

The Lightning Kid

By Ivy Ngeow

ONE DAY, YONG PING WAS PLAYING in the open fields, minding his own business, when suddenly he was struck by lightning.

Throughout that day, his mother had warned him against going out because the clouds were swollen and darkened with rain.

But Yong Ping, sensing the impending storm, was mesmerised by the trees, though faint through his myopia, which were outlined in orange by sunlight bursting from behind the cumulonimbi.

In the little sleepy town of Tangkak that strange summer afternoon, Yong Ping's short-sightedness was instantly corrected by the white searing numbness that passed through him from the black heavens. The miracle was then on the lips of each of the 90 inhabitants of Tangkak. Soon, news passed from lips to ears and ears to lips and so on and so forth about how a bolt of lightning restored a boy's eyesight, until a local reporter appeared at Yong Ping's house, the door of which was opened by his mother.

At first, his mother was taken aback by the reporter's interest. She might have only been a farmer, who had never used lipstick in her life, but she was not easily tempted into the lime-light. The reporter persisted with his keenness in interviewing Yong Ping, dangling the carrot of a sum of money.

The sum was so small that it was worth the wager to salvage the long-suffering local newspaper, which hitherto only ran news such as "impending droughts" and "local dressmaker wins cattle prize". Never before had a phenomenon of eyesight restoration by the natural element ever occurred, a natural element only known to be murderous on any other occasion.

The sum of money to Yong Ping's mother, however, was large enough for the purchase of a small tractor, something they had dreamt of for a year or so. "All right, then," said Yong Ping's mother, and the reporter set about his business of interviewing Yong Ping, who was playing with the dog.

The boy was asked to describe in every detail how the miracle took place, and if there were any warnings in the hours or days before it happened. The boy answered truthfully that there were none.

"Are you a religious boy, Yong Ping?" asked the reporter.

Yong Ping was puzzled. "What does that mean?" he said.

"Do you ... do you pray? To a God?"

"Why, yes. All the time." "Which God?" asked the reporter.

"I don't know. A few," said Yong Ping.

The reporter wanted to establish if Yong Ping ever prayed for his short sightedness to be cured and the boy said "never". How bad was his eyesight? Yong Ping didn't know, and his mother, who was also at the interview, said it was bad; and that he couldn't see faraway scarecrows or read road signs. He had glasses, but they were his grandfather's and made his eyes worse, so he stopped wearing them.

"Yong Ping always walked into things at home," said his mother, "but now his eyesight is perfect; he can see faraway things that none of the other villagers can see ... like an eagle."

Driving the tractor the following week, his mother heard their neighbour reading aloud, for the benefit of those who could not read or write, the article written by the reporter. It said, in the article, there are laser operations to correct eyes, but they cost an arm and a leg. The villagers

laughed.

So it came to be that many, many more people read the article, especially those in the nearby town where there was a weed killer research plant, a radio station, a post office and a hospital.

At the hospital, the eye surgeons were horrified at the article and dismissed it as a fabrication of a struggling newspaper. The staff at the weed killer research plant were alarmed because they interpreted the article as a red herring, a conspiracy or a warning from the great Somebody. Massive amounts of further research were undertaken straightaway to establish if this was true, thereby creating many employment opportunities for people all over the country to work in the weed-killer research plant.

The post office amusingly saw the delivery of many fan letters to Yong Ping, many of them girls the same age who went to school in town and had enclosed photographs of themselves.

Yong Ping's mother was a strict woman who denied her son the pleasure of reading his letters. She said

they were distracting and he could not concentrate on school if he started correspondence with these fans. He was after all, still very young, and she wanted him to have a successful job in the nearby town such as at the weed-killer research plant, radio station, post office and hospital. Then he would not run the risk of farming hazards like standing in an open field and being struck by lightning again.

The radio station, however, was interested in conducting a radio interview with Yong Ping for a nationwide broadcast.

Yong Ping, the wonder boy. Yong Ping and the miracle of eyesight restoration. Yong Ping this, Yong Ping that. By this time, his mother half-regretted the bribe she had taken from the local reporter, although there was a marked improvement in her agricultural activities.

The boy, however, started resenting his mother for hijacking his fan mail, and his friends had also dwindled away because they thought he had become a superboy whilst they were merely boys who played in the open fields and had never been struck by lightning.

Yong Ping also resented his mother because she turned down the radio interview opportunity. Why not, he thought. The previous interview made him famous not only in Tangkak, but in the nearby town as well. It also got his mother a tractor. So why couldn't he go right ahead with the interview and win his mother something else, like a hi-fi system with radio? In effect, as you may well guess, that was exactly what Yong Ping did. A full home entertainment system with karaoke possibilities was negotiated for his mother which he knew she was secretly delighted with, although tears of disappointment at his disobedience were shed.

Even as she tuned in to the interview, her heart filled with trepidation, that his voice, her own son's voice was listened to by hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in the country. She had no idea of the extent of transmission, all started by one bolt of white light. Like threads of liquid mercury, electricity had passed from her son's eyes into people's ears and back into her heart like a stake as hot and precise as the sliver of current that started it all.

After the radio broadcast, more

letters rained in and Yong Ping read them with stored relish after his mother had gone to bed. One by one he read them in the aura of a kerosene lantern, and re-sealing them carefully so his mother would not find out. Yong Ping's heart clapped with thunderous fear that his mother would suddenly walk in, but each letter only confirmed his star status. He was no longer Yong Ping the village boy, but Yong Ping the scientifically miraculous breakthrough.

Scientists, sceptics and psychics alike had agreed that this was no ordinary stroke of luck. All the others who were struck only perished seconds later, charred and unrecognisable, while those millions of volts only singed Yong Ping's cornea.

As Yong Ping lay in bed, he was particularly drawn to one letter, which was from the top ophthalmologic university research laboratory in the country, which wanted him as a subject for research. There was also a

scholarship included in it, where he could study in the finest boys' high school in the Big City.

"The Big City," Yong Ping murmured, unable to contain his excitement and his shock. All the boys would be so envious. He would never have had the chance to go to the Big City otherwise.

The only people who went there from the village were girls who became prostitutes, his mother had once said. They plied their skills or non-skills, on merchants, sailors, soldiers and thieves. He had heard stories of how the girls thought they could do it for a couple of years and then come home with their savings to buy cattle or fields. But they never returned. Some even died of illness, were murdered or both. And the money? They never saved a cent.

But the Big City. Yong Ping sighed. The lights, the tall buildings, the museums, the port and shops. He had seen them in his mother's wall calendar, but there were only 12 images. Now it was time to see them all.

In the next two weeks, Yong Ping planned his escapade by retreating into a secretive life. His mother suspected nothing, attributing his quietness and solace to adolescent mood swings. One drizzly morning, Yong Ping slipped out before his mother awoke, and like a bolt of lightning, he was out of Tangkak via a hitched ride

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in the back of a lorry.

A day and a half later, Yong Ping arrived at the university laboratory whose address was on the letter they wrote him. He was surprised that everyone in the white lab coats was drinking coffee and reading newspapers. He introduced himself as though he was reading out the headlines he had made. The people in the lab coats laughed. They thought it was quite cute that he summarised his newsworthiness so succinctly.

Yong Ping was made to wait in a room where lunch was being served, with other newsworthy kids. A girl who got into university at eight years of age. A boy who had been transplanted with an ape's heart. Another who was half of a pair of successfully separated Siamese twins. They were all there to be research subjects.

At once, Yong Ping, who had been led to believe, by himself, the media, whatever, that he was one-of-a-kind, felt deceived.

Actually, the other kids were all one-of-a-kind, but Yong Ping had expected the red carpet and the bulb-flashing paparazzi.

Nevertheless, as agreed, he went through with the interviews and the elite education promised.

Meanwhile, Yong Ping's mother was taken ill due to anxiety and depression at his mysterious disappearance. Luckily, she received a letter from him which she showed to everyone in Tangkak until it tore at the creases where it once folded.

Everyone at Yong Ping's school was gifted and exceptional. Yong Ping slowly lost his reputation as the lightning kid.

With the advent of films, urban McFeeding, excessive reading in bed, in the park and everywhere else, eye check-ups were soon necessary. With the use of computers to the level of confidante and appendage, Yong Ping's eyesight quickly deteriorated.

He spent 10 years of his post-lightning life in the Big City.

He only went there to know what it was about. He also saw himself as a prodigy, a sensation, the boy whose eyes God touched. But the only sensation that remained was the caustic dryness on his eyes left by pollution and late nights. Now a myopic youth with a bright future, his view of the Big City seemed bleary.

When Yong Ping returned to Tangkak, he was a bespectacled man.

He thought of giving his mother a television but her eyesight had been robbed by cataract feasting on her cornea. Yong Ping thought, didn't someone say there were operations to correct vision impairment? It was in the article. Surely it was true.

Many specialist doctors whom Yong Ping paid handsomely to treat his mother said that her diabetic condition was too serious for an opera-

tion, as her retinal blocked vessels might not heal properly, and therefore she could even lose what little sight there was left. Crushed, Yong Ping tried hard not to pray for lightning to strike his mother, for that was exactly the miracle she needed.

Yong Ping's vision of working close to home sharpened. He found himself a scientific job at the weed-killer research plant facing the field

where it all started. In the end, there was no memory, no polemic, no history. In the end, there was no recollection of the lightning kid. After all, he was only Yong Ping from the Big City, not Tangkak.

Every atmospheric ion had vanished, every newspaper lost, like phantom summer rain. And as though it

never really happened, a perfect vision had been squeezed into a lens, only now it seemed imperfect, irreversible. Yong Ping's life, now seen through membranous milky eyes, swept along until the world had completely forgotten how and why the boy had left in the first place. 5

