

YENG PWAY NGON

Winner of the
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MEDALLION**



A NOVEL

TRIVIALITIES ABOUT ME AND MYSELF

Translated by HOWARD GOLDBLATT

Trivialities About Me and Myself

YENG PWAY NGON

TRIVIALITIES
ABOUT ME
AND MYSELF

A NOVEL



TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE
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Part One

O

HE HEARD THE gentle voice of a woman over the loudspeaker as he stood on the platform waiting for the MRT train: Attention, please. For your safety, please stand behind the yellow line. That must have meant the train was about to enter the station. Looking down to see where he was standing, he was surprised to note that he was in front of the yellow line. He wanted to take a step backward, but his feet would not do his bidding; instead, they inched toward the platform edge. He heard the rumble of an approaching train. Attention, please. For your safety, please stand behind the yellow line. The voice had become louder, as if directed at him alone. But he was powerless to drag his feet back behind the yellow line. They kept inching forward. For your safety, please stand behind the yellow line! Now the voice was loud and shrill. The train was rumbling into the station, and his feet were right at the edge of the platform. He was about to fall onto the tracks. For your safety... The sound reverberated in his ears.

1

LOTS OF PEOPLE say you ought to learn to live with your selves by talking to them often, but in fact most people do not say what they think. As far as I know, there are many people who spend lots of time in front of mirrors, but few who are willing to spend time or have frequent conversations with their selves. Not only are they incapable of getting along with their selves, they actually wish they could cast them off, let alone talk to them. People long for a variety of freedoms, and one of those is the freedom to cast off one's self.

I was one who wished to cast off his self, and now I've actually done that. To be honest, I haven't seen Myself for a very long time, so naturally I've had no chance to speak to him. In recent days, I've been spending a lot of time in front of a mirror, not to be narcissistic, but to see Myself in it. Yet no matter how long I stand there, weeping, looking sad and plaintive, bowing guiltily, even slapping myself savagely, I see only me, never Myself.

There is a contradiction here. In my youth, Myself and I were inseparable. We grew up together, but when I reached a certain age, I lost interest in living with him. And yet, if he left me for even a short while, I felt empty, disordered, and yearned to have him rush back to my side. But not long after he was there by my side, we would clash again and demand to separate. Myself and I were like

lovers who could not sustain a once-passionate relationship, and yet we were far closer than any lovers could ever be, which is why it was so hard for us to remain together.

In the end we did separate, but for a while after that, Myself showed up in my life from time to time, which is to say, though we announced that we were going our separate ways, each charting his own course, I still saw him on occasion. Then I saw him no more. Has he returned to look for me in recent years? I haven't spotted him in the mirror. Maybe, just maybe he has appeared in my dreams, but who knows? Women I've slept with, including my ex-wife, Jieyi, and Lily, who divorced me not long ago, tell me I talk in my sleep, and that can only mean that I talk to Myself in my dreams. What do we talk about? I cannot say. What annoys me is that I recall almost nothing of those dreams.

And yet I easily recall my dreams involving other people—living, dead, friends, strangers—and am grief-stricken, jubilant, excited, or despondent over their arrivals and departures. I've dreamed of my deceased parents, of friends I haven't seen in ages, and of enemies I'd rather not see ever again, but never of Myself. Maybe he comes into my dreams disguised as someone else. Since my bedmates tell me I talk to him in my sleep, what else could it be? But I haven't actually seen him, not once. How long has it been since I last saw Myself? I cannot say. What I can say is that I miss him, especially now; by that I mean over the past few months—no, actually, the past few years. I really do miss him; I am missing Myself more and more.

A few years back I began writing to Myself. I've written him lots of letters. Has he read them? I don't know, because he has never written back. I just know he's given up on me. And it's not his fault

that he ignores me, since I drove him away. I said earlier that casting off one's self is one of the freedoms people wish for. In order to do things my own way, I drove Myself away.

Ah, you don't know, but this self of mine is a stubborn individual. He insists that I see things his way, think the way he thinks, do things in accordance with his value system. But his thinking is behind the times, in my view, out of step with the current realities of life. His insistence on doing things his way can only lead to our destruction. As I was growing up, his outlook on life and his value system did indeed influence and instruct me. But once I joined the workforce, we began to see things differently and, as a result, frequently clashed. By the time I decided to leave him, our relationship had deteriorated to the point where we were like fire and water. There was no way we could get along. Every time we were alone, we quarrelled violently and parted on bad terms. For the longest time I took pains to hide from Myself. If I spotted him first, I'd sneak away to avoid meeting with him.

I don't have to hide from you now because I've lost you, I say to Myself. Faint strains of Brahms' Violin Concerto in D major glide through the stillness of the room as my fingers dance over computer keys, filling the screen with yet another letter to him. That's right, I am writing to him, even though he is lost to me, lost—my own self.

Before you and I parted, I desperately wanted you to leave me. Sentence upon sentence, I tap words onto my keyboard: But—you can believe me or not—I had trouble getting used to the separation for a while after we parted. We'd been together for so long.

At this point in the letter, my fingers hover above the keyboard and stop. Maybe it's Brahms' fault, but in the wake of those two sentences, I am lost in thought. Myself and I have been apart for

a number of years; finding it hard to let go at first, from time to time he returned to disrupt my life. Abandoning a partner from whom he had been inseparable for years was simply too hard. An emotional, sentimental individual, he was forced by my cruel, cold-hearted nature to cast me aside. But did he really do that? I think he did. I know for a fact that for a long time I have lived life without Myself. Not long ago, I assumed that after so much time had passed I'd become used to being alone and no longer needed him. Now, however, I can't stop thinking about him. I miss him so badly, despite the fact that we have been apart for many years, and that in recent days he seems to have vanished from my memory. And yet, he and I lived together for a very long time, and not all of those days were unhappy ones, especially those of our childhood and youth.

2

MYSELF AND I were inseparable during our childhood. As an only child, I had no one to play with, no one but Myself. I cannot recall when I first became aware of his existence, but I am clear on one thing, and that is, when I was learning to talk, he was the first person I spoke to. I referred to Myself in the second person “you”, but when I spoke to my parents of Myself’s needs, I used “him”. This should have been perfectly clear, but my parents, especially my mother, took this as a sign that, as a child learning to talk, I could not differentiate between forms of address, and she was quick to correct me each time; since I was slow in coming around to her change, she was both concerned and annoyed.

Changing the narrative perspective often appears in modern literary works, and is nothing to be alarmed about. But my father and mother never went beyond primary school, and it is no exaggeration to say that their knowledge of literature, especially Western literature, was deficient to the nth degree. They hadn’t heard of the French *nouveau roman*, in particular, and would have found the narrative strategy of using you, me, and he for the same person impossible to accept. They could not appreciate hearing a child express himself with confused pronouns, and were annoyed by my doing so. Because, you see, they did not—could not—know

that when I said “he” I was talking to them *about* Myself, and when I used “you” I was talking *to* Myself. When I started out in primary school, I still habitually spoke and referred to Myself in front of others, angering many of my teachers. But their anger, and that of my parents, taught me a way to behave. Myself did not exist in their eyes. That is to say, they saw me, but not Myself. In order to avoid unnecessary punishment and keep from alarming other people (my mother and the young woman who taught my class actually believed I was endowed with a sixth sense with which I could see things they could not, like ghosts and fairies), I spoke to him only in my private moments, that is when Myself and I were alone, and I resolved not to mention him in public. For the times and places when and where we could speak, we settled upon, for instance, when I was in the toilet, taking a bath, or under the covers just before falling asleep.

But there were times when Mama heard me talking to myself in bed, and she could not figure out why I was always giggling under the covers. Not even the harshest scolding could get me to stop, which truly made her angry. Sometimes, when she was determined to put a stop to my puzzling behaviour, she resorted to a switch. After a few swats, I shut my eyes and went to sleep, no more wasting time with Myself.

Although my parents could not get used to hearing me talk to Myself, they allowed me to do so when I was playing with Myself because there was no need for them to be with me then. In fact they encouraged me. Maybe they simply hadn’t the time to play with me. That was certainly the case with me later on, when I could not find time to spend with my own child. To be fair, the situation with Papa was different. I can’t fault him, because his life was so much harder than mine. As a minimart assistant, in addition to the hours

he spent in the store, he had to make deliveries, often having to carry customers' heavy sacks of rice and other staples up two or three flights of stairs on his back: dark, steep stairways that required great care to keep from falling down and taking the rice with him. Did Papa ever fall down one of those staircases? I have no way of knowing. I recall that his arms and legs, even his face, were often bruised and scraped. He would say he'd had an accident at work. Just how had he hurt himself? I never found out. Mama must have known, since she washed his wounds and daubed on medicine, grumbling as she did, and Papa would have had to tell her what had happened. He went out early in the morning and returned home late. He slept and ate, and that's about all he had time for. I'm sure he would have liked to play with me, but he was too tired. Sometimes we'd be doing something and he would fall asleep sitting up, snoring loudly.

When Papa came home from the minimart for lunch, I'd drag him over to join me and Myself in a game of Char Kway Teow, stir-fried rice noodles. Mama would be in the kitchen cooking. Since Papa would have to go back to work after lunch, while he waited to eat I pretended to sell him some char kway teow. Want an egg? How about hot chilli sauce? I asked, trying to sound grown-up. Yes, please, both, he'd say. Then he'd sit down in front of me, cross-legged. His sweaty body odour was always mixed with the smells of rice, salted fish, and other foodstuffs, odours Myself easily detected. Many times, before Papa had even opened the door, Myself would pick up those smells and get excited, knowing that Papa was about to walk in.

Myself would shred calendar paper and sprinkle it into a cookie-tin wok to stir-fry the paper kway teow with a strip of wood. In the kitchen, Mama would be at her own wok, from which stir-frying

sizzles would emerge, though they'd seem to come from our cookie tin. Arrayed in front of the tin would be jars and bottles, big and small. Myself would pick up a tiny bottle to add soy sauce to the kway teow, then dab some imagined chilli sauce on the wood strip before stir-frying everything. He'd knock a bottle cap against the side as a gesture to add an egg. After mixing the sauces and egg with the noodles, he'd scoop some kway teow into the metal lid of a cigarette tin and hand it to me to deliver to the customer. Along with the steaming, mouth-watering kway teow, I'd hand Papa a pair of chopsticks (used incense sticks that we called incense chicks). Papa would take the kway teow and hand me something, such as a pair of five-cent bus ticket stubs he'd find in his trouser pocket.

Myself was like a professional kway teow vendor, conscientiously stir-frying the noodles for the customer—Papa. Sampling the char kway teow, he'd exaggerate the act of chewing, smacking his lips and repeatedly praising the delicious food, even asking for more.

Papa really liked char kway teow. What I mean is, he liked the imagined food in our game as well as the real thing. He often brought a bag of it home after work for Mama and me. Like everyone during those times, and unlike people these days, he knew next to nothing about healthy eating habits. The greasy dish was tasty, no doubt about it, but it was a silent killer of old folks, with its high caloric content. As a young man, Papa had been a manual labourer, and could quickly burn off the calories during physical work. But in his retirement, next to beer, his favourite food was char kway teow. Though he spent his last two or three years in a nursing home, where the dish was not easily available, I was sure it was at least partly responsible for his fatal heart attack.

Whatever happened to those ticket stubs Papa gave me?

3

I'VE GOT UP from the computer to go lie in bed.

A sheet of darkness spreads out before my eyes, and there's not a sound anywhere. I've placed a pillow over my face and crossed my hands on top of it. Moving the pillow aside, I experience a wave of dizziness. The lights are on in the room, and the music CD has stopped playing. The computer is still on, its screen a scene of coloured lines silently roiling, floating, shifting, like an oversized marine microorganism. I like staying in bed, a result no doubt of age, though I developed the habit early in life. As a child, I scooted under our little dining table at home whenever I was hurt or suffered some misfortune. That table was my childhood haven, replaced by my bed when I grew up and could no longer squeeze under it. Whenever I suffer injustice or a setback in life now, I take to bed and refuse to get up; I feel self-pity, pain and sorrow, with no desire to do anything. But back then Myself was hanging around, and he lectured me, encouraged me, and urged me on; he dragged me out of bed and forced me to pull myself together, to face reality. I did fairly well for a while after chasing Myself away. Except for the attraction of sex, I rarely stayed in bed over a setback; I was, in fact, too busy leaping from bed to bed and having sex with different women to linger in bed. But I resumed the old habit once problems

began to surface in my finances and in my marriage, and this time, no one was there to pull me up. Lying listlessly in bed all day long, I fell into a funk of bitterness, resentment and suffering, unable to pull myself up. I spent even more time in bed after Lily left and, at its worst, I would not get up for several days, neither answering the phone nor going to work. I nearly gave up eating, so depressed I was, like a dead fish. By then Myself had been gone for a long time, so naturally no one was there to drag me out of bed. I have no idea how I eventually left that bed, but maybe I reasoned that if I didn't get up, I'd remain there forever and end up a salted fish, not just a dead one, to languish in a coffin. In the end, I wasn't ready to part with this colourful world, which was why I forced my hollowed-out, scarecrow body up to deal with a tattered reality.

I have lost just about everything—my business, my house, my car, and my wife. Now I live alone in a small room in a HDB flat, where I lament the lost fortune and women, and worry about the future. On the other hand, I no longer feel such resentment and loathing, probably because my wounded body and soul are slowly healing. I hope so. Yet except for writing to Myself on the computer, I still prefer lying in bed, and, with the melodious strains of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, or Brahms from the CDs as company, I recall the bygone days, relive the extravagant past I'd enjoyed and the sexual pleasures I'd experienced, or let my thoughts run amok amid minor sorrows and regrets. The bed is still the most comfortable spot for me, and I hope to leave this world lying comfortably in it.

Now, I'm rolling over. No, I don't plan to get up; I've just noticed how quiet the room is. The music has stopped. So I pick up the remote, aim it at the disc player, and push a button before lying back down. The third movement of Beethoven's Violin Concerto in

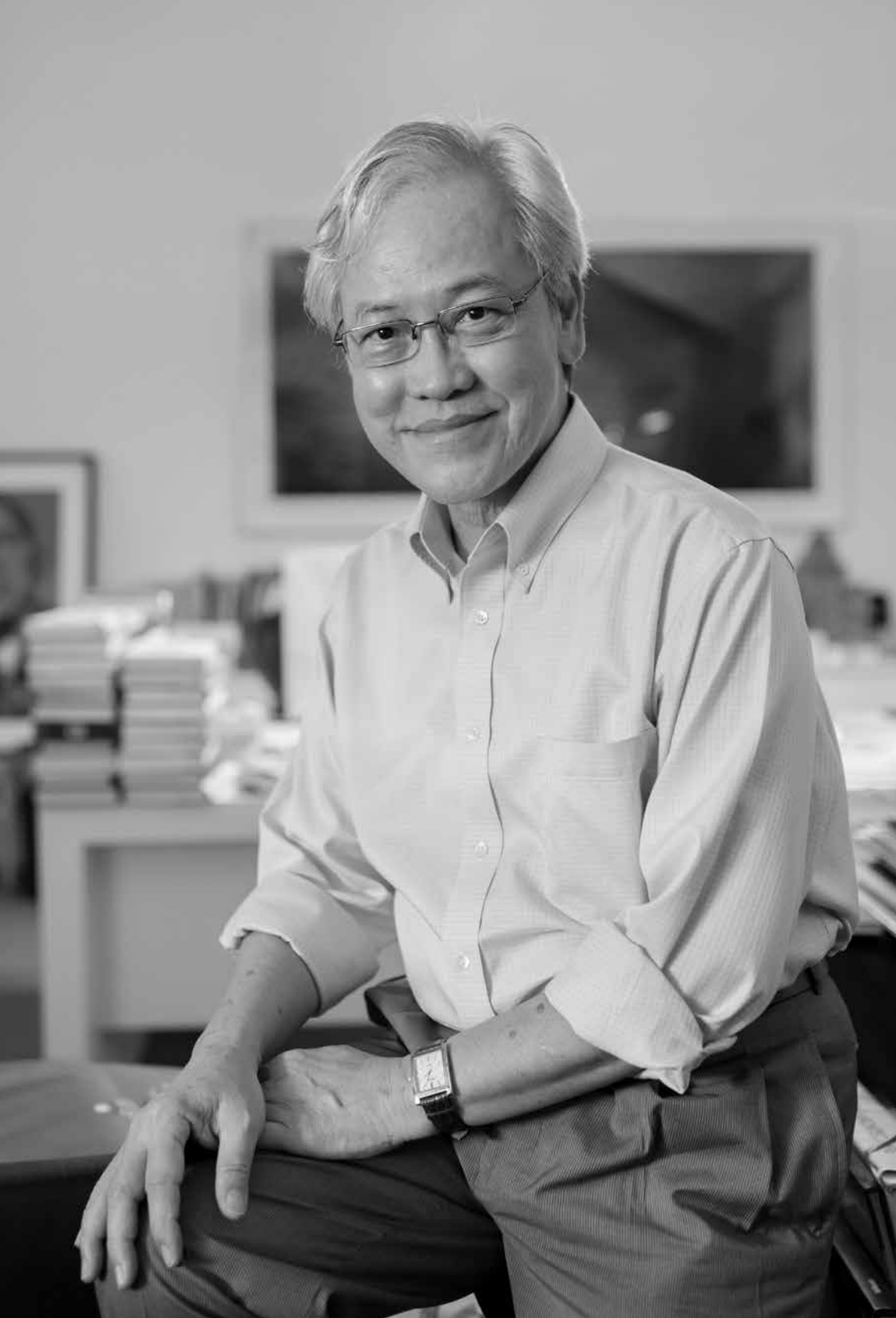
D major comes to me softly: *dah-dah, dah-dah-dih, dah-dah, dah-dah-dih*. Caressed by the serene strains of the violin, I cover my eyes with the pillow and enter a dark tunnel of time to recapture the past.

Ah, the tickets Papa gave me, like all those pretty candy wrappers, were treasures I carefully stored away. But these cherished items disappeared, along with my childhood, without a trace, as with so many other things in my life, either because I forgot them or they were simply lost. Papa's job kept him away a lot, so most of the time I tried to get Mama to play with me. Mama was a homemaker; in addition to taking care of me and doing the housework, she also took in laundry to earn some extra money. That included not only clothes, but piles of bedsheets she never seemed to finish washing. Outside of eating, sleeping and doing chores, she spent most of her time squatting in the courtyard with the wash. She had little time for me and my pretend char kway teow. Every time I pestered her to play with me, she'd say, I'm busy. Why don't you play by yourself?

So, Myself and I played together when Mama was home.

When she did the washing, our tiny courtyard would be filled with clothing in every imaginable colour, and piles of white sheets. It was a mystery to me where all those sheets came from. I'd bring a stool out to sit near her in a courtyard permeated with the smell of soap. She scrubbed everything on a washboard, sometimes even stomping on sheets soaking in her wooden basin and sending soap bubbles floating past my eyes. Through the drifting bubbles I saw clouds in the blue sky, Mama's face and mounds of colourful clothes. Like Mama, who was focussed on the washing, Myself and I were engrossed in our fictional world as, prompted by made-up stories, we jumped, shouted, and rolled around on top of the dirty laundry. Mama usually left us alone, scolding us only when we got

too rambunctious. We'd quieten down, whisper, and cautiously move on with our adventures. At times like that, a scolding Mama became an immense and dangerous enemy, and we had to proceed with caution without startling her.



About the Author

YENG PWAY NGON is one of Singapore's most prolific authors, having published over 25 volumes of poetry, essays, fiction, plays and literary criticism in Chinese. His books have been translated into English, Malay and Italian. Yeng received the National Book Development Council of Singapore's Book Award in 1988, and the Singapore Literature Prize in 2004, 2008 and 2012. He was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 2003 for his contributions to literature in Singapore, and the SEA Write Award in 2013.

About the Translator

HOWARD GOLDBLATT has translated more than 30 novels and short story collections by writers from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. His translations of Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem*, Su Tong's *The Boat to Redemption* and co-translation of Bi Feiyu's *Three Sisters* have all won the Man Asian Literary Prize. He also translated the works of Chinese novelist and 2012 Nobel Literature Prize winner Mo Yan.

Ah-hui, a journalist turned entrepreneur, possesses a split personality. He is a figure consumed by greed and sexual desire, two impulses that undermine his careers, his two marriages, and the relationship with his son. Throughout the novel, he engages in a dialogue with his other identity, the moralistic Myself, whose principled stances try but usually fail to win over his other half.

Ah-hui's lifetime, from childhood to his dying days in a rest home, parallels the modern history of Singapore itself and its evolution from a colonised city to a consumer-oriented nation, one in which an English-language educational system and commercial interests suppress indigenous languages and traditions. While the meticulously described action takes place in the city, the real setting is within the psyche of the narrator, whose two halves are engaged in an epic struggle for dominance.

The original Chinese edition of *Trivialities about Me and Myself* won the 2008 Singapore Literature Prize, and was selected as one of Top 10 Best Chinese Novels Worldwide in 2006 by *Yazhou Zhoukan [Asiaweek Magazine]* (Hong Kong).

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