

Blue Violet

[by Renaa Bhai V. Visvanathan]

The young woman wore a blue dress that matched her blue shoes. She held the hand of a little girl, who had just turned four. They walked towards the bus interchange, their steps in sync. When they reached the chaotic mob at the interchange, the woman let go of the girl's hand. She bent down and whispered into the girl's ear, "Stay still". Then the woman pushed past the crowd, never stopping to look back. She walked away from the bus interchange that day. The young woman who wore a blue dress that matched her blue soul.

Twenty years later, the image of the woman in blue still haunts Violet's thoughts and at times, her dreams. But the woman appears faceless in these dreams. Whenever she sees these flashes of blue, she knows it's time to pay a visit to Doctor Lowe. Violet has known Doctor Lowe almost her whole life. One could say they share the relationship similar to that of a grandfather and a granddaughter. Though the doctor's holy white capsules seemed to be getting weaker throughout the years, they have usually been able to keep the demons at bay. In addition to that, Violet had found love. Love could cure everything, couldn't it?

The one who caught her when she fell was named Adam. Adam and Violet fell together like two jigsaw pieces that fit effortlessly. It was almost as if Violet was walking to a tune only she could hear, and then one day Adam fell in step next to her. Fast would be the adjective used to describe their story. They fell in love fast. They made love soon after. Before they knew it, wedding vows were being recited. "Always & Forever", they promised each other.

Always & Forever.

How have those words lost their significance thought Violet as she reached for her wedding ring that was under her vanity. She picked it up and noticed the scratch in the Sapphire stone. She regretted throwing it as hard as she did when she had an argument with Adam, the previous night. Adam had been spending too much time with his new assistant. Like he did with the last one, and the one before. Adam always said his relationships with his assistants were professional but Violet knew better. Violet's confrontations often lead to intense quarrels that would leave them both exhausted and miserable. After each of these episodes, Violet requests for a divorce but Adam convinces her of her paranoia and begs her to *stay*. Violet always *stays* but only after making sure that Adam fires his assistant and hires a new one.

This time she needed to think of another way to make him pay. She headed down to her favourite café, Azure, to think things through. She sat down with a mug of coffee, her head buzzing with thoughts that were multiplying by the second.

"You've stirred enough for today, don't you think?" a voice cut through Violet's thoughts.

Violet looked down at her mug and realized that she had spilled some of her coffee on the table. She had stirred her coffee more vigorously than she intended to. She looked up at the source of the voice and saw a middle-aged woman. The woman offered Violet a packet of tissue, smiled and said, "Hi, I'm Sky, but there's nothing blue about me". *What a strange thing to say*, thought Violet.

Sky had an athlete's lean physique and a pixie haircut. She was around the same height as Violet. She donned a navy velvet blazer with fitted white trousers. There was an understated elegance in the way she was dressed and carried herself. Sky somehow felt familiar to Violet.

That was the start to Violet and Sky's friendship. The more time Violet spent with Sky, the less

she thought about Adam's after-work activities. They had many things in common, like the genre of novels, films and music they preferred, and the way they liked their tea. Violet even thought that they looked alike. Sky was understanding and nurturing when Violet needed someone to talk to. Sky's hugs were like warm quilts that made Violet feel safe. There was something magnetic about Sky. The heat that was lost in Violet's marriage was right there in the palms of a woman named Sky. When they were in close proximity, Violet felt as if there was electricity in the air. Soon after, so did Sky.

The faceless woman in blue made frequent appearances in Violet's dreams even though she remembered taking her medication. In one of these dreams when the faceless woman turned towards Violet, she was wearing Sky's face. This dream haunted Violet even during the day. As things got more intimate with Sky, the occurrence of this dream was frequent. After a while, Violet got used to it.

It was a paradisiacal Sunday afternoon. Violet and Sky were lying on their beach mat, enjoying the constant sound of waves licking the shore. Violet felt a sudden sting in her right eye and started rubbing it. Sky bent over Violet, gently pulled Violet's hand away from her eye and whispered, "Stay still". Then, she blew into Violet's eye. Violet felt paralyzed for a minute. Sky's words took her twenty years back in time and she felt like the little girl abandoned at the bus interchange again. Sky's nudge brought Violet back to reality. She looked into Sky's eyes as if searching for an answer. *Could it be...* That was the moment it all clicked in Violet's head.

She is my mother. Sky is my mother.

Sky had all the qualities of a perfect mother. Sky was around the same age as Violet's mother probably was. Sky always wore blue. Her name was "Sky" for heaven's sake!

Blue! Blue! Blue!

Violet could not breathe all of a sudden. How could she not have drawn these parallels sooner! How else can the intense connection they shared be explained!

Violet left the beach that day, a little light headed. She was leaning against Sky as they walked towards their car. Violet looked up at Sky, her mother, and squeezed her hand.

You finally came back, Mom.

The days that followed were an emotional blur for Violet. At the end of the third day, however, Violet made a decision. She was not going to let anything ruin her second chance at happiness. So she came up with a plan to keep her mother with her forever. This time Mother would not abandon her.

Sky found Violet at her door at half past midnight on Wednesday. Violet appeared to be in the midst of an emotional breakdown and kept referring to Sky as, "Mommy" which confused Sky a little. However, she let Violet collapse in her arms and consoled her with kisses to her forehead. As Sky was about to pull away she felt an unbearable pain in her back. She looked down and was met with a surreal sight of a knife protruding from her torso. Blood was running down her body. She looked at Violet perplexed as nausea hit her and she slumped to the floor. She tried to pull the knife out but she was too weak. Violet wrenched the knife out and stabbed Sky several times while softly whispering, "Stay still" over and over again.

After Sky was gone, Violet used the knife to stab herself four times. Her vision blurred as she slowly laid onto a puddle of Sky's blood. She smeared the warm, slippery crimson liquid all over herself with the strength that she could muster. She closed her eyes. This was how it

must have felt to be in her mother's womb she thought. It all started in the warmth of the womb and that is how it should end.

"I'm still, Mother, I'm still", were the last words uttered by Violet.

There were two female bodies found at a grisly crime scene early Wednesday morning. The woman who was identified as Violet Lee, 25, by her spouse Adam Lee was said to have been suffering from Schizophrenia, a chronic psychological disorder. The purse that belonged to Mrs Lee, which was found at the crime scene, had a bottle of medication for her condition.

The seal, however, was not broken.

Chempaka

[by Nur Diyanah Bte Jonah]

I cracked an eyelid open and stared at the rusty patches on the roof. My heart sank as the smell of frying *chincalok* pierced my nostrils and roughly hauled me back to reality.

I am still here.

I twisted my neck gently and stifled a groan into the musty-smelling pillow. I blinked and sighed.

The sky was a depressing purple, a bruised beginning to a much loathed existence in this god-forsaken place. From the cracks between the planks, I could see the *padi* stalks waving a gentle morning greeting to me as the cold morning air nestled itself between my toes. I propped myself up on one of my elbows and sighed resignedly. Without realising, my lips had pulled itself into a pout.

“I guess I’d be here for some time.” I mumbled angrily to the crude wooden rectangle framing the picturesque scene. I pushed myself up on my knees and buried my face into the pillow, wishing with all my might that my parents were not so traditional. It is just like them to threaten me with this punishment when I was caught doing something they deemed immoral. It was not even a cigarette for God’s sake. Just *sheesha*. That was all.

I snorted insolently into the pillow and swung my legs over the bed, causing it to creak obstinately at the abuse from bearing my body weight after years of abandoned use. My aunt would not be thrilled if I broke her best bed. Of course this was her best bed. It was the only bed there in this rickety house. *Pfft*. Everyone else was sprawled on thin mattresses or carpets when the night beckons. It feels like I might end up on the floor if I turned in my sleep. It did not help that the bus my parents packed me onto seemed to take on every hole it possibly could on the road. My body ached badly, a by-product of the arduous bus ride to the middle of green wilderness.

I pushed air forcefully through my nose as footsteps echoed through the wooden floors, indicating the arrival of the unwelcomed one.

“Chempaka, are you up? *Sudah fajar.*” my aunt called out, knuckles thwacking hard against the wooden leaf separating her unwanted presence and the room. The room suddenly seemed gloomy. It must be the effect of her presence.

Resentment coiled itself into a tight knot beneath my ribs. “*Sudah wak*” I answered.

I scrutinised the gaps between the planks separating me from the oh-so-cheery *padi* plants. I never wanted to come back here. I never wanted to come back here. I never wanted to be reminded of you. I never wanted to allow memories to anchor me or my feelings for anything. Least of all, you.

I glared indignantly at the happy stalks mollicoddling each other when a breeze caresses them.

“My dear aunt, you’d send me home once you realise I am not changing just because I’m exiled.” I whispered.

The sky was ablaze in a bright blue and fluffy clouds cheerfully tittered on a downy pedestal watching me frown in discomfort. Everything was annoyingly cheerful. Sweat beaded at my

temples and a drop of saline liquid ran cheerfully down the length of my neck into my cleavage. I pulled the damp *sarong* from between my legs as I stared dreadfully at the tall guava tree.

“Seriously, you want me to climb this? In a *sarong*? What’s so wrong about wearing pants?”

I pushed up the sleeves on my *baju* and gripped my waist, my arms akimbo. With a sudden rush of blood, I kicked off my slippers against the tree. It barely shivered from my assault. The guava tree was just a sapling when I was last here. Wak Ani once said that it was considered proper for a lady here to wear *sarong* in a *kampung* and because I am under her roof, I had to wear one. An unmarried woman wearing pants is considered shameless as pants defined our legs and men would stare. By 11, the age I first had my womanly cycles, I had to don one of these confining wraps around me. I snorted.

I turned and allowed my gaze to follow the length of the garden. Unruly weeds were sprouting alongside the edges of the flimsy chicken wire planted to prevent runaway poultry from the barn. No one has tended this place in ages. I turned to the impending task at hand and approached the tree with a frown. Gamely, I planted one foot against the trunk and wrapped my fingers tightly on one of the branches. With a massive burst of energy, I hauled myself above into the tree, swinging my legs over and gripped the branch with my lean thighs.

I gasped at the rough bark cuffing against the soft skin of my inner thigh. My skin was used to soft cashmere wraps and silky fabrics, not rough irritating barks. My days of sitting astride coarse branches were long over. I grabbed a few guavas, aiming at the basket accurately. The first fruit bounced at the rim of the basket but the rest that followed landed with a satisfying thud into the rattan container. I felt a tell-tale tug at the corners of my lips. I must have missed being a kid to enjoy this so much despite the redness I would experience in between my thighs.

My eyes swept across the yard. From the aerial view, the place and the hurtful memories seemed so far away. My eyes traced the perimeter and rested on the rusty swing parked at the edge of the veranda. I closed my eyes and I could see your shiny black hair braided with pink ribbons, your white *baju kurung* and the clean smell of soap from your skin. I could see your dimples and the long eyelashes that framed brown round eyes so full of hope and kindness. I could hear your laughter and the high-pitched squeal each time I pushed you. I could feel you, sense you. I was sure that if I reached out, I would touch you, feel your soft milky skin.

Suddenly, I felt a strange sensation creeping up my by now abused thigh. I looked down and yelped.

“*Kerengga!*”

The battery of fire ants marching in an organised fuss on my thighs flexed their incisors like practised surgeons and plunged their blades into my skin.

I swatted frantically with my fingers, heart racing upon realising that there was not much effect. In my flurry of panic, I did not realise that my thighs had loosened their grip on the branch. Fear squeezed my heart painfully as gravity wrenched me to the ground. My fingers desperately clutched at the rush of green and brown but alas, it they failed as I ungracefully answered the call of gravity, landing in a heap of damp *sarong*, leaves in my braid and profanities that would have earned solid clouts to the head from my mother.

Frantic and in blinding pain, I ran to the yard, wrenched the *sarong* up and desperately hosed down my wounds from the fire ants. I cursed angrily and sat down heaving against the water tank. My creamy white skin was dotted with angry bites and I could feel the hot flood of salty water coursing down my face, mixing with my perspiration. Something inside me pushed

against my ribs. The composed façade I had been holding up so well flaked and cracked.

Why did you have to leave me with your mother? You were the only one sibling I had; even if we did not come from the same parents, you were the only sibling I had. You were my only elder sister who would have bothered to help me out when I muddled up my life and got into tight spots too difficult to wriggle out from. You were the only one I trusted and told secrets to, the only one who would listen and not treat me as a failure my parents constantly reminded me I am to them. You had been my rock, my pillar of strength when I feel like I cannot go on. Why did you have to leave me here alone to fight through life by myself? We had dreams and ambitions. We were going to be each other's bridesmaids. Why did you have to go and hurt yourself with those pills? Surely, we would have crossed that bridge together?

I shut my eyes and recalled the day I came home to find you sleeping on the couch. I teased you while I put away groceries, thinking you would respond with something about trying to stifle your nerves two days before the engagement.

How could I have known that he had left you the week before and nothing you did would have brought him back? How would I have known? Why did I not notice how sad you were and how you shunned any talk about him and seemed overly focused on the trays of goods you would have exchanged with him? How could I have not sense your hurt, Mawar? Would you ever know how much I regretted being so focused on my career and not sensing your pain? Would you ever know?

The flimsy sheen of silver blurred my vision acutely and I sobbed into the edge of my shirt. Warm hands grasped my shoulder and then, circle my middle. I could hear Wak Ani's raspy tone whispering "shhh, it's okay, shhh."

"I'm sorry, I should have taken care of her better."

"Chempaka, it was her choice. You didn't do anything wrong."

I hugged my aunt tightly and allowed my tears to soak her *baju kurung*. Today might be the beginning of healing.

Gone [by Shanice Lim]

She rarely smiled. But when she did, it was for me. It was always, only for me. The whispers of the indentation just on the corner of her right cheek, deep enough to bury every secret moment, every secret kiss. I remembered reaching out to study its secrets, to trace its outline, but it was not there. Or was it? But just then, everything eclipsed and I was gone.

The first thing I noticed was that everything was pristine white. It took a second before the pain hit; my head hurt, my limbs hurt, my heart hurt and try as I might to move, it was as if my mind and my limbs were not on speaking terms, like a connection had been severed. Everything hurt, and I just wanted it to stop hurting.

"He's awake."

From the corner of my eyes, I saw a man advancing and it was as if the movement had shocked my senses into working. I heard the constant sounds of beeping, of shuffling, of murmuring, and everything was just so loud. But the pain was still there. The pain was always still there.

I looked at the face, inches away from mine. He looked worn out, exhausted and there was a name on the tip of my tongue, pushing itself to come out but nothing came out. My head hurt from thinking, and God, why must everything hurt so bad?

"Isaiah, it's Benjamin. Oh God, you had us worried sick for weeks. The doctors couldn't find anything wrong with you but you just didn't wake up, and we were so worried. It was just so worrying, oh God, how many times have I used the word, 'worry' and..."

I saw the photograph of a woman at the side of my bed and after a moment, realized I was staring at my wife. My wife. The only thing that mattered to me was my wife but where was she?

I grabbed the hand beside me and croaked, "Cass, where the hell is Cass?"

The colour from Benjamin's face drained and I could swear he looked whiter and paler than I probably was at that moment. I could not understand the hesitation, the silence; my mind was in a complete mess and all I wanted at that moment was my wife. I just wanted my wife.

Benjamin wrung his hands together and cleared his throat. "Listen to me, Isaiah. I can't... Oh God. Alright, what can you remember? About the night of the accident, anything."

Accident? Had he just said accident? What accident had there been? I tried to frantically remember but nothing came up. My mind had been wiped clean.

Benjamin sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, "Why don't you tell me what you do remember? Your name, everything. Let's just start from the basics." I remembered my name, my job, my father died when I was ten, marrying my childhood sweetheart six months ago...

"Hold up, hold up. You've been married for six months?"

Benjamin pinched the tip of his nose and squinted his eyes shut, something he always did when he wanted something to go away. Flashes of surprise, shock and something I could not quite catch, flew past his face. He exhaled loudly, "You've been married for a year, Isaiah. The

night you were out with Cass, was the day of your anniversary. Oh God, I better get the doctor..."

No, no, there had to be some mistake. It was as if one of the pillars of belief that my world had been built upon had crumbled into dry sand.

"We have three different types of memory - semantic, procedural and episodic. Your semantic and procedural memory are intact, considering you are walking and talking but your episodic memory has been affected."

Flipping several pages, the doctor paused and pursed his lips and continue, "Such instances usually happen because of a blow to a head, coupled with psychological trauma. I'm guessing you believed you were going to die, which may have caused the trauma."

"There is no way to tell why your two-week long coma had caused you to lose your memory of the past six months, but maybe if you try to retrace your footsteps, you may find something. But amnesia is a tricky condition. It's hard to know for sure. I'll keep running tests but the brain is a complex muscle." The doctor hesitated, "Oh, and I am very sorry for your loss."

My loss?

Benjamin explained everything that happened the night of the accident. I felt like my entire body was going to explode from the pain.

"It's late. Get some rest, Isaiah. I'll come back tomorrow. Don't think too much."

Think too much? What exactly had happened? I wanted Cassie. If she was really gone... How was I supposed to not think too much? Everything was so confusing and the worse part of it all was that Cass was not around to help me sort everything out. It scared me to remember life before Cassandra. Even now, my memory had the depth of a photograph, and without her, who was I?

Benjamin came back the next day. It felt good to have a best friend, someone who would always have your back, whom you could undoubtedly rely on. I had two best friends. Now I have one.

There was a knock, and I felt my heart jump at the noise. Everything was just so foreign, I felt like a stranger in my own body.

"Hi Isaiah, I'm Detective Jonathan. Do you feel well enough to answer a few questions?"

I nodded slowly, willing myself not to cry. How do I tell the detective that I will never be well enough for the rest of my life without my Cassie?

"Can you tell me what you do remember about the night of the accident? Even the smallest detail. Who you were with, where you were heading? Even the colour of your shirt, anything."

Useless. I felt utterly useless. I did not remember anything. Not even the date of the accident. I shook my head, in hopes that shaking my head may rattle something inside me to awaken but nothing. All I heard was the hollow sound of my heart, missing something important.

"Well, from what we know, on the night of the accident, your neighbours complained about shouts. You and your wife have been quarrelling quite a fair bit the past few months. Remember anything?" I shook my head. I did not want to think about the fact that the last thing

I may have said was something I would regret for the rest of my life. Oh God, the last thing. Did I tell her I loved her?

"According to witnesses, both of you were seen arguing rather heatedly all the way to the car. The accident occurred because the driver had crashed into the tree. The reason you're here and your wife isn't, is because of the seatbelt and airbag. She flew out and smashed her head into the tree." He paused and frowned, staring at me like he was interrogating a criminal.

"What I'm wondering is, could you have crashed into the tree intentionally, knowing that your side had the airbag while hers didn't. Maybe you had an argument, and you didn't mean it but you were so angry, and you lost control. Now, if you remember the events I had told you, I can talk to the attorney-general about cutting you some slack in your sentence. If we find you guilty, you go away for good. But if you plead guilty, the word manslaughter will never be brought up. How's that sound?"

I scrunched my eyebrows together, certain I had misheard, but judging by Benjamin's face, I had not lost my sense of hearing.

"Get. Out. Before I call my lawyer and sue you for slander." Benjamin slammed the door and punched the wall. The sound echoed throughout my body like an electric shock. I did not want to stay a minute longer in this place of death, I did not want to see my wife's lifeless body on a slab with a sheet covered over her face. I wanted to see my wife, smiling and dancing and singing and living.

I needed to find out what had happened that night, and I needed to do it now. I yanked the needles from my arms, and ignored the world spinning. Benjamin glanced at me, and his eyebrow arched like a question mark. Without wasting another second, he packed my things into a bag.

I tried to process the events that had just occurred, pressed my fingers to my temple, trying to squeeze out something that would help me remember. But I was so lost. Everything was gone. I had nowhere to go but home. An empty home without a wife, without love, without happiness.

The house was exactly the way I had remembered it, but without Cass, it no longer felt like home. She was my home. I looked at the pictures on the mantelpiece and wondered what we had been fighting about. What had happened recently, and why could I not remember?

Benjamin went home after I had made a thousand promises to call if anything. The bedroom felt cold and lifeless, and I was overwhelmed with the gaping hole where my heart should have been.

I laid on the bed and ran my fingers along the ghost of what should have been. But there was only a void on the other side of the bed, a cosmic black hole, one that I could not roll too close to without falling into a chasm of memories. I closed my eyes crying, and I pushed my face against the pillow and tried to let the silence put things where they were supposed to be. The only thing worse than not feeling anything, was feeling everything at once - physically, mentally and emotionally.

The next day, I was sleeping when I twisted and turned, and before I knew it, hit my head against the bedside table and felt a throbbing pain. Suddenly, something flashed before me.

Cass was screaming, "I have done everything for you. Why can't you just love me? WHY?" Crying, she wiped the blood from my lips and whispered, "I love you more than she ever could. You know I never meant it." In that moment I knew, she was not the woman I had fallen in love with.

Cringing in pain, I struggled to get up. What had I just seen? What... What had I remembered? Was that a memory or was that a figment of my imagination? I closed my eyes. Everything was a confusing mess. Had Cassandra always been that way?

Half an hour later, Benjamin arrived with a thick envelope tucked inside his jacket like it was some trade secret he had to keep hidden.

"Apparently, two months ago, you gave this envelope to your lawyers, saying that if anything were to happen, they had to ensure that I would get this. It'll explain everything. Almost, I think."

In the kitchen, Benjamin busied himself with the coffee machine. The aroma of the coffee flooded the kitchen and I was hit with a wave of nostalgia. Coffee had always been Cass's one true love, she joked. Only coffee could keep her up all night. Oh God, I missed her so much it hurt.

I took the warm cup in my hands and breathed in the smell, desperate to cling onto another reminder of Cassandra. Just one more second with her, what I would not do.

"Now, before you open this, I need you to prepare yourself. I know you just came out from a coma but there are things you need to know. But I must warn you, once you know this, you cannot un-know it. You need to accept this. It'll be difficult, but I'm here for you. Are you ready?"

My hands trembled as I unwound the string. Was I ready for what was inside? Why had I asked my lawyers to deliver this to Benjamin? I shook the envelope, and photographs and letters streamed out. The photographs were surveillance pictures of Cassandra with another person. The dates were stamped on the photographs, and with each updated one, the other person looked different. She looked more and more like Cassandra: her hair dyed blonde, her face looked like she had gotten surgery, her makeup looked more natural, like Cassie's.

What did all these things mean? Who was this other girl? Benjamin looked over my shoulder, "Isn't that Mandy?" Mandy? Who was Mandy? Mandy... Was that not Cassandra's best friend? Why were there surveillance pictures of them? I needed to know what was going on.

Benjamin put his hands up in mock surrender, "Don't look at me. I'm just as puzzled. All I know is that you told me that there was something off about the way Mandy kept coming on to you, and that something felt different with Cass lately. But you eventually managed to brush Mandy aside. Cass... Well, you were trying for a kid so I'd imagined that put some pressure on the marriage."

I remembered looking through baby photographs with Cassandra, wondering if our children would look more like her or more like me. A girl. She had hoped for a girl.

Sifting through the documents, I grabbed one of the letters. But it was not a letter. It was a diary entry dated August 10.

I was wrong. I thought that I could get used to the idea of Cassandra being gone but one can never get used to it. Just when I thought I had reconciled with the fact, it hits me in the darkest of nights, that numbing pain that throbs deep within my soul. I dread the nights I had to sleep with her, curl into someone that is not her and listen to sounds that were not her breathing. She was gone, and I simply had to embrace the idea of her instead. But things rarely get fixed the way they need to be.

No, no, what was I reading? If Cassie was gone, who was the dead woman in the hospital? How did Cassie die? How could I not have known it was not Cassie all these months? Or had

I known? How could I have known and said nothing? Cassie had told me something, about how Mandy looked more and more like her but I had brushed her off as being paranoid. Did she know?

I picked up another piece dated July 27.

I confronted 'Cassandra' today. Even as I'm writing this in the toilet, I know I have to hurry and hide this well or I will be dead. Just like my sweet Cass who is gone because her psychopath best friend killed her. I stared at her - the manifestation of a lie and was seized by the sudden sensation that perhaps she did not exist. Perhaps none of this existed, for the inches between us seemed to divide into two entirely different realities. Because to her, this is heaven and to me, this is hell.

Oh God, what was I reading? Was she the psychological trauma that had caused me to lose those painful six months of memory? Why could I not remember? Reading the letters, I felt like I was losing my wife all over again. I was right. The numbing pain does indeed throb deep within my soul.

There must have been something more I could remember, something that would help this all make sense. I needed to think, to remember. I looked through more photographs. It was a photograph of a woman, wearing a sleeveless tank top, climbing into Cassie's car. I remembered taking that picture because Cassie had been so different the past few days and I wanted to find out why.

The woman was Mandy. I remembered it now. I remembered the tattoo that Cassie had on her right shoulder - a butterfly. I was still a little fuzzy on the details of the tattoo, but I remembered because it had caught my eye the first time we met.

This woman, who looked exactly like my wife, did not have that tattoo.

Maybe Mandy didn't know, or she hadn't gotten around to getting the tattoo. But Cassie seldom liked wearing sleeveless tops, so it might have been the former. Shuffling through more documents, I came across the first diary entry I had written, the one with the earliest date - April 16.

Things feel different. Cassandra feels different. Recently, it seems that we have been fighting more than usual. In fact, she does not seem like herself. It all started that one night when she did not come home. Every time I try to bring up that night, she becomes defensive, dismissing it like it is nothing when we both know she has never spent a night away from home. Things she used to enjoy, now become a chore to her. Some events, some secrets, she does not even seem to remember. It is like she is totally different, and I cannot reach wherever she is. At least her crazy best friend Mandy has stopped coming round. Note to self: Stay the hell away from that one. She is nothing but trouble.

I gripped the table top till my knuckles turned white and I willed myself to try, to try for Heaven's sake, to remember anything about the last six months but I came up empty. The woman in the car with me that night was not Cassandra. She was long gone.

Was it really Mandy? How could I have kept quiet the entire time then? And yet, who would have believed me? Mandy was an orphan, with not many friends. Cassie's parents had moved to some godforsaken island with hardly any communication services, and she had been an only child. We did not have many friends, it had been just the both of us. And we were happy. For a time.

Was that the reason why I could not remember? Because I was traumatized by the game, by the events that Mandy had put me through? But looking at these photographs and reading these entries, things were starting to make sense. Images were becoming less distorted. But oh, did my head hurt.

I was in a whirlwind of emotions, thoughts, and I needed to sort my head. But I also needed to remember more. Things would be so much easier if I could just remember everything.

"You know what that means right, Isaiah? The woman in the car with you that day has to be Mandy and she killed Cassandra. All these are evidence, all these are proof. We have to go to the police with this before they try you for the murder of your supposed wife. If they find Cass... Oh God, Isaiah. They will try you for two murders. Isaiah, say something. You're scaring me." I felt Benjamin grip my arms, trying to shake some sense into me but all I could sense was grief, shock, pain.

The walls closed around me, and I felt myself hyperventilating. You have got to be kidding me. I have not had an asthma attack since I was ten. Air. I needed air. God, I needed air. I pushed Benjamin away and felt myself fall, before scrambling up to get out.

Running out of the house, I did not know where I was going or what I was doing but I knew I needed to move to stop myself from thinking, from forgetting, and to start remembering. How was I supposed to remember what my mind most likely forgot in order to protect me?

Distant horns blared, and my eyes widened at the sight of oncoming bright lights. I was in the middle of the road. How had I gotten to the middle of the road? I felt a sudden force slam the air out of me and my head hit against the pavement. A wet, sticky liquid flowed down and I saw the ghost of my wife smiling with that dimple I loved, that dimple that was not there the night of the accident.

We were screaming and shouting, and I looked at what should have been my wife, but was not. "I really messed up, didn't I? I never meant to hurt Cassandra, not in that way, but I just wanted to be with you and Cass, she didn't let me. She told me she hated me and that you'd never love me... I just wanted her to SHUT UP! I didn't mean to." Mandy was all dressed up, ready to celebrate our wedding anniversary, mine and Cassandra's. But I was done with her. I was done pretending, I was done being scared, done playing her game. If that meant death, at least I would be with Cass. "You understand, don't you? Sometimes forgetting is the only way back to normality. Forget Cass, I'm tired of being Cassandra. I'll be your Mandy. No more torture, no more knives, just you and me."

"Where is Cassandra's body? Where did you dump my wife!" I demanded. Her face contorted into an ugly mess as she yelled, "I AM YOUR WIFE! You will never find her. I hid her body in my family's cabin up north. Promise me you will never look for it, and we can just forget everything." She stood in front of me, a spitting image of Cassandra. But she was not my Cassie. She quietened down and smoothed her skirt, and I knew that this relationship, or false relationship was only worsening her dissociative identity disorder. Her lips quivered and she held her fingers to her mouth, "I'm sorry, honey. I don't know what came over me. Let's celebrate our anniversary together, shall we?"

My hand hovered over the doorknob, "No Mandy, I am tired of denying myself the truth for fear of breaking things I cannot fix. They will break no matter what I choose." In the car, we were shouting and screaming and she kept crying, when another car suddenly appeared and I swerved to avoid it. Time slowed down as I turned to look at Mandy. How could I not have noticed the lack of that dimple at the corner of her cheek those earlier few months? How could I have overlooked the one thing I loved most about Cassandra?

When I came to, I noticed the same pristine white surroundings I had woken up to not too long ago. Benjamin had been the force that had knocked the air out of my lungs. But despite the bump on my head and minor blood loss, I would have died, had it not been for him.

I remembered the night of the accident, the quarrelling, the discovery, the hurt. Ben had notified the police and after taking my statement, they looked into the matter. Dental records confirmed that the woman in the car was Mandy, not Cass. Cass was found where Mandy had said.

I still could not remember the exact details of the past six months but flashes of memory do pop up once in a while. However, I thought it best if I had no memory of being in a loveless relationship with a woman who only pretended to be my wife.

Several days later, as I watched her body lowered to the ground, I felt the void in my heart sink into the ground. The days passed in a daze with speeches, shaking of hands, accepting condolences and all I could think about was how Cass would have laughed at the solemnity of it all. "People are in a better place," she would say. "Why do people look like someone just died? Oh wait, too soon?"

Because that was who she was. Someone who found joy in the darkest days, happiness in the deepest sorrow, who trusted too easily and gave too willingly. She was the complete opposite of me, the yin to my yang, because like she always said, "Don't opposites attract?"

As the sun set over the horizon, I realized that lost love is still love but in a different form. I may no longer be able to see her smile, hear her laugh or watch her dance; but when those senses weakened, another will heighten. Memory. Memory will become my partner, my laughter, my dancer.

I realized that I could not control or change the world I was in, could not walk away from the things or moments that had hurt me, but I could take joy in the things that made me happy, even if they were in the past. She was my life, and I would never be whole ever again, but I had to make do with that. I had to live for the memory of her.

Sakti

[by Alexandra Goh]

Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. Each time it was three successive movements, involuntary from birth. Occasionally, there would be a grunt or a murmur. Nothing really noticeable. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. Another three movements.

There she sat, alone on the sidewalk. A raggedy cloak outlined her hunched frame, its hood enveloping her withered skin. Her bony fingers peeked out from beneath the folds of the cloak, tightly clasping a rusted tin can with a few copper coins. The people around her might have been oblivious to her presence but she was not to theirs. Even if they did notice her, they probably thought she was mentally unsound. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. Three movements once more. These twitches were part of her. Not like she could tell anyone that though. People probably just saw her as another one of the millions of beggars in Delhi, just about as common as dust. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. But things are always more than what we see through our tinted lenses.

Her eyes surveyed the area for signs of danger with the expertise of a seasoned pro. Satisfied with the conditions, she fixed her gaze on the entrance of ^ city. It was coming. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk.

In the distance, she saw the convoy with 4 security vehicles in accompaniment. The left side of her mouth curved upwards slightly in a half-smile. They were ready. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. As the unsuspecting entourage passed the city gates, she rose, tinkling the coins in her tin can ever so slightly as she disappeared into the maze of shadows.

And then, there was the glorious melody of gunshots.

As she navigated her way through the sewer tunnels, she contemplated the legacy etched into these very walls. Her father had created the Code, used it to encrypt everything about the Sakti and inscribed the organisation's journey onto the tunnel walls, everything from the rules to the successes and failures; she continued this practice after taking over the organisation. As she ran her fingers over her fresher inscriptions, a lump rose in her throat. If only her father had lived to see this. He would have been proud that she was propelling the organisation from strength to strength. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. From the folds of her cloak, she withdrew the knife that once belonged to her father and inscribed the latest victory. Taking a step back, she took a moment to savour her success before returning the knife to its sheath. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. Wrapping her cloak around her, she continued down the reeking waterways toward the faint sound of voices.

The Sakti Headquarters was located in a supposedly sealed-off, abandoned segment of the Delhi sewage system; it was where every member of Sakti underwent training before commencing missions. Should the authorities ever be able to discover their headquarters, it would still be impossible to capture them; each member knew the waterways like the back of their hand and could easily disappear into the labyrinth of tunnels.

The Delhi authorities had been attempting to shut down Sakti for years but with little progress. It was especially hard when every member was someone thought to be dead and therefore off the government's radar; prior to joining Sakti, each member had to stage his or her own disappearance, undergo physical changes to become unrecognisable and thereafter take on a fake identity. These individuals would then re-introduce themselves into the community, getting jobs and staying in apartments across Delhi. If an identity were in danger of being compromised, that person would fall off the radar immediately and repeat the transformation

process. The entire organisation was also split into squads and they took turns to execute missions, making them practically untraceable.

Even within the organisation, the members knew little about each other's lives; they just did what they had to do. Their operations were seamless, exhibiting the brilliance of this hunched frame and her predecessor; they were discreetly present at every major mission, heading the execution. Nobody actually knew how these two were related and while some had seen the face of Sakti's founder, no one actually knew what this beggar really looked like. But no one asked questions.

As the beggar made her way into the Sakti headquarters, a hushed silence filled the area. As she made her way to the chair on the raised platform at the centre of the area, men and women alike made way for her; her presence had a way of striking fear in every heart. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. She seemed oblivious to the acrid smell of sweat coupled with the stench of the sewer. She took her seat quietly and nodded slightly in the direction of her deputy for that day, signalling him to proceed with his report on the mission.

Everything went according to plan. A sizeable sum of gold retrieved and stored safely. No casualties on the team. No civilians hurt.

Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. She was silent for a few moments; the tension in the room was palpable and no one dared to move a muscle. Finally, her lips parted and her voice echoed through the headquarters, raspy from years of smoking.

"Good. Tie up loose ends and then everyone get back to ground level."

As the members began to their preparations, Hamza, her personal aide, stepped forward and handed her a cigarette before bending down and whispering something. Her bony fingers seemed to tighten their grip on the cigarette as she rose to her feet and hobbled down one of the tunnels, heading to her hidden chamber for privacy. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk.

Upon reaching the chamber, Hamza withdrew a phone, handed it to her and then retreated to the common area to ensure that preparations were going smoothly. Mustering all her strength to keep her cool, she answered the call on hold.

"I saw what you did." She couldn't help but roll her eyes. How dramatic. "This has to stop. You're going to get yourself killed!"

"Your underworld contacts are efficient, brother, but you need to stop tracking me down like this. Maybe you should only call me on New Year's Day, brother. But it's nice to hear from you, Jai."

"I don't want to see you getting hurt."

"You work in law enforcement, Jai. How could you not want to see criminals like me suffer?" There was silence on his end.

"You're my sister. Why would I want that?"

"But you wanted that when it came to Dad. As if it wasn't bad enough that you left us to become a cop, you led the cops straight to Dad! What the hell for, if not to see him get hurt?" Her grip on the phone was so tight that her knuckles went white. She remembered that day as clear as crystal; her father being caught defenceless and taken straight to the death row. She swallowed hard.

“He had to be punished, you know that. He killed innocent people...”

“Those people sold their souls to a corrupt government by serving them, Jai! He wasn’t wrong!” She was shocked at her own outburst and struggled for a few moments to collect her emotions.

“Listen, they think someone else is running the organisation. Nobody even knows you exist; nobody knows Malik Gupta even had a daughter. You could live a normal life!”

She’d had enough by now. This was her life. Through gritted teeth, she delivered her ultimatum.

“I am my father’s daughter. He would’ve wanted me to finish what he started. You are either with me or against me.” And that was that; a line drawn in the sand.

Years passed. Sakti grew in numbers and continued to fight against the corrupt Delhi authorities with great fervency under her leadership. But one day, the inevitable happened: someone’s fake identity was discovered and the authorities, now aware that such a person could possibly be linked to Sakti, were hot on his heels. She dispatched a retrieval team to bring him safely underground. That night, Hamza called; they were a step behind the authorities and one of their operatives was already being interrogated. There was no choice but to call for an assembly at the headquarters.

The mood in the sewers was sombre. Everyone was fully aware of what the corrupt government would do to those they considered dissidents; each feared deeply for his or her own life. Jerk. Jerk. Jerk. Just as she was about to speak, government Special Forces swarmed into the headquarters. She disappeared stealthily through the nearest tunnel and hurried through the maze of tunnels, heart pounding fast. How had they discovered them so soon? She couldn’t understand it.

“Stop!” A familiar voice echoed along the tunnels. She whipped round to see her brother, weapon drawn.

“Could you bring yourself to shoot me, Jai?” she taunted, her voice dripping with sarcasm. That raspy tone; he would recognise it anywhere. His face paled and conflict was written all over his face. She shook her head, bemused at his lack of conviction.

“You don’t recognise me? Not surprising; you left when I was just 13. Even if you did see me brother.” She knew him too well. Jai would never pull the trigger on her. He pressed his lips together and maintained his position, unwavering and determined, finger on the trigger. Just before he pulled the trigger, memories of the past and his little sister flooded his mind; it was that split-second of hesitancy that cost him.

Seizing his moment of weakness, she hurled a tear gas grenade in his direction and fled down the tunnels. Gone.

Emerging from the manhole in an abandoned alley, she heaved a sigh of relief. If it hadn’t been for her brother’s weakness, it would’ve been the end for her. After surveying the area to ensure she was alone, she tossed back her hood and peeled off the mask she had been wearing, revealing her stunning features and flawless skin. She stripped off the cloak, revealing the cropped top and shorts beneath it.

Peeling the custom-made coverings off her arms and legs, she revealed soft, fair skin; it felt good seeing that instead of crinkly skin. She straightened her back; all that hunching and twitching had proved tiring and strenuous but it was probably worth it. With one last lingering

look down into pitch-black darkness, she replaced the manhole cover and emerged from the shadows of the alley. Effortlessly, she slipped into the bustling sea of people.

Meet Jitya Gupta, the invisible head of the largest crime syndicate in Delhi.

The Man Who Can't Be Moved

[by Hilda Yeoh]

Life is like vapour, here today and gone tomorrow; like a flower that blooms today and fades tomorrow; and with every newborn that takes his first breath leaves an elderly taking his last. How he was brought into this world was just like every other baby, birthed out of a deliberate choice by humans, or maybe that of nature, some would say. It was not as if he had an option, as if he could turn back into dust. Whether he liked it or not, he was here on this earth to stay, until the day someone takes him away.

There he stood, arms folded and with a seemingly thoughtful expression; looking out to the river and watching the world go by. Everyone who passed by presumed that he was in deep thought about something purposeful like the meaning of life, but no one ever stopped to discover the depths of his heart and the thoughts that he bore. He wasn't thinking about the beauty of life. In fact, he hated life itself. Freedom was out there; freedom was in the people walking along the streets and in the trees that swayed to the rhythms of the wind. Freedom was everywhere but not for him.

The more he stood watching people go by, the more he loathed them and the life he had. He wanted to experience life like everyone else; to feel the movement in his limbs, to smell the flowers that were blooming and to hear the sound of his voice. More so, he wanted to relish in the city that he had painstakingly laboured to make something out of nothing. But life would never allow him to, for he was always seen as an inanimate object void of emotions, only erected for the admiration and viewing pleasure of people he barely even knew.

People always said that the passing of time was relative to one's emotions and for him, minutes felt like hours and hours felt like days. The merciless sun rays glared upon him and he could feel his polymarble skin beginning to crack under the intense heat. People of all ages, from all walks of life and from various parts of the world echoed the same words that went on like a broken recorder throughout the day: "That's him, the founding father of Singapore!" Was that all he was to them, just a "founding father"? Wasn't that a bit too shallow of a thought? Did they not recognize the struggles he had to go through in order to transform the country from barely zilch resources to a thriving British colonial settlement? That without him, there wouldn't even be a place for them to call their home? None of that seemed to have crossed their minds for all they wanted was a photograph with him and they couldn't care less about a significant historical moment.

He deserved so much more, but none he got. And if the sun wasn't bad enough, nastier days came when cumulonimbus clouds gathered overhead and tattooed raindrops which felt like bullets penetrating his body and there was nothing he could do but to withstand what felt like the wrath of God. When bolts of lightning tore across the sky followed by a peal of thunder, the people who seemingly adored him scattered to seek shelter. They only took care of their own needs and he abhorred them for that.

So what if he was seen as a popular representation of the tiny red dot, it held no value because he was just a part of history that people didn't even know. People didn't have the luxury of time and were caught up in their own lives; meeting deadlines, beating the rush hour, keeping up with appointments – living life as if it were a checklist of events.

No one, not a single one, ever stopped to think about what it would be like to be confined the way he was. They had goals to achieve and dreams to realize but for him, his aspirations ended with his demise, hundred and eighty-nine years ago. If he were to be given mortality

now, he would have led a life far above the rest, spending the time he had to perfect the very nation which he had founded, but the opportunity he had was long gone.

What then would life be, if it were to only draw misery? What would there be to look forward to, when each day and night, rain or shine, brought about a vacant heart and a bitter soul? It would only be wise for him to disappear from the face of the earth, before the resentment of living a life that he did not desire engulfed him.

It seemed God took pity on him for one day, he no longer heard the clicking of the shutters or the shrills of people. Although throngs of people walked past him, none lifted their heads for even a mere glimpse of him. They huddled outside the Parliament House, packed like herrings in a cask, and just seeing the writhing, quivering mass of humanity was enough to release the claustrophobia in him. In place of the exclamations and animated chatter he usually heard were the shuffling of feet and the occasional snuffle. Despite the clouds coughing out great spouts of water, the people stood unfazed by the unending cataract of water sluicing from the sky. What could be more significant than his death? What could cause even the air to hang so low? Who had the power to unite the ignorant nation in such a manner? It felt as if a time bomb was ticking within him, ready to explode and hurl debris all over.

The amount of pent-up anger he had withheld all these years was bubbling and boiling like lava, on the verge of eruption but as quickly as it had risen, it subsided for he saw what they clutched on to so dearly. Not a camera, but stalks of freshly bloomed white lilies and roses, and photographs of a man.

“LEE KUAN YEW! LEE KUAN YEW! LEE KUAN YEW!” chanted the sea of faces. *“LEE KUAN YEW! LEE KUAN YEW! LEE KUAN YEW!”* were the only words that rang out from the seething mass of people as the cortege passed by. From where he stood, he saw it all. He saw the contorted faces, the scattered petals, the salutes of acknowledgement and remembrance. Above all, he saw the coffin bearer party, the gun carriage, and the national flag that was carefully draped over the casket.

As the procession passed by, something shifted within him. It wasn't one of those usual bouts of turmoil that bubbled into a fit of rage. It was an unfamiliar feeling, as if the thorns that grew out of him over the years were gradually being plucked away. He could not quite yet comprehend what it was, but all he knew was that a particular bank of memories, one which he had carefully stashed away at the back of his mind and double-locked in steel so that all who ever did try would never break through, began to fall through. The selfish hearts of men and the darkened and weeping skies weren't the only things that he had seen. He saw high-rise buildings come to life and felt the security in the hearts of people walking along the streets late into the night. He didn't want to come to terms with the fact that the nation had been further transformed since his demise – he wanted credit to be accorded to him. After all, wasn't he the one who founded this land? But as memories burst through the seams, truths that he had tried to suppress for the longest time, tumbled out.

As these memories and truths broke out from their chains, something else was also set free. All the anger and frustration that he had suppressed for years fell to the ground. That unfamiliar feeling was that of liberation, and experiencing it for the very first time made him want to break out into a dance and fist-pump the air. As the first rays of the sun graced the earth, there was no longer heaviness in his heart but an unspeakable joy that overflowed, and with that, he was ready to face the world again.

He didn't mind not having a shelter over his head, and it didn't seem to bother him that he could neither move nor speak. The sun rays that used to flash relentlessly at him he now saw akin to spotlights on a stage, casting a glow over his whole body. The sporadic camera flashes which he once detested actually created a glistening effect on his white and flawless skin. He

really did feel like royalty – all he needed was a crown and a red velvet robe with faux fur trim to pull off a look of elegance, stature and poise. He didn't seem to notice this before, but everyone who came by always had their photos taken, striking the same pose as he did.

When the crepuscular rays began to stream through the gaps in the clouds, it was the cue for him to fade into the shadows. The night sky to him used to always be an ocean of blackness, but this time, a canopy of luminous stars materialized right before his very eyes. The city skyline boasted a subtly illuminated glow, enticing the young and old, lovers and merry-makers alike, into the outdoors to make a party out of their night. As usual, no one seemed to notice him anymore; it was as if the curtain call came when the fiery red orb dipped beneath the horizon. But strangely enough, instead of feeling the pierce of daggers, into his heart flowed a great rejuvenation.

And just maybe, he could get used to this life.

This Is So Frustrating [by Nur Shilah Bte J. Faisal]

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