



CARISSA FOO

Green is the Colour of Hope

Jenny had black thumbs and a bruised finger. The balloon cactus sitting by the stove was almost spineless, the spring onions in the upcycled ketchup bottle would not regrow. Only the two-week old potatoes were sprouting. She had meant to make rösti but could not find a grater. They might still be edible, all one-kilo of them. Just pry off the eyes, Isa would say. They had a habit of eating near-expired food. Nothing was really perishable to them.

Jenny picked one potato up and ran her finger around its sprouts. It was firm and earthy, soil caked on its skin. She imagined the ground in which it was sown. Malaysian, possibly muddy. For some reason, she thought of wild boars picking at the potato eyes. She reached for the paring knife on the sink, felt its skinny hilt, the blunted tip that could barely pierce clingfilm. The blade reflected a glimmer of the orange-red sun. Jenny put the knife down. She threw the potato into the bin. There was no one to cook for.

Jenny was used to cooking for two. Before Isa, she cooked for Vic who had a very refined palette. She was also half-Swiss and vegan. For a while, her bungalow on Sembawang Road had a greenhouse with plants in water trays until the



neighbourhood became a dengue hotspot. The day Jenny moved out the plants were hanging in the air, their roots dangling and feeble. Jenny was just as reluctant. She still had feelings for Vic, no doubt, but she was also used to running away from home and overstaying at others'. The eviction saddened her.

After Vic, Jenny briefly dated Ying. Ying lived in a four-room flat near Bishan station with her grandmother who wanted a good girl for a tenant. The flat had a tiny kitchen and a faulty stove. Jenny was sad that she couldn't cook, she was still thinking about Vic. Ying afforded her respite and was in charge of ordering take-outs and microwaving frozen meals. It took Jenny two weeks to realise she had had enough of Bishan. With a feeling that wasn't like sadness, she moved to Ang Mo Kio, into the arms of one Isabella Ho.

They met at the nursery: Jenny wanted a succulent, some life to spruce up the top deck of the bunk bed at her parents'. Isa was the horticulturalist on duty.

"Doesn't hurt," said the woman who came up behind Jenny who was looking at the prickly pear.



“It won’t bite, you know?” she went on. Jenny heard her, and put her finger on the plant. It didn’t hurt. Like she had promised. Jenny liked her a little right then.

“Doesn’t hurt,” the woman repeated.

Jenny supposed so and walked over to the balloon cactuses.

“Those do hurt,” the woman said, following closely. Perhaps in want of attention, perhaps incapable of resisting pain that reminded of life, Jenny drove her finger into the ball of thorns and bled urgently. As she withdrew, a spine was stuck in the skin. Her finger was slightly swelling, crowned with a gem of blood. The nursery was spinning a little. Jenny wondered if she was still allergic to needles. It would be absurd to think that time did not heal and that she was going to break out into hives because of a cactus.

There was a stir, some shuffling, the sound of decumbent leaves crackling on the ground. Jenny could not quite wrap her head around the ruckus, finding herself suddenly sitting on a wooden bench, the woman with a green apron kneeling in front of her. She watched as her finger turned grisly red, then was swathed in



white gauze, then was red again. The only consistent white was the woman's porcelain skin.

A dab of alcohol and some pressure on the finger jolted Jenny. Also jarring was the hand waving to and fro before her, the voice crying out: "Are you okay?"

"Hey, are you okay?" the woman repeated.

Jenny looked steadily at her. "Yes."

Hearing this, the woman let herself relax. Then, with a mordant sense of humour, heedless of the standards of service, she burst out:

"Oi, what is wrong with you? I told you those thorns will hurt. You're my first accident and now I have to make a report, you know that?"

Jenny wanted to smile but she did not know if it was a compliment. Looking at her bandaged finger, she said, "Thanks."



When she looked up, there was palpable relief on the woman's face. Then Jenny smiled, and the woman smiled along.

"Who are you?" said the woman. Her question unexpected.

Jenny did not know what to say next.

Unable to leave her thoughts inchoate, the woman continued: "What kind of a person sticks her finger into a cactus? That's all I'm asking."

"I'll pay for it," she replied and pulled a ten-dollar out. Her fingers left a red blotch on the bill.

"Bloody money," said the woman in the apron.

Jenny stood up.

She said again, "Blood money, I mean. Kinda like Judas, you know?"



“Like Judas.”

The woman laughed. “Are we saying the cactus is Jesus?”

“I’m saying, I will buy it.”

“Can’t do that. Please keep your money.” The woman sat down on the bench.

“You can have the little fella for free.”

“It’s okay. I want to buy it.”

“Treat it as compensation. Nursery policy.”

Jenny shook her head. “It’s okay. I will buy it.”

“No, please.” The woman continued to sit there.

“Please let me buy it.”



“I’ll get into trouble. There are cameras, you see?” The woman pointed aimlessly.

“There, there.”

“It’s not your fault. In fact, I think you helped me. You dressed me up,” Jenny said after her, moving her bandaged finger.

“That’s a funny way of putting it.” The woman arose. “How about this: you take the cactus and buy me lunch. As a thank you. Today’s my last day, anyway.”

“What?”

Their eyes met again. This time, the woman’s eyes were glistening, of a shade of brown that Jenny had never seen in Chinese people.

“So, how?”

“What?”



“Okay, okay. I’m just teasing. But, it is almost lunchtime and my last day at work is ending in four minutes.” She raised an eyebrow at Jenny, waiting for her to catch on.

“It is almost noon,” Jenny replied, echoing her tone. “I don’t want to buy you lunch.”

“Oh.”

It was a short time of silence, but long enough for both women to realise they were waiting for the other to find something to say, that in the meantime they were okay with being quiet together.

And Jenny said, “Can I cook you something instead?”

At that the woman smiled a little less sadly and Jenny felt the pain in her finger disappearing, and they both knew they wanted each other.

Less than three months they had moved in together. A moment Jenny now recognised as a rush of happiness that always came before lamentations. Their



happiest days were spent in Isa's dead uncle's flat. The man's last wish was for no one to remove the ancestral shrine in the living room, and the women acquiesced. They did not touch the deity tablets and gold incense holder. Out of familial obligation and gratitude for the inheritance, Isa added her uncle's urn to the tableau.

They were the kind of Christians who did not mind such veneration. Jenny had backslidden and Isa's only reason for belief was Eden. A god who created gardens was something she could trust.

Both believers in their own ways, they named the cactus Jesus Junior. A souvenir from the nursery to remember Jenny's allergy, Isa's last day, their love. Jenny thought the name was romantic; Isa found it blasphemous but suitable. For its spherical body looked like a head wrapped with thorns. From afar, the yellow spines looked like light scattering, life rising from the ashes. Jesus Junior reminded them that with a little faith they would survive the dust and dirt, from living in a one-room flat on the twelfth floor.

There was a sense of completion from the very beginning. What they had was little but they made space for each other. The kitchen was where Jenny cooked and Isa gardened. Farm to table, within twenty-five square metres. Each meal



was humble and from Jenny's heart: bread and jam, hummus and carrots, porridge and achar. Sometime later that year, Isa was able to bring home unwanted and almost expired canned food from the organic supermarket where she had found temporary work. They were living simply and Jenny was less sad.

Then Isa took on extra shifts. She didn't do it for the money. It was for the vegetables. She had found out that most of the unsold produce was chucked when the store was closed. Neither customers nor her colleagues had interest in bruised vegetables. Isa had to make a decision: quit or do something about it. So she applied to work from opening to closing, to bring home as many vegetables as she could. Jenny was glad to have more ingredients to cook with. When there was too much food, she would freeze the leftovers for another meal.

Those days Isa returned late. She never came in straight. She would go to the kitchen, heat up the food and read whichever day's newspaper was on the table. At first Jenny tried to stay up, but Isa stayed out late and even more late. At some point it was like they were living in separate time zones. It turned out that the supermarket had decided to operate twenty-four hours.

Isa saw less and less of Jenny. She should have been sad but fatigue was a stronger feeling. She seldom came into the room saying anything, instead



collapsing on the bed and sleeping, as though she had never left Jenny in the morning. Her only comfort was she must have really loved Jenny, that Jenny had become an omnipresence that seemed like absence that she had gotten used to.

Jenny was not used to Isa being away. She had visited the supermarket a few times but was too out of place to go unnoticed among the expats. The manager always found out, and Jenny was asked to leave or buy something. Each time she left only after catching a glimpse of Isa.

Most days Jenny was alone at home, usually in the kitchen cooking something, or just sitting and staring at the plants that seemed less green. She felt sad but settled, whereas with the other women from her past she was unsettled and not always sad. And even if she was sad, she had felt sad for herself. This time, with Isa, the sadness was mutual.

Love was leaving them. So was life. The herb garden was a mess. The pansies were turning brown. The money plant had stopped climbing up. Jesus Junior outlasted all of them. It was evergreen, holding on to hope for the women. Jenny looked at it with an eye from which affection was waning. She thought about the morning at the nursery, the thorn in her flesh, the hands that held hers, afraid



that if they were to let go, she would bleed out. The shaking of hands should have begun a friendship, but theirs mired in blood spoke of a different relation.

Sadness distorted her thoughts and distortion allowed recklessness. Jenny looked at Jesus Junior with a new thought. It transformed her from a burdened soul to a ray of light. It would be a worthy sacrifice, a small price to resurrect the love that her blood had once sealed. What was left to do was simple, a no-brainer for her. Jenny reached out to Jesus Junior, her finger knew exactly where to go. The moment was quick, as she had remembered. Only this time there was no pain. No rush to stop the blood.

For the rest of the day she sat in the kitchen with her tissue-wrapped finger. She sat until the light was fading, and remembered the pleasure of being together. Then the door opened, and Isa walked in. In her hand was a bag of potatoes. She saw Jenny, smiled feebly, and put her arms around her, with a trace of sadness. Jenny felt the same. They clung tighter to each other, knowing it was time to let go.

Finally, someone said, "Shall we have supper?"



What Remains of Love is an Echo

The old uncle and Roxanne were the last people to surrender their ICs and Visit Cards for verification and be permitted to enter the room. The female officer was wagging her finger at them like they were naughty children. Roxanne lifted her arms, consenting to be searched. She hoped that the officer would leave her ribs alone. She would not like to be reminded of the sore. For too long it was painful to take a breath; crying or sneezing would send a piercing sensation shooting from inside out. The doctor said it was psychological. The psychiatrist said it was a phantom pain. The pastor said it was a cross to bear. Roxanne stopped seeing all of them. She was trying to seek help from men of power and on pedestals, when who she really needed to see was the man behind bars.

Roxanne surrendered her house keys, her mobile phone, her wallet, everything in her clutch, her ring, and the cigarette packet. A second cursory search required her to empty her pocket of coins. When she had stripped herself of all personal belongings, except for her dress and sneakers, the officer finally allowed her into the waiting room. There Roxanne reunited with the old uncle with whom she had stood in line for the past two hours. Although they sat in complete silence, save for the ticking of the clock, she was oddly pleased to have him beside her. She was contemplating whether or not to make small talk when the door opened. A burly officer gestured for them to enter yet another waiting room.



All the rooms regardless of size were claustrophobic and chilling. They had the same cautionary light, the extra glaring exit sign that said, “In case of lockdowns and evacuations.”

How to stay away from the idea of staying away from him? That was the sole thought in her mind for the past eleven months. Roxanne had expected to see a row of boxes where she would have to speak to him through a grating for twenty minutes. Instead, there were five closed cubicles and a glass panel divided the room. To the opposite of each cubicle was a man, straining to see his visitor. Nearly all the visitors were women, except the old uncle.

In the furthest corner was the cubicle she was assigned. Roxanne took some steps forwards and passed the old uncle who was talking to a younger and wearier version of himself. She was very close now, a few more steps and she would see him. A deluge of feelings came over her, a mix of the fear of dying and courage to kill. She could feel her whole frame turning into water. The unfamiliar odour of the room was filling her lungs. Her knees were giving way. She had waited a month after his admission to be allowed this face-to-face visit. Her lawyer said that he wanted to see her too, that the defendant was guilty and remorseful, hence the plea deal. She must remember that they had won, that he was paying for his crime. But now that she was here, anxiety spread through her body. By habit she summoned a prayer for physical strength to walk to the end



of the room. She could not remember if it was Saint Christopher or Saint Daniel, so she appealed to them both. She could use whatever divinity left in heaven for this portentous moment. There was no turning back now. Not after the officer had bolted the detention locks.

It is written in history that a long time ago humans were pack hunters. Like wolves and chimpanzees, our ancestors roamed the earth and scaled the mountains in packs, cooperating with each other to find and kill preys. They gathered together regardless of race, beliefs, religions, intelligence, hunting methods, whatsoever. This can be said to be the origin of team play and sports, the army and the cabinet, basically most kinds of community. Then someone in history—who must have been a leader of his pack—said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Men could not afford to be weak. They dared not show weakness. The slightest scent of frailty would cause the pack to leave the weak behind. This was not cruelty nor selfishness. Some say it's survival instinct. Self-preservation. It is only human to leave another human.

On their first night in the hotel room, Roxanne decided that she would never leave Nora. It wasn't just the oxytocins and exchange of sweet promises. It was an unaccountable warmth swelling from within her—the feeling of hope, she thought—that caused her to expect eagerly the break of dawn. A new day meant another day with Nora. There was also a possible maternal instinct stewing



inside her after seeing Nora remove her makeup to unveil the fading brown patches on her skin. Afterwards when Nora would make up again, even when the bruises were completely healed, Roxanne still caught herself searching for those patches on her fair skin, as though she was trying to collect enough evidence or muster enough anger to do something—but to do what exactly? Even Roxanne herself did not know. She was too engrossed in trying to imagine the day when she would stand up for Nora to realise that standing with her was important too.

“I loved her” were his final words to Nora. They gushed out as he held the hilt of the knife, the side of his palm resolute on her chest. “I loved her,” he said again to his dying wife, as if it were her fault that he was unable to continue loving her. She was his first and only love; they were together for more than a decade. The thought of her leaving him was at first absurd, then absolutely crushing. He wanted the old Nora back, and when she would not give him even a fraction, he took her entire self with the knife. The first stab was tentative, the sharp edge of the knife pressing against the skin, causing a shallow wound. The second was a cleaner cut; it left a deeper wound near the end that was inflicted first. The rest of the stab wounds were precise. A total of fourteen stabs, one for each year they’d been together. He believed that love is pain, and the deeper his love for her, the deeper his knife would reach. He pulled out and entered her again and again, until she was still as though she was sleeping. “I loved her,” he kept on



saying, as his hand departed from her chest. “I loved her,” he was screaming when he ran out the door and left her choking on her blood. His knife was in her heart when the police arrived at the hotel room.

Roxanne woke up in a cold, empty room with tubes inserted into her arm and nose. She could hear Nora’s pain-stricken voice calling to her for help. She screamed and screamed back at her, but no words left her mouth. Try as she might, all she could do was gasp and cough. Wrestling herself from the tubes, Roxanne flung herself towards the door. She had to get to Nora, she must get her away from him at once. As she pushed herself off the bed, it seemed to her that her body had grown heavier. She tried to bend forwards and fell to the ground immediately, her legs unable to lift her. Roxanne did not get up. She lay on the freezing floor for what seemed like hours, overwhelmed by a helplessness that knew no bounds, a helplessness fueled by Nora’s gut-wrenching cries and the throbbing pain in her head, ribs and heart. As a nightmare that takes place in utter loneliness, she felt Nora and a familiar room unfolding before her. She whispered her name with all the power of her being. “Nora,” she gasped. Her hands found Nora’s body, they were running over her, searching for a faint breath, a heave of relief. The stab wounds that dotted her chest were bleeding profusely. Roxanne was simply unable, she stopped and began to withdraw uncontrollably, as if her body were shrinking from her skin that was marred with blood. Sometimes it was the police that came to the rescue. Other times it was



the nurse on night shift. But always, as nightmares recur, Roxanne would wake up and find herself in a cold, empty room again. The smell of dried blood in the air, Nora still screaming.

They met in Malay class. “Siapa nama awak?” were Roxanne’s first words to Nora. “Nama saya Nora,” she said. Roxanne thought Nora was a beautiful name, the name of powerful women like Norah Jones, Ibsen’s Nora, Nora who wrote *When Harry Met Sally*. They were paired up, both sat at the corner of the classroom. They practiced how to count money and how to tell the time. They picked up the formalities of the language, to say *Maaf* whenever possible, and on their own they learned how to be informal with each other,

When the course was finished, they continued to meet in a hotel room paid for by Nora’s supplementary card. Both had their responsibilities to the world: Nora was married; Roxanne had poverty. They also had reasons not to return home. Nora’s husband was often drinking with his business partners, if not drinking at home. Roxanne was living with her parents and four younger brothers in a three-bedroom flat. They tried to stay together for as often as they could, one night at a time.



If Roxanne could look herself in the mirror, she would find that her eyes were melancholy. These days she could barely gaze at her own reflected face. She had abandoned her countenance. What used to be a bashful flush of innocence and anticipation was now a reminder of her weakness, her inability to participate in crisis and her feminine helplessness. Gentleness was fragility, she had learned this in the hardest way possible. She was disfigured by weakness—the fish-tailed mark on her forehead was Cain’s. It was covered by her overgrown fringe, an immature inch long scar left by the tip of a kitchen knife that missed her skull. The same knife that spared her life had ran through her beloved. It was still sitting in the evidence bag, stained with their blood. The police at the scene said the bag was made with a certain plastic that facilitated the drying of wet evidence and prevented deterioration. Roxanne only knew that it was the last remains of Nora. Her body was pulverised after the autopsy, the ashes and bits of bones were scattered over the Pacific. None of her was preserved but the smear on that blade.

It wasn’t long before Roxanne composed herself, feeling put together in one piece again. She walked towards the last cubicle. It’s only twenty minutes, she reminded herself. She had been imagining this confrontation in her mind since the very first night she saw those bruises on Nora. This was it, the day she would finally stand up to him. She just had to look him in the face and ask him why he did it. Why he would take the life of the one he claimed to love. What was he



thinking? What did love look like to him? Was it Nora's bleeding face? What were Nora's final words—did she say anything about her? Why didn't he take her life instead? In the midst of rehearsing her speech and rebuttal, Roxanne stopped. She realised, quite suddenly, both the impact and futility of this visit. She took a step back. One by one, the questions that ran amok in her mind for months were departing from her. Roxanne took a long breath, turned around and marched to the door where the officer stood. The exit sign was welcoming,

When asked why she cancelled the visit, Roxanne told the officer that there was nothing to say. Nothing he could say to her at all. She did not need to hear his side of the story. She would rather what remained of love to be an echo of Nora's pain-stricken cries than his contrite voice.



Plans

The fear of losing Lily was a last-minute worry to Pea. Had she been older, or known what it was to lose someone, she would surely not have walked out of the house when Lily showed her the life insurance policy.

Her strong, deep red lips, her dyed hair and the natural slimness of her face could not age the childish stare she had directed to Lily who wore a curling smile the whole time she was talking about legal claims and exclusions.

Only a few weeks ago, around the time of her birthday, Pea had received a letter from the Ministry of Health informing her that under the Human Organ Transplant Act she was legally required to donate her heart, corneas and some other organs that she could not remember in the event of her death. Another letter from the National Organ Transplant Unit requested that she opted in to pledge her body parts for medical research.

The end-of-life issues were not taken well by Pea. She was fuming and retaliated by sending out a complaint letter for which she never received a reply. She wrote that the notification was inappropriate and a killjoy; even if the schemes were conceived as the bestowal of the gift of life to fellow Singaporeans, such



information should be mailed out at a different time of the year. She was twenty-one and the last thing she wanted was a plan for death. Pea had no patience for such negativity. She could not understand the need to protect against future losses. That Lily was expecting her own death seemed like an incredibly pessimistic way to live.

Pea said, in a tone of voice as puerile as her expression, that she did not want to talk about this and that she was leaving.

Knowing Pea's temper tantrums and more importantly the stress fractures of her own foot, Lily sat down on the sofa and watched her walk away. The figure of Pea, a little diminished, filled her with a strong conviction of life's fragility. She looked not a day older than seventeen when they first met, still seemed so girlish, so incapable of causing the chronic pain that wrenched at her heart. Resting on the sofa, Lily made the decision on her own, and lest she should have second thoughts, she signed the insurance papers.

The kind of end-of-life planning Lily had in mind was not fatalistic. On the contrary, she saw it as a way of keeping faith with Pea. Just as she had bought the Picanto so that Pea could drive from the eastside to Boon Lay without having to get up in the wee hours of the morning. Since she had no way of knowing how



Pea would survive the sadness of her future death, the least she could do was to make sure she could grieve comfortably. She herself needed many, many cries when her ex had suddenly passed away in a freak diving accident. Lily wanted to give Pea that, an allowance to grieve. Money could also buy her some relief: her dream trip to Peru, the dog she had always wanted, therapy. These were the things Lily was thinking about when she dithered over the types of premiums.

There was a lot more to the policy, including doubled coverage for accidental death to age seventy and equal family coverage for same-sex spouses, that she did not manage to tell Pea. Pea was more concerned about the aesthetics of life: the colour of their lampshade, the texture of the sofa, food presentation, those sorts of things. Lily was even-minded and salaried, the mathematical one in the partnership. The romance-reason dyad was inevitable, not that one woman was strictly this or that, but the arrangement gave them a sense of bearing. Like the kind of hesitation one has when looking at a blank piece of paper, a relationship without the rules of the norm can bring both anticipation and anxieties.

Lily was more than willing to take care of the banalities of their daily life, the bills and chores. But of late, as she was nearing the ripened age which allowed single women in Singapore to buy HDB flats of their own, the fear of catastrophes seemed to be seeping out from the depths of her being. It was a good thing, the right to buy a house, but it was in a backhanded way a compensation for her



waning womanhood. A hinged door to her memory was pried open, and the familiar feelings of inadequacy and fear of rejection she had suffered from as a teenager were coming back.

Strange are the forces of memory that she should think she was young again. And the younger she felt, the worse she was. Flashing in her mind were the instances of how she had tried to date her best friend and later slept with him only to ruin their friendship, how her ex-girlfriend had opened up their relationship because she was unsatisfied, how her mother was silent when she came out to her and remained silent for many years after, how her grandmother's dying wish was for her to get married.

Such remembrance drove Lily to arrange to meet a financial planner. She had never thought of the future when she was alone, but with Pea she needed to plan a little more, be more forward thinking. Her love for Pea became increasingly anchored in an undefined motherly concern for her to never have to go through the crises she faced, the fire and water she had to go through to get to where she was, here, seated on the sofa with the insurance policy in her hand, thinking of how she did not want Pea to be like her.



Lily sent her a text message. She was glad when she received a reply from her. Pea wrote that she was getting a drink, goodnight and don't wait for her.

Pea was sitting down in a café, sipping on her bubble tea and waiting on her takeaway order, when she replied to Lily's message. Repulsed by the dryness of policy language, she wanted some saccharin. The sudden downpour had left her stranded—it was just as well that she could not go home.

Motionless in her seat, she gazed long into the street outside. She placed her hand on the window and felt a cool tingle. With her index finger she traced a trail of droplet that trickled down to the bottom of the glass panel. She could vaguely make out the silhouettes of pedestrians holding their umbrellas as they crossed the street. The blurry faces of the men and women waiting under the awning reminded her of Lily who was abiding at home.

Pea always thought she would love Lily forever until Lily made her the beneficiary of the life insurance policy. She was not sure what that actually entailed but the idea of death was confronting enough. The only insurance she ever bought was the kind available on airline websites where you tick a box and feel safe instantly. It had only been a few weeks since she turned twenty-one and already a stack of government letters and those insurance papers were interrupting her life with



reminders of mortality. Turning twenty-one was a milestone but no said that to be an adult and legal was to be conscious of the limits of life. How to love forever when death denies forever? It seemed Lily and her were foreclosed from the start. The thought forming in her mind was unbearable, the thought of people who bum around, go about their lives, then one day stop.

Pea loved Lily so desperately that she panicked. She thought about her and she panicked. A quarter of the icy sweet tea relieved her for a moment, but it wasn't long before she suffered again from the smallness of her imagination. She could think of nothing but that. The irony is, like people who have a lot of money and lead poor lives, as people who have diseases are often those who cannot afford them, Pea thought about death in the prime of her life.

Stirring the gula melaka that had amassed at the bottom of the cup, Pea took a big sip to calm herself. The space of the café was slowly widening out. To her left was a table of two young girls, probably of her age, and their NS boyfriends, passing different flavoured milk teas around to taste while their fingers picked at the plate of truffle fries. A few girls in their blue pinafore dresses huddled in the corner table, their laptops opened and bright. Three giggling teenagers were taking photographs of themselves, trying to fit all of their faces and blended drinks into one frame. The couple with matching purple and green hair on the bar seats by the window got up and strutted out of the café. It was eleven o'clock



and still people were hurrying in for bubble tea, laughter and chats. Pea slumped in her chair and thought. This was what it was to be young: unafraid of germs spreading from sharing food, studying for an examination because grades mattered, finding affirmations of friendship and oneself in photographs, heedless of what other people thought, walking with a swagger, me against the world.

Sitting quietly in her corner, watching them, it was like the girls and boys were all on stage, enacting a play about young love and young blood. Pea had long ago walked off the stage with pride and was caught up in the flurry of another act whose lines she was trying to learn. She was still learning to age well, to catch up with Lily. She wished she was old enough to consider life respectfully, from start to finish, older to make plans for Lily as she did for her with the life insurance. She wanted so badly to learn how to talk about death as a matter of fact without panicking and slamming the door in Lily's face.

She was so busy trying to grow old that she did not realise it was not raining heavily anymore. She looked around and the crowd had dispersed. The guy behind the counter nodded at Pea when she walked past him and wished her goodnight.



As she turned on to the street, she felt a few drops of water falling on her face and pulled her hoodie down. Pea moved through the inclement darkness with her eyes half-shut until she found herself standing outside their door.

There was piano music playing in the house. Pea surmised that Lily must be sitting on the sofa, worried that she was not coming home tonight. She might have wanted to send her a text message but did not know what to say, just as Pea wanted to run into the house and snuggle under the quilt but could not yet bring herself to turn the door knob.

There is nothing as painful as the sudden wordlessness and inaction that befall lovers. One was inundated by the burdensome feeling of youth, the other was overwhelmed by the workings of time. Death was never the crux of their problem, but in the face of death love was tested.

They would have failed miserably if Lily hadn't started typing—pensive at first, then quicker and with more enthusiasm. If Pea hadn't searched her bag to take out her keys and the oolong tea she had bought for Lily. In their own ways, they tried to make words and act in spite of themselves, to do what was necessary to stay together. That was always the plan.



They went to bed and Pea cuddled up to Lily to sleep. They did not talk about the life insurance policy, death, future and whatever happened. The contract was left on the table in the living room to be revisited when both of them were sober.



BIOGRAPHY

Carissa Foo teaches literature and writing at Yale-NUS College. She received her Ph.D. from Durham University, with a focus on women's experiences of place in modernist writing. Since moving back to Singapore in 2017, she has shifted focus to local literary representations of desire. She has published on the workings of perception and complexities of friendship; she is also the author of *If it Were Up to Mrs Dada* (Epigram Books, 2019).