

WHO AWAITS YOU, ON THAT SPARKLING SILVER PLANE

誰在銀閃閃的地方，等你

This book is a complete guide for the living, an encyclopedia for the old, a regimen for the ill, a blessing for the departed.

The five sections included within cover life, old age, illness, and death, musing on everything from the flesh, to the mind, economics, disease, healthcare and family to funerals and how to prepare for the inevitable. With a colorful imagination and insightful observations, Jane Jian invites readers into the minds of the elderly to experience the psychological transformations of those who are coming to terms with their own withering away.

'Life and death are both precious and rare, each coming but once, and so as we mourn for a life gone, we must also solemnly face the inevitability of death, a tribute to a life finally concluded.'

Jane Jian 簡嫜

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WHO AWAITS YOU, ON THAT SPARKLING SILVER PLANE

By Jane Jian. Translated by Stephen Liu.

I. The Non-player Adorned in Spectacular Garb

How do I describe the revelations visited on me that morning? Do I start with the people involved or with an account of where I was going? Should I write on the season or describe the mud spurting out from tiles awash with rainwater?

I don't want to lock such an ordinary morning in place by describing it in flashy words. It was the morning commute, none of which is worth mentioning here; the roaring stream of traffic; the curb under the bus stop home to a row of faces stiffened by restless nights and chronic sleep deprivation; the dog shit, either fresh or leftover from the night before, a window into the state of each individual dog's stomach. I don't want to expand on the red banners advertising grand anniversary deals, nor the recklessly parked scooters—even if I did imagine them to be a row of live prawns that I might shovel into my mouth and chew to pieces.

The autumn light. That was the only part worth recollecting. The sun finally escaping the heat of its midsummer incarnation, an autumn morning like a young lover home after a night by the lakeside, bringing with it a refreshing, cool embrace. Yesterday's raindrops still lingered on the tops of the trees, transformed into spots of dew from which the fragrant smell of osmanthus flowers floated out on the wind. As I headed out the door I spotted in the distance a Chinese rain tree greeting me with unprompted praise in a language punctuated by golden leaves. Autumn, this most joyous of seasons, is the one that brought me into this world and, fate willing, will be the season to hold me in its caress when the time comes for me to die.

Wrapped up as I was in my joyful admiration of that beautiful, crystalline light, the feeling lasted only until I stepped out onto the street. The cacophony of the city hits you like the pounce of a snarling pack of wolves, rending with sharp teeth the season's young sheep. This is precisely why those poorly parked scooters left me so furious, why my imagination, in an attempt to untie a knot of emotions, had no qualms in stuffing them like live shrimp down my make-believe throat. I had stumbled into the predatory jungle of urban traffic where survival of the fittest rules supreme, where everything is suddenly so onerous and repulsive. I managed to come to my senses in spite of it and subdue those impulses, and with just a few steps back, I had summoned once again that freshness that is an autumn morning. I would, after all, like to remain a person worthy of salvation. As I was caught up in the act of encouraging myself, my feet landed in front of the crosswalk.

As the red numbers on the signal were busying themselves with their count down, I had a moment's downtime to squander on people-watching. I speculated, based on what they were wearing, about where they were headed or how pissed-off they might be. Lately, my new diversion has been counting how many old people show up in the

time it takes the light to change.

This bad habit of mine is likely a result of those advocates of our modern-day health neurosis, the ones who call for using the little strips of downtime throughout the day to do micro-exercises while spending large chunks of time destroying it. Examples include clapping so furiously while watching television that neighbours mistake it for domestic abuse; or leg stretches while waiting for something to print; or doing the same on the metro until someone gives up their seat to you out of fear that your workout could derail the train; or exercising your eyeballs in a hospital waiting room (just be sure that you're aware enough of your surroundings to avoid making eye contact with any rough types). I never paid much attention to these health shortcuts at first on the assumption that they would be ruinous to my underlying physique, which was so boldly grand that it could chew up rivers and mountains and spit them back out again. But when it comes down to it, perhaps it was my insecurity, or my fear of dying, that ultimately left me in the position where I would decry these practices on the one hand while quietly taking them up on the other.

When I started my counting game, it was just a way to exercise my eyes while waiting at a red light. It was initially intended to stave off blindness, that occupational hazard inherent to being a writer, but eventually it grew into keeping track of how many heads I saw. When I discovered there were more grey hairs than black, more old than young, it became a game of counting elderly people. I realised early on that it's the elderly who have the most time to idly wander the city, their presence transforming everyday streets into historic districts. Rather than disrespectfully referring to them as 'old people' all the time, I have taken to calling them 'non-players,' those who have retired from the games of work and love, left the playgrounds and marketplaces behind, and who receive envelopes bearing cash gifts as a sign of respect from the little ones every time the Chongyang Festival rolls around.

Now, waiting at the light, I commenced yet another round of 'count the non-players.' And precisely because I was occupied in that game, I became probably the only one to take notice of the silhouette of a person bowing out from the alley across the street. If she had been some fashionable, pretty girl I wouldn't have paid her any attention, nor would I have taken more than a glance if she were a petulant child making a ruckus, and I would have simply ignored her if she were a stocky housewife out buying vegetables. Instead, my eyes fixed themselves on this woman, not just because she was the eighth non-player to show up in just 20 seconds, but because she was older than any of the seven who preceded her and the ninth who followed shortly after. She was today's winner.

I crossed the street and stopped. There she was, separated from me by just ten meters—no, more like by a century of splendid distance—no again, it was by an entire life gone and returned in a new incarnation—there I saw her. She moved so slowly that I had no need to worry about her noticing a stranger spying on her from a distance (for this is, naturally, a very rude thing to do). Little by little, she shuffled past the post office. Next door sat a bakery, followed by a pharmacy, a supermarket, a Watson's, a bank, and lastly, me. I had no clue as to where she was headed. Was she crossing the street? Going to the bus stop in front of the supermarket? Or making her way to one of the several establishments laid out before her? At this point, a little voice reminded me that the counting game had to come to an end for now, as there were several wearisome items on my agenda this morning and I had little time to stand about in idleness. At any rate, at my age there is little sense in making acquaintances outside of those already listed on my household registration—those few names alone are enough to make anyone exhausted—and I no longer have the energy to get excited over chance encounters and new friendships. No, people my age are too far

removed from that heroic bygone Bronze Age, our hearts so rusted that even scrap metal collectors would rather just toss them out.

But something changed. As I was sitting at the bank waiting for my number to be called, I somehow lost interest in what would have been the bank edition of the eye exercise game—counting the number of CCTV cameras and, in the process, giving the security guard the amusement of a suspicious-looking character. Instead, I stared absently past the list of foreign exchange rates and started picturing some of those non-players I'd been counting. They had left unique impressions in my mind and now started to entangle themselves uncannily with the shapes representing dollars, euros, and yen; while the numbers beside them turned into indicators of the appreciation or depreciation of their respective misery index values. Mrs Dollar, for example, today saw an increase of 0.03 percentage points in her bad posture, while Grandpa Euro's tremors had depreciated by 0.01 points and Miss Yen's recent deflation means she no longer needs to be pushed around in that wheel chair... Meanwhile, I looked up to see there were still thirteen people ahead of me. Customers clutched phones in hand and mind out of body, but I kept staring at those exchange rates, wondering what each of them was doing at this very moment. Eating congee, using the restroom, seeing their physical therapist, going for a walk, minding their health, or perhaps they were even laid out to rest, in transit to their next destination?

...

I finished up my business at the bank and prepared to move on the next item on my list. I don't know what it was that led me to make that adventurous right turn when I should have been turning left, but there, I saw the eighth non-player of the day. She was standing in front of the supermarket and facing the road, seemingly neither about to cross nor about to catch a bus. She wasn't waiting for anyone and she certainly wasn't admiring distant lush forests on snow-capped mountains. Perhaps she was trying to flag down a taxi?

If I had a young lad or servant by my side who was responsible for carrying my bags, you can rest assured that I would have certainly instructed him to investigate and lend a helping hand. Alas, the only servant I have is myself and so it was I who ultimately walked over to her. There, I hesitated. Before I could open my mouth, my mind shouted out in silent amazement. Had this non-player lady just walked out of 1920s Shanghai? From a banquet at a dance hall perhaps, draped in opulent silks and tipsy after a few cocktails having spent the afternoon encircled by laughter and lively conversation. Several cups in and now redder in the face from wine than from rouge, she attended to her playfully disobedient hair, and tumbling into the couch, proclaimed: 'I just need to lie down for a moment.' She grabbed a porcelain pillow, like a cool breath of air pushed against her heated face, and fell asleep. What she couldn't have known was that this was the enchanted pillow from the ancient story; when she would finally awaken in an old and unfamiliar apartment, seventy years would have already passed like violent waves and she had slept through it all. Her youth stolen, her beauty once like flowers in the moonlight, now reduced to weeds tossed about in the wind.

With her embroidered dress, vermilion shoes and that glamorous cheongsam wrapped around her wizened

frame, she was the living, breathing vision of an edifice painstakingly painted and adorned but abandoned and forgotten within. On her head was placed a woven hat to block the sun, over her eyes perched a pair of sunglasses, around her neck lay a necklace of jade beads, her one hand grasping an embroidered purse, her other a walking cane. She was a sight to behold, outfitted from head to toe in splendid garb, out of place here on this street, out of place in the body of this 90-something elderly woman.

‘Are you waiting for a taxi?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Where are you headed?’

‘To the hospital,’ she answered.

‘Do you have enough money for the cab?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she responded clearly.

...

Why was she dressed like she was going to a banquet? Were those the only clothes she owned? I puzzled.

A woman passing by told me that this non-player lived all alone in the alley just behind us. ‘Do you know her?’ I inquired, but the woman shook her head.

‘Then please inform the neighbourhood association about her,’ I said.

I realised how much I sounded like a parent speaking to a child and grew uneasy. Had I suddenly lost the intellectual capacity to understand what had moved me to speak to her in the first place? Was it pity? No, not quite. Maybe what I pitied was an entire generation that had grown old but was insufficiently prepared. Their every last asset, from their bank balances to what remained of their physical strength, was the result of years of saving as tradition dictates and yet was still not enough to meet the needs of this crazed, drunken era we find ourselves in. And the younger generation, meant to take up their burden, is either not ready or entirely incapable of building the kind society where their elders can grow old in peace. It’s like a line of tour buses filing into a resort as the sun slowly fades, children shouting ‘They’re here! They’re here!’ as dogs bark and cats retreat to their hiding spots; a group of exhausted travelers thinking of nothing but a warm dinner, a dip in the hot springs, a massage and a soft bed, eagerly sticking out their heads from the bus windows to wave at the locals. And we, the ones meant to be their hosts, just stand there dumbfounded, some averting our eyes and others starting to tremble, because we haven’t even begun to clear the pig pens where the inn was meant to be built. We all have elderly relatives. But how many people can honestly claim to be even remotely devoted to them? There must be a surge in the orders for ‘negligent offspring’ badges lately; the deliveryman would do well to stuff one in every mailbox he sees. Ours is a generation teetering on the edge of nothingness. Looking up, we see our elders in need of support, and looking down, our offspring waiting to bleed us dry—if they continue to put off graduation and can’t hold down jobs, that is.

I found myself pondering things to which I had never given serious thought before, as lonely, suddenly, as a solitary bird watching the sunset from a sandy shoal. I have slunk towards my half century—though have not yet

entered the gates of dotage—and can see my contemporaries in their fifties and sixties clutching to the last feather on the tail-end of youth, employing any and every means possible to turn back time, using the silver lining of the gathering clouds to deceive themselves and those around them. But as for me, I'm too lazy to keep up with trends. I have been little vexed at the gradual increase in grey hairs, those first summons from Mother Nature that I am to serve my due time in the silver-haired brigade. After all, even silver-lined clouds disappear when the day fades.

Where will I end up in my old age? Will my spine grow so crooked that I'll be turned away from the sunset and the night sky? Will I be pushed around in a wheelchair like a mule at the millstone, afflicted with the burden of what to do with that accursed otherwise good health forced upon me as I watch everyone I ever loved leave me behind, one at a time, a sole exhibit of sustained longevity? Shall I follow the example of the Ancient Tomb Sect warriors, gorging and imbibing until I'm the proud owner of two clogged arteries—my backup plan in case I decide to no longer follow the search for what health advocates call growing without aging, aging without dying, dying without stiffening, stiffening without decaying, decaying without crumbling, crumbling without disappearing? (Disclaimer: The above is but a personal fiction, absolutely not to be taken with any modicum of seriousness.) Or will I show up on a curb somewhere, dressed in my best gown, decked out in jewellery, moving with the speed of a common garden snail?

But why was she dressed like she was going to a banquet?

And suddenly, it made sense. Her elaborate dress was the way a lonely non-player copes with a world brimming with the unexpected; she was dressed to be ready at any time for her own funeral. No matter where she falls, no matter who finds her, she was making sure she would be going to her last supper in style.

I realised then what it all meant: I'm officially old.

2. Bury me Under a Tree Blown Askew by Wild Winds

Bury me under a tree blown askew by wild winds, or beneath flowers in desperate need of nourishment. Let my ashes be their prosaic fertilizer.

Should I die under crashing waves or upon rugged peaks, send no search team of strapping young men. I simply cannot accept anyone risking their lives or facing the cold just to fish out and lug back my wasted canoe of a body for they are all somebody's child, somebody's husband, somebody's father! Rest assured that my spirit is equipped with the best GPS function and my superior sense of direction means that whether or not you erect a guide post for me, there will be no need for a Taoist priest or conclave of monks. I'll find my own way back.

If I should close my eyes on a sickness bed (once what usable organs I have are rushed to where they ought to be), dress me in something old. Don't bother buying a new pair of canvas shoes for me, for I do not believe that a lifelong meat-eater dressed in canvas is any more merciful than a vegetarian dressed in leather. If the courts of the underworld wish to arraign me for my dietary transgressions, surely they have on file a digestion activity report just as the tax bureau keeps a record of my assets. One pair of canvas shoes will do naught to commute the sentence of a convicted carnivore, if eating meat is even a sin at all. I have no objections if you choose to burn everything anyway through cremation. Actually, going barefoot is a fine idea now that I think of it. What a grand way it would be to bring back that barefooted childhood, starting from the base of my ice-cold feet, so that my last breath comes just as

my soul is fixed in the season of flying rain drops on the Lanyang Plains, back in that time of braided innocence, jumping, skipping and enjoying the happiness of life, party of one.

Certainly there will be no need for loud mourning or for singing songs of sorrow. Do not trouble a priest on my behalf and do not read from the sutras. All I need is my family by my side, along with those few old friends who might as well be family. Speak to me, sing for me, recite a poem, lower your head in prayer, or just sit back and cry. Then let the professionals take this old canoe where it belongs and shut the door between the worlds of light and darkness for good.

No ceremonies, please. I want no Buddhist rituals, no seventh-day rites, no memorial services or farewells. Build no alters or memorial tablets. Burn no ingots, place no photos, prepare no obituaries, for if we do not say our goodbyes in life there is no need for remembrance in death. Just quickly cremate me and bury me under a tree or toss me into the ocean. If you put me beneath a tree, say a few goodbyes or bow in four directions to thank the lush vegetation and open skies on my behalf for taking me in, for giving unto me the gift of the magnificent seasons. There's no need for publicity. Keep it quiet, like a light breeze or drifting clouds, just my family beside me as I am interned into the earth. Should you absolutely insist on lighting incense in worship, use a tree branch or even a wild flower. Do not present me with any offerings of fruit as I'm not hungry and I don't want to deal with the hassle of peeling them (I've done that quite enough times during my lifetime as a housewife). Just give up eating meat for a day or for a month and that will be as good as a grand feast to my soul.

You are perfectly welcome to lay me to rest beneath a little coffee tree. Its ancestors nursed me through life, exciting my mind and giving me energy at least twice a day, every day and so I owe it thanks.

Or toss my ashes into the sea beneath a drunken autumn sun, with light and shadows sparkling like broken silver, like gilt. And as my dust touches the ocean waves let it bring happiness to the hearts of my family, that you may feel my joy, that you may hear the call of freedom ringing from the mouths of the gulls.

A leaf fallen does not shake the forest and perhaps I, too, was never all that close to my friends. Thinking back on it, I have never been too keen on the complexities of the world. So let this, my last affair, be simple, serene and agreeable.

Don't bother sweeping my tomb. When you miss me, take out a small photo and make a cup of hot tea or coffee, set out a bundle of colourful flowers and maybe, just maybe, I'll come back to sit for a while, take a walk around and lacquer my subdued brand of joy upon the gates of your home.

3. Completeness

It is said that if the heavens had emotions, the gods too would grow old. But if the earth felt nothing, surely it would waste away. We are rooted in this emotive soil, looking at the everlasting, heartless sky as we experience countless unions and separations, pass through love and hate and joy and sorrow, living our lives for however long or short they may last. The true meaning of life is not what we take away from it but what we leave behind, not how it starts but how it ends. Even a child who dies too young strives to leave her voice imprinted in her mother's mind. And

those of us bestowed with long lives? If we have nothing to show for ourselves after a delirious lifetime, what's the point of having lived? Only by pushing ourselves and championing our own lives—those bestowed with the gift of life continuing it through their children and grandchildren, and those fated for an early departure leaving at the height of their glory—can we give ourselves purpose by authoring our own definitions of what it means to live and to die. Our lives are continuations of the stories left by those already dead and in days yet to come, our deaths will likewise impart life into others. Life and death both are preciously rare, each coming but once, and so as we mourn for a life gone, we must also solemnly face the inevitability of death, a tribute to a life finally concluded.

When others speak of a wholesome and fulfilling life, it should mean one that even in times of sorrow offers up power: the power of love, of knowledge, of morality, of a spring silkworm using up the last of its silk, of a burnt-out candle becoming dust. This power animates those who are living and encourages those who are yet to, an eternal source of energy that death only makes more valuable. Even the old farmer, illiterate and abused as he is from years of toil and labor, is no stranger to the happiness of a life marked by the success of raising children into adulthood to carry on his tradition of perseverance. Indeed, the word 'wholesome' here is not just being thrown around.

Those forced to leave before their time may find aspirations unfinished, dreams unattained, problems unsolved, a life suddenly cut short with chapters still unwritten. Those chapters are bequeathed unto the living, who continue to write and to patch up, to achieve and actualize, to overcome and fix the final period after the last word. The living are thereby tasked with not just their own lives but with resolving threads left unfinished so that those who are past may rest in peace. Who says that nothing comes of death? It teaches us the perpetuity of love and determination, it brings us to the highest peak and from there shows us the scene below, naming it the Land of No Regrets.

If we live with dedication and champion ourselves, there is no harm in letting fate determine how many summers and winters we are fit to see, in letting the drifting clouds decide how much we are fit to achieve. Purpose is found in passing on the amalgamation of every drop we sweat, every flavour we taste, every principle we learn. Life is meant to foster life, each one linked to the next to grow an unbroken eternity of interconnected lives.

And so when we face the inevitable, what is there left to fear? Death is but one stage in a person's life, the part that makes it complete. The broken canoe will be returned to the earth that made it, its burdens cast off into the world, love given unto family, kindness released into the wild, leaving only that expanse of liberty for the departed soul to enjoy alone.

When the time comes, let laughter float up from the heart. It no longer matters who awaits me in that sparkling silver plane, for freedom and joy without end ripple this way, leaving only one thought.

Carry me away, wind; I am a falling leaf, I am nothingness.