home late every night." She looked down for a moment. "Raj, she told me about some nasty rumours concerning his company."

"The same old nonsense, no doubt," said Raj. "Old news."

"No, these are different, Raj. Much worse. I don't know if I should even tell you about them. They 're really bad."

"I don't want to know," he said. "Let's not talk about it, okay?"

There was silence for a moment. When Raj spoke again, his tone had softened. "How is Mummy?"

"She worries, Raj. Every day she calls me and tells me how worried she is about Dad, about the company, about our reputation, about you being so far away, about me not being pregnant. You know how she is." Ramita smiled as if she was talking about a child.

They finished the call with a promise to talk soon. Raj removed his headphones and slowly pulled on his nightshirt, wondering

whether it was these nasty rumours that had prompted Ramita to contact him. What could possibly be so bad that she wasn't sure she should tell him? Raj didn't like being in the dark about anything, but what was the point of listening to rumours? No doubt they were untrue.



THE FEATHER OF TRUTH

Solomon and Raj had arrived at the scheduled time and sat in silence, waiting for the girls to appear. Although they did not acknowledge each other's presence, their heads bobbed in unison as they moved back and forth between checking the wall clock and their cell phones.

"Sorry, we just finished." Mei Ling rushed into the library from her meeting with the math club, the mathletes. Breathless and flustered, she dropped her bag on the floor, fifteen minutes late for their planned start.

Emily arrived sweaty from volleyball practice, still in her shorts and team T-shirt. "Sorry I didn't have time to shower," she said, slumping into the chair between Raj and Solomon. "Hey, it's cold in here today." She reached for her jacket. "What's going on?" she asked, looking pointedly at Mei Ling.

Raj noticed a look pass between the two girls, as though they were sharing a secret of some kind. "Let's get started," he said,

bringing an abrupt end to the chit chat. He still couldn't believe he was participating in this project. Nor could he believe that it would make any difference in world events. The morning news announced another massive earthquake, this time in New Zealand, and a hurricane in Mexico. Thousands had died. Surely nothing the four of them were doing could have prevented that.

They sat quietly, trying to recreate the conditions that led them to the diamond field. Mei Ling started speaking slowly, trying to calm herself as she spoke. She reminded them to breathe, aware of the irony that, in spite of her earlier fear of Dr. Ravana, she was now copying her tone and instructions.

Once they had all closed their eyes, a strange metallic glare filled the room. Raj rustled in his chair, struggling to relax. Solomon reached down to tie his shoe lace. Emily ran both hands through her hair, scratching her scalp, unable to concentrate.

"I'm not getting it." Raj broke the pained silence after five long minutes. "This is boring and unproductive."

"I can see the screen in my head, but I'm not sure what we're supposed to be seeing there," said Solomon. He opened his eyes. "Hey, what's with the light in here?"

Emily had also opened her eyes. "You're right, the light isn't right in here." She gave her head a little shake. "Never mind," she said. "We have to do something that gives us the same feeling as before. You know, that feeling of being totally relaxed and quiet inside and focused." Again, she and Mei Ling exchanged a look, noticed by Raj but missed by Solomon.

“Let’s try again,” said Mei Ling. She sat upright in her chair. “Everybody concentrate.”

The instructions came more easily this time, and Mei Ling’s calming voice helped them relax. They sat still long enough for the atmosphere between them to become quiet. The metallic haze around them faded away.

Finally, when they were each absorbed in their own inner world, there was silence. Emily recognized the feeling of peace as her body relaxed and her mind began to calm. Solomon felt his shoulders drop and his breathing slow down as he entered a quiet, reflective state of mind. Mei Ling felt calm and focused, powerful. Raj felt serene, his thoughts had finally slowed down.

They opened their eyes. They were in a cold place, surrounded by darkness.

“It feels like a tunnel,” said Solomon, reaching his hands out to touch the wet earthy walls on either side of him. “We’re underground,” he said.

“Smells like it,” said Raj. “We might as well follow the walls and see where they lead.”

Mei Ling realized she must be near the front as she could hear footsteps behind her, squishing in mud or water. Emily sniffled loudly, she was beginning to get a stuffy nose from the damp air. Solomon knew he was at the rear of the line because there was no sound behind him. Water splashed to the ground as they walked, the occasional drop landing on a head.

“It’s cold,” squeaked Mei Ling. A cool breeze blew past. She

shivered.

“You okay?” Emily asked, responding to her whimper.

“Low blood sugar. I didn’t have enough to eat today,” Mei Ling confided quietly.

Finally the walls of the tunnel opened and light poured in through a triangular door. Through the doorway they could see a three-sided room with smooth stone walls. They entered the room and saw that the walls were taller than a two-storey house and as wide as a city street. The tops of the walls fell in on each other, like in a steeple or the inside of a pyramid.

“It’s dry in here,” said Solomon, gasping.

Hieroglyphics covered the walls, like the kind they had each studied in their modules on ancient Egypt. “I think we’re inside a pyramid,” Mei Ling said, stating the obvious.

Against the furthest wall stood a table that looked like an altar. It was made of dark wood embellished with images of snakes, eagles and pharaohs. On the centre of the table stood a golden scale with two bowls hanging, balanced equally on either side of a support beam.

“It’s like the scales they use to weigh vegetables in the market,” said Solomon, taking a step toward the table.

“Or the symbol of justice,” said Raj. He turned to examine the hieroglyphics on the walls.

Mei Ling was the first to approach the altar and see what lay in one of the bowls.

“It’s a feather,” she said without touching it.

“A feather? That’s it?” asked Raj from the other side of the room.

Emily approached the altar. “It’s like the story of Maat’s feather, the Egyptian Goddess of the afterlife,” she said.

“Yeah, I could never figure out how they could weigh a human heart to determine a person’s destiny,” Solomon said. He stepped forward to stand with Emily and Mei Ling.

“Especially against a feather,” Mei Ling added. “Every heart would be heavier than the feather.”

“It doesn’t seem fair. How would anyone get into the afterlife?” Emily asked.

“A lot of people must have stayed between worlds to suffer for eternity.” Solomon looked down at the feather, a fragile determinant of an individual’s fate.

“That’s a cheery proposition,” said Raj, joining them at the altar.

As they spoke, the massive stone door to the chamber swung shut, making a hideous scraping sound that reverberated through the sealed room. A flash of light left a metallic haze, like heat waves shimmering across the room.

“Oh my god,” gasped Mei Ling. The metallic flash made her think of Dr. Ravana’s bizarre appearance. “Was that Ravana?”

“Is this how she’s going to stop us? By trapping us?” asked Emily.

“I suspect she hasn’t even really started to make things difficult,” Raj said calmly. “So, I guess we’re stuck in here until

one of us gives up our heart. Who will it be?"

Mei Ling shuddered, and Solomon gave Raj a disapproving look. "Very funny," he said. Then something clicked. "This is the Feather of Truth from the book."

"Right, it's a test of conscience. In India it's known as the law of karma," said Raj.

"How do you test a conscience?" asked Mei Ling.

"I nominate King Solomon to find out. After all he's probably never done anything wrong," said Raj, his voice dripping with disdain.

A rush of anger pushed Solomon toward Raj. He wasn't sure what he would do, but he stopped suddenly when he saw the feather rising into the air.

Without thinking Solomon jumped to grab the feather as it lifted upwards. The minute it touched his skin, he felt an odd sensation. His head felt light and he had a floating feeling like he was leaving his body.

Little by little he felt himself rising, like a helium balloon, into the air. He could see the room below as he hovered above it and was shocked to see his body crumpled on the floor and Mei Ling kneeling beside it, her brow furrowed as she held his hand.

"Solomon, are you okay? Solomon!" Emily shouted into his ear while Mei Ling shook him and Raj stood by, watching.

"Can you hear me?" Solomon shouted down at them from the ceiling, but no one heard him. "Guys, look up, I'm here. Can't you see me?"

Oh great, thought Solomon. What can I do if they can't hear me?

Suddenly, he began to see pictures. They flashed across his mind like a thousand movies playing at the same time, although he could see each individual picture as if it was the only one on the screen. He recognized scenes from his life.

He saw himself as a baby. He remembered being in his crib and looking at the world on the other side through the bars. He could see the floor and his dad's shoes and his mom's slippers. Sweet innocence filled his mind.

He saw himself as a grade four student in the school cafeteria, rushing to find a seat so the woman at the cash register wouldn't notice she had given him extra change. *How cowardly*, he thought. He felt a wave of humiliation seeing how he had behaved for a few coins.

He saw himself swimming in the big pool at the community centre, his arms reaching over his head like windmills, pulling the water down past his sides and propelling his body forward like a torpedo. He felt free and powerful.

Then he saw himself with his friend David, racing to reach the bench in the schoolyard. Solomon was sharing part of his sandwich because David didn't have a lunch, again. He felt bad for David who never seemed to have what was needed at school.

Then he saw a different scene in the schoolyard. A boy in his seventh grade class was taunting him because of Solomon's good grades. The boy pushed him against the fence and punched him in the stomach. Solomon bent over, scared and humiliated. Then

he got angry and punched back. But he wasn't fast enough. He missed and his hand bashed into the fence. His pride and his hand hurt.

Each scene flashed across his mind then quickly dissolved into another. His feelings changed with each scene change. One minute he was scared then happy then ashamed as he reacted to the memories playing out in front of him.

He saw a small group of people standing around his father's casket as it was lowered to the ground. His arm was around his mom's shoulder and Ben was holding her other hand while she cried into a white handkerchief.

Then he saw himself after his father's death, pacing in his room, trying to think of a way to make money. He was slumped on his bed with his head in his hands, crying. He felt the despair of his younger self as keenly as if it was happening in the present.

He was in the stairwell last week when Mei Ling dropped her books and a kid pushed her out of the way. She looked flustered and afraid and he saw himself reach out to help her pick up her books. She looked up at him in surprise, a small, grateful smile on her face.

The images stopped as suddenly as they had started. He felt the floor against his side and someone's hands on his head. He could hear a voice, thick and slow, trying to reach him through a haze.

"Solomon!" Emily's voice suddenly came through, loud and clear.

Behind them the feather floated gently down and landed in its original position on the scale. The door to the chamber swung open and they found themselves back in the library.

“What happened?” he asked. It took effort to formulate his words, they sounded slow and muddled in his ears.

“You weren’t breathing.” Mei Ling looked shaken, but relieved.

Solomon tried to clear his mind.

“It was like being in a movie theatre with a 3D movie playing in my head,” he said slowly. “Only I was the main actor and the audience. I saw all kinds of scenes from my life, things I had done, things that were done to me. Mostly memories that left a strong impression, good and bad. How long was I gone?”

“Solomon, you didn’t go anywhere,” Emily responded. “But you seemed dead. Your body just lay there without moving. We checked your breathing, we shook you, but we couldn’t wake you up. It was awful.”

“So it was like the diamond field,” he observed.

“No, we couldn’t hear your thoughts,” Mei Ling said. “We couldn’t tell what was going on with you.”

“I was right there, the whole time. I could see and hear you,” he said. “I was calling down to you from the ceiling, but you couldn’t hear me.”

“So tell us what this secret is all about, since you’re the only one who knows,” asked Raj. He was clearly annoyed that all the attention was on Solomon.

"I don't have it figured out, but I can tell you one thing. It was tough to watch the scenes I wasn't proud of," Solomon said.

"So did you get your conscience weighed?" Raj persisted.

"I think so." Solomon smiled sheepishly, remembering the embarrassing scenes.

"Maybe you'll make it to the afterlife then," Raj grumbled, and he strode briskly out of the library.

Traffic moved slowly most days on the Fifth Ring Road around the city. There were days when Raj waited in the back seat of the limo, shielded from the fumes and noise, for an hour without moving.

That afternoon, Raj and the chauffeur watched as drivers and passengers emerged from their cars during the long wait. The highway was transformed into a giant coffee break. Several men leaned on the car next to the limo, smoking and laughing, telling stories of the day. Children chased each other around the stationary cars as if they were in a playground. An old woman was bent over a set of tiny porcelain teacups on the hood of the car behind them, pouring tea.

A few moments after the cars began to move again, the limo slammed to a sudden stop, hitting the car in front of it. Raj jolted out of his seat and the chauffeur's head bounced off the steering wheel. The world went silent for a moment and Raj felt a surge of fear. In an instant the image of the diamond field flashed across his mind and a reassuring feeling of peace washed over him,

lasting until he heard the chauffeur move.

The chauffeur turned to see if Raj was okay. Then he got out of the car to check for damage. There were no dents in either car, which meant they could move on without the theatrical fist waving and yelling that accompanied most accident scenes.

When the chauffeur returned, Raj saw that his hands were shaking as he put the key in the ignition. His shoulders were clenched in stress. Raj looked at him carefully, realizing he had never seen the chauffeur's face. He remembered the life review of the Feather of Truth.

"What's your name?" asked Raj as warmly as he could.

The man turned, uncertain how to respond, having never spoken directly to his young charge before. His chauffeur cap was tilted slightly on his head, blocking the sun and forming a long shadow across his face.

"My name is Tom Huang, Sir," he said with a thick Mandarin accent.

"Are you okay?" asked Raj, smiling at Tom.

"Yes, Sir, I am fine, thank you." Tom's smile lit up his face and revealed how young he was.

He looks my age, thought Raj.

"Well, I guess we better get home, Tom," he said.

Mei Ling wasn't sure what she was doing here in the food court eating noodles with Raj. He had called her a couple days after the Feather of Truth and asked her to meet him.

She wondered how he knew about this place. She couldn't imagine him eating in this gritty, colourful bazaar. The food stalls exuded the odours of Chinese delicacies produced in huge supply for the local palate and pocketbook.

But he had seemed right at home, expertly navigating them both through the crowded food fair. They had passed several stalls selling bubble tea and had each bought one, the straws standing upright, anchored in a sea of pill-sized tapioca balls. The hawkers yelled at them to purchase sticky buns and wonton noodles. In the end they each bought a bowl of spicy Szechuan soup.

Mei Ling watched as Raj added more spicy sauce to his noodles and stirred them elegantly with his chopsticks.

"I need to understand this math," he blurted out.

She looked at him more closely, wondering if this was some kind of joke. She knew Raj did well at school, especially in math, since they were in the same class.

"What part do you find difficult?" she asked, wanting to buy some time to figure out what he was up to.

He asked specific questions about their recent math assignment and Mei Ling answered, forgetting her suspicions as she lost herself in the complex details of her favourite subject. They talked and ate until their bowls were empty.

"Thanks, Mei Ling," Raj said cheerfully as he put down his chopsticks and formally closed their discussion about math.

She looked him in the eye. "Why are you being so nice?"

“Oh, you know, just warming you up.” He laughed a little, but it was a nervous laugh.

She looked to see if he was serious. “For what?” she asked, waiting. A slight glint in his eye reassured her that she had not just spent the past hour with a complete jerk.

“You know, Raj, maybe you should show more of this nice side when we’re in the group.”

“Maybe you should reveal your intelligence more in the group and not be so afraid to speak out,” he replied.

“I’m not hiding; I just don’t have much to say.” She looked down at her hands, suddenly shy.

“Don’t have much to say, or don’t want to say what you know?” She could feel his eyes boring into her. “It looks like you and Emily have some kind of secret.”

Mei Ling met his penetrating gaze and cringed with guilt. “What do you mean?” It came out sounding more defensive than she’d intended.

“I thought so,” he said smugly. He rested his chin on his hands and peered across at her, waiting for a response.

She hadn’t noticed before that he had an elaborate silver ring on one hand. It glared at her as if defying her to lie.

“Well,” she began, deciding there was no reason not to be honest. Then she told Raj about the voice, explaining all the details and the conclusion she and Emily had drawn.

His face was impassive as he listened. When he didn’t say anything she wondered if he thought her story was crazy. He

looked at his watch and got up.

“We better go,” he said, “before the last bus.”

She followed him without asking what he was thinking, even though she wanted to.

Her bus was waiting at the stop and they rushed to get there before it left.

“Thanks for being honest with me,” he said to her back as she boarded the bus.

She turned and gave him a small wave goodbye, still bewildered, then found a seat by the window. As the bus pulled away she saw him wave back and they held each other’s gaze briefly. She saw a genuine smile spread across his face.

Many of the students at the international school spent the weekends in the shopping malls, which were overrun with groups of giggling teens drinking bubble tea and talking on cell phones.

But Solomon and Ben had discovered a better alternative, an underground world of computer gamers. After reading about it online they had spent a full Saturday afternoon on a mission to find it.

Eventually they found the entrance, hidden behind a downtown movie theatre. They followed a tunnel that descended several flights of stairs until they reached a warehouse door splashed with psychedelic graffiti. This was not the kind of place Solomon would normally be comfortable entering, especially with Ben, but having come so far he decided to try the door.

He pushed it cautiously. It opened to reveal a cavernous room, bigger than a football field, filled with rows of computers. The eerie glow of black lights made the room dim and surreal. There was a small army of teenagers, each positioned in front of a computer screen, with a can of green tea, a small bag of snacks and a cell phone propped next to the screen. Their white T-shirts glowed eerily under the black lights. The atmosphere was charged with intense concentration. Images of the same warzone computer game flashed across multiple screens, creating the impression of a hall of mirrors.

Solomon almost turned to leave. But a young woman with a lazy smile and a bored expression on her face looked up at them from the front desk and he knew it was safe. After that first visit they had returned every Saturday, happy to have found a secret get-away.

Today the same girl was at the front desk, and she smiled at them through her pink sunglasses as they approached. The multiple rings on her fingers flashed in the black light as she took their money for the hourly rental fee and turned back to her book.

Ben and Solomon bought a can of juice and bag of chips from the small canteen behind her then settled in front of two computers.

“I love it here, Solomon. Thanks for bringing me,” Ben gushed.

Solomon was hoping for some quiet time away from school and the assignment. He had spent hours thinking about the Feather of Truth and what it meant. Some of the more painful

memories still haunted him. He fired up one of the games and settled in, grateful for the distraction.

“Hey, Solomon.” He heard the familiar voice before he saw her.

“Emily,” he said, shocked to see her in this underground bunker. “What are you doing here?”

“A guy in my class told us about this place,” she said. “He comes here all the time. Thank goodness he talked us here on his cell or we never would have found it.”

She looked around her. “Have you noticed they’re all playing the same game?” She gestured to the computer screens.

“Yeah, I’m trying to get Ben to play something else,” Solomon said, nodding at Ben, who was staring at Emily. “My brother, Ben,” he said, confirming the obvious.

“Hi, Ben, this is my sister, Tess. Tess, this is Solomon.”

Tess took the seat next to Ben and within minutes they were giggling and talking like old friends.

Emily logged on to the computer next to Solomon. The two of them sat silently for a long time, getting used to each other’s unexpected presence.

After a while Solomon turned to her. “I did some research into near death experiences.”

“Oh yeah?” said Emily, turning to face him.

“I think that’s what happened to me in the pyramid.” He saw the interest on her face, so he continued. “It seems like most people who have had a near death experience see their whole life

flash before their eyes when they leave their body. It's called a life review. That's what happened when I touched the feather."

"That makes sense," said Emily. "So, it's like a conscience review?"

"Yeah, you watch everything you've done and you see how it has affected you and other people."

"So you think you had the same experience only without nearly dying," she said.

"I think so," he said quietly.

"So what's the secret then?" Emily looked at him more closely. For the first time she noticed his brown eyes were deep pools of contemplation and kindness.

"That's what I've been trying to figure out." Solomon stared off into space, his recent experience fresh in his mind. "I was trying to figure out why our lives flash before our eyes before we die," he continued. "When I thought about the diamond field and how our spirit exists separate from our bodies, it made me wonder if maybe our spirits somehow carry our life lessons. And we need to review our life at the end so we understand what we've learned. Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah, it does," said Emily, nodding slowly. "Maybe the lessons shape who we become in the future, that is, if you believe in reincarnation," she said.

"I'm starting to think I do and that somehow all that we've done stays with us so we can do better the next time round."

"In that case, everything we do is incredibly important, isn't

it?" Emily asked.

Solomon nodded.

Emily turned away to consider the implications. Solomon quietly returned to his game. They spent the next two hours in companionable silence with the occasional outburst from Tess and Ben when they scored points.

Emily was about to tell Solomon about her dream of destruction and Mei Ling's experience with the voice, but something stopped her. She didn't notice the dull odour of spent firecrackers wafting in through the air exchange system or the slight metallic glare coming from her computer screen.

Back in the apartment Solomon helped Ben get ready for bed then went to his own room to read. As he opened his school bag, a crumpled piece of paper fell out. He saw his name written on it and opened it to find a note from Mei Ling.

Thank you for helping me with my books. ML

He smiled and suddenly thought of his father and all the kind things he had done in his life. *Dad would have had a good life review*, he thought, comforted as he slipped into bed.



RAVANA

“It is no surprise they find it such a shock each time they leave their bodies,” said the Keeper of the Earth as he entered the Council Room. “After all, their bodies are made of the elements.”

The Keeper of the Water drifted into the room beside him. She took his proffered hand and lowered herself to a chair. Then he sat beside her.

“They are attached to their form,” she said. “We pull them to stay here, then they must work against the elements to break the attachment to their bodies.”

The room heated up as the Keeper of the Fire joined them. “They don’t have the power to leave their bodies without pain and struggle,” he said.

“Humans believe that when a body dies the spirit leaves it. They do not understand that it is the other way around.” The Keeper of the Earth marvelled at human memory loss. “The body dies because the soul leaves it.”

A slight breeze refreshed the room, announcing the arrival of the Keeper of the Air. “That is Ravana’s greatest illusion,” she said. “She

makes humans forget they are the fifth element. She has convinced them they are the body. They forget they are spirit."

"When they understand all the secrets, they will leave their bodies as easily as a hair pulled through butter," smiled the Keeper of the Water.

"They will begin to doubt," said the Keeper of the Earth, worry furrowing his brow. "They will not be able to maintain focus, especially now that they will be parted from one another for this school break."

"You don't give them much credit do you?" Once again the Keeper of the Water found herself defending the children.

"These are special children, chosen because they will understand." The Keeper of the Air added her breathy support.

"Ravana has been working on them, affecting their trust in each other," said the Keeper of the Fire.

"Do you think they've noticed?" asked the Keeper of the Earth. "Do they recognize the clues to her presence?"

"They will begin to notice her shiny illusions," assured the Keeper of the Water.

"They do not have the power to withstand her influence." The Keeper of the Fire begrudgingly admired Ravana's skill. "I fear they will forget the urgency of their mission. Can't we help them?"

"They must conquer Ravana on their own," the Keeper of the Water reminded him. "We cannot intervene."

"She will do whatever it takes to make them lose heart and give up," said the Keeper of the Earth. As he stood the ground shook slightly beneath him. He moved to the window to watch and wait.

Emily messaged Mei Ling.

Emily: What are you doing for Christmas break?

Mei Ling: I'm staying here. Mom and Dad are both working. Chinese companies don't take much time off at Christmas. At least there won't be as much tutoring as usual. What are you doing?

Emily: I'm going home to visit my mom in Canada. It'll be great to see her and be somewhere familiar. I hope you can have some fun.

Mei Ling: Yeah, me too. We'll see.

Emily: We need to keep going on the assignment. We can't get slack.

Mei Ling: I feel like something bad is going to happen.

Emily: Me too. I'm worried about Raj. Stay in touch with him while we're gone, okay? I'll email you when I arrive. Just a couple of days of school left! See you!

And with that, Emily was off-line.

Solomon put a water bottle and a change of clothes into his day pack. He had orientation today for his new job as a camp counsellor during the Christmas break. He and Ben would both be spending a lot of time at the British Club while their mom worked. The time at camp would be fun for Ben and give Solomon a chance to earn some money.

When he heard his phone he saw Mei Ling's text and responded immediately.

Mei Ling: You're around for the holidays, right?

Solomon: Yeah. Emily's off to Canada though.

Mei Ling: And Raj is off to Delhi.

Solomon: You should keep in touch with him. He's more likely to listen to you.

Mei Ling smiled at the unexpected compliment.

Solomon: Do you want to hang out one day during break?

Mei Ling: Yeah, that'd be great.

"Hey," said Raj, taking off his jacket and throwing it over a chair.

The others were sitting in the library, waiting for him to arrive. It was the last day before Christmas break and they were anxious to get going.

"If we're going to do this, let's get started," Raj said, offering no apology for his late arrival.

Emily adjusted herself to get comfortable. "Tell them about the life review," she urged Solomon.

After Solomon described it, Raj said, "So we'll all experience this before we die?"

"I think so," said Solomon.

"It makes everything we do seem much more important," said Mei Ling.

Raj looked at the clock. His tone was softer when he spoke. "We better get going before the late buses come for you guys. Mei Ling, why don't you get us started."

Mei Ling began slowly. Her voice was quiet but gained volume and strength as she continued. She started with the breath, then took them inside the room in their heads.

Raj let out a sigh of surrender and began to concentrate. Emily could feel the almost forgotten sensation of peace pulling her inwards. Solomon relaxed his shoulders and settled into his own mind.

After ten minutes of quiet concentration they opened their eyes to discover they were in a room under a white spotlight that momentarily blinded them. The room had no ceiling. The spotlight originated from somewhere deep in the night sky. They stood on a raised platform in the centre of a circular room.

“Well done, Mei Ling. I think we’re getting better at this,” said Solomon quietly.

“This is a much nicer place than the other rooms we’ve been in,” Emily said.

The light from the spotlight spread beyond the platform. As if passing through a prism it extended outwards as eight rays, each a different colour, that created a giant pinwheel with the platform at the centre. Each colour formed a pathway of light leading directly to a door in the curved white wall that surrounded them.

“This is the Wheel of Powers,” Mei Ling chirped with excitement. “This is exactly how I imagined it in the book.” She bounced up and down, eager to move.

Emily turned to her, “What’s behind each door?”

Before anyone could respond, a door opened at the end of the magenta pathway. They could see only darkness behind it.

Suddenly a man emerged from behind the door and ran towards the platform, yelling and shaking his fists. He was tall

with closely cropped dark hair and was wearing a pinstriped business suit. His face was red with anger and he looked like he might explode.

“Excuse me,” Emily called out. “What’s wrong?”

Before anyone could stop her she left the platform and walked confidently toward the man.

“It’s okay,” she said as she got closer to him. “Why are you shouting? What’s bothering you?”

The man continued to shout and waved his fists in front of Emily’s face. She couldn’t understand what he was saying; his words came out as babble, like a combination of several languages. He didn’t seem to notice her. She watched his face contort with anger, little bits of spit flying from his mouth as he spoke, his eyes blazing and his hands waving.

Solomon yelled, “Be careful, Emily.”

The man picked up a rock from the pile that had suddenly appeared at his feet and threw it toward the platform. Mei Ling scurried back in fear. The man’s hands were full of rocks and he began throwing them at the group in rapid succession.

“Hey!” said Emily. “What are you doing? Stop it!”

She reached to take the rock from him, but he pulled away and continued to hurl rocks at her friends.

Suddenly furious, Emily picked up a rock and threw it at his feet.

In that moment the spotlight disappeared and the room went dark. Then they were in the library.

“What happened?” Raj and Solomon spoke at the same time.

“Oh my god, you guys. What did I do? I blew it.” Emily’s voice was cracking with emotion.

“Is this what happens when we fail?” Solomon looked around him in disbelief. “We get sent back to the library?”

“We didn’t learn anything about that secret.” Raj’s tone was resentful. “Except not to throw stones.”

Emily looked at her feet. “But we already knew that.”

Mei Ling sat next to Emily and leaned against her gently.

Emily sat rigid, her cheeks wet with silent tears.

“So what do we do now?” Mei Ling looked at Solomon. “Should we try to go back?”

At that moment a voice came across the loudspeaker: “Emily Harding, please report to the office.”

Emily’s eyes grew wide with alarm. “It must be important,” she said and rushed from the library. The others watched her go, not knowing what to do.

As Emily approached the office she saw Tess, her head hanging, her arms crossed over her stomach.

“Tess, what’s wrong?” Emily rushed toward her.

“My stomach hurts,” Tess sounded pathetic. Her face was pale. “A lot.”

“You said it hurt last week too. What’s going on?” Emily’s voice wavered.

“I don’t know, but I want to go home,” Tess whined, tears starting to flow down her cheeks.

“Okay, let’s call Dad and ask him what we should do.” Emily pulled out her cell and called him. She put her around around Tess’s small shoulders.

“He said the ayi is at the apartment and we should go home. He’ll leave work and meet us there.”

Tess managed a small smile.

Mei Ling texted Solomon, anxious to find out if they were meeting Raj and Emily for coffee before they left for the holidays. They were planning to talk about their failed attempt with the Wheel of Powers and figure out what to do next.

Mei Ling: Is Emily’s sister okay? Can Emily meet?

Solomon: She said Tess is feeling a little better. She can come for a quick meeting. Raj too. See you there.

Mei Ling asked her dad for a drive to the downtown cafe.

“Dad, it’s okay, I can miss tutoring just this once,” she said, trying not to beg. Surprisingly he relented, but he wouldn’t talk to her on the drive to the cafe.

“Dad, is there something wrong?” Mei Ling couldn’t bear his stony silence.

“Your mother would be upset if she found out that you were missing tutoring, Mei Ling,” he said finally, clearly distressed to be complicit in this deception. “What could be more important than your studies?” he asked, his neck muscles taut.

Mei Ling hesitated, unsure she could properly explain the situation to her father.

“Dad, these are my friends, and they’re leaving tomorrow for the rest of the break.” She was surprised to hear the calm confidence in her voice. “My math marks are fine. Missing this one time won’t hurt them.” She smiled at him, her resolve firm.

He didn’t look convinced or reassured. But he gave her a half smile as she got out of the car, a small indication that even though he disagreed with her decision, he wouldn’t tell Mei Ling’s mother. She nodded her appreciation and stepped out of the car in front of the café. She turned back to wave goodbye before he pulled away from the curb.

She was about to enter the coffee shop when she heard the high-pitched squeal of tires. She turned to see a silver car crash headlong into the driver’s side of her father’s car, crushing the place where he was sitting. Her mouth opened in shock, a strangled scream on her lips, as thick grey smoke began to pour from the car.



CHRISTMAS BREAK

Wake up. Please wake up. Emily was sitting in the intensive care unit, waiting for some sign of movement. But the only movement was the drip falling through the plastic IV tube attached to Tess's thin arm.

Emily reached out to extract Tess's small hand as she slept inside the cage of the bed. It was hot and limp.

Her mom arrived.

"What is it, Mom? What did they say?" Emily asked.

"She has a parasite called giardia. It's common to get it in infected water or contaminated food. In Canada we call it beaver fever because beaver dams sometimes contaminate a water supply. She obviously caught it in Beijing."

"She looks so tiny." Emily leaned back into her mother who had reached her arms around her.

"It explains why she was eating a lot but not gaining any weight," her mom said. "And why she had those painful stomach cramps."

"I feel so bad. I didn't even notice she was losing weight. It happened so gradually. She seemed okay most of the time."

"It's entirely treatable, Em. The antibiotics will get rid of it soon," her mother assured her. "She's just dehydrated now. But I do wish I had known about it. Why didn't you tell me she wasn't feeling well?"

"I guess I just got preoccupied with things." Emily decided she would tell her mom about the adventure and what she'd been doing. "Sorry, Mom."

"I'm going to get a cup of tea," her mother said, stroking Emily's hair. "Do you want to come?"

"No, thanks. I'll stay."

"She'll wake up soon, Em. Try not to worry. I'll be right back."

But Emily was worried, especially after the horrific accident that killed Mei Ling's father. She remembered her conversation about it with Raj at the Beijing airport.

She and Tess were travelling as unaccompanied minors. Tess was young enough that she was required to wear a plasticized passport holder around her neck.

"This is so embarrassing, Em. I don't want to wear this," Tess said. They had just waved goodbye to their dad at security.

"Just wear it until we get upstairs, okay? Then you can put it in your bag," Emily said.

"Okay," Tess agreed.

When they passed through security Emily saw Raj in another security line.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Hey,” he said as he put his shoes back on. “I thought I’d visit the airport to see you off.”

She looked at his slight jeer and realized it was a silly question.

“Sorry,” she said. “I guess you’re leaving for Delhi. How long until your flight?” she asked.

“Two hours. I’ll hang out in the lounge,” he said, nonchalant. Then, “I have a couple of guest passes if you want to come with me.”

“Sure,” Tess said quickly before Emily could answer.

“This is Tess,” Emily said to Raj.

“Hi, Tess.” Raj looked at her carefully. “You look a lot like your big sister,” he said, “except for the beautiful red hair.”

Tess beamed at Raj. Emily frowned, amazed how he had won her over so quickly.

They settled into the lounge with drinks and snacks. Tess had eight small bags of pretzels in a pile in front of her, next to a plate full of olives. Thankfully her tummy ache seemed to have disappeared.

“Healthy eating,” said Raj, smiling at her.

Emily sat across from him, unsure what to say. He eased the discomfort by asking Tess about the holidays and what she wanted for Christmas.

When Tess got up to refill her plate with olives, Emily blurted, “I didn’t get Mei Ling’s dad killed by making us fail the Wheel of Powers, did I?”

"It's not your fault," Raj said as he twirled his silver ring around his finger. "This is Ravana's way of showing us that she will do anything to get us to stop. What could be a greater deterrent than the innocent death of someone close to us?"

"I'm trying to remember the diamond field and how no one really dies, but it's not helping," Emily said.

"The stakes are higher than any of us thought," Raj said. His nonchalant demeanour was erased by a deeply furrowed brow.

"Do you think bad things will keep happening until we succeed?" Emily asked.

"The longer we take to do this, the worse it will get. No one is safe," Raj said with conviction. He paused. "Maybe Ravana did us a favour by getting us to pay attention."

"But it's so awful."

Raj looked her straight in the eye. "Emily, what's wrong with the planet is so much more than just global warming and natural disasters. Ravana is everywhere, and she's affecting everything and everyone."

On the drive home from the airport, Raj's senses were assaulted by the distinctive odour of the Delhi night air. The acrid smell of cow dung was mixed with the sweet fragrance of incense and the pungent scent of onion and garlic with a dash of diesel fumes. He had almost forgotten the chaos on the road as auto rickshaws competed with cars and pedal rickshaws for limited space. The cars in front of them stopped suddenly to make way for a cow as

it ambled freely across several lanes of traffic. He smiled to himself and thought, *Beijing may be dirty, but it's definitely more orderly.*

His mother greeted him with a tight hug, refusing to let him go until he hugged her back.

"Your dad is working late tonight, Raj," she said apologetically.

Ramita was there in a bright yellow sari, her long black hair hanging past her waist and a big smile on her face. She had come for dinner without her husband, in honour of her brother's return. She squeezed Raj in a hug, and he returned it readily.

The siblings laughed and shared stories over a luscious meal as their mother beamed at them. Finally, Raj excused himself.

"I'm off to bed, Mummy," he said as he leaned to kiss her cheek.

"Your father will be here to see you at breakfast, Raj," she said, holding his hand for a brief moment. "Get some rest; I know you must be tired. Tomorrow we will go out to the shops and get you some new clothes." She was clearly overjoyed to have him home, but Raj could tell something was troubling her.

Ramita had stepped outside the dining room and was waiting for him.

"Raj," she whispered. "You have to know what's happening with Dad." All the merriment of the evening was gone from her face.

Raj looked at her, not sure that he wanted to know.

"It's horrible and we don't know if it's true, but a rival

company has accused him of using child labour in one of his factories," she said, grasping tightly to Raj's hands.

"What?" He shook her off and stepped away from her. "That's obscene, Ramita." His face was grimaced in disgust. "That's impossible."

"We don't know anything yet, Raj. Mummy has been too upset to even raise the topic with him. She didn't want to tell you, but I thought you should know."

"What if it's true, Ramita?" he asked, shaking his head. *Surely it's impossible*, he thought. "What if it's true?" he asked again. "What then? What are we supposed to do?"

"I don't know. There is nothing we can do but stand by him for now, until we know. He is our father."

"I don't want to stand by him." Raj spat the words out, suddenly disgusted by the man who had been his hero his whole life.

"Raj, compassion," she urged. "We still don't know if the rumours are true."

"That's not an accusation to be taken lightly," he said. "I can't even think about this right now, Ramita. I'm going to bed." He trudged up the stairs to his room, his mind reeling. When he crawled into bed his last thought before sleep was that his familiar bedroom felt foreign.

The dream was so vivid he thought it was real. He was in a room with fifty or more young children. They squatted in rows hunched over work mats, chiselling and painting small statues.

He smelled the suffocating stench of urine and saw an open latrine in the corner. The room was filled with smoke from a small fired kiln and many of the children were coughing.

As he moved closer he could see they held statues of the Lord Krishna and a dancing Shiva in their small hands. He could tell from their emaciated bodies that they had not eaten well in a long time. Some had scabs and sores on the skin of their arms, others had red gashes. Raj felt sick and threw up in his dream.

He woke with a start, wondering if he had messed his bed. He turned on the light and went to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. When he saw his healthy, well fed face in the mirror, he felt like he might be sick for real.

It took a long time for Raj to fall asleep again. He had always assumed he would work alongside his father and eventually take over his successful export business, selling religious relics to Western countries. Of course he was aware of and embarrassed by the existence of child labour in India, but he never in a million years imagined his father would employ such a despicable practice.

As he lay awake he remembered a line from the *New Beginnings* book: "Humans must reform first before the world can be reformed." He wondered what it would take to reform a world where horrors like these were common.

Raj took his time getting ready for breakfast the next morning. As usual, the tea trolley and his freshly pressed clothes awaited him

as he emerged from the bath. He checked his hair in the mirror, using his wet palms to flatten the small unruly fringe over his ears. He tucked a clean shirt into his freshly pressed pants and tightened his belt. Finally he couldn't delay any longer and went downstairs.

He sat in his usual place, between his parents. He smiled at the maid when she placed his usual breakfast in front of him. She looked astonished and Raj felt a pang of guilt for all the times he had so rudely ignored her in the past.

His father was reading the morning paper and looked up briefly to make eye contact with Raj.

"Good morning, son," he said. "Welcome back."

"Good morning, Dad." Raj looked closely at his dad for signs of...what?

His father folded the paper and laid it down neatly next to his plate. He took a sip of chai, then asked, "How is Beijing? And school?"

"Fine, Dad." Raj looked for something more to say. "The classes are more challenging than my old school. The students are from all over the world. Auntie and Uncle are very good to me." How was he going to introduce the topic he really wanted to discuss?

"Uncle tells me you have made friends," his father prompted.

"Yes," Raj replied. "From Canada, Ethiopia and Vietnam."

"Ah, Canada, we do good business in Canada." His father smiled.

When his mother left the table for a moment Raj turned to his father.

“Dad, I had a terrible dream about children working in a factory,” he said abruptly. “Is it a common business practice?”

His father turned away to look out the window. Then, in a measured tone he said, “There is such a need for manual labour in the factories today, Raj. It is becoming harder and harder to be competitive in the global market.”

Raj stared at his father in disbelief. He couldn’t ask directly the question that most needed asking.

“Many young people are looking for work,” his father continued. “They need money to send to their families in the villages.”

“But children?” Raj spluttered.

“The opportunities you have to travel, to study abroad and live as you do would not be possible without someone making tough business decisions, Raj.” His father’s eyes were opaque behind his silver rimmed glasses.

I can’t believe this, thought Raj. He’s actually justifying child labour!

Raj looked down at the gorgeous teak dining table with the polished silver and fine china. He felt the marble floor beneath his slippered feet and looked up at the maid who waited patiently to respond to the next command. He felt sick.

When Solomon walked into the coffee shop next to the Dirt Market he saw Mei Ling sitting at a table with her head down. She didn't notice him approach and he was able to catch a glimpse over her shoulder of the coin sized drawing in the middle of her notebook page.

"Wow, Mei Ling, that's amazing!" he said. "You're an incredible artist."

She flipped the book closed. "Oh, it's just a hobby," she said dismissively.

"No, let me see, it's amazing," Solomon persisted as he took a seat across from her.

She sighed and handed over the notebook. It was filled with pencil drawings of fine lines that curved and looped in and around themselves, creating complex mandalas. Each was unique. In some the lines were thicker, highlighting lotus flowers, stars and spirals. The precision of the layout was a clear testament to Mei Ling's mathematical mind, but the artistry was subtle and refined. Solomon stared at the drawings for a long time until Mei Ling cleared her throat, prompting him to look up at her.

"I didn't know you were so talented, Mei Ling. How come you've never mentioned it?" He looked at her in awe.

"There's not much to say. I love to draw. It's relaxing. I can get lost in it so easily. I wanted to take an art class this term but my parents said it would interfere with my tutoring schedule." Mei Ling stared at the drawing, her eyes softening as she traced the curves of the outer shape. The mention of her parents brought the

horrible reality of her father's death front and centre.

"Are you okay?" Solomon asked. "I was in a fog for nearly a month after my dad died." He spoke slowly, calmly, unsure what her reaction would be.

"Fog is a good word," she said. "I needed to get out of the apartment."

He noticed her cheeks were blotchy. A leftover from the tears, he figured.

"Mom is having a hard time," Mei Ling continued. "I know it's terrible, but I just needed to get away. Everything in the apartment reminds me of him." She was rubbing her hands together as she spoke.

"It gets easier," he said gently. "Eventually."

"Him not being here has made a huge hole in my life," she said, fighting tears. "He was always there for me; he took the edge off everything. I mean, sitting in the car with him on the way to school was the best part of my day. I can't imagine going on with just me and Mom." She kept her head down.

"But it's the only option, right?"

"Of course." She looked up at him, her eyes brimming. "But it's hard to imagine." A single tear slid down her face. She didn't wipe it away. Instead she stood and said, "Let's walk. I love the market; I find all the old stuff soothing."

She put her notebook into her bag and took her coat off the back of the chair.

"Sure." Solomon followed her out of the cafe.

As they neared the main gates of the Dirt Market they passed people on the ground with cages full of yapping puppies for sale. Next to the opening, an old Chinese man with gnarled hands and dirty pants sat next to a square plastic tub, the size of a small sink, filled with turtles for sale.

The Dirt Market was an open building with poles holding up a tin roof. It got its name from the dirt floor that made everything seem dusty and old. There were rows and rows of antiques, jewellery, calligraphy and all manner of strange pieces of furniture, some ancient, some new.

They stood next to a stand selling Chinese calligraphy, bold brush strokes of one or two letters on scrolls hanging between bamboo sticks.

Solomon gestured to one of the pieces. "What does this one mean?"

"Beauty," Mei Ling replied faintly. He pointed to another. "Hope," she said.

Solomon showed her several more hangings. Mei Ling's voice grew in confidence as she told him what each one meant.

"Are they all positive?" he asked.

"Mostly." She smiled, moving over to the next stand where two silver balls lay nestled side by side in a wooden box cushioned with red velvet.

"What are those?" Solomon asked.

"They're stress balls; you hold them between your hands and move them back and forth as a way to relieve tension. Listen." She

picked them up, and Solomon could hear a faint tinkling as the balls moved.

Suddenly Mei Ling dropped the balls onto the velvet, as if they were burning her hands. "Every time I see something silver I remember Ravana's steely eyes." She shuddered.

"Lately I've been noticing silver all over the place," Solomon remarked.

"Me too!" Mei Ling said. "Do you think it's a sign that Ravana's around?"

"She promised she'd try to stop us," Solomon said, moving on to the next booth.

Mei Ling stopped in her tracks, a realization dawning.

"Solomon. The car." She looked at him. "It was silver."

Solomon gasped. "Oh my god, Mei Ling." He stood staring at her. "Did Ravana do that?"

They looked at each other, absorbing the possibility.

"She's making bad things happen," Solomon said.

"I think you're right. But why?" asked Mei Ling. "It's not like Ravana gains anything from my father's death."

"Maybe she's trying to distract us, take us off track," Solomon suggested.

Mei Ling paused. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but knowing how Ravana operates might help." She stopped, then said, "Solomon, we need to keep focused on this task. I can't let my dad die for nothing. That would be letting Ravana win."



THE WHEEL OF POWERS

The first week after school break was like a gathering of the United Nations as students returned from their home culture refreshed. Homework assignments and projects were piled on them daily and there was a palpable tension in the hallways as students adjusted their pace from the leisurely stroll of holidays back to the race of academics.

Raj arrived in the library the first day back at school. He was anxious to see the others, but he wasn't sure if he would tell them about his father.

When Mei Ling arrived, he jumped up from his chair to greet her.

"I'm so sorry, Mei Ling," he said, concern written all over his face.

"Thank you, Raj," she said.

"How are you?"

"I'm not sure if I'm coping or not. Everything's a blur," she said.

"I wish I could say something to help, but I don't know what to say." Raj thought about his dad and wondered why Mei Ling would lose hers.

"It's okay, Raj. There's nothing to say, but thanks for trying."

Emily rushed to Mei Ling, engulfing her in a hug.

"Are you all right?" Emily pulled back to look closely at Mei Ling's face.

"I guess," Mei Ling said quietly.

"We have to do something," Emily said. "Ravana is trying to stop us."

Solomon approached as Emily was speaking. Mei Ling reached out a hand to welcome him. He took it and held it for a moment. "Emily's right," he said. "We have to keep going."

"And fast," said Raj. "We have to conquer Ravana. She's going to keep throwing obstacles at us."

"It'll be easier now that we can work together." Emily looked at Raj.

"Yes," he said.

They sat and waited for Mei Ling to take them into peace. After several minutes it was obvious they were struggling to relax and focus their minds.

"I wonder if we lost our touch over the break," said Solomon when nothing happened.

"We're just out of practice," said Mei Ling. "Let's stick with it. Everyone try to concentrate."

Raj felt the reassuring pull to silence. Since his dream he hadn't

been able to relax; it was such welcome relief to be able to do so now.

In a few minutes they were back on the platform in the round room. The coloured pathways were waiting for them exactly as they had been before.

They watched as the same man stepped from behind the magenta door and came toward them, yelling as he had before. Emily descended from the platform and walked toward him just as he picked up the rocks and began to throw them.

She knew that any attempt to stop him would only antagonize him. Instinctively she moved closer to him and stood by his side. She watched as each rock left his hand, arced toward the group and fell to the ground just before reaching the platform. He could not hurt her friends.

Standing beside him she quietly willed him to calm down. His rock throwing slowed and Emily felt his anger subside. Then he dropped the rocks and sank down to the floor, hunched at Emily's feet.

"Looks like I'm doing okay this time," she said to the group on the platform. She felt calm inside, focused.

The man let out a sob, then a deep wail, obviously suffering. Emily reached out and touched his shoulder, letting her hand rest there as he cried. Slowly his crying subsided. She kept her hand on his shoulder. Then suddenly he put his hand over hers, the first indication that he was aware of her presence. He looked up at her, his dark eyes steeped in sadness that turned to warm gratitude.

“Thank you,” he said. He got up, walked down the pathway and disappeared through the doorway.

“Wow, Emily,” said Raj as she climbed back onto the platform. “You handled that well. Even knowing it was the wrong thing to do, I still might have punched him.”

“Are you okay?” asked Mei Ling.

Emily stopped to consider the question.

“This time I could just see that he was suffering and needed help calming down.” She remembered all the times she had soothed Tess after an outburst or tantrum. This was something she was good at, she had just forgotten last time because she was so preoccupied and irritated. Now it seemed silly.

“You did well, Emily,” said Solomon.

“It takes a lot of patience to calm someone down like that,” said Mei Ling.

Emily felt herself warming in their praise, hoping she had redeemed her past mistake.

They stood on the platform and waited for another door to open. Mei Ling stepped down from the platform and walked the violet pathway, reaching the door just as it opened.

She was thrown back as a rush of unseen energy burst through the doorway like a gust of wind. Phantom-like forms emerged and moved around her, dancing on the wall like projected images. The phantoms were images of Mei Ling with her shoulders hunched, head down, looking burdened and lacking confidence. With books hugged tightly to their chests, each was an accurate

representation of Mei Ling at school.

Then the voices began. They started as a whisper then crescendoed to a roar.

“You aren’t good enough,” taunted one of the phantoms.

“You’ll never succeed,” shouted another.

“Always alone,” whined another.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“You’re so stupid.”

The voices harangued Mei Ling relentlessly. She stood frozen, stunned by the intensity of the verbal attacks reverberating around her.

“You are wasting your time,” one continued.

“You will never make it.”

After her initial shock, she ducked her head in shame, aware that the others were listening.

“No one wants you.”

The voices grew louder, and her mind was filled with their poisonous energy. She wanted to scream in pain, she could barely think. She slumped to the floor, defeated.

It’s true what they’re saying, she thought to herself. I am a failure; I never seem to get it right. She repeated the litany of insults to herself, recognizing the familiar sound of her own inner voice.

Then she heard Solomon’s voice, mixed in with the phantoms. “Mei Ling, are you all right? Don’t listen to them!”

She turned to look at him and saw something unexpected. Raj’s face was filled with concern. Emily gave her a look of

encouragement. Solomon looked defiant, ready to stand up to the phantoms. It gave her strength and courage. They were with her! These people she just dared to call friends.

Something inside Mei Ling snapped. She stood up with her shoulders back and her head held high and a look of focused determination on her face. Her voice rose above the phantoms.

"I'm not listening to you anymore!" she yelled. "I'm finished with you. Go away." She shook her fists at the floating images.

As she did, the phantoms stopped moving. One by one they dissolved, the terrible sound of their taunting voices leaving with them. The entire room vibrated with the sudden silence. As she walked back to the platform, she heard a quiet voice from behind the door: "We will never leave."

She turned and stood, facing the empty air, solid like a stone statue. Speaking as much to herself as to the voice, she said, "Maybe not, but I will not listen to you any more."

She turned away from the door and climbed onto the platform.

The others looked at her with awe, barely recognizing the confident person they saw in front of them.

"You don't really have to deal with people saying things like that, do you?" asked Raj.

"It sounds like that inside my head most of the time," she admitted.

"For what it's worth, Mei Ling, I recognize some of those voices." Solomon's kind tone was free of pity.

"It's time to let them go," she replied.

They stood in silence on the platform. Mei Ling was quiet and reflective. Emily stood by her side in silent support. Both Raj and Solomon stood near the edge of the platform, prepared for action.

“It’s like an obstacle course only we can’t see the obstacles until they come out,” said Raj.

Suddenly a burst of colour flashed from the door at the end of the turquoise pathway. A clown stepped out, juggling as it walked toward them. Raj was mesmerized and left the platform, drawn to the scene before he was aware he had just committed himself to deal with it.

When Raj was three feet from the jester he stopped to watch. He stared in wonder at the power, agility and focus of the clown as he juggled several balls. Without warning the jester threw one of the balls to Raj. Surprised, Raj caught it and looked at the ball in his hands. It seemed to have a life of its own and leapt into the air. The clown threw him another ball and another until Raj was holding all the balls. They leapt in the air of their own volition, returning to his outstretched hands, giving the impression that he was juggling, just like the clown. Meanwhile the clown, despite having no more balls, continued to make juggling motions next to Raj.

Raj’s hands began to fumble when he realized he had all the balls, but the precocious spheres continued to rise and fall of their own accord. He spread his feet further apart to stabilize himself, wondering how the balls continued to move. He felt pressure to keep the balls in the air but was certain he would drop them.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, his hands were clammy and the veins in his neck bulged.

“Help,” he yelled to the group. When Solomon tried to step onto the pathway he banged into an invisible wall.

“You’re on your own I’m afraid, Raj. We can’t get off the platform,” said Solomon.

Raj was clearly stressed, feeling a need to perform as he juggled all the balls.

“I don’t even know how to juggle,” he screamed, unable to stop interacting with the balls.

The others watched as Raj gradually relaxed. He was beginning to enjoy the odd sensation. His shoulders dropped, he stood taller and he moved effortlessly, like a dancer, as the balls moved in and out of his hands. At the moment when he felt completely comfortable, the balls froze in the air, hovered above his head, then descended one at a time into his hands, inert. He looked at the clown, confused.

The clown carefully and with great show retrieved each of the balls from Raj’s arms. Once they were gathered he bowed to the platform and disappeared through the doorway.

Raj returned to the platform, a puzzled look on his face.

“Great show, Raj.” Solomon smirked as Raj climbed onto the platform.

“One minute you were completely overwhelmed and uncomfortable and then you seemed to relax and get into it,” said Mei Ling. “It was amazing to watch, Raj. Well done.”

"I didn't think you could go with the flow like that, Raj," said Emily.

Her surprise brought a small smile to Raj's face. *I didn't know I could either*, he thought, momentarily proud of himself.

The room was silent and still for a moment.

"You're next, Solomon. We've each had a turn," said Emily.

"One challenge per door, eight doors and four of us," said Mei Ling. "This is a test of power, like the book said." Her demeanour was more confident since her encounter with the phantoms.

Suddenly a pitiful moan filled the room, a long, low wail of pain, sadness and misery, like an animal dying. An old woman appeared at the green door and began walking toward them, her hand outstretched, her walk slow and crippled, pain evident in her every step. Solomon jumped from the platform and rushed to her. She reminded him of his grandmother.

When he was closer, Solomon could see that her face was covered in sores that were swollen with pus. Her hands were red and raw as if she had spent a lifetime washing clothes in buckets of bleach.

"Please, please," she begged, reaching out for his help.

His stomach wrenched with pity as he stretched his hand out to meet hers. Then, suddenly, he stopped. Something made him pull away just before making contact. He knew he couldn't risk touching her, the lesions on her skin appeared infectious. There was nothing he could do to help except comfort her.

"It's okay," he said soothingly. "What's wrong? How can I

help?"

The woman did not respond. She continued to moan and was now grabbing at him to get his hand. Something didn't seem right to Solomon. He didn't like how he was feeling; it was a horrible mix of revulsion and helplessness. The pitiful look on the woman's face was intensifying, urging him to respond, but he kept his distance, reason overriding his instinct to reach out and help.

As he stood reflecting, something inside of him shifted; suddenly rather than pity he felt detached, curious to see what was really happening in front of him. He looked at the woman more closely to see what was in her eyes. As he did, her form began to change. Her body crumpled like modelling clay folding in on itself and a new form began to take shape. The woman's outstretched hand became a pincer ready to pierce him. He recoiled instantly when he saw that the new shape was a giant scorpion.

He thought about running away but the shape continued to change. He wanted to see what would be next. The hard shell of the scorpion's body softened and morphed into a new shape. The scorpion became an old man, sitting on the ground in front of Solomon with a deck of cards in his hands and a pile of coins at his feet. He was gambling. Then as quickly as the man-shape had formed, it disappeared completely and Solomon was left standing alone on the green pathway.

He was dazed for a moment and stared into the empty space

where the man had been. Then he turned and walked back to the platform.

“What was that?” Raj asked. “You didn’t have to do anything.”

“It’s what he didn’t do that saved him,” said Emily.

“You looked like you were going to touch the old woman, but you didn’t. Why?” asked Mei Ling.

“Something didn’t feel right,” Solomon said. “But I didn’t know what.”

“In India we have a story called the Ramayana,” Raj said slowly. “It’s the story of a queen who is told to stand inside the line of protection so a demon won’t get her. But when a beggar comes she crosses the line out of pity. Then the beggar turns into Ravana, the ten headed demon, who kidnaps her and makes her a slave for fourteen years.”

“You think that’s what that beggar lady might have done to Solomon?” asked Emily.

“Maybe,” said Raj.

“Maybe this power is about seeing things for what they really are,” said Mei Ling.

“Okay, my turn,” said Emily as she stepped off the platform. She walked toward the door at the end of the blue path, quickly at first, then more slowly as she got closer.

When she reached the end, she waited for something to happen, but the door stayed closed. She stood in front of it awkwardly waiting, then reached to open it. Peering inside she saw nothing but darkness. She hesitated and looked back at the

others. Before they could gesture or say anything she stepped through the door.

The last thing she heard as she crossed the threshold was Solomon yelling for her to be careful. His voice disappeared and all sound was swallowed in the vast silence of the space she had entered. Somewhere off to the right she saw the warm glow of a light.

She looked at the walls around her and realized she was in a cave with a small fire burning in the centre. The walls were smooth and cool to the touch. She made her way to a low bench next to the fire and felt herself completely alone in a place of dead silence. She sat on the bench and waited quietly. She couldn't remember ever having been this removed from the outside world.

"This is your natural state of being. You have forgotten." The voice was soothing and kind but very powerful, like the voice in her dream.

"What?" she asked, as much to hear the voice again as to clarify its meaning.

"There is a place inside of you that has not been touched by the outside world," said the soothing voice.

She smiled around the room, wondering if someone was watching her.

"Do you hear their cries?" asked the voice. In that moment she heard cries of distress, moans of worry, stress and fear. The voices surrounded her like the sound in a movie theatre. They sounded familiar, like students and the people she passed in the street

every day. They cried about lost love, death, fear and worry. Their collective misery was overwhelming. She felt herself cringe in pain, sucked into their suffering. The cries made her feel helpless and hopeless.

As she listened something happened. She felt slightly removed from it, as if the silence of the room protected her from feeling the pain even though she could hear it. In that moment she felt her heart swelling with love, and she reached out with her mind to offer comfort. She stayed in front of the fire for a long time even after the voice left her. Finally she rose to return to the platform, her feet steady.

When she stepped through the door, the serenity on her face and the stillness in her eyes silenced Solomon's questions.

She returned to the platform and sought Raj's eyes. She smiled at him. Her eyes were gentle and encouraging and her look melted something in him.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes." Her voice was soft but strong.

They stood in silence for a few moments until Raj said, "I'll go."

He walked deliberately toward the door at the end of the red pathway, apprehensive about what he might encounter.

The door opened and a trolley rolled out. It was covered by a white tablecloth with a trophy and a framed picture positioned on top. Curious to see what was in the picture, he got closer to look. He gasped when he saw that it was a photograph of himself as an

old man, wearing a business suit and looking very dignified.

"It's me," he called over his shoulder, excitement overriding his usual cool demeanour.

The photograph showed him shaking hands with an older, grey-haired European gentleman, who was also wearing a fine suit. The gentleman was handing him a trophy, the one that was on the platform next to the photo.

"I must have won some kind of award for my work," he yelled back to the platform.

He bent to see the picture more closely and noticed that it had changed slightly. In fact it wasn't a picture of Raj at all; it was a picture of his grandfather, receiving an award for his humanitarian work during the time of partition in India.

Raj felt his cheeks flush. He hoped his friends couldn't see his embarrassment. He stopped for a moment and faced the picture directly. He felt a giant weight crushing his chest and his self-image. *I've never done anything to deserve an award*, he thought.

He suddenly thought of the recent news report from India about a factory fire that had killed sixty-nine children as they worked. His father was named as the industrialist who owned the factory. Raj bowed slightly to the picture of his grandfather, remembering how many times his mother had encouraged him to follow in his grandfather's footsteps.

Lesson learned, Mummy, he said to himself and walked back to the platform.

"What happened, Raj?" asked Mei Ling.

"I haven't done anything to deserve an award. That was a picture of my grandfather, not me," he said humbly. He avoided eye contact and stared down at his feet. Then he sat on the edge of the platform and looked toward the closed door. *Maybe Dad has forgotten grandfather's example too*, he thought.

Emily, Solomon and Mei Ling watched Raj lost in thought. They didn't know what to say. Finally Emily placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's hard to face the truth sometimes," she said gently.

Solomon looked at Mei Ling, wondering which of them would go next. Her eyes did not meet his; she wasn't quite ready. So Solomon left the platform and walked down the golden pathway.

As he approached the door he felt his confidence draining, and he began to wonder if he was up for the next challenge. What would it reveal about him? Would he be able to handle it? He had the feeling he might let the others down. He stood in front of the door, self-doubt washing over him.

When nothing happened, he glanced back at the others and noticed the pathway behind him was rolling up like a carpet, cutting him off from the platform. He rushed back to meet the edge of the path as it continued to roll itself toward him. He wouldn't be able to get back to the platform without the pathway. He tried to cross to the next path but his foot fell through the space between the paths into nothingness.

"Solomon, do something!" yelled Emily, waving her hands at

him to cross over to the next path.

He looked to either side of him. The neighbouring paths were getting further away as the golden pathway continued to roll itself up. He would have to leap across the space between pathways. Any delay would make the distance greater. He leapt. He landed safely on the red path. Panting with relief he ran back onto the platform.

“What was that about?” asked Mei Ling, releasing her grip on Emily’s arm.

“I don’t know, but there wasn’t much time to think.” Solomon shook his head.

“It’s good you acted quickly or who knows what would have happened,” Emily said.

Then Solomon realized something. “My self-doubt completely disappeared the minute I took action,” he said.

Mei Ling looked at the orange pathway, knowing it was her turn. She hesitated then left the platform and walked slowly toward the door, not knowing what to expect. The phantom voices were still fresh in her mind as she stopped halfway to the door and looked back at the group.

Solomon called, “Do you want us to come with you?” He stepped off the platform, surprised that nothing prevented him from doing so this time. Emily and Raj joined him, walking together to stand by Mei Ling. They stood in front of the door, waiting for it to open, but nothing happened. Mei Ling pushed against it, but it did not budge.

As they stood waiting, an envelope appeared under the door, pushed toward them from the other side. It was a creamy colour with a gold seal on the back. There was no writing on the outside. Mei Ling opened it and pulled out a piece of parchment paper, embossed with gold edges. She unfolded it so they could see the words written across the page in gold script:

To cooperate is to have a quiet eye for what is needed to bring success, to supply it at the right time, in the right place and in a positive state of mind.

Cooperation is the greatest of all powers.

When they finished reading, the envelope and the parchment vanished from Mei Ling's hands. The scene changed and they were back in the library, standing around the dictionaries.

"That was amazing!" Emily enthused.

Mei Ling considered for a moment. "I loved this section of the book. It was all about inner power. I liked the idea that there's another kind of power in the world."

"So was this about the power we have or what we need?" asked Solomon.

"Good question. Maybe both," Mei Ling replied. "Like, Emily's usually pretty tolerant, so it didn't surprise me that she could handle the guy with the rocks. At least now that she's feeling calmer and more focused."

Emily smiled. "Thanks," she said. "I guess I'm pretty accepting

of others, but I do have a hard time being quiet and still. So the quiet room was good for me. I liked it.”

“And you definitely know how to cooperate, Mei Ling,” Solomon said. “I admire the way you’re always ready to help sort things out.” He smiled at her.

“But I’m also swamped with negative voices in my head. I really need to be able to shut them down and let them go,” Mei Ling added.

“I need to be more decisive,” Solomon said. “Especially when I start doubting myself.”

“But you’re good at seeing things for what they really are,” Emily said.

Raj was silent. Emily looked at him. “What about you, Raj?” she asked.

He responded in a hoarse whisper. “Why did I get the juggling? You’re the one who is good at juggling a bunch of things.”

“Maybe that’s the power you want to have more of, Raj,” Mei Ling said. “You did really well with it though.”

“It’s obvious I didn’t have the other power either, the one about facing the truth. I immediately assumed that was me in the picture,” Raj said quietly. Then, as if speaking to himself, he said, “I’m not sure I have any of these powers.”

No one said anything. They had never heard Raj speak like this before. It was so quiet they could hear their hearts beat.

Finally Mei Ling said, “It’s okay, Raj, you did face it. We saw

you face it. And you're very decisive."

"And you probably wouldn't tolerate any of those phantom voices in your head," added Emily.

Solomon nodded. But Raj was unmoved.

Mei Ling placed her hand lightly on his. "We're all learning, Raj. I think that's the point."

The next day Solomon found Ben in the library, bent over a book, his forehead furrowed in concentration.

"I don't get it, Solomon. I try but I can't understand all the letters. I'm supposed to read this out loud tomorrow in class and I can't do it." His eyes were red and Solomon could tell he'd been crying.

"But you love to read." Solomon put his arm around Ben's shoulder and sat next to him at the desk. Ben's book was propped open, and a shiny silver pen was lying across the open pages.

Solomon cursed Ravana silently. *Leave him alone, he's only a kid,* he yelled in his head.

"Maybe I'm just not very smart." Ben rubbed his eyes.

"That's not true, Ben. Listen, the bus is about to leave. Let's go home. I'll look at that book of yours on the bus. Maybe they wrote it in Chinese."

"Can I wear your jacket on the bus?" Ben looked longingly at Solomon's basketball jacket. Solomon took it off and draped it over Ben's small body.

"There, all yours for the ride home." Solomon smiled and

rubbed Ben's head.

Ben looked up at his big brother and the furrow in his brow dissolved.

When they got home, Solomon greeted the *ayi* with his usual smile, the only communication possible with their different languages. He settled in a chair at the dining room table to help Ben with his reading. After an hour, Ben was more confident with it and Solomon went to his bedroom to check in with the others.

"Hey, you there?" he typed.

Emily: Here. So what was that last secret about?

Solomon: The true nature of power?

Raj was also online, still humbled by his experience.

Raj: I don't understand how these powers work.

Emily: My mom used to be a social activist. She said she just got more and more angry fighting for peace until she started meditating. Now she says she gets the power of peace from meditating.

Raj: How does meditating help?

Emily: She says if we want to create peace in the world we have to be peaceful, not just talk about peace. Like Gandhi said, we have to be the change we want to see in the world. Mom calls meditation "inner activism."

Solomon: That's kinda cool. I like that. Maybe that's what Mr. Ellis meant when he talked about soft power.

Raj: That's not how the world works. Hard power means you can get what you want. That's why Ravana likes it so much.

Emily: Maybe that's the point. Maybe the world needs a new kind of power. We've had enough of hard power. Look where it's got us.

Solomon: More war and conflict. Didn't Gandhi say "an eye for an eye and everyone's blind"?

Raj: I still don't see how these powers could help a small country or an oppressed people or a defenseless child.

Emily: Well I think that's the point, Raj. The cycle of violence will only end when we start using a different kind of power.

Solomon: But it would take huge courage to do that the way the world is.

Raj: I guess that's why Gandhi was so great.



THE CUP OF LIFE

It was Chinese New Year. Many people would leave the city and go to seaside resorts and other holiday places for the weekend. Those who stayed in the city would burn old things all day and the many fires would add to the smoke, dust and darkness of the cold February air. Fireworks and firecrackers would pop all day and late into the night. The pressure at school was mounting; many projects and papers were due before the weekend break.

“I’m toast,” groaned Emily as she flopped into a library chair. “How are we supposed to do all this work?”

“Organizational skills and discipline,” said Raj, mimicking Mr. Helmsby and his time-management workshop.

“I feel much better organized after his talk.” Solomon rolled his eyes.

“I am organized,” Emily said, “and I’m still barely keeping up. I feel like there’s never enough time.”

“It’s like this every year,” said Mei Ling.

“Aren’t you guys feeling the stress?” Emily was starting to worry that there was something wrong with her.

“I’m feeling it,” said Solomon. He was fidgeting with his metallic watch strap, trying to tighten it. “I guess it’s a bit like those juggling balls though, you just keep moving and somehow everything stays in the air. What other choice do we have?”

Raj looked at Emily. “It is getting more intense around here,” he said softly. “Don’t worry, you’re not crazy, Emily.”

She looked back at him, grateful for the kindness.

“Let’s get started,” said Solomon. He settled into his chair. “I wonder what today’s secret will be.”

“I hope it’s something that eases the pressure,” said Emily.

“I’m exhausted,” Mei Ling said. “I need the break.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes, trying to fully relax, until Mei Ling’s voice brought them into silent contemplations. Her calm voice was familiar to them now and it helped them focus and concentrate their attention until they were quiet inside.

When they opened their eyes they were standing in a huge empty room. The floor was solid wood beneath their feet. The walls were made of glass, curving upwards into a dome shape, like a fish bowl. The only object in the room was a pedestal, positioned in the centre with an ornate chalice perched on top. It seemed out of place in this bowl of a room. But it was obviously their intended destination.

“There are no doors,” said Raj, spinning in a circle to survey the room.

Emily began walking toward the pedestal only to discover that each step took her further away from it.

“Oh,” Mei Ling muttered. She was trying to follow Emily to the pedestal, but she remained at a standstill.

“This is creepy,” whispered Emily. “What’s happening?”

Solomon watched as the girls attempted without success to get traction. He could see their legs moving but Mei Ling remained in the same place, and Emily was moving backwards.

“Stop,” he yelled. Both girls stopped moving. “It’s an illusion,” he said as he attempted to walk to the centre of the room and had the same disorienting experience of moving without getting anywhere.

“It’s obvious we’re supposed to get to that cup,” said Emily, “but how?”

“And why?” Raj asked.

The chalice was close enough for them to see that it was made of four different materials, forming stripes of equal width. The top quarter of the goblet was a sparkling golden colour. The next section was silver, slightly tarnished, followed by a layer of an orange metal, maybe copper. The base was made of a darker metal, like iron.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. A steady ticking sound was suddenly audible, but the source of the sound was not visible.

“Okay, we get it, there’s a time pressure for this task,” snapped Raj.

Raj dropped to the floor and started slowly sliding his body forward, pushing against the floor for leverage. He was making progress.

Solomon tried to run to the pedestal, but his feet slipped out from under him. He moaned as his back hit the floor. Mei Ling looked down at the floor and noticed a thin film of sand gathering at her feet.

“Solomon, is there sand where you are?” she asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I slipped on. What’s happening?” He looked down at his clothes and saw they were covered with sand.

“The sand is coming from a hole in the ceiling,” Raj said, pointing upwards. The sprinkling intensified until the sand was falling like heavy rain.

Solomon looked down to see his feet disappearing under a pile of sand that spread quickly over the floor. He looked up at the hole in the ceiling and around at the glass walls. The sand cascaded over the cup, which was shielded by an invisible barrier that prevented it from filling. The sand spread quickly across the room as it gushed over the cup, pushed by the force of the drop and its sheer volume.

“We’re in an hourglass,” Solomon yelled over the sound of the clock and the falling sand.

“Ah, so this is all about time,” said Raj. “Get it? Time is an illusion; it’s the unseen force we move against. This is the Cup of Life, from the book. Remember?”

Tick, tock, tick, tock. The steady beat of the clock was speeding up, sounding a mantra of *hur-ry, hur-ry*.

Their movement was now further impeded by the deep sand accumulating around them. Slipping and sliding, Solomon tried to propel himself forward.

“You look like you’re swimming.” Emily laughed at Solomon until she tried to take a step and fell to her knees.

Mei Ling started to panic. She looked up at the hole in the ceiling and the sand pouring through it in a steady stream. “We’ll be buried if the sand keeps falling,” she said, her voice shaking.

While the others continued to struggle, Raj succeeded in inching slowly to the centre of the room.

“Hey, it’s wet here,” he yelled from beside the pedestal. His fingers were touching the sand that had fallen around the base of the chalice.

Copying Raj, Emily lowered herself to the floor and, moving deliberately, pushed her way to the pedestal. She reached her hand out to touch the cup and was jolted backwards. She fell onto a pile of sand.

“Emily, are you okay?” Mei Ling was approaching the pedestal, copying Emily’s movements. Both Emily and Mei Ling were sweating and panting with fatigue.

Emily shook her head in confusion and returned to the cup more tentatively this time. As she reached out her fingers to touch it, an energy field surrounding the cup repelled her approach and she recoiled.

“Now what?” she asked. “If we can’t touch it, how can we do anything?”

Mei Ling looked around the room, hoping to see evidence of a door, but the glass remained smooth and unbroken, trapping them in sand.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. The sound of the clock was loud and relentless, urging them toward an unclear deadline. The sand was now piling around them in dunes.

“Some kind of liquid is draining from the cup,” said Raj, who had been examining it closely.

Mei Ling approached cautiously. When she was close enough she climbed onto a pile of sand to look inside the cup. An amber coloured liquid was seeping from the bottom of the cup, draining down through the stem. A line around the inside of the rim indicated where the liquid had been before draining out.

Solomon had now reached the pedestal. “There’s no sign of a crack anywhere,” he said.

Raj reached out to touch the stem of the cup, but Solomon pushed his hand out of the way.

“Don’t, Raj! There’s some kind of electric field surrounding it.”

Raj glared at Solomon, more annoyed by the intervention than thankful to be saved from the shock. He looked around the room at the mass of sand beginning to drift in piles.

“We have to do something with this liquid,” said Raj, his voice muted under a steady shower of sand.

"But what?" Solomon's voice was unusually shrill. He was starting to panic as he struggled to stay above the sand accumulating around his thighs. He was exhausted.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. The clock sounded like the rapid fire of a machine gun.

The sand now reached halfway up the pedestal, burying the lower part from view. The cup rested at waist level now, easily accessible but untouchable because of the electric shield.

Emily suddenly slumped onto the sand, yawning and holding her head tightly with both hands.

"I wonder why there are four metals. That must mean something," Solomon asked. He lay down beside the pedestal, completely drained of energy.

"In India there's a story about time divided into four ages," Raj said. "The four metals represent four stages of the earth as it goes from new to old."

"That's nice, Raj," said Emily woozily as she laid herself flat on the sand. "I'm so tired. I think I'll just have a little rest."

She closed her eyes and within seconds she was asleep.

Mei Ling had fallen to her knees beside Raj. Her face was flat and unresponsive.

"I can hardly think straight, Raj. What are you saying?" Mei Ling forced herself to focus on his voice, but her eyes were closing and her head fell sideways in exhaustion.

"Mei Ling!" Raj yelled.

Solomon likewise couldn't resist sleep. The sand was so soft it no longer felt like a threat. He laid his head on the soft sand to rest. As his eyes closed he heard Raj yell, "Wake up, you guys! You need to stay awake so we can figure this out!"

Raj swayed. He was losing energy. He reached his hand down onto the sand for support.

"I'm losing balance. I feel odd," he said to them even though he was the only one still awake.

The liquid was almost completely gone, the cup almost drained and empty. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Raj understood that the liquid draining from the cup was directly related to their loss of energy.

"I have to stop it," he mumbled, turning to Mei Ling in the hope that she would spring awake with a solution.

He looked more closely at the cup and saw the smallest crack in the iron base. He looked at the others; they were no help. His stomach felt queasy and his knees were weak. He was in danger of falling asleep, but he forced himself to take a deep breath and focus his thinking. *We have to get the liquid back into the cup*, he thought. It was the only thing that was clear in his fuzzy mind.

He noticed the air smelled funny. An odd combination of odours had filled the room, a mix of spray paint and burnt firecrackers. His vision was blurry and the air around him was streaked with metallic heat waves.

He turned to look again at Mei Ling's slumped form and noticed a rectangular lump in the pocket of her athlete's jacket.

He remembered that she carried a juice box with her at all times in case of low blood sugar. He reached into her pocket, his hands shaking as he found the box and ripped the straw away from the side. *It's so small*, he thought, *but it might do the trick*. He unfolded the accordion bends of the straw, stretching it to its full length.

TickTock

The clock sound was now one uninterrupted beat. There was no space between tick and tock anymore. Raj sniffed in some sand and coughed, trying to spit it out of his mouth. He looked as his friends whose bodies were almost completely covered. Thankfully, their faces were clear of the sand and they were able to breathe, at least for a little while longer.

Raj placed one end of the straw at the bottom of the goblet where the crack was. He held it there as firmly as he could without touching the goblet, to avoid the electric shock. *Just in case you're right, Solomon*, he said to himself.

A cold sweat dripped down the back of his neck; he was starting to panic. He knew he couldn't get the liquid back in the cup with the straw, but somehow he didn't think that was the point. He just needed to make the connection between the bottom and the top, to connect the end to the beginning. Then it would be okay.

He stretched the straw to the top of the cup, relieved that it reached. *Now, if I can just hold it*, he thought, *at least the connection has been made*.

TICKTOCK.

His head fell to one side and his arm drooped with the effort of holding the straw. It seemed ridiculous to expect the liquid to flow through the straw and back into the cup, but he didn't know what else to do. He felt his eyes closing.

Hold on, he told himself, just another few minutes.

TICKTOCK.

He waited as long as he could, but the liquid wasn't rising. His head fell forward onto his chest, too heavy to hold up. He quickly snapped it back. He was so tired. He held the straw as tightly as he could. The sand had reached his shoulders, a pillow awaiting his tired head. He laid his head back on the sand.

TICKTOCK. The last thing Raj saw before he closed his eyes was a small flash of light from the cup.



TIME

The news of the tsunami flashed across every TV and computer screen in the school and in every home in the city. The television provided an endless parade of improbable images: houses sheered in half, boats resting on top of hotels, power lines broken like matchsticks, palm trees flattened like newly mown grass and debris scattered across a bed of mud as far as the eye could see.

There was no way to fully comprehend the destruction. The television news could not begin to convey the horror of a wall of water smashing down on so many human heads.

At the international school, many students had left early to take advantage of the extended weekend for Chinese New Year. Many of them had gone to the popular resort area south of Beijing that was hard hit by the tsunami. School was cancelled for the rest of the day and buses waited in the parking lot to rush students home.

Tess sat with her head on Emily's shoulder in the back seat of the minivan. She clutched her school bag to her like a life jacket, opening and closing the zipper.

"I'm really glad we didn't go on holiday to that place with the tsunami," she said, looking up at her big sister. "Dad wanted us to go there, remember? But then he got really busy at work."

"Yeah," said Emily. "Thank goodness." She put her arm around her sister's shoulder and pulled her close, breathing in the sweet freshness of her little girl scent.

Raj was in the front entrance, waiting for his chauffeur to arrive.

He held his cell phone away from his ear, letting his mother's voice dissipate into the air. "You must come home straight away, Raj," she shrieked.

Raj waited for her to finish, but she continued to sob in his ear.

"Mummy, it's okay. It happened south of us, we're fine here. Really, everything's fine."

"I don't care, I want you home." He could barely make out the words through her sobbing.

"Mummy, Uncle has gone to the tsunami area to meet the families from India who are coming for their loved ones. He will be gone for a few days, but Auntie and I are staying here. We are safe, we are fine." He knew from past experience that it was impossible to console his mother when she was worked up like this.

“Raj, I am sending you a ticket to come home immediately.”
And she hung up.

Solomon found Shane slumped in the locker room.

“Shane?” Solomon was shocked to see tears flowing down his friend’s usually cheerful face.

“My parents were there.” Shane’s shoulders heaved up and down as he struggled to speak. “For holidays.” His hands shook as he pushed them through his hair, trying to get it away from his sticky face. “They let me stay home so I could do the snowboard competition this weekend.”

“They were in the tsunami?” Solomon looked at his friend in horror and reached out to put a steadying hand on Shane’s shoulder.

“Did you hear what they said?” Shane spluttered, saliva foaming at the edge of his mouth. “They said it would be like having an apartment building fall on your head, that much water.”

He looked up as he spoke and Solomon’s heart stopped when he saw the despair in his eyes.

“Oh my god, Shane.” Solomon couldn’t absorb his friend’s reality. “Are you sure they were there? How do you know?”

“I know.” Shane was drowning in sadness. “The pictures on TV are the same as the ones my parents showed me from the balcony of their hotel. They were right there.”

His voice shuddered as he clasped Solomon’s hand.

The sky hung above the school like a fist ready to strike. Rain drummed down on the roof, a declaration of nature's anger. Students returned to school, bleary-eyed after two sleep deprived nights. Every day revealed new stories of friends or family members affected by the tsunami. Mr. Wilson had been in the same geographic area of the disaster for a jazz festival and no one had heard from him.

At the same time there was a massive outpouring of support from around the world. Shipments of food, tents, beds and housing supplies were being flown into the area together with thousands of volunteers to help with reconstruction. It seemed as if people were reaching beyond borders and self-interest on a grand scale to help in a way that wasn't often seen.

Solomon wondered if disasters served a greater purpose of getting people to pull together across the boundaries of race, religion and nationality. Somehow it made him feel more hopeful.

He texted the others in the morning, asking them to meet him in the cafeteria at lunch. The cafeteria was quiet, cloaked in the silence of shock. Solomon placed his tray on the table next to Emily. Raj and Mei Ling arrived and sat across from them.

Emily looked at her noodle soup with disinterest.

"This is connected to us, somehow, I know it," she said, wringing her hands.

"Does this mean that it's our fault if bad things keep happening?" Mei Ling's hands were shaking as she tried to open

the plastic container of sushi. "We're only fifteen; we can't be responsible for all these lives."

"Hang on, this isn't our fault. Tsunamis happen. It doesn't mean we're responsible," Raj said. "I think it's a freak coincidence that it happened now." His aunt had talked his mother into letting him stay to finish the school year, despite her fear of his imminent death. Education trumped disaster.

"Things are happening so fast all of a sudden," Emily said, squeezing her hands so tight her knuckles turned white.

"I thought we had more time," Solomon said, his voice heavy with worry.

"It's about the cup," said Raj.

Emily looked up from her drink. "So the secret is that we're running out of time?"

"You got the liquid back in the cup, right Raj?" Solomon asked.

"I'm not sure. I missed the punchline just like the rest of you sleepers," he said with a slight smile. He liked the thought that he had lasted the longest in the race against time.

"It must mean something if we came back here." Emily looked at Mei Ling for help understanding.

"Raj, you said time was a cycle. What does that mean?" Mei Ling asked.

"I don't know if I get it either," Raj said, trying to remember details from the book. "I think the liquid in the cup represents energy. The book said that when people and nature lose energy

things start to go down in the world. Then we have to regenerate energy to make it better.”

“That helps explain why we lost energy in the hourglass,” Mei Ling said. “So is that why you were trying to connect the bottom of the cup to the top? To transfer energy?”

Emily shook her head vigorously. “I don’t get it. The assignment is about saving the world, isn’t it? So why is it being destroyed? Did we do something wrong?”

“The book was clear,” Solomon said. “Annihilation never happens. But a massive clean-up is likely. Maybe there is a life cycle for the planet and it’s time for the earth to be refreshed.” He paused. “Mr. Mathews says we shouldn’t celebrate Earth Day, we should celebrate People Day instead. He says the earth will survive anything, even meteor collisions and massive earthquakes, but people won’t. He says no species can survive in large numbers if it destroys its own habitat.”

“So you mean the planet isn’t in danger, but people are?” Mei Ling asked.

“Yeah, basically,” Solomon said.

“My dad used to say we can’t avoid the consequences of our actions. That’s what Buddhism says,” Mei Ling offered.

“Maybe the tsunami is one consequence of what we’ve done to nature,” said Emily. “Even though we are starting to change the way we treat the environment we still have to face the consequences of what we’ve already done.”

“The Cup of Life section in the book said that when the human race has lost energy it will be time to start again,” said Raj, fidgeting with his silver ring.

“The law of entropy says that everything starts new and gets old.” Mei Ling was connecting the dots between her love of science and what they were learning in each secret. “When energy goes to chaos, an outside source is needed to bring it back to order. Like plugging the cellphone battery into the wall to recharge.”

“And if the end has to loop back to the beginning,” said Solomon, “then what makes that happen? I mean, I get that it’s time, but how do we get all the energy back?”

“If we really believed we only had a short time left I bet it would change our priorities,” said Emily. “We wouldn’t waste energy on things that don’t matter.”

“We could save a lot of energy if we stopped fighting about things,” Solomon said. “Mr. Mathews says human energy is the most valuable renewable resource on the planet.”

“Everyone knows the environment is in crisis,” said Emily, “but we’re still arguing about carbon credits and quotas. They won’t undo the damage that’s already been done. Maybe the only solution is to start fresh.”

Suddenly the lights in the cafeteria flickered and went out. The room was cast in semi darkness, except for the natural light streaming in through the side windows.

“Do you think that’s Ravana’s attempt to shut us down?” asked Mei Ling.

“It seems like every time we get close to figuring out one of the secrets, something happens to stop us,” said Emily.

“We know Ravana is always nearby, but we have to keep going. Let’s figure out what we know already,” Solomon suggested.

“Okay,” said Mei Ling, looking at each of them. “We have five secrets.”

“Secret number one is the Jewel of Life,” Emily began. “The soul that never dies.”

“The second secret is the Feather of Truth or the law of karma,” said Solomon.

Mei Ling, Emily and Raj looked at each other and shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. They remained silent as Solomon waited for one of them to speak.

Mei Ling broke the silence. “Solomon, remember in the book, the second secret was the Silent Voice?”

He nodded.

“Well,” she continued, “I heard the voice the night after the diamond field.”

“And I had a dream,” Emily continued, “about destruction. But it wasn’t like a sci-fi movie, you know, with the computer generated effects. It was real, like what we have now, only more of it. There were earthquakes and war and violence.” She stopped

for a moment. “And tsunamis. The voice spoke to me in my dream.”

A quick look at Raj’s face told Solomon that he was the only one who didn’t know about the second secret. He felt his stomach coil and recoil on itself like a snake, around the feeling of betrayal. The lights suddenly came on again and the fluorescent glare shrieked at him, *You have been wronged, they have betrayed you. They are not your friends after all.*

He felt an uncontrollable urge to lash out, to yell at them and to shower them with hurtful words. He wanted to walk out of the cafeteria and not look back.

But he steadied himself, recognizing Ravana’s influence in this uncomfortable surge of emotion, not trusting it. He stared at the glare reflected from Raj’s ring and tried to settle his feelings. He remembered Ravana’s threat to prevent their success just as they were getting close and how she would find subtle ways to undermine their trust in one another.

He turned slowly to look at Mei Ling, barely registering her nervous smile and twitching hands. Forcing his voice to remain calm, he said quietly, “Tell me about the voice.”



LETTING GO

Raj sighed, fatigue in every part of his body. Even after a good night's sleep he was exhausted. His feet were heavy as he walked the hallways, trying to put on an authoritative smile. He was no longer followed by a band of students. He was often alone. His shoulders were hunched during meals with Uncle and Auntie. He'd lost his master-of-the-world demeanour.

The horror of his father's factories and the pressure of trying to hide the shame of his father's crimes weighed heavily on him. He couldn't bring himself to share his burden with anyone and it was preventing him from really connecting with people, even his new friends. He wanted to be more like Emily and Mei Ling and especially Solomon, but that seemed impossible, and he was tired of trying.

Shane approached Raj as the class waited for the biology teacher to arrive and unlock the lab door. Shane had become much more subdued since losing his parents in the tsunami. His

grandparents had come to live with him so he could finish off the term. "Hey, Raj, how're things?" he asked.

Raj tried to smile back at Shane, but he couldn't. "Not bad," he said, and turned away.

Shane took the hint and moved over to a group of friends just as Emily appeared. When she saw Raj she stood next to him and leaned against the wall.

"What are you doing here?" Raj asked.

"I have to make up this lab, I missed it last week," Emily responded.

She saw Shane and asked, "Raj, why do you think bad things happen to good people?"

"Bad things happen to good people all the time," said Raj. "It's just how the world works." His tone was dismissive.

"Raj, what's up? Sometimes it's like you have this big chip on your shoulder and you won't put it down."

He pulled his shoulders back and sucked in his breath, expanding his chest like a peacock, and Emily braced herself for his retort. But then he deflated like a balloon. His eyes clouded over with sadness.

"There is so much suffering in the world," he said quietly. "It's impossible to understand any of it."

Emily waited, hoping he would continue.

"Look, Emily, you can't know this because you come from such a pristine part of the world, but when you grow up in India you see things every day that rip your heart out. There's no

explanation for all the suffering. Sometimes it's just better not to look and definitely better not to let it affect you." He sounded like an old man, weary and forlorn.

"You're not the only one who has seen suffering, Raj. Look at Mei Ling and Shane. I can't imagine the pain they're dealing with, but they haven't given up. They're still nice to people. It's okay to keep hoping," she said.

"I don't feel very hopeful," Raj said. "The scale of suffering is overwhelming. It's better not to think about it." He walked away.

As she watched him go, Emily remembered the terrible sounds of pain and suffering in her dream and in the cave during the Wheel of Powers. She understood how easy it would be to become disheartened and lose hope. *We all need the power to stay hopeful*, she thought.

Although Mei Ling found it comforting to think that her dad was a spirit and that he was still in the world somewhere, she missed him terribly. She hadn't realized what a calming influence he had been in her life. He was her best friend. Now she rode the bus home from school. It wasn't as great as she'd thought it would be. She sat alone.

The voices returned and Mei Ling was losing the fight against the phantoms that had tormented her in the Wheel of Powers. She began to doubt every answer she gave in class. She stopped participating in the mathletes. She stopped seeking out her new

friends and walked alone between classes, the way she had done for years.

At home it was even worse. Her dad had been the glue in the family. Her mother was struggling without him. Most days, when Mei Ling returned home she found her mother on the couch, staring blindly out the window, shoulders hunched, eyes red and complaining of a headache.

Today was no different. Her mother didn't acknowledge Mei Ling when she came in the door after school. Suddenly, she glared at Mei Ling and blurted, "If you hadn't wanted to see your friends that day, if you had stuck to your tutoring schedule...."

Mei Ling dropped her school bag and stood frozen in her mother's glare.

"Ever since you've had friends, everything has been ruined." Her mother's voice was rising as she spoke. "It's because of you he died."

Mei Ling was stunned. Crushing guilt muted her ability to think. Her knees weakened and her stomach turned. She wanted to run to her room but couldn't move.

Part of Mei Ling wanted to yell at her mother, *You have to be here for me now that dad is gone! It's your job to be strong.* But she knew that yelling at her mom wouldn't help. Her mind was reeling. It wasn't fair of her mother to say these things.

She looked away from her mother and out the window. Through the tears brimming in her eyes, she noticed a sparkling star in the night sky. It reminded her of the star she had seen the

night she heard the calming voice. Then the diamond field flashed in her mind and she thought of her dad as a diamond. She stood looking at the star for a long time while her mother held her head in her hands. As she gazed at the star, she felt her anger subside. She felt reassured as she thought of the voice and the diamond field. She wanted to say something to reassure her mom. A deep calm filled her as she spoke.

“Don’t worry, Mom.” She paused and took a deep breath. “I’m sad and I miss Dad too. But I think Dad is still with us. He’s a spirit that can never die.”

Her mother looked at her like she was speaking another language. Mei Ling had never stood up to her mother before. There was an uncomfortable silence as she waited for her mother’s response.

“What is this nonsense?” Her mother spat the words at her. “Where have you been getting these ideas? From your new friends?” She was angry now. “What do you know? What do they know? He’s gone!”

Mei Ling remembered how Emily had been with the man throwing rocks. She waited. She wasn’t sure she had the power to be strong for her mom, but she knew her mother was suffering.

“Spirit! How does that help me now?” her mother said through clenched teeth.

Mei Ling had seen her mother angry, had seen her uptight and tense, but had never seen her cry. As she stood watching, her

mother slumped onto the sofa and began to sob. Mei Ling stood still, unsure what to do other than just wait.

The sobbing continued. Slowly, Mei Ling approached her mother. She lowered herself onto the couch and put her hand gently on her mother's arm. *We'll get through this, Mom*, she said to herself, unsure if she could say it out loud. She felt a quiet strength well up from inside. Maybe she did have power.

Despite what she had learned in the cave, Emily was finding it hard to focus. Her dad was often away for work, which left her to take care of Tess. They had extra volleyball practices in preparation for a tournament, she was falling behind in her school work, and there was Ravana's assignment, of course.

When she left school after practice one day, she saw Tess sitting alone on the bench near the bus stop. She looked shrunken and afraid.

"Tess, what's up?" Emily called, racing toward her.

Tess spun around. "You promised to meet me here after school so we could go for ice cream on the way home. Remember?" The pain of betrayal was all over her face.

Emily stopped dead, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Oh Tess, I'm so sorry. I completely forgot." Emily was frantic, scanning her memory. She had been so preoccupied with her own thoughts she had lost all connection to time and place. "Have you really been waiting here for two hours?"

“Yes.” Her crisp emphasis indicated Tess was angry. “You said we’d go right after school.”

“Oh Tess, I’m so sorry.” Emily kicked herself mentally. How could she lose herself so much that she let Tess down? “Let’s go, the last bus leaves in five minutes.” She put her arm around Tess’s shoulder and pulled her close. She felt Tess stiffen.

“We can stop and get your favourite pistachio and mango ice cream,” Emily offered, desperately hoping she could fix things with her.

“Okay,” Tess said, and she relaxed slightly against Emily’s shoulder.

Solomon was worried about his mom. She sat at the kitchen table late into the night, piles of paperwork in front of her, rubbing her eyes. He was worried about Ben who was having difficulty reading. He was worried about his incessant worrying. He couldn’t sleep, he couldn’t focus in class. Finally he decided to visit the guidance counsellor, quietly, between classes, hoping no one would see him.

“Solomon, many students experience severe stress during their upper school years.” Mrs. Berg’s face was kind and her smile made him feel a combination of relief and disempowerment, like he was a small child.

“This isn’t normal for me,” he said. “I don’t get severe stress.” He felt the panic rising from his stomach to his mouth, making his tongue dry and slowing his speech.

“What are you stressed about?” she asked.

He didn’t want to get into it, but the kindness in her voice coaxed him to share.

“I’m worried about my mom,” he started. “She works hard and has so much responsibility. She’s in a foreign country, without a husband and with two kids to take care of.”

He spoke faster as he continued. His words tumbled out. “And I’m worried about my little brother. He has a hard time with school. He has trouble reading and he’s always behind in his homework.”

Solomon looked down and noticed his hands were clenched together.

Mrs. Berg looked at him calmly. He could feel her reading his mind. She looked out the window, then back at him and down at her own hands before speaking.

“Do you think you are helping your brother or your mom by worrying?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. A line appeared in his forehead as he tried to pinch his thoughts together.

“Well, I know you want to help them. I’m just wondering if you think that worrying is helping.” She was very matter of fact.

“No,” Solomon admitted. He thought for a minute. “But since my dad died, I feel more responsible for my brother.”

“Sometimes we aren’t helping when we try to protect the people we love from making mistakes,” she said softly.

"I guess I don't know how to help him." Solomon didn't realize he felt so powerless until he heard himself say it.

"People get stronger when they face challenges," she said, watching Solomon closely. "We have to let them find their own way so they can grow." She paused. "Sometimes the best way to protect someone is to help them see their own strength, and then they don't need to rely on you."

Solomon wondered what she meant. Hadn't he been trying to help them be strong? Wasn't he supposed to protect Ben in this new place? And be the man in the family to replace his father?

"Sometimes the ones we love make mistakes or get hurt and it's okay because they learn and it makes them stronger," she continued, watching Solomon's face as he processed what she was saying.

Is she saying I've been playing the protector in the wrong way? he wondered. *Like I think I'm the only one who's strong?* That would be arrogant of him. *Ouch*, he thought, *maybe this is how Raj felt when he realized the photograph in the Wheel of Powers wasn't him.*

Solomon stood up. "Thank you, Mrs. Berg," he said.

She smiled.

He picked up his backpack. It seemed lighter.

The library was dark. The winter months had shortened the amount of daylight, and the students lived like moles, arriving at school in the dark and leaving in the dark at the end of the day.

Twice Mei Ling, Solomon, Emily and Raj had set a time to meet but it had been cancelled when one or another couldn't make it. All their time and energy was dedicated to school and family. The assignment kept getting pushed aside.

Finally they found a day when they could all meet. Mei Ling sat buried in her advanced math text. Solomon and Raj were in chairs opposite each other at the table. Raj's arms were crossed and Solomon's body was turned away. Emily sat next to Mei Ling, her thumbs punching rapidly at her cell phone and her knee bouncing up and down.

Raj stood up and looked down at the others, flipping the silver clip of his pen. "Well, I guess we might as well get started," he said.

"Give me a minute," said Emily, her knee bouncing faster.

Solomon unzipped his jacket and laid it on the chair next to him. He said nothing but turned his face away from the group and stared blankly out the window.

"I wish you two would stop with the hostility," Emily said, glancing alternately at Raj then Solomon. "How are we supposed to get anything done with this kind of negative energy?"

"Like your manic energy is helping," Raj fired back at her. "We actually have to sit still to get something to happen."

"You should talk, Raj, like your attitude helps." Solomon was shocked to hear the anger in his voice.

Mei Ling looked at Solomon. "You should stop picking on Raj," she said, her tone uncharacteristically stern.

There was a chilled silence as each retreated inwards, quietly justifying their own grievance.

Finally Mei Ling spoke. Her voice was so quiet they barely heard her. "I'm not sure what's going on here. We were fine last week. What's happening?"

Emily stopped texting and put her phone on the table. Looking thoughtfully at Mei Ling, she whispered in response, "I can't seem to slow down. I can't focus on anything."

Raj looked at Emily, calculating whether to follow suit and offer an honest admission or wait for someone else to speak.

Solomon sighed. "I can't stop worrying or getting angry, ever since our meeting in the cafeteria."

Mei Ling cleared her throat. "I was feeling good about what we were accomplishing. I mean, I don't know what it all means yet, but it feels like we're learning something important." She paused. "I know I'm changing. I'm gradually getting stronger and happier. But I thought it would all make sense by now and I'm not sure it does."

Raj looked at her. "There's something going on here. I've been thinking about Ravana's final warning. Do you remember? She said we have to trust each other completely."

"Yes," said Emily. "She said she'd try to stop us any way she could."

"Of course," Solomon said, rising from his chair. He began to pace. "Why didn't we see it? It's obvious now." His face was

suddenly animated. "This week I was tied in knots because of all my responsibilities. It was making me crazy."

"I haven't been able to concentrate," confessed Emily. "I'm totally distracted."

"And I've been hearing those negative voices again," admitted Mei Ling quietly.

"Hey, it's like the stuff Ravana talked about in her lecture, about thoughts creating pathways in the brain," said Emily, excited. "She's messing with us, making us have negative thoughts, and they're influencing the way we see everything."

"What about you, Raj?" asked Solomon, turning to see if Raj was with them.

"I guess I haven't been sure we're getting anywhere with this." He hesitated as he spoke, uneasy revealing a hopelessness that ran deeper than the assignment.

"Do you think it's possible that Ravana is twisting our feelings?" Solomon asked.

"They seem real," said Mei Ling.

"I guess that just shows how good the illusion is," said Emily.

"She has changed her methods," said Raj. "She was making bad things happen and now she's messing with our feelings." He shook his head as if waking up from a deep sleep. "If that's how Ravana operates, she's pretty good."

They sat in silence, each reflecting on the illusion that had held them in its grip for more than a week.

Finally Raj sat up in his chair. "I think we need to power through and keep going."

Emily looked at him to see if he was serious with this sudden enthusiasm. She could see he meant it. "We've been through too much at this point to stop now," she said, supporting him.

"Mei Ling, can you get us started?" Solomon knew they had to act.

"I'd like to try it this time," Raj said unexpectedly. He waited to see if they would agree.

Emily grinned. "Do it, Raj."

Solomon nodded and Mei Ling settled into her chair.

Raj's voice was gentle and soothing as he started. "Let's get comfortable."



THE FAMILY TREE

The scene changed quickly in response to their synchronized breathing and intense concentration. The honest conversation had focused their attention faster than the breathing exercises had ever done. When they opened their eyes, they were standing in front of a huge tree in a field of long grass that stretched to the horizon. The tree towered majestically two hundred metres above them, filling the entire sky. Its branches reached out in all directions.

“It’s beautiful,” said Solomon, leaning his head back to take in the monolith in front of them. He loved the stability and grandeur of trees.

The bark of the trunk was broken and scaly like patched, dry, old skin. The major branches were like small trees themselves. They extended outwards, each a mother to multiple children that held tight while reaching out to explore the world. The leaves were so dense it was impossible to see the end of each branch, and together the leaves formed a canopy high above the trunk.

Whistling sounds revealed a community of birds and possibly an entire world of other beings living inside the leafy oasis of the tree.

As they stood staring upwards, the outline of a doorway, barely visible at first, began to form in the base of the trunk. Slowly it peeled itself away from the trunk and opened with a creaking sound to reveal a dark cavity within.

Mei Ling gasped and stepped back.

"I think we're supposed to go in," said Emily enthusiastically. "Let's go."

As Emily spoke, the trunk began lifting slowly into the air, pulling the roots of the tree with it. A groaning suction sound reverberated around them as one by one the giant tendrils sprang free from the earth. As the tree lifted further a ladder descended from the open doorway. Several of the largest branches reached down and rooted themselves, stabilizing the tree as it wrenched itself upwards.

"Hey, we're surrounded," Solomon yelled as he turned to see the roots form into a wall that encircled them. The trunk continued to lift, taking the doorway and the now fully descended ladder with it.

"Let's go!" said Raj, lurching toward the trunk.

One after another, they climbed the ladder and ascended into the darkness of the tree trunk.

Raj discovered he had reached the top of the ladder when his climbing turned to walking. He stopped in the dark, hesitant to

step forward too quickly. A door opened and he looked beyond it to see a desert. He could just see the outline of forms that looked like camels wandering in the distance. They were with a group of travellers crossing the sands in front of him.

“Where are we?” he asked. It took a moment for the lack of response to register as he stared at the foreign landscape. He had come to expect a quick reply from one of the others, but when he turned to see where they were he discovered he was alone.

“Guys, are you coming?” His shouts drifted unheard into the open space of the desert.

The sands shifted in front of him, swirling into shapes that changed as quickly as they formed. He watched, mesmerized, wondering how people could find any destination in the desert when there were no stationary landmarks. Then he noticed the shifting sands were creating images. He shook his head, wondering if he was hallucinating. *I haven't been here long enough to be affected by the heat*, he thought. He stood still, adjusting his eyes to the glare of the sun, trying to focus so he could discern the images.

In quick succession he saw a series of images flash in front of him as if the desert had turned into a giant movie screen. First he saw the image of a man walking, staff in hand. Then he saw a great and mighty sea parting in the middle and creating a pathway. Then there was a bush burning but leaving everything around it untouched. Finally he saw a man holding heavy tablets of stone.

The images passed in front of his eyes as mirages in the desert. He felt no personal connection to them, but he knew they represented stories from the Jewish religion.

He felt the presence of someone standing beside him.

“Are you all right?” a male voice enquired. “You look a bit disoriented.”

“I’m a bit confused,” said Raj, turning to look at the person beside him.

The man was slightly older than Raj, in his mid-twenties, with a neatly cropped beard and long black hair that was tucked behind his ears. He wore a dark coloured desert kaftan that was cinched around his middle with a wide red cotton belt. When Raj looked into the eyes of the young man he felt a surge of recognition. Time stopped as he stood staring, trying to identify the eyes. Then it struck him, they were Emily’s eyes.

“Now I’m even more confused,” he said, grappling to understand what he was seeing.

“I knew you would recognize me,” said the man with Emily’s eyes. “We have been friends many times, you and I. That’s why we feel we can speak with such authority about each other’s character flaws.”

Raj couldn’t deny the deep feeling that he knew this person well, that it was Emily. Still, it was a bit creepy to be speaking to Emily in his mind and a young Middle Eastern man in physical reality.

“Where am I? What is this all about?” asked Raj. “I have been seeing things that make no sense to me, images from the Jewish religion.”

“How could you know of Judaism?” asked the young man, looking closely at Raj as he awaited an answer.

“We had to study the religious diversity of India and one of the groups we studied were the Cochin Jews of the south. But I have no connection to them. So why am I here?”

“We were here once together, you and I,” the man said. “You were equally confused at that time. I was passionate about the new religion. I loved the clarity and simplicity of Abraham’s message, that there is only one god and that we were to stop worshipping the multiple idol figures we prayed to.”

He looked at Raj to measure his reaction to this information. Raj stared into the distance, looking for something that wasn’t there.

“But you loved the deity idols,” continued the young man, “and it was difficult for you to give them up. You felt that you would be abandoning God’s expression if you abandoned the deities. For this reason, you would not accept the new religion.”

Raj turned to look at the young man, a memory tickling inside him. Without a clear image it remained a vague, formless feeling.

“We parted ways then, you and I.” Emily’s eyes searched Raj’s for recognition. “After that I followed the new religion for many years, many lifetimes. We didn’t meet again until much later, under different circumstances.”

“I see,” Raj said, not fully understanding but intrigued to know more. “I can relate to some of what you’re saying. It seems silly to me that we bow down and worship stone idols, but I still feel that God is connected to them somehow. I can’t let them go.”

“It’s okay. It’s been an issue for you for a long time. You have always loved your religion. I didn’t respect you for it when we were together during this time; I thought you were a pagan, unsophisticated and backwards. And I’m sorry that I judged you so harshly. I hope you can forgive me.”

The young man looked at Raj with such love in his eyes that Raj felt his heart melt. He could feel the truth of everything the man had said. He could also feel the depth of connection he had to this person, how comfortable he felt to speak of such deep matters. *So this is why Emily and I challenge each other so openly?* The idea made sense somehow. He thought back to the times when he had voiced opposition to Emily’s opinions, even when he agreed with her. He had a feeling that by accepting this man’s apology now it would put something right between him and Emily.

“Yes, I can forgive you,” he said. “In fact, I can see how much you would have loved the simplicity of Abraham’s message. It is what I admire most about you, your clarity and simplicity. I’m sorry if I judged you also,” said Raj, surprised to hear himself speaking with such humility. It was easier to speak to this young man than it would have been to say the same words to Emily.

“Walk with me for a bit,” said the young man. “I’ll show you what happened to Abraham’s message.”

Mei Ling's steps slowed as she climbed higher inside the tree trunk. She wasn't sure where she was going and she was suddenly afraid in the dark. A door opened and she looked beyond to see a tropical forest filled with lush, flowering trees, vines and a waterfall that cascaded from a rock cliff in front of her.

The air felt like the inside of a sauna. Her forehead was suddenly sticky and her hair hung limp with the humidity. Turning to take in her surroundings she saw a golden statue of the Buddha lying in the jungle off to her right. She recognized the statue as one of the many she had seen as a child in her home country. Vietnam was full of statues of the Buddha, reclining, standing or sitting. Each image showed a face of such sublime contentment it inspired people to seek contentment by following the Buddha's example.

She looked behind her for the others but they were nowhere to be seen. With a pang of fear she realized she was alone. Then she saw a little girl bent over the stream near the Buddha. She was washing a handful of flowers and placing each one gently at the Buddha's feet.

"Hello," called Mei Ling.

The girl looked around, confused, searching for the source of the voice. She obviously thought she would be undisturbed in her devotion. She smiled sweetly when she saw Mei Ling at a distance. Mei Ling had an odd feeling that she knew this girl.

“Hi,” she called again as she got closer. “My name is Mei Ling. What’s yours?”

The girl stared at her then began speaking in a language Mei Ling did not understand. As the girl spoke Mei Ling recognized many of the hand gestures Solomon used when speaking. As she continued to speak, the little girl reminded Mei Ling more and more of Solomon. She had the same quiet dignity and gentleness. Mei Ling kept smiling so as not to frighten the girl. As she got closer she could see the fraying seams in the simple cotton frock the girl wore, her plastic flip-flop sandals that were so worn down that her feet rested slightly off-centre. Mei Ling could imagine the little girl running with the sandals sliding sideways under her feet.

I’ve always known about reincarnation, Mei Ling thought to herself, but I never thought it could be like this. She stood in wonder for a moment before speaking.

“Who are you?” she asked, knowing the girl would not understand. “Are you Solomon?”

The little girl said nothing but reached out her tiny hand. Mei Ling accepted it with a confused smile. The girl pulled her to sit on a stone in middle of the stream. Mei Ling sat, grateful for the stability of the rock beneath her and the warm body beside her. The girl pointed her tiny finger up at the Buddha, directing Mei Ling’s eyes to follow. As she looked into the Buddha’s face she felt herself relax.

The girl smiled up at her, her face bright with the pleasure of Mei Ling's company. There was a kindness and maturity in her eyes that comforted Mei Ling, the same way Solomon's presence did. The girl nodded her little head and pointed back up to the Buddha's face. They sat together in silence for a long time. As Mei Ling settled onto the rock surrounded by the soothing sounds of the stream, the sweet floral scent in the air and the girl's warm hand clasping hers, Mei Ling's mind became calm. She began to know things.

She looked up at the smiling face of the Buddha and somehow understood that this girl was Solomon in another time and that she was the mother to this girl. A flood of emotion washed over Mei Ling and she felt a protective instinct toward the girl. She moved a bit closer to her, happy to be with her again.

The little girl's eyes were deep pools of light. Her dark hair was pulled back flat on her head and held in a ponytail by a simple band decorated with a yellow flower. Mei Ling smiled. She imagined that, even as a daughter, this young girl had been the wise one. She understood why she trusted Solomon from the first moment she had met him at school. She had recognized him as an old friend.

Mei Ling understood that they had visited the forest many times together to see the Buddha. Suddenly a crushing sadness threatened to suffocate her. Unexpectedly, tears began to well up in her eyes. She looked up at the half closed eyes of the Buddha and understood that the girl had died of typhus. The horrible

disease had robbed the life from her little body after leaving her weak and bedridden for weeks.

The girl reached up to wipe away a teardrop as it fell over Mei Ling's nose. Mei Ling reached down to touch the little girl's cheek. They continued to sit, the girl leaning back against Mei Ling's chest. Mei Ling wrapped an arm around the slender body and held her close as they swayed and listened to the sounds of birdcalls and water splashing.

When she gazed up at the Buddha Mei Ling felt content. She understood that, although the girl had died, they could never be parted. They would continue to meet each other time and again over many lifetimes. This understanding brought her great comfort. She looked into the girl's eyes and made a quiet promise never to worry again.

"Now what?" asked Mei Ling. "Is there more?"

The girl pointed up to the Buddha's face, and Mei Ling settled into silence, awaiting new understanding.

Solomon continued to climb inside the darkness of the tree trunk. It smelled of wet earth and he wondered where they were going. Just as he was about to ask, he reached the top of the ladder. A door opened to reveal a vast expanse of land, covered with brown, dry grass, flattened, as if swept by a continuous wind. He looked down and discovered he was standing on a rock outcropping, overlooking the plain in front of him.

“Hey guys,” he called to his friends. Raj and Mei Ling had entered the trunk before him. Now they were nowhere to be seen. Turning around he discovered that Emily was no longer behind him.

The plain in front of him was filled with men on horses. They rushed at each other, swords held high in the air, shrieking with vengeance. The air was heavy with the smell of sweat and anger. The screams were primal and inhuman, like animals roaring against the bars of captivity. Solomon felt his skin crawl with fear and disgust as he saw weapons flash in the sun then heard the sickening thwack as sword met flesh.

Who are these people? A queasy feeling arose in his stomach. What am I doing here? Where are my friends? A muffled cry escaped his lips.

As he was wondering what to do he heard a quiet voice in his head, not his own voice.

“It is all right, there is no need to fear.” The voice was gentle and soothing. “You are witnessing a very important scene from history, one from which you may learn a great deal.”

“Who are you?” asked Solomon, turning to find the source of the voice.

“I am known by many names. The man you are about to meet thinks of me as the Angel Gabriel.”

Okay, now things have really gone off the rails, Solomon thought to himself.

“Am I having a vision? Have I been drugged by this tree? What is going on?” he asked aloud, feeling his usual calm dissolving and panic taking over.

The scene in front of him began to change. A bearded man was now standing in the middle of the crowd. The warriors had dismounted from their horses and were gathered around him, their swords at their sides, no longer yelling.

The man was speaking to the gathering. His natural authority captivated the warriors as though they were children. He stood tall and dignified, and he held the men’s attention as he turned from one to another, speaking directly to each of them in turn. Solomon marvelled at his gentle power and the way in which he reasoned with them. He assumed the man was convincing them to stop fighting.

As the man spoke, two warriors broke from their respective groups and lurched toward each other, shaking fists and trying to out yell each other. But they were quickly separated by the quiet mediator who held each man’s arm. Solomon could almost see the heat between them as they stood waiting obediently. One man raised his fist, about to strike the other, when the mediator’s commanding voice rang through the air. Instantly the arm dropped as if unplugged from an energy source.

Although Solomon could not hear the man’s words, the lilting, musical quality of his voice drifted toward him. Its firm, commanding tone urged the two warriors to listen. The men settled like animals surrendering to the alpha male, at least

temporarily. It seemed highly improbable to Solomon that this reasonable man would succeed in stopping the barbaric fists from flying again.

Then Solomon was standing closer to the scene, close enough to see the faces of the two men who had threatened each other. He was shocked to recognize himself in the eyes of one of the men. The eyes were unmistakably his, but somehow the body was that of an Arab man. He was transfixed by the anger and fierce pride he saw there. When he looked closely at the other man he saw Raj's eyes, filled with rage and pride in equal measure.

"Oh god," Solomon muttered aloud. "Is this why we are always fighting, Raj and I? Are we still angry over some ancient battle?"

The thought both shocked and comforted him. Somehow it was easier to acknowledge his strong feelings if they had historical roots. At least he wasn't just making up the feelings that erupted in Raj's presence. According to this scene they had a reason for their animosity, even if it was just an old axe to grind.

Solomon shook his head. *What is this all about?* he wondered. *This scene is of another time and place, far from anything I've ever lived. Why am I here? And how can Raj be here?*

"You are witnessing the man who will become the prophet Mohammed," said the voice in his head.

"This man in the middle? The mediator?" asked Solomon.

“That’s right,” said Gabriel. “He is a man of great honour and diplomacy; he was well respected even before he played his part as God’s messenger.”

“You’re saying that this is the prophet Mohammed?” said Solomon. “But no one is meant to know his face.”

“Yes, it is understood that God’s message was shared by the Angel Gabriel through the prophet’s mouth and that his face was never to be worshipped. The Holy Qur’an is a record of the words spoken directly through his mouth. It was important that he not be seen as God, as had happened with Jesus Christ,” said Gabriel.

“This new religion will bring much hope to the people of this land,” Gabriel continued, “as well as great pride and self-respect. It is the first time that God has spoken to this people in their own language.”

Solomon stared at the scene before him, suddenly rich with new meaning. “So this is the start of Islam?”

“Yes. Come. I will show you how it grows.”

His eyes are so clear and pure and sweet. It’s like falling into a deep pool of warm chocolate. I can see God in those eyes, Emily thought as she gazed, mesmerized, into the sparkling eyes of the bearded man in front of her.

She knew in that moment that she would follow this man anywhere and do whatever he asked of her. He wasn’t particularly tall or handsome or unique, but his eyes embraced her with an all-encompassing acceptance she had never

experienced before. Although she wondered who he was, something about him assured her that she would know when she needed to.

When Emily had reached the top of the ladder inside the tree trunk, she passed through open doors that lead her into this room where she encountered these divine eyes. It was a place she recognized just as she recognized the man standing in front of her, although she didn't know how.

She looked around the room to see what her friends were doing, but they were nowhere to be seen. In fact there was no one in this room with her except the man and, in the corner, a woman who sat quietly watching. The red dirt floor had been swept recently, the brush lines still freshly visible in the loosened dirt. The walls carried the same earthen colour upwards from the floor to the ceiling, meeting hard clay tiles in an interlocking wave pattern across the top of the room.

The woman sat by an open fire, warming her hands and stirring something in a big earthenware pot.

"Where am I?" Emily asked out loud, feeling the comfort of the cool air around her.

The man looked at her quizzically, clearly not understanding her words. The woman also looked up, uncomprehending. Through the open door Emily could see the street. She left the room, assuming she'd find Raj waiting outside. But he wasn't there. She looked in all directions and realized that neither

Solomon nor Mei Ling was here with her. She was in a foreign place and time, alone.

She began to walk along the street. It was lined with small, simple houses built from the same red clay with the same rooftop tiles that undulated in a wave pattern. She recognized the architecture of the Middle East from movies and the pictures she had seen in sporadic childhood visits to Sunday school.

That was Jesus, she thought. I know it. She remembered his eyes, so penetratingly kind. *This is totally weird. What am I doing here?*

She continued to walk down the road until she came to an open doorway facing the street. She saw a family sitting together around a square wooden table, eating a meal. They appeared happy and peaceful. The man at the table looked up at her. She recognized him immediately but didn't know from where. He greeted her with a kind smile and gestured for her to enter and join them at the table.

She hesitated but then entered the room and sat in the chair that was offered. She felt a wave of kindness as each of the family members welcomed her with warm eyes. The mother offered her a bowl of food; it looked like yam and potatoes in a yellow liquid. She accepted a small earthenware bowl, like the one she had seen in the other house, with a carved wooden spoon. The mother's hand was soft and reassuring as it brushed lightly against Emily's outstretched fingers.

They did not understand her words when she asked about this place. Smiling politely, she ate in silence, wondering why they

would invite her in without knowing her. Then she remembered what she had learned about the first people who followed Christ's teachings. They lived with kindness as children of God. Charitable and welcoming, they shared what they had with strangers as though with kin. She sat with them in companionable silence and they smiled openly at each other as they ate.

After the meal the father stood, bowed slightly to the mother and children and gestured for Emily to follow him outside. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so quietly content, so unconditionally accepted. She followed him outdoors and he led her away from the small gathering of houses on a road leading out of town.

There was something familiar about him, but she couldn't quite place it. His gentleness, the sense of responsibility he carried with him and the quiet sadness she saw in his eyes reminded her of someone. She realized with a start that this is what she saw in Mei Ling's eyes. Stopping to make sense of this, she turned to look at the man. His eyes found hers the way Mei Ling's did when they were with the boys and she needed confirmation or reassurance.

Then the scene changed and she was sitting under the tree with her friends nearby.

Emily looked at them. They were silent, each lost in thought. Raj caught her eye and a smile spread across his face.

"What's got you smiling?" Emily asked, still wondering what had happened. Raj's story about meeting Emily in another body prompted the others to tell their stories.

Afterwards, Raj asked Emily, "How did I know that was you?"

"It explains a lot if we've known each other before," Emily said. "Apparently I was Jewish once."

"I had no idea we had all of that inside us," Mei Ling said.

"Can you believe I was a warrior at one point?" asked Solomon.

"That explains a lot." Raj looked at Solomon with new eyes.

"How can we possibly understand each other if we all have these amazing back stories?" Mei Ling asked.

"It seems we meet each other at different times and in different places," said Solomon. "And each time we feel like we know each other, even if we can't remember the details."

"Maybe when we really know someone, the details don't matter so much," said Emily. "Now I get what the diamond field was all about. We change bodies but we stay the same inside."

"The Family Tree from the book turned out to be an actual tree." Solomon stared up in wonder at the leafy expanse of the tree above them. "The world's population grows just like a tree and spreads wider and wider across the world."

"The book said that religions were meant to guide people when they lost their spiritual power," noted Raj.

"Why is it important for us to know about the different religions?" Emily asked.

They sat in silence for a moment, considering the question.

“Really, the seed of all the religions is the same,” said Raj. “Be good, treat others well, live a virtuous life and connect to a higher power.”

“Maybe that’s the simple message we all need to live.” Mei Ling liked this idea. “But what does that have to do with regenerating the world?”

“My mom works in palliative care, with people who are dying,” said Emily. “Even though they know that everyone who comes into the unit will die, they take really good care of them. Maybe it’s the same with Mother Nature and we have to take care of her while she goes through a death and regeneration.”

“When a tree gets really big and it’s ready to die, it drops a seed for a new sapling to grow,” Solomon offered.

“The book said the new world would form around the seed of a new consciousness, remember?” said Mei Ling. “Maybe the religions have kept the seed alive.”

“So we’re waiting for the new tree to grow?” asked Raj, skeptical.

“Well, the book also said a new sapling would grow from the compost of the world’s decay,” Mei Ling offered.

“And the Feather of Truth said we take the memories of our experiences with us, right?” said Emily.

“So maybe that’s how we help regenerate the world,” said Solomon. “We take memories of our best selves with us. It’s like we have to become the new sapling.” He liked that idea.

The tree above them disappeared and the heat from the sun shone directly on their heads, no longer obscured by the massive foliage. Emily turned and saw a small sapling standing where the giant tree had been. Then the scene changed and they were back in the library.

In that instant the earth rumbled.



THE FINAL SECRET

“Ravana is gone. They have outwitted her.” The Keeper of the Fire crackled with delight. “Their desire to learn was greater than her ability to undermine them.”

“They were not deceived by her illusions, even when she was changing their feelings,” the Keeper of the Air whispered. “They did well.”

“It is finally time for us to play our part in the last great scene.” The Keeper of the Water looked at each of the other Keepers, reassuring herself that they were ready.

“Now for the Final Secret,” said the Keeper of the Earth. “The human spirit expresses itself through the physical world and within time. To truly regenerate, these children must turn their awareness away from the mechanics of matter, from the grasp of time, the clutter of sound and the limits of their own breath.”

“As they have practiced with their meditation,” said the Keeper of the Water.

"It will take one powerful thought." The Keeper of the Fire sparkled in anticipation. "But it must be strong and they must have it in the same moment. Then..." He smiled, knowing what would come next.

"One breath...one second...one thought...one heartbeat," whispered the Keeper of the Air, like a mantra. Her form was becoming wispier, anticipating the much awaited return to her original pure state.

"I know this is one of the hardest parts for you, dear friend." The Keeper of the Earth looked at Water with empathy. "Now you must wash over everything, removing all traces of human debris." In spite of his sympathy, he was more excited than he had been in many, many years.

"I know it must happen to allow for a fresh start." The Keeper of the Water smiled as they turned together to watch the final scene.

The announcement of the school's closure came over the loudspeaker as students prepared to go home for the weekend. They were being sent home to an uncertain future. When the minivans arrived, the students looked like sleepwalkers, dragging their heels across the parking lot, their bags hanging off their shoulders and their heads lowered. The school was closing; definitely for the upcoming week and possibly forever due to the anticipated damage from the next predicted earthquake.

Solomon was waiting for Ben at the front entrance. Ben and Raj arrived together.

"Wait for me on the bus, Ben," Solomon said, patting his brother on the back. "I'll be there in a minute." Ben waved goodbye to Raj and dutifully headed for the bus.

“Hey,” Raj said to Solomon. “Aren’t you leaving? Or are you planning to stay behind and take over the school?”

His smile was warm and Solomon smiled back, happy about the friendship that had grown between them.

“Want to stay behind with me? I’m sure we could have this whole operation up and running by ourselves in no time,” Solomon said. Then quietly he added, “By the way, thanks. Ben told me you helped him with his English homework the other day.”

“Well the kid was struggling all alone in the library, what could I do?” Raj waved away the gratitude. “He works hard you know, but it’s like he doesn’t see the words right. Poor kid thinks he’s stupid, but he’s not.” Raj hesitated for a moment. “Maybe he should have his eyes tested.”

It was remarkably mundane to be speaking of eye tests at a time like this, but Solomon appreciated the normalcy of the conversation. He looked at Raj for a moment and wondered if they would ever see each other again.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” he said, steering Raj out the door.

Emily slid onto the back seat of the minivan and sidled up next to Tess. “Hey,” she said in response to Tess’s worried face. “You know, Tess, we can never die. Did you know that?” she said. “Ever.”

“What do you mean?” Tess asked, looking at her big sister intently.

Tess was a practical person; Emily knew from past experience that her little sister preferred the hard truth to a sugar-coated lie. She remembered when their mom was leaving for a business trip and Tess had rushed to the front door, distraught. Emily had thought, at the time, that Tess was crying because she would miss her mom. But instead, Emily heard Tess call out to her mom as she climbed into the taxi, “Mom, what do I do if you die?”

Her mom had stopped and turned to look directly at seven-year-old Tess and said, “If I die, the will is in the top drawer of the filing cabinet, in a yellow file folder.”

“Okay, great,” said Tess, calmed instantly by the useful information. “Bye, Mom,” she said and then ran, carefree, back to play with her friends.

Emily looked at Tess as the van drove down the long school driveway on its way into the city and said, “Well, a body can die, but the soul can’t. So even if you leave a body, you will go into another one as a baby. We will never lose each other.”

Tess considered this for a moment.

“But what if that baby is somewhere else in the world? How would you find it then?” Tess asked, wanting details.

“I’m not really sure,” Emily said, “but I think we just know how to find each other. Maybe we attract each other, like magnets.”

Tess smiled.

Earthquakes turn the soil in a way that releases nitrogen and other fertile elements buried deep. Surface level damage is the high cost paid for this regenerative action.

In many parts of the world, fault lines were known to be active, and governments had spent years developing exit strategies. China sat at the junction of several tectonic plates, crossing the Pacific, Eurasian and Indian oceans. There were more than 150 fault lines, mostly inactive. However, suddenly something was activating all of them at the same time. This same phenomenon was occurring all over the world. Since all fault lines were active, there was no place to go.

Many people were rushing out of Beijing, heading for the safe zones broadcast by the government, more than two hundred miles from a fault line.

Mei Ling and her mom were planning to leave Saturday evening by car with their neighbours. Emily's dad had managed to book plane tickets on the midnight flight to Canada. Raj's uncle, who was responsible for evacuating Indian nationals, would stay behind, but he had booked a flight for Raj to return to Delhi Saturday night. Solomon's mom had accepted the government's evacuation assistance, so they would be leaving Sunday morning.

The international crisis rang as a wake-up call around the world. Newspapers were filled with stories of people helping each other to exit the most dangerous areas. Everywhere, radio stations sent messages of hope, encouraging people to take care of each

other. It was described as an unprecedented shared global emergency, greater than either of the world wars.

Some countries were fighting over land to house their evacuees. Amidst growing threats of violence and the possible use of nuclear force, the majority of the world's people were ignoring their governments and finding ways to help each other. There was a feeling of shared humanity that extended beyond borders, dispelling separation by race, nation state or religion. Everyone needed help.

Emily knew it was time to meet her friends when she heard them calling in her head. It was an oddly familiar sensation although she had never experienced it before. It was a bit like feeling the presence of all three friends in her mind at the same time. Although she wasn't sure she would be back, she was confident Tess would be fine without her. She slipped out quietly, knowing her dad trusted her to take care of herself.

Mei Ling put aside her packing when she heard a subtle whisper in her mind. Her mom was next door with the neighbours, planning tomorrow's trip. She wrote her mom a short note, saying she would be back soon. Then she walked to the front gate of the apartment complex where Raj was waiting for her in his limousine.

"We'll pick up the others on the way," he said.

Solomon had the sudden thought to leave and told his mom he was going out to get some air in the courtyard. As he was leaving he thought about Ben and paused. He knew his little brother

would be terrified if Solomon wasn't there with them. He found Ben lying on the bed in his room, almost asleep.

"Ben, I'm going out for a bit," said Solomon looking his brother in the eyes. "But I'll see you soon."

He took off his basketball jacket and laid it over Ben like a blanket.

"This will keep you warm until I see you again."

Ben smiled a sleepy smile up at him. Then Solomon took a deep breath and walked away.

The four friends stared out the windows from the back seat of Raj's limousine. Each was deep in thought. They didn't need to speak to know they were about to discover the final secret. They rode in silence for most of the trip.

As they reached the outskirts of the city, Mei Ling said dreamily, "You know that beautiful presence I felt in the second secret, when I heard the voice? I thought I felt it when I was falling asleep near the cup."

She looked at her friend's faces to see if they were listening.

"Then again when I was with the little girl and the Buddha I felt the same warm feeling inside and a pull upwards." She paused. "Have any of you ever felt it?"

Raj looked sideways at her. "I felt like there was a presence helping me figure out the straw and the cup when you were all asleep." His voice was quiet and confessional. "I didn't believe you at first, Mei Ling, when you told me about the voice. Now I

wonder if God isn't just an invisible presence that touches our minds, personal and intimate like what you experienced. It feels right."

"I wonder what part the Silent Voice has to play in all of this," asked Emily.

"Maybe it was with us the entire time," said Mei Ling, "giving us the power to conquer Ravana and finish the assignment."

Solomon looked at her quizzically. "So you think the voice is causing destruction?"

"No," said Mei Ling. "I think the voice is giving us energy and helping us understand the secrets so we can reclaim the essential best part of ourselves to take with us."

When they arrived at the school, Emily wondered if this was how it looked every weekend when the students weren't there. There was a powerful feeling of abandonment. The building seemed to announce, *I have been left for good, no one is coming back.*

Solomon used a big rock to break a window at the back of the building near the gymnasium. He was just tall enough to reach the window ledge and pull himself through. Raj propped Mei Ling on his back as she reached for the window ledge and followed Solomon in. Emily accepted Solomon's hand and a gentle push from Raj. Then Solomon and Emily pulled Raj in and they were all inside.

They did not speak as they walked through the deserted school, passing familiar classrooms, the cafeteria and their lockers. The dark hallways were filled with memories that were suddenly

precious because they would not be repeated. Finally they arrived at the library and pushed the door open. Like a well-oiled machine they sat in their usual chairs, ready to begin.

“Everything we’ve been trying to understand has led us here,” said Raj.

“The final secret,” said Solomon.

“The book said the final secret is one precise moment in time. You think this is it?” Mei Ling looked at Emily who gave her a small smile.

“Had this moment happened even a week ago,” said Emily, “I would have said I wasn’t ready to go.” She looked at Raj and his dark brown eyes smiled back at her. “But the moment has arrived now, exactly when it was meant to.” She nodded. “Yes, it’s time.”

Solomon understood that, although all of humanity would leave together, his place was here beside his three friends.

They sat for a moment in silence before focusing their minds. There was something deliciously familiar about imagining the room in their heads and experiencing the peace that washed over them as they did. It was a path well trod, and they knew easily how to reach their destination. It didn’t take long to focus their concentration.

Eyes opened, they found themselves standing close together in a valley. The forest around them was densely packed, filled with tall thin conifers, the same kind that surrounded the school. They stood still, prepared for anything, trusting the scene to emerge at its own pace in front of them.

There was movement in the forest. A figure emerged from the edge of the trees and walked toward them. As he approached it was obvious that he was from another time and another place. He looked like an Indian prince. He was wearing a knee-length golden tunic with bright buttons lining the front up to the neck. His head was covered by a brilliant red turban with golden threads woven around the front and a peacock feather in the centre.

He walked purposefully toward them, an arrow held by his side like a baton. When he was within a few yards, he reached down and touched the arrow to the ground. Then he walked around them using the point of the arrow to etch a line in the earth, encircling them.

The skies behind him were black, announcing an oncoming storm. The wind howled and the trees bent low to the ground as if bowing to the prince. He was independent of the storm, unaffected by the wind, even his clothing did not move when the wind whipped theirs. He moved with the grace and lightness of a ballet dancer, there was nothing rushed about him.

“Remember what you have learned,” he said, looking each of them in the eye. His eyes were like dark pools of liquid honey and his smile was sweet and empowering.

Then, with quiet dignity he turned. They watched him walk back into the forest and disappear.

Instinctively they pressed their backs to each other as if to form a shield. They watched the world around them. The sky cracked

as lightning split it in two. In the distance they could see the ocean welling up. Suddenly the wind that howled around them stopped and a dead silence descended upon the place where they stood, marking the circle as the eye of the storm.

“Is this the final destruction?” Emily asked.

Raj spoke calmly. “No, this is regeneration. It’s time for the earth to be renewed so we can start fresh.”

“Mother Nature has to clean up after the mess we’ve made,” said Mei Ling.

“This is the final life review for the planet, the Feather of Truth moment,” Solomon said.

“I’m glad we know it’s a new start, not the end,” said Emily.

“I’d like to see a new world,” said Mei Ling.

“Now everyone will get to see it,” said Solomon.

“I don’t think anyone believed it was really possible to make a better world. Even though everyone wanted it,” Emily said.

“Maybe that’s why we were picked,” said Raj. “Somehow we believed it was possible. Although I wouldn’t have said that about myself until now.”

“I wouldn’t have said that about you either, Raj,” Solomon laughed kindly. “But now I would.”

“Are you scared?” asked Emily.

“No,” said Solomon. “I know we won’t lose anyone, even if we’ll look different next time we see each other.”

“I told my mom we are spirits,” said Mei Ling. “I hope she remembers.”

“I think knowing is the real protection,” said Emily, thinking of Tess’s delight when she heard about the diamond field.

Suddenly there was a great roar, like a thunderstorm approaching. The ground around them cracked and the earth broke away as if a giant meat cleaver had slashed it apart. They stood on an island with a gaping hole surrounding them like a giant moat. They marvelled at Mother Nature’s power.

The earth heaved up into the air and crashed down, breaking apart in huge chunks around their circle. It looked like a massive tilling project that was turning the land to regenerate it, restoring its energy for the seeds to flourish in the new garden. A wall of water rushed toward them, like the tsunami they had seen replayed a thousand times on television.

“This is it!” said Solomon. “It’s all coming apart.”

“Just when we’re coming together.” Raj smiled.

Around them the air was filled with sparks of light, like fireflies. They danced across the sky then began to swirl together upwards in unison, creating a sparkling cloud. There was a spotlight from above that seemed to be pulling them upwards.

“Just like in the diamond field!” said Mei Ling.

“I feel like we do when we meditate,” said Solomon.

Raj smiled. “See you on the other side,” he said.

“Yes,” said Emily, “let’s go.”

They felt their awareness drawing inwards, the way they had done many times together in the library. It was a familiar sensation of peace and concentrated power.

The last thing they heard was the calm sweetness of the Silent Voice.

"Come."

In the same split second each of them willingly let go.



EPILOGUE

“Humans think that heaven is another place,” the Keeper of the Earth said to his dearest friend. “It doesn’t occur to them that it’s a different time period for the earth. Now they’ll see for themselves.”

“The children did well,” bubbled Water, fresh as morning dew. “It is now time for harmony again.”

“At last,” he said, delight in his voice. “We can return to our original form.” The Keeper of the Earth stepped out of the Council Room into the scene in front of him.

As his feet touched the green grass, he transformed into earth and settled around the roots of the nearest tree.

The Keeper of the Water stepped from the Council Room and flowed into the crystalline pond.

The earth was rich with potential, like the promise of a spring morning. The dewdrop freshness of the air made the leaves and grass sparkle, their colours vibrant with life. Flowers bloomed, painting the landscape around them with the lush hue of natural

beauty. A slight breeze carried the sweet perfume of lilac and lavender and thyme. The sun shone with a steady, warm glow.

She stood in the sun, gazing at the splendour of the natural world around her. Her face shone with an inner beauty that illuminated her body and surrounded it with light. The light spread around her head forming a radiant crown. Her eyes were full of love.

He walked toward her, his hand outstretched, his loveliness equal to hers. She took his hand and joined him to walk along the pathway through the garden to the gathering place, where their friends, families and community awaited them. A peacock strolled gracefully across the path in front of them to the edge of a pond sweet with the scent of jasmine.

Another pair joined them, their faces mirroring the beauty of the world around them. Diamond light sparkled through their eyes, expressing the innocence of a fresh start. The wisdom of the seven secrets that shaped their character was carried as subconscious memories. The world in front of them had formed itself around their new consciousness.

They walked together in silence, and the sound of tinkling bells filled the air as the trees and fragrant flowers heralded their arrival.

The four friends stopped beside the clear pool of water. They turned to each other and smiled deep smiles of recognition, basking in the certainty that they belonged together, in this place and at this time.

the end...

...the beginning





THE SEVEN SECRETS OF RAJA YOGA MEDITATION

Meditation is seldom associated with history or the concepts of time and space. It is seen rather as a method to escape the details of such things. Raja Yoga meditation recognizes that the natural thirst of the soul for truth and understanding, for meaning and significance, for purpose and identity must be satisfied before the “peace that surpasseth all understanding” can be achieved through the technique of meditation.

The Foundation Course in Raja Yoga Meditation as taught by the Brahma Kumaris centres worldwide consists of the topics below. The organization is an international non-governmental organization that offers all its courses and programs for free. The organization is administered by women.

For more information or to contact a meditation centre near you, visit www.brahmakumaris.org.

ONE: Self-Realization

Raja Yoga is the practice of understanding and realizing yourself as a soul, a being of consciousness, located in the centre of the forehead between and behind the eyes, in the brain (the software

inside the hardware of the brain). As a tiny spark of spiritual light, eternal, imperishable, each of us is innately peaceful and loving. Letting go of the consciousness of the body and body identity results in self-realization and the powerful but subtle shift of consciousness from “I am a body and I have a soul” to “I am the soul and I have a body.”

TWO: Yoga or Union with the Supreme Soul or Spiritual Parent

There is much confusion and controversy surrounding the existence and nature of God and God’s role in the world. Exactly who is God? Does God really exist? Does it matter anyway? These are not just academic questions. They go right to the heart of the problems facing the world. Different religions have different ideas about who God is and how God should be worshipped. These differences have caused much conflict.

In Raja Yoga, it is understood that God is also a soul, with all the highest qualities of peace, love, bliss, clarity and power to a supreme degree. One can reach out to God with pure thoughts and experience the response of pure feelings and spiritual strength to begin to transform. Meditation is a way to create a link with God.

THREE: The Philosophy and Law of Karma

“For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” “As you sow so shall you reap.” Both are expressions of an

understanding of the immutable law of karma. Understanding this law sets us free from wondering, Why me? Why now? Why this? In the context of our relationships with others, karma explains everything. As eternal beings, we have written the current script of our lives with past actions and we are writing the future script of our lives with actions chosen now.

FOUR: The 8 Spiritual Powers

Through a body-conscious or physical lens, power is expressed as dominance (even subtle dominance of opinion or pressure). Physical power (force) creates resistance whereas spiritual power attracts. The current dynamics of force and resistance present in our world are a result of a lack of spiritual power. Spiritual power is the subtle energy that transforms situations, in benevolent ways. Meditation enhances the inner power to improve the qualities of one's response to life's challenges:

- power to tolerate (put up with a little discomfort to respond with kindness in all situations)
- power to withdraw (become independent of any influence – internal or external – other than peace)
- power to accommodate (go with the flow and adjust to all situations)
- power to face (be honest with myself)
- power to let go/pack up (to be free from old images, expectations, fears and doubts)

- power to discern (see things as they really are, including and especially our own blind spots)
- power to decide (act with confidence on what we know is right for us)
- power to cooperate (to have an abundance of inner resources and be willing to offer them when/where needed)

FIVE: The Cycle of Time

Time can be seen as a cyclical process and therefore eternal. The four key ages the earth and humanity move through demonstrate a natural organic process of moving from the “highest, most ordered state” to a more degraded, conflicted and fragmented state. This process happens slowly over time as a result of a loss of power. Massive spiritual power is required to regenerate earth’s potential, and this is done through human consciousness.

SIX: The Tree of Life

The story of human history and geography as told through the lens of the world’s great religions. Each religion offers a timely message to uphold the core virtues and values of humanity in a unique way suited to the specific language and cultural context of the time and place. All branches of the tree originate from the same roots—the timeless values that hold humanity together—and the same seed, a Supreme Source. When these values are lacking, the world falls into conflict. A reconnection through the

essence of each one's religion leads to the roots and ultimately to the seed for spiritual power.

SEVEN: The TIME is Now

Human consciousness returns to its original state of peace, love and silence, letting go of the attachments, ego identities and desires that were generated in a materialist mindset. Love motivates all actions. The energy holding together the material world shifts, transforming old to new with the massive infusion of pure positive energy from the Supreme Power Source.

The cycle turns.



www.sevensecretsrevealed.com

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Eleven years and two high school graduations later the book is in your hands.

To the two who make my heart sing, who challenge me in all the right ways, who are sisters and friends as well as daughters

- Rachel and Lucy -

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May you use your mind to create pictures of a better world.

