

Boy and His Cat [by Nicholas Tan Wei'en]

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I know what it means to be alone. I mean, I always have been all my life. Of course, that does not mean I have never liked anyone – it is only natural right? You know how the story goes: boy meets girl; girl meets boy's crippling social anxiety; boy gets obsessed over girl; boy thinks of girl day and night; girl does not even know boy exists – young love.

After class. School library. Shelf "XAC to ZZZ".

"Hi." I whisper.

"Right back at you." She replies. "I've seen you at this this shelf before. Anything good to recommend?"

Strategic pause. Chin stroke. Enthral her with your knowledge of LOTR. "Well, you know, the Lord of the Rings movie just came out. I, of course, loved the book before it was cool to be a Tolkien fan. You know? Yeah. The movie? Absolute garbage. The book, now that's a masterpiece. Where to begin, where to begin. Ah yes. Olórin, or "Gandalf" to those who never read the books, was of course the Isitari to Manwë and Varda - Manwë as you should know was the greatest Valar, but weaker than ...

No. No. It should go like this instead:

"Hi."

"Right back at you. Anything good to recommend?"

"Harry Potter." Everyone loves Harry Potter. Can't go wrong with this suggestion. Yes. I love the Harry Potter series. If she reads the books too, then we can have something in common to talk about. God, she's beautiful. And smart. So perfect. She'll probably be a Ravenclaw. She's just like Cho Chang. We would spend hours and hours talking about Harry Potter. And then she would fall in love with me. And I would bring her on a date to the best restaurant. And I would end the date with a kiss on her cheek. And I...

But then again...

What would the statistical probability of her being here and talking to me be? I'm here practically every day, so that's practically 100% chance of encountering her if she does come. However, I am usually at the single seater tables and only spend about 10 mins at the shelves looking for books - if she were to encounter me at the shelves... let's see... I'm typically here for 4 hours... so $10/(4 \times 60)$ $1/24$ so that would be... 4.16 recurring percent. There are about 45 rows of books so the probability she would need a book from the shelf that I am at would be $1/45$, so that lowers it to.... what's 45×24 ... 1 in 1000ish? And then I need to factor in the probability that she even comes to the libr...

She actually came to the library. She was actually here.

“Hi.” She initiated. Shit. This was not how it is supposed to happen. I froze. This must have been how the medusa myth started. Men – there is nothing scarier to men than an amazingly beautiful woman. She freezes men, turning them into stone, petrified. Looking into her eyes, that’s what does it, her beautiful hazel brown eyes. I realized that I had just been standing there, slack-jawed, for the last ten seconds. I turned my head away in shame, catching her reflection off the tinted glass windows of the library. Like Perseus, this was the only way I could look at her – through a reflection. Sophie, catching sight of her friends (or people who I presume are her friends) in the library, waved at them and started walking off toward them. Like Perseus, I had to slay her – slay her in my heart. But for now, I wished I had Hades’ helmet of darkness to grant me invisibility.

I hated it. I hated myself for this cowardice. I hated Cupid and his cursed arrow, Atë and her curse of folly. Why must I be so cursed to fall for Sophie and yet be so useless as to be unable to pick up the courage to open my mouth to say “Hi” back? I mean, didn’t I love her? Or did I really? I realized I did not really know why I felt she was “the one”. I realized I did not know why or what about her that I loved. Perhaps it was her beauty... but did I love her because she was beautiful... or was she beautiful because I loved her? Her adorable dimples when she smiled – are they intrinsically beautiful? Or only beautiful because I was so obsessed with her? The little mannerisms when she talks that makes my heart all aflutter – or was I attracted to the mannerisms because my heart was already in love with her?

I started banging my head on the shelf to clear my head, with my hand placed on the shelf to muffle the sound, allowing the physical pain from hitting my knuckles with my head overwhelm the pain I felt in my chest.

No. Wait. What did I mean “I love her”? What is love but a potent mix of adrenaline, dopamine and serotonin – just a chemical high that means nothing. What did I mean “I love her”? I didn’t even know anything about her. What did she like? What did she not like? What were her hobbies? What made her laugh? What made her cry? I knew not her birthday, not her family, not her hobbies – how couldn’t I claim to love her? How could I pretend to be there for her hopes and dreams when I knew nothing of them? What a fool! What a self-absorbed fool I was.

I silently fled the library, not hearing the librarian as she called out to me, remarking that I was leaving earlier than usual. I could not hear the snickering of the passers-by at my red, tear-filled eyes. I just wanted to be out of school, away from any possibility of having something reminding me of her, away from the pain in my chest. Like a coward. I could not hear the peals of thunder of the July monsoon. Only the familiar taunting from my noonday demon, the familiar resound of my self-loathing. I once more walked down the well-trodden path of self-loathing – familiar, well-worn, habitual, as familiar as the homeward path I was taking. It was easy to see my own follies, my own lack of courage, my own faults and failures, and easily adding on that more empirical proof of my own lack of *Chutzpah*. If this was the kind of man that I was, I figured that she was better off the way she was – not knowing me; not subject to the wretched existence of being tied down to a worthless creature like me. Besides, the way I was, I would think much less of her. She would no longer be the perfect goddess that I so desired; only an overly flawed being would be low enough to love someone like me. I chuckled to myself – Groucho Marx made sense to me now: “I don’t care to belong to any club that will have me as a member”.

It seemed like the goddess Atë was not done with me yet, and with one more act of mischief, opened up the heavens upon me. Cursing my luck, I ran through the rain, taking shelter under a nearby tree, I made up my mind. I knew what I had to do. Just as Quasimodo had his Esmeralda; just as Snape had his Lily, so too will I have my Sophie. I knew all I could do at that moment was to be a martyr for her. Even if it meant turning my heart to stone – I had to just stop longing after Sophie.

Even as my mind had made its choice, my heart did not want to be dragged along, it did not like the decision. I lashed out in frustration, kicking the trunk of the tree that had kindly given me shelter. As though Karma had decided to join in the dogpiling, the impact of my right leg against the trunk of the innocent tree caused my left foot to slip, unceremoniously dumping me on my butt, leaving me with a sprained ankle. I laughed out loud bitterly, as tears mingled with the rain and mud.

As I sat there wallowing in my misery, an animal screech cut through my own bitter laughter. It was then I saw her. The little clump of damp, matted fur arched its back, bristles standing on end. Her tail puffed up, projecting her to be bigger than she really was. Irises two narrow slits, a flash of white fangs and a high-pitched hiss as I reached out to her. She was unkempt – her fur all muddy and ungroomed; her little crevice under the roots of the tree, with space only for one. Just like I was: wet, dirty, alone, lashing out at the world. Not a pretty sight.

As I approached her, the kitten lashed out at my hand with her tiny claws leaving a long claw mark. This pain was nothing; nothing compared to the pain of the “could have been”s for not even trying to talk to Sophie. Seeing how I had not given up despite her initial attack, the kitten tried again; this time she dug her fangs into my fingers, drawing blood. This pain was nothing; nothing compared to the pain of self-loathing, of the lack of hope, of the self-conviction of being alone forever. I pulled the struggling kitten close to my chest, providing warmth to her freezing cold body as I gently stroked her back, untangling the clumps of fur, rubbing the mud off her face with my shirt as she slowly began to warm to the grooming. She was alone, abandoned; a tiny baby that needed someone to care for her, to protect her, to give her shelter. But at that moment, I needed her more than she did me. You know how the story goes: boy meets cat.....

Forty Years [by Choo Mei Fang]

I winced as a piercing pain shot through my right knee. Ah, it's the rheumatism acting up again. I leaned heavily against the wall as my chest heaved. Just fewer than ten steps to go. Gritting my teeth, I shuffled slowly to the cheery yellow door. In my hands I held a single stalk of white tulip wrapped in butcher paper. I peered through the door and saw Helen in her wheelchair near the windows. The rays of the afternoon sun illuminated her face and she looked radiant. At once, the ache in my knees seemed to fade. Forty years with the love of my life but the sight of her still made me feel like I was fifteen again. With my eyes trained on her, I hobbled slowly across the room while smoothing out the creases on my haphazardly ironed shirt.

She noticed the flower almost immediately and her eyes lit up. My beautiful Helen. Her salt-and-pepper curls were in a neat bob, with a floral barrette pinning her fringe back. I lowered myself gingerly into the seat beside hers and grimaced as my knees creaked.

"A flower for the lady," I offered it to her with a crooked smile. She peered at me quizzically. Her brows furrowed intently and her forehead creased into a map of wrinkles— the same expression that clouded her face when she tried to figure out the last word of the Sunday puzzles, or when she was attempting a new recipe in the kitchen. Before.

"Why? Who are you?"

The same routine ensued every week. Her condition had whittled her down to the point she no longer recognised me, and she insisted that she never had a husband. I had been bracing myself for this day ever since she entered the nursing home. When it first happened, I brought photos of our wedding and past travel souvenirs, desperately hoping that they would jog her memory. Yet, she always waved me away agitatedly and refused to even speak to me.

The nurses and I decided it was less distressing if I introduced myself as an acquaintance. I thought nothing could be more painful than watching her mind blur at the edges and seeing her memories disappear into a fog. But it felt like my heart broke every time she asked me this question during my weekly visits.

"Richard. I'm just an old friend who's visiting you today."

"Oh, hello," she smiled. "How nice of you."

The early signs were easy to miss. Helen would point to a cup of coffee, and ask for a cup of "that stuff". Sometimes she would enter the room, look at me blankly and ask me why she came in. We would laugh it off, but somehow there was a sinking feeling in my stomach that grew day by day. I had seen her father crumbling under dementia, and heard stories about how her grandfather went through the same. I knew what was happening. On our 35th anniversary, she went out to buy potatoes for dinner and didn't return after two hours. I found her two streets away from home, claiming that the houses must have undergone renovation as the streets looked different. But the houses had been the same for the past ten years. And my fears were confirmed.

I tenderly clasped her hands in mine and noticed new liver spots creeping over the back of her hands. I began kneading her wrist in the circular motion she always found comforting. Helen leaned toward me conspiratorially and whispered into my ear, "Let me tell you a secret." I chuckled and searched her face. On bad days, all she would do was to stare vacantly into

space with a distant smile. Today, her eyes twinkled mischievously and I sensed a certain sort of energy around her. Today was a good day.

"I'm in love. With Fred. He stays just next door. Oh, he makes my heart sing!"

My hands stilled. The sun rays suddenly felt too warm. I became aware of the shrill chirping of birds on the trees. My throat felt itchy and I cleared it with a raspy cough. The silence seemed to stretch out for miles as I tried to string together a coherent response. But my mind refused to cooperate, and all I could think about was how I should lower the blinds to block out the piercing sun rays.

"Uh. Wow. Fred, huh? Uh. Fred. Great." I finally forced something out, and my voice sounded unnaturally nasal. I twitched my lips upwards in what I hoped was a semblance of a smile. My mind spun through mental pictures of all the male patients I had seen before in the nursing home, trying to place a face to the name.

"He's very funny. And handsome, too! Nurse Jane wheels me to his room, then we hold hands and watch the telly together," Helen gave a little girlish giggle. She was the most animated I had seen in months. The ache in my knees came back. The last time I tried to interlock my fingers with hers, she pulled her hands out, claiming that she didn't like to touch strangers. I waited until she was asleep before I quietly tucked my hand under hers, noticing how her hand still fitted snugly in mine. That was all I could settle for. Oh, how I longed for her to reach out for my hands again. I felt a surge of bitterness and jealousy towards Fred. He didn't know how lucky he was to hold Helen's hands. Oblivious to my inner turmoil, Helen smiled serenely at me. She patted my arm and leaned in once more. "It's a wonderful feeling, you know. Being in love. Have you ever fallen in love before?"

I swallowed the large lump in my throat. I didn't just fall in love. Falling made it sound so accidental. I *chose* to love. A sense of desperation swept through me. I had to make her remember. I refuse to be replaced by Fred.

"Uh, yes. My wife and I, uh, we were childhood sweethearts. I knew she was the one because... my heart skipped a beat every time she laughed."

My voice faltered and broke. She nodded patiently, and waited for me to continue. I took a deep breath.

"She's not by my side any more. But we used to travel the world together. We saw the seven wonders, like the Great Wall of China and the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Oh, Italy was one of our favourite countries. The pasta we had there was heavenly," My voice grew steadier as I recounted our memories. I looked into her eyes, and willed for a light of recognition to reach them. None.

"How romantic. Where is she now?" She asked, a tone of polite inquiry. The same way someone would ask about the weather, or the traffic conditions. Despair within me welled up.

"She's... away." The tightness in my chest refused to ease. My mouth felt parched, and I reached over to pour myself a cup of water. The stiff joints in my fingers ached as I clenched the cup tightly. I gulped the water down in two large mouthfuls.

"Is she coming back soon?" She shifted about in her wheelchair and absentmindedly patted the crooked cushions behind her back. Almost automatically, I straightened and adjusted them in the manner she liked—two on the left, one on the right.

"I don't think so. But—" I tapped my chest twice, the area where my heart was. "— she's always in here."

“That’s beautiful,” she sighed softly. She looked out of the window and closed her eyes, letting the afternoon sun warm her face. A few strands of grey hair had come loose from the barrette. I resisted the urge to reach over and tuck them behind her ear. “Italy... pasta...,” she murmured, rolling the words off her tongue. My heart ricocheted around my chest at the mere possibility that she might remember something. I grasped the handle of her wheelchair tightly. *Please. Please. Please.* I fervently repeated the plea in my mind.

Her eyes opened.

“Can you wheel me to Fred? I haven’t seen him today,” She pouted. Helplessness engulfed me as the realisation sunk in. My shoulders slumped. Is this what it has come to? I wanted to shake her shoulders and beg her to remember. Remember something, *anything*. My heart felt like it was being wrung cruelly. Dementia has been relentlessly taking away her memory of us, bit by bit. But this time, it was as if I was truly erased. Forty years of memories gone just like that. A wave of fatigue crashed over me and I buried my face in my hands. When would it stop?

I hardly ever said no to what Helen wanted, but it was impossible for me to agree to this. My mouth formed the beginning of the refusal before the child-like innocence of her face stopped me. It somehow reminded me of our wedding day. We were 23, young and naïve, with the blind faith that love could conquer all. On that day, we made the vow to stay by each other’s side—for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health.

Helen started humming a tune beneath her breath as she tugged the frayed ends of her blanket. She didn’t choose to leave me. Dementia slipped into her life and made that decision for her. So neither will I choose to leave her. Her happiness was my priority for the past forty years and it was all that truly mattered. Every week I visited her just to see a twinkle in her eyes, or see her smile. I would give everything I had just to hear her laughter—the same one that made my heart skip a beat. If Fred could do that, it was suddenly clear what I had to do next. But I would always stay by her side, till death do us part.

I stood up unsteadily, and my knees cracked in protest. I stretched out to smooth the blanket over her knees. I gripped the handles on her wheelchair and leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Let’s go meet the lucky man.”

Love Is Not A Square [by Estella Khin]

I counted 43 yellow squares and 38 orange squares on the shirt of the man who stood in front of me. A square is special because it is also a rhombus, a kite, a parallelogram, a tetragon and a rectangle. For example, a square is a rectangle with four congruent sides. A square is a rhombus with a right vertex angle. A square is a parallelogram with one right vertex angle and two adjacent equal sides. It has two pairs of parallel lines; I do not like parallel lines because they will never meet and you would never know when they will end.

“Welcome to McDonald’s. How can I help you today?” Sophie asked. I knew Sophie is called Sophie because her name tag spelled S-O-P-H-I-E. Today is my twenty-third time in the Bukit Panjang outlet. I come here because I am familiar with this place since my mum and I moved to Block 78 Senja road #09-10 Singapore 987778 forty-one days ago. I like the new system in McDonald’s. After I order, I will receive a long slip with a number. The ticket numbers are displayed on a big black screen and when you see your number under ‘READY FOR COLLECTION’, it means you can collect your meal. I feel very calm and safe here because everything is in order and well-planned. I once had #2347 for breakfast and I was very happy because it was a prime number. The people in this outlet are nice. People like Sophie. Sophie is approximately 1.6 metres tall and she wears yellow-framed spectacles and she has multi-coloured hair like the feather duster hanging near my cupboard. Sophie works on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesday.

Sometimes, Danny would meet me for lunch, like today. Danny is my best friend and he is the coolest person in the universe. He wears a black leather jacket and he has dated a lot of girls. Danny never calls me *spass* like the boys in my class. I am not spastic. I am autistic and people with autism spectrum disorder are not spastic or retarded. Danny thinks nobody is normal and he thinks I am cool in my own way. Danny thinks Sophie likes me and that I should ask her out on a date. He would say he loves dates and I would tell him I love squares.

Danny and I used to work together in a hardware store but I was banned from the store because I punched a customer in the face. I will explain why. It was a Tuesday, and I was having my lunch break so I ate my baked hash brown from *Farm Land Grade A* behind counter three. Then, a customer came and asked me for recommendations about the shutter speed of Nikon D90. Mr. Lim who was my store manager said that we do not need to entertain the customers during lunch. To entertain means to answer customers’ questions. So I ignored the customer. But the customer did not go away. He said, “Hey, I am talking to you. Are you deaf?” And then he came over the line which he was not supposed to and grabbed my arms. I do not like people touching me so I punched him in the face.

“Hello, may I have your order?” Sophie asked again. Sometimes I would take a while to respond because I have gone to another place in my mind but that does not mean I cannot hear the person who is speaking.

“One hot chocolate.” I said and I handed over a ten-dollar note and Sophie handed over eight dollars and sixty cents and one cup of hot chocolate and I walked back to where Danny was seated.

“So?” Danny asked with both his arms open at forty-five degrees like a double-v. I preferred to call it double-v just like we did in French class: *doo-bluh-vay* because ‘W’ looked more like two ‘V’s rather than two ‘U’s.

“I’ve got hot chocolate.” I said.

“Dude, I mean did you ask her out?” He asked.

“No, I was looking at the squares.” I replied.

“What? Okie, never mind. Tell me your master plan, mister!” He asked, rubbing his palms together like how mum did it when we were skiing in Hokkaido.

I told Danny I would wait for Sophie after work and follow her home like I did the last time but this time, I would ask her out. Danny did not like the idea and said,

“No no no no no dude. You can’t just follow her home. It’s cute if you are eight but at eighteen that is called stalking.” He whispered, which most people would find quite difficult to hear but I have very good hearing so it was alright for me. “Tell you what, there is no one now, just walk up to her, look her in the eye, smile and ask her for a date and remmemmmmmmmmm mmmmm ipwupql asiuep loperuqh iwuelqj.”

I could not hear the last part of Danny’s suggestions. Sometimes when new information is given to me, especially if it is about social interaction, my mind gets a little fuzzy and my hearing too. Dr. J says it is alright because sometimes I have difficulties processing new information and all I have to do is to get my friends to repeat themselves.

“Can you repeat that but can you speak a little slower, I want to write it down” I said. So Danny repeated slowly and I recorded it in my notebook:

Step 1 Look her in the eye.

“Hold on, which eye? Do I look at the left or the right eye?” I asked.

“Both dude, both!” Danny replied. I was still confused but Danny continued.

Step 2 Smile.

Step 3 Speak in a low voice and say hello babe do you want to go out with me?

I took out the cards Dr. J gave me which had different faces together with the exact meaning of those faces. I met Dr. J when I was in primary three after I urinated on my seat. My form teacher, Ms Nazurah switched my seat with Benjamin Loo and I did not want to change seats so I marked my territory. Muggie always marks his in the park. Dr. J said it is good to have these cards with me so I can refer to them whenever I need them. This is because I cannot comprehend people’s emotions so I have to use the cards to help me understand if someone is happy or angry or confused or shocked. I took out picture number 1, the one with a convex curve and showed it to Danny and I said “Step 2” and he gave me two thumbs up. I walked up to the counter. Sophie was smiling at me which made me feel uncomfortable so I could not proceed with step one. But I have learned from Dr. J that it is alright to skip a step because sometimes we do not know what life would bring. Missing a step could also be seen as following an alternative route. “The point is to move forward, Kelvin.” Dr. J would sometimes say that. I could not look at Sophie, so I looked at her name tag and smiled and I remembered that Dr. J said that it is always polite to introduce yourself before a potential friend. So I said in a really low pitch,

“Hi, my name is Kevin Tan, I am eighteen years old. I like prime numbers but I also like squares even though it has four sides. And hey babe, want to go out with me?”

There was no response from Sophie. I thought she could not hear me so I repeated myself.

“Hi, my name is Kelvin Tan, I am eighteen...” but I did not manage to complete my sentence because Sophie started to laugh. I do not like when people laugh at me so I turned around to look at Danny who gave me two thumbs up which made me feel a little safer and less angry.

“Are you asking me out on a date?” she asked.

“Yes.” I replied. Sophie looked at me without speaking and then she said *I am free on Saturdays* which did not make sense to me but Danny said she meant she was interested in hanging out with me.

I like Saturday because it has three syllables but Saturday also made me nervous because Sophie and I are meeting at ThaiNai, a restaurant I am not familiar with. I prefer familiar restaurants because when I am in a new restaurant, I would notice everything around me, the menu, the signboards, the type of lighting, the tiles on the floor, the paintings on the wall, the plants at the door, the type of utensils, the patterns on the table, the curves on the chair and that made me very confused. Usually, mum would visit new places with me and help me familiarise myself with the area, for example, where is the toilet, what is on the menu or if they serve nuts in their dishes because I am allergic to them. But Saturday came too soon and I did not tell my mum about Sophie because she did not ask.

I sat alone in the corner of the restaurant to wait for Sophie. I was across four girls who were talking about online shopping and they were sharing a blueberry tart. Then, they made loud giggles like the hyenas from BBC Earth Two programme. I did not like the way they giggled and I wanted to leave but I had to meet Sophie so I needed to stay. Then, one of the girls suggested to cut the tart into four. I do not like to share but I like blueberries. I wondered how she was going to cut the blueberry tart into four because it is challenging to cut it into perfect fours; you can have two choices--either you cut all the blueberries into fours equally or you can remove the blueberries and divide them equally into four. But they only had nine blueberries on their tart so one of them would have three instead of two which is not fair. We have to play fair. When dad left home on 2001, December 8, 4.32 p.m, mum and dad decided to split everything evenly. They calculated the price of all the furniture, electronics, paintings, and books in our house before they distributed 50:50. Mum said that that was the only solution in order to play fair. But one of the girls who laughed like a hyena took a white plastic knife and cut the pie into unequal parts and that made me very upset. They started taking photographs of themselves with that unevenly divided blueberry tart, bright lights coming out of their phones. I do not like bright lights. It had been fifteen minutes and eleven seconds and I did not see Sophie. The girls were still giggling. So I covered my ears with my palms and started to groan. But I could still hear them so I groaned louder.

The waiter came and asked if I am alright and offered me a glass of water but I did not say anything and started rocking backwards and forwards which made me spill the water on my pants. Then, one of the girls who made sounds like a hyena turned to point at my pants and screamed *OH MY GOOOOD HE WET HIS PANTS* which made me stop rocking for about five seconds. I had to put the additional five ‘o’s in ‘God’ because I want to emphasise how she extended the word God in her speech. I did not wet my pants, I spilled water on my pants. But I could not speak at that moment because my brain was not working well so I started groaning louder and louder but I could still hear the girls laughing at me and I think the waiter was laughing at me too and the man behind the counter put oranges into a V-shaped container and it made a really loud DRRRRRRRRRR noise like when my neighbours renovated their house and I thought ThaiNai was going to collapse on me so I hid under the table, closed my eyes, hugged my knees and continued groaning. When I opened my eyes, I saw two pairs of legs. I recognised the waiter’s shoes but not the white sandals.

“Kelvin... Kelvin...” I heard the sandals speak.

“Kelvin, are you okay?” It was Sophie and not the sandals. Sophie bent and looked under the table. I wanted to tell her that I did not wet my pants and that I waited for over twenty minutes and that the girls were laughing me and that the building was going to collapse and that I think water should have a definite shape so that it will not spill on my pants and make me look like I wet myself. But I could not because my mind was not working well. All I could say was *hmmm*. Sophie did not say a word after that but the waiter with the black shoes did; he said *I think you have to leave*. So we left.

When we were outside the restaurant, Sophie asked me *Kelvin what is wrong with you?* People always ask me this question but I could not come up with an answer so I left Sophie by herself and headed for the toilet. I like the toilet cubicle because there was no one around me and I can touch the walls and I feel safe. In the cubicle, I remembered Dr. J said that if I am too nervous, I could do deep breathing exercises to make me feel less nervous. So I did but I could also smell urine and poo which I do not like, so I thought of all the properties of a square and that made me a little calmer. I counted all the square tiles on the floors and on the walls of the cubicle and waited until I heard no footsteps. I groaned for approximately one hour before I left the toilet. Sophie was not outside the toilet so I walked back home.

I disagree with Danny. Love is not easy and it is not fun. Love is not like a square. It cannot be compared to a square. But if someone wanted me to compare, then, Sophie is line AB and I am line CD and we are parallel to one another, therefore it makes sense that we will never meet.

That night, I could not sleep. My chest hurt and I could not find a logical explanation for the pain so I provided a genuine reason for the discomfort by scratching my arms with my nails like the time dad left.

Missing

[by Lisa Chi Li Shan]

My bedroom was getting increasingly stuffy – the heat had accumulated under the thick cotton blanket and my clothes felt slightly damp from my own perspiration. The vibrant sunrays had begun warming up the day and the white walls in my room were now tinged with a honeycomb-yellow, just as if someone had decided to paint it to fit the all-year-round summer that Malaysia had. The exhaustion, from getting caught in the traffic bottleneck after dropping my husband off for work at the airport the night before, had taken a toll on me, so before I knew it I had drifted off to sleep without rolling down the binds or switching the television off. I woke up to the glares that blinded my half-opened eyes and to the familiar voice of the same morning newscaster who had been presenting the news for many years. He was in the midst of sharing the weather forecast for the day and his tone remained uplifting and cheery as he reminded the viewers to carry an umbrella just in case they were caught in a storm that was coming. I looked at the clock on the bed stand – 8:05AM. With another 25 minutes left on the clock before it was time to get up, I felt like my day was off to a great start.

“... MH370 disappeared after they lost contact within an hour after take-off. There was no distress signal or message sent...”

All my attention was immediately directed towards the newscaster on the television. I reached for the remote control and increased the volume. His face was expressionless and his tone was completely different from how he sounded just a minute ago. His words were carried in a grave tone. Something in me didn't sit right and I felt extremely uneasy – it was the airline that Hizwan worked for.

“...There are currently no leads on the whereabouts of the aircraft that was carrying 239 passengers and crew to Beijing.”

Did they say Beijing? My heart started to race faster and my stomach churned even more as I recalled Hizwan telling me he was heading there for two days. I immediately grabbed my phone to check if he had dropped me a text, as he always would when he arrived in another country; but there were no text messages or phone calls from him. In fact, his last-seen timing on WhatsApp was still from the night before. It couldn't be that he was on that flight, could it?

Suddenly, I recalled that Hizwan consistently writes his flight details into a brown, leather notebook that I had bought for him; it was meant to help organize his busy travel schedule. Now this notebook was the only way I could get any answers. With adrenaline coursing through my veins, I got out of bed to look for this notebook. I had to find it no matter what. I searched high and low for the notebook. It wasn't on the table, neither was it in his drawer. Where did he usually put it?! Why was it gone?! The heat from my body was trapped in my pajamas and I was starting to sweat from the panic. I had so much confidence in being able to find the notebook, but as I continued to search frantically, it felt as if the chances of finding it were dwindling. Tears started to well up in my eyes – all the feelings of frustration and hopelessness that were bottled inside of me finally erupted and I fell to the bedroom floor crying, just like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum. Was I thinking too much? Could it be that I had made a mistake and he was still on the plane en route to another country?

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to calm myself down. “There's no way you can find something in the state you are in. Calm down Nora – you don't even know for sure if he was on that plane.” I chided myself for being so impatient and pessimistic. I took in another deep breath and once I had cleared the thoughts in my head, I opened my eyes and scanned the room once again – slowly and thoroughly. I spotted the spine of the book almost immediately,

among the stack of papers that I gathered together in my state of frenzy. I sighed at my own carelessness and picked up the book. I knew that my life could experience a complete overturn in just a few seconds. What if he was really on that plane? I was terrified. What would happen to our family? With all the courage I had gathered, I opened the book to his March schedule. My palms started to sweat and I felt super queasy. All I could do now was to repeat a silent prayer in my heart.

“Please say it’s not MH370. Please say it’s not MH370. Please say – ” I stopped my nervous chants when I saw what Hizwan wrote.

“MH370 KL to Beijing: Arrival time 8/3, 6.30am”

I stared blankly at his writing. How could this be? I had just seen him yesterday and now people were saying the plane’s missing? There were so many questions, but I didn’t know who to ask or what to ask first. It had to be a mistake. How could a plane go missing without a trace? It didn’t make sense. Was Hizwan safe? How would I tell my son and mother-in-law? What could I do now?

My phone started to ring and I immediately picked it up, willing that it was Hizwan at the end of the line, assuring me that he was safe.

“IS MY SON WITH YOU?” My mother-in-law’s voice boomed over the receiver. “Nora, please pass the phone to him. He hasn’t been picking up any of my phone calls or replying my texts. Where is he? I need to speak to him.”

Hearing her anxious voice made me choke up. Everything was happening so quickly and I was still in shock from the discovery. “He.. he isn’t here – ” A whisper was all I could manage at this moment.

“THEN WHERE IS HE? Did you see the news Nora? Is my son safe?”

“He was on that plane...” I couldn’t continue any longer. My fists were clenched so tightly together that my knuckles turned white and I could feel the sweat trapped inside them. There was a moment of silence between us and without saying a word in response, my mother-in-law hung up the phone abruptly. I was left sitting alone on the bed, trying to digest the cruel awakening that had left me in chaos. My emotions were all over the place and my insides were gripping tight. All my feelings were mixing together, contributing to the overwhelming mess that I felt I was. The tears were now flowing uncontrollably and the pain that filled my heart seemed to be suffocating me.

“If you are a family member of any of the victims on this flight, please call the toll-free number at 1800-81-4819.” The newscaster looked solemn as he appealed to the viewers. It was as if he was talking directly at me but I hesitated. I refused to believe that my beloved husband was a victim of this bizarre disappearance. He had to be out there somewhere – planes couldn’t just suddenly vanish.

My phone started to ring again – it was my mother-in-law. “Are... are you sure he was... on the plane? The MH – MH370 plane?” I could hear her sniffing in the background as she waited for my response. Having to admit that he was on that plane out loud for the second time seemed harder and I dreaded having to do it. Why did this have to happen to me and my loving family? What did we do to deserve this?

“Y-yes... I’m sorry mother...” I mumbled. My mother-in-law started to wail and hearing her pain just broke my heart even more. What were we going to do? I was lost and helpless.

“... HIZWAN!! Why... WHY did you have to be on THAT plane? WHY did you have to abandon your family? I already warned you that your job... was too dangerous... but you refused to listen! Nora... w-what do we do now?”

“I-I don’t know mother... All we can do is to pray and wait for more news to come. If I have any news, I will let you know ok?” She agreed and we left our conversation there. Deep down, I knew that I had to call the toll-free number but I wasn’t ready to admit that my beloved husband was on that plane for a third time. I keyed in the e-number and stared at the call button. I had to be strong – for my mother-in-law and my son. I had no other choice. I had to make that call, even though all I wanted to do was to sleep and pretend all of this was nothing but a nightmare. I nervously pressed the button and waited for my call to be picked up.

“Thank you for calling Malaysian Airlines’ emergency helpline. You’re speaking to Aisyah. How may I address you?”

“My name is Nora.”

“Good morning Ms Nora. On behalf of the company, I apologize for what has happened. Rest assured that the authorities are currently doing all they can to find out what happened to the plane. In the meantime, I would appreciate if you could provide me some details of yourself and the passenger. What is the name of the passenger you are calling for and how are you related to him or her?”

“Um... My husband’s name is Mohammed Hizwan Shah Bin Hussein and he was one of the flight stewards on MH370.” Saying it for the third time felt surreal. It was getting easier to mouth those words, as if I was finally accepting the harsh truth. Aisyah continued to ask for more details and remained reassuring the entire time. She advised that I could either wait for the updates via text messages or I could head down to Cyberview Resort and Spa in Sepang where I would receive updates directly from the ongoing press conferences. I knew I wanted to be as close to the investigations as possible but I needed to be here for my family as well. What was going to happen to my mother-in-law and my son? The responsibility that rested upon my shoulders was overwhelming. All I wanted was for Hizwan to be by my side, telling me what I should do. He was always calm and composed, and nothing ever seemed to faze him.

I figured the first thing I should do before making any decision was to break the news to my son. I walked to his room and saw him lying in bed with his eyes fixed on his hand phone. Looking at my son was as if I was looking at my husband. His features were a carbon copy of Hizwan’s when he was at that age. Their sharp jaw line, brown rugged hair, thin lips and caterpillar-like eyebrows were almost identical. He must have sensed my presence in the room as I stared blankly at him. He put his phone aside and asked “Ma, what’s up?”

“Azim...” I couldn’t control my tears and broke down the moment I tried to speak. I thought I wouldn’t have any problems saying it again.

“What’s going on? Ma, why are you crying?” Azim asked quizzically, not knowing how to react from seeing his mother cry for the first time.

“Azim... There’s a plane that just went missing... and Daddy was on that plane.” Azim stayed still and stared wide-eyed at me.

“Does.. this mean Daddy won’t be coming back?”

My heart ached when I heard my twelve-year-old’s question. This was something a child should never have to go through, but it was happening to my own son. I walked to him and sat

on his bed. "Mak doesn't know for sure... All we can do now is wait for more news. Mak is thinking of going to the airport to stay for a couple of days so I can get updates faster. I'll ask Nenek to come over and stay together with you. Ok?"

"Can we all go together? Please Mak. Please, I want to follow you." Azim responded almost immediately and looked to me with so much hope in his eyes.

"Nenek cannot travel long distances remember? You also have school, Azim. Be a good boy – keep Nenek company and take care of her while Mak go away for a while. I can update you whenever there is new news about Daddy, ok?" It pained me to reject my son. Not only did he find out his father was missing, he also had to see his mother leave him for a few days. He nodded but kept his head down, refusing to look at me. With tears in my eyes, I reached out to hug my son, promising him that I would come back to the family very soon. It was only then when he started to sob in my arms, as if the shocking news had finally sunk in. I consoled him by assuring him that we were in this together, that his mother would be there for him no matter what.

I immediately made the arrangements for my mother-in-law to stay with Azim and also booked a cab to bring me to the hotel in Sepang. Though my mother-in-law insisted on coming with me, I managed to convince her not to, saying that Azim needed her company while I was gone. When the cab had arrived, the sky was no longer bright and sunny. Instead, it was dull and overcast. All traces of the vibrant rays that pierced through my window earlier were completely blocked by the tar-black clouds in the sky. I sat in silence for the entire 45-minute drive. Staring at the raindrops that pounded the window, I couldn't help but drift back to the memories that Hizwan and I shared. It was only a few hours ago that he last held my hands, kissed my forehead and told me he loved me. He promised that the two days would pass quickly and he would soon be back. How long would this emotional turmoil last? What if he never came back? Thinking of all these reminded me of all the pain I was going through and I couldn't stop the tears from falling. No one, especially me, would ever be ready to face the uncertain future, but for my family, I had to persevere and stay strong. I would always look to the light at the end of this cold and dark tunnel, and remain hopeful for the day my family reunites. So long as Hizwan remains out there waiting, I would never lose hope; neither would I ever give up.

Perceptions

[by V Praveenkumar]

I will never understand how some people can just jump to conclusions that a woman who gains ownership to a mansion after her husband's death is most likely a successful gold-digger and perhaps even a psychopath witch. I'm a normal human being with her own dreams. How is it my fault that life decided to take a twisted turn! So here I am, being normal, doing something I hope I can find calmness in, writing. But what could I possibly write about? There is nothing that has not been written about. Perhaps, I have forgotten that books are just like life – collections of everyday ordinaries, fragments of another person's mind. It has never been my intention to write my way to fame and glory. My intention is to simply pen my realities. If I could ignite some insights in some people through my words, double the purpose is served!

Rich widows - trust me when I say this, very little is known about such women or should I say, very little is known about me. I never imagined dying alone. I always wanted to die a happily married woman with loving children surrounding me. The last time my house was close to being a home, I prepared his favorite chicken masala & biryani. It was past 10pm, the food was ready, the scent of ghee & saffron wafted through our home. We sat, I served & we started eating. The only sounds that filled the dining room were the chewing of roasted chicken meat and the cracking of *papadum*. He threw a few compliments about the food at me. I acknowledged it with a second serving.

"Dia, I have early morning tomorrow, I go finish some work and then sleep", he informed me as his eyes focused on his Samsung device resting safely in his left palm as his right hand simultaneously fed himself the last bits of biryani. How I wished it was my cheeks that rested in his palms instead of that phone. It occurred to me rather fleetingly that he had developed wrinkles at the sides of his eyes, probably due to all the work and tension that he put himself through every day or perhaps age had started to catch up. Time was passing us by. Regardless, I decided to postpone the topic of having a child once again, keeping in mind that Ismail was probably drowning in his own pool of worries at work. I told myself I had to be a good and understanding wife as I had been instructed to be for as long as I can remember. Putting my thoughts aside, I looked up to wish him all the best and bid him goodnight, only to realize he had already left for his study. That was the last dinner I had with my husband.

The next time I saw him, he was lying face up, on a hospital bed, not breathing, looking like he had just come out of a warzone, with thick bandages molded on his head. After a few unsuccessful attempts of trying to wake him up, I realized that he was gone. Staring at his lifeless body that had been severely bruised by what the police officer informed me was a speeding lorry, I gasped as I clung onto his shirt that was soaked in his blood.

"WAKE UP ISMAIL!! PLEASE WAKE UP! I PROMISE I WILL NEVER ASK FOR A BABY! PLEASE WAKE UP! I JUST NEED YOU! PLEASE WAKE UP? I WILL COOK YOUR FAVOURITE BIRYANI! WON'T YOU WAKE UP FOR THAT AT LEAST?" I shook him in hopes of bribing him back to life. I realized then that I did not even know what else my husband liked other than biryani.

I never got to tell him how badly I wanted a child and a family. Guilt was a handmaiden of sorrow and I knew I was going to be haunted by both for the rest of my years for all my unexpressed desires. As I stood by his grave during his funeral, bidding my final goodbye, the poisonous whispers of accusations invaded my ears. Accusations from people I thought were supposed to be my family. I never asked for a rich husband. I never craved for the lavish lifestyle. All I wanted was a loving husband and a happy family. A woman does not dream to be married into a respectable Engineer family; a woman dreams to be loved and to be part of

a loving and accepting family. I wished that my parents were still around so that I could push the accusations towards them. They were the real gold-diggers. I felt like I was alone in the world. Sooner or later, I was the only one at the funeral as the thunders in the skies threatened people into hiding.

That night, I made my way back to what used to be a home in the recesses of my heart. I knew I was not only going to enter a house that would be haunted by his memories, but a neighborhood that would haunt me with its words as well. The little family I thought I had turned out to be nothing but an illusion. How silly of me to assume that my in-laws would stick around and love me like their own daughter. How ridiculous of me to have thought that they would stick around to comfort me.

As the days progressed, the reality of things started to sink in—that I was truly alone in this world. I got out of my home as much as possible and went for walks to clear my head. I would spend hours finding solace simply watching my neighbor's kids play in the garden. The smallest smiles they gave me when I threw the ball back to them when it came into my garden would make my day. Deep down I knew that this was probably the closest I would ever get to having a child. Soon even this little happiness would be taken away from me. It was a sunny Friday evening and the kids were playing with their ball and as usual, the ball came bouncing into my garden. Looking forward to my little dose of happiness, I picked up the ball for them, but this time the kids scurried back into their homes as if they saw a ghost. Confused, I brought the ball over to their side of the garden and as I was about to knock on their door when I heard something that would break my heart even more than I thought was possible.

“Do you want to get another beating! Why you throw the ball there? How many times I tell you? That witch did some magic and killed her own husband just to take the house to herself! Imagine what she will do to you for throwing your stupid toys there! GO TO YOUR ROOMS!”

First my family, now even my neighbors? What I did to deserve such a label I will never know. I should have broken into a rage upon hearing such accusations but I was not angry. I should have broken down into tears, but I did not cry. I left the ball there and went back into my cocoon without a drop of expression on my face. The following day, those kids' parents, Mr and Mrs Rajambal visited, bearing fruits and other food items. It was amusing how they assumed I wouldn't notice the fact that they did not bring their kids over like they used to. It's fascinating how they assumed I wouldn't notice the whispers of accusation of me being witch when I prepared coffee for them in the kitchen. Coffee that they would pretend to sip on but never drank, fearing I may have poisoned it. I knew that somewhere in their superstitious minds they hoped that the fruits and food they brought would be some kind of a peace offering.

“Do they honestly believe I am actually a powerful witch who would do something to their kids just because their ball fell into my garden?” I shook my head as I forced a smile at them, ignoring their unprecedented supposed act-of-kindness.

A couple of days later, I had another visit, but this time with a different agenda. I opened the door that evening to see a worn out Mrs Rajambal cradling the lifeless body of her son in her arms.

“EHHH TIYA MANTIRAVATI (Evil Magician)! I KNOW ITS YOU! HAPPY AH? WHAT DID MY CHELLAM EVER DO TO YOU? WHY DID YOU NEED HIS LIFE TOO AS IF YOUR ISMAIL'S NOT ENOUGH? MAY YOU NEVER PROSPER! MAY YOU NEVER EVER PROSPER!”

She then went on to thrust what seemed like sand at my face before storming off. It's a stupid Indian belief to throw sand towards a person when you wish for them to go to hell. Clearly she didn't take any chances with that, throwing it straight into my face. What broke my heart most was that she didn't even let me touch that poor innocent child. I learned that he had met with

a hit-and-run accident as he ran into the road to get his ball earlier that evening, or so I heard from the police who came to ask if I had seen the culprit's number plate.

As the days went by, the town's once light-hearted buzz started to die down. Kids who used to play in the garden in the evenings were nowhere to be found. The neighborhood had become eerily silent. As I went for my walks, the ominous crushing of soil against my sneakers were almost piercing. Even the dogs of the neighborhood seemed to have lost their spunk. I realized Mr and Mrs Rajambal weren't the only ones to give me the cold shoulder. Rumor had spread to the entire neighborhood about me being a witch. Even the cashier at the nearby 7-11 who used to make friendly conversation with me, bitching about her boring job, wouldn't look me in the eye any more. Everywhere I went, I felt eyes gawking at me and whispers about my apparent ruthlessness sneaking into my ears.

After that, I refused to leave the house. I wanted to run away, but where would I go? I couldn't find a job with my A level certificate, not these days. My parents never entertained the idea of allowing me to further my studies. It was always marriage over a degree as a woman's place should be in the kitchen not an office.

After a few days of sleeping in the living room, I decided to take a walk, just around the mansion. I dragged my feet up the steps towards the bedroom, the place Ismail first brought me to as his new bride. A brothel rather than a bedroom, it seemed to me. The pink glow that slithered on the floor from the night-lights at the sides of the room added to its effect. A bedroom was supposed to be a place of love, but it was merely a place for him to use me for an escape when work was too overwhelming or perhaps when his other world was not working out too well for him. It never mattered to him that I had not the slightest expression on my face as he was getting his release. Perhaps he knew that secretly I wanted a child. Regardless, that was the only reason I prostituted myself; the hope of bearing a child that could perhaps give me a new lease on life. Unfortunately for me, there was the invention of that stupid condom.

I dragged myself down to the kitchen. Bottles of various spices still neatly lined up on the counter tops while unwashed pots & pans in the wash basin had become the feasting ground for cockroaches. Growing up, I had always dreamt of the kind of husband who would sit in the kitchen as I cooked his favorite meals as he taste-tested my different recipes, the kind of husband who would surprise me with morning breakfasts which would probably be disastrous but still cute and adorable because it would be made out of love for me, the kind of husband who would play dolls with our daughter in the living room as I prepared lunch for us all. Reality crept back to me when a cockroach crawled onto my fingers. Flinging the cockroach away, I escaped into the living room. Tripping over a wire, I found myself slamming shoulder-first onto the cold marble floor. The pain in my shoulder however was incomparable to the pain in my heart. The skin underneath my chin trembled as I eyed the photograph of my husband, myself and my in-laws resting arrogantly on the television table. The three of them, my in-laws and my husband were sitting down on red-cushioned chairs as I stood behind them, respectfully. How dare a bride sit beside her own husband when the groom's parents were around? That was their logic.

My eyes slowly started to drip tears. It was the first time I had cried since that day at the hospital. This time however, I was not crying for him. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I was crying for me. There was a kind of rawness to how I wailed that evening, finally acknowledging the pain from a wound that was opened almost 11 years ago when he slid that ring on my finger. I did not try to hold my tears in. Not anymore. My screams bounced off the dark maroon walls, my fists pounding the marble floor in agony.

I thought I would have felt better after a good long sleep, but I did not. The rotting odors from the kitchen still pierced my senses. The thick stuffy atmosphere in the hall suffocated me. I

could not cry any more. It is said that it takes strength to cry at sadness; strength to engage with the authentic feelings of what is being felt deep down. Clearly, I had used up all my strength that night. I knew I was depleted. I could not go on like this. I had to do something for myself. I had to stand up for myself. Suddenly, I felt a flame being lit within me. A flame that was sparked by years of constant friction. I knew that this flame was going to spread like wild fire.

What happened next was a series of motions that happened as if it were programmed into me by an external source. Oblivious to the piercing ache in my shoulder, I grabbed that family photograph, strutted up into the bedroom and placed it on the study table. I draped myself in a red sari and combed my long wavy hair, hair which my husband never allowed me to cut short. I maintained it thinking it would make him happy. I had always secretly hoped that he would be free one of the nights and comb it for me. It would be a little activity which I thought could help salvage the loosening bond between us and ignite some romance rather than lust. Little did I know my hair would only be of use for him to grab as he indulged in his cynical pleasures from the back. Clenching my trembling fists, I smiled at my reflection in the mirror, almost laughing at my own naiveté.

I tucked myself in the chair of the study and opened up an empty diary. I flicked off the cover of a ball-point pen and began to write my story as I glared at the family photograph. That story I wrote is the story you are reading right now. The story of a rich widow who many despised for no valid reason; the story of a rich widow who some even thought was a witch; the story of a rich widow who no one bothered to understand due to their own superstitious beliefs. Superstitious beliefs that transformed me from a simple girl who simply craved for love and family into one that is full of hatred for the world!

As you see my blood on the pages of this diary, may your words and actions not be the reason for the blood of another to be spilt.

Selamat Hari Raya [by Shehnam Khan]

My eyelids could barely open and every time I opened them, the figures of the three round women crowding around me did not become any clearer. If it weren't for their distinct voices, I wouldn't have wished I was unconscious again.

"*Allahu Akbar!* Meera! It's me, Meera! Your *mama!*" I almost felt guilty that I pretended to slip into a coma. Her voice broke into a high-pitched wail.

"Ssssh! Don't worry, Jah, don't worry. She is a strong girl, our Meera. Ha, you never see the doctor just now smiling tell us got no problem. Our Meera is a fighter." The corners of my mouth were about to pull into a smile. Was my aunt comforting my mother? Well, that was pretty new.

"Leela is right, Jah. Remember when Meera was six years old, that accident happened..." *Nenek's* croaky whisper brought a still silence to the room. Even mother stopped sniffing. The silence stretched longer than a few seconds. I wondered what was going on, so I peeked. They were still standing around but this time, they were staring at me in apprehension, their hands clasped in front of their chest. Mother's torn expression turned angry in a split second.

"Where am I?" I asked and wore a frail look. They couldn't have possibly known that I was pretending to be unconscious for a while. But *nenek* saw right through me. She let out a raspy laughter. "What did I tell you ... just like when she was six", she shuffled away on her cane. *Nenek* knew I had pulled the same stunt again, when I burnt with fever and took advantage of the attention to pretend to pass out so that my parents would, in their state of concern, buy me whatever toys I asked for after "regaining consciousness".

"Meera, they found you so far away from the kampong! *Sayang*, please tell *mak* what happened" Mother's voice quivered again. I sighed because I knew she deserved to know the truth about how I ended up here, in Hospital Puteri Seni on Hari Raya day. Let's just say, it wasn't very "*selamat*".

That morning right after the Hari Raya prayers, we left Singapore for *Kampung Damai*. *Damai*, as in peace, or 'piss' as I would rather call it. I went through the ordeal of a gruelling three-hour drive with my two younger brothers who were reading Dr Pluto, their favourite science comic series. I resorted to counting motorcycles on the road. Four hundred and seventy-something motorcycles later, we arrived on the bumpy, sandy path outside my *nenek's* home. She stood by the window framed by soft pink curtains she had sewn herself. She stood by the window, expressionless for a while until she finally could make out who was sitting in the backseat of the car, then her face broke into a smile. I walked over to her and held her leathery hands. She clasped my hands, her eyes brimming with tears. I brought her hand to my lips and kissed it while she softly smoothed my hair.

"Meera!" Auntie Leela screamed from afar and waddled over in excitement. Oh, how I dreaded the asphyxiating embrace and the rows of gold bangles digging into my back. "So skinny la! Every year I see you becoming thinner and thinner. Even my *ayam* got more flesh than you!" She threw her head back cackling at the joke she made. She clicked her tongue in disapproval, "Your mother work too hard she forgot to feed her children *lah*".

Auntie Leela was a spitting image of my mother, but was sunburnt from the years she spent working in her fields rearing the animals she served on the table for us.

“Eat some more, Meera! Now you how old? – What you study? – Eh last year you wear this *baju* also right? – Eh growing older ah, pimple all coming out – Meera you like my *kari ayam*?” She interrogated at the table. The buzzing of the uninvited guest made it difficult to enjoy my food. Every time I brought a spoonful to my lips, I was attacked by a swarm of questions. Surprisingly, you would think that because of the size of these Malaysian species, as compared to ordinary mosquitoes, would slow them down, but they buzzed around your ears every time you did not want them there. The longer I sat with Auntie Leela, the more impatient I got with her buzzing.

Mother had probably seen my agonised face because she sat down next to me at the dinner table. “*Sayang*, go sit with the other children in the room. They are all in there.” I looked her in the eye and never felt more grateful. She nodded at my unspoken gratitude.

“Eh! *City* Meera is here. Why you play *masak-masak* with all the oldies outside. We are too boring for you, eh?” Aqilah smiled mischievously. She was always one with a smart mouth. Her comment made all the other twelve cousins in the room look up from their mobile phones and computer screens. She patted the cushion, motioning me to sit next to her. Aqilah was a month younger but mature in looks and her adult-like disposition. The kampong life toughens people and they were always smug about it. They wouldn’t miss the chance to mock us city folk for being ‘weak’.

She led the conversation, like always, filling me in on the *in-betweens* which were the family updates, from last year’s Raya to this year’s. Our banter went on for some time before being disrupted by a smash of a rock, the size of a fist, which flew into the room through the window, whizzed past us and rolled on the wooden floors, missing one of the children’s head by a centimetre. “Oi! Come down!” I heard a familiar bellow from downstairs. The voice was rougher, and deeper than when I had last heard it. I went over to the window and recognised the same-yet-different guy I grew up playing with. His bronze skin gleamed under the blazing sunlight. His white shirt was creased, and his sleeves were rolled up. Perspiration down his back made his shirt cling, revealing his strong back. I couldn’t help but notice how his jaw had squared and his shoulders looked broader and more athletic. He was even taller than the other men around him.

Aqilah’s frown eased when she looked out the window. “Damn you, Adam.” Her usually offensive stare softened into a gaze. There was a dreamy look in her rebellious eyes. I felt a stab in my chest. Aqilah turned around and lifted her satin purple *baju kurung* slightly above her ankles and jogged out of the room.

“Meera?” Aqilah motioned me to join the gang. The gang was made up of Aqilah, Suren who was Aqilah’s next-door neighbour, Ryan who was her classmate, and finally, Adam, the Kampong Chief’s son. “Yah, Meera join us. We only see you once a year”, Adam smiled genuinely, his eyes on me. I nodded shyly, trying to avoid eye contact.

Adam leaned against the lamp post and got all our attention. “Okay, guys, listen. Do you want money? More than any Hari Raya packet can give you?” Adam proposed to the group.

“Adam cut the crap and tell us what’s the deal?” Ryan jokingly punched Adam’s arm. “We are going ...inside the *hutan*.” Adam’s proposal was met by murmurs of disapproval from the rest of the gang. “Adam, are you *gila*? That’s a crazy thing to do.” Aqilah looked at him quizzically.

Suren took a gentler approach. “Brudder, what for go into the jungle, *dey*? How can we find money in there? *Selamat tak*? Nobody has stepped in the *hutan*, NOBODY. We don’t know we can come out alive or not.”

Adam's expression stiffened. He stared at each of them without saying a word. "There are people talking. Talking about a house in the *hutan*. And recently it was raided by police because of some criminal activities going on in there for some time. And I heard the rubber tappers actually saw the house during their rounds. Come on, you all know people have been talking about this, right?"

Suren laughed excitedly. "You mean you are talking about *that* house in the *hutan*?" Suren guffawed and clapped his hands maniacally. "Dude, you are *gila*. But I love it. That old man who used to live there – he's dead, right? Man, we are going to be rich today."

Aqilah rolled her eyes. She did not believe there would be money in that abandoned house. I was still dumbstruck that they were planning to break into a home. In the middle of the JUNGLE! And Aqilah did not seem to find a problem with that, except the possibility that we wouldn't find any loot.

Adam, being a smooth-talker, reassured them that there was money and the dead owner's valuables were still lying around the house because he had overheard his father on the phone with the Kampong police. "Then why the police didn't confiscate his valuables and money for their investigation?" I finally joined in the conversation. Nobody spoke. I wondered if I had asked a stupid question and I instantly regretted it. Adam smirked, "Now, Meera...nobody in the right mind would mess with a *bomoh's* things right?"

I was conflicted. The answer was clear. I knew I should not be part of this crime, trespassing a witch doctor's property. But my family would be driving back to Singapore that night and I would only return to this kampong a year later. "You are coming, right?" Adam looked me in the eye expectantly. If I said no, I would only see Adam next year. Besides, what was the worst thing that could happen? The sound of the adventure started to agree with everyone else. Being a party-pooper would destroy my chances with Adam.

I knew little about the jungle that the kampong folk were too afraid to explore. I only knew that we were entering a dark abyss. The deeper we ventured, the denser the jungle got. Its canopies seemed to close in, letting little sunlight through. When I looked over my shoulder, the path we had been treading on narrowed until only a sliver of light from the outside world remained. I imagined what the house would look like. A desolate, decrepit hut, with an unmown, knee-high lawn protecting it from trespassers, like us. Its windows would probably be shattered and an abandoned rocking chair rocking on its own on the front porch. I imagined voodoo dolls decorating the inside of the house, hung on walls like hunting trophies. My anxiety dipped and my adrenaline started to spike. Finally, a Hari Raya story to tell my friends back at home, and make them wish they were as lucky as me.

As though the sky had been dipped in ink, its crystal blue had quickly turned into a deep indigo. When the occasional breeze swept across the jungle, the wispy clouds covered the full moon, halting us in our journey. We huddled together. Sometimes the only thing we could hear were our staggering breaths, until the moonlight glowed again.

"It's getting cold Adam, we should turn around", Aqilah's voice trembled. "I, I feel like, like got something following us," Ryan supported Aqilah's decision, stammering while he spoke. His proud persona had obviously been shaken by the cold. I found Aqilah's hand and our fingers interlaced.

"Adam, let's turn around. We are too deep in the jungle already. *Jom balik lah!*" Suren became tensed as the night filled with howling winds, rustling and animal sounds nearby and faraway. It dawned upon us that we were in a territory where we were the only humans. It started to shake everyone to their senses. We were not in a *selamat* zone. "We are already almost there, don't worry. We will be coming out of here loaded." His voice became small. The confident,

suave guy I had trusted before was losing trust in himself. "Okay, fine, let's rest for a while." He grew impatient as the idea that the house was just an old folk's myth to scare children became more believable.

I wondered if my family knew where to find me. My insides caved as guilt overwhelmed me at the thought of my family searching for me at that hour. I would be counting my Hari Raya money in the car ride home if I hadn't been so stupid, following my heart instead of my brain. I didn't even know what time it was and how long we had been walking. It could have been 8 pm or midnight, I couldn't tell. Even if we had been walking around in circles, none of us would have known.

We finally stopped to rest. My *baju kurung* was drenched with sweat and soiled with mud at the hem. The insides of my calves itched terribly, and my fingernails were caked with dried blood from constantly scratching the sore bumps the mosquitoes had left on my skin. Suren and Ryan partnered up to relieve themselves at the bushes. And while we three were alone together, at that inopportune moment, Adam's outpour of concern turned Aqilah into my enemy.

"Are you okay, Meera?" Adam squatted next to me, concerned about my legs riddled with scores of itchy bumps. His hand grazed my ankle. I could almost feel Aqilah's burning glare in the dark. Her silence while she observed Adam and I was not a good thing.

Before I could respond, we were interrupted by echoing screams. The trill of Suren and Ryan's shrieking punctured the still night. They charged past us, their faces chalky-white as if they had seen a ghost. From the bushes, pairs of piercing red eyes came into view and low rumbling snarls grew louder and louder as the creatures paced towards us. Their razor-sharp fangs gleamed in the faint moonlight and their tongues slithered out. In a fleeting moment, no one said a word. We fled.

We ran blindly, not knowing if we were all running in the same direction. My muscles were charged with adrenaline. Fear and courage possessed my body but the only thing pushing me to run faster than I had ever run were the loud growls right on my tail, which were becoming more and more threatening. I came to an abrupt stop when a powerful blow to my gut sent me flying and tumbling through the dirt, landing face first in the mud.

The sound of footsteps crunching gravel came closer to where I was lying on the ground, and then it paused as though making sure I had been knocked off my feet. The angry growling of the pack of creatures was getting closer to us. That was when he fled. The footsteps quickened and disappeared into the darkness. That was it. I knew at that moment that it was just a matter of seconds before I met my end. I was going to be devoured by a pack of ravenous creatures.

The sound of grovelling on the dirt and hungry growling soon surrounded me. But suddenly, instead of going in for the prey, the creatures yelped and they retreated into the jungle. I wondered what had scared the creatures so I lifted my head from the ground. Shadows of people moving towards me with flashes of light were shouting my name. My head spun wildly, and my vision blurred. That was the last thing I remembered.

"*Sayang... sayang*, it's time to go." I was feasting my eyes on the cyan-blue skies and watching the emerald trees outside shimmer in the luminescent sunlight. I turned around to my mother's call. Everything was packed. All the bouquets and 'Get Well Soon' balloons that were all over the room had been cleared. Mother stood by the door. She smiled but her eyes were tired, her cheeks gaunt. She looked so different from just a week ago. I was finally getting discharged and no longer confined within the four walls, getting the same meals daily and being supervised in case I performed any 'physical activity'.

We drove by the kampong one last time, to bid goodbye to my *nenek* and my Aunt Leela. They came to the car, exchanged *salam*s and kissed me and my brothers goodbye. A figure standing by the window in the house caught my attention. Aqilah was staring at me relentlessly. Her expression was hard to read. She never once visited me in the hospital. I wondered if the mysterious person who had hurt me in the jungle was her. As the car left the driveway, Aqilah continued to stand and watch us from the window. I hoped to see some guilt flash across her face as I kept my eyes on the sideview mirrors, observing her, until the house was out of view. I never told anyone about how I ended up lying on the dirt in the *hutan*. The only thing my family knew was that I had ventured into the wild with a couple of friends. The only thing I knew was that I was cudgelled by one of them.