

REMNANTS OF LIFE: THE TENDER BUSINESS OF HANDLING ALL THINGS DEATH

我是人生整理師：死亡清掃 X 遺物整理 X 囤積歸納

With nearly twenty years of experience, Lu La La, Taiwan's foremost trauma cleaner, has a unique familiarity with death. Writing with clarity and compassion, he records his observations and reflections on living, dying, and carrying on, helping readers to understand his profession and his personal calling to help settle the affairs of the deceased.

A few years back, South Korea had a hit TV series with *Move to Heaven*, a fictional portrayal of the life of a trauma cleaner, which raised public awareness the professionals who clean and organize the homes of the deceased. Taiwan has a similar profession, and the top man in the field is author Lu La La. He removes blood stains, deodorizes living spaces, and packs corpses into body bags in addition to tending to the cleaning, organization, and disposal of a lifetime of possessions.

Lu La La has worked in the funeral industry for nearly twenty years, during which he has literally seen it all. As a trauma cleaner, he travels from one death site to the next, restoring the homes of the deceased to a more presentable condition while also helping to clear away the pain of those who survive them. With this book, he shares his experiences on the job, his personal reflections, and the stories of those who have passed on.

In the first of its four parts, *Remnants of Life* introduces the work of trauma cleaning in objective terms, lifting the taboo of death that



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shrouds the industry. As in any industry, there are high and low seasons due to the increase in heart disease related deaths in winter and an uptick in suicide deaths around major holidays.

In the second part, the author continues by discussing how he first began working as a trauma cleaner. He shares his desire to contribute to society, and to give opportunities to disadvantaged members of society, whom he often employs in his work: the homeless, rehabilitated inmates, and those with disabilities. Part three delves into the human side of death, relating the full spectrum of emotions that the author has observed in his work, and the impact of social issues on life quality as death nears. Herein, readers witness how, after death, money often becomes the primary focus of the surviving family members. More poignantly, readers learn the background factors that too many deaths share in common: poverty, estrangement from family, loneliness, and cramped and unsanitary living quarters.

In the fourth part of the book, Lu La La expresses his complete vision of what it means to tend to the affairs of the deceased: as much as his work focuses on sorting through the possessions of the departed, he also hopes to accompany the surviving family members as they sort through the complex emotions that are stirred by the loss of a loved one. Only when each emotion, and possession, is finally settled in its proper place, can the soul of the departed finally rest in peace.

Though constructed around a chilling subject, *Remnants of Life* passes through the darkness to emerge with a message of sincerity and warmth. At its heart, Lu La La's account is an exploration of our humanity and what is most essential in life, and also sheds light on social issues that are often obscured by the fears and taboos surrounding death.

Lu La La 盧拉拉

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By Lu La La

Translated by Ana Padilla Fornieles

Chapter 1: Between Life and Death

I: On the Privations of Life and the Seasonality and Aftermath of Death

Take it from my past experience in the death care industry: the grim reaper has no operating schedule. That being said, we do have peak seasons – something that people are always curious about. For starters, the change of seasons comes with abrupt temperature swings. People with pre-existing comorbidities are particularly vulnerable at these times. Winter cold fronts typically cause a surge in the rates for cardiovascular disease and sudden cardiac deaths. In these circumstances, you just don't get a break. It's a constant string of customers.

In fact, my one piece of advice is that we should all look after our bodies a great deal more. In daily life, you want to avoid excessive strain that could compromise your wellbeing and eventually put you at risk of collapsing.

Back to winter – our utmost peak in activity came in the weeks leading up to Lunar New Year. Because this is meant to be a joyous festival, traditional customs warn that funeral rites must be completed before the holiday. As a bereaved family contemplates the minutiae of funeral rites, in the lead-up to the Lunar New Year they scramble to secure three things – an available day, a ceremony hall, and a cremation oven. As mortuary staff, I worked long hours from four or five in the morning to late night, with only a brief break at noon. The first half of the day went to funeral preparations, while the second half I devoted to all sorts of managerial duties, including decoration, overseeing of rituals, negotiating with service providers, receiving bodies, and more. Go home, sleep, rinse and repeat.

Needless to say, this took a toll on our physical and mental health. In my time in the industry, I never got to enjoy the family reunions and merriment that are characteristics of Lunar New Year. It was a time to catch up on precious sleep, recharge and rest from serious burnout, if not downright illness.

Later, as a death scene cleaner, my job duties included biohazard cleanup – the inauspicious term for the thorough sanitization of the site where a violent crime, suicide, or otherwise traumatic death has occurred. Previously I mentioned the risks of the winter season;

summer is not without challenges either. The sudden death of a lonely individual will often go unnoticed for a good while until an apprehensive relative or friend attempts contact. In the absence thereof, a landlord will eventually show up to collect their rent arrears. By then, the putrid stench of death will trigger the alarm bells.

Summer dispatches required us to cope however possible, except our working environment was inherently challenging. Ideally, we would close all windows, turn on the air conditioner and keep cold beverages at hand to regulate our body temperature. The reality is that more often than not there was no AC unit at the death site, or else it would be entirely out of order. Windowless spaces weren't entirely out of the realm of possibility, either; in those occasions we could only hope that the dusty ceiling fan would still work. I guess the one saving grace is that bodies are usually discovered way earlier in the summer. It only takes a couple of sweltering days for a rapidly decaying corpse to smell accordingly.

Our body bags carried plenty of shirtless or even naked bodies. This could have been due to the personal preferences of the deceased, though you couldn't rule out mental health issues or even simply poverty at play. One would be wise not to pass unwarranted judgement nor jump to conclusions.

For Starters, Dignity Is a Privilege Out of Reach for Many

Dignity: a composed or serious manner or style; a sense of pride in oneself; self-respect. A lofty concept, if also one that relies on your essential needs being sufficiently met. Those who die in solitude – loners, elderly people, financially disadvantaged individuals, or a combination of all of these – often fail to secure the necessities of life.

American psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow (1908 – 1970) determined that human needs can be categorized into two types: deficiency needs and growth needs. The former are lower order needs, while the latter arise from the desire to grow as an individual. Both are arranged in a five tier model known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. As in any hierarchy, there's no reaching the top without first climbing from the bottom.

Dating back to the Spring and Autumn period (771 – 476 BC), Chapter Herdsman, *Guanzi* (《管子·牧民》) warned readers: "...when there are adequate stores, people will know what are decorums; when the people have enough of food and clothing, they will know what is honor."¹ Honor, self-respect, and shame are all secondary concerns when your survival is at stake. We cannot possibly expect anyone in dire straits to spare energy for noble ideals when their next meal, the roof above their head, their clothing, and the means to move freely are not guaranteed. Instead, we should acknowledge our privilege that we lead stable lives conducive to the pursuit of our own, unique life values and goals. There is certainly a direct correlation between these two.

¹ Reference: "Introduction: 'Wisdom' in Traditional Chinese Culture and Its Application in Modern Management," *Chinese Wisdom and Modern Management*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.

Frugality

Frugality is an unfortunate, involuntary badge of pride and honor for people in strained circumstances. I have met my fair share of vulnerable folks – whether elderly or otherwise disadvantaged – that continued relying on low income or meager subsidies even after they'd eventually managed to step out of the streets and secure some form of rental housing. More often than not, they were forced to go without in their daily lives. They'd open the door to any summer visitors with sweat beading their foreheads, and insist that they did not need to turn on the air conditioner, if they even had any. They were much too frugal for such frivolities.

The truth is that it was far too costly for them to afford the electricity bill, or else the repair cost of their broken AC units. They would also never dare to approach their landlords to cover the costs, out of fear that the rent may go up or their lease be terminated. The best case scenario, for them, would be for the landlord to ignore their demands. The air conditioner became a pointless item of wall décor, and the tenants settled down for their umpteenth cold shower of the day, or else cracked open a window in the vain hope that a breeze would trickle into the house. The electric fan certainly wasn't there for comfort, not with those rotating blades threatening to send out gusts of hot air to compound an already sultry and miserable predicament.

Daytime does offer some respite to resourceful minds. Many seek refuge in public spaces that won't be too crowded and will be fitted with air conditioning. Libraries are nothing short of havens: spacious and comfortable, cool indoors, and never short of books and newspapers to entertain oneself. At the end of the day, though, you still have to go back home, where the steaming heat will punch you with an invisible yet inescapable force. This is a phenomenon known as nocturnal urban heat island effect, where densely populated urban areas suffer from higher nighttime temperatures as a result of the released heat accumulated during daytime by concrete buildings and asphalt roads.

Bedtime marks the end of another wretched day, except there's no rest in sight when your back is drenched with sweat again. But taking yet another cold shower before immediately jumping into bed could prove fatal for those with hypertension and heart issues. The sudden exposure to chilled water leads to the rapid contraction of the blood vessels in the body, followed by a significant blood volume flowing back to the heart. The result is an equally sudden spike in blood pressure that could increasingly compromise the patient's already fragile health.

Poverty, Death and Sweltering Heat: A Rotten Trifecta

In any case, the beneficial effects of a cold shower can only go so far. Soon enough, the body is back to sticky unpleasantness. Our lonely dweller is alone at home, so why wouldn't they take off their clothes? They get naked hoping that the more they expose their skin, the more comfortable

they'll be. Then fate strikes – and, in death as in life, the deceased are stripped of their remaining dignity when their remains are found weeks later amidst the pitiful mess where they took their last breath, the ultimate grotesque sight.

I still remember one of these wretched stories. That summer, we'd been called to a "sardine tin" – residential units subdivided into an array of smaller rental units typically aimed at low-income families or individuals. The iron roof meant that, in the summer months, the property turned into a furnace divided into a total of eight narrow chambers.

One of them was now our death site, a room barely measuring one and a half square meters. Most of this surface had been seized by a single bed frame covered with straw mats and a thin quilt pushed to a corner. What remained only allowed the space reserved for the door to open, a simple storage cabinet with some personal items and – miracles of modern technology – an LCD TV propped up on piles of magazines at the end of the bed. But the ill-fated tenant of this room was no longer in need of any worldly entertainment nor material possessions, which in any case only amounted to a backpack and some clothes hung behind the door since they could not possibly fit in the rickety wardrobe. The tenant had clearly had some hoarding tendencies, because there was a collection of ashtrays, beer cans, off-brand cigarette packs, and mobile phone carcasses spread through the scattering of everyday refuse.

It was a wretched space for a wretched body. Naked, lifeless, decomposed flesh that had been decaying at a steady rhythm for who knows how long. At night, the remains stewed further into putrefaction under the dim light of a night lamp plugged in a socket. But if the fluorescent tube light fixture had given up long ago, the slightly dazzling electric fan had persisted, its relentless blades – click, click, click – circulating the putrid stench of the blackened body crawling with maggots. There wasn't even space to turn around. We had to drag the remains directly into the body bag spread on the ground.

Nowadays, there is plenty of evidence pointing out to an epidemic of loneliness among the elderly, many of whom spend their final days in squalor. Our modern society deems them useless, and so they shrivel away, dispossessed and deprived of any human contact. By the time we make our entrance, we're only there with one purpose: biohazard clean-up.

II: Seasonal Joy, Inauspicious Fate: On the Complexities of Festive Days

To be sure, there was more to our job than just weather conditions. The calendar of festivities can also be very triggering for people in vulnerable circumstances. After all, humans are social animals. It truly takes a village, one ruled by complex bonds – mothers and infants, family, citizenship. Loneliness effectively implies exclusion from these communities, ultimately compromising the ability of an individual to survive. Alienation can exacerbate the feeling of loneliness, thus leading to worsening mental and physical health issues. At the end of every tether, some people end up faced with a single and tragic way out.

Early onset conditions and lifestyle factors are the root of more serious health issues down the road. Such is the finding of a growing body of research, including the WHO 2011 Study on Global Ageing and Adult Health (SAGE), which warned about the impact of sustained loneliness in the elderly. As a demographic, they are exponentially more exposed to chronic issues such as neglect, strain, isolation and lack of support or a stable family environment. This has to be paired with the fact that older adults typically experience a greater range of significant life transitions – retirement, widowhood, empty nest syndrome, age-related health issues – that will equally impact, or even sever, their social connections. Solitude is indeed a silent killer, perhaps more so than other better-known factors.

Our services were at full steam around the three major modern festivals – Lunar New Year, Christmas and Valentine’s Day. The latter two may not be acknowledged in the traditional lunar calendar, but their present importance cannot be underestimated. They’re pushed onto our agendas by corporations and companies in our gradually westernizing modern society. They also share the same mandatory pattern of obligatory gift exchanges, travel, and indulgence in lavish meals, all in the course of a single day.

Nowadays, some people equate heartfelt expressions of love and affection with an almost ritualistic display of material gestures. If the expensive bouquets, meals, and gifts (the modern day equivalents of ritual offerings) do not appear in a timely manner, the relationship may turn rocky. Emotions consequently run high for quarrelling lovers and lonely singles alike, triggering potential self-harm and suicidal episodes that sometimes lead to fatal consequences.

*The world at large unfolds like a lengthy dream
How many autumn chills a fleeting lifetime holds within?
On the wings of the nightly wind, a rustle of leaves from the corridor.
Sight I catch of my hoar eyebrows, my thinning temples.
I have but cheap wine only, and often worry that guests are all but a trickle.
Clouds shroud the bright disc of the moon frequently.
Shall I find some kindred, solitary shadow to join mine in this mid-autumn night?
I raise my glass. Desolation tilts my gaze northward.*

Su Shi (蘇軾) (1037 – 1101) (Song Dynasty) *Moon over West River* (西江月・世事一場大夢)

Statistics point out at a yearly rise in suicides before and after the Lunar New Year holidays –the quintessential family festival in Chinese culture. However, many don’t get to bask in this highly anticipated reunion. Not everyone gets to return to the family home, even if they still have one such haven in their lives.

Whatever the reason, some spend the holidays alone, suffocating under the overwhelming weight of their burden until they cannot take it any longer. It’s no surprise that we’re right back to business after the festivities have concluded, and these bodies are only found later since the

cold weather delays odors. The alarm is usually raised by the deceased's landlord; few cases are reported by family members or friends who suspect a tragedy. Victims tend to be either middle-aged or elderly folks, and the common denominator is their vulnerability. They are typically either unemployed or struggling to secure a stable job; they are economically disadvantaged, and they are loners. Their final backdrop differs little from one case to the next. They live and die in stuffy, messy spaces where the stench of decomposition competes with the pungent, sour smell of a dusty cornucopia of objects, sundries, unopened medicine bags, and trash. Lives that deteriorated from badly monitored health issues, monetary woes, and family tragedies, cut short amidst the numbing seasonal bustle.

When It Rains, It Pours

For each suicide there is a story of strained family dynamics, sometimes tracing back decades. If the deceased had problems, so did their families. It's not unusual that they refuse to come forward. Landlords then have to contact us, powerless in the face of the situation.

In one such story, someone committed suicide by charcoal intoxication during Lunar New Year. Three weeks passed until the landlord found out, and though the police notified the family and they showed up for all relevant procedures, they made it clear that that would be the extent of their involvement. They hadn't seen their now deceased relative for decades, and they believed that this was all on the landlord. "Surely you made enough money from us, what with having rented your apartment for so many years. You deal with the aftermath." The landlord must have been appalled at that final text, and he seemed bitter that the family had cut all contact afterwards. When I met him before entering the death site, he looked forlorn. I'm not sure how he managed to handle everything on his own.

"The man truly was in low spirits. I came to gift him some fruit for the season, and he told me he'd lost his will to live. Too many issues, too many ailments. I tried to encourage him to listen to his doctor, stay positive, all that stuff. Turns out he was dead serious! And then his family just washed their hands of the whole damn thing. It's all so inauspicious. I'm going to be done for if word goes out and people see the property as some haunted house. I won't even be able to sell it."

If I hadn't feared that he would lash out at me, I'd have reminded him that a landlord was legally bound to perform a number of less-than-palatable duties. Instead, I offered to check the apartment first in hopes of placating him. "You wait for me here, don't worry. Maybe things won't be that bad."

But I knew things would be that bad, and then some, as soon as I approached the iron gate and the foul putridness hit me like a ton of bricks. I opened the door and my eyes were met with a macabre scene right by the front balcony. I saw the necktie used in the suicide, still dangling from the horizontal frame of the aluminum door and window, swinging in the breeze. I also saw a pool of bodily fluids – fat, excrement, blood – staining the floor with their yellowish, dark brown, and transparent hues. The room was bleak and almost empty of any furniture beyond the pieces

that had assisted the man in his ominous adieu: a chair, a wooden coffee table, and a kicked-over bench.

The ground was carpeted with empty cigarette packs and bottles. Cigarette butts piled on every container placed on the coffee table, and there was an assortment of unopened, expired medicine bags. These pointed to an interesting phenomenon. Taiwan's National Health Insurance (NHI) provides universal, mandatory coverage to all citizens and foreign residents. It is a high-performing, government-run, single-payer system, funded primarily through payroll-based premiums, with generous premium subsidies for low-income households and other sectors of the population. Coverage includes the bulk cost of surgeries, outpatient and inpatient care, medicines, etc. Thus, ordinary folks only need pay some basic, inexpensive medical fees. Their clinic or hospital will in turn liaise with the NHI to report, calculate and collect all due medical expenses. Unfortunately, some individuals derive a certain feeling of safety and comfort from frequent doctor appointments. They might go to the hospital when they are not sick. More often, they obsess over perceived health problems while refusing to address the actual illness as diagnosed by physicians. These patients end up with a hoard of medicines collected from repeated hospital visits, most of which are never used. It is a situation in which everyone loses. The NHI ends up in deficit due to overuse of services, and the patient receives little benefit from their misuse of the system. This vulnerable population eventually faces rapidly declining health due to untreated illness, and their bodies are tragically overcome by disease.

I rushed back downstairs to report my findings to the landlord. He looked a little worried and wanted details, but for his sake I didn't mention the necktie.

The approach worked, and the bitterness on his face softened. "Just deal with this as quickly as possible. His relatives may not show up, but this mess still needs cleaned up. That poor devil lived here for so long, we might as well just approach it as a renovation. That was his fate, you know? And this is mine. I gotta deal with this."

After this pep talk to himself, the landlord launched into action. When push came to shove, he found he was equipped with the emotional awareness to acknowledge his lot and face the challenge. Not everyone is able to do quite the same.

Piecing Together a Broken Mirror

Lunar New Year is also rife with deaths by suicide on account of unbearable psychological distress stemming from the season's frequent family disputes and opportunities for relatives to exert *emotional blackmail*. This is a term coined by American psychotherapist Susan Forward to broadly describe a behavioral pattern where an individual is unable to take responsibility for their own negative emotions. Instead, attempts are made to force those around them to comply with their demands, through threats or other stratagems – think your stereotypical toxic parent exclaiming, "I do everything for you, so why don't you just do as I say?"

Are these words uttered out of love, or a need to control? And, should the child pay heed, is it because they are simply good-natured or obedient, or is it an inability to act on their own, or even a foolish filial piety? The pressures that result from emotional blackmail can be difficult to understand, leaving the victim with no place to vent their frustration.

Though sometimes obscured by an eclipse, the sun and moon are always restored to their place in the sky. However, a broken mirror can never be made whole again. Likewise, for some wounded spirits, there is no assurance that healing will ever come.

When emotional blackmail and family distress become too overwhelming for a suffering individual, they may feel compelled to make a drastic and fatal decision. In the end, there is no way to pick up the pieces and start anew. Though the Lunar New Year was meant to be a period of rest and peaceful family reunions, these expectations can only be met as long as the family unit isn't irreparably broken.

And I wouldn't have my rest, either. Despite my every hope, I was once again cleaning another death site, breathing in the smell of charcoal. Only the pictures on the wall of the suite spoke of a warm past, now long gone. The bed, stained with dried blood, and the clay charcoal pot still propped up with bricks on the coffee table – what jarring remnants they were, hinting ominously at the abrupt disappearance of life.