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SCC Overton

The human genome underlies the fundamental unity of all members of the human family, as well as the recognition of their inherent dignity and diversity. In a symbolic sense, it is the heritage of humanity.

Article 1, The Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights

The human genome in its natural state shall not give rise to financial gains.

Article 4, The Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights

WITH THE LAST LIGHT of the sun she left the common room and walked out to the terrace. There she stood and studied the mountains below to the south: silent and impassable. She and the others were alone up here, safely marooned as if on a treasure island, surrounded by a sea of white. They were the heritage of humanity. One representative of each ethnic group in China. Her name was Triffin and she was an ethnic Hakka.

The school stood on a pedestal high above a cold, empty world. The only way down was by cable car and this was only available to the teachers on their annual leave. Little could be seen of the school above the level of the terrace except the main dining room: a large, circular structure like a tent, covered in snow and topped with a weather vane. Soft snowflakes blew around Triffin, looking like gold dust in the electric lights from inside. The wind strained at her coat

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but her hood was fur-lined and done up tight around her face and she was not cold.

From inside, the small hand bell sounded and it was time to change for dinner. They would wear silk dresses from China and pearls or diamonds. They would eat with real silver cutlery. It would be rich food, five courses, fresh bread and small quantities of white wine. She could barely digest this food even after so many years and she sank a little at the thought of it. She returned inside because she could not be late.

She thought, This is not what I want.

After dinner they changed again and when Triffin had returned to the common room she sat with her friend, a Manchu woman named Greta, and they read books in silence like the other fifty or so women here. Greta read a Russian book because her Russian was good and Triffin read a French book because her French was bad but she liked the sound of French in her mind as she read. From time to time Greta looked up at Triffin, trying to catch her eye for a joke or a smile but Triffin pretended not to notice. Other women painted tables, covered screens or netted purses. The sound of a pianoforte came through from an adjoining room. There was no talking during this time.

An hour later was bedtime. Triffin and Greta were in their room and across the hall were the Zhuang woman and the Uyghur. In this, their only real free time, there was a babel of voices – dialects and accents from all over China – arguing, joking and haggling. On this floor alone there were represented the Hui, Miao, Yi, Dong and Chaoxian, as well as numerous Han sub-groups, such as Yue, Min and Triffin's own Hakka. The women talked freely in their rooms and passed notes from door to door. Gold and silver pieces changed hands too as today was allowance day. Triffin and Greta had each saved nineteen gold and seventy-one silver. They would buy new dresses when they had saved enough and they each added a piece of gold to their savings. The silver would come later as change when they bought sweet delicacies, fine stationery and expensive foreign-made cosmetics. Each woman received the same amount, and the equivalent

amount was sent back to their families in China – the families they had left as children and had not seen since.

The notes stopped and the voices faded abruptly and then the duty mistress passed through the corridor, switching off their bedroom lights one by one. She left the dormitory in silence. The Hakka and the Manchu watched the gentle snowfall develop into a storm and then they lay down to sleep. Triffin dreamed about shades of gold replacing the whiteness of the snow: golden sunlight, a golden storm, golden hair upon a pillow, golden fruit from the tropics where she was born, golden kumquats and persimmon, and finally she dreamed of herself, golden in the sun and in the water, warm and carefree and with a family, her family, and far away from here.

Far away from there, a young man was dressed in black and white and was watching his father expire. The old man seemed to hesitate between each breath as if trying to decide whether to take one more. Eventually he did not take another and he was dead. The young man left him and left the hospital and returned home, sweating in his suit but not taking off his jacket until he was inside. That night he dreamed too, of a child and a man, but without being sure which one was the father of the other.

In the morning, Triffin lay listening to the wind chasing itself through the mountains. The wind carried the echoes of the world before, inconstant but never lost. Everything that had once mattered was gathered together in leather-bound books, pages gilt-edged, read only by fifty Chinese women, pure ethnic specimens, themselves isolated in time and in place. Triffin could hear the echoes but could see only the whiteness of the snow.

The women breakfasted and changed for recreation. They stood in lines in the snow and practised gentle aerobics. Then it was maths, physics, philosophy and history, changing outfits again and again. Triffin spent recess periods outside, trying to see beyond the mountains, beyond the virgin snow.

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The weeks accumulated and the snowstorms became more frequent, more strong, more heavy. The snow was thick and unchanging and often the outdoor recreation activities were cancelled. Sometimes the water stopped and sometimes the electricity but it got fixed and they were cold but nobody became sick. Triffin and Greta saved one piece of gold every two weeks and made careful plans of their new silk dresses on fine, creamy cartridge paper. Triffin traced idle lines in thick, black Chinese ink on her paper, imagining a route down the mountain from the school. She imagined a river of oil – black gold – pouring down the mountain, cutting through the white snow in sheer contrast and carrying her on its back.

One evening before lights out a note was passed between rooms, wrapped around some small solid object. The corridor was hushed prematurely and even Triffin and Greta had been sitting together in silence as if they had anticipated the note's arrival at their own door. Triffin opened it and revealed a silver coin. Not a piece, not rounded and pebble-smooth like the silver and gold they saved each fortnight but an actual coin, flat and sharp-edged and disc-like, filigreed and embossed, crafted by hand and minted *en masse*. It was light, surely too light to be real money, but it was real.

On the coin was written, One American New Dollar – In God We Have Trusted.

There was the Statue of Liberty, the arm with the sword rising up as if it newly stretched aloft, and on the other was a president whom the women did not recognise.

Greta said, What is it?

Triffin said, It's money. From outside.

Triffin attended classes as she was expected to, but she had been cast adrift by the appearance of the coin. Stories emerged amongst the women that it had been stolen from a school mistress, that it had been given with the change for two golden treacle tarts, even that it had been delivered personally by a mysterious visitor from outside. For Triffin it was not important how it had arrived at the school. For her the coin represented much more than its face value. It exposed the

falsity of the finishing school with its own currency of gold and silver pieces, its rules and routines, its learning and languages, its apparent opulence in such bleak surroundings. She was aware of her own importance as a representative ethnic Hakka: a kind of living heritage, kept in comfort by humankind for the comfort of humanity, but here at the school she did not even feel she was human. Disconnected from the world, the coin, for all its stated worth, had none. Only outside, amongst people, could its value be realised.

This was what she wanted.

The banker, Jose Crowder, entered the office and shook hands with Midas Kam.

I was extremely sorry to hear of your loss, Crowder said. Your father was a formidable businessman.

Kam waved vaguely and sat down. Crowder sat down too, opposite the younger man, who seemed distracted, but not because of grief. Rather than looking at Crowder, Kam gazed through the plate glass windows of the office at the vast sprawl of the city – Bian City – at the hundreds of lonely tower blocks, factories and empty shopping malls, and at the lonely canal that wound its way through the deserted streets, as if he had inherited the city as well as his father's fortune. Perhaps, in a way, he had.

Crowder very politely ventured:

Sir?

Midas Kam broke from his reverie and turned to face Crowder.

So, he said. What have I inherited?

Well, sir. . . .

And let's do this quickly shall we? Kam interrupted.

Of course. I can give you a crude summary if you like. The entirety of your father's share in Au Agricultural Holdings will transfer to you, plus the properties, and aside from a few charities and other philanthropic gestures your father made in his will, the cash is all yours too.

What about tax? I assume that will write off about half of the cash?

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Kam turned away again, back towards the window and the city. Perhaps it was the money that was distracting him.

No, Mr Kam, I don't think tax will be a major problem.

Midas Kam rolled his head across the headrest of his seat.

Sir, said Crowder. Have you heard of the Genome Reserve?

No, and I am not interested in it either. I want the money that my father left me and I want it in a form that I can spend it. I do not want to reserve anything.

Sir, this is a little different and I should point out that your money is already, as you say, reserved. Our bank took that decision in order to best comply with your father's wishes.

You mean all the money is tied up already?

Kam had turned towards Crowder. His apathy was turning to antipathy.

Sir, you're old enough to remember the fall of the old American dollar. Until that time, the dollar had been used as a foreign reserve currency by a great many nations. The fall of the old dollar took with it people's faith in foreign reserves. It effectively disconnected the world.

Kam was starting to drift again, and Crowder continued with renewed urgency.

So, a new form of reserve was sought. Many were in favour of reverting to a gold standard, but even gold was not immune to volatility at that point, nor did a declining and desperate human population value it as much as it had done. The only thing that was unique and valuable enough, and available to all nations was the human genome. Each country would select certain genetic specimens to represent their national ethnic groups and would defend their currency with their genetic purity.

That's absurd, said Midas Kam. How can that be money? How is it even quantifiable?

Is it so absurd? said Crowder.

He took his wallet from his jacket pocket and from it took a bank note of large denomination.

How about this? asked Crowder. This piece of printed cotton paper, what would you give me in exchange for it? I can tell you its production costs are a tiny fraction of its exchange value. Its exchange value is sustained only by your belief in it, in your trust that it will be recognised for the same value by others and that, at any time you can go into a bank and redeem it for the amount that they 'promise to pay the bearer on demand' on the front. In fact, the only thing you can redeem it for at a bank is a further quantity of notes or coins, also of arbitrary value.

Midas Kam took the note from the banker and turned it in his fingers as if looking at it for the first time.

In this way, the Genome Reserve is not absurd at all, or at least not more absurd than any other form of currency. As the value of the human genome is universally recognised it is very practical and as perfect specimens are relatively rare, it is also very stable.

He paused.

Strictly speaking, the Genome Reserve is available to national banks only. However, small private reserves do exist that maintain the same level of security.

Kam said, Is that even legal?

Crowder said, Of course. These private reserves operate primarily as additional archives to their national counterparts, like a back-up. Your wealth is transferred into a kind of sponsorship of a specimen or several specimens. The capital gains are excellent, especially if the human population continues to dwindle.

Jose Crowder grinned.

Midas Kam turned his head and gazed out of his window. Beyond the well-tended tropical gardens of the office complex were endless tracts of human absence: empty buildings, silent roadways, and wild plant growth everywhere that there had been people. What good are capital gains to a disappearing species?

Crowder spoke again from outside his vision, We reserved the majority of your wealth in the Chinese. We thought that would be a respectful choice. You have a one hundred percent share in a Hakka

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specimen and large minority shares in Mongol, Dai and Maonan girls too.

Midas Kam turned back.

Girls?

Jose Crowder said, Sorry, we shouldn't call them that. I mean specimens, sir.

Midas Kam asked, Are all the specimens girls?

Yes, they are, said Crowder. The median age is eighteen, but each reserve acts as a kind of . . . finishing school, so we tend to call them girls.

Can I see one? Can I meet this Hakka girl? Where is she?

Crowder said, It is technically possible but it would be unprecedented. If anything happened to her, even something as minor as catching the 'flu, you could lose all the wealth invested in her instantaneously.

Triffin scrambled through the drifts of snow hour after hour, minute after minute, step by step, each step an enormous effort with the snow up to her thighs which were burning and shaking from unaccustomed exertion. It was a blank, dangerous landscape. The mountain would kill her in an instant without even trying. Her back and neck were drenched in sweat but her hands and feet were frozen into wretched claws, like an eagle wrought in some burnished ornament. It was cold and growing colder but the slope compelled her downwards, further and further from the school. Below her, hundreds or thousands of metres below, was a forest of evergreens and somewhere, maybe, a path through the trees leading towards the sun. But before that was the snow and each step did not seem to close the distance and she was already exhausted, more tired than she had expected to be and more ready to give up with every frantic thump of her pulse in her ears.

Midas Kam flew to Switzerland. The reserve facility had been surprised at his request but had not refused. From Bern International airport he had transferred by limousine to Mürren, to a helipad, but there was delayed. The weather was worsening and the mountain

rescue helicopter was the only one with permission to take off. And it was already flying.

Triffin woke up in a helicopter, her eardrums aching from the pressure of a sudden descent.

Midas Kam transferred the girl to a private, international hospital, rather than the government hospital where she was first taken, and out of the hands of the genome facility. For two weeks she slept, not in a coma, but exhausted and fed by an IV drip and without any need to wake up. Then, Midas Kam took her back to South China.

She woke in the tropical afternoon and a fan turned overhead, turning the air and making a faint sound. The afternoon was hot and damp but not sunny, and outside the window were sad, dusty palm trees. A man entered the room carrying a silver platter.

He said, I will tell Mr Kam that you are awake.

He spoke a strange non-standard Chinese but Triffin understood it on an almost instinctual level as if it were an inherited memory. She nodded. She was tired from sickness but she was content. A woman entered carrying a silk dress and Triffin felt something sink within her. The woman left the dress and closed the door behind her. Triffin lifted back the sheets, the layers and layers of heavy expensive sheets and began to dress automatically.

Triffin was taken to Mr Kam's office. He sat behind a long, narrow desk and studied her. He was neither old nor young but he was older than her and she felt like he was a teacher. She waited to be spoken to before speaking.

He said, Sit down. Don't be nervous. I am Midas Kam.

She sat down but she did not respond.

He said, Can you understand me if I speak Cantonese?

She nodded.

He said, Can you speak it?

I think so.

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Triffin, I took you out of the school and brought you here to China – where you were born. You can have anything you want here. Do you understand? Anything.

She nodded. She did not want anything.

She was perfect. Not so much beautiful as essential and vital. She was exemplary of her race without being exceptional and yet she was fascinating. She fascinated Midas Kam.

She was interested in small things: rain and fruit and little creatures. She was both earthy and refined. She would plant flowers herself, ignoring the staff who should do it for her, and then carefully wipe the soil from her fingers. She ate slowly and delicately, but preferred coarse rice, cheap greens and simple steamed fish and meat dishes.

Midas Kam would say, Tell me what you want. Tell me what I can get for you.

Triffin would say, Nothing. I need nothing.

The rains came and passed. Winds brought the scent of vegetables, fruit, sea salt, damp rocks and soil from the archipelago to the south, transmitting the slightest echo of a more primitive world emerging there, blowing through the obelisks of the ruined city that surrounded them. Triffin would sit outside, running her fingers through the warm waves of sunlight, turning golden in the sun. But still the city oppressed her and she would leave the garden before the shadows of the mountainous buildings could reach her.

She was not happy and he was not happy.

He needed her but she did not need him. She did not want the luxuries that he tried to give her and yet he felt he had nothing else to give. With each dress and comb and pen and stone that he gave her she seemed to grow more distant from him. He put a golden slide in her hair and she thanked him for it but the next day it was left in her room on the bureau with everything else.

One day Midas Kam had to travel to one of his father's farms for some minor business. He asked Triffin to come, expecting her to reject him just as she had rejected everything else but she did not.

She said, I would like to come.

He said, Okay, you can come.

The farm was far away. They were driven there on rough deteriorating roads for several hours. She was silent, not looking at him, letting the landscape roll past, flat and silent and brown in the heat. The weather was fine and she slept, and Midas Kam carefully propped her head with his jacket. The driver glanced at him in the rear-view mirror; Mr Kam never appeared in shirtsleeves before staff.

At the farm there was a skeleton staff of around twenty. At harvesting times Midas Kam employed day labour, who earned enough for themselves and their families for the rest of the year and otherwise lived in meagre villages throughout the countryside near the extant reservoirs. These were Triffin's people and she walked amongst them.

She asked, Who is all this food for?

He said, It is for you and for me and for people like us. The workers look after it and the guards keep it safe.

Is it for them too?

No.

Half of the crop was rice, planted and reaped by hand. Otherwise there were beans, pumpkins, marrow and cabbage, and some tracts of carrot, potato and coriander. Triffin delighted in this and she wandered through the ancient paddies that crept up the hills in livid green contours, soaking her dress in the water, her shoes dangling from indolent fingers. When Midas Kam had finished his work he joined her, leaving his shoes behind and rolling up his trousers and untucking his shirt. She laughed at him and he laughed too. They left the paddies, side-by-side now, and walked among the bamboo trellises that supported the beans and peas and other climbing vegetables. He took a sugar snap straight from the plant, early but green and fresh, removed the string from top to bottom and gave it to her to eat and it was sweet and crunchy and she enjoyed it.

He said, Do you like it here?

She said, Yes.

Do you want to stay longer?

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No, I want to go back home.

Home?

With you.

Okay.

He stopped plying her with luxuries and took over her meals and care from his staff for himself. She stopped wearing the expensive clothing with which he had filled her wardrobe and instead wore a single simple dress that became grass stained and fruit stained and looked more lovely every day as her skin became brown and contrasted more and more with the white of the cotton fabric. They spent their time together in the garden and Midas Kam felt that the house was being run for someone else but not for him. His suits were brushed and his shirts were laid out for him every day as normal but he did not wear them. The business ran itself, just as it had done while his father was alive.

They were all day in the garden, returning inside in the afternoon to eat quickly from the fruit basket. Triffin took water from the kitchen and sprinkled it on her plants and flowers with her fingers. The flowers nodded under the drops of water. She sang in a soft voice. The day was sunny and not too hot and later they sat together on the grass in bare feet.

She asked, What am I?

He said, You are Triffin. You are Chinese. Ethnic Hakka.

Where is my family?

I do not know. There was a famine and many families do not survive famine.

But there is plenty of food here.

There is plenty of food because there are very few people. Now there are few.

So why was I saved?

Because you are precious. You are—

He thought, but he did not say, Valuable.

She asked, Where was I born?

You were born in this province. You were born on the islands to the south.

Can we go there?

Yes, we can.

Triffin smiled.

The next day, Jose Crowder called at Midas Kam's household.

Mr Kam, sir, you need to return the specimen.

Don't call her that.

Sir, please, try to understand, she is not yours to take.

She is here of her own free will.

Sir, your wealth is invested in the *value of the genome that she represents*, not in her as a person. The reserve is not a bank and you cannot withdraw these . . . these women as cash. If she is not inside the reserve she has no value to you or anyone.

I own her, one hundred percent. You said that yourself.

That is a one hundred percent stake in something that cannot exist in isolation. You do not own the person, the reserve does.

Midas Kam stood up and went to the door of the next room where Triffin was waiting, as if to lay claim to her, but then he stopped and turned back to Jose Crowder.

Crowder said, If you do not return her willingly you will be arrested for theft.

Midas Kam left the room and slammed the door. In the next room, Triffin stared blankly out of the window.

What's wrong? Kam asked.

Triffin did not answer.

What did you hear?

She did not answer.

In the dream from which he wakened he had been walking down a long black road in a grey landscape, walking with a direction and a purpose but all the while knowing there was no purpose and there was no hope. It had been a cold, burnt, wet landscape and beside him had been a child, a boy, who had held him by the hand and led him

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onwards. He had to watch the road because it was traversed by all kinds of seen and unseen dangers and yet he could not stop looking at the boy because he had to keep him safe and only if the child was alive was he alive also. By the side of the road was a waterfall, incongruent with the flat bleak landscape that surrounded the road and he wanted to bathe with the child and remove the ashy dirt from their faces and fingers but he knew that if they got wet and cold they would never be dry again. The boy's face was forlorn and yet it contained the possibility of joy and he recognised this and he was sad. He realised, on waking, that it was not possible to spend a final happy day with someone who was going or gone or someone who had gone and come back, and that all things end sooner than one might expect. This was not what he wanted.

In the morning she was gone. Midas Kam went through his house and garden but she was gone and so were most of his staff. In the kitchen he found his driver, who was preparing to leave.

Midas Kam said, Where has everybody gone? Where is the girl?

The driver said, Sir, they're coming for you. They say you stole a huge amount of money and that you are bankrupt. Everybody knows about it.

Where is the girl?

She has gone to the islands, sir.

Midas Kam took the driver back to his village and then drove to the islands. Already there were reports on the radio of the raid on his home. He passed through the bleached countryside, speeding through the enormous motorway junctions where roads as many as ten lanes wide intersected and where spider-like sliproads ran into the smaller towns and villages. The roads were dusty and the blacktop was cracked and potholed and animals walked freely where few vehicles now passed. Above him the sun burnt a hole through the otherwise thick cloud cover and Midas Kam's head ached.

He reached the main island quickly and drove around through the old industrial and financial districts, letting his engine roar as if she might recognise its sound. He realised that she could not have made

the journey so quickly and drove back along the main route to his home. He stopped a solitary bus that was making the journey to the archipelago but she was not on it. He doubled back again, taking roads that would be easy and direct for someone on foot and whenever he saw people by the side of the road he would stop and ask if they had seen her. What did she look like, they would ask. What did she look like?

He slept in his car and the next day he abandoned the vehicle when its description was given in the radio news. He drove as close to the old island city as he dared and then abandoned the car facing back towards the mainland. He did not suppose it would fool anyone. He tried to get off the motorway leading south but there were few alternatives and the villages where he might acquire some food would be close to the road in order to trade. Some of them bartered – a coincidence of wants and needs – his need of food and water and their want for whatever he had remaining from his opulent life, each item given away for yet smaller proportions of their true value, or their former, traditional value. But he was able to exchange his expensive clothes for food for the road and for peasant clothes which might afford him some disguise. He walked south, always looking for her. He told each family of villagers he met where he would meet her, if they should see her. They said they would let her know.

Soon the road became closed to him too. The villagers whom he met were not reliably sympathetic to him. They recognised that he was not really a peasant and they associated him with the famine, perhaps rightly. He reached the islands and went as far south as he could, spending the last of his cash on a ferry journey to the old fishing village where he had said he would meet Triffin, should she ever ask about him.

Days passed and weeks passed. Midas Kam fished using some knotted old line and then he found some rusty hooks and then a rusty fishing rod. He worked fast, catching only white fish, then removing the heads and guts and adding salt and drying them in the sun. What he did not eat he sold to buy more salt as well as pickled vegetables and fresh

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water. He rarely left the shack where he had first settled. It was a wooden structure, built on stilts above the slow running channel and with an open back. It was rotting but it was firm. Midas Kam gathered rags around himself and gnawed at his filthy fingernails. He fought constantly against the overwhelming sadness of loss that he felt without Triffin. He had been an empty vessel before she came, but he had not known how loudly he would ring once she had gone. He busied himself only to maintain his silence, his apparent calm. He could not afford to draw attention to himself.

Autumn started to turn into winter and with a brighter sun and fewer clouds the salted fish dried faster and more cleanly, but fish stocks were lower every day. He had less and less to sell.

A woman in a shawl approached him and asked if there was anything for which he would exchange a single salted cod, but he could not spare anything. She was crouched at the entrance to his shack, her head lowered and she would not leave even after Midas had rejected her offer. Fearing that she would try to steal something, Midas Kam stood and approached her and she looked up and she was Triffin. She had found him and she was there.

She had heard of his whereabouts from a group of villagers – nomads, really – travelling away from the coast ahead of wintertime. She had not intended to leave him so abruptly, or rather she regretted doing so. She had attempted to return to his home but had been scared off by government men guarding the property. She had travelled to the islands on foot.

They ate together and then they slept.

Midas Kam woke at dawn and lay with the white noise of the flowing water blocking out all other noises. Yet he wondered what had awakened him. The sky was barely beginning to lighten at the point furthest east beyond a ragged line of abandoned freight liners across the delta.

From the north, a ferry was approaching, cutting a long scratch in the thick morning seawater. Already he could see the men aboard it –

government officials and police. He did not wake Triffin and she did not stir.

The rotting ferry pier, where they were sure to land, was some two hundred metres away. He could hear the men talking now in snatches as the wind carried their voices at random, and he thought one of them might be Jose Crowder, the banker. He was certain to lose Triffin to Crowder and the bank. She represented his wealth, but only within the confines of the reserve. Out here, now, where she was born and where she belonged, she was worth nothing, except to him. He could have her, but not hold her.

Yet faced with this paradox he felt calm, as if he had already mourned her loss, as if there really was no difference or distinction between love and loss. Surely one was an expression of the other. He looked at Triffin and ever so briefly she opened her eyes and met his gaze, and in the morning sun her dark brown eyes seemed to glisten.