

For Review Only

CATHERINE LIM *An Equal Joy*

An Equal Joy

REFLECTIONS ON
GOD, DEATH AND BELONGING

CATHERINE LIM



I have noticed, increasingly, that people after the age of 65 or thereabouts, begin to experience the fear of death in a very palpable way. While childhood and youth had viewed death as happening only to grandparents, while middle age could still afford to relegate death to remote corners of consciousness where it could not intrude upon the pleasures of living, the advent of old age after 65 brings a deeply disturbing sense of mortality.

So begins *An Equal Joy*, a collection of essays in which award-winning author Catherine Lim undertakes a bold and intense exploration into the fear of death, the nature of religion and the question of who we are. Drawing on her own experiences and myriad influences—from the Taoist “Sky God” of her childhood and the Christian God Jesus of her adulthood to scientist Pascal and philosopher Socrates; from intimate conversations with close friends to the imagined world of fictional characters—Lim reflects on the beauty of both the natural world and the world of faith.

As Lim writes, “Truth, Goodness and Beauty. For me, they form the goals of a perfect life.” In sharing her insights, Lim not only provokes us to reflect on the meaning of life but also encourages us to live as meaningful a life as possible.

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GOD, DEATH AND BELONGING

A large, light gray decorative flourish consisting of several overlapping loops and swirls, centered behind the author's name.

CATHERINE LIM

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IN ALI BABA'S CAVE OF TREASURES

I love it that scientists, in order to get across scientific knowledge about our universe to laymen like myself, don't just offer their complicated theories and incomprehensible equations. Instead, they take the trouble to use simple analogies from everyday life. Indeed they have to, for the subjects of their study are so huge as to be beyond our ordinary understanding of size; so far away as to be out of the reach of the most powerful telescope; so tiny as to be undetectable by the most powerful microscope; so numerous as to be beyond the power of any computer. On our own, without help, we would have no idea of the awesome, complex reality around us.

So the scientists come down to our level and speak our language. They explain patiently that this or that planet is so large that a hundred suns can be fitted into it; so distant that you couldn't reach it, even if you flew in the fastest plane for 10,000 years. To do that, you would first have to obtain the elixir of life to enable yourself to live 300 times longer than you normally would, leaving behind an amazing line of great-great-great-great-great ... grandchildren on earth. Wow. I love the whimsical humour of this analogy.

How small is the atom, the most fundamental unit of matter that all things in existence, living and non-living, are composed of? Well, so small that nobody has ever seen it. But the scientists are able, through their calculations, to tell us that the nucleus of the atom, around which buzz the electrons, is so very small that if the whole atom were the size of a cathedral, the nucleus would be no bigger than an orange. So an atom is actually mainly empty space. Wow again. I remember when I first read about this, I thought, “Hey, does that mean that this body of mine, made up of trillions and trillions of atoms, is just empty space? Why then does it feel solid and real?”

And on the matter of complexity: what about the multitude of connections among the billions of neurons firing away in that little two-and-a-half-pound brain inside our heads? Well, the number of neuronal connections actively taking place as we talk, eat, play, work and go about our daily lives is greater than all the billions of stars in all the billions of galaxies — more than all the grains of sand on all the beaches in the world.

By now, I’m staggering under the weight of these unreal numbers. But I enjoy the fun of the deliberately hyped-up analogies when it comes to describing neuronal activity inside what has been described as the most complex thing in creation — the human brain. Here’s another of these breathtaking comparisons:

You are one of the seven billion inhabitants of the planet Earth. Imagine that one day you feel neighbourly, and have the urge to talk to the rest of your fellow earthlings, not one by one, but *simultaneously*. You realise, to your surprise and delight, that all of them have the same friendly urge. Everyone wants to chat with everyone else, all at the same time, all over the planet. Think of the incredible number of connections, forming an impossibly dense web of communication lines virtually smothering the planet! The computer would break down if it tried to do a count.

But the analogy I like best of all has to do, not with the mind-boggling numbers themselves, but the incredible human effort

required to master them. When the Human Genome Project was started, to great fanfare, more than 10 years ago, there was the concern that it might be impossible to meticulously map out all the thousands of genes in our DNA, each comprising millions of bases, that form the recipe of life, determining the colour of our eyes, our personality, our musical talent, the kind of disease we might have inherited.

Somebody came up with a mental game to emphasise the sheer magnitude of the work involved, which I thought brilliant and charming.

He said to imagine having the entire set of the 20 volumes of the *Britannica Encyclopaedia* ranged before you. You tear out each page of each volume, and then shred all the pages. Shred them into *tiny* pieces. Gather together all the pieces to form a little paper mountain. Now fling yourself upon it and roll around, scattering the tiny pieces, like a happy child playing on a heap of fallen autumn leaves that his father has just painstakingly swept up. Make sure you roll around long enough, and energetically enough, to get all the pieces *thoroughly* mixed. Next, get three giant fans and set them blowing *at full blast* on the scraps of paper. They fly like confetti in the air. A few minutes of the blasting will do. Now for the real work — gather up all these pieces, paste them together to form the correct pages, then put the pages in their correct order to form the correct books. Finally, arrange the books in their correct order, *to restore the entire original set of 20 books of the Britannica Encyclopaedia*.

The scientist, through this deliberately exaggerated and playful imaginary game, was displaying the boisterous good humour of a showman, relishing the open-mouthed astonishment of his target audience.

It doesn't matter to me what hyperbolic imagery scientists use; they just confirm for me that this universe of ours is the most marvellous thing I can ever experience. It is such a joy to contemplate everything in it, from the grandeur of stars far out there to the intricate

orderliness of cells working in harmony inside our bodies right here; from the tiniest bacterium to the largest organism; from the grunts and shrieks of our prehistoric ancestors hundreds of thousands of years ago, to the most sophisticated system of communication called language. No analogy can hope to capture the sheer scale and wonder of it all. My fascination sometimes overtakes my use of language, causing me to resort to awkward superlatives — ‘inexpressibly beautiful’, ‘incredibly awesome’, ‘unimaginably complex’. The famous Indian-American astrophysicist Chandrasekhar once wrote about ‘shuddering before the beautiful’.

Now, in response to the helpful analogies from the scientists to explain the universe, I would like to come up with one of my own to celebrate it.

I compare myself to a treasure hunter who has managed to enter Ali Baba’s fabulous cave. Remember how, as children, we were enthralled by the story of a poor man who stumbled upon a cave full of glittering treasures that was actually the secret hiding place for the loot amassed by a gang of thieves? He and his wife wanted to measure out their newfound wealth, but had been too poor to own a measuring bowl. So the wife borrowed one from her sister-in-law who got curious, secretly applied some glue to the base of the bowl and was shocked to see gold stuck on it when it was returned. You can bet she told her husband. The race for the treasure was on.

Well, I find myself before such a glittering trove of treasures — only they are not gold or silver or precious stones, but the wealth of knowledge won for us by the dedicated work of scientists over the centuries. Slowly, patiently, they have managed to make Nature reveal her secrets (not all of them, though). Together, they have discovered enough for their knowledge to be systematically encoded and summarised in models, such as the Standard Model (physics), the Periodic Table (chemistry) and the Central Dogma (biology), which are extremely useful to all who are in the business of learning, from the student in school to the scholar doing research to ordinary people like myself, who simply love knowledge for its own sake. I

make a survey of this treasure trove in order to select some special items which I will take home, to pore over each one at my leisure, and absorb every detail of its beauty and the hard work that has gone into its making.

Here are three of these personally selected gems of scientific achievement:

The first is the discovery, made in the 20th century, that our universe is expanding. For centuries, people, including Einstein, had believed that the universe was static, steady and unchanging. The belief fitted in with the human need for order and stability. But the astonishing truth is that the universe is dynamic and actually getting larger and larger. The scientists say they don't know why. All they have is the solid evidence for this phenomenon, provided by the work of the famous astrophysicist and astronomer Edwin Hubble. Hubble, through his knowledge of the properties of light and the use of the telescope named after him, was able to prove that the galaxies in the universe are receding from each other, like spots on a balloon getting further and further apart as the balloon gets bigger and bigger. So while we earthlings are going about our daily activities, our universe is expanding, with increasing speed. I indulge in a giddy, intoxicating thought: at this precise moment in time, I, an inhabitant of planet Earth, am at one specific point in the vastness of cosmic space. But I will never ever be at the same spot again, because the expanding universe will have moved on and taken me with it. We are indeed travellers being carried along on some cosmic escalator!

It is both an exhilarating and fearsome thought. What will happen in the end? Nobody knows. This process of expansion could go on forever. Or the universe could stop expanding at some point and start shrinking, to end up in its original state. In that event, what would happen to our planet, to us? Would it shrink into nothingness? Would we be dragged into some cosmic black hole? Not to worry, say the scientists, with smiling reassurance. This wouldn't happen for billions of years. The universe is about 13.7

billion years old, and it might take that long for it to end in either a heat death or an ice grip. So just go on with life. Phew! I remember watching a Woody Allen movie in which a young well-read boy was so terrified of the expanding universe coming to a fiery end that his mother had to take him to see a psychiatrist.

The second gem in my treasure chest of knowledge is Einstein's discovery of the relationship between matter and energy. It is difficult to understand that energy, which is invisible, and matter which our senses easily respond to, are really one and the same thing; each is convertible into the other. The amount of energy that can result from matter's conversion is unbelievably huge and can be calculated using the most famous equation in the world: Einstein's $e = mc^2$. The simplicity of the equation belies its shocking revelation: energy equals the mass of the object multiplied by the square of the speed of light which is 186,000 miles per second. Imagine the square of this colossal number multiplied by itself!

It was just so tragic that the discovery led to the making of the first nuclear bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to bring Japan to its knees and the end of the Second World War. Instead of thinking of the bomb and its destructive power, I would settle for this far less unnerving example of $e = mc^2$: a small teaspoonful of matter, I once read, can yield enough energy to heat an Olympic-size swimming pool.

My third treasure is from biology, and it evokes even more awe and wonder than the expanding universe and the unbelievable power of the atom. It is the story of life on our planet, from its beginnings in the oceans three billion years ago, as simple single-celled organisms. These evolved into multicellular forms that culminated, 530 million years ago, in the emergence of an amazing diversity of life forms. This period of burgeoning life, appropriately called the Cambrian Explosion, showcased the weirdest-looking life forms in the oceans.

One just has to look at any book on the evolution of life to see the most bizarre-looking ocean creatures that no longer exist —

jellyfish with multiple eyes and mouths; long, wormlike creatures with rows of legs sticking out of what seem to be their backs; huge, grotesque predators with weaponised teeth and claws; small frightened prey that learnt to swim faster and dart deeper into the ocean floor. Then came the fish, about 400 million years ago, that opportunistically used their fins as legs to explore land for the first time. In clever adaptation to their environment, they evolved into reptiles that brought the ocean with them — through the ingenious device of abandoning the old method of giving birth to live young in the water, to the new method of laying eggs on dry land. In the most fascinating demonstration of brilliant adaptation to the environment, the watery interior of the eggs, as well as their hard shells, kept the growing foetus nourished and protected from land predators.

The reptiles would evolve into mammals that would, in turn, evolve into primates, and finally humans. The last time we shared a common ancestor with chimpanzees, before we went our own way, was about six million years ago. Hence, ours is a very long eventful history, dominated for a while (about 150 million years) by the dinosaurs before they were killed by an asteroid that crashed into earth (more precisely, Mexico) 65 million years ago.

We modern humans, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, have been on the planet a bare 100,000 or so years. I am never tired of being reminded of the fact that we are very latecomers in the story of life on earth.

To emphasise our new-kids-on-the-block status, there is this unapologetically harsh analogy: look at a clock. If the timeline for all life on earth was represented by the 12 hours on its face, human life would be represented by only the last few seconds before midnight. Think of this: within this very tiny sliver of remaining time are crammed the ancient civilisations in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and China; Jesus, Buddha and Confucius; the Crusades; the Middle Ages; the Industrial Revolution; the Scientific Revolution; Shakespeare; the abolition of slavery; the two world wars; Beethoven and Picasso; the landing on the moon; the Beatles; the collapse of

the Berlin Wall; globalisation; the advent of the Digital Age; the Internet; the search for life-carrying exoplanets by NASA.

It is a profoundly humbling thought that on the cosmic scale, as a species, we are really nothing. As individuals, proceeding from birth to death according to our pathetic quota of years, we are less than nothing. And yet who can deny the immensity of human purpose and achievement contained in this speck — or rather, this speck of a speck — of cosmic time?

It is not only these three gems of scientific knowledge that I will take away from the cave of treasures. There are other caves connected to it by passages, containing still more treasures: the knowledge from philosophy, gained from ancients like Plato and Aristotle and a whole line of foundational thinkers after them; the social, political and ethical theories advanced by thinkers from the Enlightenment onwards; even theories that have somewhat lost their shine, such as those of behaviourists like Skinner, and psychologists like Freud and Jung, who explored the secret recesses of human consciousness.

No wonder I'm endlessly enthralled by my ventures into Ali Baba's cave to haul away so much of this treasure of knowledge. I'm able to go back for more, again and again, for this precious store can never be depleted. Indeed, the opposite happens. For the more knowledge is taken away and shared, the more it will renew itself and radiate out, in ever widening circles, to lead to understanding which, in turn, will lead to wisdom. Knowledge, understanding, wisdom — all underlain by joy. That must be the truest path to a truly fulfilling life lived on this beautiful planet.

Anybody can enter this Ali Baba cave — all one needs is the 'open sesame' of an inquiring mind and a receiving heart.

DEATH AND TWO WOMEN

One day, for no special reason, I thought about two late friends, both in their sixties when they passed away. Different in personality, temperament and general philosophical outlook, they were nevertheless remarkably similar in the way they dealt with Death, in the progressive stages of its approach.

In the first stage, when it was just a distant presence, they ignored it altogether, happily going about their affluent lives that included regular family holidays abroad with children and grandchildren, cruises with friends and frequent socialising through church and club activities. Indeed, so pleasurable was life that any reminder of its opposite would be instantly met with a look of displeasure or the superstitious dismissing gesture of a succession of quick hand movements and sharp tongue clicks.

In the next stage, as Death signalled its advent through the doctors' dreaded diagnoses, both women first recoiled in disbelief and horror, then went on a frenetic search for a cure, including trawling the Internet for any relevant information. One of them even made arrangements for a trip to a remote part of the Philippines to seek out a shaman faith healer.

In the last stage, with Death already by the bedside, both women fell back in exhausted acceptance of the inevitable, displaying varying degrees of submission. Neither of them attained the final perfect peace promised in pious literature about the dead and dying. Their last expressions of confusion, bewilderment and anguish were smoothed out by the skilful work of the undertaker to give a semblance of that elusive peace, as they lay in their coffins, eyes serenely closed, dressed in their best clothes.

I had known QT for many years. She was an attractive and energetic woman who prided herself on an efficiency that had resulted in one promotion after another in her work as an administrative officer in business organisations. At 53 years, in her last place of work, she had chosen the time of retirement to coincide precisely with promotion season, for she knew that this would mark the zenith in her career, after which everything could only be in a downward direction, all the way to obligatory retirement at the age of 62. “I’m leaving when I’m in peak form, in control,” she said.

She also said with a smile, “People like me never retire,” for she simply transferred the efficient routines of office to home. On the very first day of her retirement, she woke up to plan a major renovation of her two-storeyed house, to be followed by a major revision of household management for greater efficiency and control. Her meticulousness was admirably manifested in every detail of this tireless enterprise, right down to the choice of curtains and cushion covers, to achieve perfect colour coordination for each room in the house (she used reliable colour charts that forbade certain colour combinations); the choice of her husband’s ties (a mix of classic and hip, always matched perfectly with his shirts); close supervision of the maid’s house-cleaning to ensure that it included sweeping under the beds and wiping the undersides of chairs and tables. Outside her own home, QT straightened pictures in friends’ houses if she saw them hanging crookedly on the wall, and forks and knives, spoons and chopsticks not properly arranged on the table, when dining out in restaurants.

QT did not mind being nicknamed ‘Control Freak’ by family and friends. Once I teasingly told her she was the best exponent of the Goldilocks Principle, named after an endearing fairytale character who, while wandering in the woods, finds a house belonging to a family of three bears. Tired and hungry, she nevertheless systematically rejects each bed or chair as too big or too small, and each bowl of food as too hot or too cold, finally settling on items that are ‘just right’. QT laughed merrily at her new nicknames of ‘Just So’ and ‘Goldy’.

I learnt about QT’s cancer (stomach, advanced stage) only indirectly, from her husband. Her shock upon the diagnosis had been quickly followed by self reproach: how could she have been so careless as to miss the signs? The self annoyance was in turn followed by the proud decision to keep the truth from her friends as long as possible. Suddenly, there was the sickening feeling that, for the first time in her life, she was losing control. The ground under her feet had begun to shake dangerously, as in an earthquake.

Then, through all the anguish, QT rose defiantly to make a clear decision. She would continue to take charge of her life, and *be seen to take charge*. No tears, no hysterics. No self-pity. Above all, no commiseration from well-meaning friends. So from her sickbed, with a look of intense purposefulness, she instructed her daughter to do this or that, to make sure that the contractor did a proper job of the koi pool in the front garden, to sell the bank shares as soon as they hit a certain price. Propped up on a mound of pillows, she interviewed — on behalf of her daughter-in-law — a new maid from Indonesia, to make sure the young kampong girl was less stupid than the last one.

By the time I paid my last visit, she had already reached a stage when her shrunken body and weakened voice meant the end of that controlling energy. She died about three weeks later. At her wake, I discovered, to my amazement, that during those last weeks, QT was actually back in the role of ‘Control Freak’, giving precise instructions regarding her wake and funeral arrangements. They

had to be just so. With a perfectly lucid mind, she decided on what songs were to be sung at the funeral service, and who should be in the choir (one member whose voice she didn't like was to be tactfully excluded). She chose the caterer for the lunch to be served to guests after the funeral, her choice based on a recollection of high praise of him from a friend, for the excellent healthy stuff he had provided at the friend's father-in-law's funeral. She stipulated the exact colour of the orchid sprays that were to be given out to guests upon their departure (bright shades of purple, each spray to be tied with a matching purple bow). Her daughter later told me that as she gave each instruction, her eyes lit up with animating purpose and satisfaction.

But what had impressed me most about QT's planning of her own funeral was the audiotape she had arranged to be made, in which she bade her last farewell. It was not so much a farewell to family and friends, as a defiant gesture that said to Death, "Not so fast. I'm still in charge." In this tape which lasted a full two minutes, QT, in between gasps and laboured breathing, talked about how 'joyous' and 'ready' she was to welcome the 'dawn'; how wonderful to view a 'new sunrise', to embark on a ride to the 'new yonder', to embrace 'the beautiful blue void'. A professed freethinker, QT replaced religious images of heaven with an effusion of poetic, freewheeling, secularist equivalents; and religious piety with a politely controlled anger against that most hateful enemy of life. The anger must have been all the greater for the overwhelming sense of helplessness against this arch foe. For Death was, in effect, the emissary of God, acting on his behalf, and hence could not be reviled in any way, in case even greater calamity followed.

The tape-recorder was conspicuously placed against a wall of framed photos of QT enjoying life — on a skiing holiday with her family in Switzerland; receiving an award on stage, dressed in a long, sequinned cheongsam; celebrating her 60th birthday with an enormous birthday cake; reaching the finishing line in a marathon for senior citizens, clad in a youthful white T-shirt and shorts, flashing a

buoyant victory sign. The tape, which played continuously against this background of life's plenitude and celebration, must have been a last desperate attempt to tell Death that real victory belonged to her.

I had troubling feelings at QT's wake, that were a strange mix of shock and understanding, sympathy and unease, pity and admiration. That night I had a dream in which I was watching and cheering QT doing a marathon. In the wild nonsensicality of dreams, she was dressed, not in a T-shirt and shorts, but a pretty sequinned dress and high heels. As she reached the finishing line, she gave a loud shout and showed, not a victory sign, but the middle finger. I was convinced it was meant for the obnoxious Grim Reaper, and that my dream was some kind of empathic connection with this feisty woman.

I had known BL much longer than QT; in fact, we had been university mates. While QT had been dominated by the need to be in charge of her life and to manage it perfectly, BL was, in exact contrast, ready to surrender herself to Fate. This was because she was thoroughly pleased with it, giving it other names to signify her pleasure: 'Lady Luck', 'Karma Fantastic' and, rather heretically for a Christian, 'a God who has favourites'.

Favoured she certainly was. Born into a well-to-do family, with very attractive looks, a charming personality and enough intelligence to graduate well from the university, she described her life to her envious friends as one long run of good luck. The run never seemed to end. At the university she had met a handsome, also well-to-do guy whom she later married. She bore him two sons, making her tradition-bound mother-in-law so happy because the family name was now ensured, that she became the old lady's favourite, too. "I'm deeply embarrassed," BL would tell me. "The mum-in-law's leaving me all her jewellery. None of my three sisters-in-law — poor girls, they only have daughters — will get any of that gorgeous, priceless Peranakan hoard. Bracelets, anklets, rings, *kerongsang* brooches — you name it! When I get that treasure trove, I'll hold a viewing party

at my place for friends. You MUST come along!”

Even her husband's premature death from a heart attack at age 50 could not detract from the charmed life. In fact, it enhanced it. For he had left behind properties and huge bank accounts. Moreover, as BL once playfully confided in me, his death at age 50 had spared her the possible humiliation of his going astray at some point, and having affairs and mistresses. It was a very real possibility, for women were always remarking on his good looks, and there were these young, predatory 'China girls' who had come to Singapore to catch big fish like him.

“As for myself, I would never re-marry,” said BL, adding with a giggle, “I'm the Merry Widow who's waltzing through life with all the freedom, and good health and money to enjoy it!” Proclaiming to the world this extraordinary largesse from Fate was not a boast but a simple statement of fact. She made sure she ate only at the best restaurants in Singapore, bought her clothes only at high-end boutiques, frequently invited friends for dinner, enjoying their compliments about the food she served, which they said was 'out of this world', because she paid for her maids to take expensive courses in fine cooking. “Your maids have never given you any trouble?” asked her friends incredulously, for they had an abundance of horror tales about theirs who stole, told lies, sneaked in lovers. Even in maids, BL was lucky.

Such a life of abundance could only express itself in an overflow of good spirits and laughing good humour. BL laughed loud and often, telling jokes at every opportunity. She even joked about how, being determined to keep her position as God's favourite, she donated generously to her church and charities. She avoided looking at the pictures of suffering children in Africa and victims of earthquakes and tsunamis, that came with pleas for donations, for they were completely alien to her bright, happy, perfect world.

And then one day, BL noticed that what seemed to be just a mild cough had lasted for some days. She was not worried, convinced that her enviably robust health would never be compromised. But

when the coughing and chest pains persisted over the weeks, BL went for a check-up. The diagnosis was lung cancer, in an advanced stage. Like QT, BL went into a tailspin of incredulity, shock and horror. But unlike QT, who overcame all these emotions in a brave attempt to continue the old life of mastery and control, she went on a rampage of pure rage.

First, it was directed against her doctors for a possible misdiagnosis that was causing her all this unnecessary shock and pain. This stance could obviously not be sustained against the hard evidence of the reports and X-rays right before her eyes. So, next, she lashed out against everything and everyone who could have, even in the most indirect way, contributed to the disease. She railed against a chain-smoking uncle with whom, as a child, she had lived for two years, quoting health experts who warned that the harmful effects of continued inhalation of cigarette smoke by young children showed up in the later years. She berated the doctor who had once treated her for a mild cough and cold, insisting that the medicine he gave her must have been the wrong kind, leading to the present lung damage. She blamed family members who had, at some time or other, caused her stress, including her late husband whose sudden death, she said, must have affected her badly at some subconscious level. She blamed the Singapore government for not doing enough to stop the haze caused by smoke blown over from burning forests in neighbouring countries.

In the most unreasonable demonstration of her anger, BL attacked her close friend, a gentle, caring person whose only offence was surviving cancer for well over a decade. BL almost screamed at her, “How come you had breast cancer and not stomach cancer? If I had breast cancer, I would have been a stronger survivor than you!”

BL's fury had a life all its own, going on and on, increasing in magnitude to match the sheer immensity of the loss she was suffering. The best life anyone could hope to have, now smashed to smithereens! The anger had to find the largest target — the entire population of those who were well and happy and still enjoying life.

The mere fact of their good health made them a collective enemy. She and they faced each other from opposite sides of life's bitter divide, and she was justified in shaking an angry fist at them.

Each time she was being driven for yet one more appointment with her oncologist at the hospital, she would look out of the car window at people busily crossing roads, shopping, eating at open-air cafes, chatting, laughing. BL would think, with deep resentment: "I have as much right to live as they. Why am I being denied this right?" She thought of the cleaning woman in her condominium, who was 10 years older, smoked filthy cigarettes made with tobacco salvaged from discarded cigarette ends and was disgustingly healthy. Why was this pathetic specimen of humanity enjoying the right to live, and not she? Life was her entitlement; the deadly cancer, in robbing her of her perfect life, was the ultimate insult.

The eventual target for blame would of course be God, since everything happens according to his will and purpose. Now, bringing God into the picture caused some confusion to BL. For as long as she could remember, God had been on her side, favouring her above all others. Why was Jesus, in whose name she made many donations to charity, doing this to her now?

BL had once read about a shaman in a mountain village in the Philippines who had cured people of all kinds of diseases, by simply massaging their bellies as they lay on the bed and pulling out the causes of the diseases, usually in the form of long, bloody entrails. Many Americans and Europeans had attested to this faith healer's magical powers. BL had heard about a Singaporean businessman who claimed to have been cured of liver cancer. With much secrecy and help, BL managed to track him down. He sounded convincing. BL made arrangements to fly to the Philippines as soon possible.

Then it occurred to her that turning to a shaman instead of relying on her Christian God, who was surely more powerful, might be a big risk. Suppose Jesus, in his annoyance, decided to punish her with something in addition to the lung cancer? BL said in peevish prayer, "Jesus, it's not my fault. Since you haven't answered my

prayer for a cure, I have no choice but to turn to this shaman.” But the troubling thoughts persisted, so BL decided to confide in another close friend, a devout Catholic whom we shall call X. (BL, knowing about my atheism, could never have confided in me.)

A very gentle, pious person, X nevertheless showed her horror at such blasphemous thoughts. She could only tell BL that everything that happens to us is in accordance with God’s will and has a purpose which may be hidden from us, that God works in mysterious ways, that he promises heaven, an eternity of joy to the faithful if they die in his grace.

It was this last part of X’s long exhortation that suddenly made BL pause and wonder if she could turn a bad situation into a good one. Heaven, joy, eternity. If she could no longer hope for life, perhaps death might not be a bad thing if it opened up the way for an equally good afterlife. The more BL thought about the possibility, the more she wanted to be assured that it was more than just that; she needed certainty. She rather regretted that she had not paid much attention to sermons in church about what eternal happiness with God meant. But there was still time to make up for that remissness. The excitement of hope caused the anger to disappear; one overwhelming emotion just had to make way for another. Once launched on the path of hope, BL was unstoppable, wanting to find out more, as much as possible, as quickly as possible.

Interpreting this as her friend’s return to spirituality, X was delighted and thanked Jesus and his mother Mary effusively for answering her prayers. She promptly went to see Father Y, a priest well known for bringing comfort to the dying. She brought him to counsel BL and prepare her for an end that the doctors said would be just a matter of months. During this period, the good priest sat by BL’s bed and spent long hours answering her questions. BL went about preparing for life in the next world in a very systematic way. First, she wanted to be assured that despite her indifference about religious matters in the past, she would be forgiven. Father Y spoke of an all-merciful and forgiving God, heard her confession and

absolved her of all her sins. Second, she wanted to know whether all the suffering she was going through would qualify her for a straight entry into heaven, instead of the usual route through purgatory (which she understood still involved some pain). Father Y assured her that God was always mindful of those who suffered patiently in quiet submission to his will. BL took that as a 'yes', glad that she would be skipping purgatory.

That paved the way for a full preparation for the new life in heaven. BL was eager to know everything about what she could expect there, to make sure it would be enough compensation for the life on earth that was being taken away from her.

She peppered Father Y with all kinds of questions which he tried to answer to the best of his ability. He was a little taken aback by some of the questions. Would all memory of her extremely painful loss be wiped out once she entered the heavenly portals? Would she meet loved ones in heaven, even those who were not Catholics, including her generous mother-in-law? Could she, from her heavenly abode, oversee the well-being of her two beloved sons? Father Y scratched his head a little when she suddenly asked about a faithful pet dog that had to be put down by the vet in its old age: do pets go to heaven too ?

Like a glutton at the smörgåsbord, BL wanted to pile on as many goodies as heaven could offer.

I visited BL a number of times after she had been brought back from the hospital, to die at home, as she wished. She was a shadow of her former bright, effervescent, laughing self. I could see that her moods fluctuated wildly in her last days, from hope and joyous expectation to serious doubt, and back, suddenly, to the old anger that had never really gone away. Her sons told me that there were tears squeezing out of her eyes in her last moments, probably not of joy at the anticipation of heaven, but despair at the treachery dealt out by life on earth.

As I reflected on the unusual ways in which my two friends, both immensely strong, proud and intelligent women, had coped

with death and dying, I had a certain, not exactly kind, thought. Both had in reality responded with the *kiasuism* that Singaporeans are famous for. This supposedly national trait which literally means 'fear of loss', is an ingrained attitude that cannot tolerate losing out to others in anything at all — financial gain, employment opportunities, social standing, academic achievement. There is fear of losing out even in trivial everyday things, such as annual sales offering big discounts to the earliest shoppers, hotel buffets where the best and most expensive offerings like lobster and oyster are quickly grabbed up by extreme *kiasus* who shamelessly pile their plates with the good stuff even if they can't manage to eat it all.

QT and BL did not exhibit this crude form of *kiasuism* when confronted by death. Theirs was much more subtle, as was indeed warranted by a crisis of an existential nature. QT was angry at the loss of control, and tried to wrest it back, with a great show of pride, even beyond the coffin, through that amazing tape of triumph. BL was angry at the loss of an exceptionally good life in this world, and tried to find full compensation in its equivalent in the next world. Both could never submit without a fight.

This comment about their *kiasuism* was just a little afterthought, an aside. More significantly, I was deeply impressed by the relentless effort shown by both women in their dealing with the last and greatest crisis in human existence. Their sheer energy, creativity and persistence did not give Death an easy time, whether you call him the Grim Reaper, the Great Leveller, Father Time or, most fearful of all, the skeleton dancer in the Danse Macabre.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Lim is internationally recognised as one of the leading figures in the world of Asia fiction. The prolific writer and commentator has penned more than 20 books across various genres—short stories, novels, reflective prose, poems and satirical pieces. Many of her works are studied in local and foreign schools and universities, and have been published in various languages in several countries.