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**CARISSA FOO
SUMEDH JOG
MIKE TALPLACIDO**



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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.



SUMEDH JOG

Broken Branches

Everyone says Krishna is a crook. They keep telling me to get rid of him. Akka only arrived here yesterday, but she already has him figured out. Clever Akka. She crinkled her nose at him, this morning, as we sat on the porch, drinking tea. “I don’t like him,” she said in a loud whisper, “not one bit. He has that shifty look. I used to have a maid like that when we were living in Detroit. I caught her with the driver. She was out within a month.” I wanted to ask what happened to the driver but I didn’t. Akka asked me his name. I told her. “His surname.” She hissed, impatiently. I told her and I could hear the caste calculator turning inside her head. “Of course. Those people are all crafty. You can’t trust them. Take my advice and let him go. I am sure I’ll be able to find you half a dozen better gardeners in the village.” “You just relax Akka. You are back home after so long. I’ll take care of these small problems. You just show me what gifts you’ve got me from America. I have been waiting all day to see.” With that, I dragged her back inside the house.

I remember the time, twenty-five years ago, when Akka got married and went to live in America. NRI akka! Such a big deal it was in those days. My friends were all jealous. For the fifteen days that Akka used to be back here, visiting us, I was Queen Bee. Showing off the perfume that she had gotten me, the t-shirt with the New York skyline on the front. The most precious treasures were of



course the chocolates - not to be shared with any outsiders. Amma would dole them out to us like prasadam after dinner. And we would eat them with religious joy - the mountain peaks of Toblerone flecked with nougat, the modak-shaped Kisses, wrapped in silver and gold, the sacred spheres of Ferrero Rocher. Because of the way we squirrelled away the chocolates, they would last us a month or two after Akka had gone back. And all that time, Amma and Appa would continue to savour their daughter's sweet success.

Akka does not approve of my house here in Kasop. She thinks I paid too much for it. She thinks it is too difficult to get here - first the train till Ratnagiri, then the hired taxi over the up-and-down roads that make her car-sick. Besides, there is nothing to do here. It is warm and humid all year round. Even the beach is a good twenty minutes' walk away. The house itself is old and dirty. It feels crowded even when it's just the two of us inside. The paint is peeling from the walls, the roof leaks when it rains and I never check if the maid has swept under the sofa. But look outside Akka, I want to tell her. Look at that mango tree - it must be at least two hundred years old. Its trunk is so wide that if you embrace it from one side, and I embrace it from the other, our hands will not meet. Look Akka, I want to tell her. But I don't think Akka will be able to see.

I have always been jealous of Akka. I know that we are different people. She is almost ten years older than me. And a woman. My parents never made any comparisons between us. And yet, it had always seemed obvious to me that I



was a disappointment to them, the runt of the litter. But all that was such a long time ago. So, when Akka called that day to say that she was visiting, I thought that I would be able to meet her without rancour. I have felt such a generosity of spirit, living here, in this lush bounty of Kasop. But I was wrong. The moment I saw her, I felt that bitter taste rose up again, at the back of my throat. Even now her rumbling laughter, her easy chatter with the neighbours fills the little house while I slip back again into the shadows.

Don't get me wrong. She is all the family I have left after Amma passed away. My flesh and blood. And she reminds me of Amma so much, that sometimes I feel like running up to her and hugging her. Today she is making sweet rotis for

me. She is standing in front of the stove while I sit at the dining table, looking at her. She looks just like Amma when she wipes the sweat from her lips with her dupatta. There is a little window next to the kitchen platform that looks out onto the garden. Between roasting rotis, she tosses out little balls of flour to the sparrows on the ledge, speaking to them softly. "What are you telling them?" I ask. "Nothing. I am telling them to take care of my little brother when I am gone."

The rotis were beautiful. Light, flaky, just the right amount of sweet. Both Akka and I overate at lunch. I pulled out the family albums onto the dining table, and we laughed as we talked about our summer holidays. Appa has written



notes on the back of some of the photos with a pencil, in his small precise hand. “Toad Rock, Nakki Lake, Mount Abu, May 1989” “Pratap Palace Hotel, Udaypur, May 1989” “Chandrakishor Singh, Driver, May 1989”. Things were going well till she brought up Krishna again. “Your neighbour was telling me not to trust that guy. I don’t know what you see in him. Why can’t you listen to me?” “But Akka, how can I let him go for no reason? I have no complaints about his work and he seems honest enough to me.” “So you are waiting for him to rob you of everything. You will fire him after that?” “Akka, please. At least don’t shout. He is working outside.” “So now I have to be careful about not hurting the feelings of your hired help? While you go about doing as you please?” I did not reply and started clearing up the table. Akka sat sulking in the chair for some time, but then she came to help out. We did not say much to each other for the rest of the day.

As a child, Amma, Appa and Akka were like gods to me, or like mountains or like the monsoon. Forces of nature whom I never dreamt of questioning, who, I was certain, did the right things as a matter of course. I never knew them to be anxious or uncertain or despairing. Of course, I saw the cracks as I grew up. But that image of them never crumbled away entirely. Even now, each time that I discover their fallibility, it makes me feel disjointed, like I have discovered some unnatural secret I better had not known. Last night I heard Akka crying. Our bedrooms are next to each other. It was about 2 am and she was crying softly, but I am a light sleeper, and the nights here in Kasop are very quiet. It



took me a little while to figure out what I was hearing. But even when I did, I remained frozen in bed. It was out of the question that I should go out and comfort her. I lay there making as little noise as possible, listening, waiting for her to stop crying. She stopped after some time but I still could not sleep. I realized that I barely knew her anymore. We had lost touch completely in the last few years. I had assumed that she was too embarrassed to talk to me and I had not spoken to her out of diffidence, not wanting to confront her judgement. Whatever the reason, there was now such an abyss between us, that I had been immobilized by my sister's tears.

I woke up late the next day, feeling guilty about the way I had acted. I decided to make it up to Akka, when I heard her calling to me in a sharp and angry voice. I rushed to see what was wrong. Her room was in a mess. The bedsheets had been thrown to the ground, the drawers were pulled out, the cupboard was open. "What's wrong Akka?" "My purse. I can't find my purse. Where's my purse? I have looked everywhere." "What purse Akka?" "My purse. I had kept it here under my pillow last night. When I came back after my bath in the morning, it wasn't there. Where has it gone?" "What does it look like? What did it have inside? Are you sure you left it here?" "It is a purse like any other purse. This is where I left it. And when I got back it was gone. I have been telling you. Warning you. Now see what's happened." "Please Akka. Don't shout. Let me think." "Don't shout. Don't shout. That is what you keep saying. And now see where we are. There is a thief in this house. And you want me to be quiet."



Akka's voice filled that little room and seemed to squeeze out the last breath from me. I was free here after so long, perhaps for the first time in my life. As Akka continued to scream, I could feel that freedom slipping away. Before I knew what I was doing, I turned to face her and shouted back. "Akka." My voice was quaking, my hands trembling so violently that I knew even Akka had noticed. But I took a deep breath and continued, "Akka, please go and sit in the kitchen. And stop shouting." She stood there glaring at me for a minute, but then walked away, mumbling under her breath. I began to search as soon as she left, with desperate trembling fingers. My eyes were so blurred with tears that I could barely see what I was doing at first. But I calmed myself, and began to search again, more methodically this time, starting from one corner. I found the purse after half an hour of searching. It was tucked away behind the almirah. I handed it back to Akka, she took it without a word, not looking up to meet my eyes. I had opened the purse to see what was inside, before I returned it. It had a two hundred rupee note and change. Not even enough money for the cab ride back to Ratnagiri station.

Akka stayed with me for ten more days. She went back early this morning. It rained last night - an unseasonal storm with strong winds that broke a couple of branches off the mango tree. Akka was worried about making the train in time, but the sky was clear when we woke up. I had sent Krishna away on leave for the ten days that Akka remained here. She did not bring up the subject again either. She has invited me to spend my birthday with her in



September. The colours on the trees are very beautiful there in the fall. But my garden looks overgrown even in the ten days that it has remained untended. Besides, there are the two mango branches to be disposed of. I can hear the thwack of Krishna's axe as he works on them. A pair of parrots that had settled into the coconut palm, fly off with angry squawks at the noise. It is hot and sweaty work, although the smell of wet mud from last night's rain will make it more pleasant. He will be done with the morning's work presently. Soon he will come up to the house, to wash away the mud and splinters sticking to his body. He will use the tap fitted next to the porch. The green, wet stone tiles, will feel cool and pleasant as I pour out the water from the steel bucket onto his feet. And then when he has dried himself, I will hold out my hand for him as he climbs up the stairs into my house.



MIKE TALPLACIDO

Open Water

Part 1: The Grinch's Christmas

Congratulations. We are pleased to offer you acceptance to our MBA Class of 2010. Those were the words written on my acceptance letter from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which I received sometime in early 2008. Ever since I permanently moved to the US back in 2003, I always had this dream of one day attending business school.

Holy fuck, I thought. This is it. My chance to finally achieve my dreams. There was just one slight problem. Getting accepted at UNC meant I had to move to North Carolina. So, I thought, what about Sergey? He and I had been seeing each other for almost a year now and we had recently moved into our apartment together in North Plainfield.

"It'll only be for two years," I told Sergey, assuring him that my move was only going to be temporary and that my plan was to come back to New Jersey after graduation.

Later, that summer, I officially made my move down south. I quickly became preoccupied with school activities. In my first few weeks alone, I was already overwhelmed with balancing my time between attending classes, working on projects, preparing for internship applications, and getting to know my new peers. There were also a lot of social activities, lots of drinking, and games



about drinking, including beer pong, flip cup, and “*never have I ever.*” In a way, going back to grad school, and specifically attending UNC was my indoctrination to America considering I was a transplant from the Philippines. Meanwhile, Sergey and I decided to continue a long-distance relationship while I was working on finishing my MBA.

During Christmas break I went back to New Jersey to spend time with Sergey. He had already moved to a new apartment in Secaucus to be closer to his work in Manhattan, so it was my first time seeing his new apartment. I took the taxi by myself and we agreed to meet at the main entrance of this massive, modern-looking, condominium-style complex. I arrived during the week, sometime before dinner so Sergey was still working in the city when I reached his place. There was a small reception area in the main building which was where I waited for him until he arrived. I did not have my laptop with me, so I spent the whole time reading some of the printed materials from my classes and other stuff related to my internship applications.

“Hi, *Babichka,*” Sergey said as he arrived at the lobby of his condo, using his term of endearment for me.

“Hi, you’re late,” I said. It was a few minutes past seven at night and I had already been waiting close to two hours for him to arrive.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he said, apologetically, although he didn’t elaborate further.

We headed straight to his unit on the third floor. It was a single-room condo with a modern design. The ceiling was high, all the appliances were



stainless, and he had hung some modern art paintings on the wall. Paintings which I had never seen before when we were living together in North Plainfield.

“Oh, this looks nice,” I said, referring to one of the paintings.

“Yeah, Jerome gave it to me as a housewarming present,” Sergey replied.

“Who is Jerome?” I asked, confused since I had not heard that name before.

“Oh, I haven’t told you about him? He is Filipino, too,” said Sergey.

I did not ask any further. However, I was deeply suspicious because he had not mentioned Jerome to me before. I was a bit skeptical when he said, “He is Filipino, too.” I had never introduced him to any of my Filipino friends so I had no idea how he could have met other Filipinos casually, and since Sergey was not really the social type. I pondered that maybe the only way he could have met them was through the hookup sites, which was where Sergey and I had first met initially. This new information about Jerome seemed fishy. There was something about it which I could not quite put my finger on.

This was not the first time I was suspicious of Sergey. When I first moved to North Carolina at the beginning of summer, I had often called him on his phone. Sometimes I would dial him around ten at night to catch-up or say goodnight. There were several times when he didn’t pick up, and then a few times when he’d simply sent me a text message or two telling me that he was still in the city with his friends. But since I was busy with business school, I did not think anything of it.



“So, how was the trip?” Sergey asked, slightly changing the topic about the housewarming present which he had received from Jerome.

“Fine,” I said. He then asked me how long I was staying in New Jersey, and I told him I was staying until early January.

“Oh, I will have to leave for Russia on the twenty-fifth of December,” Sergey said, sounding surprised upon hearing my schedule in the northeast.

“What? I didn’t know that!” I said. “I thought we were going to ski in the Poconos after Christmas.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry but I had to see Martina (Sergey’s kid) since she and her mom wouldn’t be able to come to the US for a while to see me. So, they had asked me to visit them in Russia,” Sergey said.

“Ugh. So, I will be here alone?” I exclaimed.

“Sorry about that, Babichka,” replied Sergey.

We didn’t talk any further that night. We didn’t even have sex either.

The next morning, we both acted as if the conversation about me being alone on Christmas and New Year never happened.

I asked Sergey if I could use his computer to send some emails.

“I didn’t bring my laptop with me, but I want to send messages to my friends in the area to see if they had holiday plans I can tag along with,” I added.

“Sure, sure,” Sergey said, while unlocking his computer for me. After entering his password on the screen, he rushed to catch the train so that he could get to work on time.



As I sat in front of Sergey's computer, I noticed that many of the applications were left running. It seemed he had left his computer on since the night before, which he often did, even when we were still living in our apartment together.

When I opened the Internet browser, I noticed there was an open tab for his email account. I clicked on the tab until his email inbox popped up on the screen. I then typed "Jerome" in the search box.

My heart was pounding as I continued with what I was doing, knowing that it was wrong to look at other people's emails. I was convinced there was something I needed to find. My search returned over fifty results, showing the multiple emails with this mysterious new guy named Jerome. I didn't read all their back and forth emails. I didn't see any actual conversation that confirmed they had sex either. But there were references to them calling each other "*papi*" and other items related to their meetups and dates at some random bars in the city.

I was becoming angry but nervous at the same time since I knew I was still looking at Sergey's email. I quickly closed the email tab and opened the hook-up site *Manhunt*. On the login page, Sergey's username and password were already stored. I clicked the login button, hitting the "Inbox" link on the left side of the screen afterwards. I did not hesitate to look at the messages—Sergey's messages—which he was exchanging with so many random guys online.



Holy fuck, I thought. Sergey had been talking to these dudes as early as the summer, not even a week after I had moved to North Carolina. It seemed he had hooked up with several of them too, and all this happened behind my back. Everything was making sense to me now. All my phone calls to him that went unanswered. All the coy text responses telling me he was still in the city, even late at night. He was cheating on me. He fucking cheated on me. Worst of all, there were conversations that were happening even while I was living with him in New Jersey.

Was he cheating on me then, too? I wondered, although I could only assume so given what I was seeing now. I was furious. My hands were shaking. My heart was pounding. I took a deep breath and decided to turn the computer off. I quickly changed into my exercise gear and went out for a run even though it was cold outside. I needed to clear my head and plan my next move.

I was hurt. I found myself crying in the middle of my run. The cold December weather was brutal. And it was the holidays, too! Worst of all, Sergey was not even going to celebrate Christmas and New Year with me since he would be in Russia with his family.

When Sergey arrived home from work, it did not take long until I confronted him.

“You fuck!” I said. “Did you have sex with Jerome?” I asked him, as he was placing his backpack on the living room floor.



“Huh?” was his reply. Sergey was looking at me, confused and trying to figure out how I suddenly came to that conclusion.

“I know you had sex with him. I know that he helped you move to this apartment and that he decorated this place,” I continued.

Sergey breathed a heavy sigh, but he did not say a word. He neither acknowledged nor denied my accusation either. “You’re unbelievable. I can’t believe you’ve been cheating on me ever since I moved to North Carolina!” I exclaimed.

“But you left,” was Sergey’s response. “I need sex. I have a sex addiction. I can’t live without sex,” he added.

“Fuck you! You are so selfish.” My voice was louder and firm. I continued to shake my head in disbelief.

“You know what? You can go to hell!” I screamed. I then grabbed Sergey’s car keys, which he had placed on the kitchen countertop and headed straight to his car in the parking lot.

I turned the car engine on. I could feel the sadness on my face as I drove out of the garage. I drove miles and miles without having any destination in my mind. I soon found myself somewhere in the Fort Lee area, over twenty miles away from Sergey’s apartment in Secaucus. I stopped the car somewhere in front of a park. The city across the river was visible. It was beautiful, and perfect. The skyline of Manhattan at night is just stunning. It was at that point when I realized that my life was just the complete opposite: I thought I was on my way to fulfilling my dreams but now felt like my relationship was



ruined. I felt that maybe it was my fault. Sergey said it too: that it was me who had moved to North Carolina and that I had left. Shit. Maybe that was what I was good at. Leaving. I had left people so many times. I left the Philippines to pursue my dreams. But then I left New Jersey too, to move to North Carolina. And for what? Was this MBA dream worth it?

Once I was calm enough, I went back to Sergey's apartment. When I arrived, he was still in the living room, watching TV. I did not say a word. Neither did he. I simply headed straight to his bedroom and slept on his bed alone. He did not come to the room, either, to sleep next to me as I found him asleep in the living room when I woke up the next morning.

A few days later, Sergey and I still had not talked. On Christmas morning, he left early for his flight to Russia. I was able to catch him before he was gone and the only thing that he said to me was, "Can you leave the keys at the reception, please?" He sounded calm and polite, like nothing had ever happened the night before. I simply responded with, "Okay." I did not even know how he managed to get to the airport. Maybe, his fucking friend Jerome was picking him up. Whatever. Sergey left on Christmas day, and I simply had to face the reality that I was all alone.

I started writing some random notes in my journal. Just a bunch of one-to-two-liners, in quotation marks. I had not had an actual physical journal before but thought I could start now so that I could capture what I was feeling. About Sergey, and everything else. Some of my entries are below:

"I'm not a fool."



"You can do whatever you want to do in your life. I don't give a fuck."

"You're a bastard."

"Babichka, my ass!"

"You're a fucking moron. Eat his vajayjay, you fuck!"

"Asshole."

"Not anymore fag."

"I hate you."

"I loved you but that was a mistake."

"Damn you fool."

"I gave you everything and I don't deserve this."

"I will not cry anymore."

That last statement was not true though. I soon found myself crying later that night. I decided to play some songs while I was all alone on Christmas night. The first song on my list was "All by Myself," by Celine Dion. It was a fucking mess. I was miserable. Alone on Christmas Day. Shit. Fucking Shit. I was having my "All by Myself" moment. I kept thinking that maybe it was my fault. Whatever. I simply just kept singing more sad songs. And then I cried some more. Aside from "All by Myself," the other songs in my "Broken Hearted" playlist included:

If I Were a Boy, by Beyonce

Big Girls Don't Cry, by Fergie

Take a Bow, by Rihanna

Better in Time, by Leona Lewis



So Over It, by Katherine McPhee

Because of You, by Kelly Clarkson

Beautiful, by Christina Aguilera

I used to love Christmas. But not anymore. Ho ho ho. It's the fucking Grinch here. Or maybe I was Mr. Scrooge now. Whatever. It didn't matter anyway. I was still alone. However, I knew I needed to figure my shit out, and there was no way I would be able to do that if I was a fucking softie. I needed to toughen up. I needed to change my perspective. I felt like a new me was emerging, I could just feel it.

Part 2: Eurovision

I returned to North Carolina in January 2009. While I was still furious at Sergey for cheating on me, I was also confronted by my intense feeling of loneliness. I had never felt so incredibly alone. There were not a lot of Filipinos in the Raleigh-Durham area that I knew either, people whom I could relate to culturally. And yes, I had my MBA friends whom I saw socially from time to time but what I needed most was someone to be intimate with. I didn't feel like starting all over again; going out on dates, getting to know people, and investing a lot of my time nurturing a new relationship. So, I resorted to checking out some of the hookup sites yet again, resulting in my meeting a few random guys in person, but none of those meetups was filling the void inside me. I needed Sergey. *I needed someone like him.*



Soon, Sergey and I started talking again on the phone. He still called me Babichka and I was a lot calmer when we spoke. Less hysterical and less emotional than the last time we'd conversed during the holidays. We decided to try an "open relationship," which meant we were still a couple, but we could have sex with anyone we wanted. It was me who had brought up the idea because I knew that Sergey was not capable of being in a monogamous relationship. He said he "needed sex," and that he was "addicted to sex." So, I thought maybe, that dilemma of needing sex was a real thing. I also recognized that I needed him, so I reckoned it was a reasonable compromise on my part to give him a pass on his extracurricular sexual endeavors.

Since we were sort of rebuilding our relationship, I brought up a few of my concerns to him, too. I told Sergey that it would have been nice if he had at least tried to visit me in North Carolina. I was the one who had taken the step to see him in New Jersey during Christmas, even though that had not turned out so well.

"Okay," Sergey said, although sounding confused as to what he should have been doing.

"It would have been nice to at least see an effort," I said.

"Tell me what I should do," he asked.

"Well, Valentine's Day is coming, so maybe you can come visit me in North Carolina?" I suggested to Sergey.

"Okay, Babichka. I'll try," he replied.



The following month, on Valentine's Day, Sergey visited me in the Tar Heel state. When I picked him up from the airport, he brought me a dozen red roses, chocolates in a heart-shaped box, and a Valentine's Day gift—a Logitech iPod speaker dock. Granted, his present was a bit techie, but that was the “System Engineer” in him. The important thing was that he tried, at least that was how I convinced myself anyway.

“Happy Valentine's Day, Babichka,” greeted Sergey.

I cooked him a nice dinner that night and then we headed to the mall to watch a movie. I wish I could say it was one of the best Valentine's Days ever. It wasn't. Sergey only stayed for the weekend. He arrived on a Saturday and left the following day. It also seemed that he only came because I asked him to. Sort of like a checkmark on his list. Not only that, but he also complained the whole time that there was not much to do in North Carolina. It seemed he was looking for something more exciting, like the nighttime bustle of Manhattan. Bars. People. Dancing. Drinking. Whatever. On the other hand, I was just hoping to have a nice quiet time with him in an intimate setting. But there was none of that. We did not even have sex.

Several months later, I was on my way to the UK to participate in a study exchange program at the Warwick Business School. I was feeling brave, travelling on my own to Europe. Frankly, it was a nice distraction too, from all the Sergey drama.



I brought two luggage bags with me, filled with lots of clothes and personal items including several business outfits as my plan was to travel directly to Thailand for my internship once the study exchange program ends after four and a half weeks.

I arrived at Heathrow Airport in London on a Saturday night. It was chilly, foggy, and damp, the kind of crazy weather I had always heard about in the UK although there is a saying that goes “there’s no such thing as bad weather in the UK, only unsuitable clothing.” I made sure I brought enough jackets with me in case it rained although thankfully, the forecast for the weekend was only a light overcast.

Warwick Business School, or WBS, is one of the most prestigious business schools in the UK, if not the world. It is part of the University of Warwick, located on the outskirts of Coventry in Warwickshire and occupying over seven hundred acres of land. In simple terms, it was in the middle of nowhere although the campus was pretty and has lots and lots of greenery.

When I arrived at my apartment somewhere in the school compound, the view outside was so peaceful. There were trees swaying as the air blew while making those whooshing sounds which I found ever so calming. I also heard a bunch of geese quacking and cackling in the morning as they strode towards a murky pond. I heard these geese were properties of the Queen, or maybe they were swans. Either way, I reckoned that as a visitor to the country, I should not mess with these animals. Not that I was going to anyway. I simply enjoyed



watching the beauty of the countryside, which oddly, sounded like an activity that seemed so *English*.

During one of the weekends while on the exchange program at Warwick, I decided to check-out the gay nightlife in London. I had a cousin who lived somewhere in Essex who had agreed to offer me a place to stay for the night. Off I went to the city of Big Ben, which was a term I came up on my own since nobody ever called London that. When I reached my cousin's place, I dumped my backpack and then headed immediately to the city. I spent some time looking at the local sights including Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, and of course, the iconic Big Ben that sits alongside the Palace of Westminster and the Abbey.

Once I was done sightseeing, I grabbed a quick bite and soon found myself inside a popular gay bar in the Soho area which was called, quite literally, G-A-Y. The place was a massive three-story party bar with lots of plasma screens that were showing SFW and NSFW video clips. Loud music was heard everywhere. Each level had its own bar too, with hot bartenders offering and mixing drinks for the patrons, along with a dance floor, a DJ, and sparkly disco balls that were hanging from the ceiling. It reminded me of Splash in New York although G-A-Y was much, much bigger.

I stayed on the main level. I sat at the bar by myself and ordered a glass of rum and coke. Several minutes and more rum and cokes later, an Eastern-European-looking dude sat next to me and started a small chit chat.



“You look really cute,” he said, in a thick accent, although I could not tell if he sounded Russian, Polish, or something else.

“Oh, thank you. WOOH HOOH,” I replied, yelling like an obnoxious semi-drunk person in his late 20s, who was out and about and ready to party in the city.

“Where are you from?” asked the Eastern-European dude.

“Well, I’m originally from the Philippines but I live in the US now, in North Carolina, and I’m here in the UK for an MBA exchange at Warwick,” I replied, offering way too much information to a stranger.

“Cool,” was his only response. “I really like your eyes,” he added.

Mr. Eastern Europe continued to flirt with me. He moved his chair closer and soon our shoulders were touching side-to-side.

“You look hot, and exotic,” he whispered in my ears.

I blushed and chuckled slightly. I had not had sex in a long time, so I instantly responded to his flirtatious antics and quite eagerly even. I started touching his thighs, moving my fingers up and down while I asked him, “So you like exotic guys, huh?”

He looked at me and giggled. He touched my hand and rested it above his thighs. He then leaned his face towards me and kissed me. Without hesitation, I kissed him back. Soon we were making out in front of the bar, on the lower level of this exciting place called G-A-Y. We made out for a few more minutes until he whispered to my ear again.

“Do you want to sit in the back?” he asked.



“Sure thing, let’s go.” I said to him, ready and willing to move to another table in the back of the bar at that very instant. I was thinking that maybe this dude wanted to make-out with me some more, somewhere else in the bar that was more private.

When we found a table, we sat down. But then he excused himself immediately after only a few minutes.

“Let me get us some drinks,” he said.

“Sure,” I responded.

While I was waiting for this Eastern-European guy whose name I didn’t even know, I found myself observing the crowd. I looked around and saw that everyone was having fun. Everyone was laughing and chatting and drinking and enjoying the night. I was having so much fun, too. I could not believe I was in a fucking gay bar in London by myself. I felt so adventurous. The music was loud, but I did not care. Nobody cared. I moved my head side-to-side as if dancing to the tunes, with my upper body occasionally swaying too. Then, Mr. Eastern Europe came back.

“Here you go. Rum and coke, right?” the Eastern-European guy confirming my drink choice upon his return to our table.

“Oh wow, how did you know?” I asked.

“Well, that was what you were drinking at the bar, right?” he said.

I was surprised that he was paying attention. *He must really like me*, I thought. We then spent the next few minutes making out some more, and then him getting more drinks for us, intermittently. I could not remember how



many more drinks I had that night, but it was a lot. I was really drunk. Like almost ready to pass out. I then excused myself to head to the bathroom and while I was walking on my way to the *loo*, I felt so dizzy although somehow aware that I was walking in such a staggering and wobbly way. It was like I was out of my body and that I could see myself just striding in a funny, totally drunk way. I kept singing to the tunes too. Britney's song was playing, and so I was humming along to Oops I did it again.

When I returned to the table, I told the Eastern European guy that I was ready to leave.

"Oh, let me walk you out then," he said.

We left this G-A-Y bar promptly and then walked towards the nearest subway station, which most Londoners refer to as the *Tube*. As we reached the station, this no-name Eastern European guy told me that he had forgotten something at the bar, so he left hurriedly and ran away. I grabbed my wallet from my pocket and was ready to use my train ticket until I came to the ugly realization that all my money had been stolen, along with my cell phone and my debit and credit cards that were with me that night. And the culprit was this Eastern European guy who pretended to flirt with me at this fucking G-A-Y bar.

Holy fuck, I thought to myself. My drunkenness had somehow subsided. I became more aware of the situation. I realized that I had been a victim of a pickpocketing scheme in London. I was so scared. My hands were shaking. I ran away from the scene quickly and found myself boarding the next bus that I



saw. As soon as I found a well-lit area with some shops and establishments around, I hopped off the bus and walked some more. Eventually, I found a McDonalds which was not open yet. When I got there, I saw another random guy passing by the store. He was wearing a dress shirt and a pair of gray wool pants. He looked professional but seemed semi-drunk, too. I figured that maybe, he was coming home from a party somewhere. So, we started chatting and I found out that he was indeed coming from a company event hosted by Deloitte Consulting which I was familiar with.

“Hey, can I ask your help?” I asked.

“It looks like I had just been pickpocketed, so I lost all my money. Do you mind if I use your phone? I just need to call my cousin,” I added.

“Oh, shit. Are you okay?” the Deloitte guy asked me.

“I’m okay, but I’m a little shaken.” I replied.

“What happened?” he asked.

I told him what happened that night. He was nice enough to let me use his cellphone. I quickly called my cousin and relayed to her the incident that had just transpired. My cousin was deeply concerned for me, especially since I was travelling by myself in London and it was during the wee hours of the night though already close to morning. Using this random guy’s phone, I also called my bank, and the credit card companies in the US to cancel my cards.

I thanked the Deloitte dude for his help. He really saved my life. Afterwards, I took the train back to Essex. Luckily, my ticket was still valid so I was able to get to my cousin’s place unharmed. I was glad I had not brought



all my money and all my credit cards with me as I had left some of them in my backpack at my cousin's place. But I was so fucking close to almost losing everything! It would have been a nightmare if my passport was stolen. But Mr. Eastern Europe had been considerate enough to leave me my wallet, along with my driver's license and my existing train ticket. He knew exactly what he was doing. I wondered if he had put anything in my drinks too. *Holy Fuck.*

I felt so stupid. I was an idiot. I tried to forget about what had happened and focused on the fact that I was unharmed and that I still had all my essential documents with me. But it was a crazy experience. I learned an invaluable lesson, indeed. I reflected on why I even went to a fucking gay bar in London by myself. Part of it was just this curiosity to see a new place. Like wanting to see something completely different from this other side of the world. I was feeling brave. I was feeling adventurous. But part of it was due to my loneliness, too. I was lonely, so I wanted to get some action. I was longing for Sergey. I was longing for someone. Anyone.

When everything else was settled, I called Sergey. I told him about the incident, and he was sympathetic. I informed him that my new debit and credit cards would be mailed to his address in New Jersey and asked him if he could send them to me once I arrived in Thailand. I also brought the idea that maybe he could visit me there too, since I would be staying overseas for a while for my internship.

When the study exchange program at Warwick ended, I flew directly to Bangkok to start my internship. The shock from my pickpocketing incident in



London was finally behind me. And now, I was looking forward to more exciting adventures, this time in Southeast Asia.

Part 3: Open Water

There were eight or nine students from UNC including myself who were part of the ten-week long internship program. Our mission was to work with the different government agencies in the country and come up with a marketing plan to promote the province of Phang-Nga, a region located in the southern part of Thailand that was hit by the devastating tsunami in 2004.

Sometime during my internship, I was able to convince Sergey to visit me. I did not think he needed much more convincing because he seemed willing and eager to see the country and had asked me about the “gay scene,” specifically in Patpong, an entertainment district in Bangkok. And by *entertainment* district, I meant it was a *red-light district*! Although sex tourism is illegal in the country, the industry has flourished throughout the years and was valued at around \$3.2 billion as of 2009.

Patpong was one of the first few places Sergey and I visited upon his arrival in Thailand, sometime in July that year. We took a taxi from my apartment and were dropped off on Surawong Road. There was a train track above the street for Bangkok’s rapid transit system, commonly known as the BTS or the Skytrain. Several stalls were on display on both sides of the road, with vendors offering different street food including noodles, rice dishes, fish



balls, and others. The streets were busy with many different types of vehicles passing by too, including several taxis, cars, and the *Tuk Tuk* tricycle.

Occasionally, you would see locals walking with their elephants and they would then offer tourists to ride those elephants for thirty minutes or so, but for a hefty fee. Everywhere else, there were lots and lots of people walking and striding in various directions. Many of them were tourists and possibly in the area for said “entertainment.”

Sergey and I walked along a road called Patpong 1, one of the two parallel side streets that comprised the general Patpong area. The second parallel road was aptly called Patpong 2. Both these streets offered many different types of bars and restaurants that were already open that night when we arrived. Several neon lights were flashing in front of these establishments, many of them containing Thai letters and characters which neither Sergey nor I could understand. Most of these places also had these young Asian ladies standing in front of the bars, wearing skimpy outfits and hollering at random by-passers with remarks like “hey come over here” or “you wanna come inside?”

We kept walking on Patpong 1 and then we took a slight turn to the right, followed by another immediate right to head back to the main road, although this time via the second parallel road called Patpong 2. We saw the same types of establishments with those neon lights in front and the young Asian girls who were aggressively pushing us to come inside the bars. Once we were back on the main road, we took another stride on the third parallel street



called Silom Soi 4, often referred to by tourists as Patpong 3 and was also the gay section of Patpong. The bars on this road had the same lights flashing from the glass windows too. And there were young Asian guys standing in front, hollering at people to check out what was inside these bars. Sergey suggested we go inside and said, “Let’s check this one out.” And so, that was what we did!

It was dark and smoky inside, with loud music playing. Occasionally some of the tunes were in English like Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face,” but for the most part, the music was all in Thai. A stage area was propped in the center of the bar where young Asian guys wearing only underwear were standing and walking from one side to another, parading their bodies as if they were contestants at a Miss Universe pageant. Each one of them was wearing a ribbon on his right-waist area. Each ribbon corresponded to a specific number from one to twenty-five or so. Some of the guys on the stage would dance intermittently, their movements slow and seductive as if trying to elicit a response. Trying to pique the patrons’ interest so that these guys on the stage can be picked-up for the night. Patrons could request a number that corresponded to one of the guys on stage. And from there, anything else could happen. The Thai boys could continue to provide some more private entertainment somewhere else in the bar like give a lap dance, but patrons could also choose to pick-up these young guys, a bit like checking-out grocery items from a local convenience store.



Sergey asked me if I wanted to pick a number and take a guy with us back to my apartment. He seemed entertained by the whole thing. *I wasn't*. I could not fathom the idea of me paying someone for sex. I could not believe any one person would choose this profession deliberately either. However, I did not want to pass any judgment. As much as I did not want to think of the whole thing as disgusting, it felt somewhat disgusting. I just found the whole thing quite sad, because maybe, some of these guys, and the girls too, might not have any choice. I did not know what their specific circumstances were, like how they ended up working at these places. I reckoned that maybe, some of them might have been victims of human trafficking, which was sad and depressing.

I took Sergey to Patpong because he wanted to see the “gay scene” in Bangkok, but there was no way I would pay someone to have sex with us.

“No way,” I responded strongly.

“I was just kidding,” Sergey said. Although I was not sure if he truly was. I think that if I had said yes, then maybe, he would have gone for it.

After a few minutes, Sergey and I went back to my apartment. However, he told me that he was horny. He suggested we find another gay person online who was available for a threesome. So, we soon found ourselves checking out a few of the hook-up sites. We used Sergey's profile and had updated his heading to convey that we were a travelling couple, one Caucasian and one Asian, and that we were looking for a third person. I could not remember



whether it was through *Manhunt* or *Adam4Adam* where we finally found our person. But we eventually did.

We found a young, thin, effeminate Thai boy named Thuy. After chatting with him for a few minutes, he agreed to head over to my apartment somewhere in Bangkok. And upon Thuy's arrival, the three of us immediately found ourselves almost naked on top of the bed, kissing, and cuddling, and touching each other's bodies. Sergey stood up from the bed and took a packet of condoms from his bag. When he came back, he told Thuy to turn around and lie on his stomach. As the two of them got more intimate, I tried to caress either Thuy's back or Sergey's chest using my hands. I tried to participate in the threesome. But soon, Sergey was enjoying Thuy, while Thuy moaned and screamed, "Oh My God."

The whole time the two of them were busy with each other, all I could do was watch, while occasionally trying to participate by touching or caressing one of them, or both. It became clear to me that Sergey only wanted to have sex with Thuy and not me. Thuy did not want to do anything with me either as he had only wanted Sergey.

It was the worst sex experience I had ever had. I pretended I was having fun.

But deep inside, I felt hurt and I was completely ashamed of myself. I had never felt so humiliated before. I felt like I was the third wheel here instead of Thuy and I was Sergey's boyfriend! Worst of all, Thuy stayed with us in the apartment overnight. I could not tell him to leave because it seemed Sergey



was enamored by our newfound Thai boy. On the other hand, I wanted to portray an image that I was okay with the whole fucking thing. That I was cool with this arrangement as this was all part of our open relationship.

The next morning, I left my apartment to head to the location of my internship. Thuy stayed with Sergey the whole day and the only thing I could think of was, *what were they doing*, and *how many times did they have sex*.

It was just so miserable for me. When I returned to the apartment that night, I gave Sergey and Thuy the silent treatment. Eventually, Thuy got the hint, so he finally went home. Afterwards, Sergey suggested we check-out some more gay bars in Bangkok and so that was what we did. It seemed that was all we did, anyway. Go to bars. Find a potential hookup. Occasionally get some drinks. I went along with it. But once we were left on our own, Sergey and I did not even have sex together, with just the two of us anyway. I started to think again that maybe he was not into me anymore. I only had a hunch before, but this time it seemed it was the case.

When Sergey returned to the US, I reflected on what had happened. I thought about breaking up with him but once again, I decided to stay in the relationship. However, even though I stayed with him, *my emotions were not there anymore*. There was just a lot of resentment inside me towards Sergey. I was not sure why I could not let him go. Perhaps, the underlying reason was because *I was afraid of being lonely*. I justified that maybe what we were going through was just part of a transition period while I was still finishing my MBA.



Once I returned to New Jersey after graduation, then we would be back together again.

After my internship in Thailand, I stayed with Sergey in Secaucus for a week before heading back to North Carolina to continue my second year at UNC. He and his friends had made plans that week to drive all the way to Montreal to take part in the Gay Pride festivities. They invited me to come along, so I said yes.

It was late summer when we left New Jersey to drive to Montreal. There were seven or eight of us in the group, although we were travelling in three separate cars. It took us about six or seven hours until we reached our destination. I had never been to Canada before, so I was excited to see the tourist attractions. At first glance, Montreal looked like a bustling smaller North American city, but with a nice European architecture. This made sense because of the city's history with France, which dates back all the way in the 1600s at the beginning of the early European settlement. A few of the buildings from the 17th century were still standing, including the Sulpician Seminary that was adjacent to the Notre Dame Basilica and the Chateau Ramezay, which was built in 1705. However, there were a lot of modern structures too, like the Olympic Stadium, which was only built in the 1970s. The city was a juxtaposition between the old and the new architectural styles, part of Montreal's overall charm. But that day, regardless of whether the building was old or new, one thing that was consistent was the presence of rainbow flags that were on display in celebration of Gay Pride.



Later that night, we all decided to head to a gay bar. I can't remember the name of the place but there were several hot go-go boys dancing on the tables, some were dancing on the stage, too. If you slipped some cash underneath these go-go boys' briefs, they could give you a private lap dance somewhere else in the bar, although I never did so. Instead, I found myself flirting with one of the bartenders. Sergey was in the bar too, flirting with some other dudes, or whatever.

After some time, I decided to head back to the hotel room Sergey and I were sharing. Once inside the room, I picked up a condom from my bag, tore it out of its packaging and then rinsed it slightly in the bathroom until finally throwing the wet condom in the trash, ensuring it was visible from the top. I left the condom wrapper on the floor right next to our bed. I did that on purpose so that Sergey could see it. *I wanted Sergey to see it.* My whole plan was for him to see this fucking condom wrapper on the floor and the actual condom in the trash. I wanted him to think that I had sex with someone else.

However, it was all fake. Bogus sex with an imaginary person in Montreal. I orchestrated this fake sex because I wanted Sergey to be jealous. But I also wanted to show him that *I could play the game too.* That I could have sex with anybody I wanted and Sergey could just go to fucking hell. I had done a lot of crazy things in my life, but this one was probably top of the list. It was fucking crazy. I never thought I could do such a thing. After planting my condom wrapper evidence, I took a quick shower and then went to sleep.



The next morning, I woke up and found out that Sergey was not in the room. He had decided to stay at one of the other rooms with his buddies. When he finally entered our hotel room, he asked me, “Did you have sex last night?”

I responded with, “What is it to you?”

“Are you kidding me?” was his reply. He sounded pissed. Although I was glad to know that my antics were provoking a response, I could not understand his rationale. It seemed like a double standard to me as it was okay for him to have sex with anybody, but if it was me doing that, then it sounded like it was a big deal.

“If you really want to know, then yes, I had sex,” I said, almost nonchalantly.

“With whom?” Sergey asked.

“With the bartender from last night,” I said.

Sergey made a heavy sigh and then shook his head. He looked disappointed, and even more pissed than before.

“Well, if you can do it and have sex with anybody, so can I,” I added.

Sergey did not argue any further. He just left the room. Afterwards, I put on some clothes and went to check the other rooms where his buddies were staying. I knocked on one of the doors and found Sergey talking to one of his closest friends, a guy named Marat.



Sergey was crying. It turned out that he was hurt by what I did. Soon, we found ourselves discussing our relationship in front of Marat who was acting somewhat as a mediator.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” I told Sergey. I suddenly felt like I was ready to break-up with him. It sounded mean, but I wanted to hurt him. And when I knew that I did hurt him, I felt like I was ready to move on.

Sergey was sniffing.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“If that is what you want, then sure,” Sergey replied. “I’ll be okay, it’s just that in Russia, breaking up is like letting go of one of your possessions.”

“Okay,” I said. Although in my mind, I was shocked that he thought of me as one of his possessions. Like, what the fuck? I wondered if that was how some guys think in general? I had no clue. I left Marat’s room and spent the rest of my day walking around to see what else Montreal had to offer.

After the Gay Pride event, we all drove back to New Jersey. I then flew back to North Carolina to start the second year of my MBA.

When I finally found the time to reflect on what happened, I realized that it was time for me to let go of Sergey. I had not been ready to break up with him last Christmas when I found out that he was cheating on me, but after trying the whole open relationship arrangement, I found out that it was not for me. And he was treating me like I was one of his possessions? Fuck that!

It was over for us. We had finally broken up, it seemed.



Our open relationship arrangement only benefited him because he was relieved of the accountability. He could do whatever he pleases and not have any consequences while I was subjecting myself to so much hurt and even humiliation after acting as a third wheel to our embarrassing threesome in Thailand.

It was not a good idea, the open relationship. It was like swimming in open water, fully exposed in the open like the fucking Atlantic Ocean. You know what you would see in those open bodies of water? Sharks. Lots of them! And they will eat you. Alive. First, they will spot you. Then, they will track you down, and then stalk you. And afterwards, they will go for the kill. Like when that fucking Eastern European dude spotted me first at G-A-Y bar in London, tracking me down, until finally going for the kill.

Some sharks will strike quickly. Others, like Sergey, will take their time. They will circle around their prey, bumping the soon-to-be victims until finally taking that first bite. The first crunchy bite that stings like hell. And before you know it, you have become the predator's snack for the day. Your body is then snapped in half and blood is oozing all over.

You see, that does not look pretty. I don't want to swim with sharks.

I don't want to swim in fucking open water anymore.

This is an excerpt from *Kiss My Mike*, a memoir about navigating the complex world of being a gay Asian in America.



BIOGRAPHIES

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).

Sumedh Jog lives and works in Mumbai. He has started writing recently and his poems have been published in *The Bombay Review*. He is a serious birder and is learning Indian classical music.

Mike Talplacido is the author of *Kiss My Mike*, a memoir about navigating sexuality and finding one's identity, interwoven with the pursuit of the American dream, the pressures of a religious Catholic family, and the ultimate quest for love. Originally from the Philippines, Mike is based in North Carolina where he enjoys cooking, gardening, hanging out with his two Basset Hounds, raising backyard chickens, and of course, Pop Culture! You can find out more info about Mike by visiting www.kissmymike.com or by following him on Twitter @miketal20.



NOTE

Mike Talplacido's work is an excerpt from *Kiss My Mike*, a memoir about navigating the complex world of being a gay Asian in America.