

## The Manifestation of an Amorphous Soul

I was instructed to create ghosts using science.

I attended a meeting with a senior leader and then finally understood the reason behind the need to create ghosts. The suicide rate of the world's population had ballooned to a frighteningly high level, and someone thought the fear of the afterlife could stop it.

"How can we create ghosts when we don't even know whether or not they exist?" muttered one thermodynamic scientist. The administration wanted to create ghosts as a form of spiritism or spirit worship. It was like creating a new belief, or rather a new fear.

"There was one fascinating experiment regarding the weight of the soul." I raised my hand to speak and pressed the button to share the research data on Duncan MacDougall's 21-gram experiment with others. A 1907 trial was conducted in which severely ill patients were weighed with high-sensitivity scales. The scientists found that 21.3 grams were lost from the body's weight when people died. That loss was the spirit. And that spirit represented the ghost the state wanted to capture and create.

"We have to succeed then in retaining this weight of 21.3 grams," I concluded. Everyone nodded in agreement. "There is one place that can stop everything. Matter, light, or even time," said a voice. Everyone at the table turned to look. He was a cosmologist. "Black holes," he smiled, "if we can create black holes, we can capture and create ghosts too."

The creation of black holes was no longer an oddity in this day and age. Humans were able to use cosmic strings to travel through time. Using such high energy to create a simulated black hole was also not difficult. A mass of 21.3 grams was considerably easier to stop than light or time. We calculated that one millionth of the energy of a regular black hole

was enough, and we proceeded to conduct our experiments at the World Government's special secret lab. Everything went well.

"Why the Southeast Asia Special Administrative Region?" As a neuroscientist, I whispered to Raphael, the cosmologist at the center of this experiment. The simulated black hole machine worked very well. We could catch a ghost inside that black box containing corpses, spirits, and everything else. "We have to bring the ghosts to meet the people who believe in ghosts," Raphael said.

We got off the plane very early in the morning. Our team consisted of me, Raphael, an anthropologist Xishi and the soldier assigned to guide our journey through the 'savage' lands. Together, we helped each other lift the black hole box onto the back of a forklift so that it could endure the extreme conditions we were about to face. In front of us stood the lush and splendid evergreen forest of the Salween River Valley.

"Do you think this mission will succeed?" Raphael asked as the four of us were being bounced about in the vehicle traveling along very rugged forest lands. Fortunately, the car could still be used, and we did not have to walk. "I'm not sure," I whispered. The meaning behind my statement was as weighty as I had meant it. At one point, I thought I heard a howling sound from the black hole box, but I did not know why.

"Do you know the most important thing in creating ghosts?" I had never seen that icy smile before. I shook my head, but he did not continue until I responded, "A mass trap machine" / "No," he replied quickly and turned to smile. At that moment, I could feel the rainforest influencing me and a wave of something spreading all over and into me. "Belief. If we believe that ghosts exist, then they do exist." His smile was unbearably peculiar.

We arrived in the village of Chaw-o-we at dusk. We carefully lift the black hole box from the car. Xishi separated from us to meet with the village leader. We did not participate

in the conversations and discussions with the villagers because only Xishi could speak the local dialect. In the end, we let Xishi talk to the villagers first and then had her tell us the conversations she had with them afterward.

"I understand now why the World Government sent us here," Xishi said as we sat in a small, dark hut, about to sleep. "Chaw-o-we still practice their strong and staunch belief in spiritism or spiritual worship. The people who rule these villages are spiritists, or shamans, known as Natkadaw. They have power or authority and are accepted by the villagers." I opened my eyes, wondering if my ears had deceived me as I could almost not believe this kind of belief still existed in this era. "Tomorrow, they invite us to a sort of coronation ceremony by the village shaman."

"Good," said Raphael, our team leader. "Tomorrow, we can try to release the ghosts from the black hole box. We can then find out if these shamans can contact ghosts." I wanted to see his face. I tried to understand what he was thinking. "Everyone, don't forget to wear your wristwatches." My hand automatically moved to grab my wristwatch. It was a device that detected abnormal weight gain or loss, although, from its outer appearance, it looked like a regular wristwatch.

The next day's coronation ceremony was held at the village's town hall. Each side of the aisle had large red and white cloths tied to the walls. A table was lined with offerings of coconuts, bananas, betel nuts, cigarettes, incense, candles, flowers, wah leaves, and tiered flags. There were also Nat statues or traces of spirits lined across the table, as the people here believed. Green cloth, garlands, and many banknotes hung on their glittering gold necks. The hall was crowded with villagers whose gazes were fixed on the ground.

Raphael, Xishi, and I, as well as our military guide, all helped one another bring the black hole box into the area the ceremony was going to be performed, but well hidden in a

corner. Nobody cared much about it, as it was probably around the same time that the sounds of the traditional wind and percussion instruments started. A black woman with a bright red cloth across her outfit came up to offer a buffalo head dyed with illuminating colors of gold and black. On the one hand, she held a snakehead fish that was not yet dead, squirming back and forth, and she began to dance.

"She is Natkadaw." Xishi pointed to the woman who was now the focus of all attention. When that woman began to dance, the villagers raised their hands to pray in a language I did not know. Xishi said the dance moves and gestures were called 'Phakomae Tor Nat' or the Mon Queen Buffalo. It was the belief of the people here that they could make any wish they wanted if, through their medium, a sacrifice of a snakehead fish or buffalo's head was offered.

"Turn it off now!" Raphael said intensely as the Natkadaw tossed the snakehead fish to squirm on the ground. Xishi and I switched off the machine simultaneously as the military guide unbolted and opened the box. The massive crash of the lid of the black hole startled everyone into silence. The band abruptly stopped playing.

I had not done anything yet. But what I did not imagine could happen suddenly occurred. Raphael fell loudly to the ground with his eyes wide open as if the bright red blood running through his veins would explode. His hands were kinked up, and his legs were pinched to the floor, "I am Nat! I am Nat!" Raphael's howl sounded in the dialect that Xishi had to translate. He swung his arms back and forth while lying on the ground, screaming in a voice that did not seem like his own but that of an older woman.

Natkadaw, dressed in black and red, was equally shocked by the events unfolding before her. Raphael's strange howls drew every single person's attention. Xishi and I did not move an inch even to try anything. We could also see very clearly, Raphael's wristwatch,

which did not reveal or show any sign of anything. I smiled. This must be what he was trying to say: ghosts can only be real if we first believe that ghosts exist.

The only living snakehead fish squirmed around on the ground just like Raphael, halfway between him and her, claiming to house the shapeless or amorphous formless souls. Everyone fell into silence. All eyes were on that snakehead fish and solely on where it was headed, "I am Nat! I am Nat!" His and her howls alternated. The snakehead fish crept and slinked along the ground, along the bloodstains of the beasts that covered the carpet.

And now, we conclude the legend of Natkadaw. The snakehead fish writhed on the ground until it reached Raphael's face. Before dying peacefully, the people in that hall shouted almost simultaneously, bringing the bloody buffalo head on a tray and the dirt-dusted snakehead fish to Raphael. He slowly regained consciousness and sat still with his blood-red eyes open and a mischievous smile. All the while, the wristwatch still had not made any sound.

I turned around, and the Natkadaw had already disappeared, and Raphael was appointed the new Natkadaw of the village. Xishi and I took the opportunity to meet Rafael in private for the first time after all of the miraculous incidents of the day had subsided.

"So this is what you meant," I said as soon as I met him face to face. No matter what had happened, that wristwatch still had not revealed or sounded a warning of any incident or occurrence. That meant the person in front of me was still the same Raphael and no one else. "What do you mean?" Xishi, who looked startled and could not keep up, asked hurriedly. I pointed to the watch on Raphael's wrist. Xishi was silent for a moment before taking a long breath, "It's not fun to play around like this. You should have told us first before trying anything like this."

But then, there was only just silence. Raphael, in the Natkadaw outfit, had remained quiet. Not saying a single word was uttered. The sound of our laughter gradually faded until it finally disappeared. I looked at Raphael cautiously for the first time, a man with golden hair, blue eyes, and a black and red body. The smell of buffalo blood and the mud on the snakehead fish was still pungent, and he was without the slightest hint of a cosmologist left, except for that wristwatch.

"What does this mean?" I shook my head, not comprehending and desperately needing an answer from Raphael. The frontman shook his head before speaking for the first time, here in the village, "I am Natkadaw." I had begun to be able to translate some of the local dialects myself. The figure laughed out loud, but it was the voice of an older woman, husky and hair-raising. I was stunned and almost forgot to breathe. It turned out that Xishi was the one who furrowed her brows, muttered something, and walked out of the room.

"Raphael, is that you?" I asked again and again.

"I am Natkadaw," a voice that did not sound like Raphael's replied curtly. I did not understand anything happening and looked at his wristwatch repeatedly, but it did not reveal anything until a loud beep sounded out in the silence. My heart fell to a slump, and I turned to look at his wristwatch. But the sound was not coming from there. It was empty. There was nothing to report, as usual. The owner of that wristwatch smirked and shook his head back and forth.

The watch on my wrist was the one making a beeping sound.

The sound warned me that my weight had increased by 21.3 grams.