

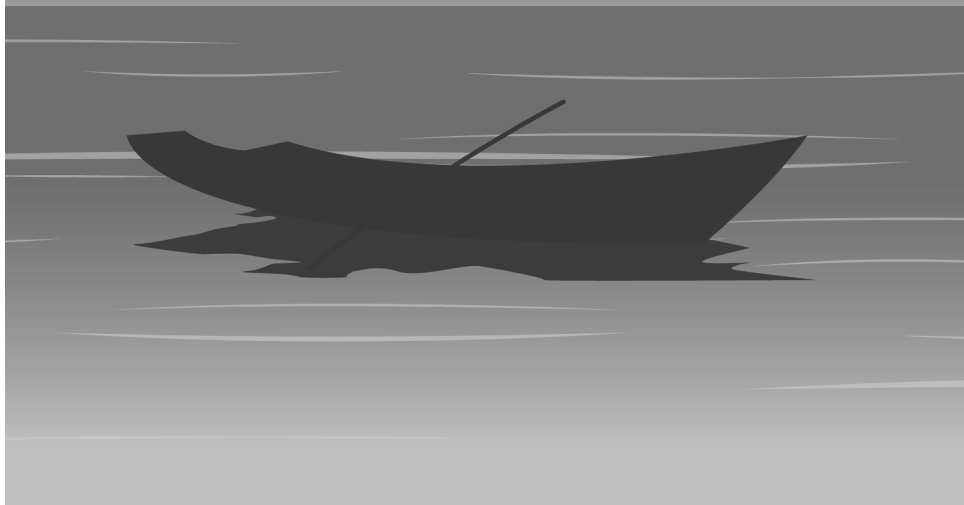
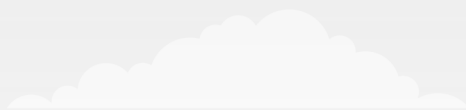
SAMPAN

The LASALLE Anthology of Creative Writing



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Published by LASALLE College of the Arts

ISBN: 978-981-18-5788-1

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FOREWORD

It's a huge pleasure to be among the first readers of this fascinating anthology. It's exciting to find here so lively a sense of what's at stake in the writing of a story or a poem and the vitality of its utterance. How are we to live? How are we to find and make our place in the world? What are the costs of the choices we make? How are we to know and conceive of ourselves? These are just some of the fundamental questions that arise and are explored with sensitivity, humour, and verve in the pages that follow. Most fundamental of all, perhaps, for a writer, is the question of how we are to speak: how the story is to be told, how the voice is to be raised and how its patterns are to hold. This involves courage – the assertion of a liberty – as well as the many other disciplines that a writer must practice if they are to answer the impulse that drives them to speak and to know.

I am thrilled to find such courage in abundance throughout this book. The breadth of form – be it in poetry or prose, composed in satire or sadness, in comedy or seriousness – is matched by the breadth of subjects explored, in all their urgent human interest: sexuality, gender, social mores and tensions, history, hope and despair, the drama

of wish and desire. The ambivalent dainties of globalised consumer capitalism encounter older cultural imperatives that linger, for better or for worse – and the work of imagination becomes also the work of social critique. Animated by vivid, evocative detail – name, place, food, aroma – the writing here gives voice to the complexity and self-questioning of contemporary Singapore and its people. Language itself is a theme of this exploration, both implicitly and explicitly: it is always in the act of making and being made, dynamic and multivalent in its ramifying rhizomic life.

For writers, to raise a voice is to raise a world. The writer's subjectivity – the unique patterning of their being and sensibility – provides the organising, animating principle that brings the contingencies of history and experience into the kind of connection and relation that can become a kind of signature, the gift or mark of their presence in the world. This is how the individual and the social, the personal and the historical, meet and flow through each other in all the fine arts. The inward, private freedom to which every writer must lay claim is the ground and condition of their involvement in the world. Creative writing programmes may teach their students about 'world-making', in the context of a novel, short story, or creative non-fiction – how to make it compelling, convincing, involving for a

reader – but in honing those skills programmes like those at LASALLE are also doing something more. They are enabling those students to create new ways of seeing and feeling, thinking and imagining – the very processes by which we relate to our common human world and conceive our reality. As I said, there’s a lot at stake in writing a story or a poem. The many worlds within SAMPAN present a hive of possibility and cultural agency. They stir once again those fundamental questions with which they engage.

Writers are perpetual students, and one of the pleasures of being a writer is to recognise that as such, you are a student in the company of students – both the living and those gone before. The work gathered here comprises its own glowing company. It is a company which – as reader, writer, and perpetual student myself – I am delighted to be among.

October 2022

Gregory Leadbetter

Professor of Poetry

Director, MA in Creative Writing

Director, Institute of Creative and Critical Writing

Birmingham City University

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to SAMPAN, the inaugural anthology of the Masters in Creative Writing (M-CW) programme at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. This anthology of student and alumni writing in many forms, is a significant outlet for works that have either been produced during the programme or in response to the call for contributions.

As Programme Leader of the M-CW, I believe in the importance of making student work visible to diverse audiences through publication. In creative writing programmes, student anthologies are an established and long-standing tradition of achieving this.

Students in the M-CW programme are encouraged to think about, write and give voice to ideas about place, history, gender, sexuality, home, and a range of cultural, religious and social situations and experiences.

The richness of expression that I have encountered in formal assessment, demonstrates the uniqueness of storytelling, poetry, creative non-fiction and dramatic writing in Singapore, a place with a vibrant literary culture. SAMPAN adds to this by presenting new writing, and in the process, showcasing the talent nurtured in the programme.

M-CW students have worked as editors and in other production roles, including communications and publicity. They have dedicated many hours to the complex process of creating an anthology. I have been impressed by their respectful team work, diligent editorial process and the constancy, patience, and thoughtfulness of communication with everyone associated with bringing this important publication to fruition.

Thank you to LASALLE College of the Arts for supporting this inaugural anthology, which contributes to the creative and artistic outputs for which the college is known.

Historically, the sampan has had a valued place in Singaporean life and culture. I trust that the works in SAMPAN will transport you to unfamiliar and surprising places and encourage you to see the familiar with fresh eyes.

I wish it well on its journey.

Dr Rosslyn Prosser
Programme Leader
Masters of Creative Writing

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SARAH SOH

Sarah Soh was born in Singapore and has previously lived in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United States. Her work can be found in Quarterly Literary Review Singapore and The Best Asian Short Stories.



Campaign to Speak

Let me speak,
but tell me how?

You say
English is my First, my main, my primary
Mandarin my minor, backup, far Second, my Mother
Tongue that is not my mother's tongue

So I stopped talking to Grandma who spoke nothing
but Hokkien—dialects have no place on the podium
Soon China grew tall and Mandarin could hold her head high again
but I'd long left her behind like an unwanted grandparent

English, the Mothers, and cousin-dialects cavorted, made
a bastard child who flaunts himself all over this mottled island
We cheer him on because he is one of us
Ashamed, you said, 'Speak Good English'

The way I speak is not good enough

The way we speak is not good enough

We will never be good enough

to speak

GABRIEL OH

Gabriel is pursuing his Masters in Creative Writing at LASALLE College of the Arts. He loves getting lost in fantasy and science fiction, and dabbling into experiments that combine words, visuals and technology. He has written for Singapore's Ministry of Education and Tripzilla, and maintains a collection of snapshots at glimpsesnsnaps.blogspot.com.



Choped

Kaisey woke up one morning to a packet of tissues over her heart. She stared at the crinkled, unopened packet. It was just like any other she had seen before, right down to the purple tulips on its front. How had it gotten there? She reached out to grab the packet, but a voice in her head made her stop.

Don't do it. You mustn't.

The packet refused to come off even as Kaisey got off her bed. She flapped her shirt up and down, but the fabric phased through the tissues, which stuck on like a Velcro shoe strap. One conclusion came to her mind, as ridiculous as it sounded.

Her heart had been choped.

But it made complete sense. There was that same nagging voice in her head that she'd hear at hawker centres, telling her to respect people's reservations, to remember the consequences of infringing on others. Don't touch the packet, it's someone else's.

Yes, she remembered now, that video circulating on social media a few weeks back. Two aunts were tearing at each other's hair over a choped table. Plates of nasi lemak were flung, a face was stepped on, expletives were hurled.

The internet had a field day commenting on the fight. Kaisey couldn't imagine herself in such a situation, her face circulated around as fodder for the nation's ridicule. She wouldn't be able to step out of the house after that. She would have to kiss her goal of becoming an aerospace engineer goodbye.

Kaisey approached her mother for help. Perhaps she had seen such a predicament before? But the older lady frowned and tutted. "Aiyah, ask you to look after yourself, don't anyhow talk to strangers. Now see lah, your heart kenna chope. How to help you, I also dunno. First time I also see something like this." Her mother's hand neared the packet but stopped short of touching it. She shook her head as her hand returned to her side. "Go see doctor lah."

The polyclinic doctor wasn't much help. The old man's eyes bulged to the size of small limes as he stared at the tissue packet, making Kaisey shift uncomfortably in her seat. "I-I'll arrange an appointment with the heart specialist," he stammered as he tried to steady his trembling hand, although that didn't make his handwriting any more legible. "How about February?"

With some promise of a diagnosis three months away, Kaisey headed to university. The end of the semester was just around the corner, and no chopped heart was going to stop her from doing well. She'll overcome any obstacle like she

had done before – with all-nighters and bottles of chicken essence. But it was to her horror, as she was on the way to school, that she failed to give up her seat to an old lady. She, who had been the president of her JC's Interact Club; she, who had won multiple Friend of Singa awards in secondary school. As the old lady hobbled off the train, Kaisey had a horrifying realisation.

The tissue packet had dulled her heart.

She went through her lectures and tutorials in a daze. The thought that her kindness-prone heart was now less than kind ate away at her thoughts. By the time lunch came, all Kaisey remembered of the morning was how cold the lecture theatres and tutorial rooms were.

As she shuffled through the canteen for a seat, Kaisey inadvertently came across a chopped table. She squinted at the square wad, her predicament making her see it in new light. The practice of chopeing wasn't anything new to her. She had seen it all her life. But when had she agreed to it? Hadn't she just accepted chopeing as if it were a part of nature's law, as if disregarding something worth less than ten cents could mean a violation of societal rules? Her research-gearred mind spun into overdrive trying to rationalise it. Perhaps she could run an experiment, gather some hypotheses, decide on the best tests to use, deduce key variables, write a ground-

breaking paper and get it published—

“Um, sorry? This seat is taken,” a voice from behind cut off her thoughts. An Indian boy was frowning at her as he neared his seat.

Kaisey apologised, feigning ignorance as she scurried away. What was she thinking? There was no need to test anything. What’s chopped, *was* chopped. An unspoken rule was still a rule. Remember the viral video. She’d be expelled. She’d never get a job. She’d have to leave the country.

As she ate her wanton mee in silence, Kaisey couldn’t help catching snippets of the conversation behind her. “Ey, did you catch the latest episode of My Zombie Neighbour?” It was the trending K-Drama that Kaisey had tried getting into. She stopped after two boring episodes. “Yeah, that Joon-ki, so mean! How can he just kiss Song-yi like that? Myung Joo gave her heart to him – literally – and he just crushed it like that!”

Kaisey shuddered at this. What was her heart’s new owner going to do with it? Were they going to use it for nefarious means, sell it on the organ market, or worse, obliterate it? What was it like being heartless? Just having it dulled was terrible enough. Could she live without a heart?

Her appetite waned, Kaisey returned her tray – thank goodness she still had the courtesy for that – and took to

searching online for a solution. But there were only search results for clogged arteries and the need for a bypass. No, since chopeing was local, she needed a local solution. And since science hadn't been able to help her, perhaps she should turn to other means. A change in search parameters gave her an address for a local psychic.

The address led Kaisey to an industrial park in Ubi, into a nondescript grey building, and to the glass doors of a Lim & Associates. A middle-aged Chinese lady answered the bell. "Nin yao shen me ne?" asked the lady in a heavy Chinese accent, her eyes not once leaving the screen in her hands. "I-I'm here for the psychic?" faltered Kaisey, cringing that amid her nervousness, she had spoken in English. Great. Now she sounded like she didn't know her own mother tongue.

But the receptionist had understood her, looking up at the last word. "Jing lai, jing lai," she said, ushering Kaisey through the door. They walked down a dimly lit corridor before entering a small office. In the middle of the dark room, surrounded by a multitude of lit tea candles and incense sticks, was a shrouded figure sitting cross-legged on the floor, fronted by a cloudy crystal ball.

"Cia tze," indicated the psychic to the seat cushion in front of her, the raspy voice betraying the old lady beneath

the veil. The receptionist had already left, closing the door behind her. Kaisey gingerly avoided the flames as she eased herself to the floor.

“Li wu simi tai ji?” croaked the psychic as she circled her hands around the crystal ball.

“Er, wa wu, er, heart eh problem,” Kaisey stammered back in her broken Hokkien, regretting that she had not double-confirmed the languages the psychic spoke. Hadn’t the webpage been in English?

Thankfully, the psychic seemed to have understood, nodding sagely. Her hands drifted above her head, waving through the air as if twirling invisible strings. Finally, her hands stopped in front of Kaisey, palms facing up.

“Gor pak kor,” the psychic said.

Kaisey blinked. She didn’t quite catch what the old lady had said but was too intimidated to ask. The awkward silence was only marred by the whir of an unseen aircon’s fans.

The psychic sighed irritably. “Li bui hiao tia, si mm si? Gor pak kor!” She made a rubbing motion with her index finger and thumb.

Right, money. But how much? Kaisey’s mouth went dry as she shifted through her memory for some Hokkien phrases to use. But the only ones she could remember were

less than polite.

The psychic gave a frustrated grunt. “Min lui eh ah? Ai tan lui, ai jiaik peng leh!” The old lady sprung up, smoke wisping towards her as long fingernails and chipped teeth glinted under yellow flames. With a yelp, Kaisey clambered to her feet. She threw open the door and didn’t stop running.

The lights had already come on when Kaisey reached the void deck of her block. When she finally collapsed onto a mosaic bench, tears started trailing down her cheeks. What was she thinking, going after dubious sources of help she didn’t understand? When was she one to believe in superstition?

Kaisey’s hands were now sticky with tears and mucus. Her properly nurtured mind told her to wipe them, but she had forgotten to bring along tissues. She could head home to clean up but risk her mother discovering her folly – she’ll never hear the end of it then. Perhaps the sink at the nearby coffeeshop would be better.

But she did have tissues with her after all. Kaisey looked down at the tissue packet that remained over her heart, unaffected by the events of the day. Its thin plastic crinkled lightly in the breeze.

Don’t do it, you mustn’t.

The voice in her head returned as soon as her fingers

closed around the packet. Kaisey pushed it aside. She needed some tissues. Surely the owner will understand. If they really did mind, she could replace their packet with the many she had upstairs.

She pried at the packet's seams and pulled them apart.

A strong wind blasted through the tear. Through half-closed eyes, Kaisey could see the dead leaves and litter around her picked up in the gale. Before she could react, a blanket of cloth-like white erupted from the same hole, enveloped her, and pulled her screaming into the packet.

“WHO DARES VIOLATE THIS UNSPOKEN CONTRACT?” boomed the voice in her head, louder now. Kaisey struggled to breathe. There was nothing in this space of endless white she had been dragged into, not a speck of dirt nor a living soul. The pristineness filled her with dread, for in her unkempt state Kaisey felt like a violator. Her constraints, white as they were, blended into this space. The purity was subsuming her. She struggled against them but though soft as tissue, they held on as strong as steel.

“WHICH FOOL BREAKS THIS AGE-OLD LAW?” came the voice again, its source unseen.

“I’m sorry, but my hands were dirty!” Kaisey cried. “I didn’t mean to break any laws or contracts! I just needed a tissue.”

“YOUR HEART HAD BEEN RESERVED AND YET YOU HAVE WILLINGLY DISREGARDED THE RESERVATION. FOR THIS, YOU MUST BE PUNISHED.”

Kaisey’s restraints tightened, crushing her lungs. “Wait!” she gasped. “How can my heart be reserved?”

“HAVE YOU NOT GIVEN YOUR HEART TO BE TAKEN?”

“No!” Kaisey wailed. “No, I have not.”

The constricting stopped but did not slacken. Enveloped by the crushing pressure, surrounded by a flawlessness she could not meet, Kaisey sobbed and awaited her end. Yet the voice had gone silent, replaced by an eerie silence fitting of the void.

“Sorry about that,” the voice suddenly spoke again, calmer this time. “Had to check with my supervisor. He’s here to see you.”

Kaisey’s constraints unwound and spat her out before the sandaled feet of a lean man.

“My apologies for the harsh treatment,” said the man with a thin smile. “My intern gets carried away sometimes. Workplace expectations, you see.”

With no strength to stand, Kaisey stumbled away but something around her ankle prevented her from going far. It

was a long strip of toilet paper, one of many that made up the man's flowing robes. "Now, let's clear this up so I can go back to my K-Drama," said the man as he pulled her back. "You said your heart hadn't been chopped?"

"Where is this place and who are you?" Kaisey blurted, still lightheaded. She clawed at her ankle, but the wispy coil refused to tear.

"My name is Bee, a representative of the Autonomous Authority of Autonomous Acquisitions, or AAAA for short," said the man, shouting out the acronym. "This is the interrogation area, where alleged violators like you are sentenced and punished."

Kaisey gaped. "Are you from the Singapore government?"

Bee scoffed. "We've been around way longer than this country, girl. Since the beginning of modern civilisation, in fact. Don't believe me? Think about it. America's Declaration of Independence. The treaty Raffles signed for Singapore. The Geneva Accords. Rights and claims, all acquired on *sheets of paper*." The representative emphasised this with a wave of a hand. The strips of his toilet paper sleeve flapped limply in the wind as if stuck to a ceiling fan.

Had Kaisey not remembered the way she came, and how close she had been to her end, she would have thought

this all a set-up.

“Singapore is our flagship country of model citizens, stellar practitioners of our extremely efficient method of autonomous acquisition,” continued Bee. “Use all the umbrellas and office passes you want – there’s no denying a tissue packet is the most powerful chopeing apparatus of all. Now, back to the matter at hand. You said you couldn’t have been chopped?”

“Yes,” said Kaisey as she finally managed to stand up. Her heart was pounding, beating against the tissue packet as if screaming to be freed. In the middle of Bee’s long monologue, she had figured her way out. “You know what, I’ll tell you. Save you the time.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “The tissue packet is mine. I chopped my heart.”

Bee’s eyes grew wide. “T-that’s not... but...” he stammered.

“There’s always a defendant and prosecutor in a courtroom. Do you see anyone else here? No, right? I chopped my heart so no one else could. In that case, I haven’t violated any reservation since it’s my own.”

Bee blinked furiously as he backed away. “I’ll need to get back to you on that.”

“Do you want me to write to your boss?”

Bee winced. “You know what? We’ll drop the case this time.” He waved a hand and Kaisey’s restraint disappeared. “The less paperwork to do, the better anyway. Please be careful about such reservations in the future or you won’t be let off so easily next time. Thank you, and have a nice day!”

Before Kaisey could reply, a strong gust of wind whisked her through the tear and back out onto the mosaic bench. She watched as sheet by sheet, tissues from the packet on her heart were torn away by the wind. As the gale died down, the empty flimsy packaging fluttered away into the dimly lit neighbourhood.

Kaisey was panting heavily and her hair was a mess, but she could not help grinning. No one had come to lay claim on her heart throughout the day, and that was all she needed to realise the truth. Her heart was not for chopeing. No one had the right to something she never wanted to give away. Her heart was hers once again, as it always should have been.

Ignoring the dumbfounded stare of a nearby makcik who had witnessed the whole spectacle, Kaisey picked up her bag and headed home.

Roadworks

1.

Sitting in the back seat
Shielded from the noonday sun, we pass
Workers, gloved and helmeted
Paving our roads
A diesel mammoth spewing
Dusty gravel from its raised tracked tongue
An industrial-age Merlion

2.

Sitting at Starbucks
Shielded from the noonday sun, we gaze
Brunchtime bagels and lattes untouched,
At the roadside
Workers, gloved and helmeted
Twisting free
The neck of a doomed tree
With a snap

3.

Sitting in the back seat
Shielded from the noonday sun, we near

A worker, gloved and helmeted, no
A mannequin, gloved and helmeted
Plastic smile, chipped and faded
Plastic arm waving, oscillating
On a single mechanical axle point

4.

Sitting on a legless plastic chair
Slumped beneath the lamplights
He gazes, gloved and helmeted
At rides returning home
Will his arrive?
He does not move
He is dreaming

SHARON SOLOMON

Creator of schools that defy the local norms, thought leader in the field of education, former financial journalist, Sharon Solomon is a third generation Singaporean. The brainchild behind The Winstedt School and Quayside Isle Prep School, her interests in the arts have a strong influence in her work.



No Returns

Tania Mai nee Soh never felt more ashamed. Standing on the corner of Kun Hock Street 14, under an overcast sky which held a threat of rain, the humidity swaddled against her svelte body while cold sweat made her skin glisten. Tucked in a corner of a dilapidated building the colour of earwax, Goldfinger Assets Pte Ltd lit up one side of the satellite town sidewalk with its bright neon red and gold signage. She felt as if she was barely breathing living in the present, hardly feeling the earth she was walking on, but an acquaintance told her that this was the best way out of the mess she was in. Tania stepped into the dingy office. A warm scent of sandalwood incense wafted past her as she climbed the stairs, but the smell of mildew blowing out of a cranky air conditioner colonised whatever trace there was of it in a heartbeat.

The man wore luminous orange shorts and a whitewash hoodie with stained jaundiced yellow marks mapped near the armpits. He sat on a large black gaming chair which screamed CHAMPION on its headrest. His name tag in bold ink Comic Sans font read Director, and below it, the name Zee with an acid yellow smiley at the corner. Zee swivelled in his chair, his eyes slowly caressing Tania's fine

features, only to rest his gaze on her gold diamond encrusted Rolex watch. Tania stared straight at a stout gold Laughing Buddha figure. It sat on a wooden altar wearing a string of pearls, the shine of the gold belly worn out from countless rubs. She knew help would come, but not in the form of an abstract deity. It would be from a human shark.

When he spoke, his long vowels were generously trimmed and, as if to make up for the loss, his short vowels took a long stretch – the sounds compounded to make for a deeply dull voice. ‘We are not like other loan providers. We have been around for many years. We have customers who always come back. We charge nine-point eight-eight percent per month. You pay principle plus interest. You have twelve months to settle the full amount. Best not to default. Customers can borrow up to six times their monthly paycheck or they can pledge something like their jewellery or...” Zee nodded in the direction of Tania’s watch, eyeing it as he spoke.

Tania walked out, greeted by an angry downpour. Tears streamed down her delicate features. She wished the rain would wash every inch of her. Having exhausted all means following her husband’s terminal illness, she was drowning in debt. Each passing day weighed heavily on her. Jewel-laden hands once willing to help, turned tight-fisted.

She stroked her bare wrist which now had a faint outline of a family heirloom given at her engagement. Those past moments remained alive for Tania, but the future that was prescribed for her felt like a cold corpse. She had to accept what she could not change. There was in every sense, no returns.

NADIA AYESHA

Nadia Ayesha is a Masters in Creative Writing student and an English enrichment teacher. Her work has been published in Quarterly Literary Review Singapore. Apart from writing, she enjoys hiking, traveling and dancing. Nadia's debut novel, Showers of Luck, is forthcoming from Penguin SEA in November 2022.



This island

could crush your dreams
if you're not careful.
It happens slowly,
the everyday heat takes years to boil.
Before you try to jump out of the pot,
a frog with burnt legs now.

First you had dreams, dreams so big
that you couldn't possibly contain
them in your hands.

So you kept them in a box where
you'd take them out one by one
and let them grow into everything
that was possible about your life
everything it could be,
would be, once you grew up.

You'd examine every star that speckles
the expanse of our universe,
walk on the moon lightly, following in
Neil Armstrong's footsteps.

Be just as modest, say it was your family, your team,
your wife and kids that brought you to this point.

Leave mementos behind
to show you were there.

Boot prints for one.

Return with lunar samples.

But you had to be practical, stay hungry,
be self-reliant, stay ahead of the curve,
give up your dreams.

Win that scholarship,
be a teacher in a government school
so your parents could count on
your iron rice bowl.

You never took your dreams out of the box
Where they lay quiet
Waiting to be picked up again.
You let them shrink to fit a jar,
little by little, and day by day it happened.
One day you opened your eyes,

Your dreams were gone like an old pet
you put to sleep.

At your desk, head bent,
you sit to pay the bills
that come on time every month.

ANISHA RALHAN

Anisha Ralhan is a freelance copywriter who recently completed her Masters in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. Her stories and essays have been published in Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, The Hindu and Arré, among others.



Tom or Jerry

You've just polished off your second roasted almond latte at the Starbucks on River Valley Road. It's late in the evening, and as you contemplate a third to help power through the business proposal you should've made two days ago, you spot the man you've been seeing everywhere lately. Hunched over the high-stool next to the cashier, tethered to a pair of Apple look-alike earplugs, he exudes feline seriousness. He doesn't blink or look up from his laptop. The ice in his milky beverage is melting away rapidly, leaving a trail of tears outside the glass.

Had he been young, cute and single, you would've found this whole thing serendipitous. We were meant to be, you'd say, clinking champagne glasses on your first wedding anniversary—living your best rom-com fantasy. But he seems to be your maternal uncle's age. Slightly over fifty? It's hard to tell because he's Chinese. It's always hard to tell their age. They say Black don't crack. Neither do Chinese, here in Singapore—the country that adopted you, reluctantly, like an infertile couple in their mid-forties.

There's something notably odd about the way the uncle looks. Eyes that seldom blink; large, floppy ears protruding from the sides of his plump face; a forehead so oily it gleams

under the ceiling light like well-used parchment paper. In *Sexy Beasts*, the Netflix reality series, where people go on dates in elaborate prosthetics to look like extra-terrestrial creatures, he would fit in without the assistance of a make-up artist.

Studying his imperfect, impervious face, you recall the last time you saw him. At Ryan's grocery. You were tapping the honey-coloured skull of a rockmelon. He was staring at you unflinchingly from the dairy aisle. It wasn't the I'll-rape-you-with-my-eyes stare, but not the inoffensive: I'm staring-at-you-while-thinking-about-the-unpaid-electricity-bill stare either. At checkout, you had felt his hot gaze on the back of your head. By the time you finished unloading your cart, he had disappeared. Yet his presence persisted briefly, like a phantom limb.

Just the other day, he rode your condo building's elevator with you humming an off-key rendition of "Stairway to Heaven." When the door opened, he casually said, "After you," without a hint of a smile or a friendly nod you'd anticipate from a fellow resident.

Probably just a weirdo who lives in or around your condo. You tell yourself to not make much of today's encounter. After all, this isn't India, where every man who isn't your father or brother is a potential rapist, guilty

until proven innocent. One of the biggest reasons why you haven't left Singapore, that autocrat in designer wear, despite witnessing no discernible growth in your personal or professional life, is that you can no longer bear the thought of having to worry about your safety constantly. Gone are the days of you walking on a deserted street in New Delhi with a tight jaw and clenched chest or pretending to talk to your fictional boyfriend on the phone ("I'm on the way, baby") from the backseat of Uber each time you head back to your empty apartment. You've never met a woman in Singapore who has bought pepper spray, let alone carry a canister of it in her handbag. The tiny, impractical handbags women carry here are stuffed with lipsticks and eyeliners, not weapons. You say a silent prayer to the universe for allowing you to spend your thirties with one less thing to panic about and get back to your ugly Excel sheet.

Twenty minutes and numerous yawns later, you decide to order a third cup of coffee. Hot. Grande. Oat milk. Decaf, because you're not stupid to overwhelm your nerves at a quarter to eight in the night. Blessedly, the weirdo on the high-stool hasn't looked up from his laptop. While the cashier notes down your order, you turn around and casually try to peer over Weirdo's screen. No Hannibal Lecter. What a relief! On the top left corner is the red and white YouTube

logo you recognise too well. He's watching a video of an empty street. Some kind of a travelogue? As you squint your eyes to read the title, his menacing reflection on the screen sends a sudden jolt down your spine. His brittle almond eyes are accusing you of crimes unsaid. You dart away like a timid squirrel. "Yes, thanks. That'll be all," you say to the barista in a tiny voice and scurry back to your low table. Your laptop is placed at an angle that blocks Weirido completely. You try and centre yourself to the boring presentation called: Competition Analysis for Procter & Gambler.

By the time you get off a work call, Weirido is no longer in your sight or in the café. The crowd has thinned out significantly. Other than a couple in matching black outfits, with their *Addams Family* vibe, you're the only customer left. The friendly barista in kelly green apron, with eyebags the size of beetles, nods in your direction as if to say: take your time, no hurry. Yet, you and him both know, he can't wait to escort you out. So you slide your laptop, notebook and wallet in your tote back and head to the door.

"Good night, Ian," you say to the barista while walking past the high table. Then, as an afterthought: "The customer who sat here. Is he a regular?"

"Not sure lah. Don't see him often. Why? Is there a problem?"

“No, all good. See ya.”

Outside the café, the moonless sky, coated in thick clouds, envelops you with humid darkness. Like facial acne buried underneath a solid layer of foundation, the stars refuse to be seen. You tread on the sensible sidewalk made of bricks and stone, ushered by dim lights filtering through high-rise buildings on either side of the road. A light breeze makes the angšana and mahogany trees hum softly—a perfect chorus for the creaking crickets.

On your right is a small, gleaming cluster of shops you pass by about five times a week: a linen store run by an Indian aunty who’s mastered the art of selling you overpriced cushion covers that you have no need for because you haven’t hosted anyone in a very long time; a humble prata stall, unequivocally responsible for the extra inches on your waist; a grungy hair salon fashioned to look like a pub that seldom receives a customer. Even after spending five years in this country, you still can’t believe how quiet the roads are here. No barking dogs, no honking vehicles, no beggars hurling curses at mankind. The sanitised soundscape lends a meditative quality to your solitary walk. You wish you could keep walking like this all your life without having to look for directions, without rushing to get somewhere.

Five minutes later, a phone call from your mother

snaps you out of your reverie. Not now Ma, you tut under your breath, knowing too well what follows the perfunctory small talk. Have you met anyone “interesting”? Are you going on dates at least? Will you visit home anytime soon? The answer to all: a stiff, monosyllabic no. You don’t have the courage to tell your mother that after your white boyfriend dumped you eight months ago, your faith in modern dating plummeted harder than the stock prices of Zara. That you’re incapable of committing to a houseplant, let alone a man. And as far as a trip to New Delhi goes, the prospect of facing venomous uncles and aunts, whose only business is to meddle in yours, makes you want to teleport to Mars. So you ignore the call and walk fast enough that your pounding heart drowns your thoughts.

Entering the gated condo, you walk past the skinny guard in navy blue uniform whom you haven’t seen before. He doesn’t look up from his phone. Who are you to come between him and his K-drama?

Outside block 401, you spend more time than you should looking for your access card, lost in what seems like a bottomless canvas tote bag. Without it, you can’t get into the building. Be more organised, moron, you tell yourself. A short man, emerging from nowhere, taps his card, commanding the glass door to slide open. You turn towards him.

“Thank...”

Fuck. It’s him. Unmistakably him. Mr. Yoda Ears is standing less than a metre from you. Has he been waiting all this while to creep up on you?

“After you,” he says in a husky voice, turning your body as rock-hard as a slice of week-old unrefrigerated bread.

In the ornate condo lobby fashioned after European palaces, with blue velvet curtains, gold leaf motifs on the wall and chequered marble floor, it’s just you and him, waiting for the elevator to arrive. From the corner of your eye, you see him standing with arms folded, chest upright, as if, proclaiming: Hey there princess, don’t you want to know more about your knight in Nike tee?

When the door opens, you rush inside and flatten yourself against the metallic wall at the back, not looking up once from your mobile phone. He starts to hum again. This time, Peggy Lee’s “Is That All There Is.” Until today, you had no idea it could sound so macabre. The elevator stops on the eleventh floor, and you’re glad it’s him getting off first and not you. He wishes you a pleasant night with a broad, ominous smile. His teeth are blindingly white and spectacularly clean. You can’t wait to ask Google if an obsession with dental hygiene is a tell-tale sign of a psychopath.

Later at night, after dinner, you keep checking if

the main door is securely locked. You even squeeze your eye through the peep hole to get a glimpse of the common corridor crowded with shoes, plants and a stroller. Their shadows form eerie patterns on the wall. Thankfully, not a lurker in sight. Only silence stretching from all sides.

The chamomile tea you just drank fails to invite sleep. Tired of tossing and turning in bed, you stream a recent episode of *The Bachelorette*, in which Jenifer is about to hand over the last rose. Slow-motion, oversaturated shots of lovestruck Mark cosying up to Jenifer on the rooftop terrace of their ginormous villa. Then a sound bite. He says the moment he saw her, he knew he was attracted to her. A doubt wriggles in your head. Could Weirdo be attracted to you? Aside from the pervy rascal who tried flashing his dick at you, in a park near your childhood house in Delhi, when you were fourteen—a memory that's permanently stuck in your brain like oil stains on your trusty wok—no stranger has ever expressed interest in you. Not in Singapore, at least. With your medium built, coarse, unruly hair (baggage from your father's side), face mapped by acne scars and childhood wounds, nothing about your physical appearance makes you stand out in the expansive sea of Indian women in Singapore. You're too light-skinned to qualify as an exotic brown, too ordinary to be an Asian man's fantasy. So what does Weirdo

want from you?

Don't overthink. Your best friend Nidhi would have texted, but only after creeping you out with a volley of gifs featuring the iconic masked man from *Scream*; her way of "messaging with you." Too bad Nidhi chose to follow a man to the other side of the world, in another time zone, leaving you utterly helpless and emotionally stranded right now. You swallow her imagined advice and numb your brain with Jenifer's happy ending till you fall asleep.

The next day, during lunch, you find yourself in a group snaking through narrow back alleys that lead to Amoy Street Hawker Centre in the wretched afternoon heat. Rachel, the gang leader of hangry marketeers, must be craving Aunty Po's fish soup. Again.

Because the place is unbelievably cheap and home to a huge variety of food stalls specialising in Malay, Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese food, you don't protest. Although, it would have been nice if she had taken everyone's preferred place for *makan* into consideration before shepherding you and your co-workers to what you privately call: The Food Court that Smells Like Anus. (Really, that's how every non-Singaporean would describe the place.)

Once everyone returns to the circular table carrying trays loaded with fried chicken, laksa, nasi goreng, fish soup

and mee siam, Michelle from accounts department, who's never spoken to you one-on-one, barring the time she approached you to proofread a Tamil ad and then walked off disappointedly when you clarified your mother tongue is Hindi, immediately pounces at you.

"So, I hear you have a stalker situation going on."

She has the same nefarious look she had when she forced tequila shots down the Director's throat during the last office party. Your ears turn crimson. You almost choke on your sambal fried rice.

"I wouldn't call him that," you say and sloppily wipe your mouth with a paper napkin.

"OMG, how exciting! I've never had a stalker," Rachel chimes in.

"Has he followed you to office?" Michelle asks with an air of mock seriousness, channeling her inner Regina George.

"Guys, he could be right here. Like this very place," Rachel says, scanning the thick mass of crowd.

Michelle interjects, "So, he in love with you or what ah?"

Hanif, the hot-headed copywriter, is quick to respond on your behalf. "Guys, I think I should write a thriller based on Maya's life. *Love Thy Neighbour*. Get it?"

Besides you, Alex Yap is the only person who doesn't laugh. Instead, he sombrelly says without looking at anyone in particular, "Maybe the dude is just lonely and trying to be friends."

Unlike other colleagues of convenience, whose penchant for gossip exceeds everything else, who hold Guinness records in being shallow and narcissistic, Alex is the person you find sensible in the giant zoo that is your workplace. Oh, how badly you ache to be invited by him to places like Hai Di Lao, where a non-mandarin speaking person is instantly made to feel out of place, to be his drinking buddy at speakeasies only locals seem to know, to have in-depth conversations with him about what it means to grow up in a country sheltered from third-world problems. But you don't because he's an insanely private person who wouldn't even accept a Facebook friend request from colleagues. After client meetings, he's always in a hurry to leave. In the last three years, he's not been to a single office party, earning the moniker: Antisocial Alex. Other than the fact he sometimes skips lunch outings to watch *Rupaul's Drag Race*, also one of your favourite reality shows, he's a total mystery to you.

Thankfully, after Antisocial Alex's bleak remark the discussion around your stalker steers towards more pressing matters, like the despicable state of the office loos. Rachel

rants about the new HR, who seems to have ignored her repeated mails to have the women's loo cleaned. You stuff your mouth with morsels of fried rice, hoping for the day to end.

* * *

On your long walk to home, under a light drizzle, you have a sudden craving for chai-latte. Its spicy, cinnamon soaked aroma reminds you of winter holidays in Delhi; a hug in a cup. So you stop by your usual Starbucks. The weirdo, whom you haven't seen in three days, is sitting on the same high-stool table, with his back to the cashier and eyes affixed on his laptop. Your first thought is to turn back and walk out of the door, but you don't because Ian is waving at you. Besides, what's to fear really? It's not like you're stranded alone with Weirdo on some god forbidden island. This is Singapore, nothing escapes the hawk-eyed CCTV cameras. Heck, you're not even sure if Weirdo has any ill intentions.

You swiftly buy a takeaway and exit the cafe, avoiding even the shadow of this strange man with a humming problem. Outside the glass door, while inserting the emerald stopper, designed like a miniature sword, onto your cup, you stop to observe Weirdo. He looks entirely harmless in his beige shorts and polo tee, just like any other middle-aged Singaporean who pays his taxes on time and complains

about CPF savings never being enough. No tattoo, piercings or bleached hair to suggest he is a deviant, or as locals say, *Ah Beng*. However, when he looks up from the screen, his trademark unnerving smile trickling from the corner of his lips as his eyes meet yours makes your skin crawl. What's so damn funny? you wish to yell.

The urge to yell at him grows fierce over the next few weeks as he keeps running into you in the lift, at Watson's, at Starbucks, on the Robertson Quay bridge. Your grocery runs are now shrouded in paranoia. Is he watching you? Does he know your house number? Three days ago, after you entered your building lobby, he stopped right ahead of you and had the nerve to comment, "Lady, are you following me?" You would've given him a piece of your mind had you not been on a call with your boss.

This is no way to live, you think, after skipping your evening walk twice in a row. Enough is enough. Tomorrow, Saturday morning, you're going to hunt him down and threaten to report him to the cops. If he misbehaves, you will throw hot pepper powder in his face. In true Delhi style, you will show him the consequence of messing with the wrong woman.

* * *

There are days when you imagine your life to be an

epic, action-packed movie. You've memorised the lines; you know where to look. Your hair is coiffed. Your make-up is top-notch. All you need is Director to say *Action*. Today, sadly, nothing is going as per script. The three cups of flat white you drank while waiting for Weirido to show up make your heart race faster than Usain Bolt. That bloody kid blowing bubbles in his milkshake sets your teeth on edge. And what the hell is wrong with his dad? Does he not see he's shaking the communal high table with his constant foot tapping. The book you brought along, *Ikigai: the Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, is so trite it's driving you to self-immolation. If you've learnt anything this morning, it's that stalkers require tons of patience. The same can be said for private investigators and detectives who stake out day after day for a living. You decide to wait for thirty more minutes before abandoning the Stalking-The-Stalker game at Starbucks.

On your way home, you can't help making a pitstop at Zion Food Centre, the same place where Weirido grinned at you in the most patronising way when he saw you buying stir-fried noodles from the famous Char Kway Teow stall. In the stuffy, non-air-conditioned hall, marked by the smell of flaming wok and long-simmering broth, you scan a few dozen Asian faces, not recognising the one you're looking for.

* * *

After seven days of client meetings, artwork changes and late nights at work, the urge to curl up in bed triumphs over the Friday night bar-hopping plan you impulsively made with Anais, the French girl Nidhi introduced you to over email. Sitting in the backseat of the garishly painted blue Comfort cab, you're now contemplating how to bail last minute without being rude. As the taxi halts at the red signal, you see a man about the same height as Weirdo entering the River Valley Starbucks.

"I have to get out here," you say to the confused cabbie and grab a ten-dollar note from your wallet. This is it. If Weirdo smiles at you creepily today, you're going to go all *Hell hath no fury no like a woman scorned*. Best case, Ian would be there as a witness. Worse case, well, there isn't any.

You get out of the car without waiting for the cabbie to return the change. You fix your hair, unhunch your shoulders and stride into a café that's buzzing with post-supper joggers refuelling their sweaty bodies with cold beverages. What you see next makes you gasp anticlimactically. Weirdo, the villain of your movie, seated at one of those cosy tables at the back, is not by himself but with a classy, middle-aged, petite Asian woman. She's sipping a beverage while he offers her a slice of his pie. Are they on a date? Are they friends who go back a

long way? Either way, it's clear he has a social life, while you have Netflix. Again. Seeing him laugh animatedly, acting like any other functional member of society, you feel stupid. Perhaps, he's not the crazy psycho you made him out to be. When the realisation hits you, you sprint out of the door like one of those cartoon characters from your childhood. Are you Tom? Are you Jerry? You'll never know.

A Good Cry

After the Thursday meeting scheduled for three-thirty got cancelled, Lekha's boss, the founder of Mompreneur Academy, gave the staff an early start to the long weekend in a rare display of generosity.

'Happy Easter y'all,' she said and strode off to the office elevator in her six-inch black Louboutins, making an awful click clack sound.

Lekha, who considered anything higher than kitten heels a man-made assault on feet, dreaded the thought of going home. Her travel-starved in-laws had arrived from India that morning. Sooner or later, they would haul her to the most crowded spots in Singapore to have their *Crazy Rich Asians* fantasy fulfilled. The idea of smiling for selfies, when all she wanted to do was cry, made her sicker than the barfing half-lion at Marina Bay.

The in-laws were not the problem. They were hopelessly nice—showering Lekha with gifts and compliments all year long. The timing of their visit was so bloody off. Karan had come home late last night—drunk enough to not leave his shoes and beer breath at the door. He had insisted on finalizing their vacation plans for the upcoming long weekend in May 'now'. Lekha just wanted to

go to bed. It had been a long, harrowing day of hunting for an Easter bunny costume, which was not too 'itchy' or too 'pink' or too 'stuffy' for their three-year-old daughter Myra.

'Can't we do this tomorrow? I am tired,' Lekha said, involuntarily activating some sort of a nuclear code within Karan.

'As always, you only think about yourself!' he yelled and walked out of the room, slamming the bedroom door behind him. Lekha's chest reverberated deeper than a boombox. Before she could process what had just happened, Karan came back seething, twitching, unable to hold his tongue or the glass of water in his hand.

'You never have time for me!

What kind of marriage is this?

Do you even love me?'

She could have explained why she had been delaying the holiday discussion. Mainly because she believed going on a trip was a horrible idea, what with Myra's myriad food allergies and strong aversion to being outdoors. But she was too busy tending to her wounded ego and exchanging fuck yous with Karan.

Around two in the night she slipped into Myra's bed, quiet as a shadow, suppressing tears and a desperate desire to file for divorce. What she really wanted to do was scream and

howl and sob till her vision becomes impaired and face caked with salt and snort.

Lekha had waited all morning for Karan to apologise, but he had simply side-eyed her. The thought that she had been called the worst mom and the worst wife in the same night coaxed tears out of Lekha. She held them back because she was surrounded by colleagues; a pack of put-together moms.

‘So, what plans for the weekend guys?’ the one in Ralph Lauren bodycon asked.

‘We’re doing a family staycation at Capella,’ the tall one chirruped.

An idea prickled the back of Lekha’s head like steam rising from an active volcano. She searched for budget rooms in Singapore on Booking.com.

Hotel Love Nest popped up. The last thing she wanted on her solo, crying venture were cum-stained pillows and condom wrappers.

In the back seat of the cab headed to Ibis Inn, Lekha chalked out a plan. She would check-in, order a hamburger and fries, stay in and indulge in the healing powers of a good cry. She would purge her pain in a puddle of mucus, far away from the confused gaze of a little person and her difficult questions. *Mommy, where are you hurting?*

Lekha couldn't remember the last time she had the privilege to cry in peace. Ever since Myra turned one, her life had been an endless loop of sorting grocery bills, excel sheets, playmats and plushies. How dare Karan call her selfish, a bad mom? She had been juggling work, home, and motherhood just fine. So what if it meant fewer date nights and a temporary halt on vacations. It's the price you pay for progeny.

Lekha began typing an angry text to Karan and stopped midway after remembering the 'think-before-you-text' rule, which she had only imposed after their last Whatsapp skirmish.

Her nostrils started quaking; her eyes became moist. The driver noticed it too because he kept staring at her in the rear-view mirror. She looked like a pair of old denims with its seams coming apart—overstretched, frayed. *Hang in there, just a little longer.*

The purple hotel lobby swarmed with large groups of families clumped together like wet hair on drain lids. There were at least eight people ahead of Lekha waiting to be checked in. On the cheap leather couch to her right was a little boy yanking his mother's hand, demanding to be taken to the pool *now*. Lekha saw in the mother's eyes the same helpless look she herself had each time she sent back a dish

because Myra found it too spicy or too crunchy or too soggy.

By the time Lekha reached the reception desk, hunger had sieged her tired body. She was told her room wasn't ready yet.

'But it's 2pm already!'

The human bot in blue uniform shrugged and turned his back to her.

Lekha headed to the Chill and Chuckle café located next to the swimming pool.

The shallow pool was overflowing with kids and their inflatable duckies. She chose an indoor table at the back, where their cackles wouldn't reach. Lekha waved her hand thrice; nobody came to take her order. The staff were busy hiding hand-painted eggs in the bushes outside.

Lekha craned her neck and saw tiny faces gleaming under layers of sunblock and chlorine. She wondered if Myra would ever take to the waters.

She began to feel a lump inside her throat. Oh God, was she a bad mom to run away like this?

An elderly server finally arrived with the menu.

'I'll have a burger with extra fries,' Lekha said without opening the menu.

'You want brioche, or regular bun?'

'Anything is fine. But please make it fast.'

Lekha fiddled with her phone before opening Instagram. The tall mom boss was drinking Bellini with her hubby somewhere at Boat Quay. Meanwhile, her own husband hadn't even texted. *Would it kill Karan to apologise?*

When the music grew louder, Lekha noticed the kids scampering off to the garden in cheap bunny hats. The cafe was nearly empty. Her stomach roared.

Twenty-five minutes later, the elderly server finally appeared.

'So sorry dear. We've run out of patties. Would you like to change your order?'

Lekha couldn't speak. Her cheeks were caked with salt and snot.

IAN GOH HSIEN JUN

*Ian Goh writes about video games, pop culture and other wabi-sabi stuff. His work has appeared in Strange Horizons, Star*Line and is forthcoming in Asimov's Science Fiction magazine. He attained his MA in Creative Writing from Goldsmiths University of London (LASALLE College of the Arts).*



*jiak tao*¹

your head lah, or the potatoes stacked atop
cracked Italian marble and moth-eaten walls,
bamboo forests chewed through, then sharpened,
with the last enclave at bukit timah earning brief
respite from the hordes of undead as they raced
over abandoned guard posts, gilded longkangs
and dried-up water fixtures as makeshift moats,
a driveway choked with suvs and land rovers
the day pa got a whatsapp text saying his wife
was alive and well; only wanted a hug and a little
nibble on the neck. soon, ah ma stopped visiting
the wet market, paranoid of anyone with their skin
peeled off a different shade of brown. the other day,
ah gong scolded me for prying open the premium
luncheon meat and black bean dace with my bare hands:
gone case lah, hi-si-hán-kía², he shouted, pumping the
sickle
like he was firing his own handgun, whilst the rest of us
lament how the undead do not require oral lessons
at learning lab, how banana leaves still unfurl into

1 eating heads

2 stupid, spoilt son

three-ply toilet paper, and how our heads became
swollen, die-die delicacies in this otak-otak³ nation.

3 hungry / brains

Eye Power

When we found out we had *eye power*,
the dock workers held staring contests
with their steel crates, the Raffles folk
rifled through paperwork through bouts
of rapid blinking, and the poets gaped
at sheets of paper till words (or worst)
materialised. That evening, Po Po snapped
a rooster's neck with a twitch of her lazy eye
and I bent Jie's JJ Lin CD collection like Neo
did his spoon in *The Matrix*. She'd glared
at my forehead, hoping to make it explode.

Soon, we flicked through shared screens
and muted faces, jumped the queue at Fairprice
and manifested hand wipes and toilet rolls
from a stranger's basket. *Go market for what?*
Ma asked, winking at Jackie Chan's kungfu moves
to qualify for free shipping. *Why must clear table?*
Pa complained, when the aunty at the Kopitiam
could levitate stained plates with swollen eyes
and the guys in pink and green could teleport
through thunderclouds for teh png siew dai?

At 4 pm, PM Lee frowned at us from the TV, his eyes big big and pleading to use our powers in the most responsible way possible, if not... a Special Task-Force would convene to stare at eye-related incidents, while the rest of us sat on our sofas, staring back.

GERRIE KOW

Before joining LASALLE's MA in Creative Writing programme, Gerrie was a teacher and a librarian for more than ten years. Passionate about heritage and forgotten spaces, she spends her time walking around Singapore gazing at old buildings and wondering about the people who had lived or worked in them.



The Lost Art of Peeling Oranges

The Three Obediences require women to obey the father before the marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of husband. The Four Virtues are (sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work.

- Gao Xiongya, 'Women Existing for Men:
Confucianism and Social Injustice',
Race, Gender & Class

When we arrived for the weekly Saturday family dinner, Mary, my mother-in-law, shouted from the kitchen, 'You all wait ah, food is almost ready!' Samuel and I exchanged amused looks. The discordant medley of clanging, slamming, and sizzling sounds that emanated from her sanctuary suggested otherwise. Which was just as well, since Samuel's brother and his family had not arrived yet. They were likely caught in the infamous traffic jam near Chomp Chomp, one of the most famous hawker centres in Singapore, popular with Instagrammers, food bloggers, and tourists alike. Mary's terrace house in Serangoon Gardens was just a short distance away.

'Hello. Food smells good,' I greeted her, standing just

outside the kitchen. She beamed. It didn't take much to make her happy. At sixty-nine, Mary was spry and exuded a glow that spoke of a lifetime of grooming. Standing just above five feet, and plump, she had Farrah Fawcett waves that were washed, conditioned, and put up in curlers nightly. These waves were usually accessorised with her favourite plaid hairband. She was an impeccable dresser and somehow still managed to look chic stirring a pot, surrounded by kitchen waste. With the right clothes, hair and make-up, any woman can be pretty! She had said this to me on several occasions while casting sympathetic glances at me, taking in my bare face, shapeless tee-shirts, and oversized three-quarter pants. I nod politely and treat it as idle conversation.

'Don't come in, floor very oily! I need to mop first!' Mary waved me off vaguely, preoccupied with garnishing her *pièce de résistance* – a succulent, braised pork belly that had been stewing in sweet and savoury soya sauce for the last three hours. When that was ready, she carried the clay pot and laid it delicately on the dining table. The lid was whipped off with a flourish, and with that, dinner was served.

'Eat more! I anyhow cook one, nice?' She looked at us expectantly. As always, she made sure to cook her sons' favourites dishes – plump little shrimp dumplings fresh from the steamer, sweet potato leaves stir-fried with chillies and

lime juice, and for dessert, a rich red bean soup, flavoured with smoky palm sugar and tangy orange peel. ‘So? Nice or not? Dumplings are handmade one, you know?’ Mary stood next to the table while we ate, observing, waiting. A chorus of *Nice! Very good! Shiok!* from half-filled mouths finally convinced her to join us, her face tinged with relief. To us, the melange of tantalising smells was simply the promise of a good meal, but for her, it represented the essence of family togetherness. And what was family togetherness if no one liked your cooking?

Amidst the joyous din, Mary permitted herself to relax and spoke of her exploits in the past week. ‘I scored ninety-five marks for the test!’ Mary had attended a “Mobile Phone Basics for Seniors” workshop the week before. ‘The teacher praised me. Say I am the top student!’ She passed the certificate of completion around the table and gleefully took in our suitably encouraging comments. The pork prices at Serangoon were outrageous (she made sure the greedy butcher knew that), so she had travelled all the way to Little India that morning to buy – Tekka Market, according to her, was the mecca of fresh *and* cheap produce. Her churchmates had invited her to lunch at Marina Mandarin Hotel, an outing she recounted with indignation. ‘So expensive you know? Not worth it at all! My food nicer!’ She regaled us with

tales of sprinting after public buses while lugging plastic bags full of pork and vegetables, a habit Samuel has repeatedly warned her against. Over the years, she had fallen quite a few times, darting around like a teenager. A fractured wrist and broken teeth were apparently not sufficiently deterring.

‘I hate spending money on taxi. Waste of money. Money is hard to earn, you know?’ Mary had said, in response to Samuel’s chiding. Her impulse buys of a fifteen-piece Tefal cookware set and two sets of Egyptian cotton 800-threadcount bedsheets laid conveniently forgotten in her bedroom.

‘Come, eat fruits! I got grapes, Sunkist oranges and longans. Thai longans, very sweet, you know?’ As we languished before the television, Mary placed two huge platters of fruits on the coffee table. Samuel reached for an orange, but Mary waved him off. ‘Wait. I peel first. You eat grapes.’

I remembered how Mary had clutched at my gloved forearm after our wedding dinner eighteen years ago. Samuel was in the restaurant settling the bill. She pulled me toward her and peered intently into my heavily made-up face, searching perhaps for some clue as to why her eldest son was leaving her nest after twenty-eight years. With pomp, she produced an orange from her handbag and insisted that

I take it. When I acquiesced, she gripped my hand with both of hers and said, misty-eyed, 'I used to peel Sam's orange for him, now it's your turn.' I nodded and didn't have the heart to tell her that my mother too had peeled my oranges, cooked my meals, *and* did my laundry. I had wondered in that moment, orange in hand, whether there was some part of Samuel which expected the same.

* * *

That night, after we came home from Serangoon Gardens, Samuel received two maiden WhatsApp messages and a Facebook friend request from Mary, much to his bemusement. Apparently, the mobile phone basics workshop she attended had paid off.

Mary didn't have the most affectionate relationship with her sons. Let me rephrase that. Mary *thought* she had an affectionate relationship with her sons. For many of their formative years, she had been in Shenzhen, China, with her husband George. George was one of the many businessmen badly affected by the global financial crisis in 1987. Pursued by a legion of creditors, he was declared a bankrupt and fled Singapore with Mary in tow, leaving his two sons in the care of their grandmother. At twelve, Samuel remembered sobbing at the airport, holding on to his grandmother's hand, not knowing then he would never see his father again.

Mary came back to Singapore alone when he was eighteen and expected that life would continue as if she had never left. She continued to buy t-shirts with Mickey Mouse prints for her sons and made them take their cod liver oil emulsion every morning. For the longest time, the circumstances of her lone return remained an enigma.

We only found out more a few years ago, almost twenty years after Mary's return. Mary had called Samuel to accompany her to the Legal Aid Bureau at Maxwell Road. She had received a letter from them and wasn't sure what to do. There, we found out that George had filed for divorce from China. Mary cried quietly for some time at the Bureau, with Samuel sitting next to her in subdued silence, handing her fresh tissues at regular intervals. Mary had believed that marriage was for life, a contract, unerasable by two decades of separation, unbreakable even by death. To marry was to lose oneself in the melting pot that was her husband's family. How did that Chinese saying put it? Alive, a woman belonged to her husband's family, upon death, she became their ghost. She had been Mary, her father's daughter, then Mary, her husband's wife. That day, she left the bureau fractured, incomplete. On certain nights, I wondered if she felt her loss like a phantom limb, forever gone, but the pain persisted, sharp, throbbing at first, then dulled by time into

an incessant tingle.

* * *

Mary rarely spoke about George, a memory here, an anecdote there, were all we had of the man. She would talk about a movie they had watched together while dating, a special place they visited, odd facts that straddle the intersection of truth and confabulation. More pieces got lost as the years went by, but what she remembered brought her comfort.

In my mind, one of their dates might have gone something like this:

It was a night like any other. Stick-thin, trishaw men tooted their horns to ply their trade. The ice-cream man rang his bell feverishly, driving children wild. The weary denizens hastened to or from work, as they have done for what seemed like too long. But for Mary, the night sizzled with an undercurrent of promise. Of what, she didn't quite yet know. Mary started running towards The Cathay Cinema the moment she hopped off the bus, her full-skirted dress flouncing madly in the wind. It wasn't easy in her platform shoes, and she willed herself not to trip as she jogged along the cracked, uneven granite walkway. Panting heavily, she leaned against a lamp post, took deep breaths, and collected herself. She patted her beehive updo, which she had spent

hours combing and lacquering, to see whether it had been dislodged. Dabbing gingerly at her upper lip and chin with an embroidered hanky, she reapplied her lipstick and walked towards her date.

To get to George, whom she had met through a friend, Mary worked her way past groups of people all waiting to watch *The Sound of Music*. It had opened the week before to great fanfare, with lines of ticket hopefuls that looped twice around the cinema. There was even talk in the news of fights that had broken out and customers fainting.

George was blowing tendrils of cigarette smoke into the air, leaning against somebody's shiny Mercedes-Benz, a James Dean in repose. He checked out his reflection in the side mirror and smiled at his stylish Elvis pompadour or the "curry puff", as the locals called it. Dressed in tight jeans and a black silk shirt, he had made sure just the right number of buttons were undone to show off his chiselled chest.

The couple, on the cusp of adulthood, greeted each other shyly. The man reached for her hand and almost as an afterthought, leaned in and pecked her quickly on her flushed cheek. She smiled coyly and lowered her head, but her pleasure was as unmistakable as his French cologne. Under the gleaming lights of a tungsten-lit Cathay, Julie Andrews watched approvingly from the looming, hand-

painted billboard. The hills were alive indeed.

* * *

19 October 2018

Sam, I have never told anyone this. Hope you don't mind I tell you. You are a good son. All those years, I help your father with his business, I didn't get a single cent. I don't ask also because he buys everything I need. In China, I took very good care of him. He also praise my cooking. When he ask me to come back first, I ask why. He don't want to say, but I know why. I have seen the woman with him outside. Sam, I am very sad. A fortune-teller told me that if I married him, he will have bad luck. But we didn't believe and married anyway. But Sam, I think it is true because your father went bankrupt. Maybe he blames me. Ok, thanks for listening. Good night, God bless.

Sent: 11:42 PM.

Mary, like many Chinese women of her generation, knew about *chikǔ*, or eating bitterness. Poverty? Endure it. Infidelity? Swallow it. Pain? Embrace it. Have your fill but do so in the dark of night. Suffering in silence and knowing one's place were virtues that had been drummed into her since she was a child – the oldest in a poor family of three girls. The inability to endure hardship was considered a deep personal failing which was second only to the sin of

disobeying one's elders. So, when her adopted brother came, and she had to go to sleep hungry most nights so that he had enough to eat, her tears were her own and no one else's. Her experiences provided surprising insights into my fraught relationship with my own mother. It was not enough that one was adept at eating bitterness. A truly virtuous Chinese woman would ensure that any female offspring of her would be equally skilled in the art. My mother tried as she felt she must, but I thwarted her at every turn, ferociously. I have never understood till now why at mealtimes, the drumsticks (and other choice meats) invariably ended up on my brother's plate. I have never understood till now what she meant when she said that a married daughter is akin to water thrown out into the streets. I have never understood till now why I was simply considered ... *less*. It was not because she didn't love me. I saw now that out of what little she had received or thought she deserved, what she had given me seemed plenty to her.

Looking at Mary's WhatsApp messages, Samuel wasn't sure how to respond. Mary had just revealed more of herself to him than she had in his entire life. Technology may have shackled some of us, but it was the instrument of her liberation. Emotions that she would have been horrified to express face-to-face were now freely revealed. In the

shadows, no one could see her shame, and that thought gave her courage.

19 October 2018

Sam, Aunt Maggie cried again today. She thought I didn't see but her eyes are so red. I always tell her not to eat outside food but she never listens. Now it's too late. She is always working. Never take care of her health. Yesterday after chemo, she felt so weak and nauseous. Can't even eat the fish porridge I made for her. Fish is very good. You must eat more. Sam, I am very worried.

Sent: 11:57 PM

Mary's younger sister Maggie died four months later from stage-four colon cancer at sixty-eight. She had been a trainer with the Singapore Airlines, conducting customer service workshops for their cabin crew stationed globally. Each time Maggie travelled, she brought back a fridge magnet for Mary's refrigerator, a ritual that irritated Mary to no end. Sometimes, when Mary opened the fridge, one or two pieces would fly off, and she would have to pick them up. Mary would, however, be grudgingly soothed by Maggie's generosity in the form of duty-free Ferragamo shoes, Estee

Lauder cosmetics, or Chanel perfumes. In life, though she had never married, Maggie led a social life an extroverted millennial would envy; in death, she was celebrated. The turnout at her funeral was so large that many had to stand throughout the service. Her eulogies went on throughout the night; everyone seemed to have a heartfelt story to share. Mary had sobbed inconsolably, unable to say goodbye. She had always believed she would go first.

The next day, at the Mandai Crematorium, the flower-strewn coffin slid slowly into the fiery abyss to a sombre “Amazing Grace” playing in the background. Mary closed her swollen eyes, added this parting to her bitterness, and ate it.

* * *

Since Aunt Maggie’s death a year ago, family dinners happen less frequently. Mary now has a part-time job as a receptionist at a clinic and works most weekends. Off days are spent attending workshops, allowing her to amass an impressive number of certificates of completion for computer, baking, and aromatherapy classes. Just last week, she returned from Europe after a month-long trip with her friends, gifting us with souvenir fridge magnets.

Samuel still receives WhatsApp messages from her, but these are now mainly food and travel pictures, interspersed

with group photos of her with people he doesn't know. We marvelled at this change in Mary - from a paper cut-out of a housewife to this three-dimensional, flesh and blood *person*. Had it been the reminder that life is often shorter than one would like, a mist that vanishes without warning? Or some epiphany that her life doesn't matter any less, even without a husband, son, or father?

We all exist for somebody at various junctures of our lives. That is not objectionable to me. It matters more that I am the one who decides which roles define me, be it wife, mother, daughter, sister, or some such. But some nights, as I lie awake listening to Samuel's rhythmic rumblings, I wonder when these slices of my life are plucked away, what is left? I hope there remains a slice that is uniquely, unabashedly, me.

Happy Endings

Xiaoli straddled the almost naked man deftly, her spandex dress hiked up to her butt. Her ample bosom heaved from the exertion of massaging her fifth customer of the day. Face locked in a frown of concentration, her manicured hands, slick with almond oil, ran up and down his well-muscled back, pausing at selected spots to knead the knots out. An involuntary grunt of pleasure escaped from the prone man which prompted Xiaoli to rub with even more intensity. The louder they moaned, the bigger her tips. Xiaoli's thick black hair, which reached down to her mid-back, was bundled up in two peppy ponytails, calculated to make her look younger than her twenty-three.

The air-conditioned room was kept dim to hide the peeling paint and water-stained carpet. However, much effort had been put into making the space a welcoming one. The massage table was comfortably firm, and the towels were reasonably fresh. Calming instrumental music, reminiscent of a pianist performing by the ocean in light rain, emanated from a Bluetooth speaker placed in the corner. A lavender-scented candle burned next to the speaker, its flickering flame casting nebulous shadows on the walls. Here, men spent money to experience intimacy - they closed their eyes,

revelled in her nearness, and imagined they were not alone. Xiaoli understood that need, having been largely on her own in Singapore since she arrived from China two years ago. In her line of work, which regularly demanded fourteen-hour days, making friends was hard. It also did not help that she had flawless skin like silken tofu, an all-natural hourglass figure, and a dewy-eyed innocence that belied her profession. Xiaoli, being the ‘freshest’ addition to the parlour, was a hot favourite amongst customers, a point that did not sit well with the two senior masseuses. She had tried to placate them with coffee and their favourite fried dough fritters whenever she could, but these often went untouched. Their frequent outings after work never included Xiaoli, and after a while, she stopped hoping to be invited. So, whatever free time Xiaoli had, she retreated to her tiny, rented room in a flat along Selegie Road to do whatever she wanted – sleep, fuss over her skin and binge-watch Chinese and Korean dramas on her mobile phone.

“Can I have a happy ending?” The man stirred, mumbling almost unintelligibly, with his face firmly wedged in the hollow of the massage table.

“Hmm?” Xiaoli couldn’t quite make out what he muttered.

The young man propped himself up on one elbow,

glanced at Xiaoli impishly and repeated himself “You know, *happy endings?*”

Xiaoli did know about happy endings. But with the recent, much publicised police crackdowns on massage parlours offering ‘special services’, Mr. Chua, the owner of Auspicious Massage Parlour, had asked her to decline such requests for the time being.

“You tell them, we only give massage, back, neck, head, any part also can. No, no, cannot say any part. Only neck, back, any *upper* body part, ok? Tell them don’t know what this happy ending is!” Mr. Chua had said, pacing around the parlour, anxiously scratching his scalp through a patchy perm. He had to make sure all his girls were on the same page. Xiaoli had been tempted to mention the countless sets of legs she had massaged and how most people would consider them *lower* body parts but decided against it. He was the boss.

Considering the state of some customers who asked for the same thing, she thought wryly that this man, barely an adult, might just be that one gent she wouldn’t mind giving one to. The last man Xiaoli gave a happy ending to had looked a little like her grandfather, making the experience all shades of awkward. But Xiaoli was a professional, and she didn’t let something as inconsequential as familial

resemblance stop her from giving her best. However, the customer had wheezed and coughed so violently towards the end that she had panicked and yelled for Mr. Chua to call an ambulance. Thankfully, after three cups of the parlour's specially concocted "Tiger Penis Virility Elixir" (which was really just a blend of oolong, chrysanthemum and ginger), he looked less ashen and was able to limp out of the parlour unaided.

"Sorry sir, only massage here, no happy ending," Xiaoli replied as instructed, still straddling him like a circus act. She squirted more almond oil on her hands and reached for his shoulders.

Like a petulant child denied a treat, his playfulness vanished as quickly as it came. His brow furrowed, he swatted her hands away and demanded, "Why not? You want more money? How much?"

"Siiiiirrrrr," Xiaoli purred, taking care to fake-whine in the girlish sing-song voice that had proven quite effective in her past dealings with so many of such men. "It's not the money. Of course I want to. But my boss say cannot, if not, the police will catch. It was on the news last week, you know?" Back and forth they tangoed - it took all of Xiaoli's feminine wiles to mollify the increasingly sullen man. His plans for an afternoon romp thus thwarted, he dug his fingers into her

exposed thigh before flopping back down on the table. Xiaoli bit back a gasp and attacked his knots with renewed vigour.

After he left, she sank heavily into the worn leather armchair outside the room, released her hair from the too-tight ponytails, and massaged her thigh where a cluster of crescent-shaped welts were forming. She thought of kicking off her stilettos and rubbing her feet as well but refrained. Mr. Chua had ensured the armchair, while still inside the parlour, was placed in the line of sight of passers-by so the girls on duty could *fang dian* – to ‘electrify’ and attract customers who saw them.

He had told them in no uncertain terms, “You girls must always look beautiful, eyes must promise heaven on earth, dressing must say welcome to paradise!” Xiaoli looked sceptically around the dingy little parlour, with its fraying mud-coloured carpet, a reception counter missing most of its laminate, and a persistent wet-sock odour that no amount of Febreze could get rid of. How loose does one’s definition have to be for this place to qualify as paradise, even with her and the girls looking their best? Well, her regulars certainly don’t seem to mind – they barge in with schoolboy enthusiasm, paw at her clumsily for an hour or two and leave walking taller, a spring in their step. Perhaps Mr. Chua was right – the girls did complete the illusion.

The parlour was one of the many oddities in Fortune Centre, a strata-titled mall in Bugis from the early eighties. Long past its prime, the Brutalist building boasted a curious hotchpotch of hole-in-the wall vegetarian restaurants, shops selling gilded Buddhist relics, beauty salons, Traditional Chinese Medicine clinics, as well as several LAN-gaming and adult-entertainment establishments. The latter had initially included only Auspicious Massage and another parlour whose décor was as over the hill as its girls. But three months ago, a spanking new joint, The Secret Garden, had opened to much fanfare, across from Auspicious Massage. Touted as a karaoke lounge *and* a massage parlour, clients could sing and drink the night away, while enjoying massage services from exotic Eastern European girls.

They had engaged a lion dance troupe to perform on their opening night. Four men, clothed as two resplendent golden lions, had executed many daredevil feats on raised stilts, playfully fighting over a red cloth ball, hopping and twisting athletically to clanging cymbals and a heart-pounding drumbeat. The energetic felines symbolised power, good fortune, and prosperity – their dramatic posturing, in addition to the din, was supposed to chase away evil spirits and bad luck. Well, they chased away much more than that! For the first time in years, Xiaoli had no customers that day,

though she had stood prominently in the doorway, clad only in a barely-there tube-top and a pair of leather shorts two sizes too small.

Mr. Chua had bragged when he first picked her up at Changi Airport two years ago that she would be working in one of the oldest and most successful establishments in Singapore. In retrospect, that couldn't have been true, except maybe for the 'oldest' part, given Xiaoli's modest monthly salary and piteous commission for each customer. She didn't know how much things cost in Singapore back then - it was her first trip to anywhere outside of China after all. Xiaoli hailed from Chongdu Valley in Henan Province, a popular destination for rural tourism. The shacks which leaked, squatting toilets, and farmland which consistently yielded insufficient food fascinated the sightseers. They came in droves, yearning for a taste of the rustic countryside and left enlightened, thankful that the poverty they saw was not theirs. Villagers relied mainly on tourist income and for eight months a year, sought to milk foreigners for as much as they would part with. Visitors could have a rural homestay, climb majestic mountains, soak in a hot spring, or take a river ride in a rickety boat. Xiaoli and her younger sister had eked out a living peddling the straw bags her mother wove. The bags, with their elaborate bird motif embroidery, fetched quite a

good price, when they sold. Those months, there was always meat on the table, and everyone smiled a little more. In the winter months however, the valley was blanketed in snow, and no one came.

Xiaoli hadn't been back since but remitted a little money now and then to her mother. She didn't tell her family what she was doing in Singapore, and they didn't ask. In the first few months, she had written many vague letters to her mother, sprinkled with just the right amount of sunshine. She did not write about her first client who made her cry; she did not write about how incomprehensible she found Singaporeans, with their rapid-fire Singlish and halting Mandarin; she did not write about how she missed wandering in the lush, willowy bamboo forest that reached to the sky back home. Her soul didn't need baring, not to her mother least of all. The simple act of writing home was enough to remind Xiaoli that she belonged somewhere, to someone, even as she felt her otherness keenly in this manic little city.

A single letter finally came after many months – her mother had responded with a terse paragraph in her shaky handwriting. She thanked Xiaoli for the money she had sent, which had gone into an investment of five chickens and a cow for the family. There was meat on the table everyday

now, even in the winter months. Her sister had outgrown her clothes and was now wearing some of Xiaoli's. They are all doing well so Xiaoli should not worry and should continue to work hard and bring glory to the family.

No more letters came after.

Xiaoli had calculated the amount she owed Mr. Chua for her airfare and living expenses in the initial months – she should have enough to repay him in a few weeks with some left over for the cosmetology and English courses she was planning to take. Xiaoli didn't plan on being at the parlour much longer and saw her future clear as day. Once she completed her studies, she would get a job at one of those facial spas in Chinatown. She would work her way up to the posh ones along Tanjong Pagar which served primarily women. She could then visit her family in style, buy them things they always craved but never could have – a heavy gold bangle for her mother, an education in the city for her sister and sightseeing trips to wherever they wanted! She shared this often with Mr. Suresh too, the affable nightshift security guard she sometimes chatted with on her break. Their conversations almost always ended the same way, with Mr. Suresh wishing her good luck, giving her a thumbs-up sign, and offering her a pack of peanuts, something he referred to in Malay as *kacang putih*. Xiaoli would miss him

when the time came for her to leave.

“Miss? How much for massage?” A gruff voice intruded. She looked up and saw a squat, middle-aged man in the doorway. Though the prices for massage services were clearly listed in a hard-to-miss font size on the shop front, this was invariably the first question a prospective client asked. Xiaoli bit back an irritated reply (think ‘paradise’, she reminded herself) and purred instead that it was usually sixty dollars per hour but for the privilege of massaging this acme of masculinity, it would just be fifty.

“Mister? Want a massage? It’s forty-five for one and a half hours, free whisky!” A dulcet voice called out.

What? Not again! Xiaoli sprung to her feet, strode out of the parlour into the mall’s open area and glowered at the source of the competing offer. Just as she thought, it was one of those blasted girls from The Secret Garden, who was as beautiful as she was unethical. All the Fortune Centre masseuses had a code – no poaching if customers were already at the door! Ever since they opened, Xiaoli’s earnings had declined steadily – at this rate, she would have to see Mr. Suresh and eat his *kacang putih* for a lot longer! The leggy masseuse slithered across from her lair towards the man, looking like a Nordic goddess. She pressed her lithe body against his, her baby-blue eyes and pouty red lips

daring him to refuse her.

“You *know* you want me,” she hissed in his ear and nipped it playfully, throwing her head back in laughter. The man swallowed hard, and couldn’t tear his eyes away from her long, bare neck, and breasts that peeked artfully out of her dominatrix corset. She placed a possessive hand on his arm and pushed/pulled him away from Xiaoli.

That vixen had violated the code again! How many times had it been now? Enough was enough! Drawing strength from the ancient Chinese adage, ‘a tigress will be treated like a sick cat if she did not display her prowess’, Xiaoli teetered toward the man and pounced on his other arm. “No, no, come with me! I give you good discount. Forty dollars for one half hours also. Massage any part, er, any upper body part. Sure feel good!” She gave him her most bewitching smile and thrust her B-cups out.

The vixen ignored her pointedly and whispered suggestively instead into the man’s ear, triggering a lascivious snigger. He freed his arm from Xiaoli’s grasp and with his hand on the vixen’s generous behind, moved to enter The Secret Garden. Xiaoli’s mind raced to salvage her pride, and she had a eureka moment.

Triumphantly, she shouted, “Auspicious Massage Parlour famous for happy endings. So happy you stay happy

whole week!"

The man stopped in his path and looked at Xiaoli with renewed interest. "Happy endings?"

"Yes, yes, very happy, and free Tiger Penis Elixir for you!" Xiaoli cooed and fluttered her false eyelashes furiously.

The man strolled towards Xiaoli, apparently won over by her passionate sales pitch. Victorious, Xiaoli smiled scornfully at the vixen.

"Mister, China girl so yesterday. Caucasian, more interesting, no? We can have happy ending whole night, *and* two free whiskies, ok?" With that, the war was lost. The man went back to the vixen, who gave his butt a squeeze so vigorous that all manner of things flew out of his pocket which he bent to retrieve. Laughing, the vixen dragged her prey hungrily back to her lair.

Bitch! Xiaoli clomped back to her turf, the bitter taste of defeat in her mouth. She fumed and thought of all the ways she should have used her stilettos. Fed-up, Xiaoli decided to close-up for the night; the rigors of her day, and the epic battle had drained her. She would seek solace in her favourite twenty-four-hour hotpot joint, and later at home, rewatch her favourite drama. Any impaling will have to wait.

As Xiaoli headed towards the lift, something glinted on the ground. She moved towards it and picked up a

card. The squat man stared back sullenly at her, face leaner, years younger. Above his photo, the crest of a certain law enforcement agency in Singapore. Xiaoli placed the card carefully back on the ground and entered the lift.

In a life that had not seen many victories, Xiaoli was suddenly overcome by an immense sense of elation at having bested someone. It was not an outcome she had to toil for, but a gift freely bestowed. As a rule, she did not believe in God or fairy tales – that had been bred out of her by bone-chilling winters and an empty stomach years ago. But in that moment, she felt different. Perhaps there *were* cosmic powers, and karma got us all in the end. A curious feeling that could not be contained bubbled up from deep within and gleeful laughter came out in a whoop, surprising her. That night, the steaming hotpot, infused with chillies and a dozen other piquant spices, smelled more fragrant to Xiaoli, and strangers she met on the streets friendlier. As she ambled back to her room close to midnight her belly warm, a balmy breeze tinged with the promise of rain caressed her skin. For the first time, Xiaoli allowed herself to feel just a little more at home.

KEVIN NICHOLAS WONG

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The Bridge

People seem more laid-back in their skimpy beachfront attire and flip flops that rattle the pavement here in Tiong Bahru. The buildings, eggshell white with the texture of sandpaper and curved in the shape of submarine fins, are never more than three stories high, not as ambitious as the skyscrapers in town that point sharply upwards into the clouds. Lining both sides of the street, they form an unfinished archway framing the open sky, with only a beginning and an end, nothing in between. An uninterrupted field of blue. Looking up, you feel like you can paint your life over again.

I remember a similar ethereal lift many years ago: the three of us were sandwiched at the back of the cab, hands piled messily on each other's laps, clasped in anticipation. Mom had her best face on and smelled of gardenias, Dad was in his spiffy polo shirt and golf shorts. Both had an image to upkeep, the sterilised crystal sheen atop their baked skin that screamed success. Whether I would be able to inherit this privilege would soon be answered. It was the release of the Primary School Leaving Examination results, our first taste of how worth is measured here in Singapore, the final score determined whether we could enter a top-tier secondary

school, their past year exam papers photocopied and sold at roadside stands for other aspiring students to purchase.

Dad was fidgety the whole time, his jackhammer thigh shook against mine. Feeling annoyed, I forced my knee sideways into him, which turned into a wrestling match of sorts, two fleshy boomerangs knocking into one another.

“Excuse me, young man. Am I sitting beside the top scorer in the school? Perhaps a future lawyer?” Dad said jocularly.

“Or a doctor who finds a cure for cancer!” I retorted, my voice shrill and ardent, the innocent twelve-year-old me that didn’t know any better. The car throttled towards the apex of the Tampines Expressway, and as we reached the peak of the bridge, I felt a rise in my stomach, like a buoyant spring to a foot being pushed off the ground, the beginning of a motion. We were on the thrust of something new; the only way was up, for we never imagined an alternative. The road soon narrowed into the two-lane Upper Changi Road, surrounded by a cloister of trees that drew playful fingers on the cushion seats, fanning into wings that flapped restlessly to the sound of the engine running, harmonising with the beat of Dad’s shaking legs. He was counting, counting down to the moment that in hindsight, meant more to him than me.

Dad couldn't even look at me after the disappointment, of '229' dotted in grey fine print on a strip of fax paper, already smudged and fading as if it too was ashamed of the result (the score was by no means a disaster, but it wasn't 'doctor-or-lawyer' good either); he didn't speak to me three days after. He called me into the study on a Sunday morning, after the long-drawn-out stalemate, where he normally drank his morning coffee and tended to his discus fish tank that stretched across the entire back wall. The square-shaped room was still menacingly dark when I entered. Light filtered through the partition between the velvet curtains, just enough to illuminate the side of his slouched body seated on a wooden deck chair, and the book he had been holding close to him, a brick-sized manual containing the names of all secondary schools in Singapore and the cut-off scores required to enter.

Upon noticing me hovering in the doorway, Dad deftly stubbed out his cigarette and without waiting, proceeded to announce his curated list of schools for me. I did not have a chance to speak. Instead, I abided, as I always did, watching as he shifted his spectacles down his nose, clearing his throat before speaking again.

"Jo, listen, very simple. If you don't do well in school, you won't do well in life."

He drew a breath and exhaled with an ascending timbre, then darted a look at me with those feral eyes ablaze; you can't look into them for long, like the bitter tropical sun in midday. "My son will not grow up to become some low-life taxi driver. Do you understand me?"

I studied Dad's face as he turned away, pensive and flushed, especially behind the ears, the shadows soon consuming all of him. Through the years, I watched as he slowly hardened with age, his expression growing effete each time we spoke in passing, with no more than a sentence or two, a stiff towel with a limp horizontal slit for a mouth. I could no longer recognise myself in him. It was as if all the hope that he had pinned onto me, that lustre, like the fleeting passage of unbridled youth, was released. I had to prove that I was worthy, to one day be looked in the eye without an overcast, without fire, a simple acknowledgement that I was good enough.

As so eloquently described by the feathered typed letter from the university, I "unfortunately did not meet the passing grade requirements", and therefore had been summoned to meet with the dean at his office. I had been half-asleep in bed up until twenty minutes before I was supposed to leave. The radiator in my room was nothing but

a limp slab only serving as a display piece, an ice sculpture in the shape of a giant popsicle. I quickly threw on a jumper with The University of Glasgow logo printed (in an effort to gain some sympathy points) and a pair of dark jeans that had been lying on the floor, hoping they wouldn't smell.

The building was housed in an old cathedral-like structure at the very back of the campus, one just had to follow the spire, the flaking edges of an outmoded antenna discernible from miles away. On the way over, with the pointed spire in sight, I suddenly had the urge to pray, but I couldn't home in on the words. My conscience was not my own, like a radio turned on underground, a distorted combination of my parents, teachers and relatives' voices nagging at me to do better.

Armed with a firm handshake and an equally forceful pat on my shoulder, Wilkins greeted me by name, his khaki tweed coat sleeve grazing my wrist which felt like a freshly mowed lawn. We exchanged short pleasantries as he guided me into his office, asking where I was from and whether we celebrated Christmas there; he was having some trouble trying to get a gift for his sixteen-year-old son Louis. I told him Christmases in Singapore were treated the same as any other holiday, just another excuse to splurge on sales, and suggested the new Nintendo.

“So, Joel. Tell me everything.”

Gently blowing on his cup of English Breakfast tea, Wilkins listened carefully as I explained my predicament – why I had been missing classes, unresponsive to administrators’ emails, eventually failing the practicum course required to graduate. I talked about not being able to get out of bed for days, how difficult it was to study for exams, staring at an anvil of this medical textbook, the words floating before me refusing to compute like a lizard’s tail detached from its body, desperately flapping for a connection. We discussed my options after, the most logical necessitated a visit to the school’s doctor to confirm the anxiety and depression, and return the following year. But this meant I would have to vacate the student flat for the time being and return to Singapore.

“Take the time you need to rest. Maybe some good would come from being back home,” Wilkins said. With the same steady hand on my shoulder, the professor nudged me towards the door. “Don’t feel like you’re in this alone, there have been many others in your position,” he said solemnly. He didn’t sound like a professor then, but a father, the father of a sixteen-year-old Louis Wilkins who several days later would receive a thoughtful Christmas gift without even asking for it, and there I felt a smouldering jealousy. When I

got into medical school, Dad started introducing me as “his son, the future doctor”, like it had been an extended part of my name. But his bashful hammock of a smile only appeared to the myriad of congratulations from his audience, never once directed at me.

The streetlamps did little to illuminate the wilderness outside that sullen evening, selfish cylinders of light that barely filled the outlines of leafless skeletal trees, and brick tenements that looked vacant and condemned. A mild sickly itch began to claw at my chest, molecular little imps picking my brain saying there wasn't anyone else like me. My flatmates had all left, boarding trains and miniature planes, ones where you can see the blades of engine fans exposed from bubble windows, giant commas spinning that punctuated a deserved rest before embarking on the rest of their lives. I thought about returning home a failure; I could predictably hear the tinny rasp in Dad's voice and imagine the lines on his face becoming tauter as he heard about my so-called sabbatical, which told me that I too would be misunderstood there. I figured staying in Glasgow would be better, alone to figure it out on my own, in many rooms with windows that wouldn't open, and outside, down a zigzag of stairs and through a dimly lit hallway, a street piled with a snow that slows and hides its decay, melting into the horizon that sealed shut

when their two ends met.

Singapore, or what I thought was home, just breeds a different kind of cold.

If not for the ‘Closing Sale’ sign outside in big block letters, I would not have entered, which would have been a pity. The store smells of freshly laundered clothes, an attic of hidden sunshine, surrounded by yellow walls and albino pinewood shelves, stacked with jigsaws of books that seem perfectly content in their little given nooks. I leisurely make my way down each aisle, thumbing through rows of multi-coloured rectangles, each one printed with a title and name. Almost all of them are surprisingly Asian in descent, striking a sense of *déjà vu*, like a classmate you hadn’t seen since graduation, or a distant relative that you only get to see during family weddings.

“Can I help you? You’ve been in here awhile.”

It is just the two of us this Tuesday afternoon. The woman has a forest green canvas apron wrapped around her ratty T-shirt, her raven hair tied loosely in a ponytail, exuding a kind of friendliness that is teasingly charitable.

“Hi yes, thank you, Cassie.”

Her eyebrows pinch inwardly, but they just as quickly retreat, remembering her name being printed on the enamel

nametag clasped to her shirt. Cassie reminds me that all the books are half off, her produced smile in a weak upward slant, like it had hurt to say. I casually mention it is shamefully the first time I've been here, and we get to talking. I learn that she isn't just an employee, but the owner, inspired by her perceived lack of local literature; she recounts having to take an hour-long bus ride to reserve the only copy of Edwin Thumboo's *Ulysses by the Merlion* from Jurong Regional Library, the book still relatively clean, with no dog ears, no wrinkles on the spine.

"So, what will you do once the store closes for good?" I ask.

Again, her eyebrows are the first to react, furry upside-down arrows locking into position, but they do not let up this time. "I haven't the faintest idea. I guess I'll cross that bridge once I'm there," she says without an inflection, stating a mere fact. But I catch her faltering ever so slightly, breaking her line of sight from me to focus on the shelves around us, the almond tips of her eyes wincing, her body recoiling back as she takes a breath, revealing something vulnerable.

"So, it's just these then?" she asks.

The books are nestled in my arms, sticking to my pasty skin, still damp from being out the entire morning. I give a shy, obtuse nod, and Cassie politely takes them away from

me. As she begins to walk away, I still picture her sad face, and wonder if she has trouble sleeping at night too.

A blown-up photograph catches my attention as I approach the counter, floating in a moat of heavenly white, the only piece of decor hanging on the scuffed wall behind Cassie. Edging closer, I am formally introduced to a distinguished looking Asian couple within the frame.

“Are those your parents?” I ask.

“Oh no, I found some negatives in a shoebox at a flea market.”

They are dressed in wedding garbs from a bygone era where colours on a photograph are diluted with a slick of Vaseline. The groom is in a cardboard brown suit with carnation ruffles blooming from his chest; the bride is in a wedding dress fitted with puffed sleeves shaped like elephant ears painted white. They seem to be standing in the middle of a road situated above ground, behind them clear vanilla skies with panels of light cascading down onto the water below that elucidated it, becoming one borderless mirror; the seascape looked familiar.

“Where was this taken?”

“I believe that’s the Benjamin Sheares Bridge,” she says.

He was our nation’s second President, apart from

being a pioneering doctor in the field of obstetrics and gynaecology, paving the way for modern Caesarean sections and sex reassignment surgeries, his techniques still studied and utilised today. In photos I could find, Mister Sheares always looked tired, his tree bark face with no fat moulded closely to the shape of his skull, bearing a weighty grin that brought out his frown lines like dried up river channels. But he could be excused, he was tired with intention; all his energy had been used up to run this body into meaning, knowing he was meant for greater things.

“Isn’t that a highway? Are people allowed to stop there?”

“That’s the whole point, I guess. The thrill of the chase, trying to take the perfect shot. They seem so free. Don’t you think so?”

The woman has her skirt hiked up, holding her fiancé as he leads her towards the camera, both frozen in mid-run, smiling with teeth showing, forcing dimples to erupt from their cheeks. Their arms are outstretched like an invitation, pulling me into their unblemished world.

“They do seem happy here, yes.”

By the time I leave the store, the afternoon glare has waned into a comfortable murmur. The air isn’t so heavy anymore. There is even a slight breeze, a rarity these days,

a perfect setting to be outside. From the quiet village of Tiong Bahru, I inch my way towards the city centre, tracing the banks of the Singapore River, watching as people start to get off work, trudging out of office buildings in their monochromatic outfits. People walk about in their brittle shells here. They duck, cower and give you looks of misanthropy; smiles are also rare. They disappear before you can even form a complete image in your mind, their runny watercolour selves chasing the next train home, the next appointment, the next big thing.

Eventually I reach the river's mouth after an hour or so, which opens into the sprawling Marina Bay. The whole landscape has changed. Out from the depths, an Atlantis has arisen, with new dazzling structures built all around the reservoir – a must-visit hotel shaped like a giant wave; a clam-like museum sitting by the edge of the water, its shell open, wide and receiving; another bridge with a mesh of swirling steel lattices shielding its top, meant to mimic the helices of our DNA, symbolising the building blocks of life. The Benjamin Sheares Bridge stands stoically on the other side of the water, the ten-lane platform mounted on statuesque hourglass stilts, forged from concrete that are now stained with darkened moss. I tilt my head up, watching as cars buzz by, trying to discern where the couple had taken

that photograph from the bookstore all those years ago, behind them a sea of vast openness.

It never occurred to me that this was nothing but empty waters before, sheets of light dancing on the surface, as wide and far reaching as the smiles on those newlyweds' faces on Cassie's wall. I begin to picture myself in the groom's place, and Cassie unwittingly plays the role of my bride. But she isn't ready just yet. In my mind, she is still at the cashier counter, deeply focused on the wrapping of my books with parchment paper, bearing a vacant expression. I start to contort her face, pulling the corners of her lips and drawing the curtains of her eyelids open, trying to match the look with the bride in the photograph – a look that is completely relaxed, one that says, "I've got you."

Hand in hand, we are smiling now, sauntering back towards the boxy Fiat parked by the road shoulder. We cruise down the highway, levitating, watching the forest green exit signs zip by as we make the decelerating swerve into the turnoff, towards a life that is our own to build. The sky begins to ombre, the candlelit sun setting behind a swirl of lavender. Mom will call soon, so I start walking back the way I came from. I hear the initial feedback of naysayers in my head, Dad's hollow threats in his veiled study which never left me. I think about Dr Benjamin Sheares, Cassie and her fledgling

bookstore, their persistence and drive to carry on.

With each step I make, the words come crackling through, soft but firm, a declaration in my own distinct voice saying: *I. Will. Be. Okay. I. Will. Be. Okay.*

SARA PATRICIA KELLY

Sara Patricia Kelly is a creative storyteller and children's poet, currently writing her first novel. Based in Singapore, she authors flossiebossy.com – a 'sticky poppy poetry' blog for kids, and performs spoken word poetry at local events. She is undertaking an MA in Creative Writing at LASALLE College of the Arts.



Singapore to a Child

Zero, one, two,
Eat crab bee hoon;

One, two, three,
Ride the MRT;

Two, three, four,
Shop at City Square Mall;

Three, four, five,
Go for dinner at Chijmes;

Four, five, six,
Find the lunar eclipse;

Five, six, seven,
We're in selfie heaven;

Six, seven, eight,
Watch the dragon boat race;

Seven, eight, nine,
Snap the mighty Merlion;

Eight, nine, ten,
It's raining again!

Now, let's do it backwards.

Eleven, ten, nine,
Snap the mighty Merlion;

Ten, nine, eight,
Watch the dragon boat race;

Nine, eight, seven,
We're in selfie heaven;

Eight, seven, six,
Find the lunar eclipse;

Seven, six, five,
Go for dinner at Chijmes;
Six, five, four,
Shop at City Square Mall;

Five, four, three,
Ride the MRT;

Four, three, two,
Eat crab bee hoon;

Three, two, one,
Who's a sour plum?!

Island of Opportunity

I moved to Singapore to have a baby. I'm not the maternal type; I don't like other people's kids. But becoming a parent seemed the obvious thing to do. I'd already travelled, the career was happening, and everyone around me was having babies. My younger sister had a baby. The more others asked, *when are you starting a family?* the more I pined for the idea. I was halfway there – I had a husband. Igor was a Russian-Lithuanian with a square jawline, beady chocolate eyes, and a thick accent. But our lifestyle wasn't conducive to family life. We lived in a damp basement flat in the London East End; the toilet was frequently clogged, and the kitchen floor tiles were so cold from never seeing sunlight; we couldn't afford to heat every room. Between our meagre salaries, we barely made ends meet. Igor's drinking didn't help. We had five bars and two twenty-four-hour convenience stores, *office licences*, selling cheap beer within walking distance. That was the problem with London – temptation was everywhere. I considered moving back to Australia, but Sydney felt impossibly provincial after eight exciting years in London. Besides, my family hated Igor. Then, an opportunity presented itself at work: the HR Manager for Asia-Pacific *disappeared* one day. Employees were always 'disappearing' in

the cutthroat world of financial services.

‘Go to Singapore. Be the glue of the office. The place is falling apart,’ my boss urged.

And so, I was off on a six-week assignment to oversee recruitment, payroll, and all other HR matters while they hired a replacement. Kissing Igor goodbye, I was already dreaming of our new life; I would wow the local staff, nab the permanent position, and we would start a new chapter in Singapore.

Changi Airport was like an eighties department store – warm-hued lights, gaudy red carpet, and flashing sale signs. My blonde hair rose like bread in the oven the second I stepped out to hail a taxi. Sailing down the highway under glowing purple trees, the city skyline opened like a million-dollar performance: a blue ribbon bridge, a flower, a boat, a melody of concrete notes in perfect harmony, as though planned by a single choreographer.

I stayed at a serviced apartment near Chinatown, a short walk to the office in the central business district. En route was a shopping mall, Chinatown Point, which had restaurants on all six floors. I dined there every night, hungry to try all the new and interesting dishes. I blogged about the har gow dumplings (shrimp in translucent skin) at Victor’s Kitchen and mouth-watering crispy duck spring rolls from

Din Tai Fung. Chinatown Point had the same eighties vibes as Changi, reminding me of after school shopping trips with mum. I spent hours on the weekend, pacing the carpeted floors, stopping for coffee, and staring at shop windows.

Every second person kept asking, *how do you find the weather?* I answered: freedom. No more layers – bye-bye gloves, stockings, coat, and hat. I even abandoned my Dyson hairdryer to embrace my hair’s fluffiness. Freedom was also solitary evenings: slow laps through warm water at the mouth of a dazzling skyline; sitting nude under the aircon, and nibbling a Chinese egg tart before bed.

At the end of the work assignment, I concluded life in Singapore was good. Like the skyline, it lacked spontaneity – there were a lot of rules and not a lot of temptation. But I felt certain that Igor and I could be successful here. Returning to London, I applied for the permanent position and got it.

Igor didn’t require convincing to move. He was equally frustrated by our existence. The eternal student, it had taken him nearly a decade to achieve an impractical degree in history from a third-tier university. At thirty-two, he was a lowly administrative assistant earning minimum wage. We made a pact that Singapore would be the start of a new, healthy, and successful life: no more drinking, no more partying. We’d get serious, focus on our careers, and grow

our family.

Mum was ecstatic. ‘This is such a great opportunity,’ she gushed over the phone, ‘to leave that good for nothing husband of yours. Pack your bags and don’t look back.’

‘I’m not going without him.’

‘He’s an embarrassment, admit it. He’ll only bring you down.’

‘He has potential.’

‘Your father was always so disappointed in your choice of husband. Even on his deathbed.’

Mum didn’t understand what I saw in Igor. I fell for him on our first date. We drank wine and talked for ten hours straight about everything – the environment, European history, Agatha Christie, the Cold War. He was well-read, interesting, and passionate. He was nothing like the complacent men I dated in Australia who preferred footy over politics and television over conversation. Even after eight years together, I found Igor to be the most fascinating man on the planet. His lack of professional success didn’t bother me. His drinking was a problem; a few beers made him charming, but a few more turned him into an animal. Anything could set him off, once he got that crazy look in his eyes.

In Singapore, we rented a two-bedroom home on the

twenty-third floor of a condominium called City Square Mall. Every day was a tropical holiday, like living in a three-star resort: sheeny coconut-white tiles, a spacious bedroom with ensuite, a guest room, single tap faucets, and floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the shimmering swimming pool below. We toured every hawker within a one-kilometre radius, incredulous that a plate of delicious sticky-sweet roasted pork (char siew) cost five dollars. Weekends we lounged on deckchairs by the pool, baking ourselves silly and planning adventurous trips around Asia.

One evening, we were playing Durak (a Russian card game) to kill the time, when Igor declared, 'Let's go drinking.'

'It's late. There's nowhere to drink around here, anyway.'

'I know a place. And they have wine.'

Downstairs was a thrum of activity despite the late hour. Crossing the main road, I followed Igor into the shadowy entrance of *Ob! Carole*, a dimly-lit, desolate pub at the bottom of a converted shop house.

Heading straight for the bar, he yelled to the young woman, 'Give me a white wine, a pint of Carlsberg, and an ashtray,' hopping up onto a barstool.

'You wait thirty minute! No smoke till after ten,' she snapped while serving a large glass of yellow wine the colour of lolly water – Australian chardonnay, ugh.

A frail Chinese man gripped a microphone a few stools over and started wailing to a melancholy tune.

We became regulars at *Ob! Carole*. Friday nights, we'd stay until late, hogging the karaoke to belt out eighties pop while the locals watched in horror. Igor needed the release; his job search wasn't yielding results, and he never lost control. I relished those hours of tipsiness, believing everything would be alright.

Bright days dissolved into weeks, then months and the honeymoon feelings began to fade. Nobody wanted Igor – he wasn't senior, he wasn't ivy league educated, and he wasn't a native English speaker. He applied for hundreds of jobs, waiting weeks for a rejection. Singapore wasn't the island of opportunity we'd thought. I dreaded coming home to his glum form, lying on the couch, an open laptop on his belly. For the first time, I felt embarrassed by him.

I applied to be a volunteer with the Cat Welfare Society. I needed an excuse to leave the house. They needed a photographer.

'I'm not a professional, but I have a professional camera,' I explained to Ei-leen, the outreach manager. The lavish Canon EOS 6D I'd purchased for all the fabulous holidays I'd planned had been collecting dust for six months.

'Okay, lah. Can this weekend?'

I met the team on a Saturday morning in the void deck of a housing estate. The sweaty-faced volunteers, dressed in blue and armed with pamphlets, posed shyly as I snapped away with my camera. They were going door-to-door, providing information on cat sterilisation to the residents. The photos came out overexposed, some were blurry. I couldn't believe I captured several volunteers looking cross-eyed in the group shot. Ei-leen didn't mind.

'Help again next weekend?'

The next event was an adoption drive at United Square shopping mall. We met at the basement level, where tables were arranged with pamphlets about pet adoption as well as assorted cages of cats.

'We don't have a physical shelter for strays,' explained Ei-leen. 'Our foster network care for the cats and help find forever homes.'

I went from cage to cage to capture the felines, moved by their dejected eyes staring back at me. The older cats nobody wanted wore knitted hats to make them look cuter. Children came, squealing and poking their chubby fingers through the bars. Ei-leen was incredibly protective of the cage by her stall, which housed three weeny kittens – one grey, one ginger, and one the colour of burnt toast. I must have been lingering because she elbowed me, 'Do you want

to hold one?’

I nodded excitedly.

‘These poor babies were found abandoned in a bin behind a restaurant. They are probably siblings,’ she carefully pulled out the grey kitten, placing her gently in my cupped hands. She mewed and trembled as I held her to my chest.

‘I bet you’d make a great fur mummy,’ Ei-leen cooed.

A week later, mum came to visit. She arrived at our flat in the late afternoon, dressed smart in a black blazer over jeans, blonde hair puffy, cupid-bow lips stained red, wheeling in two suitcases.

After a series of energetic kisses, she made a show of unloading the smaller suitcase, which was full of goodies for us: two bottles of Australian Semillon wine, a cooler bag of cheeses, Haigh chocolates, Chanel perfume, Kerastase purple shampoo, and a paddle brush.’

‘I’ve stopped straightening my hair,’ I said, waving the hairbrush, and shaking my loose shoulder-length waves.

Looking me up and down, she replied, ‘You need more volume. I like your dress.’

I wore a Calvin Klein A-line dress with vertical black and white stripes, which disguised the weight I’d gained.

Igor watched us from the couch, perking up a little when I put the wine in the fridge.

‘We can take a bottle with us to dinner. You’re not tired, are you? I made reservations at a *Michelin star* restaurant next door.’

‘It sounds amazing.’

Putien restaurant was always busy – I passed it most days, thumbing the glossy pictures of clams, prawns, and tofu, on the menu stand out front. Mum was a picky eater. She only liked authentic cuisine, and her bar was very high.

A few hours later, at the restaurant, the waiter poured us tea into smooth cups with no handle.

‘So, Igor, how’s your mother?’ mum finally addressed him.

‘Good.’

‘How are you finding Singapore?’

‘Good.’

‘How is the job search going?’

‘Good.’

‘Have you reached out to recruiters?’

‘How are things back home?’ I inquired loudly.

‘I want to hear about Igor’s job search. Don’t interrupt.’

‘I can’t wait to try the crispy skin chicken. Apparently, that’s the signature dish here.’

‘Have you got a cover letter, Igor? Make sure to use spell-check. You won’t get an interview if your resume is

riddled with mistakes.'

Glancing at Igor's flared nostrils, I yelped, 'Do you know I'm thinking of adopting a cat?'

'What?' they cried in unison.

'Actually, three cats! I've already decided their names – Jammy, Peanut, and Toast.'

'What kind of name is Toast?' Igor grimaced. 'I'm going out for a smoke.'

The minute he left the table, mum pinched my arm and hissed, 'Don't even think about adopting a living creature until you sort your own life out.'

'What? I was just promoted at work, and I...'

'You don't have a good track record when it comes to making decisions,' she pinched me again. 'You lack judgement. Is he still drinking?'

'No! And I'm adopting those kittens,' I huffed, gulping the tea and banging the cup on the table for effect. The waiter appeared with a long plate laden with chopped chicken, which he placed on the centre of the table with a flourish. The rose-white meat, peeping from its roasted jacket, looked succulent.

The following day, I phoned Ei-leen about the kittens. She wanted to inspect my home to ensure it was *cat-friendly* and provided a list of items to buy in preparation. I dragged

my mum out shopping.

'I'm not saying anything,' she kept sighing and pursing her pink-lipstick lips as I browsed the Pet Lovers store with enthusiasm. We returned home with two litres of kitty litter, a bag full of cat food and treats, and another bag of fluffy toys. Igor, who was lying on the couch with his laptop, rose groggily and asked, 'What's all this stuff?'

'For the kittens.'

'What kittens?'

'I'm not saying anything!' mum cried, disappearing to the spare bedroom.

'Our kittens! Jammy, Peanut, and Toast. We talked about this last night,' I stomped with bare feet on the cool tiles.

'Uh, yeah.'

'I thought we came to Singapore to start a new life?'

'What does that have to do with anything?'

'I really want these kittens. Can't you support me for once in my life?'

'I am!'

'Because you don't seem interested at all.'

Squeezing my shoulders, he whispered, 'We will have a great life. Just wait. I'm trying to find a job. And I can't relax when your mum is here. Cut me a break.'

We went to Din Tai Fung in the mall across the road for dinner. They served wine, and we all needed a drink. I ordered the crispy duck spring rolls, and we shared edamame, pork cutlet with noodles, and stir-fried spinach. Igor struggled with his chopsticks in silence. I accepted he was always sullen when mum was around; ever since she'd screamed, *That's your last beer!* at the door of the courtyard at two in the morning, in her dressing gown, the first time I brought him home.

'Remember the shiny kittens?' She woke me from my reverie.

'There were silky, not shiny,' I laughed.

'They had evil, shiny faces. Poor Tom Tom.' she sipped her wine. She loved to tell the story of Jasmine and Simba, my childhood Burmese cats, who bullied Tom Tom, the fat moggy cat.

'Wanna see the logo I've sketched for Jammy, Peanut, and Toast?' I stabbed a spring roll with the chopstick.

'What do they need a logo for?'

'For their Instagram account.'

She rolled her eyes.

Mum and I went to bed early that night while Igor stayed up to apply for more jobs. Glancing at the kaleidoscope of city lights that illuminated my bedroom

window, I snuggled under the heavy quilt, aircon blowing, and smiled with glee. Everything was happening for me. I had a professional job, a modern apartment, and soon I'd have pets, I mused, drifting to sleep.

Several loud thumps and muffled shouting woke me some hours later. I knew instantly there was a party in the next room. Reaching to touch the other side of the bed, empty, I reluctantly pulled on a pair of tracksuit pants and padded out to the living room. Igor was clutching a beer – he had that crazy look in his eyes, and was shouting in Russian to three red-faced men draped across our furniture.

‘What the fuck is happening?’ I spat. ‘Mum is in the next room!’

‘Fuck her. She hates me. We’re just having a few drinks.’

‘Who are these people?’

‘I met them downstairs.’

‘They have to leave, NOW!’

There'd been countless impromptu parties at odd hours when we lived in London. I accepted them as a part and parcel of our life and never fought back. This time was different. I was furious at him for embarrassing me in front of my mum. She was a light sleeper and would give me grief about this in the morning. I continued screeching at him to

leave, until he barked Russian orders at the mob, and they drifted out of the apartment.

Several hours later, my sleep was interrupted again by the sound of mum screaming. Feeling the other half of the bed, empty again, I opened the bedroom door to an open-mouthed mum in her dressing gown.

“This cannot go on!” she indicated madly towards the bathroom and, throwing her hands in the air, barged past me to use the ensuite. The small bathroom reeked of shit. Igor, briefs around his ankles, was asleep on the toilet. I tried nudging him awake, but he only responded with obscenities. There was nothing for us to do but freshen up quickly and leave the crime scene.

At the Coffee Bean Tea Leaf, her well-manicured hands wrapped elegantly around a hot latte, mum cut straight to the point, ‘You married a loser. Even in Singapore, he can find the other drunk Russians quicker than he can find a job. Where is he getting money for drinking?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘How long has this been happening?’

‘Everything was fine until...’

‘You’ve got to leave him.’

‘I’m too old to find a new husband!’ I blurted. The truth I had been hiding from myself for so long finally came out.

‘Rubbish. I remarried at fifty.’

‘But I want kids. I’m running out of time. I’m old!’
Dabbing the corner of my eye with a napkin, I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing into my coffee cup. I knew the marriage was over. There would be no kittens. There would be no baby. But that was okay. This was my opportunity to be free.

BRYCE W. MERKL SASAKI

Bryce W. Merkl Sasaki is a writer, editor, and wizard-errant [citation needed] currently wandering through Southeast Asia. When he's not publishing lol book reviews for Eleventy-One, he writes travel poetry or works on his science fiction novel, Lucky Prime V. He can usually be found snuggling with the nearest cat.



A Passage through the Pasar

Introduction

In Singapore, the *pasar* (Malay for “market”) faces an uncertain future. Wet markets are both a pillar of culture and a symbol of an older era. They aren’t the same as wildlife or live-slaughter markets that birthed the COVID-19 pandemic, but in February 2022, the stigma still lingers.

My wife and I sit down across from our Singaporean friend Krystle over a plate of chwee kueh. I ask her which wet markets we should visit while we’re in Singapore. After five years of living in Southeast Asia, we’re no stranger to wet markets, but we want to experience the best pasars that the Lion City has to offer. Krystle smiles and gives us her recommendations, not where to go shopping but where to go *marketing*—a verb applicable to both buyer and seller alike. Marketing, it seems, is a partner dance.

Singapore was once part of the old Silk Road network of land-and-sea passages that connected traders, travellers, tourists, and tycoons from every point of the compass rose. It still is today. The passage through the Straits of Malacca is a critical part of the 一带一路, better known as the Belt and Road Initiative or New Silk Road. What wet markets—the epitome of local—look like in an era of global belts and roads is a question yet to be answered. Is the pasar passing

away? Or is the pasar a critical passage of global-local trade? We go marketing to find out.

Tiong Bahru

Every Singaporean I ask tells me that Tiong Bahru is the most posh or *atas* wet market. It's often said to be the oldest pasar in Singapore, but no one cites a year (or a source).

Housed in a three-story art deco structure, Tiong Bahru hosts the pasar on the ground floor, a hawker centre above, and a car park on the roof. (A wet market with its own car park? *Atas* indeed.) In the middle is an open courtyard of grass, ferns, and bamboo—a luxurious way to spend space in Singapore. In one corner, a gaggle of children clamber over a rusty swing set that creaks under their weight.

Plastic orange netting covers all but a single entrance to the market, funnelling my wife and I and every other patron past an apathetic contact tracing attendant. Pasars were once free-flowing structures without any set entrance or exit, no beginning or end. They were intersections, not roads. In the pandemic, they've become a controlled artery of commerce. One way in, one way out.

Tiong Bahru greets us with flowers from every corner of the globe: orchids, hibiscus, daisies, marigolds,

mums, roses, and even cotton. We're awash in fresh, floral aromas accompanied by jazz piano music from the overhead speakers as we make our way deeper into the bustle of the pasar. There's a hum in the air, a pulse of the market. Vendors and customers quibble over weights and prices. Assistants count out change and pack items in plastic bags. Shoppers jostle for position, squeeze past one another in tight aisles, or swap neighbourhood gossip.

We move on to the lush diversity of okra, long bean, lemongrass, and cucumbers stacked alongside galangal, brinjal, daikon, pumpkin, and pineapple. The smell is sweet and fresh and savoury all at once. We can practically smell the greens still growing. At every stall, produce provenance is marked with labels like Australia, Japan, Malaysia or "local veg." The pasar is the terminus of the Singaporean food system, the penultimate stop before the fridge, plate, and bowl. Food doesn't leave Singapore; it only arrives.

Today, we're not only visitors to Tiong Bahru, but grocery shoppers as well. We scoop up tomatoes, beans, potatoes, mushrooms, yams, and green onion. I count out some coins for a Southeast Asian staple: *kangkung* or water spinach. The stallholder bags the kangkung in virgin plastic before I can offer up my reusable bag instead. I mumble in protest but pass onto the next stall. After going back for

lettuce, I declare, “I think we’re good on veggies” before we’re immediately entranced by some taro at the very next stall (which we buy).

Across the aisle from the produce stalls, clothes vendors stand sullen, ignored, selling bras, sundresses, men’s swimwear, and unlicensed Elsa shirts. Every vendor has diversified their business into selling face masks. One stallholder is so apathetic about the number of customers that he hides behind a full-page spread of newspaper bearing the headline of the day: Russia invades Ukraine.

On paper, wet markets like Tiong Bahru are in decline—sales figures dip a bit more each quarter, though no one shares by how much—but you wouldn’t guess it from the thriving crowd marketing here on a Sunday morning. For many Singaporeans, the pasar is a part of daily life—a place to stock up on groceries for the week, eat a hot bowl of prawn noodles, take some selfies, and catch up with friends. Marketing isn’t just an economic exercise, but a community one.

Tekka Centre, Little India

Tekka Market is a tighter squeeze than Tiong Bahru. We rub shoulders or bump elbows more often with fellow customers as we squeeze down the interlacing aisles. The

chatter here is a bit louder but also lighter: patrons joke and tease and bargain and laugh more than the strait-laced atas shoppers in Tiong Bahru. If markets made music, Tekka's track would be more upbeat.

We make our way through contact tracing and past the hawker centre, and suddenly we're engulfed in a cloud of cigarette smoke from a cluster of uncles talking over tea. Nearby shrines to Ganesha and Chinese ancestors add their own incense-laden smoke to the mix. A bell chimes through the smog at the offering of another worshipper.

We enter the pasar proper and smell the spices before we see them. The selection is an overwhelming palette of colour: cinnamon, dill, cardamom, cayenne, clove, turmeric, wasabi, coriander, cumin, pandan leaf, paprika, pepper, saffron, sesame, and basil (sweet, holy, lemon, Thai). It's the smell of home, of holiday, of faraway friends, of favourite dishes, of shared memories, of can't-quite-place-it flavours, all wrapped up in one aisle. Our mouths water with the potential. We bag some ginger and move onto the section where all uninitiated Westerners are sure to cringe: meat.

Most Americans like their protein presentable, well-packaged, and utterly divorced from the notion that it came from an animal. They'll find no such nonsense here. Meat and fish sections in pasars like this one are often the

distinguishing line between a wet market in Southeast Asia and a farmer's market in suburban Chicago.

In Tekka Market, we find the mince, chops, shanks, ribs, and rumps of any animal we'd care to eat. The smell of acrid iron fills the air, and the regular hacks of cleavers serve as a background rhythm. A queue of eighteen aunties and uncles tells us which butcher is the most popular. As we wait in line to get a cut for char siew, we slowly work our way past an overflowing tray of chicken necks. Between the melting ice and the frequent rinsing of blood and offal off of butcher's counters, the floors of the meat section are never dry. Thus, the name. I'm thankful for not wearing flip-flops on market day.

Before we exit, the last stall has a brightly lit sign: "Joe's Butchery: Expect the Best. Fresh! Halal!" Complete with crossed legs in slacks, a paunch, and a halo of white hair around a shiny bald head, Joe is the picture of the Singaporean uncle as he sits across from his stall reading a newspaper.

Next is seafood. I'm married to the daughter of a Japanese fisherman and Tekka Market doesn't disappoint her. Everything's on offer: salmon, squid, shrimp, *ang koli*, red snapper, yellow fin, small sharks, cockles, Korean oysters, Canadian clams, Hokkaido scallops, and proudly displayed:

“Air-Flown Crabs: Sri Lanka, Australia, Vietnam, India.” If it swims (or swam once), it’s available for purchase and wrapped for you in yesterday’s *Straits Times*. I’m used to the smell of slowly rotting fish, but on a different day when I bring a Myanmar friend he can’t stand it. We linger over the octopus (*tako*) but purchase a salmon head instead. My mouth waters.

It’s now 11:00 a.m.—nearly the end of the marketing day—and shops like Samy’s Banana Leaf are already tarping over their stalls. Lim’s Coconuts and Sundry Products is already closed. In Singapore, the wet market is an early-bird game, a pasar of morning people, by morning people, and for morning people. Night owls need not apply.

The greatest peril to Singapore’s pasars isn’t the supermarkets, hypermarkets, or delivery apps. And while COVID-19 has certainly battered the most socially un-distanced form of grocery shopping, it isn’t a death knell either.

The pasar’s most serious threat is succession: according to the National Heritage Board, Tekka Market is home to many second or third generation stallholders whose forebears set up shop in the area over 40 years ago. It’s a characteristic common to most pasars in Singapore. But the next generation of Singaporeans—more educated, cosmopolitan, and well-

off than their ancestors—don't want to take up the work of operating their parents' wet market stalls.

An enterprising young Singaporean might consider the business of a boutique hawker stall and sell chic, Instagrammable meals to Gen Z foodies. But to become a butcher? A dry goods seller? An egg stall owner? No, thank you lah.

Pasar Geylang Serai

The next day, we stop by Pasar Geylang Serai. As a tribute to the shoppers and sellers marketing within, this pasar is shaped like a huge Malaysian Kampung house with tall eaves and long, sloping roofs. *Serai* is the Malay word for lemongrass, and its fresh smell fills the air of the market.

As we enter, it's impossible not to notice the much higher proportion of aunties in hijabs or uncles with beards sprouting beneath the bottom of face masks. Halal signs hang from almost every booth and stall. Green is the favoured colour. If wet markets are a pillar of culture, this one bolsters the rich Malay heritage of Singapura.

Today, every other auntie or uncle has brought along that ultimate symbol of Singaporean compact consumerism: a shopping trolley. As such, the tightly packed aisles are

crowded even further. A clumsy pasar rookie like me finds aunties rolling over my toes (with apologies) every five minutes. Looking back, Tekka Market seems almost roomy.

All pasars have dry goods vendors, but Geylang Serai has the most and the best, with everything from rice, mung beans, onions, salt, chilis, potatoes, and dried noodles to mini-shrimp, salted egg, dried fish, garlic, tapioca chips, and spice mixes and packets of every kind imaginable. When the fan from BB Spices gusts our way, my eyes instantly water with the overwhelming mix of pungent air. On all sides, aunties and uncles are rifling through crates, pouring out ingredients, weighing potential purchases, bagging goods. We linger at Safwa Date Boutique and ogle over dates from Palestine and Madinah too expensive for today's shopping trip. We can smell the sweet date-sugar in the air, licking our lips in hopes of a taste.

We turn to the fruit section next. Every pasar has an unwritten, unwavering commandment: The Fruit Shall Be Brightly Lit. Veggies can dwell in mere daylight, but fruit require LED suns. We pass watermelons, mangoes, apples, oranges, passion fruit, papayas, plantains, avocados, peaches, pears, plums, grapes, quinces, dragon fruit, and more. One aisle is devoted just to bananas. We're tempted at the stall selling huge jackfruit: green, ripe, soft peaked, perfect.

Instead, we load up on loose limes and discount water apples.

As we leave Geylang Serai, I notice the long line of patrons at the ATM—a reminder that wet markets are (for the most part) cash-only enterprises. Keep your fancy electronic money at home where it belongs, the pasar whispers. And so some shoppers—particularly the most modern of Singaporeans who seem allergic to hard currency—take their business elsewhere.

Chinatown Complex

I arrive at Chinatown Complex in the middle of an afternoon downpour. Like most pasars, it has a three-part structure: a wet market, a hawker centre, and sundry shops for non-food goods. This integrated, cross-consumer arrangement is just one of many tactics intended to keep pasars economically viable in the ecommerce era.

The size of the crowd clustered around one ground-floor stall makes me think this market has more than enough business to thrive, even if the overall numbers tell a different story. One (powerful, pungent, perfumed) whiff from the booth in question tells me they're selling durian.

In Singapore, wet markets used to be a loose collection of open-air street booths and travelling food carts. But such economic informalities couldn't be taxed or regulated, so the

government waged a decades-long campaign to “clean up” the streets of Chinatown and other similar neighbourhoods. In the 1980s, the government forced the last of the Chinatown street hawkers into this building, according to the National Heritage Board.

But what the government taketh away, it also giveth: Now recognizing the cultural value—and the recent UNESCO inscription—of hawker culture, the government props them up with a generous stack of subsidies and incentives, even as the supply of patrons slowly shrinks. The street is a pasar’s native habitat, the wild home where it can mutate, adapt, or move on. In Singapore, wet markets are now an endangered species living only in captivity.

Today, I understand that customer contraction: Google Maps lists the market as open from noon to seven—long past the pasar’s peak hours. Most stallholders probably aren’t aware the market is even on Google Maps, let alone that the wrong hours are posted. They’re used to analogue communication with face-to-face customers. But most Singaporean Millennials aren’t likely to be so understanding.

Timing, it turns out, is one of the wet market’s biggest hurdles to connecting with younger clientele. Most pasars are only open dawn to noon—hours that many parents, working folks, or younger people don’t find palatable or convenient,

especially compared to the numerous locations and round-the-clock hours of FairPrice or Sheng Siong, let alone online grocery vendors who never sleep. Without a step change, the pasar marketing dance is sure to stumble.

I descend to the basement-level market—an ironic reversal of its open-air origins. Everything is dark, quiet, and still save for a few stalls that seem open only by accident. The houseplants vendor looks like she'd rather I not purchase anything. Next door, a Chinese auntie is selling herbs. I smell her basil and mint despite the overwhelming stench of blood and rotting fish from the closed stalls nearby.

Per the commandment, bright lights still shine at a fruit stall further down, and a single egg seller closes up shop as I walk by. I follow signage for the section selling turtles, snakes, and frogs, but every butcher is closed or closing. One meat seller sprays off the bloody tables and shelves of his booth scattering blood and offal into the nearby vicinity regardless of potential passers-by—of which none are assumed present. I flinch as moisture of unknown composition hits my face.

Tarps block the entrances to most stalls or cover adjacent piles of produce, or else goods are packed in styrofoam boxes stacked to the ceiling. Cardboard is everywhere and in every form: cut, folded, filled, boxed, stashed, strewn, stored, or stacked to the ceiling. Stray cats wander confidently across

my path. A sweaty, shirtless uncle pushes two empty flatbed carts past me as if I am invisible, a ghost of the customers who've all since left.

My afternoon visit to the Chinatown pasar is an image of a possible future for Singapore's wet markets. The floor is still wet for the most part, and many stalls are still dripping generously, but everything is drying fast. If a wet market isn't wet, what does it become?

Conclusion: Tiong Bahru Again

We're back at bustling Tiong Bahru. My wife loves Singapore *kopi*: wok-roasted coffee beans with caramelised sugar and margarine. We stop at the best-known stall for it at this market: Yong Seng Coffee. Mr Tay Yiong Theng first began roasting and selling his own kopi in the 1960s. Today, his stall sells seven varieties from Brazil, Malaysia, and Colombia along with a few house-roasted signature blends. We get 500 grams of Traditional Blend #1.

Yong Seng Coffee is an exception among Singapore pasar stalls because of what it has secured: succession. Mr Tay's grandson has taken over the family business and intends to keep it going for the next generation of kopi customers. Looking at its impressive website, you'd never

guess Yong Seng Coffee was only a single market booth. Most stallholders aren't so lucky in their grandchildren as Mr Tay.

In some ways, Tiong Bahru is the pasar equivalent of Yong Seng Coffee. It's decided to innovate and compete to survive. Both institutions embody the Singlish word *kiasu*—competitiveness driven by the fear of losing out.

If Tiong Bahru is indeed the oldest wet market in Singapore, it's also determined to outlast its competitors. With longer hours, a generous car park, and a hawker centre with five Michelin-starred stalls, maybe Tiong Bahru's *atas* approach is what keeps it competitive with hypermarkets and on-demand delivery apps. Even the layout of Tiong Bahru's sundry shops along the outside of the building is intentional in building night-time foot traffic long after the pasar has closed.

Whether other wet markets will be as—or more—*kiasu* in protecting the heritage of the Singapore pasar is an unanswered question, an unfolding dance. Marketing, after all, is a partnership between buyer and seller. Like any dance, it depends on the willingness of both partners to find a workable rhythm that keeps time, builds connection, and allows for a few flourishes.

The pasar is not a place, but a verb—to market. It is

an intersection, not an edifice. It is as much community as it is commerce. It is a bowstring: alive only when in motion. When still, only a potential.

MANDAKINI ARORA

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Singapore Night Promenade

Beneath a star-inlaid sky, gargantuan hulks lie
laden with freight, treading water
as they wait to be waved on
to the comfort of harbour.

Gentle palm fronds reach beyond
into endless dark as the stark
night dances with ethereal light of friendship—
a blip on a universal screen.

We were thirteen when we
met, in our fifties friends yet,
once youthful gait, grown slower, sedate;
we walk in the park, no longer scared of the dark.

They that dropped anchor—
container ships, tankers—
tomorrow they will be gone,
those twinkling dots on the horizon.

Singapore Love

Plumb the depths of the Kallang Basin,
our island grows with land reclamation,
no dirty laundry at Dhoby Ghaut station.
Bugis Junction where the streets were mean
offers shopping that's respectable, squeaky clean.
Green of gardens can't be kept at bay
as I reach for a stick of lamb satay
while bumboats make their steady way
to the landing site where Sir Stamford holds sway.
The white man's flag once unfurled
bringing goodies to the 'civilized world'
and the Merlion stands above the fray.
Always an extravaganza at the Esplanade
Vanda Miss Joaquim steps out of the shade.
Once herald of death, Blakang Mati,
Sentosa is now peace and tranquility.

People of the rivers, people of the sea,
drowning in the waters of history.

JOCELYN LOW

*Jocelyn reads so much that she sometimes dreams in text form,
with punctuation and paragraphing neatly in place. She enjoys
writing as it allows her to be many selves living many lives.*

Jocelyn loves teaching and cats.



Next door is a brothel!

‘隔壁是妓院!’

Qiang was a little mite, with fresh roses on his chubby-for-his-otherwise-petite-built cheeks, fresh from the cold in China — ‘HaErBin,’ he said, with the ‘r’ rolling off his tongue, cheeky and already getting fresh with me at our first session. Adorable. Until I had to teach him the alphabet. Being unschooled in the art of pedagogy (this was before I was trained by the Ministry of Education to reap the bountiful benefits of the joy of teaching along with the joy of learning in both teachers and students alike), I, a first-year English Major at National University of Singapore, used the most primitive method of painstakingly going through the twenty-six letters of the alphabet with Qiang. Five afternoons a week the Apple in A to the Zoo in Z got mangled beyond all recognition. The lessons would test even someone with the most Buddha-like disposition. And although I sat there like the Buddha himself in Qiang’s father’s living room from two to four each afternoon, the only nirvana I was aiming for was the tuition fees I was getting for this rote learning. Qiang was bright, but playful, as most snot-nosed kids who had only known play and TV from a young age would naturally be, and all the more in his case as he was suddenly thrust into

this new environment of Singapore at six years old.

All because Qiang's seventy-year-old Singaporean father had impregnated Qiang's forty-year-old China-born-and-bred mother. (This unsolicited fact was volunteered by Qiang between the letters J and K during the third lesson.) So here Qiang was, getting ready for Primary One next year, far away from HaErBin, sans Mama, plonked right into our education system, and more perplexingly, right smack into a whole new family of step siblings who were around his own mother's age or older. (This I inferred from a sepia-toned family portrait on the wall of Qiang Senior, his first wife, and their three sons and two daughters.) As a poor undergraduate, I was just the tutor; much as I wondered what had happened to the first wife or whether Qiang's mother and father were legally married, I'd learned it was best not to know too much and focus on getting my little monkey ready for Primary One in competitive Singapore.

'Next door is a brothel!' Qiang repeated this refrain in his perfect Mandarin at lull moments during every lesson, but I would pointedly refuse to engage. If only he could pronounce the English letters and words with such precise crispness. Did I mention that the little mite might be little, but mightily potent at testing my patience? Or perhaps it was because I was younger and more prone to being annoyed

at what I deemed as his perversity at not getting the alphabet right. Well, what did I expect? The tuition agency did warn me the boy would be as blank a slate as they came — he urgently needed a crash course in English to be ready for our beloved state-sanctioned schools. Ten hours a week starting in December and in the months to follow would be the closest thing to a regular job a poor undergraduate like me could hope for, and for that I would also brave any mountains and valleys, let alone mere Geylang Lorong 16. For that was where Qiang's father owned house number 24 along that quiet stretch of *lorong*.

‘Next door is a —’ Regular as clockwork, Qiang interrupted his spelling of ‘boy’ with this newflash.

‘I know, brothel, right? Do your spelling!’ I sliced into his beautifully-intoned Mandarin with my rusty primary-school-level Mandarin.

Tuition took place in the sitting room of his father's house. Anyone walking along the *lorong* would be surprised to witness the scene of a bespectacled tee-and-jeans clad hapless twenty-year-old woman trying to be stern with a young boy wriggling all over the sofa. Wriggling is the right word; till this day I wonder if he might have ADHD, undiagnosed. Between the road outside and the sitting room was a courtyard where there would be an occasional car

parked. Once you entered the sitting room, you would see a big office table and chair standing guard on the left, and a flight of stairs on the right tantalising you to the second floor. Further in, there was a long dark passage leading to the kitchen and a couple of back rooms and toilets. A three-piece sofa set and coffee table took up the middle of the sitting room. The blank screen of a TV set against the far wall bore silent witness to our daily (five times a week, two hours a day, twenty-five dollars per hour!) mutilation of the ABC. All while Qiang bounced from sofa to sofa and wall to wall, sometimes including shovelling spoonfuls of rice into his mouth or drinking copious amounts of water just to spice up his great slaughter of the English language a little. This would be when his lunch coincided with tuition and his father would bring a bowl of rice heaped high with vegetables and meat to the coffee table. Qiang Senior spoke to me in Mandarin, indicating that we could continue with the lesson while Qiang had his lunch.

‘He is always hungry!’

I smiled, nodding sagely, pretending I was used to the hunger pangs of a growing boy. Indeed, I much preferred it when Qiang ate during lessons, for at least I could get him to sit still and focus. He had this habit, though, that I would be horrified by.

‘See! See!’ Qiang would put an impossible amount of food into his mouth, chew vigorously, then opened wide like a hippopotamus at the dentist. Before I knew what was happening, I had gotten the whole visual of the masticated mess in his mouth.

‘Yikes! Don’t show me that, Qiang! No! No! Naughty boy!’

‘Yes! Yes!’ Qiang insisted. He looked almost pained, and I realised he was not being cheeky; he genuinely thought I would want to look into his mouth.

‘No, Qiang, no, okay,’ I used a gentler tone.

* * *

By the fifth time (Friday of the first week) Qiang announced that NEXT DOOR IS A BROTHEL with his usual gleeful bluster, I had also sussed out what his old man’s operation was. Back before we had our budget love motels, Qiang’s father served the needs of the lovelorn who just needed an hour or two in a private space. More often than not, the urges would occur when night fell, but sometimes, the rooms were also leased in the afternoons, say, at three o’clock where poor Qiang’s tutor might be trying to get Qiang to remember what came after ‘c’ in ‘cat’. Qiang’s father would quote a price to these couples, give them a towel, a bar of soap, and a toilet roll, and hand them a key

for one of the rooms upstairs. I had to pretend I didn't know what was going on. Until Thursday, when Qiang's father was not around (he would usually be in the kitchen during our tuition, but he was not there that day), there was a couple who came in. I hesitated. The couple seemed impatient. I got up and handed them the towel, the bar of soap, the toilet roll, grabbed the key left on the office table by the previous guest and gestured to the staircase. I only hoped that the room had been cleaned, although I had never been up there and did not know what the room cleaning or turndown service was like. In fact, I had only ever seen Qiang Senior and a local aunty who cooked for them. When Qiang's father appeared, I passed him the money the couple had paid me — fifty dollars for two hours, same as my tuition rate — and Qiang's father grunted his thanks. I was quite sure that was not part of my job scope, but that was me, always going the extra mile for my employer. In subsequent weeks, there would be at least once that I had to be the concierge. Good thing no one ever had luggage I had to lug up the stairs.

Back to today. This being Friday, and at the thought of having two days' respite from him, I allowed myself some indulgence. 'What is a brothel?' I asked him in my flat-toned Singaporean Mandarin. More forgiving of my bulldozing of his beautiful native tongue, Qiang's eyes flashed and his

teeth glinted. In his immaculate Mandarin, he offered, 'Neh, that is where you know...you know...' he gathered the digits of both hands and brought the two hands close together in mid-air 'where they will go inside the room... and KISS!' Tickled by his own description and even prouder of his worldliness, he ricocheted from one end of the sofa to the other. Impressed despite myself, I had to shut down my retort to him, 'What do *you* think goes on in this house then?'

* * *

January came and tuition went on as before. Qiang began to show some almost imperceptible improvement. Maybe going to school made him see that he needed to know the English language for his daily transactions, or maybe being in an institution with its non-negotiable rules and regulations had instilled some discipline in him. He could focus a little better and knew more words. His pronunciation also sounded more like English. One day in the second week of January, he said to me in English, 'My Mama come Singapore.'

'Oh, your mother is coming? From China?' I asked in slow English.

Qiang nodded his head, looking serious for once.

'That's great, Qiang! I'm happy for you!' I said. I

accompanied this with a hand to my chest and a big smile on my face.

Qiang gave his usual cheeky grin. The next moment, he burst into tears.

Flabbergasted, I stared at him. Who was this boy? I had never met him before. Had he been missing his mother all this while?

* * *

The family dinner took place at a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown. Qiang Senior had told me tuition would be cancelled that first Friday of February and instead, there would be a family dinner to welcome Qiang's mother to Singapore.

'Really thankful to you for teaching my son,' Qiang Senior said. 'Please come.'

When I arrived at the restaurant, I realised the family had booked a small room on the second floor. Four tables were taken up by the whole Qiang Senior clan. Qiang Senior's children and grandchildren took up three tables, and awkwardly I sat at the table with Qiang and his parents, and a couple of older relatives.

I had never seen Qiang so happy.

'Mama, my *Laoshi*,' Qiang gestured to me. He was both more grown-up and more childlike.

Qiang's mother had the same eyes as Qiang. Intelligent, curious, they added to her allure. All at once, I wondered if I had been too quick to dismiss Qiang's potential. Just because he could not learn the alphabet fast enough...

'Ah! *Laoshi!* Thank you for teaching our Qiang!' She put some food in my bowl.

I thanked her. The whole place was noisy with Qiang Senior's grandchildren running around.

'Hey, don't run over to that side. My Mummy said only play around this side! Don't mix with that one ah!' one of the grandchildren said.

I chanced a look at Qiang. The spoken English must have been too fast or difficult for him to understand. Or perhaps he chose not to. The dinner was in honour of Qiang's mother, but there was also not much interaction between the adults at the other three tables and ours.

'Mama, Mama, see, see!' Qiang, who had been eating the exquisite food with gusto, opened his mouth wide.

'Good boy! All chewed up!'

Qiang beamed.

So *this* explained his occasional invitation to me to witness the party in his mouth!

An hour or so into the dinner, to avoid having more food piled onto my bowl, I went to the washroom. Two of

the women from the other three tables were at the sinks. They barely looked at me. I went into one of the cubicles.

‘She’s quite pretty. I can see why Pa fell for her.’

‘So what? Pretty women are a dime a dozen. Just don’t expect me to call her Ma! We are about the same age.’

They both sniggered.

‘Don’t know what she sees in Pa, he’s so old already.’

‘Must be money, what else.’

The taps were turned off and the sound from the hand dryer drowned out what they said next.

I went back to the table and tried to make out the women from among the groups at the other tables. With alcohol being consumed freely, the din was louder and there was much movement at the other three tables. At our table, I saw that Qiang stuck close to his mother. It was as though this table belonged to a different family from the other three.

* * *

On Monday when I went for tuition, I found Qiang seated on a stool at the office table. He indicated I should take the office chair. His mother was lying down on the long sofa, while his father sat next to her on the single sofa. The TV was on, with the sounds turned on low.

‘Laoshi, you are here,’ Qiang’s mother said. ‘Sorry, I have a headache. The weather is too hot. Please let me rest

here, you have tuition there okay.'

'Oh, of course, of course! Yes, our weather is really hot! Please rest!' I said.

I started my lesson with Qiang. With both his parents around, he was more restrained. Since term started, I would also go through his schoolwork with him. Soon, Qiang was frowning over his English worksheet. I took a glance at his parents. To my surprise, I saw that Qiang Senior had inserted his hand into the cleavage of Qiang's mother. The older man's dark wrinkled skin contrasted with her fair and firm bosom. Their eyes were on the TV screen, but his hand was making gentle squeezes, as though he was milking and the action perfectly natural in public. I checked that Qiang could not see this with his back towards them. After a while, I also found myself accepting this state of affairs, just like how I had accepted tutoring a young boy in a love motel in Geylang. Whether Qiang was born out of a love union or a mere transaction between two people, I would never know. What I did know was that the family of three seemed happy enough, their bliss stealthily sealed in that moment in time. Perhaps that was enough, that life would be just a series of moments like these, where everyone was just where they should be and doing what they were supposed to do. All in equilibrium, all at peace.

‘Qiang, next time you eat, you can show me what’s in your mouth okay?’ I said softly.

‘Okay,’ he said, his eyes on the English words in front of him.

Mother and Daughter

Bee Choo had just taken the pomfret out of the fridge to thaw for Julie's late lunch. A schoolteacher, Julie would be home about half-past three that day. Her favourite dish was Teochew-style steamed pomfret with salted plums, tomatoes, shiitake mushrooms, and silken tofu, garnished generously with young ginger, coriander, and spring onion. Bee Choo thought that making it for her on a Thursday instead of the usual Sunday lunch might lift her spirits. Julie had been more withdrawn than usual, spending more time with her room door closed, and as a single mother, Bee Choo knew better than to probe. Julie was already twenty-seven; it would be strange if she did not have a few secrets. Bee Choo understood enough of the world today that being a single twenty-odd-year old had its own set of challenges, even though Julie, unlike Bee Choo, had not had to bring up a young daughter on her own.

The phone call came at 2.45 p.m.

Bee Choo let the house phone continue its urgent trilling. A freelance copywriter, her jobs came through her mobile phone. The landline was hardly used these days. Guessing it would probably be another property agent asking if she wanted to rent out or sell her three-room flat,

Bee Choo nonetheless picked up the receiver.

‘Hello?’

‘Is this the household of Julie Ong?’

‘Yes, who is this?’

‘Are you her mother?’

‘Yes. What’s this about? Who are you?’

‘You don’t have to know who I am. You only need to know your daughter’s a slut. Ask her where she was last Saturday night. Ask her! What kind of mother are you?’

‘Who are you? What are you saying? Stop talking nonsense!’ Bee Choo didn’t realise how tightly she was gripping the receiver until she felt her wedding band cutting into her finger.

‘Don’t believe me? Ask her! Tell her she’d better stop. Or I’ll make this big.’

The line went dead.

Bee Choo put down the phone. Lightheaded, she backed onto the sofa and sat down. *Last Saturday...Julie said she had to stay at school...Some overnight camp.* Bee Choo recalled being surprised when Julie returned on Sunday. Julie had looked tired but she was humming under her breath. Bee Choo had been happy to find her daughter in a good mood, so she did not think to ask much about the camp. *Where was she on Saturday night then? Could it be true? No!*

Not her Julie...Even when she had that boyfriend in Uni, Ben, she never spent nights out...Who's the woman on the phone...?

The sound of the keys in the front door jolted Bee Choo out of her tangled thoughts. It was already half past three.

'Ma,' said Julie, heading straight into her own room to put down her bag and work things.

'Julie. Ma got busy and forgot to make lunch. Can you Grabfood something for yourself? I'm not hungry.'

'Oh, in that case it's okay, Ma. I don't have much of an appetite too,' Julie's voice floated out from her bedroom.

Should I ask her? How to start? My little girl... Bee Choo's eyes fell on the photograph of Julie atop the TV console. Julie was in her Primary School uniform, the bangs of her pageboy hairstyle framing grave eyes. Bee Choo remembered that that was the year Julie stopped standing at the gate of their flat, looking out along the corridor. Knowing her daughter was waiting for her father, Bee Choo did not have the heart to tell her he was never coming back. The sight of that forlorn figure standing patiently at the door made Bee Choo feel as though someone was slowly tightening a fist on her heart, and that made her bury her own pain of losing her husband to another woman.

She did not want to lie to her little girl then, neither

did she want to hurt her even more by telling her Daddy was never coming back. Bee Choo did not want Julie to know her father could walk out on mother and daughter just like that. Bee Choo could only tell Julie that Daddy had gone to another place, which was technically true. A new place far, far away—emotionally. Julie kept asking where this new place was and why they couldn't go there until one day, shortly after she turned ten, she stopped asking. Bee Choo had no idea that it was possible for old scars to be reopened and new scars to be made, but her heart suffered a thousand cuts as she wondered at what her young daughter must have gone through to decide that she was giving up on Daddy.

But now, this phone call. Just as with other crises Bee Choo had to face in bringing up Julie alone, with no aunts and uncles or grandparents to turn to, Bee Choo wanted to proceed with caution. Why should she believe that woman on the phone? Give Julie time to open up. Observe first.

Julie emerged from her bedroom, changed into her usual tee shirt and shorts and with her long hair tied in a bun, Bee Choo watched her go to the balcony to sort out the laundry.

'If you have a lot of marking to do, I can do the laundry this week. I don't have any more assignments once I'm done with this one for Casio,' said Bee Choo.

‘It’s okay, Ma. I only need to set a test paper for next week.’

Julie had always been a quiet child, but this seemed different. Even when she had broken up with her Ben, she did not have this haunted look in her eyes, and her mouth in this tight line. Bee Choo wished she had sisters she could confide in about her worries over her daughter, but she was an only child herself, and her own parents had disowned her after her shotgun wedding. The birth of Julie had not mended the relationship.

Mother and daughter had a simple dinner prepared by Bee Choo. Conversation was desultory, and after washing up the dishes, Julie retired to her bedroom. Bee Choo spent a sleepless night.

* * *

Friday and the weekend went by uneventfully. Bee Choo had almost persuaded herself the phone call had been a prank. On Monday, Bee Choo was about to sit down to her breakfast of toast and tea when, to her surprise, Julie came back into the house distraught.

‘What’s wrong, girl? Are you unwell?’

‘No, but I’m...I’ve called my HOD. I’m applying for urgent leave.’

‘Why?’

'My car's been vandalised. Someone broke the window on the driver's side. I need to make a police report. I came back for the registration papers.'

Julie had been so proud of her first car, second-hand notwithstanding. She had saved up her meagre teacher's salary and private tuition fees to buy a red Mazda.

'What?! It's an open-air car park! Who would do such a thing?' Bee Choo thought of the woman on the phone. *She'd better stop.*

'I don't know. I'll get it to the mechanic after I go to the police station. There's also spray paint and scratches.' Bee Choo saw Julie's pale face. She knew Julie was outwardly calm for her sake.

'Yeah, quick. Make the report and then go to your regular guy. Maybe park at a more brightly lit spot next time, or leave it parked in school after it's back from the workshop. Don't drive for the time being? Doesn't sound safe. What if the engine is messed with next time?' Bee Choo looked closely at Julie. *Should I ask her about the phone call? Is this the right time?* Bee Choo decided no, this might just be a coincidence. Besides, she did not want to force Julie into a corner, where she would feel compelled to lie to her mother.

On Tuesday night, the landline rang at midnight,

waking mother and daughter.

‘Hello?’ Julie said sleepily.

Bee Choo held her breath, standing at the doorway of her bedroom.

‘Hello?’ Julie said again.

After a while, Julie put down the phone.

‘No one.’ She looked at her mother. She shuffled back to her bedroom.

Bee Choo told herself she would definitely talk to Julie the next day.

* * *

At ten a.m. on Wednesday, Bee Choo was surprised to see her daughter back home.

‘Why—’

‘Ma!’

Bee Choo saw fresh tears spring from Julie’s red-rimmed eyes. She went toward her, led her gently to the sofa and sat down next to her.

Bee Choo waited, anxiety riddling her. All her years of coping with the vicissitudes of life had taught her to be like the willow tree.

‘Ma, I didn’t mean to, Ma. You must believe me,’ said Julie. She was crying in earnest now.

‘I will always believe you. Take your time. Let it all

out. I'm here for you. Always.'

Bee Choo soon heard the full story in between Julie's sobs. The man was a much older married colleague in the same school but from another department. They had gotten close as they were both in charge of the Drama Club. They fought it for as long as they could but in the past few months, they had drawn even closer, and that Saturday night...

'I lied to you, Ma. We checked into a budget hotel, Ma.' Julie looked down at her hands on her lap. She started clasping and unclasping her hands, as though her fingers were comforting one another.

Ask her where she was last Saturday night...your daughter's a slut...Is the caller the wife? How did she know though?

'I really loved him, Ma! I thought I loved Ben then, but this is different. I really did not mean to. I know he is married. It didn't feel wrong to be alone in the room with him that one night. He said he would leave his wife. But since then, he has been avoiding me. I feel so dirty, Ma!'

Fresh sobs ensued. Bee Choo could only hold her daughter tightly. If only she could share her pain. If only she could tell her love was well and good, but between love and survival, one would have to forget about love to pull yourself together, to put food on the table, to be the only parent your

only child knew, even as your own heart was crying out in pain.

‘I tried not to worry you, Ma! But today, Mrs Lim called me into the office...’

‘The Principal?’ *Tell her she’d better stop. Or I’ll make this big.*

‘She said she’s received an anonymous phone call. Someone made an allegation that I have been fooling around with a married man. I couldn’t look Mrs Lim in the eye. That’s as good as admitting my guilt. She didn’t force me to reveal who’s the other party. She told me to take the day off and think things through.’

Bee Choo couldn’t decide if she should tell Julie about the phone call. It must be the wife then. Should she tell Julie the wife had not only attacked her car, but also attacked her on the home front?

‘I...I went to look for him after that. I cornered him at the canteen. He was alone. I told him what Mrs Lim said. He...he said he felt guilty...Ma, he told his wife everything! He said he can’t leave her!’

‘Oh, Julie...’

‘I can’t go back to that school, Ma! I can’t face him! I’d apply for no-pay leave and ask for a transfer at the end of the year. I’m just sorry I’ve been so stupid! I truly loved him! I

didn't mean to be the third party, Ma!

Bee Choo thought of the third party that had caused Julie to be fatherless and her, a wife without a husband. That was why she was still wearing the wedding band. She was not a divorcee, just a woman whose husband had fallen in love with someone else. So, was it also true love that made her husband leave both mother and daughter all those years ago? All these years of hating that other woman, and now Bee Choo saw that perhaps that woman, always imagined to be smirking in victory, had also suffered like Julie now, even though she got her man. *What if I had fought like this man's wife? Would Julie have had a father all these years then?*

Bee Choo searched her daughter's face. She could see that despite everything, there was a strength in Julie that Bee Choo never had. Julie would be one of life's survivors. She deserved the truth.

'Girl, actually I received a phone call too. And...'

Bee Choo looked at the surprise on her daughter's face. 'And I think it's time we talked about your father.'

The morning sun shone through the curtains. Somewhere, a bird tweeted. Mother and daughter sat close on the sofa, the strength flowing from one to the other as they let the words out.

SALEEM HADI

Saleem Hadi is a hybrid visual-storyteller who uses theatre and film to shed light on national narratives and social issues. He is also a bilingual writer who writes scripts, poems and short stories. Saleem had written, directed and produced more than 20 plays and 25 short films.



One Rainy Morning

Time on my seasoned brown leather-strapped FOSSIL watch showed 7.55am. Sipping my hot Milo from a white porcelain cup with emerald green engravings of Chinese characters, I looked out at the busy traffic from the crowded hawker centre I sat in.

With a pen and a notebook.

Waiting for her to come.

Inspiration.

Roads were still damp from last night's downpour. Slept very well after many months. I think. I heard thunders at random. Some were loud and some whispered. Sounds of howling wind sneaked through my room window. Slightly ajar. The cool breeze didn't fail to tickle my feet last night. Today it decided to moonwalk by my collar. A black young myna whizzed past my gaze. My eyes returned to the hawker centre. An orchestra of voices - Singlish, Tamil, Malay, Chinese, Bangladesh, Thai, Hokkien, Bahasa Indonesia, Tagalog, along with the occasional cries of babies - filled my space. Long queues outside a Malay food stall, selling *Nasi Lemak*, *Mee Siam*, *Mee Soto*, *Mee Rebus*... Hungry mouths,

open-close-chew-open-close-chew-open-open-open-close-
chewed steaming hot food. Hated those slurping mouths.
An Indonesian domestic helper, in her mid-teens, dressed in
bright yellow T-shirt but with face so dull, was sitting beside
a Chinese grey-haired woman on a wheelchair. With a deep
sigh and eyes closed, I prayed...

Faces can morph to prunes
Bones might turn soft earth
With smiles, I can part,
The world I was roaming free. But
please, me never
A breathing burden, To
anyone living.

The helper's eyes were fixed on a spot at a distance.
With no life. Was she waiting for something... someone?
I wondered. A man in his late forties in black shoes, black
pants and short-sleeved baby blue shirt with a pen in his
chest pocket, lifted the plates cautiously without dropping,
the white clouds-mucus-soaked tissue papers; utensils;
bones; chewed fat and more that I can't see, from non-
law-abiding individuals' tables. Tables clean now, vacant till
occupied. Three South-Indian construction workers, with

their grease-stained jumpsuits, yellow safety hats, a steel ladder and toolboxes, exchanged smiles with me even as they hurried, while I munched on my crispy kaya toast. A white fan above me spinning at full speed. Fifteen more fans, with their blades in motion, cooling the hawker centre.

Two yellow claws landed on my table. Two curious eyes looked at me. A myna. Its agenda? To peck on the crumbs I'd dropped. Felt warm in the chilly weather. I liked the new company. To welcome my guest, I gently pushed the red saucer which carried my half-eaten toast. With opened yellow beak, the myna came forth to take my... no, *its* breakfast. The myna poked into its toast. I took my phone out. Like a ninja in stealth mode. Needed a picture for my damned Instagram. My notebook was on my lap. It dropped. My spider-man reflexes worked just in time; the notebook never reached the wet ground. But it didn't stop the myna's wings from spreading above me, in fear of my strike.

Asian orchestra came to an end.

Angry tears welled by my eyes,

When the blades put the hungry myna to rest.

Clean tables, clean no more with

painful strokes of red. Me no

good host,

Me no shit ninja, Me
no spider-man, But a
murderer on One rainy
morning. Till now, it
stings.

Collection

A frail old man and a granny, cornered in silence and darkness, inside a van so red

A man, in singlet and stained berms, walks up the stairs, screaming, “KAAA-RAAN-

GUUUU-NI” Old things need to go, no place to keep, for new things want space

With or without price, the karanguni picks the unwanted, off he goes

A man, in singlet and stained berms, walks up the stairs, screaming, “KAAA-RAAN-

GUUUU-NI” People in the block, not all but some, dash out to get rid of stuff they don’t need

With or without price, the karanguni picks the unwanted, off he goes

to collect more and more, anything, everything people simply throw

People in the block, not all but some, dash out to get rid of stuff they don't need
The sun is gone, dark clouds are forming, it's going to rain, the karanguni has to
rush to collect more and more, anything, everything people simply throw
With things of no value to others present today

The sun is gone, dark clouds are forming, it's going to rain, the karanguni has to
rush to dump all he's gathered, into his red van and go next block

With things of no value to others present today

A frail old man and a granny, cornered in silence and darkness, inside a van so red

KEN LYE

Since his graduation in 2019, Ken Lye's short stories have appeared in online literary journals from Singapore, China, Japan and Malaysia, including Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, and the anthologies, Singapore at Home and The Best Asian Short Stories. His contribution to SAMPAN is from a work-in-progress novel.



Coming Home

‘Wonderful to see you back home in Singapore,’ Aunty Nirmala said, as she threw her thick, meaty arms around Arul.

‘Of course. How could I miss such a big occasion?’ he replied, pressed against her formidable frame.

Arul’s aunt waddled into The Tamarind Kitchen, one hand adjusting the drape of her sari, leaving her nephew to welcome the next in the line. Arul struggled to remember everyone’s names. (Was it Uncle Sundar or Uncle Siva who was hard of hearing?). He could count on one hand the number of times he had returned from the UK since moving there a decade ago to study Law and then staying on to work. Because, well - this wasn’t home anymore.

‘Don’t you miss local food?’ his mother would ask over FaceTime, steadfastly refusing to believe that there was a curry or takeaway around every other corner in London. And there was always Harrow, London’s Little India, just a train ride away, where ‘I go to temple, *Amma*’ (well ...). He hoped she would be impressed that he had started cooking his own meals with fresh ingredients from the South Asian markets there, but he had underestimated her ability to channel everything round to her foremost grievance with him.

‘You shouldn’t be in the kitchen,’ she would say, before the inevitable segue: ‘I thought you are very busy with work? This is why you need to settle down. Get a wife to take care of the house for you. Your cousins are all married with children.

Vijay is already at number four.’ (Which one was Vijay again?)

His father would sit stoically behind her in a white singlet, hands on his mighty belly, sagely nodding his head, letting his wife do all the dirty work.

‘If you are having difficulty finding, don’t worry. I told you, Aunty Reshma can recommend. She’s been living in London for so many years.’

Actually, no, this wasn’t really her area of expertise. Arul’s tastes ran in a very different direction from any of the demure, sari-clad ladies in Aunty Reshma’s directory of prospective spouses. Not that his friends had had any luck with the potential boyfriends they had foisted on him either. He had his career, his friends, his community work. Who had time for a serious partner?

Visits to Singapore were always fraught. Yes, there was now Pink Dot, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* on Netflix. But also, Section 377A still and so always a certain discomfort, a certain guardedness.

Even with family. Especially with family.

He had flown to Singapore this time for his father's seventieth birthday. Arul and his older sister, Shalini, had booked out the whole of their father's favourite restaurant. Not a five-star hotel, but still. *No need for such expense*, his father had insisted, though not too vehemently, his two children had noticed.

Nine-thirty pm, and Arul was exhausted and hungry. All evening long, he had been paraded by his parents to family members he hardly knew, and his father's friends and former colleagues. Easier to have simply embroidered across his jet-black *jippa*, "Oxford, lawyer, London." He wasn't all golden. He was still single, but there was a sort of triumph in that too, a sense of being unattainable, too good for just any girl. (*He's very fussy, this one*, his father would say, scolding and smug at the same time.) And there was Shalini, a Human Resource manager, mother to a squawking brood of three, two girls and a boy. Proof that his parents could raise children right.

Arul weaved through the well-dressed assemblage of guests to the deserted buffet line where he filled his plate with a sizeable mound of *briyani*, and liberal helpings of creamy butter chicken and *palak paneer*. It was the only way he was going to make it to the cake-cutting at the end of the evening. He would go to the gym tomorrow.

He searched the teeming restaurant for refuge, spotting Shalini at the edge of the room. Partly concealed in shadow behind a potted ficus, she was hunched over a table for two, just about to bring a spoonful of sticky-sweet *gulab jamun* to her lips. She grinned guiltily and waved him over.

How was his sister already on dessert?

‘Next time, don’t leave me alone out there!’ he said, plonking himself loudly into the seat across from her.

‘Who would be interested in me? You’re in demand because no one ever gets to see you.’

‘I’m inventing a girlfriend next time,’ he said, scooping the orange basmati rice into his mouth greedily.

‘The simple solution is to come back more often, you know?’

He didn’t say anything, so she continued: ‘*Appa* and *Amma* get lonely. I try to spend time with them, but it can be difficult with the kids.’

‘How’s Priya doing in school?’ he asked, taking the opportunity to change the subject. He didn’t see Shalini much even when he was back in Singapore. She and Vinod did not live near his parents’ HDB apartment. *Nearer to the good schools*, she had explained, *better for the children*. Her whole life revolved around them.

There were always enrichment classes to take the kids

to. Catching her for an afternoon coffee was like trying to arrange a meeting with the Queen.

She swallowed her last piece of fried *khoya* ball: 'Primary school Math nowadays—'

Vinod barged into view, towering above the siblings: 'Can you go and get your son?'

He had one gangly arm curled around Jayanthi, his youngest, holding her aloft by her armpits. The two-year-old was bawling hysterically, and his inability to placate her was clearly a source of agitation for her father. Shalini had only started dating him after Arul left for the UK, so Arul didn't know his brother-in-law that well, but there was something joyless and grudging about him. Arul suspected Vinod was the sort of man who complained loudly and incessantly about the government, but quietly voted for the same party anyway.

'What's wrong with Prashanth?' Shalini asked, pushing her bowl of cardamom and rose water syrup away from her, and taking Jayanthi from her glowering husband. The little girl fell silent immediately as if an off switch on her back had been flipped.

'Your mother's sister is in the children's area, and she's going around painting glitter nail polish on all the children's hands, including Prashanth's.'

‘I have to look after Jayanthi. You find an excuse to pull him away.’ ‘She’s your aunty. I don’t want to cause a scene.’

‘Just say I want to speak to him. Either that, or you deal with this one,’ she said thrusting the child back at him. Arul’s niece stared at her father, unblinking, the slightest quiver running across her lips.

Tail between his legs, Vinod hurried off.

‘All sorts,’ she mumbled, as she brought the babbling toddler into her arms. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘Nothing, it’s just that Aunty should know better—’ Shalini caught herself.

‘What were you crying about, you silly-silly’ she said, spinning Jayanthi round to face her.

‘They’re just kids playing around with make-up.’

Shalini kept her eyes down, locked on her daughter’s, as if talking to her, and not Arul: ‘Yes, and Prashanth is a boy. He shouldn’t be playing with nail polish.’

Arul felt like he had just been kicked in the chest. ‘Because?’

‘Because what?’ his sister continued in a babyish voice, still focused on her daughter.

‘Is there something wrong with a boy playing with make-up if he’s enjoying himself?’ he asked, his tone measured, but only barely.

Jayanthi giggled.

‘Look,’ Shalini sighed, finally turning her face up, confronting her brother head-on, ‘What do you want me to say?’

A moment when it could all have been saved, but then the opportunity passed: ‘That I don’t want my son to be’ – and he noticed she dropped her voice to say this, though no one could hear them – ‘gay?’

She cast him the same look that Arul remembered from when he was a boy. The one that his mother showed him as she slapped his wrist because Arul was just a little too ... expressive with his hands.

‘He’s five,’ he replied, enunciating each word with great deliberateness, using them as bricks to build a dam against the rush of anger. All those years ago when he was just a teenager, Shalini had assured him that he would always be her little brother, she would always love him, no matter what. That affirmation and support had meant everything to him growing up.

Shalini swung back towards her daughter: ‘You don’t understand. You’re not a parent. You have to make sure they don’t get any funny ideas at this age.’

Arul knew what he would have done if this had happened back home. There was no way he would have let

such an affront – such a betrayal – pass unchallenged.

But, here in Singapore, with his family, he was sixteen again. And Arul Chellakanna at sixteen, was a very different creature.

‘I see.’

This is why, he thought, as he forced himself to calmly pick up his plate and walk away before he lost control; *this is why I don't come back*.

‘Did something happen between you and your sister?’ his *Amma* asked, mother and son in the kitchen, his father’s heavy snores reverberating from his parents’ bedroom.

‘When we gathered for the family photo, I could tell that there was some unhappiness. You were not speaking to one another, like you both wanted the evening to be over.’

‘Nothing,’ Arul replied, staring into his ginger tea as he stirred it, almost hypnotised by the swirling. ‘Just a small disagreement, no big deal.’

‘Not about the cost of the dinner, I hope. Your father and I can contribute as well.’

‘I’m a lawyer. I can afford a dinner,’ he said, gulping down a belch. His stomach wasn’t used to so much oily, spicy food.

‘There’s only the two of you. When your *Appa* and I

are gone, you only have each other,' she added, slowly filling her ceramic cup with tap water from the jug by the stove.

The evening had been a night of celebration, but it occurred to him now that the party must also have been a stark reminder to his parents of their mortality.

'Family must always come first,' she continued and, to his surprise, took a seat across from him at the kitchen table. It was one in the morning.

'Nothing is more important,' she said, pushing a coaster towards him for his mug.

'Yes, *Amma*.'

'That's why I'm always so happy when you come back. And look at you, so big now. And so handsome.'

'Only now?' he asked, and they both laughed.

'You were so skinny last time. The relatives always asked how come I didn't feed you properly. I thought you had worms.'

'I probably did.'

More laughter, slowly fading into the hum of the night. This was the first time they had shared such an intimate moment as adults; not even in a long time, but possibly ever. He had moved out at twenty-one. After the army, he had gone straight to Oxford, then London, and never looked back. This flat, this kitchen: it had not been home for many

years.

His mother took his hand, and her face turned serious, sad, though not without tenderness. 'Can I ask you something?'

He hesitated, not sure whether to reply, and how. 'Promise me you won't get upset?' she said.

'It depends,' he replied, trying to keep things light, though it was a challenge now just to look her in the face.

'You're doing well in your career, good-looking, and yet, all these years, you've never brought a girl home.'

This again? Her tone was different tonight, however. Heavier.

'Your father and I were wondering,' she began, before taking a breath, visibly summoning all her willpower, and pressing on, 'is it because you are dating a white girl, and you think we won't accept her?'

Everything in his line of sight shifted, like a video camera tilting on its axis. It was possible to feel depths of disappointment and relief simultaneously.

'I know your *Appa* and I, sometimes we say the wrong thing. Your parents are of a different generation, so we can be stuck in an old way of thinking.'

She was gripping his hand so tightly now that his fingers lost feeling. 'But we are also not stupid. We know

times have changed. So, if you really have a British girlfriend, even if she's a Christian, and you want to marry her, we will accept her as part of the family.'

He stared at her, stupefied.

'Unless there is some other reason?' Was this the night?

Arul had come out so many times to so many people over the years, but this constant revealing of a part of himself that he used to feel such immense guilt and shame and anxiety over—no, it never became any easier. Especially not with the people he knew before he discovered his truth: the people he loved, the people who loved him. Who raised him as a baby, who placed upon him all their hopes and aspirations, who knew everything about him—except this one thing.

'Amma—'

He felt like throwing up. Come on. 2019, baby. Two words. Just two more words—but they seemed so large and far beyond anything that he was capable of right now. All the years of climbing up the ladder to the top of the flying fox, but always choking as he stood on the edge of the platform, climbing back down again. Somehow, it was easier to march down a London street wearing nothing but a black leather harness and assless chaps, than it was to have an honest conversation with his own mother.

Before he could continue, however... 'We just want

to know that you have someone to take care of you, and that you are happy,' she said.

She breathed in noisily through her nose. 'That's all any parent wants for their child.'

And what did he want? He wanted them to know he was gay, but why? It struck him now that he had never really asked himself that question. He had always taken it as an immutable fact that it was better to be out of the closet. Not just for his own mental health, not just because he believed that flag-waving visibility was political, but also because, surely, his parents would want to know, wouldn't they?

As he looked now into his mother's eyes, the skin wrinkled around the edges like crushed paper, no, he wasn't convinced that that knowledge would make her life any richer or fuller. After all, he was single; in his mother's eyes, incomplete. She would conflate his homosexuality and his unmarried state, blame the latter on the former.

There would be no joy for them, he saw that now; only for himself—and even then. This wasn't a question of bravery, of pride. Telling them was just being selfish.

And so, for the second time that night, he persuaded himself into discretion. '*Amma*,' he said, willing his eyes to shine, his lips to draw into the kindest smile, 'there's no girl. I just haven't found the right woman yet. One day.'

‘That is all?’

‘Yes, *Amma*.’

He saw her body relax and the tension lift. He thought some disquiet remained on her face, just for a moment, but then the cloud dissipated as her features rearranged themselves.

‘As long as you know that your *Appa* and I love you very much, and we trust you to always know the right thing to do.’

Yes. Yes, you can.

‘It is just very sad if you have everything, a good job, a nice house, but you don’t have anyone to share it with. Aunty Reshma can help. She—’

‘Stop it. Please.’

His mother sighed. Her previous attempts to coax him into meeting with matchmakers, astrologers, fortune tellers and face readers had all met with the same stony resistance.

‘I don’t believe this is your destiny. I know you will find someone.’

She leant over to kiss him on the cheek.

‘Don’t stay up too late,’ she said as she ambled back to her room. Her husband was still sound asleep, still dreaming, no doubt, of his perfect family.

Arul remained in the kitchen, sipping his tea, one

finger tapping on the linoleum surface of the table. What was it about this country—the air, the water?—that made it so possible to talk yourself round?

SARAH TAN SHU LING

Sarah Tan Shu Ling is inspired by water bodies and one particular period in Australia she wishes she could freeze in time. Her work has appeared in Atelier of Healing, Anima Methodi, Asingbol, and SingPoWriMo 2017 anthologies. She is currently pursuing an MA in Creative Writing at LASALLE College of the Arts.



初一¹

chū yī

dawn's watery light cascades the long kitchen
a space peppered terrazzo from decades ago
a washing machine sits quiet, not humming
toilet still a squatter, metal doors banging shut
held in place by an unyielding hook
bathtimes with huge red pails filled to the brim
grandma ladles mini containers
over lathered hair and soaping, droopy flesh
hanging off tough bones

laundry basking on blue bamboo poles
scrambling sun rays dart into kitchen
walls sighing with the sound
of cleaver meeting duck flesh
pearls of sweat dripping down grandma
right leg extended left leg an axis, her pivot
we tell her no need for cooking this year on
newspaper collects brine and sweat
turns into wet pulp year in year out

1 first day of the lunar month

curry chicken boiled for reunion lunch
its rich density a fulcrum pulling
four generations under her roof
potatoes float like icebergs in a bright orange sea
slices of bread passed around a rickety table
pig stomach soup in a ceramic bowl
peppercorned and double, triple dipped by family
meat roll padded with carrots crunch under
exacting mouths, every year the same meal

same routine; extra table barrels out
shirtless cousins fix it up for blackjack
twenty-five heads squeeze around it
alternating leaning in and out just to fit
around our queen
ten cents twenty cents two dollars five
sticky heat swallows us even as
steel framed windows and yellowing door
lie agape to let walls breathe

we stay till last light and wait
wait a year to be anchored as one again

PETER MORGAN

Peter Morgan is an educator, IT professional, photographer and writer. His photography has been published in Queen's Quarterly, an Argentinean math textbook and a German surfing magazine. His poetry has appeared in the Southeast Asian Review of English and a short story will be in the forthcoming Best Asian Short Stories 2022. Peter completed his LASALLE College of the Arts MA in 2019.



Pogo and the Blue Guitar

“Hey Pogo, I can’t get my email!”

“Hey Pogo, the website is down, again!”

“Hey Pogo!”

I toil in a hospital, alleviating employee pain. Singapore Hospital Number One. An immense, complex place. The agony of Information Technology. After ten years in the IT department, I know what a nuisance the computers can be; I do my best. I’m discreet, except for my silver and leather bracelets, and a couple of gold rings. Modestly, I can dance across any staff member’s recalcitrant keyboard.

“Hey, thanks Pogo!”

About my name. I would prefer to be called Moog. After the electronic music synthesizer. The early one: plywood and vacuum tubes. Not like now. We’re synthesizing *everything*, not just music. It won’t work out well. Another story. I listen to music. All kinds, all the time. The Senegalese singer Youssou N’ dour. John Coltrane’s bebop saxophone. Leonard Cohen’s poetry. Umm Kulthum’s sultry voice. Singapore’s sixties pop update, the Cashew Chemists. Wide range, eh? But I’m 183 centimetres tall and 75 kilograms light and people tell me I jump around, so my smart-alec IT teammates call me Pogo. Docs, nurses, physios, cleaners

- everyone heard me being called Pogo. Now even outside of the cramped, cluttered IT office it is “Hey Pogo!”

I have a super smart sixteen-year-old son, Yusef. You'd think that would mean I am married, which I was, but it means my ravishing, spirited southie ex-wife went home to Chennai one time and had an affair. And her discerning family preferred the rich guy. She was recalled. She left our Yusef with me.

“He can have a better life,” she said.

She wanted for him to have a first-class Singapore education.

Also, I had wanted to call my kid Youssou, but my ex-wife prevailed. Too late now for the name, but maybe he'll still go for music? I'd like that. I don't tell her about my music ambitions for him.

Even though I love being a single parent, I'd still like to meet someone. With all those single Singaporean, Malay, Indian, Chinese, Indonesian, Pilipino and Burmese nurses, you would think at least one would be interested. But everyone seems to be climbing the hierarchy. Or the nurses see only Pogo - everyone's helpful IT guy - and not my Moog angle.

Yusef is on a specialized tech track at school. He gets an A+ in math because of his mother - she's a math

genius. That's how we met; at university in Chennai. I'm U2's ageing Bono, and my son is his younger world-class guitarist sidekick Edge. Once, Edge said to Bono, just concentrate on rock and roll instead of all those social causes, especially in the middle of our concerts. That's the situation with me and Yusef. He wants me to focus on being his dad, getting my work done, and leave all these digressions and distractions.

Like I was saying, his mother is a math genius. I mean, a real math genius. Descendent of Ramanujan. The guy Dev 'Slumdog Millionaire' Patel played in the movie *The Man Who Knew Infinity*. And another reason he should get an A+ is because of his no-slouch-either father. I'm the practical side of the family. By day, I'm an ambitious, underemployed, data-wrangling IT guy. By night, I'm an aspiring student of the guitar. My blue guitar.

"Hey Pogo!"

Interrupted in my train of thinking again.

There is actually lots happening at the hospital. Most of the guys and women I work with are fun but crap when it comes to commitment. They get it fixed and then get on with whatever. I'm more devoted, so I read: technical stuff like agile and continuous deployment, and medical things like anti-microbial resistance and value-based healthcare. Just today, Monday, I had to reset the visitor registration

terminals, again. Other IT guys leave them down; let the visitors go to the registration counter. Undermines the government effort to automate everything, which I'm trying to do my bit to support. The self-registration terminals keep crashing after people kept slamming them. I blame the poor quality terminal vendor that hospital management hired. I was on the proposal committee; token IT rep. The vendor's sales vice-president was really friendly and shinier than a new iPhone screen until he realized I was like crayfish on the pecking order and then he didn't bother.

Not even a "Hey Pogo!"

The reasons I am good at my work are by being forever positive, even when I don't feel like it, and because I imagine being in the machines. I know the technical details; hey, I was in computer science in Chennai too. Like the kid's mom. Just not as disciplined. Bastard line of the Ramanujan family maybe.

I see myself on a different scale. What if I was an electron? If genes can be selfish...why not electrons? If I were an electron, with all kinds of demands on me, what would I do? The answer mostly tells me the solution to the problem. Like how should I encourage Windows to stop beeping error codes and get on with letting the user log in? I tempt the electrons with the promise of real work. Like

the cat in the Emergency Department is tempted by the cream the cleaners leave near the Seventh Month altar, just outside the ambulance bay. “Here windows windows, I’ll let you run a database if you just let the poor doctor log on. Here windows windows ...”

“Hey Pogo!”

Gotta go. More interruptions to my brain.

One of the nurses on Ward 9C talks to me. Sweet, pure. She wears horn-rimmed eyeglasses. Smart too, even though we are talking in our third language, Singlish. Her first language is Tagalog and mine is Hindi. Her second is bahasa Indonesian and my second is Ruby, the programming language.

“I adore hip hop,” she said. That was unpredictable. Common interest in music.

We were talking about some project. I blurted about how it was *supposed* to be wasn’t how it really was. She quietly laughed.

“*Sama sama* my duties,” she said.

Empathy.

The machines on 9C work better than anywhere else.

Tuesday night, everyone was in the auditorium for a work buffet dinner. Some guy retiring. Bossa nova samba in the background. She was drinking the glass of cheap red

wine they let us have, which was great. She didn't know how to hold the glass. Too high, warming the wine, and then too low, twirling it, like a baton. Gave me hope.

Another aspect is that I'm second-order to the go-to guy for the hospital CEO. Glass office. Top floor. CEO listens to Johann Sebastian Bach, which is cool.

My boss, the Head of IT, gets called to help CEO all the time. Funniest was a couple of weeks ago when David – that's my boss – deleted all CEO's personal email. The Previous David configured CEO's laptop to download CEO's personal account, like you're not supposed to do. Singapore. Internet separation. That's the drill. David thought making more space, deleting inconsequential folders, would fix whatever problem. All the Ministry of Health memos were still there, but not maybe the dating site messages.

Judging from CEO's panic, all his personal messages – wife, mistresses – gone. This strained his Handling Conflict seminar training, I could tell, not choking David. It took two days, but we got it all back. Using my cousin's two-cent data recovery outfit. So now every time CEO calls David, David pulls me along.

Some of the senior execs believe I can read their messages. But I'm just not interested. Like when we sent CEO's laptop to be fixed, it's true I could have read them on

the server, at least the backed-up ones. I wouldn't put it past my cousin to have burnt a copy of CEO's hard drive, like some skanky Hong Kong basement cyber-hoarder. Metallica pummelling his dim cranium. But I got my own life and the magic girl on 9C, who I am going to ask out soon, as my goal.

“Hey Pogo!”

The calls I like best are from the Emergency Department. Long, long walk from IT. Muzak American Country playing to calm panicked relatives. The call for IT is usually not a real emergency, unless some big specialist doc can't log in because she wasn't paying attention last time we told her to change her password to a Zen Koen combined with a math equation. I like Emerg because you see them helping people who are in a bad way. They screw around less.

Once there was a blackout, and the generators kicked in. One of the systems wouldn't reboot. The stray cat the housekeepers were feeding cream to was ok. Would have been a real emergency if it was the billing system that crashed, but it was just the patient record. By the time I got there, the older docs were writing illegible scripts on some disused ECG tape they found. The young docs were playing with their phones, hoping that would help. There was a team of sweaty security guards and porters all lined up to take

blood samples to the lab and bring back results.

I was the hero that day. I was paying attention when the installation guy had said to restart things in a specific order. Boom! Back on-line. I feel like as a species, we are really stretched. There are all these little bits of loosely connected, almost forgotten knowledge. The porters liked me that day because they could go back to meandering. And the security guards got back to higher-order work guarding the entrance from drunks and looking for pretty girls to help in and out of taxis. I'd act like the porters and the guards too if I were paid one one-thousandth of CEO's pay. IT can jump ship these days, so we get more respectable pay.

“Hey Pogo!”

Recently I bought this blue guitar. Keeps me out of the kid's hair when we're at home together and he is being a teenager. Maybe if I learn to play my blue guitar well, then I can get people to change my nickname.

There are perhaps three-hundred systems at Singapore Hospital Number One. After a while, you learn the protocol - reboot, and if that doesn't work, ping everyone, and then hope. Just pray someone in the WhatsApp group knows what to do when the lab micromanagement system goes down. Or the MRI software won't restart. Don't act

flustered. So what if, like happened yesterday, the radiology tech treats you like a dork for not being able to fix *his* dual grey-scale monitors? The algorithms are already catching things faster than the rad techs and nudging them out of the way. After the algorithms finish with radiology, they will be coming for the bone guys. Orthopaedics staff are friendlier than the cave-dwelling radiology techs, so I'm not so keen on this takeover. Can't we be more selective about how the technology is used? Another story.

Wednesday, I had lunch with 9C. So far, I have seen her every day this week. Just lucky. I was in the cafeteria line-up for chicken rice and she was in the line-up too, with her friends. Marvin Gaye in the background. She asked me to join her friends. We had a sweet talk, but with her group. I subtly inquired but couldn't tell if she had a boyfriend. We agreed to have filter coffee sometime as if it was some vague United Nations commitment to agree to agree to talk. Maybe we were shy because of her friends.

"Hey Pogo, you look pleased," someone back at the IT closet had said when I came back after chicken rice.

"Dad, you're here," even Yusef said, that evening.

Humans are like that. The smallest things set them one way or another. Even me.

Like the machines. They have character. Some of them

are having affairs. Others are sulking in the corner. Mostly they are just chatting with the other machines they like. The router is me, everyone flying in and around and through and no one noticing, except when things break.

“Hey Pogo!”

Sometimes we get real kick-ass gear. Or the installation is complicated, like splicing fibre-optic cables. I don't know how they made the splicing so the tech guys could do it. Maybe at some weird human-machine language level – Mandarin, dialect, machine language, more of another machine language, Chinese opera, more dialect. Language. Communication. More and more these days we have to get it exactly right. Not like the old days when we'd say, “the rain in the field is interfering with the ISDN lines”, and everyone would believe us. Even though the explanation was utter crap. One of the fibre contractor minions told me they got their splicing machine on eBay. Cousin of my cousin, I'd guess.

“Hey Pogo!”

You probably want to know more about 9C? Everyone wants drama and conflict in the stories they hear, and I want to be superhero to my Yusef, and of my own what-looks-like-cheerful-but-potentially-desperate story. And have my music reach escape velocity.

Well, there is good news! 9C, she sent a message. We are going for *masala dosa* and filter coffee this Friday. Just the pressure of being with the group held her back! We are going to Mavalli Tiffin Rooms in Little India.

I called my cousin. Made sure he'd properly fixed the CEO's laptop and asked if he'd take the kid. He couldn't hear me at first until he turned down the brain rot techno-pop. He's happy; thinks he can educate Yusef in the real world by taking him to *The Avengers*. My boss knows I work my ass, so was lenient about leaving on time Friday night. Especially when I told him CEO's laptop was fixed properly. My boss and me could count on getting through the weekend without a critical house call.

Even before our *masala dosas*, I had a story for the inevitable Monday Morning gossip session. In case anyone back at the cable-strewn IT closet asked. I was all ready to say to anyone who questioned, "9C and I had a great time, but we were on distant shores." Cut the embarrassing inquisitions if it didn't click between 9C and me. Anyway, I knew she had an early shift Saturday morning, and I had to save my kid's brain for his math exam. No great expectations for Friday night. Just enjoy the tropical breeze. And on Saturday, Yusef would be glad to see me after over-binging on my cousin's video education.

But on that beautiful sunrise Saturday morning, just before she had to run to punch in, I told her about the blue guitar. And about wanting to be known as Moog. No yakketty technical explanation. She got the idea! At least she didn't say it was flaky. And she and I were out the door, me walking her to the MRT platform. She got on the train. The automated doors were just about to close, when she looked back at me.

“Moog, can we have *dosa* and coffee again next Friday?”

HANIS HUSIN

Hanis Husin graduated from LASALLE College of the Arts with a Bachelors Degree in Arts Management (2017) and a Masters of Arts in Creative Writing (2022). Passionate about championing local literature, she is currently working at the Book Council as a Programmes Manager. On the side, she is also the Creative Director of a small press, Bilal Books, focusing on English-Islamic writings. Other than writing book reviews, her works can also be found online under @houseofhikayat.



Carrying the Sun in Us

The ones too close, they burn
through the fever
a fervour —
throbbing in their chest.
Little sparks, scattered
like confetti
create a fire,
for together we survive.

In the palm of your hands
a fist to the breast
sing a city, sing for
the stars ascending to the sky.
A searing pride
red — white —
starting the day
before noon to rise.

Out before light and back by night
I've paid my dues
taxing an explosion in the air
cheers for a day

and toil for life.
Feeding on greener grass
an endless summer
— shortchanged
I am heatwave
all year round.

In harmony, sand in feet
you hold a silver spoon
passing down generations.
History of
fluent of the foreign
lessons turning traditions
carried like a torch —
this a searing
memory.

The ones that came to be
alight and alive
warm from the rat race.
This is the island of the sun
carrying it in us
heavy and golden
— beyond.

CHEN CUIFEN

Chen Cuifen is a writer from Singapore. She was the winner of the Troubadour International Poetry Prize 2018, the Literary Taxidermy Short Story Competition 2019, and most recently received an Honourable Mention in the Golden Point Award 2021. She loves coffee, liminal spaces, and fantastic things.



Grow Your Own Solar System!

The void decks were the first to go. One hot August night at Ang Mo Kio Block 155, a black cat was startled by a shift in gravity. Unlike the human beings that were to follow, it was attentive enough to notice the moment its paws lifted off from the humid concrete, displacing it into the orbit of Saturn-1678, which was registered to two-month-old Lilian Tay Hui Min.

Lilian's mother Yu Zhen kept her baby's first planet in a birdcage at the void deck, like everyone else. Uncle Tong downstairs had hung up all nine of his planets near the letterboxes, and enterprising neighbours had created an elaborate lattice of bamboo poles near the bicycle parking spaces for people to grow their solar systems, not unlike the terrariums in the community garden. The void deck had lots of space and their three-room flats didn't, so why not?

Two hours later, Lilian's father Anthony Tay returned from a late shift at his security guard job and was blinded when he stepped into the path of Uncle Tong's sun. He unsuccessfully tried to shield his gaze with the back of his hand. When they found him the next morning, he swore barely five minutes had passed, and he spoke of a horizon of warm light that never ended. What he did not admit was

that it had been the most peaceful five minutes of his life since the baby was born. He had to stop himself from crying: take me back there.

Years later, in an interview on Channel NewsAsia, Professor Yves Tan from—Nanyang Technological University—whose mother had been enamoured of all things French, and bitterly disappointed when her genius son failed to invent a solar system that would transform their HDB flat into a Parisian apartment—shared his expert opinion that the first person to kickstart the DIY solar system trend here had been the influencer JessieRoxx.

JessieRoxx, whose parents were chicken rice hawkers, took artful photos of her condo that made it seem smaller than it really was. Having married into wealth, she did not want to alienate her twelve thousand followers with pictures of her generous balcony, where her solar system enjoyed lots of space, fresh air and sunlight. Her *Venus-24* time lapse series on TikTok, which was described by media as “hypnotic”, “visionary” and “inscrutable”, showed her first planet growing from a pink speck the size of her fingernail into a shimmering disco ball. People said if you turned up the volume, you could hear the music of the stars. More than one person went to the doctor because they could not stop

crying.

But viral videos were one thing, said the Channel NewsAsia presenter. How did Singapore end up becoming the number one overseas market for SolarGro's *Grow Your Own Solar System!* kits?

Professor Yves Tan smiled. It was really very simple. If there was one thing all Singaporeans yearned for, wistfully, aspirationally, it was more space. What was a little spatial and temporal distortion, in exchange for the entire universe?

After the interview, he went home and watered his Neptune-6799 until icicles began to form, a new moon rising. He closed his door, closed his eyes, and slipped into his galaxy. Outside in the living room, his parents began to argue again.

Local media never managed to find out that the Malaysian woman who'd cultivated the first DIY solar system had studied briefly in Singapore, where she had enrolled in the sports school before deciding to hang up her badminton racket for astrophysics. Had a reporter unearthed this little-known fact, there would have been a full-page feature on this *Singapore connection* to the biggest global phenomenon since the iPhone.

But this woman had scrubbed all mentions of her name

from the documentation when she left SolarGro. By then her initial prototype had been through so many iterations, across so many teams in so many different global offices, that no one remembered where it started. In her retirement, she visited Singapore one last time. Her two children, born and raised in Scotland, complained how small the playgrounds were. I know, she said. Once, I thought so too. But my dears, if they were not so small, I would lose sight of you.

When the special report on the loss of Singapore's void decks was published, the government put together a thorough FAQ to answer complaints on why they had not acted earlier. Void decks were meant to be shared spaces that residents could make their own. Did the government police the growth of community gardens? Of course not. The solar systems, in their infancy, had been the same. How could the authorities have known that the intersection of all these planets' gravitational pulls and orbits would lead to such a warping of time and space? And what were they to do now?

But the complaints never came. Hard copies of the FAQ were sucked into the solar systems that Ministers kept in their offices, and secretly watered in between meetings. Children began to make a game of wandering into void decks. They told stories of what they saw, and as adults,

pretended to forget.

After the void decks, the bus terminals. Abandoned car parks on moonlit rooftops. 7-11 at 3 AM, an hour for strange bodies to collide.

We dream. We dream of land, of being tethered, and then we retreat into the safety of all this space we have grown for ourselves. Lilian dreams of water, of her time in the womb. The smallest distance possible between two human beings. Yves dreams of running down the five-foot-ways of Chinatown. His mouth is sticky with dragon beard candy, and he has one hand snug in his mother's, the other holding on tight to his father's. On a plane back to Edinburgh, a woman gazes out the window at the stars, whose light has taken a thousand years to reach her eyes. Somewhere beyond lie their inert bodies, perfectly suspended in an infinite stasis.

Shipwreck

Sophie didn't know it then, but four years after the breakup, she'll see Terence again in the All Bar One at Holborn. It isn't planned. None of this is: she, standing at the doorway wrapped up in her University of London hoodie and a hand-me-down scarf the colour of blooming rust, he, a coat slung over his arm and a beer in his hand. He's watching the match on the big TV overhead. Sophie has never seen Terence watch football before. It makes her do a double-take and rub her eyes. Is it really him? Did he ever have stubble on his face? Is it just a trick of the shadows?

Ravi walks into her where she's frozen in the doorway, and grabs her by her elbow as she stumbles.

'Sorry—'

'No, no, my bad. You ok, Soph?'

'I'm fine. I just... saw someone I thought I knew.'

Ravi glances over to the bar. 'From Singapore?'

'Yeah.'

'Wow. What are the odds?' Ravi asks, eyebrows raised.

'London is full of Singaporeans,' Sophie admits. 'Hard to go anywhere without bumping into one.'

'So, who's that?'

Sophie opens her mouth to say *my sister's ex*, closes it

and shakes her head. ‘No one important.’

Sophie finds out Mia and Terence have broken up on Instagram. She doesn’t even find out through Mia’s feed. She sees it on Terence’s feed, out of the blue. She’s on the MRT on her way home from math tuition, tapping through her friends’ Instagram stories. Terence has posted a short video of his dog Cookie’s head in his lap, his hand just visible at the top of the frame, stroking her. The caption reads: *she knew I just had my heart broken </3*

Sophie texts Mia right away. There’s no answer. She sounds as perky as ever on the radio that night. *Hi everyone! I’m Mia Tay and I hope you’re all having a beautiful evening. Our first song dedication tonight is from Melody, and this goes out to her boyfriend K... wishing you lovebirds all the best! This is Taylor Swift’s ‘Lover’, on 96.5 FM’s Music of the Heart.*

‘We just got busy with our jobs,’ Mia mutters into her pillow, the next morning.

*

Terence works as a civil servant in the Ministry of Social and Family Development by day. By night, he posts pictures of neighbourhood cats on Instagram. His account *meows_of_sg* has over 10,000 followers. Sophie is one of them. Mia isn’t. She curates her social media with a ruthless

vigilance. People judge her on who she follows and what she likes and comments on, she tells Sophie, and so she only ever interacts with her colleagues and the 96.5 FM official account.

There are dark circles under her eyes and she's still in bed. That doesn't mean anything. It's not yet seven in the morning and Sophie's barged into her room before school, knowing full well Mia got home from work barely three hours ago.

'We never saw each other,' says Mia, after Sophie sits on the edge of her bed for a while and refuses to budge. She rolls round and throws one arm over her face. 'We just figured, we're practically not dating anymore anyway. That's all.'

'But have you seen his Instastory? He says he's *heartbroken*.'

Sophie shoves her phone in Mia's face. The Instastory is going to disappear in twelve hours. Maybe sooner, if Terence decides to delete it. But Mia keeps her eyes closed.

'Don't tell Mum and Dad,' is all she says.

Their parents like Terence. They like the way he greets them politely whenever he comes over, and brings chilli sauce handmade by his mother, who learned how to make it from her mother who used to sell nasi padang in Malaysia.

Sophie's grip tightens round her phone. 'You just don't want them to know you fucked up a good relationship, right?'

Whether Mia is too tired, too defeated, or they've both finally grown out of Mia telling Sophie to watch her mouth, Sophie can't guess. But after a moment, Mia sits up, wooden and abrupt. She pushes her hair back and blinks her eyes open as if the light hurts her. They're red, and the dark circles aren't from sleeplessness but smudged eyeliner. It's a mess running down her cheek. Mia never sleeps with her makeup on. She exhales and runs a hand over her face. Her fingers come away smeared in black. 'Please.'

She does not so much say it as let the word break forth, a wave dying upon the shore. The blanket, stretched taut between them, feels like an impassable ocean.

Sophie puts her phone back in her pocket and leaves.

The Instastory stays up on Terence's account for the next twelve hours. Sophie looks at his profile picture, still unchanged. A smiling, clean-cut young man in a polo tee, crouching down next to the black cat that likes to hang about near his block. When the story disappears, no sign remains of his broken heart. Mia is still on his *Following* list. Sophie wonders if he will unfollow her, if that is how a breakup works. What about Mia's friends and colleagues? And Sophie herself? Should she unfollow him first? She has

no reason to. She didn't fall out with him.

Two weeks later, Facebook pops up with *one year ago on this day* memories. It's a photo of their family at Chinese New Year, all of them gathered in the living room. Mia is sitting cross-legged on the floor in a red tank top and jeans, and Terence is beaming beside her, his arm around her shoulders. It had taken them many tries to take this photo. Terence had tried to balance the phone on the TV console using an ingenious tower of remote controls and a bowl of mandarin oranges. Mia's laughing, her head thrown back, and there's a grin on Dad's face. Mum looks bemused. Sophie's staring at the camera like she isn't sure when it's going to go off, her mouth open.

'Next year, you should all come to my place. My mum would love to cook for you,' Terence had said over dinner, while scooping rice into all their bowls. 'And I know Soph is dying to meet Cookie.'

That photo is on Mia's Facebook account. She hasn't deleted it. Sophie can't delete it. She hovers over the *Remove Tag* option for a while, then closes Facebook.

Mia tells their parents that Terence and his family are overseas this year. They decided to take a family trip to Hong Kong, she says, to see relatives.

'Oh, we must go visit them when they're back, then,'

says Mum.

Mia excuses herself from lunch, saying the radio station is short-staffed this season and she's covering for some colleagues. Sophie, who has been planning for the past month what red outfit she'll wear to meet Terence's dog, is sprawled on the couch, pretending not to hear anything.

Who's watching? asks Netflix, when she turns on the TV. One of the little square icons, the one that looks like a golden retriever, is Terence's. Sophie's icon, a purple penguin, is next to it. About to click, Sophie hesitates, moves the cursor sideways and clicks on Terence's icon instead.

He has been watching *Street Food*. Of course he has. Terence loves food documentaries. The last time he came over, he brought homemade pineapple tarts and they watched *Flavourful Origins* together. Terence had been to Yunnan the year before. He told them all about the life-changing ham he ate there, how he'd tried to find something like that in Singapore. One day, he said, they should all go to Melaka together. The nasi padang stall his grandmother used to run is still there. One of his aunts has taken over.

'Sometimes,' he added, 'I think I'd like to move to Melaka and work at the stall.'

Mia wrinkled her nose. 'Who'd want to live in Malaysia?'

‘Why not?’ Terence laughed. ‘You’d probably have an easier life there. No more weird hours. No more crazy stalker listeners.’

Sophie stared. ‘Jie, you have crazy stalkers?’

‘Don’t listen to him,’ said Mia, leaning over to smack Terence on the shoulder. He caught her by the wrist, pulled her close and kissed her on the corner of her lips.

Sophie scrolls down, hovers over Terence’s watch history for a moment before clicking into it. *Street Food. Marriage Story. Terrace House: Boys and Girls in the City.* He has been watching a lot of Netflix. He has been watching shows about breakups and romance. He’s been posting fewer cats than usual, too.

The remote control is heavy in Sophie’s hand, and her palm is clammy. It is too late to wish she had not clicked in. She puts it down, rolls over to lie back on the couch and stare at the ceiling, at the hypnotic whirl of the fan spinning round and round. They had cleaned the dust off it just this morning, she and Dad. They had got out the ladder and took turns climbing up to wipe the blades. It was shocking how much dust could get on a fan that was constantly moving. Sophie had thought surely it would be blown away every time they turned on the fan. But not quite.

The chilli sauce doesn't last forever. It was already half empty when Mia and Terence broke up. Every time Sophie sits down to eat, she tries to take less than usual. It's her favourite chilli. Terence's mum makes it with garlic and lime and it goes with everything, whether she's eating rice, noodles, or pizza. When Sophie reaches the bottom of the jar, she scrapes up the last bits and licks the teaspoon and the inside of the lid, till everything is clean.

'How come we're out of chilli sauce?' asks Mum, the next time she opens the fridge and sees the space where the jar used to be. It is a Sunday, Mia just woke up, and they are having carrot cake for lunch.

'I just haven't seen Terence lately,' Mia says.

Mum closes the fridge door and comes back to the table. She frowns at the white carrot cake in front of her, then at Mia. 'What happened? Are you having a fight or something?'

Mia shakes her head. Her chin tilts upward as she glances across the table at Sophie.

Or something, Sophie mouths.

'We still haven't gone to visit his family. We should go,' says Dad.

Mia makes a noncommittal sort of mumble. Sophie carves out a big piece of carrot cake and stuffs it into her

mouth so quickly she starts to cough. Mum whacks her on the back. 'Don't eat so fast.'

Mia slides her water across to Sophie. The soft scrape of glass on glass makes Sophie look up, meet Mia's gaze, bare and naked in this moment. In another sort of story, Sophie might have remembered the weight of her in her arms. How heavy she was, how her smudged eyeliner had left a stain on the sleeve of Sophie's school blouse, and she had worn a cardigan that whole day so no one would see. The blankets pooling under them as she tried to keep Mia from drowning. She can imagine it so clearly it might as well have happened.

Sophie takes a drink and puts down her chopsticks. 'I'm going out.'

Dad stares. 'Where?'

'Buy more chilli sauce.'

'No need lah! Sit down and finish your food first,' says Mum.

Sophie stands up and slides her chair back. 'I'll be fast.'

As she steps out into the lift lobby, she hears Mum's voice rise slightly behind their front door, then hears Mia say something she can't make out, short and terse. In the distance, grey clouds are gathering behind the trees. The breeze is rustling the leaves of their potted money plant, standing lonely in the corridor.

By the time Sophie gets downstairs, it smells like rain at the void deck. There's a cat curled up under one of the stone chess tables. This one, a ginger with a white spot on her nose and between her ears, is a favourite of Terence's. He's posted photos of her a few times on his Instagram and nicknamed her Cinnamon.

Sophie crouches down to give her a few scratches, and Cinnamon rewards her with a soft purr. She reaches into her pocket for her phone to snap a photo, but comes up empty-handed. Her other pocket is bare as well. She sits down with Cinnamon, hugs her knees to her chest and watches the drizzle start.

After a while, Sophie doesn't know how long, Mia comes down. She's carrying a big yellow umbrella.

'Thought you went to get chilli sauce.'

She sounds tired. She always sounds tired, but she sounds even more tired right now.

'Didn't bring money,' says Sophie.

Mia leans against the wall and crosses her arms. Here in the void deck, wearing a ratty old class T-shirt and shorts, she looks nothing like the radio host whose photo is on buses and trains and Facebook ads. Her hair is up in a messy ponytail.

'Are you mad?' she asks.

Sophie shrugs. Mia lets out an annoyed huff. Her foot is jittering where she stands, plastic slippers making insistent *piak piak* noises against the cold concrete floor. 'I don't get why you're mad. If you like Terence so much, you can date him yourself.'

'Jie! It's not like that.'

'Then what *is* it like? God, why are you so sulky? Why are you making it all about you when *I'm* the one who went through the breakup?'

Sophie's hand is balled up into a fist. She's driving it into her thigh knuckles-first. 'It's like... it's like I lost an older brother, okay? And I didn't even have a choice. *You* did.'

Mia runs a hand over her face. She sighs. She doesn't apologise. Sophie is a little bit glad of that.

Under her hand, Cinnamon tenses. Sophie can feel all her little cat muscles tightening as she rouses herself, gets to her feet with a flick of her tail, and pads away without looking back.

Mia watches Cinnamon go. 'Cats don't like me.'

'Cats don't care. It's not personal,' says Sophie.

Cinnamon disappears around a corner and out of sight. Tonight, probably, she will return to the void deck where someone will have left food out for her. Sophie marvels at how easy it is for her, how easy it is to get by, when things

aren't personal.

In the end, Mia never tells Mum and Dad. They find out when the chilli sauce never gets replenished, and Terence never comes round again. Dad buys chilli sauce from the Korean supermarket near his office. Sophie gets used to the taste of it.

Before Sophie flies off to London to start university, she goes to Batam with her friends. On the ferry, she stands at the prow and lets the sea spray hit her face. As the boat speeds across the water, she imagines it running aground. All of them picking themselves up and walking away, unscathed, or maybe not. Terence left the family Netflix account by himself, in the end, and stopped paying for his share without ever saying a word. But they're still friends on Instagram, Terence and Sophie, even if she never likes or comments on any of his posts. He just adopted a new dog, a black puppy with floppy ears called Sesame. He never untagged himself from any photos.

The team in red jerseys scores a goal, and a cheer roars forth from the bar. Terence is among them. He flies to his feet, arms shooting up in the air, and does a fist pump. Sophie has never seen him get excited over football, but she

knows that fist pump. She used to see it when he won at Mario Kart.

It's unfair. The full brunt of that whole-hearted unfairness, the pang in Sophie's chest all those years ago when she left the carrot cake unfinished and went downstairs to pet a cat, swells up inside her. She had not known how to name it then. It is easier to see in the aftermath, and she lets herself revel selfishly in it, for a moment. How completely, terribly unfair. She never got to say goodbye to Terence, so she doesn't know how to say hello to him again. She doesn't know how to say, *I never got to go to your house for Chinese New Year. I never got to eat your mum's cooking, or the nasi padang at your grandma's stall in Melaka. I never got to meet Cookie before she died.* How to say that she grieved, when she saw the news on Instagram? How strange, that grief for a dog she had never met, that was never really part of her life.

Sophie walks into All Bar One, right past Terence without saying hi to him. Ships in the night. All this detritus the tide never swept out. At seventeen, it had seemed an unsalvageable wreckage and she had wanted to pick over the debris, catalogue every last piece of it, all of it until it made sense. But here he is now, living, living on. So is she. So is Mia, miles away. She does the morning show now. Sophie listens to her when it's midnight in London.

Ravi takes her hand. She laces her fingers through his. He's talking about Christmas, about going to Barcelona together, wouldn't that be nice, to get away from the cold, and Sophie says yes, yes it would be.

SEEMA PUNWANI

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Secret Ambitions

Deep cleaning. A new obsession with ma'am Elsa. Top of cupboards, which requires me to climb on a step ladder. Below the kitchen sink, which means I must crouch low. Window panes. But only by "safe stretching". Elsa is clearing out yet another wardrobe, which means more after-cleaning for me. On the positive side, she will toss more stuff out. One woman's trashy dress is another's treasured gown. I will need a bigger Balikbayan Box to send home. The only items I do not add into the box are the books that Elsa discards. She asks me to place them on the bookshelf outside the management office— a free library— without a librarian or any kind of rules. But I hide them under my bed. I devoured *Hunger Games*. I've just started *Handmaid's Tale*. Some nights I dream of District 13 and Gilead. Am I a Katniss Everdeen or an Offred?

'Rose, please take these to the recycle bin,' Elsa calls from the guest room. The room floor is filled with files, papers, notebooks and stationery items. Pencil stubs. Leaking pens. Erasers of various shapes and sizes. Amongst the pile is a gleaming notebook. The cover is a green parakeet with a peacock feather in its centre. I quickly leaf through it. Empty. *This is so not going in the bin.*

‘Mark is a crazy hoarder!’ Elsa says, holding a bunch of old magazines she retrieved from behind the cupboard. Dust rises as she drops them on the floor. I pick up the stack and am about to dump them in the big trash bag. Time Magazine Man of the Year 1998— Bill Clinton. Elsa comes over and looks at the magazine cover. ‘Long before Monica Lewinsky and cigars.’ I cannot help giggling out loud. We look at each other and collapse with laughter. A stolen moment in time when we both are simply two women sharing a laugh.

‘Tomorrow, we shall clean out the kitchen.’ The moment has passed.

I shuffle my feet as I try to find the right words. ‘Ma’am...tomorrow is Sunday.’

‘You can have your day off, but what will you possibly do? We are all trapped in this lockdown.’

Morning walks. Evening runs. Dashes to the grocery store, with a quick coffee stop. Elsa goes out at least a few times a day.

‘I would like to get some fresh air. Maybe go cycling, or for a walk.’

‘No Lucky Plaza. I suggest you stay away from crowds.’

Like I don't read the news. I stare ahead, make a polite smile and nod, I hope not too submissively. Caucasian employers *suggest*. Indian ones *inform*. And Chinese ones just

expect you to listen. Elsa and Mark call me the nanny in front of their friends. Like nannies ever clean, let alone deep clean the insides of freezers. The Chinese family I used to work for called me ‘girl.’ Like I have no name and no identity of my own. The Indian family referred to me as ‘helper’ when their guests were around, but otherwise it was ‘maid’. In the last ten years, I’ve worked with several nationalities, each with their own quirks. The common denominator here is they all act like they own you.

The next morning, I shove sheaves of writing paper, the new peacock notebook, and some snacks in my beach tote—a ‘gift’ from Elsa. I know she’d used the bag when she bought it in Bali. It’s in the photo displayed on the living room mantel. But she pretended it was a gift for me. I take the service elevator to the top floor. The corridor overlooks the ocean. And the apartment on this floor has been empty for months. I take out more items I salvaged from the discarded pile and hid at behind the staircase— a folding chair and a faded picnic mat. From my tote I remove a bottle of coke, a chicken mayo sandwich that I’d made the previous night and a large piece of leftover chocolate cake. I take in the ocean breeze and bite into the sandwich. After a leisurely meal, I pull out the notebook. On the first page, I write my full name. And on the next page, in upper case letters I write

A NEW WORLD. Then one by one I transcribe the words from the miscellaneous pieces of paper into the notebook.

A NEW WORLD

Rose woke up close to 10.00 a.m. in a king-size bed with sheets as soft as flower petals. She pressed the buzzer on her nightstand and within minutes Rose-Elsa was before her. 'What would Lady Rose like for breakfast?' she asked.

'I am in the mood for TapSilog.'

Rose-Elsa looked perplexed, and beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

'Just google the recipe.' She dismissed the maid with a brisk wave of her hand.

The bathroom tiles looked well-scrubbed. She should complement Rose-Elsa. But then she remembered the instructions in the New Order Handbook. 'Keep your workers on their toes. Praise can make them complacent and should be restricted to twice a month and no more.' Rose had already complimented her for the swan napkins earlier this week.

The revolution had brought about much-needed changes. Now people who did all the hard work over the years were in control.

But how did that happen? I stop writing and muse. I'd built a New World like they do in dystopian novels, but I still

needed to explain how this world had come about. Had there been a war and the workers won by sheer brute strength? Or should I introduce a technological angle? Maybe a series of synchronised hacks and ransomware attacks on the government and the wealthy? Or maybe the concept of currency had dramatically shifted? Maybe the cumulative time spent on labour over the years got converted into dollars, so the people who had toiled in homes and outside on labour-intensive tasks like farming and construction became rich? And the ones who sat on their asses in their luxury homes and cushy offices became poor. Or may be a political twist? A coup by a Marxists opposition party, perhaps?

I take another sip of the now lukewarm Coke. I would have to explain how this New World order was created but I was having too much fun with creating it. I pick up the pen and continue.

Rose asked the maid to get the pill box from the medicine cabinet. She took out the peach-coloured pill and shoved it in front of her. She gulped but did not reach for the pill.

'You know the rules, girl.' Rose raised her voice.

The maid cowered. 'Lady Rose, the pill gives me nausea, headaches...I...I also noticed some blood clots—'

'You made the choice! Rose-Mark could have gone with the other men to work in the shipyard. But you wanted him to

stay with you. That is only possible if you take your pills.'

'We use other forms of protection...we can even abstain—'

'Who are you fooling! You white people go on like rabbits. And not just with one rabbit. Your men have different coloured rabbits in different burrows.'

Her eyes widened. 'No. My Mark is not like that.'

Jeez, girl! You truly are deluded.' Rose wondered if Elsa was as clueless as she appeared. The neighbourhood chatter was that Mark was seen sneaking in and out of a Chinese maid's room in the wee hours of the morning. Horny rabbit!

'Take the pill. I don't like insolence. You should know that by now.'

The maid did as she was told. She then opened her mouth and pulled out her tongue. Rose inspected closely to ensure the pill had indeed been swallowed.

Last month her friend Christine discovered her maid was pregnant. The wretched woman was sneaking off at nights and fucking who knows what. She was sent off to St. John's Island. She will now have to live there till the end of her days, toiling under the burning sun. The baby will be placed in a household willing to accept a white child.

After a few hours, I put the chair back behind the stairwell, pack up my things, take the elevator down to our floor and enter the apartment through the service entrance. I

look around my tiny room, which was built as a bomb shelter, to hide the notebook. Under the mattress is too obvious. I only have a small chest of drawers which is already choc-o-block, and I don't want to bend the book's beautiful cover. I take out my faded suitcase and hide my prized possession between the clothes.

In the evening, I change out of my shorts and Tee and wear a coral lace dress. On an impulse, I dab lip gloss and put on strappy heels. Maybe it will help getting into the character of Lady Rose. I walk down to the library to see what books other residents donated. *Da Vinci Code* (typical and cliché), multiple books by Tom Clancy (not my kind of genre), *Pride and Prejudice* (I am so Lizzy Bennett, except I am still waiting for my Mr Darcy), and *Love Story* (that's one slim book). I pick up *1984* and flip through the pages.

'One of the best dystopian books ever written.'

I look up and find a tall handsome man with greenish-brown eyes, the colour of rainforests. His eyes crinkle when he smiles.

'Is it now?' I mimic Elsa's way of talking when she indulges in light flirting with some of Mark's friends.

'The book got so many aspects right. The Big Brother world we live in today was predicted way back in the 1940s when George Orwell wrote the story.'

'Sounds very interesting.' The dimple on my right cheek deepens as I flash the stranger a smile.

'Henry.' He extends his hand to me.

I shake it confidently. 'Rose.'

'You've moved in recently? Not seen you around by the pool or the barbeque pits.'

'Just before this damn Covid hit. Now I'm trapped at home and can't enjoy the beautiful grounds . . .'

'It's such a pity. I would kill to go out for a nice dinner.'

'Who wouldn't?' Thanks again for the recommendation. Appreciate it.' I make sure to pronounce the word correctly. *Uh PREE shee eit* and not *AHP ree sheit*. I flit my fingers as if to wave, just like I've seen Elsa do numerous times.

'Hope to see you around,' he calls out behind me.

I don't turn back and strut away, moving my hips slightly from side to side.

'I am so bored.' Christine let out a large yawn. *They were sitting on the deck chairs under the giant blue and white striped umbrellas by the pool.*

'Tired of watching telenovelas on your 85-inch flat screen TV while submerged in a bathtub filled with rose petals and essential oils?' Rose said.

Christine giggled. 'Who can tire of that? Especially when the Latino actors prance around topless.'

Rose chose to spend her time more lucratively. She studied the commodity market and was learning about investments. Her biggest indulgences were food and wine.

'You need to stop eating so much kare-kare. The stew is too rich. Not to mention your love for Leche Flan.' Christine shook her head.

'Rose-Elsa is now cooking my lola's Spanish recipes.'

'Lodi! Well done you.'

'English only. It's the language of power. And you still have traces of your Filipino accent.' Rose tutted.

'Susmaryosep! Don't be annoying.'

'I have an idea. To spice things up around here,' Rose said.

Christine pulled her Gucci shades down her nose and peered.

'A Talent Show! Like American Idol. Our staff compete against one another,' she paused for dramatic effect, *'and we vote.'*

Christine shrieked and raised her hand for a high-five.

'There will be a swimsuit round for the boys.'

Rose laughed as she imagined Rose-Mark in speedos.

The next day Lady Rose briefed her staff. 'You need to smile when you sing. Like you are enjoying yourself,' Rose said.

'But I won't be enjoying myself.' Rose-Elsa gritted her teeth. *Rose-Mark held her hand tight.*

Lady Rose raised her eyebrow at them. 'There are worse things you could be doing. The Pratts have to wash the Bentleys every single morning at 5 a.m. and don't get anything to eat until lunch time.'

'We are grateful for your employment,' Rose-Mark used his appeasing smile.

'Practice daily. The talent show is in two weeks. Now you can go and prepare a snack for me.' She snapped her fingers. 'Pork Empanadas.'

The staff did a tremendous job with the ballroom. Silver and blue streamers balloons. Ornate centrepieces. Live band. Rose sat in the centre of the judging panel, with Christine on her right and the CEO of Sin Hock Developers, Masood Azad, on the left. There were ten contestants. Considering the wolf whistles, Veronica-Adam's booty shaking on Ricky Martin's Livin' La Vida Loca would undoubtedly be the winner. Rose-Elsa and Rose-Mark come up on stage together. Hand-in-hand, they crooned one of most popular duets from the 60s — I Got You Babe. A convincing Sonny & Cher, down to the wigs and the makeup. The performance closed to a thundering applause, but not a standing ovation. Siti-Indira danced to a popular Bollywood number. The competition was close, Ricky Martin won by a small margin, and Sonny and Cher came in second.

After the prize giving ceremony— vouchers for FairPrice and an additional half-day off a month— the party broke into two groups. The employers stayed in the main ballroom for the scrumptious buffet dinner while the staff moved to the smaller backroom with their bento boxes. The committee was feeling magnanimous and sent over a few bottles of wine. After an hour Rose peeked in and was greeted by a familiar scene. The whites were getting pissed drunk. Indian men stood in a corner ogling at the women and taking sips from their hip flasks which were likely filled with cheap whiskey. Indian women were at the far end, most definitely gossiping, and the Chinese were digging into the food, like they hadn't eaten in days. When necessities become luxuries, the elite attitude washes off fast.

One Friday morning, when Elsa is out and Mark is busy in the study I know I have a good hour to myself. The white and blue resort-styled furniture in the balcony looked inviting so I make myself a cup of coffee, take a chocolate chip cookie from the jar and sit on the armchair with my peacock notebook. A gentle ocean breeze plays with my hair. I imagine it's summer and I am back in Cebu in my *lola's* home.

Suddenly the main door opens and Elsa enters with a guest. I swiftly get up and pretend to clean the table and clear the coffee mug.

‘Make two cups of coffee and get some of those homemade cookies,’ Elsa says without even looking at me. ‘Henry, come take a seat. Was marvellous running into you.’

Henry! No wonder he looks familiar. The handsome stranger who recommended *1984*— which has been a riveting read.

He smiles at me. ‘You look familiar.’

Elsa squirms and squints her eyes towards me. I scurry off into the kitchen.

I place the tray on the centre table in front of the sofa and as I am about to go, Elsa says, ‘Thank you, Rose.’

‘Rose! Aha! Now I remember. We met by the library downstairs. Are you enjoying *1984*?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘One of my favourites. Let me know if you need any more suggestions. Books are such a joy and it’s a treat to meet a fellow reader.’

Fellow? It almost sounds like he considers me at the same level. His smile is wide and there is no hint of cynicism on his face.

‘Thank you.’ I reply with a slight bow and retreat to the kitchen. I feel Elsa’s eyes boring down my back like a drill to a wall.

After Henry leaves, Elsa comes into the kitchen. ‘So

how do you know Henry?’

‘Ma’am, I only met him when I was dropping the books off.’

‘Seems you did more than that.’

‘We chatted...spoke...a little...he suggested 19—’

‘Rose, I have been very clear. What you do on your Sundays *outside* the condo is none of my business. But here, you cannot be chatting up men. Henry is *married*. He has *kids*.’

‘Ma’am! It was nothing like that. We just spoke about books.’

‘Don’t be naïve. A man like that doesn’t talk to a pretty thing like you to *read* together. You and I both know that. It’s up to you to maintain some decorum.’

‘Yes ma’am. I understand.’ Why was it up to me though? Is it taken for granted that men will flirt, but women should resist? Or was it because we came from different backgrounds?

I spend the rest of the day in the laundry area washing, drying, ironing and folding.

In the late afternoon when I emerge from my cave, I spot Mark and Elsa standing in the living room, their backs to the balcony.

Shit! My notebook! Too late!

They both glance up at the same time and gawk at me. There is a look of sheer disbelief in their eyes.

I resist the urge to retreat and stand my ground. But no words come out of my mouth.

‘Sonny & Cher?’ Mark raises his eyebrow. ‘Think we are more Danny and Sandy from *Grease*.’

Elsa has her resting bitch face on. ‘Chinese maid?’ she hisses as she stares at Mark. Holding the notebook close to her chest, she storms out.

‘Elsa, come on. It’s a story...’ Mark follows her, continuing his puppy dog whimpering.

Relationship fallout? Maybe just the twist *A New World* needs.

Falling

People like me are crouched on the floor of the crowded A&E. People with groomed hair, and clean clothes are sitting on chairs. Old, young, middle-aged. Chinese, Indian, Malay, White. So different. So similar. Hospital brings everyone to the same level.

Usually, people move away when I approach them. But today, there are not many seats available in the waiting room. So, they do what they always do. Look down. At their phones. On the floor. Anything to not 'see' me. I don't exist for people in Singapore. After all, I am a migrant worker. I am dark. I must be dangerous. They think I am smelly. Try working on a construction site under the harsh sun and be allowed less than five minutes of shower time. Even you won't smell like jasmine as you do now.

I shouldn't be thinking about the way a woman smells. Or looking directly at her. *Never make eye contact. Especially with the female kind.* First warning during our orientation. Amongst many others. All of which end with—
Otherwise, you will be deported.

You sit there, looking away. But I feel this time it's not about me. You don't seem to register anyone. You have a light shawl wrapped around yourself. You keep twisting the

tassels at the edge, your eyes lost in the embroidered maze of peacocks and roses. Your long black hair is bundled at the nape of your neck. Some stubborn curls, refusing to be bound, lie behind your ear, caressing the tiny silver bells dangling from your earlobes. You are wearing a floral top over designer DKNY jeans. I know because I also have similar jeans. But mine say DNKY. Mine come from China. Yours probably from New York or London. Your skin contrasts with mine. The light and the dark. Or what white people would call 'brown.' Would you and I both be brown? Different shades on a colour chart.

Your eyes are lined with black *kajal*. Some bits smudged at the corner. A teardrop is gathering. You hurriedly brush away the tear with your little finger. Women with sad eyes look even more beautiful. You nurse your head with an ice pack, wincing softly. Your bag is on the seat next to you. You startle when I am in front of you and move your bag to the floor, offering me the seat. I thank you and sit down at the edge of the plastic chair, holding my back.

I check my queue number. As if looking at that small piece of paper will make the numbers move faster. You have neatly folded the paper in your palm. You slowly open and look at it and then again at the board in front. People always think they are unique. At heart, we are the same. Impatient.

Wanting to control time.

To stop my thoughts from focusing on you I look around the room. A mother stroking her infant. A toddler swaying from side to side, slowly stomping his feet. Like he is deliberating whether to throw a tantrum or spare his parents the drama. Big eyes and oh-so fair. Almost like *ang mob*. He walks towards us. You wave to him. He comes closer and stands in front of you. You raise your hand for a high-five. The toddler reaches up towards you. When his palm meets yours, he giggles. You laugh. My heart melts. Then the toddler stands in front of me. I too raise my arm. But before the child can react, his father shouts in a heavy Indian accent. *Wapas aao*. Hindi for 'come back.' The toddler hesitates. The father walks over and takes him away. You look embarrassed for me and give me an awkward smile. I take this as a sign.

'What's your number?' My voice sounds different to me. Squeaky.

'My phone number?' Your big eyes widen slightly and look even more beautiful. I hold out my queue ticket.

'Ah! Eighty-six,' you say.

'Looks like many people unlucky today. So many need A&E.'

You nod politely. I want to keep talking to you. *In public spaces, keep to yourself*. But words spill out, 'Did you

fall?’

You look at me, narrowing your eyes. ‘Yes,’ you say, turning away as you let out a deep breath. I gulp and murmur, ‘sorry.’ *Always apologising. That’s our life.* You turn back and look at me, your face slightly softer.

‘How did it happen?’ I ask.

‘What does it matter to you?’ That edge in your voice seems misplaced. Like a melodious singer suddenly hitting a wrong note. Once again, I say sorry.

‘It’s OK. You don’t have to keep apologising. Nothing major. I tried to go to the bathroom without switching on the light. I can be a klutz.’

Ah! The soothing voice is back. But I don’t understand all the words.

‘What’s that?’

‘Klutz?’ You tap your fingers on your chin. ‘Means someone who keeps falling. Ah!’ Your face breaks into a smile. ‘Means clumsy.’

I nod, still amazed we are having a conversation.

‘You are never clumsy?’

‘Not allowed,’ I reply.

‘What does that mean?’ You hold my gaze like you want to hear what I have to say.

‘I cannot be a *klutz*. I work on construction site. Not

being careful means a very bad accident.'

'Looks like you were in a bad accident. The way you keep holding your back.'

I shift in my seat and massage my back. 'That's what I will tell.'

Your eyes squint at me. 'Is it not what really happened?'

I let out a deep sigh and shook my head. 'No one interested in what *really* happens.'

'I am Mishka. So, tell me what *really* happened. Looks like we are stuck here for a while.'

'Myself, Farhad.' I tell you about my construction site in the Central Business District. The body harnesses were jammed, and many workers didn't have the right safety equipment for more than a week. I kept asking my boss man to get new ones. But he kept saying, 'Tomorrow, tomorrow.'

'But tomorrow never comes?' you ask.

'Like Elvis says. *Oh, tomorrow never, never comes. Oh, tomorrow never comes.*' I hum the song. You smile. A smile that can light up a room. Even this sad hospital waiting room.

'Elvis fan?' you ask.

'Forever.'

I continue my story. How I fell from a height and injured my back.

You shake your head and huff. 'This is Singapore.'

There are laws here. Not like—'

'Not like Bangladesh, you mean?' I look straight at her. 'Bangladesh is a third-world country. But countries like Singapore need us poor Bangla men to make their countries look first-world.'

You cover your mouth with both hands. Like a child who has said something naughty. 'Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. In India also labour laws are very weak. But we are in Singapore.'

I shake my head. 'You and I live in very different Singapores, madam.'

You insist on calling your friend, who is a social worker. You scroll on your phone. I don't want to involve anyone. I try explaining to you. But you are already dialling. I have no option. I lean forward, my hands desperate to take your phone away. You move the phone from your ears, close to your chest, as you pull away from me. Shrinking. Fear in your eyes.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to afraid you.' I join hands in apology. 'Please understand. If I complain, my boss will deport me. I take big loan to come to Singapore.'

You shake your head softly. 'Oh. I was not aware. Deportation!'

'I was a Civil Engineer in Dhaka. But factory close

down. Lost my job.' I speak fast. I must make you understand how critical my situation is. 'My brother also no job. How to look after the family? So, I take loan for agent fee and get job here in Singapore.'

'Better to work in a country like Singapore, no?'

'Maybe for people like you. But when I come here, my salary is much less than agent promised.' You listen attentively. I explain how I am an engineer by profession. Degree. Not diploma. I don't mean to boast. However, involuntarily my shoulders rise. My voice finds confidence that I'd forgotten existed. 'I used to work in an air-conditioned office. Here I work in the heat, in the rain, sometimes even doing manual work and lifting heavy materials.'

'And without proper equipment.' You let out a deep sigh. Your eyes have clouds of worry. No one is ever sad for me. Cheap pity I get always. But never real concern. You give me your friend's number in case I change my mind.

The queue numbers on the screen flash slowly. But for once, waiting is easier. Pleasant even.

Your phone rings. You fumble to turn off the ringer. You answer quickly. Your voice changes again. 'Hi...yes, still waiting... it's busy here. You finished your conference call... Sorry to hear it didn't go well...' You cover the speaker with your hand. 'Please don't yell... Sounds like yelling... I didn't

know you'd not eaten dinner yet...it may be a while here...'
The call appears to be cut mid-sentence.

You are twisting the tassels of your shawl again. I don't want to embarrass you. But I don't want to stop talking to you, either. You pick up your bag from the floor and a red and black coloured book falls out.

'*Crime and Punishment!* Nice!' Excited that I have another chance to continue our conversation.

'You've read it?'

'Why? You think I can't read?' Typical reaction. I expected better from you.'

You fold your hands now and apologise. 'That's not what I meant.'

'You mean many things without saying.'

You hold your ears like we used to when our teachers scolded us in school.

'It's OK. Naturally, you feel, Bangla worker what he knows about Dostoevsky. I have read the Bangla translations of most Russian writers. My favourite is Maxim Gorky.'

'I haven't read him. I am sorry. I didn't mean to imply...'
Your face is red. You smile nervously. I don't like seeing you like this.

'*Thik āchē.* Don't worry. How would you know that I enjoy Russian stories? Always liked them. So grand. So

interesting. I also tried reading *War and Peace* in college. But could not complete.'

'Tell me about it! I gave up after the first three chapters. I love *Anna Karenina*, though.'

'I never read that. But I watched the movie. With that girl from *Bend it Like Beckham*. *Khuba shundor*. So beautiful.'

You laugh. Like ice cubes tinkling in a glass of rose sherbet. We continue talking. Tolstoy. Tagore. Bengal. Bangladesh. Our worlds merging. Like red and white on a painter's palette. Coming together to make a rosy pink.

With a brave voice I'd forgotten I possessed, I ask, 'You hungry?'

'I am a bit peckish.'

Again, words I don't understand. We speak the same language. You have more words. I have less. Less of everything.

'Peckish. Means... little hungry. Like a bird pecks at her food.' You join the fingers of your right hand, tap them against your other hand, which is cupped, as you mimic a bird's cheeping. I laugh so loudly that people look at us. You also laugh. With me. Not at me.

We make our way to the vending machine outside the waiting room.

'Not many options. You probably eat more fancy

foods,' I say.

'Don't worry. I will have a coffee.'

'Not tea?'

'Sweet Indian tea is my most favourite thing in the world. But in Singapore, tea is...' You turn up your nose and shake your head. Like a little child.

'I also love tea. And biscuit with tea.'

'Marie biscuit? Do you have that in Bangladesh?'

I am excited. One more thing in common. My brother and I used to save our pocket money to buy Marie biscuits.

You take your wallet out of your bag.

'No. Let me.' I request.

'No. Please.' You insist.

'I cannot buy you a nice dinner, but biscuit I can afford.'

You graciously let me buy you this little treat. I put coins in the vending machine, and you push the button. You bend down to pick up the packet and take your shawl off your shoulder as it gets entangled in the vending machine slot. You flinch.

What's that? Is your fair arm blue and black?

You quickly cover up your arm again with your shawl. I let you go. I know the shame of such bruises, hidden under covers of saris and shawls. I get a can of Coke from the vending machine. I am down to my last dollar.

‘Your ice pack no more ice. Put cold can on your forehead.’

You look surprised and mumble thank you. The waiting room looks the same. But our world has shifted. The little trust you had established is now replaced with doubt. I see it in your eyes.

‘Your arm pain?’

You shake your head.

‘How did you hurt?’ I try again.

‘I fell.’ You don’t look at me.

We both know you are lying. ‘How to fall and get blue, black like this?’

‘I fell, okay?’

Your voice gets louder. I know I should stop this questioning. Go back to talking about Elvis and Marie biscuits.

‘I know injury from falling looks different from injury you have. My sister—’

‘I am nothing like you and your sister.’ Your eyes get bigger, and your face turns harsh.

Give up. Stop asking more questions. But my mouth is not listening to my brain. ‘You don’t look different from me right now. You and I, both hurt. You and I, both at this hospital. You and I, both in pain.’

Your eyes soften. Your voice pleads. ‘Can we talk about something else?’

Stop it. This is not your business. ‘OK. But you tell me I should talk to your social worker friend. Why you don’t talk?’

‘It’s not that simple.’

Now it’s my turn. I raise my voice. An octave higher but still softer than yours. ‘How simple for me then? I do job of labourer. You have an easy life. Big house, nice clothes, money—’

‘A wealthy life isn’t always easy.’

I want to understand why your life is difficult. I open my mouth to say something.

‘Please, Farhad. I cannot do this right now.’ My name on your lips. I haven’t heard a female voice say my name softly in over two years. Unless you count the 7-Eleven aunty.

Why are you alone? What kind of man lets his wife come by herself to the hospital at night?

‘My parents and sister live in Kolkata,’ you say, like you are reading my mind.

‘You miss home?’

‘*Hyām̃*. Miss everything about home. Especially street food.’ You laugh softly. ‘You know *puchka*?’

I laugh. Loudly. A Chinese couple who’ve been staring at their phones all along look up. You don’t even

notice.

‘Ah *puchka!* Very nice. Sweet and spicy and cold all at the same time. And sweets? Your favourite Indian sweet?’ I ask.

Just stay quiet. I watch your eyes become moist.

Mishti. That’s my actual name.’

Mishti. Sweet. Perfect name for you.

‘Before we moved to Singapore, my husband made me change it to Mishka. He said Mishti was too old fashioned. Too *Indian*. He insists I call him Nick and not Nikhilesh.’

Everything Western everyone wants.

Our knees touch by mistake. Shit! I withdraw. My forehead begins to prickle with sweat despite the air conditioning. But you don’t notice. You carry on talking about sweets —*rosagullas, sandesh, chum-chum.*

You don’t see him. But how can anyone miss him? Tall, well-built, fair. He looks like a Bollywood star. Dressed in formal pants, a shirt that probably cost six months of my salary. And those shoes. Could the leather shine any brighter? His eyebrows are close together and he makes no attempt to hide his anger. Like most rich people. Even anger is their right.

As soon as you see him, your hands start shaking. You stand up but your body is shivering.

‘What the fuck are you still doing sitting here? We spoke, like, half an hour ago.’ His accent also sounds rich. Every word pronounced. Every note clear.

‘Number...my number—’

‘Stop mumbling, Mishka! What number?’ His voice grows louder.

‘My...my... number is not called yet.’

‘That’s preposterous! How can they keep us waiting? Where is the nurse? Nurse!’

I don’t know what ‘preposterous’ means. His words also seem to be dipped in money. He walks off in a huff towards the registration counter. Your hands shake. You put one hand on my knee while still looking straight ahead. *What’s happening here? What should I do with this contact?* I know what I am supposed to do. But instead, I place my hand on yours. Soft as a petal. I give it a gentle squeeze. You look up at me. Pools of tears gathering around your eyes. *Oh, where is a clean handkerchief when I need one?* I notice him coming at a distance. I tilt my head in his direction. You quickly let go of my hand and go back to looking at the floor.

‘Get up. They cannot keep people like us waiting this way. We are going to a private hospital.’

You get up and follow your husband. He grips your arm tightly. Leading you. Away from people like us who are

always waiting. Away from me. You look back and smile. My world shifts again. I give you a thumbs-up sign. Your eyes blink. Your lips come together as you stop yourself from crying. I want to rush to you. To hold you. I raise both my thumbs instead. You nod, blinking away your tears. Suddenly, you shake your husband's hands off your arm. Shocked at your reaction, he stops. You don't. You continue walking straight ahead.

SUBHRANSU BEHERA

Subh is a software engineer turned writer. He has recently completed his Masters in Creative Writing from LASALLE. He is a trilingual poet - writing poems in Odia, Hindi and English. He is the lyricist of an Odia music album, Mo Manare.

His work is available on Apple Music.



Waves

I wish I knew
how to swim across

the blurred ocean

Through the rapid exhalation
of monstrous waves
clawed by the moon

If only I could close my eyes and
believe the ocean is a floatation spa
at *Kampong Bugis* the epsom liquid

will keep me afloat

That buoyancy of belief
would help me drift
take me home

If I could snatch
the anchor
like a sea-liner
I would push the waves aside

Instead I stand at the sandy shore
that ship disappears into the stars

Is it destiny calling or
one ship calling out to another

Is *Can Lah*
the language of hope?

Frightened to jump
I hear the Merlion's roar
calling my name

I wish I knew
how to answer

VICKY CHONG

Vicky Chong is the author of Racket and Other Stories. Short story The Uber Driver won third prize in the 2018 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards Asia-Pacific. Other short stories are found in the anthologies: The Best Asian Short Stories 2021, Letter to my Son and A View of Stars.



The Twin Embryos

Sue braces herself for what's coming when she sees her mother-in-law wearing *that* smile on her face, the smile which only Mummy, as Sue calls her, is capable of, to show both pleasure and displeasure at the same time.

'Mummy, Papa, eat,' she says. As the outsider in the Ong family, she's the only one who follows this filial practice. Lester, her husband, and Leslie, his twin sister, were already spooning out the ingredients from the hot pot into their bowls as soon as they sat down, without so much as a word to anyone.

How rude, she had chided Lester a few times in the beginning, when they first dated.

'But it's never been our habit. We're not that kind of family,' Lester said.

'When we have children, they will be taught proper manners. But now, I shall start with you.'

Six years have passed, and nothing has changed.

'Eat, eat,' Papa says, pleased at her manners.

'Mummy, try this slice of wagyu beef,' Sue says as she swirls the slice of beef in the boiling broth. Despite having called her mother-in-law 'Mummy' for six years, she still trips over the word, a term not only childish for an adult but an

unnaturally intimate address for someone she is emotionally distant from.

Dinner with the family is often awkwardly quiet. Thankfully for Sue, the couple meet Lester's family only once a month and usually at a restaurant. A quick eat and go. The only occasion for Sue to spend the whole day at her in-laws' is during Chinese New Year's Eve, when she's expected to help Mummy prepare the reunion dinner.

Now, other than the occasional sound of cutlery clinking on crockery and the noisy slurps of soup, there is the loud chewing which everyone from this family is guilty of.

'Haven't you been taught to chew silently with your mouth closed?' Sue had asked Lester on their early dates.

'Why do you continue to go out with me if this irritates you so much?'

The truth was, she had found Lester cute. At five years her junior, he was like a mischievous *didi*—little brother—when they exercised together in the gym where he worked as a personal trainer. He was always clowning around and teasing her. She enjoyed how he attracted appreciative glances from other women when they were dating. With his tall and muscular physique, he was a nice accessory to show off. She never intended the relationship to be serious, much less to marry him. Yet, a spouse, perhaps with a

couple of children in tow, would be a good deflection to all the inquisitive glances she often got during family or high school gatherings. A family to show she was a balanced, successful career woman. So, when he surprised her with a public proposal at the Gardens by the Bay, complete with flowers, fairy lights, balloons, musicians, and an audience, she said yes. She was tired of always being the bridesmaid (seven times) and never the bride.

Sue hopes someone will say something now. Mummy has that smile again as she catches Sue's eyes.

'I'm retiring next month. I just got the letter,' says Mummy.

'That's good news, Mummy,' says Lester. 'So what do you intend to do after?'

Sue nods at her bowl as if she's agreeing with her bowl of broth, but she secretly wants to kick Lester under the table. *Can he not see what's coming?*

'I hope you don't expect us to contribute more money to the family. I am saving up for my own HDB,' Leslie says.

'She's rich lah. Don't need your money,' Pa says.

'That's a relief to know. You should have enough CPF for retirement,' Lester says. 'But Mummy will be bored. You need to find something to do. How about finding a job as a kopi auntie at the kopitiam?'

Sue watches Mummy purse her lips while the family members laugh at Lester's joke.

'I can get free kopi if you work there, good idea,' Pa says, guffawing.

Although her face darkens, Mummy remains as cool as a cucumber. 'I am in human resources. If I wanted to, I could easily get a job at Kopitiam Corporate Headquarters.'

'Mummy, I'm joking. No need to get mad. It's Chinese New Year tomorrow!'

'Yea, dear,' says Pa, 'Where is your sense of humour? Here, have a slice of abalone.'

Mummy picks the slice of abalone and places it on Sue's bowl. 'Sue, you have this, and hopefully can give us some good news this year.'

Sue has her gaze on the slice of abalone, but she can feel all the other eyes on her.

'Sue, your family is in Malacca. I've always treated you like my own daughter. I've offered many times to retire early to watch your children while you advanced in your career. It's been six years. What are you both waiting for?'

'Mummy, that's not fair. Why are you pressuring Sue for grandchildren? What about Leslie? Isn't it time she gets married?' says Lester.

A loud screech of protest on the ceramic floor pierces

the air as Leslie pushes her chair back and stands up. She glares at her twin brother. 'Leave me out of this.'

'Leslie, sit down. What are you so worked up for?' Pa says. 'For goodness' sake. It's Chinese New Year tomorrow. Let's have some peace in the family.'

Leslie's face softens when Sue grabs her arm and urges her to sit. She reluctantly slumps onto her seat like a deflated balloon.

The boiling broth interrupts the momentary silence with its loud gurgling.

'Let's eat,' Sue says as she throws in a fistful of cabbage, squelching the angry hot pot.

Mummy follows suit, throwing in the plate of fish balls and tofu. 'I don't mean to pressure you, Sue. But you're forty-one this year. Time is not on your side. I'm sure you want children too, right?'

Lester answers on her behalf. 'We don't mind not having children, actually.'

'WHAT?' Both Pa and Mummy exclaim. 'Seriously?'

Lester puts his chopsticks down and looks squarely at his parents. 'Yes, seriously.'

'This can't be true. Sue, you have a problem, right? Are you too old for children? I knew there'd be a problem when Lester told me he wanted to marry a woman much older

than him.'

'Dear, stop it. You're making the situation worse,' Pa whispers to his wife.

Mummy shakes her head angrily as she looks at Sue. 'I should never have approved the marriage. I didn't approve, but Lester was adamant about marrying you.' She turns to Lester. 'And what did you promise me, Lester? You said there would not be a problem, that you'd make me a doting grandmother in no time. Were you lying?'

Lost for words, Lester can only look helplessly at his mother.

'I know you want a baby, too.' She puts her hand on Lester's head as if he were a young boy instead of a man of thirty-five. 'Look at my son. So handsome. I always imagined that you'd be a father of three by this age.'

Leslie clears her throat, forcing everyone's attention on her. 'What about me? Mummy? How many children did you imagine me having?' She stares at her mother, a fragile shell over her face which is on the verge of cracking. 'Two girls? Three? I bet you never think about my future, only *his*.'

'All I want is for both of you to be happily married with children, like what the government is encouraging. This is the least we can do for Singapore's declining population. It's no wonder the government has to import immigrants

if young people like you don't even reproduce to replace yourselves.' Mummy turns to her husband. 'Wasn't your mother happy when I gave birth to a pair of dragon-phoenix twins? Your grandmother waited until she saw the twins before she passed away. Everyone was thrilled when both of you were born.'

Pa takes his wife's bowl and scoops some ingredients from the pot. 'Yes, dear, you were a good daughter-in-law and a good citizen. Now everyone, start eating. Sue, you prepared the meal all day. You eat more.'

Sue has lost her appetite. She forces herself to cook the sliced beef just to have something to do. On her right, Leslie does the same. On her left, Lester throws in some noodles. A cloud of unspoken words hangs heavy in the air, waiting to rain down on the family.

Lester turns to Sue. 'Can you get an egg from the fridge to dip the beef in?'

Sue is about to get up when Leslie stops her. 'Get it yourself, Lester. Do you see why she doesn't want children? It's because she already waits on you hand and foot.'

'Leslie, please,' Sue says.

'Shut up!' says Lester.

'It's true. Ask her,' says Leslie.

'What do you know about what we want? Don't

second guess us. We were undergoing IVF,' says Lester.

Mummy claps her hands at this news. 'Is this true? That's wonderful news. See, I always knew Sue has a problem. You should have told me sooner. I could have brewed some tonic for her. Why did you wait so long to go for IVF?'

Lester looks uncomfortable. 'We had two unsuccessful attempts.'

'When did you last try?' asks Mummy. Sue can almost hear the string of questions waiting to gush out, which she is trying hard to restrain.

'June 2019. We were going to try one final time with the last two embryos, but COVID made hospital visits impossible.'

'So when will you try again?' Mummy looks at Lester, then at Sue. 'Well, when? You're not getting younger.'

Sue picks up a ladle and scoops noodles into her bowl. She starts shelling a tiger prawn, oblivious to the four pairs of eyes watching her.

'Sue, I'm talking to you,' Mummy says.

'Sorry, Mummy. I spent the whole day in the kitchen preparing this meal. Can you let me eat in peace since no one here seems to be interested in eating?'

The family looks at her in astonishment. Is this the same meek and polite Sue they know?

‘Yes, Sue is right. Let’s eat. We can continue this conversation after dinner,’ says Pa.

The news of the IVF seems to have lightened the mood and increased everyone’s appetite. Lester even gets up to retrieve the egg he has wanted. In no time, only empty plates are left on the table.

‘The soup is so delicious at the end,’ Lester says, giving Sue a pat at the back. ‘Good job with the dinner tonight, Honey. I am bursting. Come, Pa, let’s have a glass of whiskey on the sofa.’

Leslie scoffs. ‘So, the women are expected to cook and clean up as well?’

Lester rolls his eyes. ‘What is it with you tonight? You didn’t prepare the dinner. You can wash up.’

‘Aiyo, stop squabbling, both of you. I’ll wash up,’ Mummy says. ‘Sue, can you help cut the watermelon and mango in the fridge?’

‘Mummy, you’re a highly educated career woman, yet you are not fighting for women’s rights and just let the men off after dinner again. Where the hell is gender equality in this house?’ says Leslie, throwing her hands in the air.

Lester marches over to his sister like he is going to war. ‘It’s no wonder you are not married at thirty-five. No man would want you for his wife.’

‘Will you both stop?’ Mummy shouts from the kitchen.

‘I’m perfectly happy as I am,’ says Leslie with a smirk. ‘Not everyone wants to be married, you know.’ She turns towards the kitchen and says in a voice loud enough for the neighbours to hear, ‘and not every woman wants to be a mother.’

Sue returns to the dining table with a rag and starts cleaning the table, ignoring the siblings, each hoping to get her on their side.

‘Where are the fruits?’ Pa asks from his La-Z-Boy recliner, swirling the golden liquid in a crystal tumbler in his right hand.

Sue looks up from her chore as if startled by the question. ‘Sorry, Pa. I’ll bring it out as soon as I clean the table.’

‘First, they treat you like a baby machine, then now they’re treating you like a maid,’ says Leslie, her arms across her chest. ‘You earn more than Lester, fuck, you earn more than all of us combined, and yet, you kowtow to everyone here.’

Lester slams his fist on the marble table, barely rattling it. ‘You’re going overboard, Leslie. Have some respect.’ He puts an arm over Sue’s shoulders and pulls her close. ‘Sue knows I love her.’

‘Then you should do more to show it.’ Leslie gets up from her chair. ‘Sue certainly doesn’t feel loved.’

Sue stiffens at the remark and glares at Leslie to shut up.

WHAT? Leslie mouths the word.

‘Have you been complaining to Leslie?’ Lester asks. His voice quivers slightly when he feels betrayed.

Sue shakes her head. ‘I might have grumbled...’

‘I didn’t know you speak to Leslie...’

‘Why can’t she speak to me?’ Leslie’s words are as sharp as shards.

‘Yes, why can’t I speak to Leslie?’ she turns to her husband, hands on her hips.

‘I didn’t think you had that kind of friendship,’ Lester mumbles.

‘What do you mean by that? We’ve been family for six years.’ Sue feels a familiar arm on her shoulders and stiffens.

‘Yeah, we are closer than you think, Bro.’ Leslie squeezes Sue’s shoulders.

Lester nods uncertainly at the way Leslie is holding his wife possessively. ‘Good. Actually, I’m glad.’

‘Are you, Bro?’ She pushes Sue’s head to rest on her shoulder.

Sue shakes away Leslie’s arm and walks towards the

kitchen. 'Fruits.'

'Don't worry, I got it here.' Mummy comes out with a plate of fruits and a pitcher of iced tea. She pulls Sue to sit beside her. 'So tell me all about IVF. When do you intend to do it?'

'I'm not sure. Work is busy...'. Sue turns a pleading eye at Lester.

'Sue! Sue! You cannot afford any more delay. Auntie Cathy tells me there's this Chinese *sinseh* who can help warm your womb before the IVF. Let me make an appointment for you.' Mummy also turns a pleading eye to Lester. 'Tell her, Lester.'

Lester sits down next to his mother and holds her hands. 'Mummy, listen. The thing is, I've invested in a gym with a friend. We can't afford the IVF now.' He forces a toothy grin he knows will touch his mother's soft spot. 'Mummy, I am going to be a boss! Are you proud of your son?'

A deep frown sits between Mummy's brows as she shakes her head. 'No, son, you don't understand. Sue cannot afford to wait...'

'We've decided not to undergo the IVF,' Sue announces solemnly, and then her voice suddenly turns bright. 'I've been promoted to vice president.'

'Wow, two pieces of good news!' Leslie mumbles. Her

expression seems genuinely pleased.

‘Shut up!’ Mother and son shout at her.

‘What did I say?’ Leslie looks bewilderedly at Pa.

Pa crosses over to the dining table. ‘What about the two frozen embryos? Didn’t you say there are two more left?’

Mummy leans forward, her face hopeful. ‘Yes, the two embryos. One last try, didn’t you say?’

Sue shakes her head. ‘Sorry.’

As soon as she finishes the word, in a flash, Mummy picks the pitcher and throws the content over Sue.

‘Mummy!’ ‘Mummy!’ ‘Dear! What are you doing?’

The freezing liquid flows down Sue’s hair as shock spreads over her. Both Lester and Leslie rush over to Sue, pulling out tissues from a box to mop her. ‘Are you okay?’ ‘Mummy, what did you just do?’

Mummy’s own teary eyes hold steady to Sue’s gaze. ‘Selfish woman! She intends to just flippantly kill my grandchildren. I need to wake her up.’ She turns to the rest of her family. ‘Don’t you see? Two embryos. Twins. Like you, Lester and Leslie, if given the chance.’

Pa clears his throat. ‘Look Sue, let’s not be hasty. If it’s money, I’ll lend you. Just finish this round of IVF. You owe us this.’

Sue feels an anger brewing in her gut, which threatens

to spill out of her mouth if she does not curtail the fury. She squares her shoulders and pushes back her chair. 'No, Pa, I don't owe you anything. Lester, let's go.'

She's at the door, putting on her shoes, when she realizes Lester is still sitting at the table.

'Sue, we can't leave like this. Perhaps we can consider their offer to loan us the money for the IVF,' says Lester.

Her voice is low when she replies. 'What about our agreement?'

'What agreement? Did she coerce you into something?' Mummy asks Lester. She turns to Sue. 'You should be grateful we're prepared to help you financially. If Lester were to marry a younger woman...'

Sue flounces back to the table. 'Just so you know, we're not doing IVF purely because of my age. Your son has a low sperm count, probably from sitting for long hours gaming. Lester didn't want to continue the IVF, and I agreed because, frankly, I cannot imagine myself being a mother to him as well as his children, on top of being the breadwinner.' She stretches out her hand to Lester. 'Give me the car key. I need to be alone.'

Lester slips his hand into his pocket and retrieves the key. 'Let's go home together.'

Sue shakes her head. 'The key.'

While he hesitates, Sue snatches the key from him and leaves. She's about to enter the lift when Leslie follows in from behind.

'Hey, you okay?' Leslie asks as soon as the lift door closes.

Sue nods, tears streaming. 'What are we going to do?'

Leslie takes her into her arms. 'We'll be fine. I love you, my darling.'

Every Page of Every Calendar

Cheng was shocked at the photos which were sent to the family chat group by Cheng's sister-in-law.

'Need to do something while Ma's in hospital,' texted Mavis, 'appalling how anyone can live like this.'

As shown in the photographs, Ma's bedroom resembled more a junkyard than a bedroom for an elderly woman. Whatever floor space in the room was covered by piles of plastic bags stacked on a mound. On the window grills, clothes on hangers hung in place of curtains, a foot thick. How Ma even accessed the window, with no walking space leading to it, was a mystery. The wooden two-door cupboard was similarly camouflaged by clothes hanging indiscriminately on the doors. Only a narrow strip of floral bed sheet was visible on the queen-sized bed where she lay at night. The rest of the bed served as a storage platform for more plastic bags.

'Does she ever change her sheets?' Cheng shivered at the thought as imaginary dust mites crawled over her exposed arms. Her skin started itching, her allergy flaring just from the mental image.

During Cheng's visits to her mother-in-law's three-room HDB flat once a month, the doors to the two bedrooms

were always closed. One was Ma's bedroom, and her two sons shared the other before they moved out. The living room was not the tidiest state, with flyers and past newspapers strewn on the coffee table, shoes assembled at a corner next to the entrance, and knick-knacks on the altar table. However, this untidiness was not something that would be flagged as a problem to Cheng. In a family where conversations were mostly cordial, and visits were more obligatory than by choice, Cheng was mostly an observer in this family's affairs rather than a participant. Despite being married to Hock for fifteen years, the relationship with her in-laws was distant.

'We only have a week to sort and clear her stuff. Jackson and I will try to do it. Anyone else can spare the time to help?' Mavis asked, her desperation not masked by the lack of emotion displayed in the WhatsApp family group chat. It was infrequent for any of Cheng's siblings-in-law to ask for help. They were mere acquaintances thrown into the same family via marriage who did their bare minimum to maintain the relationship. The WhatsApp group chat was initially created to arrange for a rare family meal and had stuck since, rarely used except to pass on news about Ma.

'Are we even allowed to touch Ma's stuff? Wouldn't she be angry?' Cheng texted back.

Cheng had no wish to offend her mother-in-law,

whom she sympathised with for marrying a philandering husband, but whom she had no affection for. Cheng's father-in-law probably had mistresses or other families elsewhere, although never verified. A woman turned up with a child in tow at the old man's wake a few years back with swollen eyes. She appeared to be the only one grieving for the elderly man in the casket. Nobody bothered to approach her, even though the two sons had a duty to at least accompany any visitors at the altar while they paid their respect.

The enigmatic woman lighted a joss stick each for herself and her child and gave Cheng an appreciative smile as the latter took her presence at the altar table as a family member. After bowing three times to the man in the photo, she closed her eyes, and her lips moved as if she was having a silent conversation with the deceased. Then she stuck both joss sticks into the urn and made her way to the back to view the casket. Her body shook with grief when she saw Cheng's father-in-law's lifeless body through the casket window, but she did not utter any sound despite her sobbing. She clutched the little boy's hand tightly and nodded at Cheng before leaving as suddenly as she had arrived.

Cheng's husband, Hock, had described his childhood as one without indulgence. Except for this information, he was very private with his family's affairs. Before he moved

out of the house, simple meals cooked by his mother were meant to fill the stomach and rarely contained meat or fish. This was from a lack of maternal concern rather than money. For that reason, until today, Hock took no interest in food, much to Cheng's disappointment, whenever she put in the rare culinary effort. Hock's father had run an illegal gambling den and took bets from relatives and neighbours and was otherwise rarely at home.

'Jackson and I never bonded with him. He was an absent father,' Hock had said.

'Do you hate him?' asked Cheng once.

'Of course not. He provided for us. But he taught me what kind of father I want to be for our son.' And Hock had been a wonderful father, tutoring their son nightly in Maths and teaching him tennis on Sundays.

Hock had complained his mother did the bare minimum as a caregiver to his brother and him.

'At least she fed both of you, didn't she, and didn't neglect you, which is the least a mother would do in the animal kingdom?' Cheng had asked in Ma's defence. Hock shrugged. Cheng didn't want her only son to grow up thinking she had done the bare minimum as a mother. Sons could be unappreciative like that. Her son would never think that, would he? He had private piano lessons, abacus

classes at the community centre, Chinese tuition, and annual vacations overseas. No, she had done more than her share as a mother in providing for him, even though she rarely cooked and they *tapao*-ed most nights because she worked.

The plan was to renovate Ma's room, give it a fresh coat of paint, buy a new wardrobe and a single bed. All this was to be done while she recuperated in the hospital to treat a bloody cough the doctor suspected was caused by tuberculosis.

When Cheng first saw Ma's room, she felt the dread of helplessness. Where would they start? What are they going to do with all the stuff? The rest of the family immediately went into action, which prompted Cheng to follow suit.

First, they removed all the plastic bags littered on the floor and bed into the living room to ensure there were no nests of rats. Luckily, there were none, but cockroaches and lizards elicited a few screams and adrenaline rushes.

Cleaning Ma's room was a mammoth affair with her hoarding problems, made complicated and time-consuming by the cash Ma had hidden in various alcoves.

Underneath her queen-sized bed, there were thick, dusty books of past years' calendars dating back to the eighties, favoured by the elderly for the large font presentation of one day per page. The pages, meant to be torn daily, were

intact and preserved as if waiting for the year to begin. These outdated calendars could not be disposed of until every single three-hundred-and-sixty-five (or six pages in a leap year) had been shaken and checked that they had no cash hidden between the pages because Hock discovered some dollar notes in between one book. Similarly, what appeared to be empty envelopes, shopping bags, boxes, handbags, mouldy wallets and purses all had to be likewise inspected just because cash was found stashed in some of them.

Ma had more handbags than Cheng ever owned, most made of cheap PVC with fake logos, which she probably purchased from the *pasar malam* or the wet market. Pockets on clothes hanging on multiple hangers had to be searched. They sifted through all of Ma's possession like detectives sifting for clues.

Cheng's skin flared up due to her allergy after a day into the sorting. There was no way she could continue to rummage through the junk and not succumb to a more serious ailment herself later, despite having a disposable mask on. So, she volunteered to count the money since she worked as a cashier in an insurance company. The sorters threw whatever cash they discovered into temporary money bags. The money was old and dirty, with some dating back to the orchid and ship series, which might have fetched a good

sum from collectors. A few were rolled into bundles, tied with rubber bands that had degraded and stuck to the cash like hardened glue. Cheng had difficulty separating the cash, and her fingers itched from handling them.

Ma was understandably furious when Hock told her they had cleaned out her room. As the eldest son, the family had decided that Hock would inform his mother that she possibly had tuberculosis and lie to her that the health authority wanted to inspect the house. There was fear in Ma's eyes when she heard that. Was her fear because of tuberculosis or that her privacy had been invaded? Hock wasn't sure when he told Cheng about Ma's reaction. There was a protest from Ma when Hock sought her permission to dispose of her belongings, and after much persuasion, a silent resignation when she was told her tuberculosis might be caused by the hygiene in her room.

Her next concern was her cash, which she claimed she had hidden to thwart any robbery.

'How much money do you think you have hidden away?' Hock asked.

'At least five thousand plus dollars,' she replied.

'Ma, you had over twenty-thousand dollars.'

That statement halted whatever un-spedwed protests she harboured. Did she believe her children would steal her

money when she received an allowance from them every month?

Other than cash, Ma had over one thousand pieces of towels of all sizes, clothes with price tags attached, bags and shoes still contained in boxes and shopping bags, obviously new and had never been worn. Ma had simply purchased them, then placed them aside and promptly forgotten about them.

Hock had never considered his mother to be a spendthrift when he was young. They were not wealthy; Hock and his brother had worked part-time while still in school. So, for him to witness his mother spending indiscriminately like this was bewildering. The things she spent on might not have cost a lot but were still a sizable expenditure accumulatively, especially when most of the purchases appeared to be impulse buys.

A second wardrobe was purchased to store some of her new clothes in the spare room, which thankfully was less cluttered. Most of Ma's stuff was either donated or discarded. The brothers painted both the rooms, changed the ceiling lights while the ladies cleaned the windows and grilles and put in new curtains.

There was a collective sense of accomplishment when Ma's room was finally ready. The before and after photos were

shared and, for the first time, the family felt a kindred spirit between them. As they inspected the rest of the house before Ma's return, the sons discovered the storeroom clogged with prayer items and joss paper money, enough to last beyond Ma's lifetime.

'Why did she even buy these for? This is a fire hazard,' said Cheng. 'Ma has a serious problem. Do you know, persons who hoard have usually experienced loss or stress in the past, causing them to have a vacuum in their hearts, which they try to fill with the hoarding.'

Mavis agreed with Cheng. 'Ma had to deal with Pa's infidelity throughout her marriage. He had seven known mistresses.'

At this piece of news, Cheng cast a questioning glance at Hock. *Did he know?*

Mavis continued. 'Seeing how much she spent on herself, I can empathise with her. Why let my husband spend money on other women? I'd rather splurge on myself instead.'

Cheng could never fully empathise with her mother-in-law, for as an independent woman who would never tolerate infidelity, she would have walked out of the marriage.

When Ma returned from the hospital and saw her room, she smiled in relief. A burden appeared to be lifted from her as her spine straightened. She went to her new bed

and cautiously lay down, spreading her arms to feel the clean bedsheet beneath her palms. There was no word of thanks from her, which was expected, but the family was gratified to see her pleasure.

‘What did you do with all my things?’ Ma asked in Hokkien as she sat up and looked around at the emptiness in the room.

Mavis walked towards the wardrobe and flung open the doors. ‘Your clothes are here, some new and a few of your favourites.’

Cheng looked at Mavis in surprise. She didn’t know Mavis shared a close relationship with Ma to know her favourite clothes.

Mavis continued, tipping on her toes to open the higher cupboards. ‘See, your handbags are here. Those which were mouldy were thrown them away because that might be the cause of your tuberculosis. We also put in a new wardrobe in the next room to store the towels and new bedsheets. The rest we donated to the temple.’

‘We deposited all the cash we found. Here is your bank book.’ Jackson opened the book to show Ma the amount.

Ma’s eyes squinted at the small figures, then widened in amazement.

‘You didn’t know you have so much money, right?’

Jackson asked, his voice having that catch of teasing amusement.

‘I didn’t know what I had. There were too many things...’ Ma mumbled.

Jackson sat beside her and took her hand. ‘Ma, there is something else *Gor*, and I want to ask you.’

Ma’s hand shook as she withdrew it from Jackson’s grasp. She hugged her arms around her chest and her face crumbled. Mavis sat down on Ma’s other side and put an arm around her.

Cheng turned to look at Hock. *What was it? Why was she the only one kept in the dark?*

Hock squatted in front of his mother. ‘Ma, I found our birth certificates, which you claimed were lost in a fire.’ He took out two crumpled sheets of paper. ‘The father’s name listed here is not Pa’s.’

On hearing that, Ma’s covered her face with her palms. Cheng’s mouth opened as she stared at the rest of the family. *Who is Hock’s father then?*

‘Ma, who is our father?’ Hock asked, his voice low.

Ma shook her head. ‘Your Pa is your father and always will be. Without him, we wouldn’t be here today.’

‘Then who is this man listed in our birth certificates?’ Jackson asked.

‘He’s nobody,’ Ma said.

‘Ma, is he our real father?’ Jackson asked.

Ma sighed. ‘This is all in the past. Why bring it up? I was hoping to bring this to my grave.’

‘Please tell us, Ma.’ Jackson went down to sit on the floor next to Hock. Mavis too went down to join them, so Cheng had no choice, and she too sat behind them and crossed her legs. They looked like kindergarten kids waiting for their teacher to tell them a story.

‘There’s nothing to tell. Your pa saved my life. I was at my wit’s end when the man I had married previously abandoned me and left for Thailand to seek his fortune. My own family in Kedah refused to help me. I was so desperate I was going to sell Hock to a childless couple. I didn’t know then I was pregnant with another. I met your Pa and he brought me to Singapore. Later, he married me and adopted you both so you can remain in Singapore. He gave you this home.’

‘Is it true Pa had other families?’ Mavis asked.

‘There was a woman with a child at the funeral. Who was she?’ Cheng asked.

Ma shrugged. ‘What if he had other families? I have no right to demand anything more from him. He had given me more than enough.’

When Ma finished, she lay down on her bed and put her forearm across her eyes. 'I need to rest now.'

The two couples got up from the floor and left the room, closing the door softly behind them. They sat on the settee in the living room, trying to digest what Ma had just said. Jackson was holding Mavis' hand as they sat side by side, showing a rare display of affection. Hock's eyes met Cheng's from across the coffee table. He smiled, and she returned his smile.

Cheng looked around the living room, also freshly painted with a new coat of paint. All the clutter was gone, and the room had minimalist zen to it. Yet, all Cheng felt was the vacuum Ma probably had felt, all alone in this home.

PHONG HUYNH

Phong is a writer based in Singapore. He is graduating with an MA Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts, and his stories have been published in Best Asian Short Stories 2020 and Beyond Words. He has also self-published a poetry anthology titled Air. His writings explore the tensions of love in the gay community in Singapore, the unspoken eccentricities of Asian families and the search for self-identity in modern life. He frequently performs spoken word poetry at local events such as Spoke & Bird, Singapore Poetry Slam and Destination Ink.



Losing My Tongue

Vowels tumble
out of my mouth
like clumsy toddlers learning to walk to their mother.

Consonants bubble up
at the back of my tongue
and then disappear down my throat.

For every word I speak in English,
another Vietnamese sound waddles away
from this Little Red Dot
back to my homeland.

Every poem I write in English
is a bloody slash
on my mother tongue.

I already carry selves in myself,
but being bilingual is not one of them.

I carry two worlds in my speech,
but can only inhabit one.

The world my mother raised me in

slowly recedes
into a nostalgic silence.
Gone are
the excessively musical rhythms when my mother
nagged me.
Gone are
the verbal antics that felt like a kiss tickling the ears.
Gone are
the violent ebb and flow of heated family quarrels.
My speech is now economical
like the sound of a shotgun,
punctuated by the lahs, lohs and lehs.
When I speak to my mother these days,
I find myself stuttering,
struggling with long pauses,
frantically opening the dusty cabinets in my brain,
fumbling for words that have been long shelved away.
There is no continuous tense in the Vietnamese tongue.
Time is instead marked with discrete moments
in our streams of consciousness.

So how will I explain time to my mother
if I now swim in a different stream?
I dream one day
when I return home,
my tongue will taste
the exhaust of rumbling motorbikes
on our bustling narrow streets again
and wake up
from this silent slumber
of linguistic amnesia.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr Jonathan Gander, Head of School, School of Creative Industries;
Professor Adam Knee, Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts, Media and Creative
Industries; **Dr Venka Purushothaman**, Deputy President and Provost
of LASALLE College of the Arts; the **Division of Communications**,
the **Division of Advancement**, and **Professor Gregory Leadbetter**,
Goldsmiths appointed External Examiner for M-CW, for all the generous
support rendered to our programme.



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ISBN 9789811857881



9 789811 857881