

Sweat

I

Bo had to the best of his knowledge only been into two different buildings in his life. Even this is an exaggeration though, for one was little more than a shack constructed of bamboo and assorted foliage. This structure he called home. The second building, which cast a great pall over Bo's dwelling, sprawled hungrily over the small volcanic island and consumed its greater part. By Bo and the one-hundred other residents of the island it was known simply as "The Sweating." Not one of the residents of the island speculated as to the name's origin; it is likely that it had been in place for many years. One of the few certainties that existed among the residents of the island is that The Sweating referred not to the manual labor the people endured while inside the building, but to the great plumes of sooty gray smoke which emanated from the building's every pore. Words such as dioxin and sulfur dioxide were not familiar to the island peoples. Perhaps with this knowledge the islanders would have realized why so little vegetation grew on the island. Those who lived on the island were not normal in the traditional sense. Some were missing fingers or whole arms, others had oddly shaped faces, and still others were abnormally short.

It was only Bo who had some concept of what the world was like outside of their small island. The caretaker of Bo, who was especially old, told him that they worked and belonged to the Republic of Singapore. Most of the island's other caretakers did not speak with the children they were responsible for. Bo's caretaker, who was called Nuwa, was lively and rebellious enough to make conversation with the young Bo. While not technically illegal, talking when it was not necessary was frowned upon as a waste of time. Who established these guidelines was never clear to Bo.

II

A gigantic steaming barge exploding outwards with garbage and human filth of every kind was the only thing to visit the island. Like The Sweating, the barge gave off much smoke, but of a blacker variety. The garbage was lifted in large lumps off of the barge by crane and placed near The Sweating. The crane, which seemed to move with a mind of its own, frightened the island people deeply. Sometimes a person would accompany the trash onto the island. The man, for Bo believed that only a man could walk with such stiffness and apathy, deposited small parcels of food onto the beach which were to be divided evenly amongst the islanders. He wore a thick black suit which covered his entire body and even his head. The suit did not form a helmet at the head so much as it did a tight-fitting cap. Where the people expected eyes were two jet-black pieces of glass. Other than deliver the meager sustenance required to keep the islanders alive, the man would supervise the work in The Sweating for

long periods of time. The man stood so still that Bo began to believe he was not a man at all, but some kind of creation much like the crane.

On one such occasion, the usual bell which signaled the end of work in The Sweating was ignored by the man.

Jin, who had somehow established himself as the unofficial ruler of the island, approached the man and spoke surely, "The bell has rung. Our day's task has been fulfilled." The man in black did little more than shake his head in firm negation.

The shovel in Bo's hands grew heavier, and its poorly smoothed wooden handle began to splinter in his reddened hands. As the hours passed, and nightfall eventually came, the garbage which Bo scooped and placed into the furnace so unremittingly crossed the metaphysical boundary from task to burden. The shoveling, done every day, was how Bo fulfilled his duty to the creator. Without this show of subservience and faith which had been instilled within him from the time of birth, Bo knew he would suffer the ultimate punishment. What the ultimate punishment entailed Bo never fully understood. Without this clarification, the ultimate punishment became even more menacing and absolute. His own conception of it was utter and eternal darkness. Bo had secretly acknowledged to himself that nothing would get done without the ultimate punishment.

In the darkness Bo chanced a look at Jin and saw that his face was contorted in anger, but that he shoveled with more ardency and vigor than Bo knew was necessary. The shoveling, it was known, was to incinerate the garbage and get it out of the way. Only the men did this. The women went upstairs to a place forbidden to the men where it was widely believed that they somehow created children. Bo knew better, the dark-covered man always made a single trip into the women's zone and carried out a large wooden crate which was almost certainly not filled with children. It was silent. Beyond this, Bo knew nothing of its contents.

Bo heard the clatter of wood on steel and turned to see Jin's shovel on the floor. Bo closed his eyes for just a moment and forced the shovel into the steaming heap of garbage. *Don't do this, Jin*, Bo thought. Bo heard the sound of foot steps approaching the dark-covered man. Then, Jin's firm, resonating voice.

"The bell has rung many hours ago. We must sleep if we are to continue our task tomorrow." Several seconds later a loud explosion was heard. In his panic, Bo loosened his grip on the shovel and let it drop to the floor. He chanced a glance in the opposite direction and saw a hole in the center of Jin's forehead, with blood pouring down his face and onto the floor around him. In one stiff mechanical motion, the dark-covered man returned the smoking weapon to its holster at his waist. Moments after Bo picked up his shovel he heard a deadened thud akin to the sound of a rock dropped on the beach. Bo did not allow himself to cry.

In five minutes the dark-covered man, with a simple implicit hand gesture, allowed the fifty-odd male workers to leave and return to their shelters.

III

In the darkness of his walk home that night, Bo discerned a peculiar sparkle to a small area of the ocean, beneath a bed of green algae. Upon closer inspection, Bo found a translucent plastic bag with what he thought to be a crumpled instruction manual inside. The choice of picking the bag up meant death if he was caught, but in his overwhelming curiosity he did so anyway.

Why would someone throw this instruction manual out to sea? Could it depict what the women are making in the forbidden zone? Bo had recently acquired an intense interest in all things womanly, but especially in what went on in the forbidden zone. Bo felt that if he knew what went on there, he would understand women in their entirety.

To conceal the bag and its contents, Bo carried a heavy armful of foliage back to his shelter along with the bag. While it was extremely late, Bo found Nuwa was still wide awake.

Nuwa was looking intently at Bo's hands when she spoke, "You brought the foliage here to patch up in case there was a storm, Bo?"

"Yes, I..." Bo's voice trailed off as he realized how ridiculous his excuse was. "I'll go in back now." The corners of Nuwa's mouth lifted so slightly that Bo blinked and thought nothing of it.

"Be careful, Bo." After several minutes of doing nothing of consequence, Bo came back into the shelter to find Nuwa asleep. He crawled up onto his small bamboo cot and took out the contents of the bag.

"WAR DELIBERATIONS CONTINUE," were the first booming words Bo came across. His literacy, while existent, was dependent on the few words he had picked up from the labels within the garbage as well as the minimal instructions on the walls of The Sweating. Bo struggled to make out the rest of the article. At the very least, it became clear to Bo that this was not the instruction manual he had been longing for. Bo skimmed the rest of the article and was able to comprehend that a great war had been going on for some time, and that it encompassed Singapore. Bo lost interest in the heap of papers and began to tuck it under his cot when a peculiar headline in the corner of the paper caught his eye. *"NEW INCINERATOR FUELS SINGAPORE"* with the subtitle *"At a Cost."* Bo read the entire article, for, while it was small, he knew it concerned himself in a big way.

"15 years ago, the 100 slaves acquired in the Treaty of Don-Hya were sent to a small island south of Singapore to work in a combination incinerator and factory. Incinerators such as that one, in addition to getting rid of waste, can heat water and generate steam for a significant amount of electricity. With the new incinerator opening last week in Northern Singapore, incinerator efficiency has increased by almost 200%. Singaporean energy officials estimate that the new incinerator will satisfy the energy demands of 10,000 households. Environmentalists complain that the chemicals released into the atmosphere from incineration are too great a compromise to make. A long list of chemicals generated by incinerators includes some of the most toxic to man, Dioxins and Furans. These byproducts can cause birth-defects in humans, increase the likelihood of getting cancer by many fold, and cause any number of other ailments. The Singapore Ministry of Health estimates that at least 80% of Singaporeans are inhaling dangerous amounts these chemicals and advises the immediate purchase of surgical masks or other breathing shields.

"Dioxin." Bo muttered the word a few times under his breath. It sounded terrible. Bo thought it sounded like a little worm that could burrow inside his gut and gnaw away stupidly at his unprotected flesh until one day, it would kill him. It could not be seen, per se, but its effect was still measurable. Now the sweat was more than just a benign darkness pouring quietly from the factory. It was poison, and Bo had to make it stop.

IV

The next time the dark-covered man came to the island, Bo attempted to speak to him. The day was particularly hot, and Bo had been engaged in shoveling for several hours. In this duration, Bo had been gathering the enormous amount of courage required to approach the man. He tried to abate his pounding heart by breathing slowly. Then, he softly put down his shovel and walked towards the man.

"The sweat is killing us," Bo spoke in earnest. The man did not acknowledge that Bo had spoken let alone answer him. "Surely there is a better way to get rid of the waste without paying such a price!" Bo tried again. The man looked towards Bo's unattended pile of trash expectantly. The other islanders looked at Bo, faces contorted in utter fear. Losing his sureness, Bo stepped backwards towards the pile. He picked up his shovel and slowly heaved it into the steaming pile of waste. After what felt like days on Bo's weary shoulders, the man released the workers to their shelters.

When the man left with the crate from the forbidden zone, Bo pursued him. Nearly jogging to keep up with the man's extraordinary gait, Bo unleashed what he thought to be his most powerful reasoning.

"I would rather die now than continue working in The Sweating," Bo ventured dangerously, "we are slowly poisoning ourselves and it is a terrible demise. There must be a better way." The man responded for the first time to Bo's words and slowed, dropping the

crate into the sand before him. Then, unexpectedly, the man whirled to reveal his front. At the sight, Bo whitened feverishly and dropped to his knees in the sand, revolted at the nightmare which stood before him. The man had removed the upper portion of his suit to reveal red ridges like waves splayed over his chest. The most disturbing sight, however, was that where his lungs should have been were two great, heaving, plastic balloons that somehow connected to his throat. Their metallic skin glistened in the light of the baking sun above. At the sight of Bo on his knees, the man cackled demonically. Then, he stopped abruptly.

"Do you think that you are the only one that feels the pain of the sweat?" The man's voice was rough and mechanical, but so quiet that Bo struggled to make out what he was saying. "Do you think that you are special here on the island? That you are somehow worse off than the rest of us?" It was Bo's turn to be silent. "The sweat is inescapable but it is necessary. The war elevates our need for the energy and the weapons." Still, Bo did not speak. "I will not kill you because you have some years in you yet. Now, go back to your shelter." It was not so much a command as it was a force, and it pushed Bo's shattered body towards home. There was no escape, he knew. Man had traversed a line too terrible to cross back now. The sweat, in some form or the other, was there to stay.

Afterword

Like most stories where the setting is dystopian by nature, the purpose of this story is to warn the public and not tempt it into fear or hysteria. Most people are familiar with the idea that factory emissions are not safe. But how dangerous are these chemicals, this "sweat" if you will?

In a science class I was shown a PBS documentary, "Trade Secrets, A Moyers Report," about the dangers of various workplace chemicals. Many of these chemicals have not been tested adequately for safety and are being pumped into the air by factories even as I write this. On my own time I looked into some of these chemicals such as dioxins, furons, and sulfur dioxide. Not only are most of these chemicals and their analogs carcinogens, but they are detrimental to the body's vital processes. Why then, are these chemicals produced? The answer is long and intricate, but in short, they are used to make things we need including energy. The logical action that must be taken then is not to eliminate our need for energy, but to find clean and efficient energy methods. Incinerators, such as the one mentioned in the story, are useful for clearing away garbage and generating power but these benefits come at a cost. MIT recently had an exposition of so-called "sustainable" energy methods. The one that intrigued me the most, and the one I most wanted to fit into the story, has been coined "green-coal." Little more than specially treated algae, these plants can cut CO₂ and nitrous oxide emissions to fractions of what they were originally. Better, the chemically saturated algae can be used as a sort of a bio-diesel fuel to power any number of things. Ideas like this are what shed hope on the future; it is imperative that the world begin to take matters where energy is concerned seriously if we are to ensure bright years to come.