

**Hong Kong, February 1980:**

“Can’t anything be done? The pain seems to be spreading to her left shoulder and arm. What about a bypass or something?” Xavier Chu asked, as he accompanied Dr. Chow down the sweeping staircase of the Chu mansion.

Dr. Chow was a gangling, loose-jointed man, several inches taller than Xavier. He carried a battered Gladstone bag of brown leather. Clad as he was in a Harris tweed jacket and tie, he appeared over-dressed for a midnight house call. By contrast, Xavier was in a maroon dressing gown and beige shantung pyjamas.

“Probably too late, Mr. Chu,” Dr. Chow said, with a touch of formality. It had not always been like that. He had attended Xavier as a child and during the days when he played bridge or mah jong with the elder Chu, he had addressed Xavier as “Little Seng”. But the visits and games had stopped with the passing of the father. The son’s absence in America and subsequent rise in the commercial world had distanced them.

“Why? We keep hearing about the great strides in medical science. Why can’t something as simple as angina be fixed?”

“It can,” the doctor replied. His face was etched with old age and fatigue. He had been asleep when the summons came. “But it does require the co-operation of the patient. I’ve been urging your mother to see a specialist for years. Angina is caused by a temporary inadequacy of blood to the heart muscles. In elderly people that might be due to hardening of the coronary arteries. Possibly blood clots as well. Picked up early enough, a simple bypass would do the trick. But your mother has consistently refused to see a specialist. I’m just a G.P. There’s only so much I can do.”

“I’m not blaming you, Doctor,” Xavier said, drawing a deep breath. “I appreciate everything you’ve done. Really. For both my mother and my son. His asthma seems to be on the mend, I’m glad to say. I’m just annoyed my mother’s so mule-headed. Is a bypass utterly out of the question now?”

They reached the bottom of the stairs. The light from the crystal chandeliers lit up the doctor’s tired features. “I’m sorry, Mr. Chu,” Dr. Chow replied. “I’ve always regarded your family as personal friends but I can’t recommend surgery till your mother’s been examined by experts. You know her situation better than I do. She had a severe case of influenza a couple of months ago and that may have caused some inflammation in her heart muscles. It would need sorting out before surgery. There’s no immediate danger but time’s not on her side.”

“Why can’t we forget about muscular inflammations and bypasses and simply give her a new heart?”

Dr. Chow chuckled wryly. “At her age? You can’t order a new heart as you would a new car or yacht, you know.”

“Why not? It’s all a matter of supply and demand, like everything else in the world. Price determines availability.”

Dr. Chow shook his head and chuckled again. “Do you realize how long most people have to wait for transplants? The waiting lists are horrendous in every country in the world. In Hong Kong, we haven’t even got around to organizing a waiting list. Nor donor cards either. You know what Chinese are like. Many of us believe in entering the next life with our body parts intact. We haven’t yet convinced people of the value of donating organs to save others. Families often object, even if a person is willing.

“In such circumstances, where are we to get a heart? It cannot be just any old heart but one that’s compatible in blood and tissue types. There is something called human leukocyte antigens or HLA for short. It’s virtually impossible to find two people with the same set of HLAs, except with identical twins. To prevent rejection, HLAs have to be as close as possible. Immunosuppressive therapy has to be used. People die randomly in traffic and other accidents. But before their organs can be used the medical authorities have to be assured there’s been no queue-jumping and that ethical standards have been fully complied with.”

“Wait! I’ve an idea,” Xavier said. “You don’t have another house call, do you?”

“No, heaven forbid.”

“Good. Let’s go to my study. I’d like to bounce a few things off you. Care for a drink?”

“A cup of tea would be nice. Dragon’s Well if you have it. Otherwise Jasmine.”

“Fine!” Xavier said, leading the doctor into the study. “Take a seat while I rustle it up.”

Left to himself, Dr. Chow was struck by how the study had changed since he was last in it with Xavier’s father. Gone was the untidy accumulation of crates and boxes. Gone, too, the Chinese books. The bookcases were now filled with volumes on business and banking and handbooks and statistical digests.

The display cases were bereft of antiques. Those objects of art had once been favourite subjects of discussion between himself and the elder Chu. Now the shelves boasted photographs in sterling silver frames and a collection of trophies. The largest picture was that of Xavier in morning coat and striped trousers at an investiture at Buckingham Palace. Others captured him receiving the Legion of Honour from the President of France, shaking hands with the President of the United States, enjoying the company of President Suharto of Indonesia and sharing a joke with President Marcos of the Philippines. Family photographs were not included in the display.

The starkest difference lay in the space between the display cases. The two scrolls of calligraphy by Teacher Tam had disappeared. He used to admire them for the sheer strength and beauty of the characters. They had been replaced by a dazzling collection of awards and honours, the most impressive of which were the ribbons and insignias of an Officer in the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire and of a Chevalier in the French Legion of Honour. Among the other exhibits were diplomas from Princeton and Harvard, a glittering steel plaque certifying membership

in Phi Beta Kappa, and a framed letter bearing the red embossed seal of the Colony appointing Xavier to the Executive Council of Hong Kong.

The doctor's inspection of the exhibits was interrupted by Xavier returning with a Filipino maid. The girl was carrying a pot of tea, a Chinese teacup and a glass of Coke on a silver tray.

"Sorry I took so long," Xavier said, motioning the doctor to a seat across from his desk. "Maids are not what they used to be."

"I don't think I've been in this study since your father passed away," Dr. Chow remarked, warming his hands around the cup of tea. "Has changed a mite, hasn't it? Pity my visits are confined to ailments now. Not like the old days."

"We must try to change that," Xavier said, with an apologetic smile. "Sorry I don't play bridge or mah jong. But, if what I'm about to say works, we should be seeing a lot more of each other -- and under much happier circumstances."

"I had been meaning to inform you, Mr. Chu, that you should start looking for another family doctor. I shall be retiring next year. I can recommend someone and work him in, if you wish. You can rest assured I won't leave your mother in the lurch."

"My dear Doctor, why think of retirement when the best is yet to come? You are still fit and able. You still have great contributions to make to the cause of medicine."

"Of course I shall finish off the hospital project in Canton. That is in honour of your father. I would never abandon that halfway. They're putting in some of the equipment now."

"That's small beer, Doctor. Let me tell you about my vision and the crucial part you can play. You're the key. I need your medical knowledge and your connections in Canton to get the show started."

Dr. Chow sipped his tea with a look of mild bewilderment. "What vision are you talking about?"

"Organ transplants, on demand!"

"That's impossible!"

"Nothing's impossible. Just think, Doctor, where is there an endless supply of fresh human organs? In China, of course! They execute thousands every year. The wonderful thing about Chinese law is that once a person has been convicted of a capital offence, all civil rights are lost. Convicts belong to the state, body and soul. After execution, families cannot even claim their corpses. Are you getting the drift?"

Dr. Chow appeared alternatively dazed and alarmed. He kept shaking his head.

"Hear me out," Xavier said. "All we need is a little tinkering around the edges and we'll have a world-beating transplant enterprise. It will set new standards in availability and efficiency. It's a simple matter of looking at things from a fresh angle. That's what entrepreneurship is about."

"Instead of waiting for someone to die before seeking out patients, you line up patients needing transplants first. You carry out in advance blood and tissue typing, liver function tests, HLAs or what have you. Armed with a clear idea of compatibility, you can pick and choose

compatible organs, which are healthy and disease-free. No hepatitis, no diabetes, no nothing. You execute the criminals only after patients have been matched and ready to go! Maximum efficiency in the use of scarce resources. Should be possible to do half a dozen transplants with one execution. Heart, liver, spleen, lungs, kidneys, blood, bone marrow, all stripped out together! One death to save many! It's marvellous."

"It's outrageous!" Dr. Chow gasped. "How can anyone sell such a scheme?"

"I can sell anything. It's all a matter of approach. The profit motive. Look at the objective factors. The Communists are executing a lot of people. They have to spend money just to dispose of the bodies. Now, if the authorities can be made to see a convict as an asset, capable of producing money and saving lives, they will sit up and take notice. Everybody can gain from it. Everybody!"

Dr. Chou shook his head and made as if he were about to speak.

But Xavier stopped him. "Look, the Communists have embarked upon what they call the Four Modernizations. They want to cut loose public sector units and make them self-sufficient. Service organizations like hospitals are bound to experience spending constrains. The general population is too poor to pay. There's insufficient income to pay staff, let alone improvements. The conventional solution is to withdraw services. It must come to that. Before long, hospitals in China will demand payment in advance before treating patients.

"What are the sick to do? Their families are too poor to pay. Lack of affordable medical attention will stir up dissatisfaction and unrest. I can offer a way out. Organ transplants can bring in big money. Not only that. Because of sheer numbers, China can soon be at the forefront of transplant technology. Modernization. Understand? There'll be scope for experimentation too, such as combining surgery with traditional techniques, like acupuncture. There are all kinds of possibilities."

"You can't deal with a human being, even a criminal, as if he were a bag of beans!"

"You can't be sentimental in business. It's all a matter of pitching the proposition in the right way. I know people in the Politburo. A few high-ups in the Ministry of Public Health and in Public Security Bureau as well. I know how their minds work. I can talk to them, gauge their reaction. I'm confident they'll give the nod. Once we get that we can work our way down the hierarchy, to the provincial and city levels.

"Now let's consider the issue from the other end of the chain -- from the point of view of convicted criminals. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain by co-operating. If they don't co-operate, justice is swift and certain. Being selected as a suitable subject means they can live longer, months longer, perhaps even years. While submitting to tests they'll be treated well, given good food and cured of diseases. Foul-ups and administrative delays occur in every system. We just have to make them work in our favour. Convicts waiting to be matched will be no different from prisoners on Death Row in America. To encourage co-operation, a small grant might be made to families after execution."

"Stop! What you're suggesting is monstrous!" Dr. Chow said. "There'll be an international outcry. No self-respecting surgeon would take part in such a scheme."

“Come, now, Doctor. Let’s not get carried away. There’ll be an international outcry only if people are aware of how the organs are come by. We don’t have to say anything about that, do we? Once the scheme is in place, it will become a state secret, the disclosure of which will be punishable under Chinese law. To all intents and purposes we’re only setting up an institute to train Chinese doctors in organ transplants. It will have the most up-to-date equipment and use the latest techniques. Plus some Chinese innovations. Money is no object. We can say more organs are available simply because there are more Chinese dying. Our handling of donors is perhaps more systematic and efficient? We open the institute to patients from the rest of the world as a gesture of international goodwill. For a price, of course.”

“Your proposal goes completely against Chinese values. Doctors, in particular, are supposed to save lives, not take them.”

“But doctors will be saving lives! And on a grand scale under my scheme. As individuals, doctors are no different from other people. They have their price. There was a report in the newspapers just the other day about doctors in China routinely severing the vocal cords of convicted traitors -- without anaesthesia, mind you -- to prevent them shouting defiance or protesting their innocence before being shot. That was what started me thinking about this. Those doctors were just trying to earn a living, carrying out jobs assigned them by government. Ethics don’t come into it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m too old for new projects. I wish I could help but I cannot see what possible service I can perform. I’m not a surgeon.”

“Ah, Doctor, you want to help. That’s good. I knew I could count on you! Now we’re talking turkey, as the Americans say. I wasn’t intending for you to deal with patients. Your role would be to talk to the professors at your old university and to the doctors at the teaching hospital. You’ve already won their respect by getting them a new hospital wing, helping them to modernize after years of neglect. Now go and excite them with a bigger and grander vision -- a whole new institute specializing in organ transplants. The only one in the world. It’s real pioneering stuff. Will make all of them rich and famous.”

Xavier leaned back, folded his arms and studied the effect of his words. He took a big gulp of of Coke. “More tea?” he asked.

Dr. Chow shook his head. “This is beyond me,” he said. “An institute for organ transplants. It would take years to come to fruition. I’m too old. I can’t handle it.”

“Just concentrate on the big idea. In talking to your contacts, let it drop that such a modern and cutting edge institute might be a suitable monument to honour China’s paramount ruler. Human beings have little vanities, you know. Who could possibly pour cold water on a project named after a nation’s leader? I’ll set up meetings in Peking while you make your contacts in Canton. Entertain your friends and colleagues royally. I’ll pick up the tab.

“Before the project comes on stream, surgeons in Canton will have to start practising on local patients, perhaps for free. In business that’s known as ‘loss leaders’.”

“How can you be sure of paying patients? In the West you can’t advertise. There are also malpractice suits to worry about.”

“Who has ever heard of anyone winning a law suit in a Chinese court against a Chinese state institution? I have a lawyer dealing with the external aspects. He used to work for the Director of Public Prosecutions. He knows how to tie up these things. To paraphrase an old saying, our successes will be hailed and talked about, our failures will be interred with the dead.

“There’ll be a lot of spin-offs. I haven’t even begun to tell you about them. Every one’s a money-spinner. Just imagine, if someone from Beverly Hills or Palm Springs can afford to come to China for a transplant, isn’t it reasonable to assume that his or her family will want to come as well? Family members have to live somewhere. Why not a luxury hotel complex right next to the institute? There are bridge tours, music tours, archaeological tours. Why not a medical tour? Don’t worry, Doctor. I’ll see to it you get a slice of the action.”

Dr. Chow rose from his seat. “It’s getting late, Mr. Chu. I’ll think about what you’ve said. I don’t want to keep your chauffeur up late.”

“Forget about the chauffeur. He’s glad for the overtime.”

Xavier walked Dr. Chow to the front door. The Filipino maid who had brought in the drinks was waiting to open it.

“I’ll talk to my mother again about the specialists,” Xavier said. “Just look after her well in the meantime. I’m a man who knows how to show his gratitude.”