

GO PARENTS

Xu Xi

Only in Wellington were there no sheep near the airport, Henk Go noted as he and his wife Pauline journeyed into Auckland. Sheep dotted the landscape on the road north towards the city, although when it came to sheep, Dunedin was overrun.

This was their last week of a three-week trip to the cities of New Zealand, travelling from south to north.

"But what about Christchurch?" Pauline had asked, seven months earlier, when Henk planned the trip from their home in Hong Kong.

"It's too English," he said and confirmed the booking, without Christchurch, that very afternoon. If pressed, Henk would not admit to strong feelings one way or another about Christchurch, although he had never been fond of the former colonial government of their adopted home city. It was just that the travel brochure named Otago "the paradise of the south", which made Dunedin the logical destination. One paradise a trip was quite enough.

Pauline felt a twinge of annoyance. She had *heard* of Christchurch, but not Dunedin. This was *exactly* like years ago when he left out Oxford — where she wanted to visit her English teacher who had retired after years of teaching in Asia — and made her ride that uncomfortable train to Edinburgh instead! She should perhaps take more initiative in planning trips, as

Julia, their younger daughter often urged. She wasn't like her daughters though, both of whom had Important Jobs with secretaries and assistants; Pauline was a month away from seventy eight.

Minutes later, she remembered that she hadn't told the maid what to cook for dinner. Christchurch vanished, a forgotten notion in the scheme of her days.

"This is a very nice hotel room," Pauline remarked as she looked out at the harbour. Picking up a tent card, she read aloud. "The City of Sails. I wonder why they call it that."

Henk began unpacking. Once, he might have snapped at Pauline, wondering *how* she could be so ignorant. Hadn't she heard, didn't she know, the races, boats, world famous. *World famous*. Nowadays, he preferred to conserve energy. At seventy seven, he was too old to educate her any longer if she wouldn't retain anything.

Pauline asked. "What's the itinerary for today?"

"In the folder."

What folder, she wondered. Why did he always have to be so short tempered? While rummaging in the carry-on, Pauline recalled Johnson, their youngest child and only son saying, as he and his wife drove them to the Minneapolis airport two years ago, *Mum, will you please stop asking what time the flight is?* His tone, like Henk's.

She unfolded the four-page itinerary. Henk had crossed off each item as their trip progressed, followed by comments like "so-so", "interesting", and "guide impossible to understand". The last was next to Lanarch Castle. Where was that? Wellington? Pauline wracked her brain but simply couldn't remember. Her memory was dreadful these days, although she wished her family were more understanding since what, after all, could she do about age? At least Julia was patient, only *why* did she have to live so far away, in London of all places, to which Henk refused to go?

Putting away the itinerary — it made her brain reel — she said. "Can we not eat lamb tonight?"

"Eat what you like."

"Yes but what I meant was don't choose a place that specializes in lamb."

"You don't have to order lamb," he said, wishing she would simply come to the point. Unlike him, his wife had never cared for the taste of mutton or lamb, or even goat.

"But there's not much choice if we don't go to a restaurant that offers more variety."

"What do you expect here? You're the one who wanted to come to New Zealand."

Pauline felt her frustration mount. *He* was the overweight one, with high cholesterol and blood pressure, not her. "But. . ."

Henk, however, had gone into the bathroom and closed the door.

Eight months earlier, Henk had declared at breakfast. "I want to go to South America before I die." He laid down the *South China Morning Post*. On page four was an advertisement for an Argentinian tango performance.

"Ie-Yan, *kelar*," Pauline shouted at their maid, who popped out of the kitchen to clear the table. Ie-Yan spoke only Javanese, Henk and Pauline's native Indonesian dialect, and came from Tjilatjap, Pauline's home village in Central Java. This arrangement riled Jeannie, their eldest, the only child who still lived in Hong Kong, although outside the city on Lantau Island in a village by the beach. Jeannie insisted it was easy to get there, now that the airport was on the island and connected to mass transit, although her mother remained unconvinced. *Mum, why don't you hire a Filipino*, she demanded. *That way at least she'd speak English, and many speak Cantonese as well. You shouldn't have to go food marketing with Ie-Yan because she can't converse. A "domestic helper" shouldn't be helpless!* None of the Go children spoke Indonesian, having all been born and raised in Hong Kong.

Over the clatter of dishes, Henk continued. "We should go during January, after everyone's done with Christmas vacations. There are plenty of deals then. What do you think?" It upset Henk that he must ask, because the money wasn't his,

although Pauline usually claimed it was for both of them to use. He had to admit she was good, though, agreeing to spend the inheritance from her eldest brother on travel. For the last three years, life held the promise of excitement once more.

"Don't talk about dying."

"Why not? It's the only thing we can't know."

Pauline didn't know what to say to his cryptic comments. They upset her. Back when they were courting, Henk *never* said things like that, wanting only to please her, taking her to the cinema, bringing flowers he could then ill afford, promising she would "never have to lift a finger at home or go to work again" if she married him. It had been *years*, decades since he'd taken her to the cinema.

She ventured. "Isn't South America unstable?"

He snorted. "Argentina's fine." This was over a year before the peso was flung out to free float in the ocean of global exchange.

Argentina! All Pauline could conjure up were *gauchoes* and alfalfa — from her children's primary school geography textbooks — neither of which held much appeal. Plus a *horribly* long flight. Henk, she suspected, was attracted by beef, so bad for his heart. There already was an Argentinian steak house in Hong Kong so why did they have to fly halfway round the world to eat? Stubborn was what he was.

In desperation, she said the first thing that came into her head. "What about New Zealand? My niece Marissa's in Auckland." Last night, Julia had been chatty on the phone, although the only thing Pauline remembered of their conversation was, *Did you know, Mum, New Zealand was the first country where women got the vote?*

"That's a ridiculous idea!" Henk exclaimed.

Pauline choked and left the table. This time, her husband's silence lasted two days before he relented.

"Your father's impossible," Pauline complained over the phone to an exasperated Jeannie for the third time during her forty-eight hour exile. "I *begged* him to explain why South America. Just explain is all I ask. But no, he pretends to be

reading, *refusing* to say a word. Your father is so unreasonable. I should have left him years ago!"

Jeannie, who was running to a business meeting, registered only the last, tediously familiar sentence. "A bit late, Mum, don't you think? Besides, what's the fuss? You don't plan any travel and go where he wants anyway."

"You always take your father's side ...!"

"Got to work. Later, *Mater*." It was a minor triumph for Jeannie, who suffered Pauline hanging up on her abruptly, inexplicably, in the middle of numerous conversations. *Utter fruitcakes, both of them*, she later emailed her siblings to apprise them of their parents' latest travel plans. *South America will never be the same*.

On board the ferry from Auckland for Waiheke Island, Henk marvelled at the easy climate and lack of crowds. Refreshing, although the city life wasn't very stimulating. This was a young country though, like the U.S., so a bland and immature culture was inevitable, given the absence of history. Even as the thought formed, he recalled, uncomfortably, the time he echoed this sentiment to Johnson and his American wife. They rolled their eyes at each other, thinking he wouldn't notice, but had not contradicted him.

Their guide was explaining schedule options for the return boat ride.

"We have to be back by three," Pauline said.

"Why?"

"Marissa is picking us up at 3:15." When he didn't respond she added, "I *told* you she was. She's taking time off work to drive us around this afternoon, specially."

Henk turned and gazed at the water. Irritating, having to hurry back, yet clearly, there wasn't any choice.

Pauline hovered. "Henk, please say something. We will go back in time, won't we?"

He did not turn around. "What do you want me to say?"

Pauline's heart sank. This whole trip was a huge mistake. Wasn't it enough that she let him spend her money — and

Henk never chose economy when an expensive option was available — risking their future, all for the sake of pleasure? *He* was the one who insisted on travelling. And now, when they went where she wanted for once, mostly because she had heeded Julia's insistence to take initiative and make some changes, he was deliberately going to spoil everything.

All this energy, wasted, for what? Beautiful scenery, yes, but what use was beauty if things simply never changed? Her daughter meant well but she didn't understand. Pauline gripped the handrail, forcing herself to extract what pleasure she could from the last days of their trip.

During the three weeks before he gave into Pauline's wish to visit New Zealand, Henk read every word of the brochures from his travel agent, plus all the literature he personally acquired from the consulates and airlines of South American nations.

South America. The name lolled in Henk Go's mind.

Jeannie bought him a video of *The Tango Lesson*, saying, *I know, I know, "Dad only watches documentaries." Try, just try this movie. You might even learn something for a change. It's better than all that travel crap you're reading.* The video sat by the television, unwatched, until the night Pauline complained, loudly, over dinner, that the only reason he wanted to go to South America was to upset her. He refrained from saying, *but it's the last continent*, knowing she probably wouldn't remember, or care.

Pauline fell asleep ten minutes into the movie, the way she did, every night, no matter what was on television. Henk continued watching, fascinated by the passion of the dance, surprised it didn't bore him as he expected it would. Two thirds of the way through, he suddenly thought that about the only thing he and his wife had ever agreed on, in over forty years together, was the naming of all their children "J's," a decision arrived at in an intoxicated duet of laughter and whimsy, the night she agreed to marry him.

Back before Henk's bankruptcy in '64, when his business brought in millions, he had taken Pauline around the world. Twice. First class. He had never been prouder of anything in his life. Virtually every major city in North America, Africa, Europe, and Australia that was not closed to them during the late Fifties and early Sixties. Their Indonesian passports precluded Israel and, of course, China. This last restriction was *a gross absurdity*, he complained often over the years. *We're still Chinese, aren't we? Being "overseas" shouldn't be held against us! Our ancestors came from the same motherland after all.* Pauline had never bothered arguing this point; why "waste saliva" complaining about something that didn't really matter, and more important, couldn't be changed?

The first trip charted the path of Taipei, New York, Casablanca, London, Sydney, and the second trip, Singapore, Canberra, San Francisco, Athens, Johannesburg. There were many other cities along those routes. South America was reserved for a third and separate trip that never happened. When Pauline asked, *why separate*, he dismissed her question as illogical. Truthfully, he had been a bit afraid, back then, although he couldn't admit that. More important, there was some knowledge that eluded him, unlike other places about which the more he read, the more he felt he knew.

Of all the continents, South America seemed the most distant adventure, where a pulse, not a place, lay at the end of the journey, and where money offered no passport to discovery. He didn't know how to say this to Pauline or anyone.

Henk kept one postcard from each city in a scrapbook, arranged in the order of their itinerary, labeled with the names of their hotels and the major sights, recording also the air miles between destinations. "The facts of the world" he called them. Every year, Pauline sent Christmas cards to the people they met on those trips, none of whom they ever saw again, since travel had been unaffordable for some thirty years afterwards, the priority being, always, survival and the children. Economy class travel, like Henk's business, resumed slowly as time passed. In 1997, they even visited China. No trip, however, was quite like

those first two, astonishing ones when everything was unknown, money no obstacle, and time still their slave.

The three Go siblings poured through this scrapbook incessantly throughout their childhood, begging to be told — *again, more* — the stories of these trips. Their parents obliged readily. Jeannie (a graphic designer) drew creative variations of the flight paths; Julia (a market analyst) memorized and updated the facts of the world, checking the annual reports of cities in the library, even writing to hotels to make sure they still existed; Johnson (a city budget administrator) re-attached the postcards as the rice glue dried and flaked. For the last five years, Johnson's wife Elaine had taken over sending the annual greetings, because Pauline's arthritis made writing cards too painful. Elaine recorded the addresses exactly the way her mother-in-law wished, noting who had died or otherwise vanished.

As adults, all three children have a surplus of frequent flyer miles.

Following Jeannie's email, Julia urged her mother to stand firm, saying she could always go to New Zealand on her own by joining a tour, to which Pauline replied, *How can, and leave your father alone?* Julia curbed impatience, and tried to say, nicely, *but if you'd just express what you really want for a change*, which only unleashed the usual "you have no idea, you just don't know your father" tirade:

Johnson, who wouldn't take sides, suggested to both parents during his weekly call home that they come visit their two grandchildren in Minneapolis instead. *Uh, impossible*, said Henk, although he failed to say why. *So cold*, Pauline said, adding, *too much trouble for Jane*, to which Johnson sighed and said, for what had to be the hundredth time, *Mum, my wife's name is Elaine, not Jane*, Jane being the child before Jeannie who died at age two. Elaine no longer got upset over her mother-in-law's persistent error. Even Johnson, the most diplomatic of the three, was beginning to give up any hope for sanity, as he said in his email to his sisters that night.

When Henk continued to research South America, Jeannie emailed her siblings, *I told you so, they always do what*

Dad wants. Jeannie got away with such smugness only because she was oldest.

"You're not going to die!" Pauline finally yelled at Henk. Three weeks of watching him lust over brochures and photos of South America had been more than she could bear. "And I won't go to South America."

"*Hoosh,*" he said, glancing at the closed bedroom door. "The servant will hear you." It was late and Ie-Yang was already in bed.

Tears welled up in Pauline's eyes. "I refuse to spend anymore money travelling only to where you want to go. All you want to do is spend. Didn't you learn your lesson in '64? If I hadn't dismissed all our servants, economized *and* gone back to work, even though you objected, where would we be now? Where?"

"Stop crying. I'm not insisting on anything."

"Then we'll go to New Zealand." She saw the twitch of his lips, prelude to a protest, and declared. "It's *my* money."

He went silent. Then. "Fine. You know, though, it is in the middle of nowhere. The flight's long, and we can't stop in the U.S. first to see Johnson and Elaine and the grandkids."

He spread open the atlas, knowing it hadn't occurred to her till that moment exactly where the country was in relation to the rest of the world. She glared at the page, fighting off hesitation, her face glowering with passion.

"I don't care," she said at last. "Johnson's bringing the whole family here this summer. He *promised*. Also, we'll fly business class. The children won't mind. And we'll only stay in five-star hotels!"

Henk laughed, knowing he'd lost. If nothing else, this would get him closest to, if not actually on Antarctica, the only continent he did not feel compelled to visit.

It wasn't, as Henk would later tell Jeannie in person, privately, after New Zealand was booked, because it was their mother's money, but because it was high time Pauline made a decision.

Jeannie, annoyed, countered, *you guys don't have any money worries now and she only has to pay for the land part so what's the big deal?* The children were floating the tickets, as they had other trips, with mileage. *Besides, Mum doesn't even like that idiot cousin of ours,* meaning Marissa in Auckland, *and doesn't know the difference between New Zealand and, and, oh I don't know. . . new potatoes! And on top of it all, she hates lamb, loathes it. It just doesn't make any sense to go there.*

Henk stifled a laugh, knowing Jeannie wasn't entirely wrong, but when it came to Pauline, Jeannie was unreasonable and overwrought — this petulant girl who hadn't quite grown up — although there were times he felt she really ought to know better and be more forgiving towards her mother, she being the eldest and all.

What he didn't dare say to Jeannie was that this might well be his and Pauline's last trip together. His health, he knew, was deteriorating. Despite her bravado, his daughter was easily frightened. He had never known how to reassure his children about much, least of all about fate, to which Jeannie, especially, would only retort that he was being "too Chinese-fatalistic." Henk had never been quite certain what his daughter meant by this.

The walk to the beach was longer than Pauline expected, and she regretted, now, her insistence that they do this. Surprisingly, Henk hadn't complained, neither about the long car ride — it was comfortable enough but he was never satisfied with anything she planned — nor about having to walk, which was harder on him than her, she being in much better health since he insisted on eating so much red meat, even at his age, despite all her warnings.

He stared silently at the swath of sand and sea and she wondered, would she *ever* know what he was thinking?

"Like Tjilatjap," he said, out of the blue.

Startled, Pauline asked. "What made you think of that?"

"Black sand."

The earth glistened.

"I'm getting blind in my old age," she told their chauffeur-guide, laughing. "I didn't even notice."

Henk said. "This coast, volcanic. Like Tjilatjap."

Later, when their guide took a cigarette break, leaving them alone, Henk said. "Do you remember? On the beach?"

Pauline stared blankly at him. What *was* her husband on about?

"Don't you?" he persisted. "When I proposed properly, in Tjilatjap, the way you wanted?" He looked hard into her eyes, marvelling at that still-gentle face, creased over the years by too many unasked questions.

Then, it came back to her, with startling clarity, their very first trip together.

Three months after they met in Hong Kong, Henk had declared, "I want to marry you."

When Japan ended its Southeast Asian occupation and surrendered to the Allies, the city signalled opportunity, attracting folks like themselves, the *wah kiu*, the "overseas Chinese" as The People's Republic of China officially labelled this emigrant citizenry, politically separate but taxed with culture, history and guilt. Pauline's eldest brother and only relative in Hong Kong had judged this Henk Go unfavourably. He was a doctor and suspicious of men in "business," especially in that post-war, beyond-Mao, still-colonial time, when kings were cabbages and mavericks overran the free world.

She thought over the situation for three weeks, and finally said, he must ask her father, in person, because that was the only way. He found the money — how she never learned — for their Garuda tickets, arranging everything to give her "face" before her parents who were wary of this stranger, *not* from their village and worse, from a family without sufficient standing and of dubious Chinese blood, unlike her own. Six generations earlier upon arriving from China, Go men had intermarried Javanese women, though their descendants' name and general appearance was still Chinese.

When her father finally said — "it's up to Pauline," thereby making clear his displeasure, even while unable to deny

his favourite child's desire — she brought Henk to the black sand beach at night where she laughed at the champagne he dared to bring, wondering, *who had he bribed to get that here?* They drank the magical foreign liquid out of gourd shells, scavenged from the sand, and she said, *yes, now I'll marry you*, because what else could she say to all that love going wild inside her, blood be damned?

Henk repeated, uncertainly. "*Don't* you remember?"

Pauline looked at this man, her husband of almost fifty years, and, pleased that these moments could still come to pass, moments when she saw his mind — in technicolor, unfaded, on a big screen — replied. "Of course I remember. How could I ever forget?"

The one thing about New Zealand, unlike any place Henk ever experienced before, was how its gentle face belied a wild heart. Here they were, on a remote and savage beach, yet only forty minutes from the city centre.

He faced the Tasman Sea, where land stretched empty along the western coastline.

Pauline was asking their guide. "This beach is the one, right?"

"What one?" Henk wanted to know.

"The beach where *The Piano* was filmed."

He puzzled, what *was* his wife talking about? During their travels, she rarely posed questions that presupposed prior knowledge about places, although she asked about flowers and plants they saw.

The guide replied in the affirmative and then suggested they walk a little before heading back, and excused himself to smoke.

When Pauline organized this part of their trip, arranging a private guide and car to take them out to the "countryside" as she called it, Henk felt mildly undermined. The guide handed him a walking stick for the rocky path and he bristled, but Pauline snapped, *take it for goodness sake, it's easier on your leg*, and he capitulated, because the flutter in his heart, at that moment, gave him pause.

Under this late afternoon sunlight, the beauty made up for his earlier annoyance.

Pauline said. "Out here, so startling."

"What film was that?"

"You mean *The Piano*?"

"Yes, yes, what did you think I meant?"

"Don't be so grumpy. Julia took me to the cinema one afternoon when she was home last and we saw it together. Some of it was filmed here."

"What was it about?"

"Something about a piano."

He refrained from rolling his eyes.

"Anyway," she continued, unfazed, "a movie happened on this beach. And, oh yes, the film director was a woman from this country. Imagine. Isn't that something?"

"I suppose," he said, but was more impressed that she remembered. Somehow, it mollified him, knowing that the trip had some purpose for her.

That night, when Pauline fell asleep, as she invariably did, before him, Henk wondered if South America, judging by the photographs he'd seen, would have been too overwhelming, perhaps even beyond his ken.

They would leave New Zealand tomorrow. It hadn't been the most exciting of trips, but it hadn't disappointed him either. The scenery was astounding, and the lamb, and even the beef, had been delicious.

In the bathroom, Henk experienced a short, sharp pain. Heart? The palpitations paused for an instant. Probably nothing, he decided, and suddenly recalled *The Tango Lesson* and the girl's face as she danced, lost to the rhythm. And then found himself thinking, just seconds before his heart gave way, *was it a woman or man who directed that*, and realized, with an odd feeling he couldn't explain, that he simply didn't know.

from.

Nineteen: A collection of
stories by women.

Joan Lau (editor)

Silverfish Books (2003)

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.