

The doctor had been very kind. She explained to Ma that what she had was “slow leukaemia.” Ma, who had a history of hearing what she wanted to hear, latched onto “slow” and ignored the “leukaemia” bit. She wanted to go home, where she could wash and set her hair properly; Sandra and her siblings could talk to the doctor for her. Sandra managed to persuade her that there were still tests to be done, and it was better to get them over with than have to keep coming back to the hospital.

Ma was admitted six days ago, just before Sandra’s forty-fourth birthday, so Sandra reckoned she deserved a belated birthday treat. She arrived at the dog petting café ten minutes before it opened—she thought it might give her an edge to bond with the dogs alone before the other customers got there. Even though she was officially on leave, she had a packed day ahead, and she could feel the weight of every task in her large work backpack pulling at her shoulders, despite the bag’s much-touted memory-foam straps and patented weight distribution system.

“For how many?” The young hostess was cuddling a stout Corgi with a proprietary air that made it clear the dog belonged to her and not the café.