

Gold, Paper and Bare Bones

Farihan Bahron

“Wak, oh Wak! Enough staring or not? How many more?”

Wak Dolah is rudely interrupted from his daydream and hot coffee by Bhat, one of the regular customers of Dinar Restaurant at Jalan Simpang Bedok.

The restaurant has stubbornly stuck to its slogan ‘Best Prata in Singapore’ even though many other shops offer softer and crispier pratas with a more stinging dalca curry. Jalan Simpang Bedok has been the shop’s home for three decades now.

Still, Wak Dolah is happy with the efficient service and the attitude of the waiters who are friendly but not smothering.

“Don’t know lah, Bhat. Wak also not sure. Maybe got another 50 points.”

“Alah, Wak! All the accounts are in your hand, right? Now is the year 2036, Wak. Not difficult to check lah. Just press only.”

Spurred by Bhat’s insistence, Wak Dolah turns his left palm up as if to make doa, and then uses his left thumb to press the chip, implanted in all elderly folks, at the middle of his palm.

Wak Dolah’s fingerprint acts as the access code to unlocking his personal portal. A three-dimensional hologram appears, hovering above his left palm. With only his index and middle fingers, Wak Dolah expertly navigates through his medical report, voice recorder, daily journal and expenses report.

Wak Dolah swipes past several other fancy app icons until he gets to his points collection app.

“99,000... 900... 50... points. Hah, I’m right, got another 50 points.”

All elderly folks know that they need to get 100,000 points to enter the top tier level. This is especially crucial for elderly folks who are in their 80s, like Wak Dolah himself. The most exclusive status.

This coveted status is known as the ‘Retiree’ rank.

Anyone can climb up to the summit to become a Retiree, regardless of age or race. But they must rush to accumulate the points. Or so they say.

Once they are in the Retiree rank, citizens will be given personalised and special privileges. Free medical treatment. Food, drinks and clothes will all be half-priced. Whatever is left of their mortgage will be wiped clean.

No need to work if they don’t want to. They can stay home to play with their grandchildren. Take self-improvement courses. Travel the world.

These were their election promises. Who wouldn’t want a life as secure as that?

But it isn’t easy to reach the Retiree rank. Firstly, one must be a true citizen. A native of the nation.

Secondly, they’ll need to successfully collect 100,000 points on their own merit. And thirdly, the points cannot be transferred or inherited. Each point collected by an individual is their absolute right.

No one fully fathoms the workings of this point collection matrix. The original algorithm was designed by a group comprising top mathematicians, sociologists, lawyers

and philosophers.

Each point has a different intrinsic value. For instance, being punctual at work earns you 5 points, adhering to road regulations earns you 1 point, but if you beat a red light, you will be deducted 35 points.

If you randomly ask people about the reasons for the weightages, each citizen will offer their own interpretation.

There are points with higher payouts. For example, a person who pays their income tax early will get 100 points, and donating to a non-profit organisation earns you 75 points, while supporting your aged parents is worth 50 points.

Wak Dolah had begun collecting points since he was a teenager. His ayah, Haji Rufiya, once offered him a piece of advice off the back of the Vietnam war. “Dolah, ayah wants you to be a useful person later in life. Ayah sold all our gold, replaced it with paper money, so you can carry on with your studies. Collect many, many points. Gold got no more value. Nixon made this happen.”

Gold is worthless. This sounds strange. But the reality is that a currency is determined by market demands. Throughout history, the price of commodities like wheat, coffee beans, nicotine, cotton and crude oil had exceeded that of gold. These had become the master currency at different times.

But, in the period that Wak Dolah had grown up, it's paper money that had increased its value by leaps and bounds, peaking beyond the summits of graphs, leaving behind its competitors to become the most sought-after currency of the world.

Everybody craves paper money. Everybody loves paper money. The kinds printed with icons of animals, or portraits of

national icons, the blue, the red, the yellow, the ones defaced by scribbings, the crumpled ones, those folded in stacks, the ones rolled in a bundle. Everyone is obsessed with paper money!

More and more people are hoarding paper money to accumulate their points. The higher their points, the closer they are to achieving Retiree status.

This is the life goal of every true citizen. Their minds have been indoctrinated with what appears to be the ideal destination. Wak Dolah is no exception.

Thus, Wak Dolah promised himself to garner as many points as possible for as long as he is able. He wants to work and contribute to the community so that his twilight years are secure. His late ayah loved to tease him, "Better look after the pennies..." And Wak Dolah would immediately reply, "So the pounds will look after themselves!"

Wak Dolah started his career at the very bottom. He was employed at the National Observatory Centre as an astronomer. It sounds like banal work. In truth, yes, it was extremely banal. Boring. And tedious.

Wak Dolah recalled a time in school when he had teased the actor who starred as an astronomer in the stage adaptation of the classic story, *The Little Prince*. He didn't expect to end up working in the same job.

He tabulated, named and documented star systems sprawled all across the expansive Milky Way.

Celebrating his fifteenth year gallivanting with the stars, he noticed that he had only accumulated 25,000 points.

There was more he needed to accomplish. He should pursue a more worthwhile career. One that could accelerate

his movement along life's trajectory. One that could bring him closer to the Retiree rank in the shortest time possible.

So, Wak Dolah sent out a flurry of job applications for posts that matched his education level, work experience and skin colour. Wak Dolah was fortunate that a multinational company was keen on taking him on full-time.

Wak Dolah was handed a role at the level of middle management suitable for his age that came with a nice title to boot. His name was clearly displayed on his lanyard pass as "Dolah bin Rufiya, Security Guard Executive".

He earned a lucrative salary. Wak Dolah was able to support his three children's education all the way up to university. He could afford staying in an ordinary house and provided a comfortable life for his family. Sometimes, they even went for holidays abroad. Just like in the Sheila Majid song, *jalan-jalan ke Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Las Vegas*.

He managed to boost his points too, reaching 85,000 when he turned 60. Wak Dolah was close to reaching Retiree rank. He would probably need to work another five years for his life to be set. That was his estimate. Or so he thought.

Some time in 2019, everything changed. The economy crashed. Like a space rocket whose crew had lost control. The worst recession since the Great Depression of 1929.

Every citizen today still remembers the hardship that befell them seventeen years ago. The prices of rice, bread, oil, sugar and salt spiked, breaking the inflation record to the extent that paper money lost its value. It became worthless. What remained was its inherent value, which meant its worth as paper, toilet paper and fuel for fire. It was reduced to its bare bones.

This signalled the end of the romance between citizens

and paper money. What used to be love degenerated into annoyance and then hatred that saw people curse paper money, step on it and hurl it far from them.

Wak Dolah wasn't spared the brutal ramifications of the economic downturn. The multinational company that hired him didn't survive. They had to shut down their major factories and warehouses. His colleagues had to return to their countries to seek refuge.

Wak Dolah lost his job.

Traumatic times like this will throw up a new player as the saviour. Then, it went by the name 'cryptocurrency'. What had first gained momentum as an underground currency that was only used in the black market and on the Dark Web slowly gained popularity with citizens. BitCoin, DogeCoin, PeerCoin and LiteCoin were some of the cryptocurrencies that became widespread on online networks.

Even the authorities wanted to have some skin in the game. They started computer software centres to mine and create a new national cryptocurrency called SingCoin.

Within the span of a few years, SingCoin had successfully replaced paper money, now in danger of extinction. The citizens became less jittery. They began buying and selling, trading and exchanging commodities using digital money.

That which has no body. That which has no mass. Still, the citizens weren't fazed. What was important to them was that the market was buzzing once again.

Wak Dolah took the opportunity to find a new job suited for his age and decades' worth of experience.

Now, he only needed 15,000 points to reach Retiree status. Having searched high and low, Wak Dolah eventually found

his match at a paper factory. The job was easy. He would be employed as a professional pointing person.

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Historians often say, "History will repeat itself." These are not empty words because history is often thought of as a wheel. Once it has completed one rotation, it will begin from the same point again. So too the fate of cryptocurrencies, SingCoin, BitCoin, DogeCoin and all their extended family members. Destroyed, buried, only after a few years of healthy growth.

Many citizens couldn't take to digital money. They likened it to the currency of a game. Can't touch it, or keep it in the safe, or hide it under the pillow; it feels like it doesn't commensurate with the value of the solid commodities it can buy.

A majority of citizens now want to return to the years before 1971 when the global community took gold as their primary unit of measurement. Gold glittered again. Blinding. Enchanting.

Who could've guessed? Only a handful of people believed in the repetition of history.

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Wak Dolah is still at Dinar Restaurant sipping his coffee little by little as he mulls over the one concern that had occupied his mind for 80 years. 50 points more... 50 points more... just 50 more.

He keeps revisiting the number of points he needs to amass. Lunchtime is almost over. Wak Dolah resolves to return to the paper factory, where he works. Time is running out.

Maybe in a week or two, he can collect the 100,000 points

that he has been pursuing all these years. After that, he would be able to sit for much longer with his other Retiree friends.

“Bhat, Wak go back to work first ah. Cannot delay, later cut 5 points.”

“Okay Wak, be careful at work... You’re very near the finish line. If too difficult, you just donate to an orphanage lah. Finish story.”

The day after, Bhat goes to Dinar Restaurant at the same time. But he doesn’t see Wak Dolah there.

Maybe Wak Dolah’s on sick leave, or maybe he’d finally crossed his last hurdle to attain Retiree status. Bhat smiles to himself at this thought. Maybe Wak Dolah has finally achieved his dream.

While waiting for his dish, Bhat turns on the portal on the palm of his hand to read the news. The usual stories appear a dime a dozen.

A train broke down, the language month was well-received, an interview with the last songkok maker, a fire broke out at a factory, the price of silver has gone up and so on. Nothing stands out to Bhat.

In the next few days, Bhat faithfully frequents Dinar Restaurant for lunch.

Today, he looks out for Wak Dolah who’s always punctual, except for the past two or three days. Bhat asks the waiter.

“Yan, have you seen Wak Dolah? He’s always here.”

“Aduh. Encik, you didn’t read the news ah? You never hear about the paper factory that caught fire in Tampines three days back? Until eight fire engines need to come to stop the fire. That one Wak Dolah’s workplace. Very unlucky one. I hear people say. Wak Dolah died in the fire.”

Bhat's eyes widen, his mouth agape in disbelief at what he had just heard.

“Then how about the 100,000 points that Wak Dolah worked so hard to collect?”

“What to do, Encik. Wasted, cannot bring to heaven.”

Iftar [Arb] The meal eaten by Muslims after sunset during the month of Ramadan.

Syurga [b.m] Heaven

Pantat gempal [b.m] Fat ass

Nasi ambeng [b.m] A fragrant rice dish consisting of steamed rice and chicken or beef curry.

Teh Tarik [b.m] A hot milk tea beverage found in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

Hikayat [b.m] Traditional Malay sagas or tales

Jawi [b.m] Jawi is a writing system used for writing the Malay language and several other languages of Southeast Asia, and is based on the Arabic script.

Ayah [b.m] Father

Tujuh [b.m] The number seven

Atok [b.m] Grandfather

Ustaz [b.m] A Muslim scholar

Syariah [b.m] Sharia or Islamic law

Serat Centhini [b.m] A twelve-volume compilation of Javanese tales and teachings, written in verse and published in 1814.

Laylatul Qadr [Arb] This is one of the most sacred nights in the Islamic calendar. It takes place in the last ten days of Ramadan.

Jahanam [Arb] Hell

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Doa [b.m] Prayer or supplication

Ayah [b.m] Father

Jalan-jalan ke [b.m] travel to

Songkok [b.m] A cap commonly worn among Muslim males in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and southern Philippines.

Encik [b.m] Honorific for Mister

Aduh [b.m] Ouch

(A)nak (I)bu

Ibu [b.m] Mother

Mother Techno

Kau tengah buat apa tu [b.m] “What are you doing?”

Mak [b.m] Mother

Mak, kita pat mana [b.m] “Mom, where are we?”

Assalamualaikum [Arb] Greeting used among Muslims which means ‘peace be upon you’.

Kau dah balek nak? Macam mana bagus tak? [b.m] “You’re home, daughter? Was it good?”

Suri, ambil kerusi, Siti dah balek [b.m] “Suri, grab the chair, Siti is home.”

Suri cakap Melayu? Ajar siapa? [b.m] “Suri speaks Malay? Who taught you?”

Aah, Mak pun dah pandai sebut bahasa omputih tu. OPEN, har kan... [b.m] “Aah, Mother can speak the white man’s language. OPEN right?”

Isolated Future 2# MacRitchie Treetops

Mampos [b.m] Literally translates to ‘to die’ but in this context it is a colloquial phrase to the effect of ‘kaput’ to signal one is in trouble.

Pontianaks [b.m] A female ghost who is said to have died during childbirth. The Pontianak features commonly in Malay, Indonesian and Singaporean folklore.

Kesian [b.m] Pity

The End

Hyang Maha Esa [b.m] Translates to ‘The One, True God’, though