

Three incidents

Three recent incidents in my life have led to some interesting insights.

The first incident took place on a Thursday afternoon. On my way back from town, I bought myself a box of fried rice at one of my favourite eateries. A quarter of an hour later I was sitting in my new living room, watching “Very Bad Things” – with my mixture of fried rice, vegetables, shrimp and an egg cooked in tea, ready to be devoured. It should be mentioned that this is one of my favourite Taiwanese dishes. Since I was quite hungry from riding around all morning, the first few bites went down extremely well. Chewing with abandonment, I wanted to put the box down on the plastic tray in front of me for just a moment. Because my eyes were focused on Cameron Diaz – and I’m not even a fan! – I failed to notice the precarious position of the tray on the edge of the coffee table.

The next moment it happened. The tray knocked over, and suddenly I was sitting there with hot, freshly fried rice on my flip-flops, between my toes and of course, on the floor. Shocked and instantly despondent my eyelids closed in denial of what had just transpired more than for the usual contemplation.

For a moment, I found myself imagining that it was just a horrible, twisted nightmare; that it didn’t actually happen; that I was going to open my eyes and continue enjoying my rice with vegetables and shrimps like only a hungry man can. But I had to face the harsh reality that my life is not a fictional story. I had to force myself to get up, shake the shrimps off my flip-flops, and continue with my life.

After a few minutes, I had recovered sufficiently from the shock to realize I could compensate myself with a box of Garlic Chicken Gratin and half dozen dumplings from the Seven Eleven. On the way to the store, I tried to piece together the puzzle of erroneous actions that had led to the unfortunate Fried Rice Episode. The coffee table on which the tray rested was overloaded with junk, so there wasn’t enough room for the

tray; the table was too far from my seat; I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing; the electric fan was quietly blasting away at everything that could possibly be knocked over.

Twenty minutes later I was back in my living room with two packs of convenience store food (a pitiful substitute for fresh fried rice) and a valuable new insight to make the whole affair less unpleasant. I figured that some factors lead to a situation where things can go wrong in your life (in this case mainly the cluttered coffee table); on the other hand, certain factors lead to a situation where things can go right (a clean coffee table would have been an excellent example).

For the record, I can also say that I was deeply impressed – perhaps for academic reasons – by my sincere horror and disgust at the sight of fried rice on my floor, instead of on the way to my empty stomach.

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The second incident occurred a few days later, with the Fried Rice Episode classified and packed away as a survivable event.

As I was exploring my new apartment, I discovered a storage space in the ceiling above the hallway between the living room and the bathroom. This space, I found after further investigation, could be reached from a small, partially hidden door in the spare room. I pulled up a plastic stool, opened the little door and scanned the dark, stuffy area. Old clothes, a hat with a feather, a useable looking briefcase, and various other signs of past human occupation of the apartment filled the space. Just as I was ready to step down from the stool – slightly disappointed at the discovery, except of course for the briefcase – I saw a light dimly flashing on-off, on-off against the opposite wall. I thought it might be a gem reflecting light, so I reached into the darkness. The item was still beyond my reach. I pulled myself halfway into the space, and leaned on a pile of black bags to edge closer. This time I could barely touch the object with the tip of my finger. That I may have

stumbled upon something of value was evident, and I decided to pull my entire body in, with only my feet still dangling outside. Reclining on probably a decade's worth of carefully collected junk, I grabbed at the item.

Fate, however, was on my case. As I tried to pull the object closer – which at that moment had developed an almost demonic red glow – the ceiling cracked under my weight. I remember that I uttered a fairly common swear word. I remember a bright flash of light. Then gravity kicked in, pulling me, several black bags, the briefcase and a portrait of two Chinese lovers down to what I had assumed will be the floor.

I was still screaming, with a black bag under one arm and the two Chinese lovers under the other, when I came to rest on a patch of soft, green grass. A waterfall, not far in the distance, pounded out a quiet rhythm on the rocks. I was obviously stunned. For a few moments I just gazed straight ahead, trying to blink all the dust from my eyes. Then I got up, put the bag and the two lovers against a tree, and started walking downhill in the direction of the waterfall.

No fantasy could have prepared me for the sight of which I became an appreciative observer the next moment. There, under the waterfall, with bodies like mythical Greek goddesses were half a dozen beautiful young women! When they saw me – hiding behind a bush, they waved at me, laughing gaily, without even for a moment pretending to lay a hand on bosom ...

Okay, not really. My sudden descend ended in a tree, in what I identified soon enough as Hai Feng Gong Yuan (Sea Breeze Park), a few blocks from my new apartment. The inside of the tree was shaped like a funnel, which was a most fortuitous coincidence. I sat for a moment in the middle of the tree in a place which, oddly enough, almost looked like a throne. After realigning my thought processes, I jumped to the ground.

I greeted some onlookers, mostly old Chinese Civil War veterans, with great dignity – I had discovered the hat with the plume was leaning over my brow, so I slightly touched the tip

the way men greeted each other a few generations ago. As I walked back to my apartment, the strangest thought entered my mind: Could it be that the branches of the tree were filled, not with leaves, but with tightly rolled bundles of one thousand New Taiwan dollar notes? A quick recall of the Fried Rice Episode reminded me that my life is not a fictional tale.

Nevertheless, the possibility was enough to stop me in my tracks. Rushing back to the tree, I grabbed the nearest branch. And, lo and behold, there it was: freshly printed one thousand New Taiwan dollar notes!

Naturally I stuffed my pockets full of “leaves”, and luckily I also had the briefcase there, which I also stuffed to bursting point. Now a little more wary about the Chinese masters on their bench, I risked a quick glance in their direction. Studiously reciting pieces from the annals of Confucius, they ignored me. More than that, no one in the neighbourhood seemed to be aware of the extraordinary feature of this special tree!

With money bulging from my shirt pockets and a few notes peering from under my hat, I walked home. Halfway I remembered that I didn’t have my keys with me, seeing that I ended up in the tree in the most unorthodox manner. When I arrived at my apartment, though, the door opened by itself, as if it was triggered by my approaching footsteps. Once inside, I immediately took off my shirt. In the process, I accidentally knocked the hat off my head.

The spectacle of money tumbling to the floor and floating around like butterflies in some tropical paradise almost brought tears to my eyes. I had a few quick shots of green tea, and then I started gathering the banknotes. Half an hour later I wrote the number “87,000” on an unopened telephone bill. “I must go back,” I said out loud, and started looking for my shirt and hat.

By the time the sun was touching the horizon, I was already halfway between one and two million NT dollars. My day was definitely reaching unprecedented levels of prosperity!

Shortly after my last run to the tree, I had an unpleasant sensation. I suddenly realized I do not know my own name. I wanted to make the unique nature of the day official by addressing myself, but I could go no further than, “Well, uhm ... Whatsyourname ...” Standing in my living room trying out a bunch of names, hunger pangs stimulated another disturbing thought. I had no clue what kind of pizza I liked! A vague awareness that I had previously also suffered from such ignorance was not in the least conducive to a sense of inner peace. The situation became worse when I suddenly realized I had no idea where I come from – America ... Egypt ... Sweden?! I stared at the pictures on the wall in the hope that this will bring forth some emotion or sentimental memory, and perhaps inspire an idea of my identity and where I belong.

Then it hit me like a ton of rotten cabbage: I have an almost inexhaustible supply of financial resources! I could have a little fun! What does it matter that I was unsure about a few minor administrative matters?!

People will sometimes refer in their stories to “some of the best times of my life”. Over the next few days, I experienced what they mean. I picked a name for myself and fabricated a story about a youth in places like New York and Paris. I bought new clothes. The few hairs I have left on my head, I fluffed up in a grand, impressive style. I even tried crooning love ballads in a karaoke bar with friendly and skimpily dressed young ladies. Pizza was of course enjoyed in abundance, even though I had to try out quite a few before I realized I was a Super Deluxe guy.

After a few days of uninterrupted revelry and indulgent extravagance, I began to calm down. I was, however, still very much pleased with the improved quality of my new existence.

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It was during this time that the third incident occurred.

I was busy staring at my television with the sound turned off so as not to disturb my sense of contentment. I had to have been sitting there for quite some time, because the wailing of the broken doorbell made me jump mildly petrified from my sofa chair. I pulled a white vest over my bare torso and opened the door.

I recognized the man on my doormat as a creature from another planet even before he opened the orifice in the lower part of his face. Over his shoulders was draped a green gown with beautiful gold patterns, and his feet looked like ice skates from the nineteen twenties. He had a few untidy tufts of hair on what could be described as his upper lip, and a similar amount of hair on his head. He stretched out his paw – it didn't exactly look like a human hand, and I shook it. Then he made a gesture as if he was politely asking permission to enter my home; with a similar motion, I beckoned him to enter.

After we had enjoyed some fresh green tea (obviously of a much higher quality than the kind I always bought at the Seven Eleven), I asked him the reason for his visit to our planet. In perfect English, he answered that he was on a mission. His assignment was to investigate human life on planet Earth: how we live, how we work, how we get on with each other, how we manage to stay so ordered, and how we manage to live our lives in apparent contentment considering the facts of the universe.

I replied that he should not be deceived by the appearance of things. Many people, I assured him, preferred life less orderly. Many people also do not spend their lives in contentment, but rather in troubled confusion. These bits of information upset my guest. I lit a cigarette, offered it to him and refilled his glass.

He finished off the cigarette with astonishing rapidity, stared at the assorted ornaments on my coffee table, and after glancing over the pictures on my walls, started talking again. He said that he did a course on his planet on Survival in Modern Earth Civilizations; that he had even brought along a

manual. He had also attended lectures on more abstract topics like “Identity”, “Commitment”, and a “Sense of Belonging”.

He then told me that the leaders of his planet – learned beings, he assured me – had informed him that he will meet a man soon after arriving who could give him some instructions on how to “fit in”. His craft had apparently dropped him off in a park not too far from here, and a few elderly gentlemen pointed in the direction of my apartment. Could I confirm the accuracy of the things he had learned in his lectures, he asked me with deep sincerity in his eyes, and could I give him a few useful tips.

I thought about my experiences of the previous few days, about the fact that I still did not know what my real name was and that I was still unsure about where I come from and where I belong. What I did know, was that life was a lot more enjoyable if you had access to some decent financial resources! Not only could I satisfy all my physical needs on a daily basis, but when I had a stomach ache a few days earlier, I went to the best hospital in the city. (It is true that my strange appearance initially made people a little uncomfortable – at that point I had not shaven for a few days, but after I had shown them my briefcase with some freshly plucked money, they became much friendlier. To tell the truth, the nurses became embroiled in what could easily be described as a fist fight with the doctors, for the privilege to take care of me.) I glanced at the strange creature in my living room, now seemingly deep in thought, and noticed the way the unusual curves of his rotund figure were emphasized by his tight-fitting bright orange outfit – his gown had been hanging behind the door by this time. The tufts of hair on his upper lip, along the sides of his face and on his underdeveloped chin, reminded me of my own appearance a few days earlier. In fact, his whole appearance contributed to my feelings of compassion towards him.

Then I looked him straight in his melancholic eyes, took a deep breath and said, “Mister Alien, I must disappoint you. I do not know much about the abstract concept of identity, or about one’s place in the world. What I do know is that if you

walk straight back to that park, you'll come across a tree that looks like a funnel. You might expect the more common earthly type of leaf on the branches, but this tree is unique. It grows money! Now, fill a few bags with this money – make sure you take enough! Then go to the nearest hotel and get yourself a room. Look in your manual on where to buy food and other items.

“Choose a name from a magazine,” I continued, “and make it your own. Make up a story about where you come from – you can say you're from outer space, but people don't take that seriously anymore. Say you're from the Balkans,” I suggested, “or Northern Ireland or Arizona or some other place.

“The money, so I've recently discovered Mister Alien, will ensure the success of your mission, no matter who you are, where you come from, or what you tell others who you are or where you come from.”

I moved to the edge of my seat, and as if the alien creature understood the seriousness of what I wanted to say next, he did the same. “Remember!” I yelled. The creature's eyes doubled in size. “Make sure you always have sufficient funds!” To emphasize the importance of my advice, I started hammering an invisible plank with an imaginary tool in my clenched fist. “It's the golden rule that you should never disregard, ignore or underestimate! Make sure your bags are always filled!”

The creature starting fidgeting on his chair, so I reached for the bottle of tea. We drank a few more glasses in silence, then I walked into the kitchen to fetch a few garbage bags. When I came back, he was already up and pacing the living room. He took the bags and shook my hand. I opened the door, and he disappeared down the stairs. A few minutes after I slumped back into my chair, I fell into a deep sleep.

That, then, was the third incident that influenced my current thoughts on certain issues.

It should probably also be noted that I muttered what I knew to be my real name the moment I woke up. Nothing could have prepared me, however, for the next shock. I strolled down to Sea Breeze Park, whistling all the way, with my empty briefcase swinging in the air, and the hat with the feather on my head. Real, organic, dirty green leaves on the branches of the magic funnel tree made me weak in the knees. One could almost say it was more upsetting than the spectacle of fresh fried rice on my living room floor.

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NOTE:

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