

The background is a watercolor illustration in shades of brown and tan, depicting palm fronds. A teal-colored bottle is drawn at the bottom right, with the word 'MALIBU' written vertically on its side.

Su-May Tan  
**Lake  
Malibu**  
and other stories

**CBdLA**

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**LAKE MALIBU  
& other stories**

**Su-May Tan**



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## Hide

When we heard the planes flying overhead, we thought they were British. But then the neighbour told us the air base in Ipoh got bombed so we knew the Japanese had come. I did not see anybody die but I could hear distant rumbling like thunder. Aunty Lan, our housekeeper, said her brother's house had been hit. I tried to imagine being 'hit.' Did the house suddenly break into pieces?

'Siew Ching,' said Aunty Lan. 'Finish your bee hoon, you still have school.'

Over the next few days I heard about people who would mysteriously disappear. Fathers at the office being taken away; sisters on their way to the tin factory. Since I was the eldest of my four siblings, I pretended not to be scared.

Ma and Aunty Lan acted as if nothing had changed. They made elaborate dishes for dinner. Dishes like acar which they meticulously chopped and diced and pickled; braised pork and yam; spring rolls and dumplings shaped by hand. My job was to take care of the kids – Roy, Ping, Mei and Boy. I sent them down for meals. I braided Ping's hair. I set out Mei's clothes and made sure her clips matched her dress.

One day my mother called me to her room. The dark blue curtains stood on either side of the window; the sunlight flooded in. I could not see the expression on her face, but from the way she sat, her fingers clasped in her lap, I knew it was important.



‘Siew Ching,’ she said, beckoning me closer. ‘Remember what I told you about going away?’

‘What about the kids?’

She assured me they would be fine. It was the older girls they were worried about. I didn’t have time to pack much. I took two dresses and a rosary, then I was bundled into Auntie Lan’s white Nissan. Ma stood on the top step waving. The badminton court lay below, the frangipani tree still dressed up in fairy lights from last Christmas.

\*

Mary, Auntie Lan’s daughter, shifted on the other side of the seat. The green lace of her dress made a whispering sound against the upholstery. She clutched a satin handbag that looked too fancy for daylight.

‘Ginger lolly?’ She opened out her hand. I couldn’t stop staring at the pure white block on her velvet skin. Warm jungle air squeezed through windows. I clutched my mother’s Samsonite bag. The faint smell of her bedroom floated up from the fabric.

I thought of the kids, of Mei, her hair wet after a bath; and Boy, doing his homework on the floor. I didn’t get a chance to say a proper goodbye. I wondered what Mary was thinking about. She looked so much older in her green lace dress. She said she had sewn it herself. Her pink-stained lips were pressed into a line. She continued to stare out the window.

\*

I’m not sure whose idea it was to hide us in a mental institution but there we were, fifteen girls, to take up one half of the women’s ward. Mary and I stuck together from the start. In the evenings she would do my hair up in fancy styles. She said I had such thick, lovely hair. She showed me how she set her curls each morning with fat pink curlers. I found out she loved music. She was about to go to England to study piano when the Japanese came.

‘How about you?’ she said. ‘What do you like to do?’

I shrugged. I told her about the kids and our Christmas trip to Penang. She couldn’t believe I had so many siblings. She only had one brother.

It seemed like church camp until the morning the Sisters told us to go to the backyard. We made two lines: one going to Sister Agatha and the other to Sister Rita. I stood in the queue with my arms folded. When I reached Sister Rita I slipped into the chair without a fuss.

When it came to Mary’s turn, however, she started screaming. Sister Rita told her to sit down. Mary shook her head. She kicked and yelled so much, Sister Rita had to put her scissors away and called for two other girls to help.

Mary cried the whole night. She spent the next day looking at the mirror and every time she did, tears sprung up.

‘It looks horrid.’ She touched what remained of her locks, shorn crudely over her ear.

‘It’s supposed to,’ I said.

A few days later, I discovered Mary in the bathroom. She was facing the mirror, patting down her hair. When she saw me, she beamed. ‘What do you think?’ she said. I don’t know if it was the clips, the hair cream, or the sun-speckled room, but Mary shone like a movie star.

\*

For a housekeeper’s daughter, Mary knew very little about keeping house. I was the one who showed her how to slice onions and wring a mop. I showed her how to tuck away the corners of a bedsheet so you couldn’t see the fold. Mary, in turn, was Mary. She read stories to the institution residents, she made them laugh. At night she opened up the piano and knocked out Bach, Beethoven and Bing Crosby.

I would sit with Lucy, one of the other girls my age, and sing along when Mary played a song we knew. One by one the popular hits came out – ‘Autumn Leaves,’ ‘My Funny Valentine’ ‘G.I. Blues.’ The night we sang Christmas carols, I wished the children were there. ‘Frosty the Snowman’ was their favourite.

A month later Aunty Lan visited us with a bag of bak chang. For the past few weeks our dinners had been rice and soya sauce or plain porridge with pickled mustard leaves. When Mary and I ran into the kitchen that day, we stared in awe at the dumplings in front of us. We didn’t say anything, we just looked at the three triangular packets on the table as the smell of freshly stewed meat rose into the air.

After every speck of rice and meat was gone, we went back to our chores. I did the dining room; Mary went to the bedrooms. Later in the afternoon, I went to the garden to check on my coriander. It was lying slumped on the soil. Every time I tried to prop it up it flopped down again.

The sky was heavy with clouds. You could taste it in the air, that thickness of a storm coming. I smiled, thinking of Boy trudging into the house covered in dirt. He often played in the drains, trying to catch tadpoles. It was then that I saw the shadow flit over the hill. First one, and then another, and another.

\*

I ran to the office, my lungs about to burst. Sister Rita was there. She told us to go to the jungle and we raced out towards the bushes. I heard they came on bicycles but I’d never seen more than one of them at a time. I imagined a whole cloud of them coming over the hill and I ran as fast as I could towards the trees.

When we reached the coconut grove we dove into the ground. Lucy was beside me, her knuckles in her mouth. A vein throbbed beside her left eye. Two other girls were crouching next to her. It

was then that I realised Mary was not with us. I felt like throwing up. I started to pray like I'd never prayed before. Rocks and snail shells crushed into my elbows. The smell of mud was all around. Mud, I realised, did not smell like sea or salt, it smelt like blood.

Sister Rita stood next to a large rain tree, her habit blending in with the grey of the trunk. I clenched my fists and fixed my gaze on the tall line of grasses ahead. I must have said a thousand Hail Marys before they parted. Ah Hong stepped out, the boy who brought us sugarcane from town. He scuttled over to Sister Rita and whispered something into her ear.

We were allowed to go back to the building. Sister Rita told me to wait, but I ran across the courtyard and burst through the doors. The only sign that the Japanese had been there was the dining table, littered with cake crumbs and empty bottles of root beer. There was a woman on the floor saying, 'Agah, agah,' but this woman was often on the floor saying that.

When I saw the piano open my heart sank. I searched the entire room for Mary, bracing myself for the worst, but there was nothing. Everything was exactly as it always was. Had they taken her away?

I was about to give up when I found her in the kitchen sitting opposite Sister Agatha, her hands clasped together.

'Is it safe now?' Mary sprung up when she saw me.

I nodded.

I followed her to the next room where she opened the broom cupboard. A man tumbled out. I found out then about her and Doctor Chen. I was surprised to see him because he was not someone who caught my attention. Now that I thought about it, I had seen Mary with him a number of times.

One evening I had seen him go to the basement. No one was allowed down there. Lucy said she'd heard voices from there before,

in the middle of the night. When we asked Sister Rita about this the next morning, she told us not to be silly and sent us off to clean the bathrooms.

Doctor Chen gripped Mary's two arms. He looked into her face and her eyes brimmed with tears. The Sisters called for rest time and everyone went their separate ways. I went to the garden to work on my beans. They were the ones that were doing best. Strong, shiny beans that sprung out of their nests regardless of what happened in the world.

As I examined the leaves, I heard voices sail through the air. I turned and saw Doctor Chen sitting with Mary on a bench outside the chapel. They didn't see me.

'Tell me,' I heard Mary say. 'I want to know.'

Doctor Chen stared at the ground for a long time. His voice travelled across the gravel, a low rumbling sound. He spoke about the things he had seen, the things that were happening in town. We sat there listening, Mary and I, about the boy who was strung up from a tree, the heads on the fences, and the young girls who were taken away, and never came back.

\*

By the end of the month, my long beans bore fruit. And then my ladies' fingers, and then it was time to go home. Auntie Lan came to get us in her white Nissan sedan: her crooked license plate greeted us like an old friend. We bumped down the same roads and saw the same thick jungle as if nothing had changed, but when the car stopped in front of the house, I knew everything had.

It wasn't my mother who greeted us at the door but my father. He squinted at the road, leaning over a stick. My mother was inside sitting at the far end of the room. At first, I didn't see her sitting there as she was so still. It was as if she was invisible. I gave her a hug and the smell of something fermented drifted towards me.

The children came out one by one, smaller and thinner. Even Roy was skinny, Roy whom we used to call Fatty.

‘Where is Boy?’ I asked.

No one answered me.

‘Where is Boy?’ I tried again. I saw only the things that stood still – the Ming vase, the Persian carpet, a layer of dust on the windowsill.

A few days later, I stood outside Pa’s study and watched him scrawling in a book. That was all he seemed to do these days.

‘Pa?’ My voice made him jump. ‘Is the war over?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘They’ve stopped the raiding and Auntie Lan said they’re hiring people at the factory again.’

The clock on Pa’s bookshelf ticked.

‘How is Auntie Lan?’ he asked.

‘She’s good. She got a job at the school canteen.’

After school the next day I came home and found that Mum had forgotten to prepare dinner. I opened the larder and there was nothing inside except for a jar of pickled mango. The rice bucket was empty too. I remembered then the sweet potatoes I’d helped Auntie Lan plant a few months ago. I ran out the back and there they were: strong, green stems with thick bushy leaves.

Dinner that night was boiled sweet potato with a side of mango pickle. It would be days before we would have a meal as good. After dinner, Ping began singing a song she’d learned in school. It was a strange song. The syllables slipped and slid over each other like a river.

In the middle, a voice said, ‘Stop.’ We turned around and saw Ma on her feet. ‘Stop!’ she cried again. Her voice trembled on that

one word and her eyes filled with so much anger I thought she would explode. She blinked back her tears and fled the room.

I'm not sure when Ma stopped talking but it happened one day. She spent her days looking at the frangipani tree outside or wandering around the backyard. Sometimes she would stare at the bushes for hours. I knew why she did it. I too longed to be in my vegetable patch, where beans climbed over potatoes, potatoes climbed over beans, and yam leaves shot up into the air.

\*

Mary wrote me a postcard once. She was in Penang on her way to England. She said she would send me another postcard when she got there. I never got it.

## Lake Malibu

We're standing in front of the coffee shop waiting for Pa to come back. Ma is in a dress with yellow flowers, the one she wore last Christmas. I'm in long pants. I wanted to wear shorts but Ma said, 'No, Olivia is coming.' She's been saying that for weeks now. 'And your Aunty Siew Ching. Do you remember them?'

I shrug. All I know is that I'd rather be out fishing with Prakash.

A cloud of dust forms in the distance and the old Datsun emerges. It creaks into the driveway and stops with a crunch. At first, there is nothing, then a woman steps out. She looks around, one hand poised on the stem of her sunglasses. This is Aunty Siew Ching – pale, polished and skinny like a movie star. She gives us a big wave and Ma flutters down to greet them.

The car door remains open. A pair of pink sandals pop out, followed by a girl. She blinks once, twice, and then pushes away a flurry of curls. I've only seen Olivia in photos. The first time it was a little bundle wrapped up in a blanket. The next time, she was holding a teddy bear. Now, the girl in front of me has a knapsack swung over her right shoulder.

She has light brown eyes that squint at our house with its blue wooden shutters. The coffee shop is in front, the living quarters on top. Olivia's gaze runs over the coconut trees and rests on the limestone hills in the distance. Standing there on the open gravel, she could have been anyone – a friend's friend, a passing tourist



– but Ma is smothering her like a long-lost daughter, and Uncle Kiong who works in the kitchen is hobbling towards them as fast as he can.

‘Say hello to Uncle,’ says Auntie Siew Ching.

‘He’s not my uncle,’ the girl says.

‘Liv!’

‘But he’s not!’

‘Sorry,’ says Auntie Siew Ching. ‘It’s been a long flight.’

Uncle Kiong smiles and says, ‘It doesn’t matter, pretty girl.’

\*

‘Eu Jin,’ says Auntie Siew Ching. ‘So big already.’

I smile back at her, trying not to stare at a smudge under her eye. Olivia and I sit at one table, the adults sit at another. A whole group of them are there – Uncle Roy, Auntie Eileen, Auntie Ping and a few of their friends. My big black Casio tells me it’s 10.48 a.m.

‘Why do you call your café that?’ asks Olivia, gesturing to the sign outside. ‘Good Taste –doesn’t it sound weird to you?’

‘It doesn’t sound weird in Chinese,’ I say.

Auntie Siew Ching dips into a bag that has the word MYER on it and starts dishing presents out. I wonder if she’s got something in there for me. One of those new Game ‘n Watch thingies maybe?

‘Eu Jin,’ she says, handing me a paper bag. I reach out for it and pull out a t-shirt. It’s got blue and white stripes.

‘Thank you, Auntie Siew Ching,’ I say, trying to hold my smile.

Uncle Roy whispers something to her in Hokkien and she laughs, slapping him on the elbow.

‘Never thought you would be the one to marry an ang moh,’ he says.

Aunty Siew Ching just smiles with her red lips and picks up a kuaci seed.

‘What do they call you over there? Susan? Sue?’ he says letting out another chuckle. ‘You like it over there?’

‘It’s okay. It gets pretty quiet sometimes ...’

‘Yah, that’s because you don’t have Roy there blabbering away,’ says Ma.

Uncle Roy makes a mock cry and everyone at the table laughs.

‘I’ve never seen her like this before,’ says Olivia.

‘Like what?’ I ask. She doesn’t answer. She turns her attention to the front yard where Kak Minah is hanging out the clothes. She works silently as always, flicking out a wet towel and swinging it over the line. From the corner of my eye, I see Ma giving me a look. So I clear my throat and ask Olivia if she wants to see my sticker collection.

‘Okay,’ she says in a way that makes her seem more than ten.

I take out my best sticker album and show it to her. They’re mostly Transformers and Bionicles. I think maybe my new Spiderman series might interest her but when I turn the page, she’s staring out at the road again. I ask her if she wants to play table tennis. No. Chess? No. Wanna see Billy, my pig? Ew, no, she says.

The plastic clips in her hair make her look like a doll. They’re pink and shaped like ribbons. Maybe it’s a combination of these clips with her rosebud lips and the way she’s stirring her lemon barley that makes me say, ‘Do you want to see a secret lake?’

Her eyes light up and she nods.

\*

Lake Malibu is a lake Prakash and I discovered two weeks ago. We called it Lake Malibu after the Malibu rum poster we found in one of Pa's Time magazines. There is a blond woman in a skimpy white dress, and behind her is a strip of blue that Prakash swears was in a James Bond movie. Prakash is a mad James Bond fan. His favourite film is *Thunderball*. He says Malibu is the most awesome place in the world. You can roller-skate by the beach, ride on jet-skis and have burgers in a pool.

As we walk through the backyard, Olivia peers over the fence. 'What's that?' she asks.

'Your mum used to live there.'

'Really?'

'Yes, but they had to sell it after the war when Ah Kong's business collapsed.'

Olivia takes in the house with its grandiose balcony and the frangipani tree sweeping over the garden.

'Come on, this way,' I say, leading her further back.

We pass Billy's pen and she scrunches up her nose. We crawl underneath a fence. When we reach the banana grove, we start making our way downhill. I can hear Olivia panting behind me. It's just up ahead, I tell her. I can see the opening.

The water stretches from our feet to a line of trees ten metres away. The wind sweeps in the scent of mud.

'It's a pond!' says Olivia.

I lead her around the edge of the water to a wooden hut. There is no door. You can see a *Goldeneye* poster inside on one of the walls. A stack of comic books sits in the corner.

'Daddy took me to a lake last summer,' Olivia says. 'We went to Lake Mackenzie—in Tasmania.' She makes this last bit sound

like some designer brand. She tells me it was so huge it looked like the sea.

I roll up my sleeves and look for a nice and shady spot.

‘What are you doing?’ she says.

‘Fishing.’

‘What am I supposed to do?’

‘You can watch,’ I say.

\*

I’m sitting there looking real cool and calm watching my line sip the water but what I’m really thinking about is whether Prakash might show up. I don’t think he will. He has to help his mum clean the house on Saturdays. I still feel bad, though. A secret is a secret. Prakash would never tell anyone things like me liking Jennifer Chan from 5 Red or our plans to move to the city.

A clump of reeds rustle on my right but I don’t see Prakash until he is next to me. ‘What’s she doing here?’ he sneers. In his fiery red jersey, he looks like George Best from Manchester United about to make a tackle. ‘Did you bring her here?’

Olivia looks up.

‘She’s not going to tell anyone,’ I say. Prakash and his red jersey glare at me. If I were Olivia, I’d just keep quiet, but she doesn’t.

‘There’s nothing to tell,’ she says. ‘It’s just a pond.’

‘Why does she talk like that?’

‘She’s from Australia,’ I say.

I tell Prakash again that she’s not going to tell anyone. She’ll be gone in a couple of days. Olivia continues to draw circles in the sand, her pale knees sticking out from her dress. Prakash grabs the rod from me and stomps to the water. ‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘She was all depressed and stuff.’

He pulls in the empty line and recasts it. Murky water ripples up to our feet. 'She has to tell us a secret,' says Prakash.

'What? She doesn't know anything.'

'Something she hasn't told anyone before, or some place no one knows about.'

'She's just a girl, she doesn't know—'

'I have a secret place,' Olivia says. We both look up. 'A secret garden,' she continues. 'It's on a roof. You have to go through this door at the top of the house. When you're up there, no one can see you but you can see them. It's like your pond—'

'Lake.' I correct her.

'Yes, lake. From below, people just think it's a building. But on top there's a garden with creepers and trees and possums.'

'What's paw-sums?' Prakash asks.

'It's a kind of animal, like a squirrel but bigger.'

Olivia flashes us a smile. It's the first real smile I've seen from her today. She tells us she can see all sorts of things from her garden: owls, cats, shooting stars. Sometimes she goes there in the middle of the night when her parents fight.

'Your parents fight?' I ask.

'Yes, don't yours?'

My parents hardly talk to each other. The last time Ma spoke to Pa was this morning. She told him not to be late picking up Auntie Siew Ching and he said, 'Mm.'

'You want to know another secret?' Olivia asks. 'My dad left my mum. He's got a new girlfriend now.'

Prakash doesn't say anything. I look at the ground.

‘Mum doesn’t know I know but I heard them arguing one night when I was up on the roof. Dad left the house and he didn’t come back.’

The air is so quiet I can hear a leaf fall into the water.

‘Do you think they’ll ever get back together?’ Olivia asks. The leaf floats away and she keeps talking. ‘I saw my dad’s girlfriend. She’s got blonde hair. Do you think blonde women are prettier than those with dark hair?’

I throw a stone into the water and the ripples grow from two to four to ten.

‘You want to have a turn?’ Prakash says. He’s not looking at me. He’s looking at Olivia.

Up in the coffee shop, I imagine Aunty Siew Ching looking for us. ‘Liv,’ she calls. ‘Livvy!’ She walks out into the sunlight and calls again. She sees the wires of the fence curled up like a waffle, the sky, still bright. She goes back into the house and rejoins the laughter and tea, the chicken biscuits and jelly.

It all started at the Ruby Café on a Friday afternoon. Prakash bumped into Mrs. Fernandez when he was not in school uniform and she was in jeans. The speakers were playing ‘Modern Love’ by David Bowie as she beamed at him.

‘Hi Prakash.’ The richness of her voice made him blush. ‘You been here before? The croissants are really good,’ she said, ordering one.

The Chinese boy behind the counter had a dewiness to his skin as if he’d just stepped out of the shower. He appeared to be studying the tray of egg tarts in front of him.

‘Can I have a croissant, please?’ Mrs. Fernandez asked again.

‘Oh sorry,’ mumbled the boy. His name tag said Bob.



## Mrs. Fernandez

Bob picked up a pair of tongs and slipped a fluffy croissant into the bag. He gave Prakash a fleeting glance.

‘Are you getting anything?’ asked Mrs. Fernandez.

‘Uh yeah, I’ll have a croissant,’ he stammered, eyeing a sardine bun.

Outside, her red nails crinkled the paper, folding the bag: a delicate dance which hinted at how she would approach its contents. ‘What’s that?’ She pointed to the book he was holding. ‘*Kabuki?*’

‘No, *The Sandman.*’

She said she liked the *Hiroki* series, she had the whole collection. He said he did too. He had never met anyone her age who liked comic books.

‘Do you want to come up?’ she said.

\*

She had an apartment upstairs that she used as a studio. Yes, she was an artist. ‘A wannabe,’ she said, laughing. Prakash didn’t laugh, he said it was cool. He stepped into the living room which was filled with not much at all. In fact, there was nothing living-room-like about the place except for a sofa in the corner. The rest was filled with plastic boxes, easels and tubs of paint. There was a faint smell of turpentine and yet the air smelt fresh, almost fragrant. Prakash looked at his watch.



‘Did you say you have tuition?’ asked Mrs. Fernandez.

‘No, I just finished.’ His mother would be there soon. He could already picture her in the weather-beaten Honda Civic, crouched over the wheel. *How was tuition, Babu? Are you ready for the exams?* Babu was her name for him. It meant ‘little boy’ though one would hardly call him little. Prakash touched a row of necklaces hanging on a rack, one of them still incomplete.

‘It’s therapeutic,’ she said, and Prakash wondered what kind of therapy a woman like her would need.

She filled the kettle with water and put it on the stove. She had such a gentle way about her. If she were an animal, she would be a gazelle.

‘How about me?’ he said.

She looked at him sleepily and he regretted he’d asked. ‘A wolf,’ she said.

Prakash tilted his head. He had expected a mouse or a meerkat, some strange creature you’d find in a hole.

This was the way their conversations flowed, following a route as random as the wind. She did not talk about her son Alan or exams or school. When the clock slid another notch, Prakash got up to leave. On the way out, he stopped. ‘I like this one,’ he said, pointing at a painting, a mass of black lines that swirled all over the place.

\*

The next time Prakash got dropped off, he didn’t go up the stairs to Ace Tuition Centre.

‘I brought that graphic novel you said you liked.’

Mrs. Fernandez stood at the doorway for a second before opening the door. ‘Come in,’ she said. Her smile was open and warm.

‘Are you busy?’ Prakash asked.

‘No, not really.’

They made tea in the kitchen then moved to the two wicker chairs on the balcony. And so it began, meetings whenever he could. After tuition. Before football. When he said Alan’s mother was giving him a ride back. The memories were engrained in Prakash’s head. Not specific occasions but nuances, like the sunlight that flitted through the ferns on her balcony. And a certain smell, like tea or berries, which reminded Prakash of her whenever he stepped into a jungle.

\*

Years later, when Prakash would be with one of his girlfriends, the image of Mrs. Fernandez often visited his thoughts. It was always the same. As soon as they spoke of love, as soon as it was time to take that next rational step, he would withdraw into himself and the whole thing would shrivel up into awkward silence.

One day a girl he had been seeing for almost a year said, ‘What’s going on, Prakash? Is there someone else?’ He mulled over her words for days. She was actually someone he didn’t mind being with. She was an accountant like him. They never fought. His mother adored her. She would often say, *When are you bringing Tina over for dinner again? What’s Tina up to these days?*

And yet, by the end of the month, Prakash found himself alone again. Every time he went to his mother’s he would have to fend off the disapproving looks she gave him. She would dish out some curry onto his plate and ask, ‘How is work?’ when what was bursting inside her was ‘When will you ever find a nice girl to settle down with?’

\*

On the day that Prakash keeps recalling with such intensity, Mrs. Fernandez had brought home yam fritters. The pink sack lay steaming on the table as she sat outside in her purple and brown

dress. Her smooth white calf gleamed whilst she stared out at the trees, a little girl bouncing on her lap. It could have been just another mother-daughter moment, an ordinary afternoon, but then Prakash saw her eyes brimming. She glanced away.

Alan was calling from the kitchen and Prakash followed. The two boys polished off everything: the yam fritters, the guava, some muruku from the cupboard. Then they went back up to Alan's room and resumed playing Galaxy Battles.

Prakash accumulated 9,332 heads that day and destroyed a record-breaking 71 aliens. He stepped out of the room, red-eyed and stiff-backed. Mrs. Fernandez was nowhere to be found.

Prakash hopped on his bicycle and slid down Jalan Limau Purut only to see a grey Saab turn the corner. He didn't need to follow her to know where she was going.

\*

The mosque let out a long and winding wail. Prakash stood in front of the apartment door, a white-speckled leaf trembling on the door mat. He took a deep breath and knocked.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

The scent of blueberries wafted out. Prakash searched her face but there were no tears or redness. Just the slightest smudge beneath her left eye. 'I saw your car and—'

'It's nice to see you.'

She opened the door and let him in. He had never been here so late before.

'What have you been working on?' he asked.

Her face tensed up. 'Have you got any more *Hiroki* stuff?' she said. She squealed at the *Demon Song* he whipped out.

'You got it!' she yelled. 'Does *Hiroki* get stuck in the nether-world? I can't believe he followed her there!'

Prakash stood smiling at Mrs. Fernandez.

‘What?’ she said.

‘I can’t believe how much you like these comics. I’ve never met anyone this—’

Prakash stopped.

‘This old?’ Mrs. Fernandez finished for him. ‘Yes, I’m a lot older than you, young man. And wiser.’ She laughed. But the way she crinkled up her nose only made her look younger.

They moved to the sofa. Mrs. Fernandez handed Prakash a cup and gripped hers. Her knuckles were turning white.

‘Are you okay?’ Prakash asked.

‘Yeah.’ Her brightness made the room brittle. She talked about going to Tokyo when she was a young marketeer and thinking of studying design.

‘Why didn’t you?’ said Prakash. ‘I can see you as a designer.’

Mrs. Fernandez laughed. ‘You can’t do things like that once you have kids.’ She sniffed. ‘You’ll understand what I mean next time.’

Prakash glanced at her. Was she crying again?

She put down her cup and said she was tired. Then she leaned back and sank into the seat. Her purple skirt fanned over her knees, the brown lines brushing over the fabric. Prakash would be forever imprinted with the knowledge that brown matched purple, a combination so perfect he could taste it, like red velvet cake and butter cream.

His legs stretched out long next to hers. He was too scared to move, too scared that she would move away. When he couldn’t stand it anymore, he straightened up.

‘What’s wrong?’ she said. The evening light poured in. Dark brown curls framed her face.

‘You’re very pretty,’ he said.

She laughed. ‘You’re very sweet.’

‘You have really nice ankles.’

She laughed again, narrowing her eyes at him. Her pendant dangled in mid-air. Everything around them stood still as if waiting for a dewdrop to fall. Mrs. Fernandez smiled. ‘I should get back to work,’ she said.

\*

When Prakash reached the age of thirty-five, when he was supposed to have all the weightings of a man his age, he bumped into Mrs. Fernandez again. It was in a back lane in Jubilee Park where dance music slipped out from bars and clubs with names like Waikiki and The Verve.

Prakash had just parked his Volkswagen GTI next to the drain. His tyre lay next to a puddle of soap, trickling from a tap. Out of the shadows, a willowy shape appeared. Prakash’s body tensed, ready for thieves or druggies. He stepped out of the car, the skin on his arms tingling. He popped his keys into his pocket, and then he saw her.

Prakash was surprised that she was walking by herself. The tips of her sea-green skirt swished over her sandals. Her hair was tightly pulled into a bun. To say she was the same delightful creature as before would be a lie, but she had garnered a certain strength to her bearing that only motherhood and the graduation from it could bring. It was this strength that pulled Prakash along as they strode towards the café lights of Jalan Telawi.

‘Where you headed?’ Prakash said, stopping outside the foyer of Alexis. Two figures were reflected in the glass, neon lights dancing around them.

‘I was just going to go to the mamak,’ she said.

‘How about Pelita?’

‘That would be great.’ She smiled and nodded.

They sat at a table at the back under the fairy lights of a neem tree. It occurred to Prakash that he was the exact age she had been when they had last met. He told her about his recent spate of business trips. She updated him on the kids. Alan was working in Melbourne. Her daughter was working for Low and Partners.

‘How about you?’ he asked. ‘You still painting?’

‘Yes, I live in the studio now.’

‘What happened to the house?’

‘We sold it.’

Alan’s father died five years ago. She mentioned this without sentiment. They spoke about other matters almost immediately, catching up on threads that had been left from years before. He took a sip from his iced lemon tea. She took a sip from hers.

‘How about you?’ she said. ‘You like it at the bank?’

‘Not really.’

‘Did you ever end up overseas? I remember you wanted to go to the States.’

‘Yes, I was there a few years for work.’

‘And then?’

‘I came back.’

Mrs. Fernandez did not ask why. She lowered her eyes and took another sip of tea. A girl in a suede mini skirt passed by, tottering on her heels. Prakash wondered when the people here had gotten so young. Or perhaps it was he that had gotten old.

‘Can I ask you something?’ he said.

‘Sure.’

Prakash's phone vibrated on the table. The screen flashed once, twice, then he slipped the phone into his lap. Mrs. Fernandez gazed at him, her eyes big and wide. 'You have a girlfriend?'

There was a split-second before he replied, 'Sort of.'

\*

The next morning she lay beside him on the pillow, curls and ringlets twirling in all directions. Prakash wondered if the night before had been a dream. He stared at the curve of her neck, her shoulders, her ankles peeping out of the blanket.

Prakash inhaled a scent of berries and an image of his mother flashed up. She murmured something. It was a blur, as if she were underwater; a woman in a white sari who vanished as quickly as she had appeared. Outside, there was the thud of a newspaper hitting concrete, the sound of a motorcycle speeding away. Prakash closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

## Uncle Bob

When Bob came back to Malaysia he found his mother lying in bed. She was a skeletal figure propped up on two pillows, a blanket under her arms. Her hair, once jet black and shiny, was riddled with streams of white; her body reeked of Tiger Balm. The only thing that looked the same was her nails – cracked and yellow. And it was this strange defect which assured Bob that it was his mother lying there.

The sun faded behind the limestone caves that yawned over Canning Gardens. Buildings and houses lit up one by one, including the Ruby Café where Bob used to work. On Bob's street however, all was dark save for the lamp light in Puan Minah's room. A light wind blew in filling up the room with a humid heat.

In Malaysia, there were only variations of hot: very hot or rainy hot. When Bob left Melbourne it was just beginning to turn into spring. He'd started to eat on his tiny deck in *Sassafras* and the daffodils bloomed in the garden. Puan Minah's garden was cloaked in darkness, hiding the overgrown grass and a bed of Japanese roses long expired. Beyond that, a tangle of merantis and vines rose out of the jungle.

The old lady did not move. She already looked un-alive. (Bob could not say the word.) There was a silk picture above her bed which said 'Allahu Akbar'. Bob was looking at this picture when Puan Minah opened her eyes.



‘No, it’s okay,’ he said, as she tried to sit up. He quickly placed another pillow behind her back. She began to talk and Bob strained to listen. She paused and spoke, and paused again. Then she closed her eyes and that was it. Bob had never seen anyone die before – someone had a heart attack on the ship once but that man had survived. Now his mother lay before him, just him and her in this tiny room, the jungle all around.

\*

When Bob woke up, light was beginning to seep into the house and through the mosquito netting that draped over his bed. He smelt something cooking downstairs. His youngest aunt whom he called Mak Su had not been perturbed about being phoned up late last night. Bob went down to the kitchen and found her standing over a pot of bubur. She turned off the fire and told him to help himself to the chicken porridge.

Bob was not hungry. He poured himself a glass of water and just as he sat down, the women came. They streamed into the room in their baju kurungs bearing rattan baskets and plastic bags, colanders and stacks of boxes. Bob sat at the marble table as they unpacked the things around him. Tupperwares piled up. A bale of cloth was unwound in front of him.

‘What should I do?’ Bob asked Mak Su who was mixing something in a bowl.

‘What do you want to do?’

‘How can I help?’

‘You can’t,’ Mak Su said. She pointed a flour-covered finger towards the dining room and told him to wait there. So Bob went to the dining room, where an elderly lady sat sewing a pouch.

‘Makcik,’ said Bob, nodding respectfully. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Sewing,’ the lady replied. She squinted at the beige material through her glasses. Her needle heaved in and out of the cloth.

Bob decided to go into town.

Ipoh had not changed much except for the traffic and a new shopping mall on Jalan Bendera. Bob went to the Heritage Inn, which used to be the centre of all activity. 'Heineken, please,' he said to the bartender, Joe.

'You here for the wedding?' asked Joe.

'What wedding?'

'You haven't heard? Everyone's here for the wedding, some Datuk's son from KL.'

'I haven't been back for a while.'

When Joe heard that Bob lived in Melbourne, his eyes gleamed. 'Wah, everyone seems to be moving to Australia now. Life is better there, isn't it?'

Bob shrugged with a smile and looked around the bar. They still had the golden chandelier hanging from the ceiling and pictures of old Hollywood stars. Only one table was occupied – four Chinese ladies sat around it, dripping with jewels and rings. One of them stood out – the one with bright red lipstick and a large jade ring. She broke into laughter as the other ladies smiled and listened.

'Where is everyone?' said Bob.

'What do you mean?' Joe said, looking around. 'It's usually like this.'

Bob stepped out of the bar and squinted at the daylight. Ipoh was the only place that could smell dusty and green at the same time. Bob figured it had something to do with the limestone hills. If you looked at the mountains with its stalactites and stalagmites, you could almost feel an energy beaming from it. Bob knew it was a bit of magic because whenever he stood in front of the crevices, an icy wind streamed out from the core of the mountain.

Bob continued to walk down Jalan Anson and found himself outside the Chinese Swimming Club. When he was young, this was where all roads led and he could imagine no other childhood except that which involved chlorine and deck chairs and diving into the cold, blue water after everyone had gone.

\*

She had come up to him on one of those evenings when he was doing his laps. It was after sunset but before the club lights had fully come on so everything was blanketed in an azure light. The coconut trees were pyres of purple; the clubhouse a block of mauve. She said she'd forgotten her hat.

'I haven't seen any hat. What colour is it?'

'Are you allowed to be in there?'

'I work here.'

'I know.'

Bob stayed at the edge of the pool, looking up at the shiny black sandals on her feet. Her toenails glistened coral pink. The pool lights came on and illuminated the whole block of water as if it were a separate world.

Shadows danced on her face as she continued to look down at him. Bob did not know whether to come out. 'You swim really well,' she said, settling onto a deck chair. She was wearing white shorts and a grey t-shirt made of some light, gossamer material. Bob said he liked swimming. She said she still couldn't get her breathing right. Bob said she had to relax more and keep her arms straight.

'Have you been watching me?' she asked, playing with an earring.

He got out of the pool, dried himself and sat next to her. She was beautiful. She had creamy, pale skin and small brown eyes

with tiny lashes. Her legs were long and shapely. Stretched out on the deck chair, they had looked like a perfect match with his.

\*

When Bob came back from town, he found his mother wrapped up in white muslin, the scent of rose water in the air. The ladies left one by one until it was just Mak Su there wiping the kitchen counter. 'Will you be okay?' she said, reaching out for her basket.

Bob nodded.

'I will come back later. Two o'clock,' she said. 'We can go to the cemetery together.'

Bob nodded again.

The moment Mak Su drove away, the sky broke and the rain belted down. Bob sat beside his mother oblivious to the sound of rain like buildings everywhere falling apart. It was only when the rain dissipated that he looked up again. What was that sound? Auong... Auong... It took Bob a minute to recognise the sound of the frogs, a chorus of bellows from the ponds outside.

That afternoon, he went to the service in his mother's old Subaru, Mak Su in the passenger seat beside him. While the Imam said the prayers, Bob stared at his mother's face and for a moment he thought he saw her flinch but it was just the shadow of a bird flying overhead.

The congregation began to recite the Surah Yasin, a prayer as forgotten to Bob as the face of a kindergarten teacher. Bob stared at his Caterpillar boots, bought from an outlet store on Bridge Road, which seemed a million miles away from that patch of mud he stood on now. He recalled his mother's expression before she passed and it struck him that she had not finished what she had wanted to say. She'd told him about Uncle Phillip, but was there something else? Did she want him to do something?

The Imam told Bob to throw in the first fistful of soil. Bob felt weak and struggled to focus on every move he made. Stand up. Step back. His mind attached to the things around him. There were flowers, lots of them; one particular wreath was an explosion of lilies so enormous it could have been a tree of its own.

After the prayers ended, various people came over to convey their condolences. He and Mak Su were the only family, assigned to the task of receiving the factory line of well-wishers.

‘Are you okay?’ a familiar voice said.

By the time Bob looked up, she was already walking away, a long black selendang fluttering over her shoulder.

When it was all over Bob stayed at the burial site. He watched the undertaker fill the hole and leave. The gravestone was a narrow menhir like the others, a crescent and a star engraved on its head. Bob placed one of the lilies on top of the fresh mound and just as he did, a man came up.

‘Uncle Philip,’ Bob said.

Philip Chan asked Bob to go for a walk. The two of them strode down the street in that long-limbed gait of men who were good at sport. The longer they walked, the more Bob remembered. His white Mercedes that looked like a knight slicing through the streets. The department store he owned in the middle of town.

The older man kept his gaze on the pavement. They stepped over cracks and broken curbs, keeping time with each other. Finally, they stopped at the old badminton hall on Jalan Peel and paused under the shade of a raintree.

‘She told me about you,’ Bob said.

Philip took in the tiniest of breaths. He looked ahead as if a part of him was already halfway down the street, beyond the Chinese market.

‘I wanted to get married,’ he said. ‘Did she tell you that?’ Philip said he didn’t care that she was a cleaner or about her background. But she was so certain. She just closed the door on his face and refused to talk.

‘Is it because she didn’t want to convert?’ Bob asked.

‘No, I told her she didn’t need to. We could live in Singapore. But she didn’t want to. It was like something snapped inside her and she didn’t want anything more to do with me. She didn’t even want me to visit.’

‘But you did.’

‘You remember that?’

‘I remember you played football with me.’

A leaf twirled down from above and Bob looked up. Vines cascaded from a bird’s-nest fern. ‘She really liked this place,’ Philip said. ‘She said these were the only real trees in town.’

Bob had trouble picturing his mother gazing at trees. She was someone you would call industrious, practical, constantly busy; if not cleaning, she would be sewing, baking or teaching at the mosque.

‘And your father,’ asked Philip. ‘Was he good to you?’

Bob was sure Philip would have heard about the fights Rashid had caused with everyone, and later, the accident in the factory. ‘Yes,’ said Bob. ‘He was fine.’

They arrived back at the gates of the Al-Jumaah Cemetery. A giant banyan tree stood guard over the entrance, its roots twisted into a tangled shriek. Bob was reminded of the ghost stories of his childhood, the things the boys used to say: ‘Don’t touch the tree, the Pontianak will get you.’ It all seemed so far away now, he could barely remember the faces of those boys, much less their names. It was as if the young Bob was not him, it was someone else; and he had been born a man.

‘What are you thinking of?’ asked Philip.

Bob shrugged. ‘It’s hard to explain.’

Philip smiled and Bob noticed how tanned his skin was, skin like his own that never burned in the sun.

‘I heard you work on a cruise ship,’ said Philip. ‘Is that true?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Do you like it?’

‘It’s alright.’

‘Got a girlfriend?’

Bob thought of Laura then: Laura at baking class, Laura ironing his clothes, Laura waiting for him to go back to Melbourne.

‘No, not really,’ said Bob.

They stopped at Philip’s Mercedes which was parked in front of the burial grounds. Puan Minah’s tombstone gleamed at them like the moon out early.

‘You will come for the wedding, won’t you?’ said Philip.

‘What wedding?’

‘My daughter is getting married. Do you remember Caroline?’

A chilly wind blew as if from the souls of people past, from inside the strangler fig, and Bob knew then what his mother had wanted to say.

\*

The whole time he had been with Caroline, his life was the most perfect it had ever been. They never went to Canning Square where all the young people hung out. They would go to the other side of town. Bob knew the ais kacang vendor outside Three Moon Temple and she would give them extra peanuts and ice cream.

They spent their days at little coffee shops and parks, or going to a waterfall so distant it didn't have a name.

He had told her about Rashid's anger management issues and she always knew when it was a bad day. Bob would be especially quiet and would just want to swim. One such day, Caroline took Bob to the laundry room at the end of the clubhouse.

'I thought we were swimming,' said Bob. 'I feel like a swim.'

'I need to talk to you,' she said.

They sat on a bench, the smell of fresh laundry around them. 'What is it?' he said. She reached for him and kissed him on the mouth. She let him peel off her blouse, button by button. The anger he was feeling before disappeared, replaced by a whirlwind of emotions not unlike jumping into a pool.

His heart pounded and he could see himself fumbling over the pearly hook, the image engrained in his mind, as if it were a jewel, a gem, a treasure from the sea. It was the first time he saw a girl's bra. He'd seen them before in his friend Rino's magazines, but Caroline was warm and real and her mouth tasted like ice-cream.

At the end of it, she told him she was going away to study. 'I'm going to England,' she said. Middlesex or Nottingham, Bob does not remember. He took it well, or he liked to think he did. He went to school as usual. He worked at the Ruby Café.

On the Friday before her departure, he remembered fumbling up a few orders.

'What's wrong with you?' his manager had said.

'Sorry,' Bob said. 'I'm just a bit tired.'

The manager scowled at him.

Later that evening, he decided he would make one last visit. He stood outside a honeysuckle bush for half an hour, waiting for her mother to go to church. The black metal gates looked down like



two large sentinels. If you peeped through the hedges, you could see a tall white building inside still bearing the features of its colonial past – ornate gables, a French lattice patio, and a badminton court in the front garden.

Bob continued to wait in the bushes. Then he heard the click and the whir of the automatic gate. The black Mercedes rolled out. When it disappeared around the corner, Bob strolled up to the house as if he lived there. He went straight for the side gate and just as he reached it, his mother stepped out.

‘Bob?’ she said. ‘What are you doing here?’

Caroline was neither on the terrace nor in the windows. Bob smiled. ‘Mak Su said you were here,’ he said. ‘I thought I’d walk you back.’

Puan Minah beamed. ‘Alright,’ she had said. ‘Give me a minute.’ She handed him a garbage bag and asked him to throw it out.

\*

The next day, Bob went to the wedding in a black suit, the same suit he wore to his mother’s funeral. When the dancing began, Bob played with the little cousins who followed him everywhere. He had no proclivity towards children but they liked the tricks he had learned on the ship.

‘Uncle Bob, Uncle Bob,’ they said. ‘Do us another one.’ The little boys and girls knelt in front of him, eyes wide and shining. Vanessa, James, John - all pretty Christian names. He was pulling a coin out of a napkin when Caroline came over to ask him to dance. ‘Love Me Tender’, by Elvis Presley came on. They often played it on the ship. Bob would watch the old people dancing, immortalised in the middle of the Pacific.

Caroline’s wedding dress was lace with a neckline that skimmed just beneath her collar bone. Her hair was swept up to one side in a way Bob had never seen before.

‘What?’ she said. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘No, you look nice.’

He caught a glimpse of their reflections in one of the mirrors. They looked like two people he didn’t know.

‘Can you believe it?’ she said. ‘I’m married.’

Bob steered her around the room. He was holding Caroline and yet, it didn’t really feel like her. Perhaps it was her heavily lined brows. Or the layers of taffeta on her skirt.

‘You look better now,’ she said.

‘Than when we were younger?’

‘Than yesterday.’

‘So it *was* you,’ he said. ‘Thanks for coming.’

When the song ended, Caroline walked back to her friends. Bob hovered around the food table and spoke to various people. They drank champagne, they ate sandwiches. A plate of cupcakes gleamed with pearls and dashes of glitter dust. This was exactly what Laura would have spent all day making. The thought of her bowls and cups all over the kitchen made him smile. He reached for his phone and strode towards the door.

‘Photo time!’ a voice cried. The crowd swelled, and Bob found himself pressed against a silver trolley. A bunch of people slipped past him, women in Louboutins, men in silk ties.

‘Come on, Bob!’ said Philip, beckoning from the garden.

They stood on the grass, white roses all around. The last glint of day shone from behind a row of palm trees, illuminating the handsome group. Dresses straightened; smiles conjured. Bob squeezed closer to a lady who smelt of rum.

You can see him at the back amongst the couples. Philip and his wife are in the centre. Caroline and her new husband beside

them, and the little ones all kneeling in front. It was a picture of a family – a burgeoning family of which Bob had become a part of. Bob the son. Bob the uncle. Bob the guy who worked on a boat far away.

## Margaret

Margaret cursed the day she had fallen down. That's when it had all started. She couldn't drive, she couldn't cook, and now she had to have this person hanging around the apartment.

'Ana,' she said. 'How can you give me toast? Don't you know I have a sore throat?'

The girl scooped up the plate and disappeared into the kitchen.

Margaret sighed. The scent of toasted bread receded with each swing of the door. Why had her son gotten her a maid from the Philippines? She would have much preferred someone Chinese like the girl who took care of Sean when he was a baby. You didn't need to teach them what kind of food to prepare or how to cook a meal, they were professionals.

Margaret looked at the clock and saw it was already 10 a.m. She had been planning for the arrival of her son's family from Melbourne for months now. She had paid the Colonel's son across the road to buy that barbequed sweet meat Sean loved. And she had ordered Ana to go to the market to buy two kilos of pork belly. 'Also get one kilo of prawns, coriander, shallots, garlic, and ginger – young not old.' Margaret Wong was going to make her special lam meen noodles, a dish that usually only made an appearance at Chinese New Year.

The blue taxi rolled into the foyer at 3.30 p.m. Margaret was happy to see both children come out. There was a time when Sean

and Kelly were pondering whether to bring the kids as the boy had school camp and the girl was having some sort of flu, but there they were.

‘Hello Ah Ma,’ they said. Margaret flinched at their accents which made her sound like a ‘horse’ rather than a ‘grandmother.’ She bent down for a hug.

Kelly stepped out from the taxi. Her hair was brown or yellow – Margaret couldn’t decide – cropped just below her neck.

‘Hello, Margaret,’ she said with a smile. Her teeth seemed too big for her mouth, just ever so slightly, but enough for Margaret to feel a sense of unease. Margaret clutched her hands together and forced a smile back. The four visitors stood on the curb – Sean, Kelly, Leah and Max. Margaret told them she had lam meen waiting upstairs. Max turned to his mum and said he wasn’t hungry.

Later that evening, Margaret sat listening to the kids talk. They spoke in such funny accents. Sometimes she could not understand what they said. They asked why it was so hot here and why Ah Ma was always feeding them. Their mother told them to keep quiet and finish their food.

Every day the children played in the swimming pool downstairs, while Margaret spoke to her son. She told him about the leaks in the bathroom, the Astro TV people calling, and of course, the issue with the maid. Sean listened without saying much. Margaret assumed this was how he was in a boardroom. She was secretly proud that her son had become a banker like his father. *Vincent, you would be so pleased.*

Margaret watched Sean pour soya sauce onto his half-boiled egg the way he did as a child. She saw these memories with such clarity as if it were only yesterday that Sean was in his school uniform having breakfast. A shadow flitted in the kitchen and Margaret remembered what she wanted to say.

‘I don’t need her here,’ she whispered to Sean.

‘Mum,’ he said with a sigh.

‘I’ve seen her making the calls.’

‘What calls?’

‘You know, when she doesn’t think I’m looking.’

Margaret told Sean what the Colonel’s wife had said. ‘They go out and make friends with those construction workers, and then they come and rob your house. It’s true. That’s what Janet’s friend’s maid did.’

‘Mum,’ said Sean. ‘Ana’s okay, she used to work for a friend of mine.’

Margaret clutched the handle of her mug, trying to piece the thoughts in her head together. Before she could say anything else, the front door opened and the children trotted in, tracking water onto the carpet.

The next morning, Margaret woke up excited. It was Chinese Mid-Winter Festival, and she was planning to make glutinous rice balls. She would teach Leah how to make them. Margaret remembered how she used to help her own mother as a child, salivating at the thought of the springy rice balls in syrup water.

She went downstairs expecting to see the kids in the pool, but instead she found them sitting on the sofa with a few bags at their feet.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘Morning Mum,’ said Sean, coming down the stairs. ‘We’re going to Penang, remember?’

‘Oh yes, that’s right.’

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes, I’m fine. Oh, it’s mid-winter festival today..’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes, I was going to make some tong yuen for the kids. Do you want some? I can make it now and you can pack it with you...’

‘Oh no, it’s okay, we have to go soon.’

‘It’s just a short trip,’ said Kelly. ‘We’ll be back on Saturday.’

A few minutes later, a taxi came.

It all happened so quickly. One minute they were crowded in her living room, the next minute they were gone. No one remained except for her and Ana. That lady again. Margaret sighed and observed her standing at the sink washing the dishes. How many times had Margaret told her not to balance the plates like that? She really needed to talk to Sean about this.

As promised, Sean and his family came back on Saturday. The next few days passed as it always did, filled with eating, going to the mall and splashing in the pool.

On their last day, Sean came up to Margaret and said, ‘Do you have a minute?’

‘Of course,’ she replied.

‘Let’s sit over there.’ He gestured to the dining table. Margaret’s heart began to race. Was this about the new maid? What was that package he was holding? It looked too big to be a new contract letter. Maybe it was one of those folders where you could choose the person you wanted based on her picture. Margaret smiled – she was very good at reading people’s faces.

As they sat down, Margaret glanced around the room. Good, Ana was nowhere in sight.

‘So,’ said Sean. ‘I was thinking about what you said the other day—’

‘Daddy!’ yelled Max, running up. ‘The suitcase lock is broken. Can you help?’

Sean narrowed his eyes at Margaret. ‘Sorry Mum, I’ll be back soon.’

By the time Sean came back, the taxi was due to arrive. But Margaret was not too concerned. She would be happy with whoever Sean chose. She was sure whoever the next person was would be better.

‘So,’ he said. ‘I was thinking about what you said about having trouble using the phone and I thought, why not get an iPad? In fact, I should have done this before. Here.’ He took out the device from the package and placed it in front of Margaret. ‘Ana,’ he said, seeing her walk by. ‘You come listen too. First you press this button, then you click this icon...’ By the time Sean moved to the third step, Margaret had already forgotten the first two. But she just sat there and nodded. ‘See, it’s easy, right?’ said Sean.

A few minutes later, they gathered at the foyer of the condominium. The two children sat on a suitcase each, their skin browned by the sun. Leah was playing with a souvenir flute as Kelly tied her hair.

‘Did you enjoy yourselves?’ asked Margaret.

‘Yes,’ said Kelly. ‘Thank you so much for your hospitality, Mum. You should come visit us next time.’

‘Mm,’ said Margaret smiling. She could not imagine going to the city by herself, much less another country.

\*

After Sean and his family left, the apartment was quiet without the sounds of other people. In some ways Margaret enjoyed the peace. She was happy not having to worry about feeding anyone else. Sean had gotten the bathroom fixed and spoken to the Astro people, but he had done nothing about the maid.

Margaret knew she was watching. She could feel it when she was eating her breakfast or when Ana asked if she wanted anything



else: that lingering gaze, always a split second longer than necessary, watching and waiting. For what? The answer frightened Margaret.

Some days Margaret barely spoke to her. She spent most of her time pottering around her balcony, which was large for a condominium unit. It was nothing like the garden she used to have in her old house, however.

An acre of land, she had back then, and a backyard that was perfect for parties. 'We had so many celebrities,' she told her friends. 'Sometimes the news crew would be waiting outside the gate,' she said, laughing, as her audience nodded with quiet smiles.

After Vincent passed away, Margaret moved to this condominium which Sean said would be better for her. It had been five years since Vincent's death but she still thought of him daily. He was in the bed when she went to sleep, in the bookshelves, on the rosewood armchairs which she refused to admit were too big for the sitting room. Many items were too big, but Margaret somehow managed to fit everything in, including a massive Chinese screen that filled the dining room with painted peonies.

Over the weeks, Margaret's friends often asked her to play mahjong or join them for high tea at the Commonwealth Club, but she always declined. She did not tell them she had developed a fear that something would happen again – that she would trip, or fall, or get robbed. Many things confused her these days such as why the hot water didn't come out or how to work the TV remote. She took comfort in the things in her apartment that had stayed the same – such as the brass gong her grandmother had used to announce dinner when she was young, and the pictures of Vincent and herself on their honeymoon in Japan.

One day, the doorbell rang, and Margaret opened it to find her friend outside. Ai Ling was examining something on the shoe rack but when she saw Margaret she broke into a smile. She swished in in a bright batik cheongsam, observing Margaret's plain top and

lounge pants. 'I've been calling you for days,' she said. 'Your phone not working?'

Ana brought them some tea. She hovered near the big Chinese screen for a while, then disappeared. Ai Ling inched closer to Margaret. 'So, how are you?' she asked, studying her friend's face.

'What?' said Margaret.

'Your hair... you don't curl it anymore?'

Margaret told her she'd stopped going to the hairdresser. She didn't like going all the way to Cheras anymore.

'I see,' said Ai Ling, taking a sip of tea. She put her cup down and cleared her throat. 'Did you hear Philip's daughter is getting married?' she asked. 'We are all planning to drive up together. Do you want to join us? It will be fun. We can stop in Pulau Carey for seafood. Remember the riverside restaurant? We haven't been there in years!'

'I don't think I'm invited.'

'Of course you are.'

Margaret found herself looking at Ai Ling as if she were a stranger. Some lady with too many rings on her fingers and lipstick that was too bright. She continued talking for a few more minutes, gesturing with her hands and her jewels. Finally, she put down her cup, leaving a tangerine crescent on the porcelain.

After she left, Margaret checked her reflection in the mirror and noticed that her hair did indeed look flat. She just couldn't be bothered to set it each day, preferring to hold it back with a small barrette. The result was a pale-looking woman with thin grey hair. It was not terrible, just different, as if she'd been washed down a river and emerged as someone else.

\*

One morning as Margaret sat waiting for her breakfast to arrive a bird alighted on her balcony. It hopped onto the altar and poked

around the joss sticks. The offering tray, usually filled with all sorts of delights, was empty and Margaret made a mental note to buy some oranges. She should also get some chrysanthemums and those sponge cakes Vincent loved.

'Ana,' she called. 'Ana!' The swing door remained shut. Then it creaked but it was just the wind. 'Ana?' she called again. First, it was anger, then it changed to a creeping fear. Margaret made her way to the kitchen, and then to Ana's little room at the back. There were no clothes on the shelf, nothing on the side table. She had left the photo of her son Julian on the wall. His large eyes stared at Margaret from that house in Manila, hundreds of miles away. How sweet and innocent he seemed, but see, look at his mother. You could never tell with these people.

Wait, had Ana taken *her* things? Margaret thought of all her gold chains and rings in the handkerchief drawer. She told herself to calm down. She had to tell herself these things these days. Calm down. Comb hair. The toothbrush goes into the cup.

Margaret stood up with a grunt and just as she did, she heard a thud on the balcony. Footsteps, voices, someone sliding open the door. Images of masked men flooded her mind. Janet had told her the other day about how the Puttucherry's had been robbed. They tied up the wife and kids and slashed the husband when he tried to get fight back.

Margaret kept absolutely still, picturing the men in her dining room. She prayed to Vincent, the Goddess of Mercy and to Jesus, whom she sometimes believed in. Nothing happened for a minute, then two. And then the doorknob turned.

When Margaret saw who it was she yelled, 'Robbers, robbers!'

Ana looked at Margaret for a second before dashing out of the room. A minute later she came back, panting. 'There's no one there, Ma'am,' she said. 'What happened?'

Margaret looked around the room. Sunlight streamed through the window. The sound of a piano tinkled from far away.

‘Where were you?’ said Margaret.

‘I went to get bread,’ said Ana. ‘Don’t you remember, Ma’am?’

Later in the evening, Margaret’s iPad rang. It took her a while to recognise the sound. She kept pressing buttons but the ringing tune would not go off. The more it rang, the more stressed Margaret got. Finally, she pressed something and Sean’s face appeared.

He apologised for not calling the week before, they had gone to the snow. ‘The kids?’ he said. ‘They’re watching TV, you know how it is, right?’ As Sean spoke about their ski trip and how cold it was getting, Margaret gazed at the sun beating down on the rooftops outside. Sean’s voice began to fade in and out, his face becoming a mess of pixels.

When Margaret hung up, she could not quite remember what their conversation had been about. The heat hung around her like a blanket. Outside, yuccas, orchids and ferns quivered on the balcony. A wind chime tinkled and she thought of her days in Bidor. While the other kids played with insects and stones, she would help her mum make fish balls, one ear constantly listening for the tinkle of her father’s bicycle. Sometime before the sky turned dark, he would appear as a shadow against the paddy fields, bearing sour plum candy for the kids.

Margaret was not sure how long she sat there looking at the plants. Sometimes she thought she was back in Bidor, other times she found herself tracing the age spots on her hands. When the swing door squeaked, she turned around to see Ana coming out of the kitchen with a tray of soup. She laid down the plate, the bowl and a cup of warm water, the way Margaret always had it.

After the dishes had been cleared away, Margaret heard the door squeak again. Ana was holding something with both hands.

‘Happy birthday, Ma’am!’ she said, placing the cake onto the table. It was not large, but it was perfect for two. It reminded her of the Japanese cheesecakes Vincent used to buy her. ‘And this is from Julian,’ Ana said.

Margaret looked up and saw Ana holding a card. ‘A rabbit?’ she asked, squinting at the drawing.

‘Pokémon,’ said Ana with a grin.

As Margaret drew a sliver of cake, Ana told her all about Japanese pocket monsters. They chatted about the house Ana was building for her mother, and laughed at a photo of Julian. While they talked, a little bird came by the altar. It nipped at the empty bowl. Margaret watched it strut around. It pecked, it paused, it tilted its head. Margaret had a niggling feeling she was forgetting something.

## Colonel Lau

Colonel Lau scanned the street before turning off the engine of his Volvo. The backs of old Chinese shophouses flanked him on either side. A fruit vendor stood behind his cart, sprinkling a piece of guava with tamarind. He handed it to a lady, and when she disappeared, the Colonel stepped out of his car.

His wife, Janet, should have been the last thing on his mind but she was all he could think about as he made his way down this alley in the middle of town. She was at church, helping with the Catholic Women's Bazaar. The Colonel strode through the shadows in his shiny shoes, the smell of urine emanating from the ground.

He stepped out onto the road and became awash in light. People blustered left and right; pots clanged from a nearby coffee shop. The Colonel passed a mobile phone store and a haberdashery. The smell of gingered rice drifted from a shop with two roasted chickens hanging in the front window.

When he reached the 7-Eleven, he turned right. The alley was as he remembered from last week. There was a rank smell of beer and carnation petals were strewn on the ground. The Colonel kept walking until he stopped in front of New Life Entertainment Centre. With its green and white awnings, you could not tell if it was a health spa or a karaoke joint. But the Colonel knew.

One hand on a curtain of beads, the other pressed on his stomach, he took a deep breath and stepped inside. The bar stood at the centre of the room, like a church, with the sun beaming through bottles of Midori, Campari and Bombay Sapphire. The Colonel scanned the room as the sounds of Kokomo seeped through the air. Women sat everywhere – legs crossed, lips red – *tropical drinks melting in their hands*. The Colonel stood, slightly dazed, until his eyes fell on Giselle.

\*

In this part of city, you can smell desire before you see it. It's in the rose oils of secret massage parlours which doubled up as brothels. Or on the skin of college boys and girls still damp from the dance floor. At New Life Entertainment Centre, the smell of jasmine and Dettol floated out from the private rooms on the first level.

From where he sat downstairs, the Colonel eyed these rooms, wondering what lay behind those velvet drapes. Giselle drummed her freshly painted nails on the table. Janet painted hers on occasion but never this electric blue. He could feel the other girls watching as he fiddled with his wedding ring. It felt surreal to be sitting there in the afternoon with nightclub music pumping across the room.

Just as he was about to say something, his phone rang. Janet asked if he'd left the supermarket. Could he get her some dish-washing liquid, please? Not the environmental one he got last time. 'Just get Sunlight,' she said.

When he hung up, Giselle smiled and stirred her lychee cocktail.

'So what happened?' he said.

'He's quite handsome, you know,' she said. 'Looks a bit like you. Did you bring the money?'

Colonel Lau took the envelope out of his pocket and handed it to her. She began talking. It struck him again how much she

looked like John Fernandez's daughter. John who led the Novena prayers at church. He had this crazy notion that this was what John's daughter did on the side and nobody knew.

Aside from the plunging black top she had on now, Giselle could have passed for one of those Eurasian girls in church who went to Life Group and helped their mothers sell cookies at Coffee Morning. Perhaps that's why he'd chosen her.

Giselle flicked her brown hair back and peeped at the Colonel from underneath her lashes. 'Does it really matter that much?' she asked.

'What do you mean?'

'You know, what he likes.'

The Colonel felt a heat rise around his neck. 'What did he say?'

'He didn't say anything, I just—'

'Do you think he's...'

'I don't know, it's hard to say. You want me to try again? I—'

'No, no, it's okay.'

Loud drums rang though the air. Kokomo had disappeared and was replaced by some noisy rock song. The disco ball flashed pink and green, and the Colonel stood up, unsure what he was doing there.

\*

'You forgot the dish washing liquid,' Janet said.

The Colonel apologised. As he continued to unpack the groceries, George walked into the kitchen wearing fitted Bermudas and a tight green shirt. Colonel Lau was constantly amazed by the aura his son brought into a room. He looked more like a surfer than a scientist with a mop of hair that was perpetually wind-swept.



‘How was your birthday?’ the Colonel said. Ever since George started a job at the museum, the Colonel and his wife barely saw him. Not that they saw much of him before – their son had quite the active social life.

‘I was just working,’ said George. ‘Though I did end up have dinner with this girl—’

‘Oh, is she nice?’

‘Michael, isn’t that being a bit intrusive?’ Janet said. ‘Do we know her, George? You know your friends are always welcome over...’

‘No, Ma – you don’t know her. She came up to me saying she needed some help with a project and we just ended up talking.’ George shrugged and grabbed his bag.

‘Where are you going?’ asked the Colonel.

‘YK’s got this event at the zoo, I’m going to check it out.’

Cries from a nearby mosque slipped through the air, then a car beeped at the gate. The Colonel watched George give his mum a quick hug and step into the honey-coloured evening.

\*

After a few weeks, Colonel Lau forgot about the whole affair until he received a call. The moment he answered one of his granddaughters – the three-year-old – began screaming. He removed himself to the kitchen where Janet was in the midst of packing away some ginger pork stew.

‘Yes, it’s okay,’ said the Colonel, continuing to walk out to the terrace.

‘You sure?’ said Giselle.

‘Yeah.’

The Colonel stood overlooking the begonias. ‘How are you?’ he said. ‘Is everything okay?’ He tried to recall if he owed her anything.

She cleared her throat. ‘Is George around?’

‘No, did you want to talk to him?’

‘No.’ Her voice was slightly strained. ‘Just wondering.’

She mumbled about needing to talk to the Colonel about something – something she thought the Colonel should know – when a man’s voice darted out from her end of the phone. Giselle said she had to go. She would call him back.

What did he need to know? Was it about George? Colonel Lau kept a lookout for her call but it never came. Did she mean ‘later’ as in another day or ‘later’ as in a few minutes? Over the next few days he checked his phone whenever he could – in church or after a shower – but the call never came.

As the days wore on, as he caught glimpses of George doing normal things like laughing in the driveway or sipping tea, the Colonel began to develop a sense of hope. He had a feeling that Giselle wanted to tell him there was nothing to worry about. His devotion at mass was always the same and each time he came back he felt renewed and more hopeful that things would work out.

The Colonel had learned to let go. When George said he wanted to move out and stay in Subang, the Colonel said it was fine. George would still come back to do his laundry or for dinner on Sundays when Janet felt like cooking. Quite often, YK would come by and the two boys would go off clubbing or to the movies, or whatever young people did these days.

It was the day that George said he was going to Sabah for a research project that the Colonel began to feel a prickle of unease. As George packed a few things from the house, the Colonel asked, ‘Do you need a lift?’

‘It’s okay,’ said George. ‘YK is giving me a lift.’

‘Doesn’t he need to work?’

‘He’s taking the morning off.’

Five minutes later, there was a honk from outside. YK emerged from his MX-5 in cropped cargos and a V-neck t-shirt. From the kitchen window, Colonel Lau watched him give George a punch on the arm and they both laughed. As if feeling the Colonel’s gaze, YK looked up and waved. Colonel Lau waved back before letting the curtain drop.

‘What are you doing?’ Janet asked.

‘Just having a look at YK’s new car.’

‘Is it nice?’

‘Yes,’ he said, flapping out his newspaper. ‘Very nice.’

\*

A year or so later, after it was no longer a secret, after it ended with YK, George went to Australia to do his masters. The Colonel started spending more time with his army buddies and one day, they met at a new seafood restaurant in the middle of town. They were seated around a large red table when a familiar figure swished passed him.

Giselle did not see him, but his eyes followed her as she bustled between waiters and trolleys laden with tea.

‘Too young for you,’ said Kiat.

The Colonel just smiled. He felt a tug of affinity towards this girl he had only met twice. Three times if you counted that last time she’d dropped by the house. She had said she was seeing friends in the neighbourhood. Masak-masak toys were strewn all over the kitchen floor, and they had to wade through the miniature plates and cups to get to the table.

They talked about the Colonel's two daughters and three granddaughters, and then she told him her news. She would stay with her sister for a while.

'I think that would be good,' said the Colonel. He brought his cup to his lips but it was empty.

The kitchen seemed very bright. He remembered the sunlight falling on Giselle. Her loose t-shirt, a light, floral skirt. When she moved, the flowers looked like they were falling through the air.

'Do you need some money?' he asked, looking around for his wallet.

Giselle had frowned and waved him off with a scoff.

At the restaurant that day, he waited until she was back at the counter. When he saw her scribbling something, he came up to her. She looked the same as she did before – yet a little different. Perhaps it was the buttoned-up blouse or the way her hair was neatly swept back in a ponytail.

'You changed jobs,' he said.

'Yes,' she said. 'A long time ago.'

She said she was staying in Brickfields now, near the YMCA. She put her writing pad away and said, 'Is George still in Hobart?'

'Yes, how did you know?'

'Instagram,' she said. 'Don't bite!'

The Colonel whirled around and saw that she was speaking to a chubby baby behind him. The boy sat in a highchair with a triangle of pink sticking out of his mouth.

'So, this is him,' said the Colonel.

'Yes,' said Giselle, sweeping the boy up. 'This is Ari.'

She pried a serviette out of Ari's mouth and flicked it into a bin. When she looked up, someone was summoning her from across the room. 'Can you watch him for a second?'

The Colonel found himself with the boy in his arms. There was a weight to him unlike what the Colonel felt with the girls. The boy seemed content to sit there, staring at him. The waitresses at the nearby table folded napkins into little boats. The Colonel and the baby stood looking at each other. They had similar dark skin and hair, which curled at the nape of their necks. When the Colonel smiled, the baby gurgled. The Colonel blinked and the baby broke into a laugh.

'He's very friendly,' said the Colonel when Giselle came back.

'Yes, he's used to having people around.'

'What happened to his nails?'

They were varnished in a medley of red, pink and orange. Giselle laughed, and said the girls were just having some fun. She returned Ari to the table with the ladies, where he resumed playing with a spoon.

\*

After the last of the sweet and sour sauce was soaked up and the Guinness drunk, the men ambled out of the restaurant. They joked about their wives and the exotic world trips they knew they would never make. Like everyone else, the Colonel strode back to his car with high spirits and too much beer in his belly.

He turned on the engine and let the pistons kick in. He drove out of the car park and stopped at the traffic lights. When the light turned green, he kept going past the mosque and under the monorail. He must have been driving for about fifteen minutes before he made a left, and then another left.

Before long, he found himself driving back under the grand archway of Super Tanker 3's car park. His Volvo was the only car in the sea of gravel. The restaurant lay ahead with a fish tank gurgling in the foyer. A broken pipe dripped next to it, the water trickling its way into a drain.

The Colonel pulled into the same spot he had occupied before. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he knew one thing: his grandson couldn't grow up in a place like this.



## Your name is Budi

The rain beats down like bullets on my skin. But I keep my eyes trained on your shoes. Sometimes you move so fast I can only see holes in the mud like candles pulled out of a cake. We keep going up and up, and just when I feel I can't go any further, you say, 'We're here.'

There's a house in front of me. Or what will be a house. Now it is a skeleton: bars and beams jutting out all over the place. Where have you gone? The wind tickles me with its spidery fingers. A chill freezes my veins – and then I see you.

'Over here,' you say, gesturing from the edge of the world.

\*

Apart from a Gardenia TV commercial I've starred in, my life is as normal as any fourteen-year-old from Sierra Heights. I go to school. I have tuition. When term break comes, I go on holiday. I've been to Australia, England, Hong Kong, Hawaii and Japan. Sometimes my aunties and uncles come along as well as my grandfather, Philip Chan. Every Chinese New Year we meet in his big white house and have parties that go on until midnight.

Sometimes I wonder if it's normal that I've never been to a mamak stall or taken a public bus. We always get driven around by Yusof. Last Sunday, however, my mother drove. She drove right past your place. 'What are you looking at?' she said.

I asked you to take me there last week.



‘Can we go to your house?’ I said.

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘There’s nothing there.’

In the end, you agreed to take me. After all, it was just down the road from ours. You walked past the MNG billboard and there was a doorway next to it. Wooden shacks tottered around a field. I smelt mud and saw chickens running around. Yours was the last shack at the back.

‘I told you there’s nothing here,’ you said.

Your room had two bamboo mats on the floor. A cardboard box crouched in the corner. It had books, wires and magazines inside, and some pieces of metal you referred to as ‘stuff’.

When we stepped out, the sky was getting dark. Your sister was on the deck, squatting over a portable stove. Her flip-flops peeped out from her sarong as she stirred the pot. She let me peer inside and I saw rice porridge bubbling, alongside tiny bits of meat. You sat on the wooden floor, so I sat down beside you and we watched the sun sink behind the mall.

Out of the darkness, a man began to sing in a strange voice, too smooth for the rough body it came from. For a moment I forgot where I was. Your name is Budi. My name is Vanessa, miles apart on the alphabet. From time to time, a group of men would cheer, watching the football game being screened from a café across the street.

\*

Even though we’re drenched it still feels sheltered to see everything else getting shot by the rain. The pellets beat down so loud, I almost don’t hear you.

‘Is your stuff okay?’ you ask, pointing your chin towards my bag. You do that a lot, point with your chin. You take a towel out

of your bag and hand it to me. It smells fresh, like soap. You start picking things up and tossing them away – an empty glass bottle, a piece of wood. You pick up a piece of metal and pocket that. Soon, the area is clear and you gesture to a nearby crate. We sit there and watch the rain. You are sitting so close, I can see a scar above your elbow.

‘What happened there?’ I point to the peanut-shaped mound.

‘Motorbike.’

‘And there?’

‘Fight.’

I can’t believe you’re only sixteen. A reddish mark on the inside of your arm catches my eye. ‘What is that?’

‘Ah,’ you say. ‘Just work.’

The wound is longer and redder than the others. It must have been recent. You start fiddling with a stone and I see how dark your arms are. A silky chocolate black, even darker next to mine.

‘What are you doing?’ you ask.

‘Nothing,’ I say, putting my hands away.

The rain slows down to a drizzle. The whole of Sierra Heights is spread out before us. My parents’ house is the one with the pool shaped like a jellybean. A few doors down is Bintang Desa, ‘Star of the Country.’ They are the new apartment blocks being built. It will have a tennis court and a swimming pool three times my height. I know because you and I have been in it. Two explorers, discovering a new world. You scavenged for tools. I picked my way through the floor, stepping over sockets and jets and pieces of gravel. I’d never walked on the bottom of a pool before.

It was the last time I did because the next day it rained, and the pool was filled with water. And it would remain filled for days after. Once I saw the construction workers bathe in it. The greenish

water came up to their knees and they scooped up buckets of water to pour over themselves.

Uncle Peter said the place was modelled after some hotel in Italy. I heard him talking about it to Pa the other day. The two of them were in the garden, discussing buildings and blueprints, or whatever architects talk about. When Uncle Peter saw me, he winked and waved.

Uncle Peter is always winking and waving at me like we have some sort of secret. At Mum's Christmas party last year, we were in the back terrace away from the crowd. I could see mum near the bar talking to his wife, Aunty Irene. They were talking about a robbery that had happened last week.

'I know,' Mum said. 'It must be one of those Indonesian workers.'

'Yah.' Aunty Irene wrinkled her nose. 'There are so many of them around these days.'

When Uncle Peter saw me, he sat up in his chair. He wriggled up the rattan seat and almost spilt his drink. 'How's school?' he said.

'Why do people always ask me that?'

'Isn't that what life is about when you're thirteen?'

'Fourteen.'

'Do you have a boyfriend?'

'Did you have a girlfriend when you were my age?'

'Kind of,' he said, with a smile. He sipped his drink and his eyes drooped down. I thought he had fallen asleep but he then he said, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

'Doctor.'

'Really?'

‘No.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he had said, peering at his glass. ‘I’m forty-four and I still don’t know what I want to be.’

Back on the hill, you and I continue to stare out at the world below. The sky is all orange and the lights of the neighbourhood blink at us.

‘Have you heard of Pied Piper?’ you ask.

‘The band?’

‘Yah, they’re playing next Wednesday. Want to go see them?’

‘Mm-hm,’ I say, nodding up and down. ‘Where are they playing?’

You put a finger to your mouth. The sky burns around us. You peer through the bushes and I hear scuffling sounds. The man emerges first, followed by the girl. She has short hair and looks a bit like a pixie, but it is him that I can’t take my eyes off. He pulls her up with one hand and she laughs.

I have never seen Uncle Peter look like this before. His eyes are bright and there is a flush to his face. You and I stand behind the wire mesh, waiting. It is like a bad movie we’re not supposed to be in. Uncle Peter puts down his backpack and takes out a bottle of water.

We wait. The bush is thick behind us, there is only one way down. You grab our bags and we start running over the rocks. There is a moment where I trip and that’s when I see Uncle Peter looking at us. Did he know it was me? Did he see you? I run after you and we race down the slope like two crazy hares.

\*

When the hammering stops, I look up from my homework. The workers at the Bintang Desa apartments are packing up. They walk in a line towards their quarters behind the MNG billboard.

When you pass our house, you look straight ahead, you don't even glance at our gate.

Friday comes and I am back on the hill. I told my parents I was going over to my friend Melanie's house. By the time I reach the reservoir, my head feels a little heavy. I've been feeling this way since getting caught in the rain.

The crate is there from the other day. I put my bag on it and look around. The ground is now dry and small pink flowers have sprouted near the rocks. I sit on a grassy patch and stare out at the houses below. At the centre of it all is Bintang Desa with its steel scaffolding rising out from the ground. There is a grand foyer in front with tall marble pillars. A piazza? A pilastro? I forgot what Pa said they were called. The wind is drumming my cheek. I close my eyes.

When I wake up, the sky is bruised and dark around me. Where did the sun go? Where are you? I make my way back down to the road, swishing away the mosquitoes and long prickly grass. By the time I reach the shopping centre, all the lights have come up. The Bolero Café has started screening the World Cup outside and red lanterns glow from the Chinese restaurant.

On the opposite side of the road, a crowd has gathered. There must be thirty people standing in front of the construction site and amidst it all, a police car flashing red and blue. There's been an accident, says Uncle Peter. He is wearing his hard hat, standing in front of the hoarding.

Behind the boards, shadows move around in semi-darkness. Torch lights sweep the area, shooting beams of brightness across the ground. It looks like it always does. Rubble. Stones. A mess. But then there is the scaffolding, all piled up in a heap. It looks wrong. Like a bunch of bones piled up on the ground.

'Vanessa,' says Uncle Peter. 'You okay?'

'Yeah,' I say.

I keep walking. Past the hoarding. Past your people squatting on the ground. The old man who sings peers up at the restaurant and the streetlamps bow their broken necks. I keep walking, I don't even glance your way. I keep walking until I reach my house with the tall black gate.

YOUR NAME IS BUDI

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## Waitress

He came to me from across the room, disco lights flashing on his face. He looked like a Chinese Clint Eastwood with his weathered skin and narrowed gaze.

‘Can I buy you a drink?’ he asked.

‘Sure,’ I replied, following him to a nearby table.

I was surprised he hadn’t chosen May. They always chose May. Thanks, John, I said as he put the bottle down. He had crinkles beside his eyes. But the more I said his name, the older I felt and soon it didn’t matter if he was twenty or sixty-two.

I told him my name. Vanessa, I said in a soft voice. We spoke about The Front Room and how busy it got on Friday nights. A girl in a tube top snaked her arms through invisible hoops, caring about nothing but the music that pulsed through her limbs.

John continued to sit across from me, his eyes half closed. Every time the lights swept over us, the gold band on his finger gleamed. Not a wedding ring, as it was on his third finger, but a ring of some importance judging by its weight and the way he touched it when he was thinking. Soon, the Dragon George came on and he watched them with a frown.

‘Do you like this music?’ I asked.



‘Sorry?’

‘Do you like this music?’ I asked a little louder.

‘It’s okay,’ he said, as the drummer worked himself into a frenzy.

We exchanged a few more words, some awkward pauses, then after the fourth song, he got up to leave.

‘What happened?’ said May. ‘What did he say?’ They were all around me – Sonia, Jo, Ming and May. *You need to talk more, why didn’t you ask him to dance? Did he want to go somewhere else?*

‘It’s okay,’ I said, quieting them. ‘He wants to meet me tomorrow.’

\*

He picked me up from my apartment at 11.30 a.m. sharp. He seemed like that kind of guy. The black Mercedes paused at the guard house then swerved into the foyer before stopping exactly a metre away from the concrete.

I slipped into the car, the smell of leather wafting up towards me. It came from the seats, soft and smooth beneath my thighs, as we purred towards the trendy cafes of Ampang Baru. At the traffic light however, John did not turn left.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

‘I thought we’d just go to my place.’

I gripped the seat. I wondered if he knew I had never done this before.

I thought of what the girls at work had told me last night. We were having drinks after our shift, and they were trying to convince me to join them.

‘It’s just keeping someone company,’ said May.

‘Sometimes you get a really cute guy.’ Sonia winked.

‘And if you don’t, you get paid anyway,’ said Jo.

In the end I told May I'd give it a try and that's when John had turned up.

He gripped the gear shift and slid it in a notch.

'So,' I said, clearing my throat. 'Do you go to The Front Room often?'

'Not so often.' He kept his eyes on the road. 'Have you been working there long?'

'Only a few months.'

'Before that?'

'I was in finance.'

He gave the smallest nod.

As John turned into a quiet street, the sunlight fell on his face. I wondered what he did. Lawyer? Businessman?

When the car stopped, a high black gate loomed in front of us. John waved to the guardhouse and the man inside waved back. Firtrees rose on either side as the car kept moving upwards, like a rollercoaster climbing up for the massive plummet.

The house was three stories high. Two marble lions sat on each side of the door. The moment I stepped inside an energy swept over me. It was the kind I felt when I entered a temple or a church. Good luck amulets hung by the window. An amethyst tree glowed in the corner.

'Are you okay?' said John.

'I'm fine,' I said, clenching my fists. 'Your house is really beautiful.'

John's phone rang and I told him I had to go to the bathroom. He gestured to an enormous staircase like something out of *Dynasty*. Paintings of clouds hung on the walls: billowy and pink, wispy and grey – all charged with a strange underlying tension.

When I reached the end of the corridor, I stopped. The hum of silence drew me to a door. I pushed it open and saw a glass cabinet filled with random items. When I looked more closely, I realised they were all horses. Metal horses, porcelain horses, a tiny wooden horse with the most delicate neck. Was it really wood?

‘Don’t touch,’ a voice said.

He sat in an armchair with a book in his lap, his feet dangling above the ground.

\*

He said he was ten. Two round circles of silver framed his eyes. The shelf behind him was filled with magazines. A row of yellow, a row of red, followed by an assortment of other journals.

‘Are you the new nanny?’ the boy asked.

‘I’m just visiting.’

The boy pushed up his glasses. ‘Do you want to play a game?’

I told him I wasn’t very good at games.

‘Give me a number,’ he said. ‘Any number.’

I said one thousand five hundred, and he said that was the number of pygmy elephants left in Borneo. Then he asked for another number. And he told me that was how many legs a centipede had. After a while, I learned the number of rings on Saturn, the number of moles on Mao Ze Dong’s back, and the population of Yangdon in 2013.

I scanned the magazines behind him – *National Geographic*, *Newsweek* – and more tiny figurines. ‘What’s with the horses?’ I asked.

The boy did not reply. His face was buried into a book. It was then that I saw John at the door, a dark figure framed in wood.

\*

I followed him to the living room. Neither of us said a word. When we reached the sofas, a lady appeared with a tray in her hands.

‘Rosa,’ said John. ‘Do you have any more of those almond biscuits?’

The lady nodded and left John and I sitting in silence. He took in a deep breath but before he could say anything, I told him I was sorry, I got lost.

‘You met Sid,’ he said, stirring a spoon in his cup.

‘Yes, such a nice boy, is he your son?’

‘What did he say to you?’

‘Nothing much, he just wanted to play a game.’

John narrowed his eyes.

‘Not really a proper game, just some number thing – you know, like a riddle.’ I gave a weak laugh.

‘He doesn’t usually talk.’

‘What do you mean?’

The ceiling fan appeared to turn faster as John asked me what colour Sid was.

I realised that he must have been there the night the girls and I were celebrating Sonia’s birthday. We had been talking about colours because Sonia told them what I could do, and after that everyone wanted theirs read.

‘How do you know what stone someone needs?’ May had asked.

This question was hard. It was something I could always do. Like how some people know what notes are being played on a piano.

‘What is Sid?’ said John, bringing me back to the room. The ring on his finger flashed and I knew it wasn’t gold. It was malachite, the stone of browns.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. That was the truth. I pictured Sid again, his little face looking up at me, but the only thing that came back was silence.

The almond biscuits arrived. After Rosa left, John told me why he had asked for me. ‘You don’t really have to do much,’ he said. ‘Rosa will be here. You just need to spend some time with him.’

‘I’m not very good with kids.’

‘Neither is he.’

John picked up his cup and began stirring again. I did the math in my head. Two hours a day, three times a week – I would get more than what I was getting at the restaurant. So, when I finished my tea, I said yes. Just as I did, the screaming started.

\*

Two weeks later at the restaurant, John sat across from me and waited. We’d been through this a couple of times already. The question was always the same and I never had the answer.

*What colour is Sid? What is his stone?*

It felt like school days again. Mrs. Wu asked, ‘What is the differentiation of X to Y. What is the answer? What is it?’ I knew I should know; I knew I should. A glass clinked from the bar and I could see May eyeing me from the kitchen. I told John I had to get back to work.

The next day, I arrived at John’s house and the whole place was glistening like after the rain. The amethyst tree shone; the silver horses whispered. I found Sid in his room surrounded by a mass of jigsaw, three thousand pieces of sea and sky.

‘What happened?’ I asked Rosa.

‘There was a piece missing.’

I pursed my lips and nodded. That’s what happened last time. Sid slouched in the corner assembling his *Star Wars* spaceship – and disassembling it. He did this a number of times, then he threw it to the ground.

He refused to speak to anyone. He just sat in his corner staring at the carpet. I flicked through one of Sid’s *Newsweek* magazines. Then I walked up to the wall and examined the pictures his mother had painted.

‘Come on Sid, you have to eat,’ said Rosa. Sid pushed the bowl away. I let out a sigh and picked up my bag.

‘Where are you going?’ Sid asked.

‘To the RSPCA.’

He stared at me, tilting his head to the side. Then in a different voice, as light as a bird, he said, ‘Can I come?’

\*

The girls at the shelter were all friendly and sweet. *How old are you? Do you like dogs?* Sid said nothing. He stared out the door, rubbing his fingers together.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ sneered a lady. I had seen people like her before.

‘Come on, Sid,’ I said, touching his elbow. ‘Let’s go outside.’

When we reached the dog yard his face lit up. He studied each and every creature inside. ‘You can pet that one,’ I said. ‘He’s very calm.’

Sid stared at the puppy with one white ear and said he wasn’t allowed to. He wasn’t allowed to touch a lot of things like cats, dogs, birds, mostly animals.

‘What about horses?’

‘Horses are okay. In fact, they’re supposed to be good.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know, Rosa said.’

It took me an hour to clean the cages. As we walked towards the car, Sid pointed to a Swenson’s sign. ‘Can we go in?’ he asked.

‘Mmm... okay,’ I replied, glancing at my watch.

We slid into a booth and he ordered a Chocolate Blitz. ‘It’s better than the Coco Cabana,’ he said.

‘I thought you haven’t been here before.’

‘I have. We used to come here all the time.’ His face changed. He kept frowning at the table until I heard a loud crack. Sid opened his hand to reveal a broken spoon.

By the time we arrived at the house, it was evening and a storm seemed to be brewing. The guard gave me a funny look as we drove past. Rosa stood in the terrace, arms folded. ‘Where have you been?’ she said. ‘Where did you take him?’

I told her we just went for a drive. Blue firs trembled in the sky. The wind swept in, pregnant with rain. ‘Sid,’ I said. ‘We’re home.’ He was still asleep, head slumped against the window. ‘Wake up, Sid.’ A dribble of foam appeared at the side of his mouth.

Rosa yelled at me, then she yelled at Sid. After some prodding and urging, we managed to get him up. I told Rosa he had been fine until now. She asked if he had taken his medicine.

‘What medicine?’ I said.

She looked at me as if I had killed someone, then she bundled him into the house. The lions on the patio growled beneath the sound of thunder.

\*

That night at The Front Room, John's driver appeared. He stood at the door, his traditional Malay clothes gleaming under the flashing lights. Every time someone touched him, he flinched and walked a little faster. Finally, he got to me and handed over an envelope – I knew it would be my last payment.

Later that night, I sat waiting for a taxi and all I could think of was Sid. Sid pointing to the Swenson's sign. Sid frowning at his ice-cream glass.

'Where's your boyfriend?' A voice came from the dark.

When I saw who it was, I said, 'He's not my boyfriend.'

Eu Jin stood there with his guitar case, the other members of the Dragon George nowhere in sight. I told him again that John was just a friend. The memories flashed back: Eu Jin walking out my front door, the shape of his back. There he was now, standing in front of me with that shimmery green glow. Yes, Eu Jin was a green – I always fell for the greens. He swung his bag into the back of his Citroen. Then he asked me if I wanted a lift.

'No, thanks,' I said. 'I'm okay.' Eu Jin didn't move. A piece of gravel creaked under his shoe. 'Where's your girlfriend?' I asked.

He looked at me with small, intense eyes. Then in a voice as soft as the night, he said, 'We broke up.'

\*

That's how it started. From waiting at the taxi stand on my own, to waiting for Eu Jin's Citroen. We went for supper at the rice porridge shop under the bridge and watched pirated DVDs until the early hours of the morning. On Mondays, while the rest of the world worked, we roamed the town like tourists.

Once we bumped into his Uncle Jimmy and I thought, wow, what a cool guy. He was a red – the life of a party. Everything he said was so funny. I thought he was thirty, but Eu Jin said he was



fifty-five. I could imagine Eu Jin looking like him when he grew old.

I didn't think about Sid until the day I saw him in front of a pharmacy. His face was so pale I thought it might catch fire in the light. I waved but he didn't see. Before I could get there, the black Mercedes whisked him away.

The shadows haunted me all day. I went back to my apartment and started clearing out my study. I threw out my old accounting books. Then I rearranged all the other books in alphabetical order. And yet, it wasn't enough.

On the way to the restaurant, I kept thinking about Sid. When I set the tables, I had to concentrate extra hard. Chopsticks. Spoon. Glass on the right. Prisms of light refracted onto a plate.

'Vanessa,' said May. 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing,' I said, putting the glass down. I knew what John was looking for. That night, I searched through my entire collection: amethysts, rubies, opals – none of them were right. I sifted through copper pebbles, agates, a piece of zirconia. Then finally, sometime after midnight, I found what I was looking for.

\*

By the time I managed to see Sid again a month had passed. The guard let me in and I parked my car in the usual spot. When I got out, I heard barking.

'Vanessa!' Sid called. A dog panted at his feet.

'Sparky!' I said and the dog wagged his tail. 'When did you get him?'

'I didn't, my father did.'

'When did your father get him?'

'Last week.'

Sid smiled at Sparky chasing after a tennis ball, then he turned to me. 'What's this?' he said, holding up the green stone around his neck.

\*

That day John had come to my apartment, his brown was dimmer than usual.

'I know why I couldn't see Sid's colour,' I said. 'He doesn't have one.'

I told him there was nothing wrong with this. In fact there was everything right, but it all seemed to gloss over him. In the end, I gave him a velvet bag with the stone inside. His eyes gleamed and the darkness around him had disappeared.

\*

'So, what is this stone?' The sun shone on Sid as he waited for my answer. I could have told him what I told John that day, but I told him the truth.

'It's just glass,' I said. He tilted his head and broke into a smile.

We sat there watching Sparky as a gentle hue glowed around us – not actual colours but a luminance that appeared and disappeared in the light of the world.

'Vanessa,' Sid said, turning to me. 'Why are you a waitress?'

'I always wanted to be one.'

'Why did you stop working at the bank?'

I thought of my old office, the smell of carpets, the view of the Twin Towers from my desk.

'I suppose I just got tired.'

'You're not going to die, are you?'

'No, why?'

'That's what my mum used to say.'

Sparky emerged from the bushes with a stick in his mouth. I said he looked like a collie mix. Sid said he was a kelpie. I told him collies originated from Ireland. He said it was America. We squinted at each other and went back to the house to check.

## The End

Jimmy Chan woke up to the sound of a myna chirping outside his window and the first thing he did was nothing. He lay under the sheets and absorbed the sounds right to the ends of his toes. He felt a buzz like his party days but this – this not going to work was hardly illegal. In fact, it was absolutely legal, because at the age of fifty-five, the company he had spent the last ten years working for was no longer allowed to keep him on their books.

\*

Jimmy began his day with breakfast at The Front Room – the latest addition to Kuala Lumpur’s trendy café scene. He took his usual table beside a Dali painting and ordered a Sausage and Eggs Benedict. The usual assortment of people strode past – Bangladeshi labourers headed to a new construction site, bankers in pinstriped shirts, ladies on their way to the hairdresser – but there was nothing usual about the day.

For one, it wasn’t a weekend. Jimmy found it amusing that he was the only person in the room not looking at his phone. He sat back, floating in this state of semi-suspension. It was then that a lady in red made her appearance. She presented herself as a silky silhouette at the door then walked straight to his table.

‘Uncle Jim,’ she exclaimed, peering from behind a set of incredibly thick lashes. He looked around, feigning embarrassment. ‘You can call me Jimmy,’ he said.

‘It’s Cheryl.’ She laughed. She had one of those faces that made you want to smile back. Jimmy could not place her until she related memories of him going to her family’s house to pluck coconuts. ‘You were there with that other guy from the agency, remember?’ she said. ‘My dad didn’t know how to open the coconuts so you had to do it.’

Good grief. This was Peter’s daughter. Peter Acland from Melbourne. As the Creative Director of BB&H, Peter was one of the many glib-talking foreigners who had come to Kuala Lumpur at the time, often with wives and children in tow. Peter, however, had married a local lady, a former model or TV host. A beautiful lady, Jimmy gathered, as Cheryl gazed at him with her greenish-brown eyes.

The other guy was Khalil, Peter’s art director. The fellow never said much but there was a sense of pureness about him Jimmy liked. A white creative director, a Chinese account director and a reclusive Malay art director – funny how the three of them got along.

Cheryl twirled a small lock of hair around her fingers. Jimmy could have watched her for hours. He had always admired women. The smallest move could turn into a spell: raising her heels to reach for a jar or turning her head to reveal the most delicate collar bone.

‘You haven’t changed at all,’ said Cheryl, her eyes twinkling.

‘You have,’ he said, and she blushed.

Jimmy found himself calculating the age difference between them. She must be what – twenty-eight, twenty-nine?

‘Do you know them?’ she said.

‘Who?’

‘Angsana. I’m in their PR department.’

‘That’s great,’ he replied.

Her cherry red dress gleamed – it was perfect for a cocktail party, but somehow just as perfect for a Monday morning in Bangsar. The sun spread over them and they soon became gold and glossy like everyone else.

Cheryl glanced at her phone and said she had to go. ‘Can I get your card?’

‘You can have them all.’

‘What?’

‘I just retired,’ he said.

She examined the stack of cards he handed her and smiled. She left him with a light pat on his shoulder he continued to feel throughout his meal.

\*

The holidays, as he liked to view them, got off to a slow start. But by the second week things began to fall into place. He’d stopped going to The Front Room (too expensive) and switched to the Good Taste Coffee Shop down the road.

It was one of those coffee shops with a variety of stalls you could choose from. Most people went for the fish ball noodles but it was the Western Grill that Jimmy always favoured. The owner, Ah Ning, was a middle-aged lady who served a mean American Breakfast.

Jimmy liked it best when the work crowd got up to leave. The café would suddenly become so quiet you could hear the sunlight spilling into the room. Ah Ning knew exactly how Jimmy liked his eggs and he merely had to gesture to make his order.

One day, she greeted him in a t-shirt that said Pulau Pangkor.

‘You been there?’ asked Jimmy.

‘Of course not. Where do I have time for holidays?’

She placed his plate on the table and watched him beam at the food. ‘Don’t you work?’ she asked.

‘Nope.’

‘What do you do every day?’

‘Why? You want to go on holiday with me?’

Ah Ning scoffed and Jimmy laughed. As he drank his coffee however, he thought about how he had called Derec the day before – and the day before that.

Jimmy kept telling himself it was a good time to get out of advertising. Everything was turning too digital. It was hard to convince clients to do a digital campaign when he didn’t own an iPhone himself. Day after day, Jimmy revelled in the joy of not having to attend another boardroom meeting or deal with clients and yet, Jimmy had made that call.

After breakfast that day, Jimmy went home and whipped out his mop and broom. It had become his daily mission to annihilate every speck of dust there was in the living room. Before, he used to get someone to come in but now he was the proud owner of a Dyson vacuum cleaner and that new spinning mop the lady at Jaya Jusco had so exuberantly sold him.

By 2.30 he was done. Jimmy sat on the sofa facing the wall clock, a large nautical device that could either be construed as hideous or cool. He had been impressed at the time by how the clock had once been used on a ship and could tell the humidity level. The metal face with its clutter of dials stared back at him.

So this is how it ends. If he were to die right then, he wondered how long it would be before anyone found his body. Who would it be? The gardener? His sister? Maybe Alicia, but she was less inclined to pop around these days. The clock showed 2:42. Jimmy’s eyes rested on the bonsai plant next to the window.

It began as a propulsion to pick out some dried leaves. After a few minutes Jimmy went to the drawer and found an old pair of scissors. He began to cut and snip and tweeze, until all that was left was a miniature tree bracing a breeze.

His phone rang. Jimmy cast his eyes towards the Nokia vibrating on the coffee table. Must be Derec. He let the phone ring for a second, and then another, and then he picked up.

‘Jimmy?’ she said. ‘It’s Cheryl.’

\*

The days drew into weeks, which drew into months, and Jimmy found a surprising peace in tending to his plants. He went to the nursery and got a dozen more bonsais.

‘Why do you need so many?’ asked Cheryl.

‘They’re all different,’ he said. ‘See, this one is like a phoenix, but that one is like a flower, and this one looks like the sea.’

Cheryl teased him about liking gardening and yet she was always eager to help water his thirteen bonsais. ‘Just three drops,’ he reminded her, reiterating that it was more of a science than an art. When Jimmy followed her to the living room, he noticed her admiring his book collection. He didn’t mention that half the books were Alicia’s. The French art on the wall was hers too.

Sometimes Cheryl would disappear for a week, presumably at work, or back with the old boyfriend. Jimmy never asked. One name seemed to appear frequently on her phone – Eddy J – not that Jimmy was prying. It just happened to be there. The boy even dropped her off a few times at his house.

‘He looks like someone from The Cure,’ Jimmy commented.

‘From where?’

‘Oh, they’re some eighties band.’



‘Actually, he is in a band. He plays at The Front Room sometimes.’

‘Ah, ok,’ said Jimmy. The Front Room was not quite his scene. Jimmy preferred the old school pubs at the edge of town that played Santana and Queen like it was 1981.

Cheryl continued to tap away on her phone while Jimmy ruminated over the perplexities of today’s fashion. He wondered if he should get a pair of those cropped pants everyone seemed to be wearing.

\*

The day that made Jimmy positively happy was the one where Derec called after breakfast.

‘Jimmy!’ he boomed. ‘How are you?’

‘Good.’

‘Guess what?’

‘What?’

‘Celcom wants to come back to us. And they want you to manage the account.’

‘Oh.’

‘They said you did such a great job on the last campaign. They need to have you back. What do you say?’

‘Actually, I’m a bit busy at the moment.’

And that was the truth. Jimmy was in the midst of finalising a business venture with the nursery owner he’d gotten acquainted with. ‘I’ll tell you more once it’s official,’ he said. ‘I understand... I understand... Yes, it’s my own thing. Thanks for calling though. Send my regards to Yanti!’

After he hung up, Jimmy danced around so much he almost knocked over his sea bonsai. When the doorbell rang, he answered

it to find Cheryl. A smear of charcoal accentuated her lower lid as she narrowed her eyes at him.

‘You look happy.’

‘I am,’ said Jimmy with a silly grin. He told her about Derec and the joy of being the one to turn him down. He steered her in and rattled away about his plans to bring hydroponic plants in from Taiwan. ‘I can’t believe no one has done this yet,’ he said. ‘It’s huge in Japan.’

Cheryl tucked her bag next to the sofa. Then she trudged to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of gin. Her top and bottom – both black – were made from a light cotton material. Holding a crystal glass in her hand, she contemplated the Chat Noir poster on the wall.

Later that night, Jimmy whipped up some Jamie Oliver pasta for dinner. He and Cheryl sat at the kitchen table facing each other. Cheryl prodded a piece of tomato with her fork.

‘What’s wrong?’ said Jimmy.

‘Nothing.’

Cheryl started twirling some pasta. ‘How close were you to my dad?’

‘Not that close, why?’

‘Who is Marie?’

‘Who?’

‘Marie.’

Jimmy knew who Marie was. He recalled when Peter had just separated from his wife and Jimmy was stuck with the little girl in the back terrace. He remembered trying to think of games to play – bottle caps, football, gin rummy – and checking to see if Peter had finished. He could see bits of that girl in the woman before him now, especially the way she was boring into him with her eyes.

‘Is that what’s bothering you?’ he asked. ‘She was just a friend – it didn’t mean anything.’

Cheryl nodded.

‘Do you think that’s why your parents split?’

Cheryl shrugged. She strode over to a drawer and pulled out a pack of cards. ‘Want to play?’

On the living room floor, fans of cards sprouted between them. Cheryl put down her last hand – a set of three Jacks – and said, ‘Okay, that’s enough.’

‘What? Why?’

‘You are so bad.’

‘What do you mean?’ He glanced at the score sheet. ‘Ninety-two to a hundred and eight, that’s not too bad!’

‘You’re so slow.’

‘I need to think.’

Cheryl crossed her legs, her skirt sliding up her thigh.

Jimmy cleared his throat and resumed shuffling the cards. He bent them into a bridge and let them fall into a pile. He was so absorbed he did not hear what she said. ‘Sorry?’

Her voice was soft and even. ‘What am I to you?’

\*

Jimmy placed the dishes in the sink. It had been five months since Cheryl and he had started spending time together. He could hear her putting things away – the water bottle, the cups, the chili sauce – she knew exactly where everything went.

After the kitchen was tidy, he went to the bathroom. When he came out, he observed the girl in the living room flicking through his DVDs. She leaned forward and revealed a sliver of

flesh between her blouse and skirt. The image touched him but it also filled him with a dread so great he could not move.

He thought of Alicia, Kim and the others that had come and gone. With Cheryl, it was the same – he could see exactly how it would go. And yet, he did not say anything. The bonsais on his shelf seemed to be cheering him on – the phoenix, flower, sea and wind, perpetually poised for action. Jimmy stepped out. ‘Manhattan is good,’ he said. ‘I don’t mind watching it again.’

Cheryl flashed a smile. She slipped the disk into the player and sat down beside him. They leaned against the sofa and waited for the movie to begin.

THE END

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## Khalil

Khalil was about to sit down to a cup of English breakfast tea when he heard a car door slam outside. The girl was early. A taxi rolled away, leaving her standing in front of his gate. She wore a cotton tunic over a pair of black leggings. Her duffel bag was in her hand and a big black case was strapped across her body.

Natalie had the same wavy hair as her mother, Hana. In fact, Khalil was struck by how much Natalie looked like Hana had as a teenager. From her pale skin and spidery veins, to the tiny eye lashes that stuck out in beautiful determination.

Khalil pushed the gate open and hugged his niece. He noticed Ranjini from the house opposite peeping from her bedroom window. She was probably thinking that Khalil, the old bachelor, was going out with a girl half his age.

Natalie flung her long wavy hair over her shoulders.

‘How long has it been?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know.’ Her voice was low and husky. ‘Five years?’

‘How’s your mother?’ he said.

‘She seems happy, she’s got a new boyfriend.’

‘You didn’t want to go with them on the cruise?’

‘No,’ she said, narrowing her eyes. ‘How about you? Seeing anyone?’

‘No.’ Khalil took her bag and turned towards the house.

The first day passed without occasion. It was awkward, of course, as Khalil had not shared a house with anyone for years. The next day, he made it a point to continue with his routine. At 6 a.m., he went downstairs and swept the porch. The cries from the mosque weaved through the dim light. Natalie’s bedroom window was still dark. The only sign that the room was occupied was the aircon unit rumbling outside her window. Khalil began sweeping near the shoe rack and moved along toward the gate. His thongs made flapping sounds on the cold cement.

He loved this time of the morning when the whole world was asleep. A starling landed on a marigold bush, cocking its head from left to right. There was a time when Khalil thought he might actually settle down with someone. When that didn’t work, he moved to this terrace house in Taman Tun. He had no qualms about leaving his ultra-modern, three-bedroom apartment – although it did have one hell of a kitchen.

After the sun had risen, and after Khalil had tidied his flowerpots, harvested some aloe vera and soaked some beans for soup, Natalie emerged at the kitchen door in an oversized t-shirt. Khalil squinted at the words DAZE or MAZE scrawled on it.

‘Uncle Kal,’ Natalie said. ‘Is it true you used to play the guitar?’

Khalil nodded. His band had been called the Deaf Monkeys. He was sure that quite a few people would still remember them and their lead guitarist who used to play in his sarong. Khalil still wore the same blue and white checkered wrap, though it failed to proffer that same element of coolness when used for pottering around.

Over the next few days, Natalie started to make herself at home. She found a yoga class down the road. She played her guitar in her room. Soon she knew everyone on the street including Raj the bread vendor who would linger to chat as Natalie searched his

bundles of bread. She even had people coming by to pick her up to go to this mamak or that shopping centre.

‘How do you know these people?’ Khalil asked.

‘Friends of friends.’ Natalie shrugged.

They seemed like a pretty eclectic bunch to Khalil. One day, a white Charade stopped in front of the gate and Natalie jumped inside. A Malay guy drove the car. A Chinese girl sat in the back next to a guy with a head of blonde hair.

‘Who were they?’ Khalil asked later that day.

Natalie said, ‘They go to Sunway College.’

‘Even the white guy?’

‘Yeah, he’s an exchange student.’

One Friday, Khalil came back from work and found the Malay boy sitting on his sofa. The cushion, usually leaning against the left arm, was resting in the boy’s lap.

‘Uncle Kal,’ said Natalie. ‘This is Leon. He lives down the road.’

Khalil did not recognise him.

‘Leon is an artist,’ said Natalie. ‘He loved your *Underwater* album cover.’

‘I used it in my class,’ the boy said. He explained that he taught visual communications at Sunway College.

Khalil’s gaze was drawn to his collection of green bottles on the wall. The second-last one was out of place and Khalil had to do everything in his power not to move over and shift it. He felt a small squeezing in his chest and excused himself.

The moment he entered the kitchen, Khalil exhaled, comforted by the sight of his money plant curled up in the corner. He turned



on the kettle and waited for the water to boil. Meanwhile, voices drifted in from the living room.

‘Why did he stop playing?’ asked Leon.

‘I don’t know,’ said Natalie.

‘They never finished their Merdeka Tour in 2009.’

‘I know.’

‘Is it true he got depression or something?’

The water began to boil, drowning out Natalie’s reply. Once the bubbling faded, the voices resumed.

‘Does he ever go out?’ asked Leon.

‘Of course. He goes to the shops. And he works at an ad agency.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, he goes in part-time.’

Ever so quietly, Khalil got up and removed the wedge under the kitchen door. He walked back to the table and sat down. For the first time in five years, he thought of Jake, not as a broad concept or a vague relationship but of him as a person, so real he could have been standing in the room.

Of course, he remembered that tour. How could he forget? He had gone to the studio to pick up more flyers and heard laughter from the storeroom. He thought it was Pauline, the admin person, and it was. But she was not alone. There were two things Khalil remembered: Pauline’s knee-high boots and Jake’s bare back, the unmistakable crocodile tattoo on his left shoulder.

You would think someone of Khalil’s age and experience would not get upset. But as cliché as it sounded, he had thought Jake would be different.

‘At least it wasn’t another guy,’ Jimmy had said, as they sat at a mamak stall after work. Khalil wasn’t sure if that would have

been worse. He thought then of Melati Musa from his hometown in Teluk Intan. Poor Melati. He had tried, really. They'd walk in the park after class or grab ais kacang at the market. And he'd really tried to be kind to her, buying her kuih lapis from the Nyonya stall and listening to her constant chatter. But when he saw his mother talking to hers one day, he knew he had to end it.

'Why?' Melati said. 'Is it someone else?'

Because it was too hard to explain, because he didn't know what else to say, Khalil had said 'Yes.' And when that didn't work, he had left town.

\*

It was hard to ignore the people he sometimes found in his living room. Jon and Pam from yoga class. Leon from up the road. The boy with the blonde hair whose name Khalil couldn't recall. Once he even found Ranjini there with a plate of curry puffs. She was gawking at the bottles he had on the wall.

One Friday, Khalil found Leon sitting outside his gate, his bicycle resting on the ground.

'You looking for Natalie?' Khalil lowered his spade. 'She's at the mall. She's always late.'

'I know,' said Leon with a smile. He picked up his bicycle and dusted the sand off his pants. The boy was an odd choice for Natalie. Not that he was unattractive. He just expected her to be with someone bigger or taller perhaps.

Leon swept away his fringe and Khalil noticed how perfectly shaped his fingers were. They emanated a sense of cleanliness and rawness that matched the linen pants he wore. Khalil glanced at the dirt in his own hands and tried to hide them.

Leon peered through the bars of the gate. 'I like your garden. It feels like a rainforest. Did you plan it that way?'

‘Not really,’ said Khalil. ‘I didn’t do anything for a while, and it got really wild, but you know what? I kind of like it this way. I have to cut those flowers back though.’ Khalil pointed at his begonias. ‘They’re going a bit crazy.’

Leon gripped the top of the brick wall and pulled himself up. ‘They’re okay,’ he said. ‘They look kind of cool like that.’

He jumped back down. The sun lit up the dip in his forearm. Khalil could tell his body was taut underneath his linen shirt.

‘So you teach yoga?’ Khalil asked.

‘Just part-time. Day job at the college, remember?’

Leon’s eyes twinkled and Khalil was reminded of that boy from the circus. He had wanted to tell his father but it was too hard. He told Hana though, and she was the one who convinced him to leave.

‘What are those things?’ said Leon, pointing to a string of flags on Khalil’s roof.

‘They’re from my father’s boat,’ said Khalil. ‘He was a fisherman.’

Khalil found himself telling Leon about all the boats in Teluk Intan decorated in creamy shades of pink, green and yellow. He told him about the evenings on the beach eating deep fried fish crackers around a fire. Perhaps he might even have told him about the boy from the circus when Natalie trotted up.

She appeared at the gate, all breathless and apologetic. Strands of hair fizzled around her face as she gestured wildly with her arms. Khalil watched the two young people chatter away. Then they disappeared down the road and he turned back to his garden, suddenly filled with shadows and ghosts he hadn’t seen for years.

On the day Natalie was to leave, Khalil made tea with peppermint from his garden. He handed her a mug and she cupped it, beaming.

‘Thanks for letting me stay here, Uncle Kal.’

‘I hope you haven’t been too bored.’

‘Not at all,’ she said. She chattered away as she packed and didn’t seem the least bit self-conscious about tossing her underwear around. She reminded Khalil of her mother in that way.

‘Grandma misses you,’ Natalie said. ‘How come you don’t visit her anymore?’

‘Do you?’

‘Not really, but I see her on Facebook a lot. I think she has more friends than you.’

Khalil had abandoned Facebook years ago. His mother must know by now, judging from his old photos. Natalie was looking out the window in that wistful manner Hana used to have. A slight frown dented her brow. Her eyes, already quite small, squinted even smaller.

‘What’s wrong?’ he said.

‘What do you think of Leon?’ she asked.

‘He seems nice, but he doesn’t seem like your type.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘How old is he anyway?’

‘Thirty something, maybe?’

‘Oh, I thought he was younger.’

‘He’s very talented,’ she said. She told Khalil that Leon was really good at yoga, and he had cooked ayam masak merah the other night and it was ‘sooo... delicious.’ Her chatter was amusing if not pleasant and Khalil smiled, absorbing the effervescence of her youth. Soon, there was nothing left on the bed. Natalie zipped up her bag and mentioned the boy again. ‘Maybe you could talk to him some time,’ she said. ‘He really likes your music.’

After Natalie left, the house rippled with an unnatural silence. There were no more snuffles from the bathroom or strains of Indie music from the bedroom. The hallway no longer smelt of strawberry and apple.

In the evening, Khalil potted around the garden as he always did. His marigolds were starting to flower and a single anthurium was in bloom. Other people passed by – the bread man, a schoolboy, a child on a scooter – but Khalil barely noticed them.

A bundle of vines hung over his head like a great big canopy. His spade slipped in and out of the soil. Birds twittered as if from trees a hundred years old. Khalil was so engrossed in what he was doing, he did not hear the bicycle stop at the gate. It was a squeak that made him look up.

A boy stood there holding a book and for a moment Khalil wondered who it was.

‘Hey,’ said Leon. ‘Natalie said to pass you this.’

Khalil squinted at the cover. He walked over and saw Jamie Oliver smiling at him from the front of the book. ‘It’s not mine,’ he said.

‘I know,’ said Leon. ‘Natalie said you wanted to borrow it ... Didn’t you?’

## In the foothills

His blonde hair caught the light of the sun. To Ren Ai it looked like gold. Every few minutes he would stop and scribble something in his book. Like a police inspector. Only there was no one to inspect – just the trees, the birds, a river muttering around them.

His t-shirt was a faded orange, a colour that reminded Ren Ai of little boy things like Winnie the Pooh and Ernie on *Sesame Street*. Ren Ai leaned over her handlebars, trying to see where he'd gone. The boy continued to write things down. Then he looked up and turned towards Ren Ai. She had already started pedaling. She knew he would see nothing but a speck on a bicycle, bobbing towards the road.

\*

When she returned to the coffee shop, the usual crew had accosted the front table. In her mind, she thought of them as The Grand Masters: experts in Chinese Chess who spent their days contemplating important matters in life – like whether Lee Chong Wei would beat Lin Dan in the next Badminton World Cup.

Ren Ai's father stood in front of a bubbling pot. The fire in front of him was so large it made a loud blowing sound. Gas hissed and huffed from a tank underneath the stove. He plunged a giant ladle into the pot and pulled out a tangle of noodles streaming with water.

Clouds of steam billowed around him. Each time the air cleared, he was in a different position – pouring, tossing, stirring – until what resulted was a plate of glistening brown noodles, doused in just the right amount of mushroom broth.

The moment Ren Ai walked into the kitchen, her mother said, ‘Why you so late?’ Ren Ai quickly retied her ponytail and unpacked the bean sprouts she was carrying. She stuffed the whole packet into the fridge, newspaper wrapping and all.

Her mother continued to stir a big pot of chicken soup. ‘Old Fu wants barley,’ she said. ‘Ask the new guy what he wants to drink.’

‘What new guy?’ said Ren Ai. She spun around and saw him at a table in the corner, a mop of blonde hair tumbling over his face. Every few seconds, the wall fan rifled his fringe and the pages of his notebook.

‘He doesn’t look like a tourist,’ said Old Lew, narrowing his eyes at the guy.

‘Artist?’ said Old Fu. He shifted his red tile to an empty square. ‘Ren Ai, you go find out.’

Ren Ai pressed her lips together and walked over to the boy. ‘What drink do you want?’ she asked. He had tiny gold hairs on his arms. His shirt was actually more pink than orange and had fine white stripes on it.

‘You have tea?’

‘Yes. Ice or hot?’

He frowned for a second. ‘Ice,’ he said or more like, ‘Oys.’

‘You want to eat?’ she asked. ‘We only have noodles.’

The boy peered at the plates on the next table and ordered the same. Ren Ai glanced up at the front table and saw Old Lew and Old Fu looking at her. She slipped her notepad away and strode back to the kitchen.

Over the next two days he would order the same thing – wantan mee and iced tea. He would spend approximately five minutes writing in his book before picking up his fork. On the third day, the Grand Masters could not take it anymore. They told Ren Ai they would give her a bag of abalone for answers.

So, this time when Ren Ai placed the man's drink on the table, she paused. 'What are you writing?' She hugged her tray to her chest.

He showed her his notebook and the first thing she saw was this: a squiggle of lines with dots and dashes within it, not unlike a child's drawing.

'That's nice,' she said. And then it began.

He said he was from Australia. His name was Sedrick.

'Sad Rick,' she said carefully.

He spoke about Canberra and his work with Sunway College. He spoke like someone in Friends. When she went back to her drinks station, Old Fu and his crew called her over.

'So?' said Old Fu. 'Is he here on holiday?'

Ren Ai shook her head. 'He's drawing the mountain.'

'Haha,' said Old Lew. 'I told you!'

'No,' she said. 'He's here to study the rocks.'

The next day, Ren Ai bumped into Sedrick as he came out from a cave. He had a little satchel in one hand and a small metal tool in the other.

'What are you doing?' she said.

He showed her something that looked like a piece of rubble. 'It's Balmoral Granite.'

'Oh.'



His eyes glowed as he told her how he found it in the cave. 'It's limestone at the top but look what's underneath!' He explained how you usually had to dig very deep to get something like this, but he'd found it right here. 'Do you know what this means?'

He showed her a ledge where a line of silver slinked into the moss. He said the rocks were like a map and could reveal the entire history of the earth. He pointed at various parts of the wall – quartz, feldspar, slate – as if they were cities, and motioned how they were all aligned with the geological forces of the land.

He pointed to a black mark at the bottom of the wall. 'Look,' he said. 'They're all coming back to this spot!'

When he stood up, Ren Ai got back onto her bicycle.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'I have to go back to the town.'

'Wait, I'm going that way too.'

They walked pass the Yeo farm and the old fishing village. They stopped at a jetty where a network of houses balanced over the water. Gentle waves broke against the stilts. Sedrick stood at the edge of the railing and said, 'Where is everyone?'

'They're out fishing.'

'Not just here. I mean, in general. We've passed a farm, a park, the market. And there is hardly anyone around. Even the town is pretty quiet.'

'I see.' Ren Ai adjusted the plastic bag on her bicycle handle. 'They're at the oil palm estates ... and the city.' She thought of her friends: Ming Yen, Gina and Ban Fu. She thought of that photograph Gina had sent her with the sparkling towers in the background.

They continued down the road. When they reached one of the walkways, Ren Ai stopped. Old Fu sat outside his house, a fishing

net spread in front of him. Ren Ai went over and said something to him in Hokkien. He nodded, giving Sedrick a glance. Each time she said something, he nodded. His fingers never stopped twirling and tucking the string. When Ren Ai finished speaking, he laughed.

‘What?’ said Sedrick. He glanced from Ren Ai to Old Fu, and back to Ren Ai again.

‘Nothing,’ she said with a smile. ‘I was just reminding him that he owed me something.’

The two young people continued on their way. They walked past thick green jungle and foliage so dense you could smell the dew. The only sign of human inhabitation was a bus stop and then it became jungle again. When they reached the sign that said Kaki Bukit – Foothill Village – Sedrick stopped.

Ren Ai could feel his intense gaze, making her look up.

‘Why are you still here?’ he said. A twittering bird went silent.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why are you still in this town?’

Ren Ai gripped her handlebars. A slight breeze caught the ends of her ponytail. She swung a leg over her bicycle and Sedrick smiled.

‘What?’

‘That bicycle is too big for you.’

‘No it’s not.’

‘I didn’t mean it in a bad way,’ he said. ‘You ride it well.’

Ren Ai pushed down hard on the pedals and sped off. Her pink culottes fluttered in the wind. The plastic bag on her right handlebar swung wildly.

‘Wait,’ Sedrick said. ‘I didn’t mean it in a bad way.’

Ren Ai kept going until she reached the main junction. Her chest heaved up and down. Her cheeks were flushed. Two minutes passed before Sedrick reached her.

‘My parents own the shop,’ she said, when he strode up.

‘What?’ he said, panting.

‘They own the coffee shop, that’s why,’ she said, before pushing off again.

\*

The shop was quiet at this time of the afternoon. Sunshine sliced through the bamboo blinds. Everything appeared to be asleep – the metal stove, the plastic basins, a stack of colanders resting on top of each other.

Ren Ai’s gaze strayed to the fish tank. It was Yueh Yee’s and the fish inside were his too. She sprinkled some food into the water and the guppies sucked up the pellets. Their gills flapped open and shut like a lion dance.

So much of Yueh Yee still remained. A baseball cap. A book on planes. Her father sometimes flipped through it as if looking for answers.

Ren Ai found her father in the back kitchen making wantans. She watched him as he worked, always in silence, always in his own world, as if making wantans was a private ritual between him and the dough on his fingers. The pork packets piled up high until there was no more dough left to scoop. Mr. Chin’s eyes started to look glazed. ‘Pa,’ said Ren Ai. ‘We need some fish balls too.’

She put a shopping bag into her bicycle basket and pedaled past Aunty Lin’s house. The old lady waved. ‘Kyan is still at the mill,’ she called out.

‘I know,’ yelled Ren Ai. ‘I’m going to the store.’ She continued on her way, avoiding the ruts on the road.

All around her paddy fields stretched out to the edge of the jungle, and beyond that the mountain stood, a pondering hulk of stone that scowled at you from every direction. Ren Ai took a left turn and cut through a field. There would not be a house in sight for another kilometre, then she would hit the old pillbox and a narrow bridge she had been able to ride over since she was six.

It was Yueh Yee who had taught her how to ride. As always, she found herself recalling the day he fell sick. It was just a fever, the doctor said. So Yueh Yee rested, he lay in bed sleeping and drinking like you did when you were sick. He could only manage small sips of water. When he tried to drink their mother's black chicken soup, he vomited all over the bed.

The doctor said it was viral and to just let him rest. The next day, he was gone. Ren Ai remembered his body lying there with the cotton sheet pulled up to his chin. That was not Yueh Yee – and yet it was. She stood there waiting for him to get up or turn, or smile at her with his small beady eyes. Ren Ai had never seen a silence like that in her life. She gripped her handlebars and flew over the rocks.

\*

Sedrick tapped on a stone with his metal tool. They were in the Fairy's Lair. That's what she and Gina used to call this place when they were young. The rocks here were shiny and looked like crystals.

'Is that Dendritic Agate?' she said, pointing at a patch of green on the wall.

'How did you know that?'

'It was in the book,' she said.

She remembered words and pictures, they stuck in her head. Sometimes she didn't even plan to remember them. Like the words on a passing bus or the names in Sedrick's notebook. She could remember every rock and gem on his list.

‘That’s incredible,’ he said. She spent the rest of the day reading another book he had in his bag. It was about the mountain and how this whole place was underwater 400 million years ago.

\*

On Sedrick’s last night, the town residents threw him a party. They called him ‘Little Rock’ and taught him Chinese chess. After the first game, he beat Old Fu twice. Old Lew laughed and Old Fu decided to retire and watch *Dallas* with the ladies. At 7 p.m. a gun shot rang through the night.

‘What was that?’ said Sedrick, sitting straight in his chair.

‘Deer,’ said Ren Ai.

By 9 p.m., the deer arrived diced and stewed from the kitchen. One of the aunties laid out the steaming claypot onto a table for everyone to share.

Later that night, Sedrick lay on his bed with the moonlight curled up on his chest. From the depths of a rattan chair, Ren Ai listened to him speak. Sedrick spoke in circles. About the beauty of the mountains and the trees, and the artistry of the tiles in her father’s shop. Ren Ai imagined his words as a melody bubbling out of a creek, with neither start nor finish. As the lights outside went out one by one, they stopped.

Ren Ai lay there looking at the ceiling and the shapes of things in the room. The more she looked, the more awake she felt. Finally, she got up and flicked through one of Sedrick’s books. A bus ticket fell out, followed by some slips of paper. Ren Ai glanced at Sedrick. His eyes remained closed. A sliver of streetlight fell on his face. Ren Ai quickly bent down and picked everything up.

She strode to the window. A bat fluttered and disappeared into the night. Ren Ai could only see darkness but she could smell the denseness of the forest. She inhaled the freshness and tried to make out the shapes of the trees. She thought of the deer that had died.

\*

Sedrick left on the morning bus in a cloud of dust. Over the next few days, Ren Ai was too busy to think about anything except for getting things done at the shop, the market, the kitchen – and then the day would start all over again.

A few days later, she was having dinner with Kyan at the Grand River Restaurant when something caught in her throat.

‘Are you okay?’ said Kyan.

She nodded, putting down her chopsticks. Everything in the restaurant began to close in on her – the velvet chairs, the golden curtains, the Buddha statue in the corner. Ren Ai stood up and ran to the balcony.

She gripped the railing with both hands and squeezed her eyes shut. Soon, the tightness disappeared. She wiped her tears away and looked up. All she could see was darkness and the shape of the forest. Then she heard the crickets, and saw the mountain rising high above her.

The next morning, she told Kyan she was going to visit Gina. The bus was a rickety old unit with blue velvet seats. Cool air that smelt of disinfectant streamed out from a vent above. Paddy fields whizzed outside the window as Ren Ai rolled down the only road out of town. She passed Kyan’s family mill, the old pillbox and the little bridge she had ridden over a million times.

Soon, the fields changed into rows of palm oil trees. Ban Fu was working in there somewhere. The trees continued to speed by, one row after another. Ren Ai did not realise how numerous they were. She had never been out this far. As the bus took her further and further away, she conjured up that piece of paper in Sedrick’s book: the one with the address of his hostel. She remembered every word and number on it, like a name card she kept tucked in her head.

Gina was staying in a condominium in the middle of town. The building was called Desa Panorama and had a view of the whole city. There was a rectangular swimming pool in the middle

and coconut trees all around. Gina lived in the tower block. She opened the door and welcomed Ren Ai with a big smile. She looked exactly the same with her bobbed hair and bangs.

‘How is Old Lew? How is Kyan?’ she said. They ate Maggi goreng and talked late into the night. It was just like the old days except that from Gina’s balcony on the seventeenth floor, it wasn’t the darkness Ren Ai saw outside but the ever-sparkling lights of a city.

The next day, Ren Ai woke up to find that Gina had already left for work. She quickly changed her clothes and downed a cup of tea before heading out. As she stepped out of the door, she saw a Chinese woman emerging from another unit. She wore a cream-coloured suit and was putting on a black slingback. Her iron-straight hair framed her face like curtains.

Ren Ai found it hard to stop staring. So, this is what city women looked like. For a brief moment, Ren Ai imagined she might dress like this one day. A little girl, still in pyjamas, stood in the doorway. ‘Bye, mummy,’ she said, waving.

‘Ma’am.’ A woman appeared beside the girl. She was presumably the maid, holding a baby in her arms. ‘You forgot your book,’ she said, handing an organizer to the lady.

Ren Ai grabbed a taxi outside the condominium and took it to Sunway College. She looked like one of the students there in her ponytail and canvas shoes. As people rushed to lecture halls, Ren Ai made a beeline for the hostels. *Block H, Room Number 52*. The words burned in her brain.

Number 52 was on the second floor: a big grey door with scratch marks around the door handle. She knocked, studying the two black numbers. There was no response. She knocked again. Her knocking sounded loud in the mid-morning light. As she was about to go, a door opened – but it wasn’t Sedrick’s. It was another one further down.

‘You looking for Sedrick?’ the boy asked. He gave her a curious look from behind his glasses. The lenses made his face seem far away, but a brightness still shone from his eyes. He told her Sedrick was in Kuantan. ‘He’s back next week,’ the boy said, swinging up his knapsack.

Ren Ai wandered down the hall and found herself browsing through the admissions office. She picked up flyers, she read brochures, she watched people eating their lunch.

When she got back to Gina’s apartment, her face was flushed. Gina came out of the kitchen, holding a spatula. ‘Where have you been?’ she said.

Ren Ai clutched the paper bag in her hand, filled with flyers and a free pen. ‘I’m going to university,’ she said.

\*

During the first semester she spent lots of time with Sedrick. You could even say they were going out. She met his friend Natalie Ibrahim who played in a band with him, and some other guys from the geological society. They chatted in mamak stalls until the wee hours of the morning and went on road trips.

The following month, Sedrick went back to Australia and Ren Ai plowed herself into her studies. There were plans to visit him in Canberra but she got too busy with a science project, then the next time, he had to go to Adelaide for work. By the time she graduated, they hadn’t been in contact for a year.

On her last semester break, Ren Ai found herself back on a bus to the village. When she reached the main street, she noticed the changes. New shop lots, a department store, traffic lights near the beach. Even her parents’ coffee shop had changed. There was a sealed-up section with air-conditioning and big glass windows. ‘It’s because of the resort,’ said her father, pointing at a tall, glassy building in the middle of town.



In the market that morning, Ren Ai bumped into Kyan at a vegetable stall. He was there with his wife, Lee Na. Ren Ai's mother had already filled her in about the girl. Kyan gave stilted answers to Ren Ai's questions. Lee Na fiddled with the spinach sticking out of her bag. Then the two of them disappeared into the crowd. It was then that Ren Ai spotted the familiar figure slipping through packets of rice dumplings

'Yueh Yee,' she cried. 'Yueh Yee!' She dashed after the boy as he wove in and out of the crowd. His slight frame kept appearing and disappearing between the stalls. He stopped at a fruit booth, peering at some melons with his glasses – then he disappeared again.

Ren Ai raced past all kinds of market goods – mangoes and seaweed, plastic basins and dried anchovies – until she burst out into a field. Golden grass waved everywhere but there was no sign of Yueh Yee. Ren Ai looked up, and was bowled over by the mountain in front of her.

'Hey, it's you,' the voice said. Ren Ai spun around and saw the boy looking at her. She never forgot a name. Lucas Ng, Room 28. He adjusted his glasses and told her he was working in the village as a teacher.

She shook her head. 'Why here?' she said. 'No one comes here.'

Lucas beamed. 'It was your friend,' he said. 'Sedrick – he said I had to come.'

## Camellias

It was the first day of a new school year. Vanessa tried not to shiver as she walked her daughters towards the gates of Rowville Primary. Chloe was going into prep and Isabel was going into year three, and what a day it was to start the semester.

Rain fell in splinters as the wind cut through the anorak Vanessa had bought from Universal Traveller in Kuala Lumpur. She remembered standing with Eu Jin in the salesman's shop as he extolled the virtues of his Number One Best-Selling Jacket. A jacket, Vanessa soon discovered, that did not quite hold up to the Aussie winter. Or summer for that matter. She pulled it tighter around her chest and trudged ahead.

It had been three years since Vanessa had arrived in Melbourne. A friend from KL asked her if this felt like a long time and she had said, 'Yes and No.' The moment she said this, she smiled. When had she picked up this phrase? It used to pop up all the time the year she came.

*Did you like working there? Yes and no.*

*Was the market any good? Yes and no.*

Vanessa noticed how Australians could never commit to an answer, qualifying everything with opposing arguments.

While Isabel strode off to her class, Vanessa walked Chloe to the prep foyer already filling with children. One was bawling, another

laughing, a few looked wide-eyed and ready to bolt. Chloe just stood there, occasionally adjusting her orange headband.

‘Mum, where is my fleece?’ she asked.

‘Didn’t you pack it?’ Vanessa said.

Chloe checked her bag again. Unable to find it, the girl joined the other kids. Two minutes later, the prep doors swung open and Chloe ran in without looking back. Vanessa walked out onto the street, stepping over a flower curled up in a puddle. There was no more rush. It was as if someone had flicked off a switch and she could finally slow down. She let the concrete path take her back to her Holden Aster sitting at the edge of the court.

Rain began to sizzle on the glass. Vanessa drove to Coles as always. This time it seemed painfully empty without the girl. Where was her mini shopping cart? Where was the patter of her sandals? The last time they were there, Chloe had pointed to a boy with long hair.

‘Look mum,’ she said. ‘That man’s got not shoes.’ The boy didn’t have a shirt on either. He stood in his Bermuda shorts eyeing a shelf of Doritos.

‘Yeah, some people do that,’ said Vanessa, steering her daughter away. She could not stop thinking of the boy’s bare feet on the road – on chewing gum and spit, and public toilet floors.

When Vanessa got back home, she checked her email and the usual list of newsletters sprang up: Scoopon deals, Catch of the Day, a Crocs offer for the whole family. There were no rejection letters. There hadn’t been for months – because Vanessa had stopped applying.

Her friends suggested she try working in childcare – lots of mums were doing it these days. Vanessa would have preferred to lock herself up in a room. In fact, the prospect of burying herself in her sheets seemed wondrous.

The doorbell rang. Vanessa sat up, feeling as if she had been caught doing something – or not doing something. She peered through the blinds and saw the old man from a week ago. He'd handed her a flyer about 'God's Loving Family.' He reminded her of the man she used to visit at the old folk's home in Malaysia. He would be dressed in the same outfit each time waiting for her to pick him up for church.

'No, you can't take it,' Eu Jin had said when she told him about the flyer. 'That means you're interested, and they'll come back.'

And there he was at the door.

Vanessa sat frozen, praying he could not see her through the blinds. He glanced at the car in the driveway and rang the bell again. He stared right at the window as if he could see Vanessa inside. But he must have been looking at his own reflection – a slightly stooped gentleman clutching a leather-bound book.

After making three more raps, the man walked off. Two ladies floated up to join him like Pacman ghosts, then they all dispersed.

*Ding.*

An email came in from Cotton On. 'New Summer Styles Out Now!' followed by a series of emojis. Vanessa ignored the message and hopped onto Facebook. Farah was now partner at the law firm with 173 Likes. The girls had gotten together for another gathering. They were all wearing cheong sams – *Oh, it was Chinese New Year!* How could Vanessa have forgotten?

Cheery group shots flooded her screen: people tossing yee sang and posing with lions in the most vibrant shades. At No. 2 Strada Road, a lone wattle leaned over Vanessa's driveway. Nothing moved, not a leaf nor a bird, until a young lady appeared. She was wearing a creamy white suit, her lanyard swinging like a medal as she marched up the footpath.

A few years ago, this was Vanessa: glossy and suited, and headed for Hong Kong. Then Eu Jin announced the visa approval and they were all set for Australia. The new world of green grass, fresh air, and as much space as you wanted.

‘How beautiful,’ said her friends of the photos she posted on Facebook. Vanessa did not reply, the silence of the house burned in her ears. She was still not accustomed the quietness, and the darkness outside when it was only 5 p.m. She missed her apartment in Desa Panorama where the children could spend hours in the pool or hang out at the mall until ten at night.

After dark in Rowville there was nothing for her and Eu Jin to do except watch TV. Vanessa’s phone rang. It was Eu Jin, asking her about Chloe. ‘She was fine,’ Vanessa said, her voice bright and perky. ‘Very happy.’

‘What are you going to do?’ he asked.

‘I’ve got tonnes of laundry. And the bathrooms. We haven’t cleaned them in ages!’

Eu Jin hung up. He used to be Senior Manager at Microsoft Malaysia. Now he spent eight hours a day feeding brochures into little envelopes. Between 5.00 and 5.10 p.m. each day, his little Toyota Ascent would chug up the street and stop underneath the wattle, and out would pop Eu Jin swinging his work bag.

A wave of tiredness swept over Vanessa. Just ten minutes, she told herself, walking towards the bedroom. As soon as she stepped inside, her phone rang again.

‘Hello?’ she said. Her heart pounded at the thought of being caught.

‘I forgot to say just now, Aunty Siew Ching asked if we wanted to come over for dinner on Saturday.’

‘What for?’

‘Nothing, we just haven’t met up in a while.’

Vanessa gripped the phone. 'I'm not that keen.'

'Why? I thought you said it would be good to meet up with other people.'

'I just find it a bit tiring going there. Everything is so formal.'

'Is it because of Olivia?' asked Eu Jin.

'No ...'

'She's not that bad.'

'I know, we just don't have that much in common.'

'You both did finance.'

'Yes, but she works for some fancy firm in the city.'

A high-pitched noise squealed from Eu Jin's end of the phone, followed by a beeping sound. 'I have to go,' he said. 'Talk later.'

\*

Vanessa intended to start making chicken soup for dinner but found herself stepping out of the house. No one was around except for old Mr. Stabilos who was pruning his hedge outside. The other houses were deserted – everyone was either at work or in school. Irene Haughton, her next-door neighbour, didn't work but she kept to herself most of the time. Vanessa tried to bring over a chocolate cake once but all she got was an awkward thanks. She found out later that Irene was allergic to dairy.

Vanessa drove all the way down North Road and found herself on a shopping strip in Oakleigh. Something made her slip into that parking spot in front of Brumby's. She strolled down the street past Priceline, Target, and a construction site. She continued walking until she reached a field of dandelions.

Looking at the endless expanse of grass, she thought of her house in Malaysia. Not the one she and Eu Jin used to live in but the house of her childhood. The one with the pergola and the fir trees where the rain would fall so hard it felt like the sky was

breaking. She thought of the Indonesian boy who had died. Is this how he felt?

The sun began to eat through Vanessa's sleeve. She strolled back up and stopped in front of a shop window. There was a painting inside. Vanessa was not sure if it was the soft, pink flowers or the golden frame, but she could not stop looking at it. She had never bought a painting in her life except for a couple of prints from Ikea.

'Lovely, isn't it?' the shop lady said when Vanessa walked in. 'It's chalk you know, very special.' The beads around the lady's neck clattered as she adjusted her glasses.

'How much is it?' said Vanessa.

It was a lot. Far more than Vanessa thought it would be – and yet, not so. Yes and no. Vanessa browsed through the shop, looking at random items like cheese knives and keychains. Then she walked up to the counter and spoke to the lady.

She strode out holding the large, brown package under her arm. It felt like a trophy. Golden light sprung from everywhere: the grocer, the post box, the track-suited lady puffing up with her pram. As she sailed past this lady, Vanessa's phone rang.

'Where are you?' asked Eu Jin. His voice sounded far away. A train trundled by: bells rang over the crossing.

'What?'

'The school called,' he said. 'You didn't pick up the kids.'

'I bought a painting,' she said.

'What?'

'I bought a painting!'

\*

It hung in the centre of the living room. You could see it the moment you walked into the hall. It seemed slightly ostentatious

for the little house. At the same time, it added a sense of character. On the bottom right-hand corner there was a signature: H. Shepparton. Was it someone famous? Could it be valuable? Vanessa did a Google search but could not find any artist by that name.

Every day, as Vanessa wiped the kitchen counter, she would stare at the painting. There was something about it: a darkness beneath the flowers, like it had taken a hundred different shades to become what it was. If Vanessa was a painter, this is what she would have painted. She liked it best when a single lamp shone beneath the painting. It was then that the camellias came to life.

It reminded Vanessa of an ability she used to have when she could read people's colours. She felt an overwhelming urge to know who the artist was. Examining the picture again, she hunted for clues. She scanned the edges of the canvas, turned it around and there – tucked in the corner – was a small sticker that said Mansfield Framers.

The next day was a superbly sunny Saturday: the type Australians spent at the beach or mowing the lawn. After Eu Jin returned from doing the shop at Aldi, Vanessa said, 'Let's go for a drive.'

'Where?'

'Mansfield.'

'Where?'

She told him it was near Mount Buller.

The drive took five hours. The first hour, Isabel and Chloe were fighting. The second, it was Vanessa and Eu Jin. If Vanessa was to look back, it would be hard to pinpoint the root of the argument. First, it was about Eu Jin leaving his mug in the sink, then it became a full-blown onslaught about why the hell they had come to this country.



After a while, it seemed better to stare out the window and watch the fields roll by. Mountain ashes, wheat fields, skinny trees too scraggly to be called 'forest.' Every time they passed a farm, Vanessa would yell 'What animal is that?' and this would entertain Chloe for a full minute. By the time they got to Mansfield, it was dark. They checked into a cabin and turned in for the night, the cold air still hanging between the two adults.

The morning was slightly overcast with a glow that promised sunshine later in the day. Vanessa woke up to find Chloe shouting at the window. 'Kangaroo!' she said. 'Kangaroo!' She pointed at the trees and both girls became transfixed like kids at the cinema. At breakfast, Chloe climbed into Vanessa's lap.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'Reading the news.'

'Read, read!' Chloe pleaded the way she did at bedtime.

Vanessa tried to recall something appropriate. A child was hacked in a train station. Some guy shot his parents in Pakenham. She folded the paper and said there had been a storm in Eildon, a tree had fallen over.

'Will there be a storm here?' Chloe asked, frowning.

'No,' said Vanessa. 'Not here, Eildon is far away.'

After breakfast, they followed the GPS to the address in town. When they got there, Eu Jin released the kids into a playground while Vanessa made her way towards the art gallery.

'Can I help you?' said the shop lady.

'No, just browsing,' said Vanessa. She scanned the artwork on display: gum trees, bush land, a rusty tractor in a field. None of the artists were named Shepparton. Perhaps she wasn't an artist at all. Perhaps she was just some lady who painted in her garage.

Vanessa grabbed a couple of blank cards and went to the counter. The shop lady chatted away about the lovely weather they were having and the ‘incredible vanilla slices’ next door. ‘There you go love,’ she said, handing Vanessa her change.

‘You haven’t heard of an artist called H. Shepparton, have you?’ Vanessa ventured.

‘Shepparton, that sounds familiar. The only Sheppartons I can think of are those that lived out in Warranga. It was quite sad really – the wife drove her car into the lake right over there.’

Vanessa looked at where the woman was pointing but all she could see was a canon on a hill. After leaving the art gallery, Vanessa passed a bookstore. *A History of Mansfield* was displayed in the window. She imagined ‘H’ as one of those ladies in a frilly hat. Had she walked these very streets? Had she sat under that tree? Harriet, Heather, Heidi, had she wanted to get away too?

Vanessa thought it would be better once they moved. But the incidents kept recurring. She remembered the day Chloe refused to stop crying. She’d chucked both kids into the car and started driving past the school, past the shops and into the open highway. Before she knew it, she was in some industrial park called Melton.

She stepped out of the car and closed the door – and once she closed it, everything became silent. From far away, she would have looked like a lady taking a cigarette break, some Chinese lady in her puffer jacket enjoying the view. Though there had not been not much of a view – only a metal fence with the words KEEP OUT written on it.

When Vanessa got back to the car, Eu Jin and the kids were already inside. Eu Jin said something about checking out a water-fall near the next town. They passed wheat field after wheat field, while Chloe and Isabel bickered in the back. Soon their cries grew too loud to ignore.’

‘Was it worth coming all this way?’ muttered Eu Jin.

Vanessa frowned and continued to stare ahead. Her window filled with more scraggly trees. There was nothing to see but grass. Then just as they crossed a bridge, Vanessa said, 'Stop!'

'What? What is it?'

She pointed at a small clapboard cottage, but it was the garden you could not miss. Flowers burst out like rainbows, hundreds of blooms in all shapes and colours spanning the width of the yard.

'I don't think you can go inside,' Eu Jin said. 'That's someone's house.'

'I just want to take a photo.'

Vanessa got out of the car and walked up to a flowering bush.

'G'day,' said a voice that seemed too loud. 'You lost?'

'Oh no. I'm here with my husband... and kids.' Vanessa gestured to the Toyota on the gravel. 'You've got such beautiful flowers.'

'Thanks!'

A muffled sound travelled through the air, followed by a soft, thudding noise. Vanessa saw Chloe banging on the car window.

'You people want to come in?' the lady said. 'I've got more flowers inside.'

'No, it's okay,' Vanessa said. 'We should get going. The kids are—'

'Hello!' Isabel pranced up. 'Are those daffodils?' she said, pointing at a bunch of yellow flowers.

'Yes, they are. My, aren't you smart!'

'You've got an owl!' Isabel exclaimed.

'Yes, he's a very special owl. He's there to scare the snakes away. I don't very much like snakes.'

'Me neither!' said Isabel.

‘Would you like to see what other flowers I have?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Isabel.

And so Eu Jin, Vanessa and the two girls tread into the lady’s garden with delicate feet. She said her name was Roz. She had curly brown hair the colour of the wheat fields they had just passed. Every time the kids did something, she let out a medley of chuckles.

Isabel skipped from one stone to another, a pink unicorn in her hair. ‘Is this a garden centre?’ she asked.

‘No.’ Roz laughed. ‘Just my garden.’

‘You have so many flowers. Are these roses?’

‘No, they’re camellias.’

‘Did you plant all of them?’

‘No, me mum did. She loved camellias.’

‘Why?’

‘I think she liked them because they’re super hardy. She used to say, plant a camellia anywhere and it will grow. Look at those plants all dried up. But see this camellia...? Pretty cool-eh?’

Isabel narrowed her eyes at Roz as if processing this information, then she broke into a smile. ‘Yeah,’ she said.

When Roz went to get some drinks, Vanessa followed her inside. The first thing she saw was a large, crocheted cockatoo sitting on the kitchen sill.

‘Did you make that?’ Vanessa asked.

‘Yep,’ said Roz, chuckling.

Vanessa smiled at the baby cockatoo next to it. When she turned her attention the side wall however, she went still. ‘Did you paint these?’ she asked, bending down to view the pictures.

‘What?’ Roz was reaching up for some cups. She swung around and said, ‘Oh no, Mum did. Knitting’s more my thing.’ If Roz said anything else, Vanessa did not hear it. She was too engrossed studying the pictures. They were smaller than what she had but you could see the similarities right up to the artist’s signature in the corner.

‘What was your mum’s name?’ Vanessa asked.

Roz put down her teapot. ‘Helen,’ she said with a smile.

By the time Vanessa walked out of the kitchen, she had developed a hazy picture of Helen in her mind. A city girl who had followed her husband to the country, but never quite fitting into the lifestyle.

The sound of running water drew Vanessa down a path. She stopped at a bridge and peered into the stream. She tried to catch a glimpse of something – a face, a smile, the glint of a car – but all she saw was darkness. She continued following the creek until it opened into a pool. In the distance, under a tree, she saw a man sitting on a bench. Another Chinese person, she thought. Then he waved and she recognised Eu Jin.

He looked different in that light. He looked like he did when all he had was a bass guitar.

‘Where did you come from?’ he asked as she walked up.

‘There’s a path,’ she said, gesturing towards the house.

Eu Jin’s eyes softened. Vanessa sat beside him and gazed out at the lake. The water glistened like a million diamonds trying to outshine the sun. The kids streamed around leaving trails of laughter.

‘It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?’ said Eu Jin.

‘Yes,’ said Vanessa. ‘It is.’









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