

# The Future of Ma Lei

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One spring, many years ago, I moved to the capital of the Maldives, Malé. An archipelago in South Asia, the Maldives is known as ‘Paradise on Earth’. As people began to worry about global warming, it had been calculated that these enviable islands were going to be gradually swallowed by the sea, in as soon as a century. Scientists warn that the Maldives will become uninhabitable within 100 years. So, Malé, where I live, is a disappearing city. In the future of the future, the last Eden will be no more.

Disappearing, disappearing...gone.

The 2004 tsunami swept across the Indian Ocean coastal countries like a giant hand. The catastrophe gripped people’s hearts all over the world and tormented them. People in Malé were especially anxious. At that time, I was in my first year of university in Sabah, Malaysia. I suddenly realised that our world was full of accidental events, just like the one that created me and made me an orphan.

An old man who worked in the orphanage told me I arrived as a baby. I was found at the gates of the orphanage bundled in a basket in the middle

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<sup>1</sup> This is a translation of the original work, written in Chinese: Huang Weikang, 马累的明日 (The Future of Ma Lei), *Zui Novel*, Changjiang Literature & Art Publishing House, 2014.

of winter, when the heavy snow of northern China had started to accumulate. The orphanage relied on donations and had hardly any food. My arrival was disastrous. Soon after that it started to snow again. ‘It was absolutely terrible,’ he had told me. I remember it vividly.

When I was five years old, I got out of the bleak orphanage, and I was adopted by my new family. My adoptive dad gave me my new family name: Ma. Dad took me to a small town in the south, and later Mum gave birth to a little boy. But it had always been only the three of us. Mum rarely came to visit after the divorce.

As my brother grew up, the ties between me and my family weakened. I’ll never forget the sparkling gaze that Dad bestowed on my brother. When I compared it with the way he looked at me, it made my bones hurt.

When did it begin, the feeling of abandonment? It followed me well into my adulthood. My birth was not welcome in the world—I thought of my life that way often, but I did not think of ending it. I didn’t have much passion for it, that was all. It was strange.

Malé is a mini city. People either cycle or walk to places. Houses tend to be tidy little buildings. The streets are not regularly tarmacked. Roads of bright white sand stretch as far as the eye can see. There are towering coconut trees and breadfruit trees around the houses.

I lived in a small residential area in the south. Every day I’d get up, have breakfast, and cycle to Sunderland Hotel to wait tables. It’s not difficult to be a waiter. You put on an apron, carry a tray of wine glasses, and grill some squid when asked. I sometimes had to interpret for Chinese guests too. It was a lonely existence, and it felt unbearable every time I fell ill. But since my life was so simple, I could just get by in any situation. Dad found my decision to live here puzzling.

‘Why would you go to a place where a tsunami could strike any moment?’ he asked me multiple times.

I remember the last fight we had before I left China was about my determination to move to Malé after graduation. He was drunk as usual, with a flushed face and a stiff neck, stabbing his chopsticks into the table. His drunkenness was making him coarse and unpleasant.

‘You said you’d have better opportunities if you studied abroad, and I

agreed but I thought you'd come back!

Thunk!

'Now you are going to a land plagued by tsunamis? You're going to die out there!'

Thunk! Thunk!

'You can't be so cold-hearted. What will I do if you die? Tell me!'

He was fifty that year. He didn't look good at all. When I was in junior high, Dad still had bright deep eyes and an imposing character. In 2002, in my second year of high school, a bunch of steel bars fell and crushed his left leg while he was supervising at a construction site.

It added years onto him. No matter how you looked at it, the accident had taken away his jaunty manner and replaced it with a pathetic limp. Dad started drinking. His cheeks would redden after a few sips. He would sit at the table, smiling at nothing in particular and not saying much. The more he drank, the louder he became. We were frightened every time he shouted at us. My brother was about to go to junior high. Due to his inflated ego, my brother asked our uncle to go to parent-teacher meetings instead of Dad because he didn't want anyone to see Dad's leg.

'I'm not a kid anymore. I have dignity too', my brother declared. It sounded naive and funny to me, but when my raging dad heard it, he slumped like a deflated balloon. Maybe it was my imagination, but Dad's limp became worse over the next few days.

By then I'd moved into the dormitory at school and only came home for a meal once a fortnight. I busied myself with study and part-time jobs, and collected information from my teachers about studying abroad. Every time I went home, Dad seemed to have let go of himself a bit more.

At first he was only drinking, then he was unshaven, smashing bottles on the floor. The next time I saw him, he looked like a pile of mud, sprawling in random corners of the house.

Dad became sloppy, loud, stubborn and lazy.

'Tsunamis aren't such a big deal. If I die, I die.' I thought of telling Dad that, but I couldn't utter it. Looking at Dad, who was so strongly opposed to me living overseas, I softened my tone: 'I won't die, Dad. You've had

too much to drink.’

‘You call me “Dad,” but you don’t really think of me as your dad, do you? You are just acting, like an actor.’ His hand was barely supporting his face, his jacket slipping off the shoulders. He seemed to be dozing off, eyes half open.

I shivered, trying to calm my anxiousness. ‘Dad, you are drunk.’

‘Maybe I should go with you. I want to live in Malé too...’

‘What are you talking about...Dad?’

I looked carefully at him. His lips were pursed into a thin line. Gradually, his restlessness subsided. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

One weekend evening, about a month after I moved to Malé, a storm struck.

I went to the convenience store to get milk. On my way back, I saw this cat. Holding a case of milk under my left arm, I stopped to look at it across the street. It was lying flat on the ground, blood pooling under its neck. The rain diluted the deep red colour, making a large area of pale red. I thought it was dead but soon noticed that it was making great efforts to push itself up again and again, trying its best to survive. And at last, it noticed me. Its life was hanging by a thread, but it still cried towards me with all its strength, however weak the sound was.

‘Meow...’

I stared at it, hesitating, and then opened the cardboard box, took the milk bottles out on the pavement one by one. I went over to pick up the cat and put it in the box.

I took it to Mr Bruce’s pet shop, knocked urgently, ignoring the fact that the shop was closed. Mr Bruce examined the injury and told me: ‘His neck was hurt pretty bad. His vocal cords might have been damaged. He might sound a little strange once he’s recovered.’

Would his voice change?

I looked at the weak animal and was amused by imagining how a little cat could sound hoarse.

I ended up taking the cat home. I wanted him to be healthy, so I named

him Chubby.

The arrival of Chubby seemed to temporarily alleviate my loneliness. For a few days after the incident, Chubby had to stay at the pet store. I always went to see him after my shift. Chubby was all bandaged up around the neck, his head unable to move much. He looked very funny. A week later, Chubby officially took residence at my home.

Chubby was quite clingy. He'd come up to me and rub against my slippers as I walked into the kitchen. Upon opening the bathroom door I'd find him sitting on the floor craning his neck, waiting for me to come out. At night he would snuggle up on my lap to sleep. 'Hey Chubby, you're acting like a love-thirsty dog. Aren't you supposed to catch mice? You are a cat!' Chubby looked at me, fluttered his ears, and settled back down.

The happiest moments of my day were when I went to work, seeing Chubby looking forlornly at me through the window, and when I came home from work and Chubby threw himself into my arms.

'Get well soon, then you will be able to talk,' I cooed. Eventually it felt like I was raising a child.

One day, my elderly neighbour Mr Alexander knocked on my door. Alexander was over seventy and lived next door. We had talked before, and he had shared his homemade bread with me several times. He was friendly, liked golfing, and looked healthy.

The old man lived alone in Malé. His wife had died. His two children lived on a different island and rarely came to visit him. He also had a cat named Mary. Today, he was here about her. He said his son and daughter were quarrelling over some business issues, so he had to leave Malé for a few days to see them. He was hoping that I could keep Mary for a while.

'Please take good care of Mary for me!' the old man said in English with a smile before he left.

I took Mary in my arms and gave him a nod. Chubby immediately came out to rub against my slippers.

Mary was a Persian. Gentle and elegant, she looked like a queen. I lay down on the sofa with Mary still in my arms. She jumped down, noticed Chubby, and stared blankly at the stray cat before walking away. You

had to admit, Mary looked precious, with her fluffy snow-white hair, and slit-shaped pupils like pretty crescent moons. 'I'd better take good care of her, she's Alexander's pet!' I thought.

Chubby was my own cat. He'd still cling to me even if I punished him for doing something wrong. But when it came to Mary, I was always afraid of not being nice enough. 'Hey Chubby, you are a boy,' I stroked his head and removed him from the soft blanket where he slept, 'Let Mary sleep here.'

After being plucked out of his cosy bed, Chubby crouched on the floor and looked at me miserably. It was only after close inspection that I realised that Chubby's wound had almost fully healed.

Three days passed, and Mr Alexander still didn't come to pick up Mary. By the fourth day, storms had come to Malé. This time the sky was dark, and the strong wind from the sea was swirling up.

That was when the 2010 tsunami hit Indonesia.

This tsunami was caused by an earthquake under the waters off Indonesia's Mentawai islands, but fortunately Malé was not affected too much. We only had a few days of heavy rain. In those days, the city had power outages from time to time, and the mobile signal did not work well.

On the morning after the storm passed, the streets were littered with leaves and broken branches. On my way to the shop, I noticed that the window of my neighbour's attic was open and thought, 'is Alexander back?'

I went to get Mary, walked over and knocked at the door, but no one answered. I went around to the back of the house and looked inside the kitchen window. To my shock, I found the old man lying next to the kitchen counter. I banged on the window with my fist. Finally, I smashed the glass with a plant pot and climbed in.

'Alexander?' I shook him hard and Mary jumped on his stomach. Something clicked and I stopped shaking him. A few seconds passed. I reached my trembling fingers under his nose. A sense of fear struck me like an electric current, and my body started shaking in an unprecedented panic. Mr Alexander was dead.

How could Mr Alexander die?

I almost sobbed when I called the police, I felt so lost. When the medical examiners carried Alexander out, I felt more helpless than ever. I stood at my door, holding Mary tight. Alexander was put on a stretcher and removed like an object. It was terribly depressing.

After giving my statement to the police, I lost all my strength and could barely return home. All I could think of was the words of the inspector. His tone was cold. ‘Thank you for notifying us. We have contacted his relatives. Alexander died a few days ago due to a heart attack.’

My steps were heavy and I felt sick. How could Alexander die so suddenly, when he looked so healthy before? Didn’t he go to see his family? Mary, what about Mary?

Inexplicably frustrated, I came home and opened the door. As if for the first time, I took a serious look at my life. The sofa was cluttered with clothes. The kitchen table was piled high with dishes that had not been cleaned. The TV was on mute, silently broadcasting the natural disaster. My mobile phone lay on the coffee table. It had run out of battery several days ago. Everything felt pointless. I had nothing to care about.

But when did this feeling start?

I finally plugged my phone in and saw Mary sleeping in her bed like nothing had happened. Chubby came over to my feet and stared at me. I bent over to offer him some cat food, muttering to myself. ‘So some people are going to be like Mr Alexander, neglected, dead for days without anyone noticing...’ I set his bowl down, ‘and die a lonely death?’

Chubby froze for a moment, before looking up and making a sound with his healed throat.

A gravelly meow that sounded like—

‘You.’

‘What?’ I asked.

‘You!’

I turned bright red and patted Chubby’s head: ‘You silly, silly boy!’

Unexpectedly, I was overwhelmed by a flood of sadness.

Right on cue, my phone that was still charging rang irritatingly. The

otherwise quiet room was now filled with the unexpected sound. I punished Chubby by putting his food away and answered the phone. A wave of scolding and repressed sobs came down the line.

‘Have you disowned your poor old dad? What’s gotten into you? I thought you were dead!

I thought you were dead, you little shit! What the hell is that place! What the hell is that place!’

Then all I heard was Dad’s crying.

The first time I saw Dad cry, I was probably five years old.

That year was a turning point in my life, before which my entire world consisted of the walls of the orphanage and the river that passed in front of it. I lived in a dark, dingy room, where there was only a very small window on the ceiling to let some sunshine in. I woke up every day staring at that square hole. Days went by as I watched other kids playing marbles under a tree in the yard from summer to winter. In the yard there were children and old people. No one spoke Mandarin—we all spoke our own dialect.

The old man who worked in the orphanage told me that it was meant to be, that Dad decided to adopt me at first sight. I was crying and wouldn’t go with him. He pulled me into the truck, and all the way while tears and snot stained my face, he kept saying: ‘Daddy’s here. Daddy’s here.’

Dad saved me from poverty and took me to a small town, where I discovered that the world had a radiant side. Neon signs hung outside shops, people selected fruit from fruit stands, smoke rose from grills. Motorcycles and bicycles on the road honked at us, and I hid behind Dad, looking at everything in amazement. I forgot what I was crying for.

I followed Dad wherever he went, and finally arrived home.

Now I was invited to eat at a table laid with chopsticks. Now I was bathed lovingly, until I was finally clean. Now I was falling asleep comfortably squeezed between Mum and Dad, as Mum told me fairy tales.

They were simple things that others were accustomed to, but for me they



were a new world.

On New Year's Eve, Dad took me out to buy a balloon. While he was paying, some child traffickers grabbed me and disappeared into the crowd. I don't remember everything that happened, just that I was brought home by the police to a house full of relatives and neighbours. Dad had injured his face from fighting with the traffickers. He was surrounded by the relatives who were telling him off. He looked extremely guilty, as if saying 'I really tried'. He was silent, his face all crumpled up. As soon as he saw me he leapt at me to hold me tight, and started crying in front of everyone.

'I thought I'd lost you!'

I was stiff in Dad's arms, his stubble rubbing against my face, his heavy, slurred and tearful voice by my ear.

I never saw Dad cry after that. He didn't cry over the divorce, or when he was disabled, or when my brother died.

He just gaped at my brother as he stroked his face, wailing his name over and over.

That was in my first year of university, in 2004, during the time of the Indian Ocean tsunami. My brother came out of an internet café after midnight, when he was robbed and stabbed to death. Perhaps that's why, although unrelated, the two events were strung together in our memory. Dad was traumatised by the tsunami. Even the mentioning of it in passing reminded him of his son's death. It became a wound that never healed.

The arrival of my brother was a wonderful surprise. Mum finally got pregnant and had a natural birth. My little brother became closer to me than Dad was, and I in turn gave him all my attention. At first, when Dad told me I had to be the sensible big brother and share food and toys with my younger brother, I was happy to do all those things, because it all sounded like what a hero would do. But as the time went by, even classmates of my neighbour started gossiping about me being an adoptee. Everything changed after I had realised the difference.

The loving father-son scenes of my dad and brother were all locked in my

eyes, all the details etched in my heart. The hero gave up and turned into a poor clown. It dawned on me that Dad did not encourage me to be independent; he just stopped caring what I did.

Things came to a head when I was in high school and Dad became lame, when our financial situation was not very good. I wanted to apply for an art course, and at the same time my brother was thinking of going to a private school. I was so determined to become an artist but had to give way because ‘an art course costs too much, but your brother has to go to the private school.’ I was disheartened. My dream was shattered.

Dad probably was trying to go with my brother’s choice in exchange for his own self-esteem.

‘Brother, you can’t make a living off art. You can work for me when I make big money’, my brother said.

I had already agreed to put his needs over mine, how dare he take such a contemptuous tone! We were in our bedroom and we fought for the first time. Dad pushed the door open. My brother immediately shouted: ‘He hit me first!’ Dad was so furious he slapped me in the face.

When I think back on it, I told myself I worked part-time and studied English to get out of the country, when what I really wanted was to escape that house. At that time, I could barely think of the warmth of home anyway. The determination of leaving was reinforced in my mind with that slap. I wasn’t his biological son, which must have been the reason for his action.

I didn’t like my brother, but that didn’t mean that I wished that he would disappear from this world. On *that night*, I rushed back home to meet Dad at the hospital and see my brother. Dad was limping the whole way. He walked with a limp for years, and his back developed a little hump. He looked thin and withered, his hair and beard unkempt. I stood beside him, his rough hand stroking my brother’s face, his mouth hung open, and then he screamed my brother’s name.

Dad did not cry any tears. I shuffled behind him and wept silently. Our family was being ripped apart. It reminded me that I was leaving Dad too. The thought made me cry, but I didn’t want Dad to see my tears.

‘Ma Lei, you wanted to punish your father, right?’

Shortly after answering my dad’s call, my uncle took over to tell me off. ‘Why didn’t you return our calls?’

‘My phone died...anyway the tsunami is far away from here,’ I muttered. ‘You don’t care about him, do you?’

How would he know that you are far away from the tsunami?

He didn’t catch a wink for days, he called you over and over, non-stop. I mean, Ma Lei, you don’t seem to talk to each other. Are you trying to punish your dad?’

‘No,’ I said curtly.

‘What would your dad do if you died?’

‘You’re only saying that because my brother died!’

My brother is dead so he puts all his hopes and wishes on me, because he only has me left! That’s why he doesn’t know what he would do if I died!’

I raised my voice in anger, but in reply there was only my uncle’s heavy breathing. After some time I heard him say: ‘You really think so?’

‘Yeah.’ I replied.

‘You would, wouldn’t you? I guess it’s reasonable for a young person to think that way.’

*Click.* He hung up.

But within a minute, my dad called back. He said that he was too worried and already bought tickets to Malé, non-refundable. He wanted to come and see me, and he thought if he couldn’t stay with me for long it would be a visit to Malé anyway.

Even though the thought of Dad coming overfilled me with awkwardness, it was true that I hadn’t seen him in a long time, so I didn’t argue.

Like Dad said, it would be just a visit to Malé.

I remember the day when I went to pick him up at the airport. From a great distance, I saw him fumbling inside the automatic doors, not knowing how to get out.

‘Ma Lei! Come here!’ His loud voice drew stares.

‘These doors aren’t any different from the ones that you passed to get into security,’ I said a little reproachfully. Still, I helped him with his luggage. Dad patted me on the shoulder and said somewhat proudly: ‘I didn’t know how to use the table in front of me in the plane, but fortunately someone helped.’

I was surprised by his tone, and turned to look at him. His deep eyes were a little muddy. He was freshly shaven. He was wearing a traditional Mao suit, which had been his cherished wardrobe piece, worn only occasionally to attend relatives’ events. It looked old. He seemed shorter, dark-skinned. He looked tacky at the airport.

Dad was old. With this realisation, I started to look at Dad with softened eyes. With a relaxed tone, I teased him: ‘Dad, can’t you find something nice to wear? Shall we buy some new clothes while you are here?’

‘Mine are fine,’ he said happily. Suddenly he clapped his hand on his forehead: ‘No, someone took my small suitcase when I got off the shuttle bus!’

I felt like I had been punched in the stomach.

‘How could you be so careless!’ I said. I was impatient again.

I asked him to wait for me while I went to talk to the police. Of course it was futile. ‘Let’s go.’ I walked in front. Dad followed, a little aggrieved. Occasionally when I turned around and saw him limping, I just got more and more annoyed and wanted to leave sooner.

Malé’s airport was on an island, we had to get to the city by boat. We talked for a while on the boat, but his face gradually turned pale and he threw up right on the deck. I didn’t know my dad would be seasick. Passengers were staring at us in surprise.

‘Why didn’t you tell me!’ I shouted. I clenched my jaw and sighed, rummaging through my things to find a plastic bag and tissues.

‘I...I didn’t want to trouble you...I thought I could hold...I...’ He said before vomiting into the bag.

‘Oh, forget it!’ Exasperated, I quickly cleaned up his mess, feeling the gaze of the foreigners on my back.

I was then fully aware of the source of my anger: I had agreed to his visit. But this was Malé, not China. Dad couldn't speak English. He'd have to follow me around most of the time.

It would be awful.

We finally got in the house, and Dad still hadn't a clue about the trouble he caused. He plopped on the sofa, commenting on Chubby, who was running towards me: 'Why do you keep a cat? I hate cats! Back home they say cats like these are very unlucky.'

I did not reply, hoping my silence would end the topic. On his way to the toilet, Dad saw Mary in my room and yelled: 'Another one!'

Perhaps, my father, like many others, suffered a great deal of discomfort in foreign environments. I had already lived abroad for many years and had forgotten how much I had to adapt. But the fact that he could not adapt was making me uncomfortable.

The second night Dad arrived, he wanted to eat rice all the time. He also pestered me for alcohol, but alcohol was not allowed in Malé. He couldn't walk very far, but in Malé there weren't many taxis. Dad would complain continuously, mumbling about how inconvenient it was in this country, and that at home all the taxis and scooters would come whenever he beckoned them.

Once he started asking questions, he would not stop.

He didn't speak English, and would pull on my arm and ask: 'What's written there?' 'What's this shop called?' 'What's this street called? How come it's not written here on the map?' For a long time, my ears were full of Dad's nagging.

In some cases, it was deeply embarrassing. Dad would grab random strangers to take photos with him, on a perfectly ordinary street. He seemed to assume it would be an honour for him to be in a photo with foreigners. He never dreamed that it might not be a polite thing to do. He bragged about any friendly 'yellow-haired foreigner' giving him a thumbs-up, saying that it meant that they appreciated his enthusiasm.

He would raise his voice for no reason, regardless of the occasion, drawing attention from people. It made me uneasy.

It was humiliating when he took giant steps, making his not-so-pretty

limping leg stick out even more.

I was annoyed that when we went shopping he would force me to ask the salesperson for gifts, all the while telling me how easy it would be at home to get a mug if you bought a tube of toothpaste like that.

He became a sloppier, louder, and more stubborn Dad.

Finally, when we were strolling on a square, Dad said he was tired. I made the effort of buying Dad some pecans like the ones we had back home, and asked Dad to wait for me while I went to the toilet. What I saw when I came back shocked me. Dad was sitting on a newspaper on the ground, cracking the pecans. He sat where beggars typically congregated. He was simply enjoying the sunshine and minding his own business. His bad leg was stretched out in front of him. A gentleman passed by, leaving a coin at his feet. My face burned with shame.

‘Don’t you realise how embarrassing you are!’ I shouted as I hurried over.

‘I can’t find a bench. My leg is not good for standing.’

‘That’s not what I mean!’ I was irritated.

‘Then what’s the matter?’

What was the matter?

Not knowing what else to do, I asked him to follow me. There wasn’t any point in arguing or trying to teach him how to respect local customs.

‘Let’s go!’ I said angrily, leading the way.

‘I want to go home.’

‘What?’ I turned back. He didn’t move. He just stood there somewhat helplessly, holding some shelled pecans for me in his hand.

This time, his voice was very quiet.

‘I said, I want to go home.’

The night before Dad left, it was raining in Malé.

My shift ended late and I was exhausted, so I went to bed early. Dad said he’d stay up and have a drink. When I went to my room, he was still watching TV in the living room. The blustery wind from the sea could be quite strong sometimes in Malé. I was woken up by the wind in the middle

of the night, and got up to close the windows. There was some banging noise outside of my room, so I went out to check, only to find Dad sleeping on the floor, at the threshold to the bathroom.

His cheeks were red. He was lying there, probably drunk, his back almost touching the closed door. He must have fallen asleep sitting against the door and slipped down on the floor. The bathroom door was pushed by the wind and rattling in the door frame, making loud noises.

‘Look how drunk you are!’ I sighed. I closed the bathroom window, and carried Dad back to bed.

Dad went home the next day.

My awful time with Dad finally ended. See, Dad? You couldn’t get used to living here. It’s better if you live on your own.

I felt like a weight had lifted off my chest. I went home, cooked, and watched TV. That night my uncle called. He said Dad had arrived safe, and that they were having a drink together. While we were talking, I heard a shriek from the other room.

I put the phone down and ran into the room. Chubby and Mary were fighting. I immediately broke them up. I sat Chubby down in front of me.

‘Why are you fighting?’ I scolded Chubby.

I stared at him, and he stared back. After a while, he yelled: ‘You!’

Chubby’s gaze sharpened.

‘You! You, you, you!’

I was surprised. Me?

Chubby yowled again. I froze.

Like being woken from a dream, I suddenly realised that I had neglected Chubby for a very long time. His wound had healed on his own. He hadn’t gained much weight. Now he had even lost his place to sleep.

‘You mean ... I’m just like Dad, aren’t I?’ Stroking Chubby’s head, I sank into silence.

Even though he was a cat, he knew that feeling. I knew I had always loved him and didn’t think it necessary to give him constant attention. After all, we had already grown accustomed to each other. Was I to

blame?

I was lost in thought, before remembering that I hadn't finished the conversation with my uncle. I picked the phone up. He hadn't hung up yet. Dad's laughter came down the line, accompanied by some static. Right when I was going to hang up, my uncle started talking.

'Was it fun in Malé?'

'Of course! "Malé" sounds exactly like his name, Ma Lei, so it felt especially familiar when I got on the island!'

'Did Ma Lei show you around?'

'He was ever so nice to me and took me to many interesting places. But I couldn't even work out how to use the handle on the window. Foreign stuff can be quite mind-boggling! I couldn't close the window, so the wind kept banging the door. Ma Lei was asleep. What could I do?'

'Ha ha! So what did you do?'

'I didn't want to wake him up, so I just leaned against the door and fell asleep!'

'You're such a chicken,' uncle teased, 'why don't you two live together? Ma Lei has been a little odd like you ever since he was a child.'

'Ma Lei is a great kid. I never had to worry about him. It was his brother that had me stressed out all the time. You know, even though I was in a foreign country, holding onto Ma Lei's shirttail, walking behind him, carefree, that felt fantastic!'

I put down the phone slowly and finally hung up.

I let out a long breath, walked to the kitchen, opened the fridge, took out a can of Coke, and pulled the tab. My finger slipped off, and I tried again. It slipped off again. I put the tip of my finger into the loop, pulled it with some force. The coke foamed over as Dad's words echoed in my head.

I was suddenly in tears.

I understood exactly what Dad felt. I remembered. I was five.

Dad carried me away from the orphanage and put me in the truck. I was crying and I was carsick. Dad gently wiped the vomit and tears from my face and kept saying: 'Daddy's here. Daddy's here.' I couldn't speak Mandarin and kept talking in a dialect that he didn't understand. Dad



pointed at various things and taught me: 'Bakery. Bicycle.' Then he pointed at himself. 'Dad.' I sometimes cried in public places for no discernible reason. People would turn to look at me. Dad always comforted me as best as he could: 'Don't cry ... Daddy's gonna buy you something sweet.' I was in a new world and I didn't know what to do. But I had Dad, who loved me patiently.

Wherever we went, I'd follow him, holding onto his shirttail, without a care in my mind. Because he was the only one I trusted.

I remembered how it felt.

'... Dad!'

He hadn't even said a word and I was about to cry. I suppressed my sobs and heard him say: 'Hey, Ma Lei.'

There were times when life was disappointing, then there were times when your body would be filled up with warmth, when you thought of home.

'Hello? Ma Lei? Are you crying?'

I had always taken it for granted that I would be protected and cared for. I realised that I'd been hurting my family without a second thought, not knowing that one day, grown-ups would become child-like. And that I had become the one to be trusted.

'Come live with me in Malé.'

'What?'

Every family has its problems. But luckily I realised early enough to still repay the love I received.

'I said, Dad, come to Malé. Come live with me.'

Now it was my turn to start crying out loud. It was as if I'd just discovered where I belonged.

After the tsunami in Indonesia in 2010, houses on the island of Malé were built stronger. The foundations of the houses were reinforced to withstand natural disasters.

Buildings are like people. The people of Malé understood that you needed to lay a good foundation first, so my house was renovated before Dad moved in. In the same way, the foundation of the relationship between Dad and me had been laid down too.

We keep two cats: Mary and Chubby. They each have their own comfy pet houses.

Every morning the sun shines through the window. Dad makes his rice porridge, and I fetch my toast from the toaster after the *ding*.

Maybe one day Dad and I will move back to China and live a life that we used to know. I might get married and start a family, and we'll all live together.

In the distant future, Malé will disappear.

As for my future...

I can see it taking shape, bit by bit.