



QUEER  
SOUTHEAST  
ASIA

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A large, complex abstract artwork. On the left, a dark, stylized figure with a crown-like headpiece is depicted. The figure is surrounded by a dense field of colorful, organic, cell-like shapes in various colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The overall composition is layered and textured.

O THIAM CHIN  
RAHUL SINGH  
INO HABANA



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## O THIAM CHIN

### Down by The Pool

For two months, before I finally moved out of my boyfriend's apartment, I would see them nearly every day, either at the playground or by the pool. I would give the man a friendly nod, the young girl a smile. I had assumed them to be father and daughter initially, but I was wrong, as with most of my first impressions of people. The man and the girl were part of the scenery at first, faces amongst other faces, and then, quite abruptly, they were right before me, taking centre stage in my head, in my observations.

It was the June school holidays then, and the playground and swimming pool were always crowded; perhaps that was why they had not registered in my sight, submerged into the anonymous bustle and din of these places. I had my phone with me all the time, and was constantly engaged with it, replying to texts from friends, skipping songs on Spotify, checking my Facebook or Grindr or Jack'd. I had nothing much to do at the time, having been retrenched from my job as a copywriter at a mid-size ad agency after a restructuring, and would spend long hours either at the gym, beside the playground, or by the pool where I would swim or sunbathe. I wasn't looking for a job then, and my boyfriend, Stephen, didn't insist that I find one either. *Take your time*, he had said. So, instead of checking job sites and sending out resume, I was spending my time not thinking about my employment or my lack of income or anything to do with my future; these things could wait—there's a time for everything—and I wasn't ready to start on anything just yet.

I had moved into Stephen's condo apartment at the start of the year, six months ago, and I had grown used to the place. There were familiar faces I knew; I had made friends with a few residents, some of whom Stephen knew, and some on the sly. It was a huge, sprawling condo, with over fifteen blocks, and there were in fact two pools available for the residents; the larger and more popular one consisting of a three-metre water slide and a row of water-guns mounted on poles, and the other a narrow four-lane thirty-metre length pool flanked on both sides with sun-bleached cabanas and tanning oil-smeared hammocks. The latter was where I liked to hang out to sunbathe or have a swim, though sometimes I'd head to the bigger pool for a change of scene, to eye what's on display. Given the hours I spent at the pool, in the late afternoon, there wasn't much to see though occasionally I would chance upon someone cute—still in the university perhaps, or just out of national service—tanning on one of the loungers, in a tight aussieBum or Addicted trunks. A few times, I would see someone closer to my age, mid-thirties, at the pool and wonder



whether they were on leave or perhaps unemployed, just like me. I would eye them closely, through my tinted Ray-Ban, watching their movements, studying them for any signs of interest. When I was in the right, and unobserved, position, I would snap a photo or two, angling my phone in such a way as if I were trying to read something on it despite the glare of sunlight, of the men that caught my eyes, and later show them to Stephen if I was in a frisky, generous mood. *You're such a pervert*, he would say, though I'd catch the keen, lingering glint in his eyes, which reflected my own.

The first time I took notice of the man and the girl was also the first time I heard the girl's laughter. I had just come out of the tiny bedroom-sized gym, and was resting on a stone bench, stretching my sore legs, when a burst of giggles erupted from where the see-saws were. The girl was seated on one end of the see-saw, hovering in the air, her hands clutching the plastic bar in front of her, her face a red plum, swinging her legs in the air. She was wearing a purple sundress with a hibiscus print, wet bangs on her forehead, horsewhip of a ponytail. From where I was seated, I could hear her breathless, excited voice: *let me down, let me down, I'm scared*.

Yet, from her demeanour and her wild, exuberant state, I could tell she wanted nothing more than to stay where she was, up in the air, or perhaps to go even higher. Eyes were drawn to her, to the commotion she was making; the other children at the playground, younger and already roused up, were giggling along, pointing their wet thumbs and fingers in the direction of the girl, ambling towards the noise, held back by their maids and grandmothers. It took only a glance to make a quick assessment of the girl: pretty, supple, willful, a shiny orb of bright, unbridled energy. A girl who had always had her way, always got what she wanted: a spoiled brat. That was my very first impression of her, gushing and unguarded in her unrestrained delight, as I sat there to watch her. The hemline of her cotton dress had ridden up her thighs, bunching around her flat hips, revealing the white stretch of her panties around her crotch. She was screaming now, getting more excitable, uninhibited. One of her slip-on sandals was dangling off her foot, falling off. Sunlight glided down the smooth milk-coffee sheen of her legs, taut as batons. Any time now, I thought, she was going to fall off the seat, she was going to hurt herself.

The man, on the other end of the see-saw, seemed to be so caught up with the girl's unfettered glee, that he was just sitting there, his seat touching the ground, yelling out words of mock threats—"I'm gonna drop you now, you're gonna fall!"—adding fuel to the fire. A tall burly man, in his late forties, with a small firm belly jutting out of the waistband of his khaki bermudas as he leant forward in a feigned act of standing, dropping the other end of the see-saw just so slightly before sitting back again, his weight reasserted. Perspiration had darkened a valley down the front of his black T-shirt, and around his armpits. He was not the kind of men I would usually notice, giving off an air of staunch, showy machismo. The man radiated a forceful, gleaming



aggression, muted now, for the girl's sake perhaps, but clearly evident in his rigid, uncompromising posture, the coils of muscles rippling along his thick arms, his loud, boisterous laugh.

At the height of the ruckus—the whole episode could not have been more than a minute, I thought—the man took out a phone from his pocket, aimed it at the girl, and began taking photos. It was hard to tell whether the girl did anything to pose for these photos—she looked to be about eight or nine years old, but was actually eleven, two years off the mark, the man corrected me later on; her small, lithe frame concealing her age—but she seemed to hang in the air for a while, stock-still, her head tilting, waiting to be photographed. It could be my impression, slight as it was, before it dissolved in the next second. The magic broke when the man tucked the phone into his pocket and lowered the girl to the ground, still taunt-teasing her. The girl had barely gotten to her feet before the man swept her up in his arms, against her weak protestations. They had not, or at least the man had pretended not to, noticed the attention they had garnered from the people around them at the playground. The girl was too wrapped up in her bubble of joy, too spellbound by the man's actions, to notice anything else. The look on her flushed face said it all: content, sated, love-stung.

After that, I would see them around the pool or at the playground all the time—perhaps I had taken a greater interest in them, and hence looked out for them at every opportunity. The man was always alone with the girl, no wife or maid to be seen; they were a perfect unit all on their own, and for a while, I thought the man was a single father, a divorcee, and the girl, an only child. I played out a few scenarios in my head, possible reasons for their closeness and intimacy. The man was always by the girl's side, close at hand, engaged in made-up games, often initiating them, unlike the other parents at the pool who allowed their kids to play by themselves, unsupervised, uninterested. The girl lapped up all the attention the man lavished, taking it for granted, without question. She was unabashed, at complete ease with the man, flinging water in his face, pushing him away when he came too close, and ignoring him when other distractions caught her eye. When the girl approached the other kids in the pool or playground, the man would stay close by her side, like a shadow, as if her every action were something to be monitored, to be kept in check. The other kids were hesitant around the girl, not sure how to engage with her, with the man beside her, watching them warily; most of them backed away, while a few brave ones struck up a game or two before scampering off, returning to their own play or to their guardians. The girl, unaware of what the man's presence meant to these kids, never seemed to be bothered by their abandonment or disinterest; she only needed to turn around and the man was there, ready to take her into his embrace.

They didn't stay very long at the pool, usually half an hour or so, and the man would hurry the girl along, bundling her up in a large towel, a tight white



cocoon, and lead them towards the block of apartments adjacent to mine. I would avert my eyes when they were gathering up their things—sunblock, bottles of water, goggles, Tupperware of grapes and sliced apples—turning my attention to my phone momentarily or sinking back into the lounge. I would never choose to sit anywhere near to them—that would be too blatant—but instead opted for a seat opposite them, a view that would offer the right proximity, a good balance between outright prying and mere passive curiosity. Sometimes, going in for a dip after a long tan, I would find myself in the water with them, the girl splashing happily nearby, tiny sprays of water landing on my face or arms, the man laughing beside her. The girl would eye me for a second, occasionally flashing an impish grin when she caught my furtive stares. The man, now that I had seen him bare-torso several times, had a broad beefy chest with a full carpet of hair that shivered in the water like tiny coils of seaweed, and two huge nipples whose tips were perpetually erected one-inch thick. We traded slight nods whenever our glances overlapped.

“Don’t go too far, just play here,” the man would say, reaching out a hand that the girl managed to dodge by submerging herself fully into the water, as I hovered by the edge of the pool, keeping my eyes fixed on the sky, hearing everything. “Come, come, let’s go, you had enough fun already, we’ll come back tomorrow.”

“I don’t wanna go, I still wanna play. It’s too early, there’s nothing to do at home,” the girl would cry when the man persisted, her tone vaguely defiant, already losing steam. The man would then promise her something—a stick of Mentos, an ice-cream, more play time on the phone, which I assumed was the man’s unless the girl had one, which was hardly surprising; I had seen younger girls with their own phones, clutching to them as if their lives were entirely dependent on them—before she got out of the pool, the end of her wet ponytail sticking to her back like a small, greasy snake. The man, rising out of the pool after the girl, was like a dark creature emerging from a swamp, slick, hirsute, lumbering, forbidding. They would gather their things, exchange a few words, and then leave.

Over dinner one night, I told Stephen about the man and the girl—he knew about my fascination with them, though not the whys—and showed him the photos I had secretly taken of them.

“Nothing wrong with a father showing his love and attention to his own daughter. Maybe she’s his only child, that’s why he’s very protective with her,” Stephen said, and a moment later, sensing my silence, added: “Why, you think the man’s cute, is it? He looks okay *lah*, a little on the pudgy side, but still fit. See those arms, I think he still works out. You like him, ah?” Stephen took another glance at the photo before returning the phone to me.



Stephen was nine years older than me, and we had been together for three years, and we were frank and open about each other's tastes and preferences, our relationship still exclusive, though we were trying new and different things on the side, as a couple, in the past year. It was a phase, like all the other phases we had gone through previously, of experimentation and compromises, of testing out new boundaries.

"No *lah*, I don't," I said, unsure whether I had caught myself in a lie, or denial. Perhaps my attraction to the man was simply a matter of lust, an irresistible physical reaction, nothing more, but yet it had felt quite different from the start. A wan interest that had edged slowly into compulsion, and then suddenly tipping into full-blown obsession. His physique was only one part of the equation; there were still many unknowns at play, each adding up to something I was still figuring out.

"Must be your fixation with father figure, you know?" Stephen said.

"Yes, must be. That would explain you *lor*, old man," I said.

I had first met Stephen at one of the gay saunas in Chinatown, and subsequently gone out with him on a few dates after exchanging our numbers at the lockers. It wasn't my usual thing, to keep up with strangers after a quick fuck, but he was persistent and persuasive, and I didn't mind the attention he was giving me, and also the gifts and lavish meals. I hadn't wanted to settle down into a relationship then, still wanted to fuck around; even while we were dating, I was still hooking up with guys from Grindr and Jack'd, still visiting the saunas. I wasn't sure Stephen was doing the same thing at the time, and it was better not to know; after all, it's tit for tat, we're only dating, nothing serious, nothing more.

But things changed after three months, the momentum shifted, and after a short trip to Bali, initiated by Stephen, we were officially a couple. I quickly got over my fears, my hesitation; the arrangement felt right, it was the right decision, and I was happy. I was willing to give this, the relationship, a try—Stephen was a good catch, sincere and self-assured, established in his career, already a vice-president in the legal and compliance department of an American bank—to see how far it could go.

With nothing to anchor my days after the retrenchment, I began to stay up late every night, while Stephen took to bed promptly by ten-thirty. I would stay in bed with him, talking, sometimes trying to tease him into sex, but after a while he would roll over to his side and drop off to sleep within seconds. Some nights, I would press my erection to his back, horny as hell, and he would grumble for a moment before reaching down to grab my cock and jerk me off. But most nights, I would wait for him to sleep before getting up to wander around the apartment, full of pent-up energy, before settling myself





down in front of my laptop and started surfing porn. I would sieve through the usual sites for new videos—facials and anal and threesomes—and set about watching them, cherry-picking through the scenes for the best shots. Sometimes it would take less than ten minutes to get off, but on many occasions, I'd be changing videos every other minute, unable to focus on any of them, limp cock in hand. By the end of it, when I finally forced myself to come, the whole act had felt like a banal, tedious chore that needed to be done, something to get over with. Yet, even then, I would still be unsatisfied, still pining for some sort of relief, as if the lust and urge were no longer something I could satiate completely, having become a creature of many hungers, many mouths. There was no way out of it, this terrible, endless loop of wanting, and not knowing how or whether it's possible to break out of it.

In despair, I would take to cleaning out the fridge, the bathroom, the study, and wiping down every surface in the kitchen and living room, trying to exhaust this surplus of energy, and again and again, at the end of each cleaning frenzy, I would find myself before my laptop, poring through the porn sites again, trying to find just the right video, the right shot of cock-balls-ass to get myself off again. A couple of times, I would jolt awake in the midst of half-sleep, the glare of harsh light hitting my face like a beam of spotlight, the sleek, raw assemblage of limbs and arms and faces on screen a slow pyretic dream reeling out in long agonised motions, and I would wonder briefly where I had gone, whether my mind was slowly coming apart.

Still, I maintained my routine, kept up appearances. The mind craves and feeds on habits, repetition, a set way of being. The man and the girl soon became the only point of reference in my day, the focal point of my growing obsession. I took to timing my swim and tanning time to theirs, keeping it to under ten minutes before and after they appeared at the pool—the balcony of the fifth-floor apartment looked out to the main pool—and while previously I had kept my distance on the opposite side, now I would come closer to where they were, albeit two or three loungers away. I no longer listened to any music on my phone, though I kept the earbuds in for pretence's sake, eavesdropping on their conversations—piece-meal, childish, bland—learning woefully little about them or their lives. The more I got to know—stretching the limit of the word, really, yet somehow it's hard not to claim some kind of knowledge of them after three weeks of observation, ascribing actions and behaviours to personality and character, as if the former were a door opening up into the latter—the more compulsive I had to maintain the façade of disinterest, nonchalance, to throw them off the scent.

It was inevitable that our paths would cross one day; I had put myself in their orbit for a while and it was simply a matter of time before we collided. That afternoon the man came up to me was the day the girl went missing. I was at the pool, leaning on the half-lowered lounger, studying them through my sunglasses. They were talking in a high animated manner, the girl's voice





petulant, drawn-out, the man's frustrated, cajoling. I glanced over and saw that the girl wasn't dressed in her usual pink one-piece with scalloped trimmings along its hem; she had on a cerulean sundress with a butterfly motif that came to mid-thigh, her slim long legs—for her age—bronzed and sheeny. The girl was sulking and had her back turned to the man, slouching, as she sat on the lounge two seats away from mine, toying with her strappy sandals. The man had in his hand the girl's pink swimsuit and, guessing from his gestures, was asking her to change. The girl refused, swinging her head fervidly. This went back and forth for a while, the man staying the course, patient and pleading, while the girl became more demonstrative in her willfulness. When it seemed they had finally arrived at an impasse, the girl pointed to something in the distance, in the direction of where the gym and BBQ pits were, and asked for a soft drink, a grape soda. The man mumbled something to the girl, words I couldn't quite catch, and left the swimsuit on the girl's lap, and walked away to get the drink. The girl stayed where she was, taking peeks at the other kids playing near the water-slide, and barely had the man gone out of sight that she quickly stood and ambled off towards one of the apartment blocks. I was still lying on the lounge and followed her exit from the corner of my eye. She had left the swimsuit behind.

When the man came back later with a can of soft drink, he immediately grasped the situation, first scanning the pool for the girl before sweeping his eyes over the surroundings. I was lying very still, my earbuds plugged in though there wasn't any music. I could sense his mounting panic, a parody of fear and disbelief, almost cartoonish. He went around the pool once, twice, and headed into the changing rooms to check. I watched him in silence, trying hard not to exhibit any sign of eagerness, or betray my awareness of anything. When he came back to the lounge, where he had left the canvas bag of towels and sunblock, the distress on his face had become clear and obvious, ghoul-like like a Kagura mask. When I finally deemed to remove my Ray-Ban, my first move, and turned in his direction, the man swerved his attention to me and quickly approached.

"Did you see a girl just now, with a ponytail, about this height"—he gestured to his hip—"did you see where she went?" he said.

Close up, and this was the first time I was able to look at him in the eyes, I studied his features. His eyes were small and vigilant, and in concert with his thick dark brows, gave the impression of sturdiness and conviviality; the parentheses that framed the sides of his thin lips were deeply carved out, rendering a masculine quality to his not-unkindly smile. Stubble sprouted along the hard line of his jaws, peppering his pockmarked cheeks; he looked older than he seemed, perhaps on purpose. His voice rang out hoarsely, baritone and commanding, a voice to address a sea of students, or protestors.



"I'm not sure," I said, choosing my words; I could see him looking beyond me, already thinking of his next move, and I added: "I think I saw her heading somewhere, in that direction."

I pointed towards another apartment block, a short distance from theirs. I knew where they stayed, having watched them head towards the lobby of their block on numerous occasions, and noticing the man coming out to the balcony to hang the girl's swimsuit and his board shorts on the railing on the seventh floor.

"What happened?" I asked, needlessly.

"I told her to sit and wait for me, but that girl, she never listens. Always getting into trouble. And now, I don't know where she's gone," the man said.

"She can't have gone far. Maybe she's gone off to use the toilet."

"No, I've checked. She's not there."

Sensing the man's roiling anxiety to do something—to do anything—I stood up, put on my T-shirt and shorts, and said: "Let me help you. Let's go and find her."

"Sorry, I don't want to—"

"It's okay. I can help."

Together we searched the area around the pool and the lobby of the block that I had pointed out earlier. The man didn't supply any further detail of the girl—did he assume I had seen her before, or known who she was?—and I didn't ask. He was terse and blunt when I tried to initiate a conversation, his replies clipped, economical. After fifteen minutes of searching nearly the entire condominium, we found the girl at the security guard post at the entrance of the main gates. She was sitting on a bench outside the post, with one of the Malay guards, her feet dangling off the ground. She looked up as we came into sight, her expression a curious mix of relief, perturbation and exasperation, as if she had been caught sooner than she wanted in a game of hide-and-seek.

"I saw her trying to sneak out of the gates, so I stopped her," the guard said, a modicum of pride in his voice. "She doesn't want to tell me where she stays."

The man thanked the guard and, turning to the girl and glaring at her, held out his right hand, which the girl grasped lightly, reluctantly. The man didn't say anything more, though I could see him clenching his jaws, the motions under the skin like a worm burrowing itself into the earth. When they



returned to the lounge by the pool—I opted to follow two steps behind them—the man had softened his tight features and proceeded to thank me warmly, reaching out to give me a firm handshake. I smiled in return, and turned back to where I had left my things. Through it all, from the walk back from the guard post to their departure, the girl did not lift her face to look at me, though I could feel a held-in rage humming from her, as if she had found some heinous flaw in me, as if I had been involved in something—a misdeed or a crime—that was causing her a good deal of pain. I waved at her as they were leaving, and she stuck out a tongue at me, lizard-like.

That night, unable to fall asleep and feeling caged in the apartment, I went down to use the gym which was open all day. It was late, around two, and the gym glowed like a jewel box as I approached. Through the glass panes, I spotted someone on the treadmill before registering who it was. The man. I paused at the entrance for a second, and when I entered, the man, with his earbuds in, didn't seem to be aware of my presence. It was only when I stepped onto the adjacent treadmill that he swiveled his face to me—in annoyance or surprise, I couldn't really tell. He quickly evened out his expression and gave me a nod. I glanced at the digital panel on his treadmill: nine point forty-two kilometres—and he waved as if asking me to wait. His blue singlet was drenched with perspiration, and the air around him reeked of a sour, over-ripe smell. The muscles in his calves tensed with clean defined lines with each stamp of his feet on the moving belt. I fiddled with the settings on the display panel on my treadmill, peeked out the window at the deserted playground, and took sips from my water bottle. The man jacked up the speed in the last thirty metres and ended his run with a loud grunt. I waited for him to catch his breath as he stood bent-over on the treadmill, fat drops of sweat dripping all over the belt.

“Didn’t expect to find you here so late,” I said.

“Can’t sleep, may as well do something.”

“Same here. Do you always run this late?”

“Not often, not really.”

He pulled his towel off the front bar of the treadmill, gave his face a rough swipe. I offered him my water bottle; he waved off the offer.

“How’s your daughter?”

For a moment, he looked puzzled, bemused, and then his face lit up. He let out a hoot of laughter.



“No, no, she’s not my daughter,” he said, and, seeing my surprise, added: “She’s my younger brother’s kid, my niece.”

I gave a light chuckle, shaking my head.

“I could be fooled. You’re so close to her.”

“Yah, we’re close. I spend so much time with her.”

“Well, you’re really great with her. I always see you guys at the pool.”

The man tightened the look in his eyes at the mention of this, but didn’t say anything. I steered the topic away.

“So you’re like her full-time babysitter then.”

The man laughed again, that deep rumbling laugh.

“Well, it does seem like it, doesn’t it?”

“You’re such a good uncle.”

“You think?”

“Absolutely.”

The man glanced at the display panel on my treadmill.

“Sorry, don’t let me hold you—”

“It’s okay.”

He got off the treadmill, went over to the water cooler, pulled out a paper cup from the dispenser. He made quick work of several cupfuls. I stood on the stationary treadmill, watching the news on the muted TV hanging from the ceiling. The man sat on the bench press, stretching out his legs. The rank smell of his sweat filled the entire gym, displacing the air, magnifying and extending his presence. I stepped off the treadmill and got closer to him.

“Must be tough taking care of her every day.”

The man looked up and then shifted his glance to the wall of mirrors on the other side of the gym. He studied his own reflection in the dim amber light. There was a calculated deliberation in his gesture, a studied move, I thought.





“She’s a good kid, not that I have to do much anyway. I’m just helping out my younger brother. He’s going through a divorce now. His wife left him.”

Caught off-guard for a moment, I uttered a vague, half-hearted reply of commiseration.

“Nah, my brother is an asshole, no need to pity him. He’s always fucking around outside. His wife, my sister-in-law, finally had it with him, did the right thing to divorce him. He gets no pity from me. I just feel sorry for the kid.”

The man sniggered and began to wipe his face and arms with the towel. When he stood up, I saw a damp patch on the bench, glistening like a small dark puddle. He looked around the gym, giving the whole place a thorough scan, and then said:

“Well, enjoy your run”—the man motioned to the treadmill—“I’m hitting the sauna.”

He threw the wet towel into a wicket basket behind the reception desk, and picked up a fresh one. He walked down the corridor to the changing room, the door silently swinging shut behind him. I sat down on the bench press, on the spot the man had sat earlier, the cool wetness seeping through my running shorts, meeting my skin.

The man didn’t look surprised when I entered the sauna, softly closing the wooden-panelled door. The heat was like a hot steaming blanket that wrapped itself around me. The sauna was small and cramped, barely able to fit in more than three or four persons at a time. I sat down on the scorching wooden bench beside the man and glanced at him; he had his eyes closed, face lowered. Sweat beads dotted the skin of the man’s broad hairy chest, down his hefty arms. I tugged at the towel around my waist, loosening it a little.

We sat for some time in the dry muggy heat, not talking. The man didn’t move, was rigid as a boulder. His legs were stretched out in front of him, his posture loose, relaxed. A path of coarse hair trailed from his navel down to the edge of his crotch, the thick tuft of pubic hair peeking out from his towel. He cleared his throat, a deep rumble, and asked:

“Do you mind?”

He pointed to the pile of granite rocks on a stove in a corner of the sauna. I nodded. Getting up, his towel fell away, allowing me a quick glimpse of his fat, flaccid cock nestled in a cocoon of curly hair. He grabbed onto the towel before it could slip to the floor, hand on his crotch, then walked over, picked up the ladle from a bucket, and flung a splash of water over the rocks. A loud crackle of sizzles and a billow of fleecy white steam exploded into the air, a



ghost materialising, crawling up the wooden walls, gliding across the low ceiling. The heat, renewed, pressed up against my body, clinging, tenacious. The man, returning to the bench, issued a satisfied grunt as I tried to make out his face in the foggy room.

“This is better,” the man said, pushing his body upright, drawing in his legs. He took a glimpse at me and, perhaps sensing something in my expression, smiled and later sighed. He brought his palms to his face, rubbing it hard. I brought my hands to rest on the front of my towel and leant my head back on the wall, looking sideways at the man.

“You have a boyfriend, right? I’ve seen him around with you at the pool sometimes,” the man finally said, staring absently at the door of the sauna.

Closing my eyes, the man’s words zipping a hot line across my thoughts, I felt exposed, marked out, caught. No matter how hard I strove to stay hidden or out of sight, I, too, had been seen and observed, it seemed; how could I assume my life was invisible to others, my presence unfelt, unheeded, as if the bubble I had imposed around me, insular and walled-off, was enough to block anyone from looking, from really seeing. I was and had been made transparent, not only by my actions—even now as I sat here, seeking the man out—but by the nature of who I was, whom I was seen with, two men together, beyond the pale. Seen and assessed in return, even while I was observing and appraising and judging what I was seeing, the people around me. The seeing became the seen, a revolving door, turning and turning. What did the man see, what did he know about me or what I had done or was doing, even now?

A new fear, laced with shame and raw arousal, rose inside me. I didn’t dare to speak or move a muscle, lest the feeling came alive, made itself untamable. I anticipated the man’s slightest motion, hoping to read it for some sign that would determine my next step: to stay or to escape. It was getting harder to breathe in the stuffy air, each breath a bag of smoke in my mouth, in my throat.

Instead, the man laughed and said: “It’s okay, this had happened to me before. I’ve almost gotten used to it by now.”

He bumped his left hand lightly against mine on the bench, as if to seal the point he was making. Then he shifted his weight, and I couldn’t tell whether he was drawing nearer to me or pushing himself farther away.

“Don’t worry, I understand. People are just people, you are who you are, no point hiding or denying it. We’re just made differently, that’s all, different natures. I have two close friends, platoon mates from NS who are also gay, and I’m fine with it. They’re just normal guys, they have their own lives. Nothing wrong with that. Just so you know.”



The timbre of his voice resonated in the dry heat of the sauna, like dark ripples of currents. The man ran a hand through his close-cropped hair, flicking off the sweat in front of him. A few droplets landed on my thigh and calf, warm burning mercury, sinking into my flesh.

“Sometimes it takes a while to know what you like, what you want,” the man said.

He spread his legs slightly apart, the edge of his left foot touching mine. I stayed perfectly still, finding it hard to respond to his signal—was this a clear sign, or was I perhaps imagining it? There was a vagueness to his gestures, an ambiguity that could go in different ways, branching into different ends, and I wasn’t sure which way to go. After a long moment, the man spoke again:

“I didn’t start dating until I was in the university, when I was nearly twenty-one, a late bloomer. I know what dating’s all about, of course, my friends in junior college couldn’t stop talking about it, who they went out with, what they did during their dates, what happened after. I was aware of all the things people did on dates, but I wasn’t sure whether I was ready then. I just listened to the stories, asked all the questions, and tried to imagine myself in those situations. Maybe I was lacking confidence, I don’t know, I didn’t always look the way I do now. I was overweight then and I felt very self-conscious about how I looked, how hairy I am. I was shy around people, especially girls.

“The first date I went on was set up by a university friend, with a girl from another faculty, same age as me. The date was okay, no sparks, but we went on a second and third date. But later the girl drifted off, and that was it. I guess my first experience in dating was just that: a way in, a kind of means to find out what I like and don’t like about the types of girls I’m interested in. So I dated more after that, with girls that were very different from one another, not really sticking to a particular type, as if I wanted to test out my own preferences, to know exactly what I like or find interesting. I wasn’t an asshole or anything, double-timing the girls, no, I always made sure to end things off properly with a girl I wasn’t keen on, before dating another. Some of my friends called me a womaniser, a *chee hong*.

“And it was slowly, through a long period of dating that I began to become aware of what was apparent all along, though it was something I didn’t want to acknowledge to myself, a small part of me that had wanted to stay in the dark, and not to make itself known, you know what I’m saying? It’s that part that wants to remain untouched, unseen, because it holds the most private of your thoughts, your deepest yearnings. You catch a glimpse of it now and then, but mostly you keep it hidden, trying not to even think about it but just keeping it out of sight, for your own good. But it keeps growing, you know, it feeds on you, it wants what it wants. I didn’t want to pay any attention to it



at first, I didn't want to give it anything to latch on. I kept telling myself then it was only a phase, people go through phases, maybe I wasn't sure, maybe I'd confused one thing with another, maybe I didn't exactly know what I truly like.

"So I spent a good part of my twenties, doing just that: to rid myself of this, this ugly persistent urge. I dated all kinds of women, slept with most of them, found out what they wanted and gave them what they needed. I exercised fanatically, dragon-boating, hitting the gym every day, games of volleyball on weekends, marathons, ultra-marathons, any kind of races you could imagine. I thought by taking control of my body I was controlling my appetites, my physical impulses, I really believed that. Body over mind, that sort of thing. All these did their tricks, helped to keep me in check. I even dated seriously for a while, had good relationships that each lasted a couple of years, had even considered marriage at one point. But that was only as far as I could go. I couldn't settle into anything like a marriage, it would be impossible. Some people are just not built for it, I thought, like me or my brother, maybe it's a genes thing"—the man broke into a guffaw at this—"maybe we were just not cut out for any kind of relationships. And perhaps this was something I knew all along.

"Anyway, there I was, leading a life I wasn't sure I wanted, and on the underside of this life was another which I was also living at the same time, untapped, hidden, silently humming along. That other life was also making its demands felt, speaking to me in a language I could understand intimately, perfectly. I couldn't turn away from it, couldn't stop giving it what it wanted."

The man stopped to take a long deep breath. The air in the sauna vibrated with an palpable tension, of a note struck and reverberating in echoes.

"There are, of course, sites I can visit to get my fill of what it needs, to relieve the pressure for a while. Photos and videos, they are all there, and there was always something new every day. There were plenty to satisfy myself, and it was all too easy, no shame about it. At least I wasn't out there doing what I shouldn't. Do these things have their own right and wrong? Does everything have to be justified, to be reasoned out, in order to be valid or permissible? Do we have to explain everything we are made of? How much of your self do you really understand, all these urges and impulses and longings that pass through you every moment, every day of your life? There's no end to thinking about all these; the more I thought about what I truly wanted, the further the thought took me away, and there came a time when it's no longer possible to stay where I was, to remain still, to be passive. The urge that had grown for so long was too strong, too much for me not to act."

The man looked at the wooden door of the sauna for a second, warily, as if expecting someone to barge in at any moment. How long had we been in





here—time was a thing with many hands, pulling from all sides. Why was he telling me all this? What was it about me that had led to his telling me about his life? What had he hoped would come out of this, this strange, uncalled-for confession, if this was what it was?

I wiped the crown of sweat from my forehead; my body had grown accustomed to the heat, cooling profusely. In the murk of my imagination, we could have been anywhere, holed up in this tiny heated room: flung out into dark space, or perhaps buried deep in the earth, our breathing slow and heavy, our skins a foreign landscape of heat and water and sensations, distant memories. No one knew where we were, and we were all that was left; everything, everyone felt faraway, cast off, shimmering figments of a wild, incendiary dream.

“It could not have been easier to slip into this other life, which made me wonder why I had been holding out for so long. I made a small change, and then another, and everything else went along with these. It wasn’t something bad or wrong that I was doing. I was just following my own instincts, just seeing where it would lead me. But you must understand, this isn’t just lust or anything, it’s more than that. There’s love, there’s also kindness and warmth and affection. I love them, I adore them, and I never fail to give them what they want, and I’m sure some of them love me as well. It’s their love I want, not just what they can give. Their love, which is so simple and uncomplicated, so innocent, you’d always want it after you have a taste. All that love in so small a body. You want to protect it, to guard it, to keep it safe. You’ll do or give anything to satisfy them. I’m happy whenever I’m with them, I’m happy because I know I make them happy.

“The first one, I can remember, is someone I got to know online, in a chat group. She’s a sweet girl, into Korean dramas and stars, dolls herself up like one of them, bright-eyed and dewy-skinned. We chatted and she told me her life and we got really close after a while. After we met, she took an instant liking to me. I bought her small gifts, a make-up kit, a laptop holder with the image of Brown—she’s really into those Line characters—which made her so happy. We went out a couple of times, and on one of our dates, she wanted to try out a kiss on me. She hadn’t kissed anyone yet, she said, can you believe it? She wanted her first kiss to be with me, so I gave her what she wanted. It was mutual, after all. I’d never force anything on anyone if she was uncomfortable with it. This isn’t who I am, I’m better than that. I respect them, respect their choices. When we finally did it, it was the girl’s decision, not mine. I did nothing but love her, and she only wanted to be loved, it’s that simple.”

The silence stretched between us, taut, strained.

“How old are you now, twenty-seven, twenty-eight? You look young. Maybe that makes the difference, in how we see things. You see what lies



before you, the enjoyment, the opportunities, the fun, lots of it. What's there to a value of a thing, of a person? I see the way you are at the pool, your eyes always roaming, restless, like you're on a hunt, like you're always hungry, always looking for someone, a target, a quick fuck. You don't seem satisfied or happy or anything. What are you looking for exactly, what do you really want? Even if I give you what you want now, will it be enough? Will it do anything for you, really, maybe a story you can tell your friends or your boyfriend, I don't know. What do you possibly want from me? Do you want this"—the man grabbed his cock through his sodden towel, a fleshy lump in his fist, shaking it—"is that it, you only want this?"

A deep rumbling laugh, booming in the hollow room.

The man rubbed the mound of his crotch slowly, dreamily, his eyes closed, his face contorting into a pained grimace, as if he were probing an old thought or sensation. The growing erection tented the towel, whose soft wet folds draped themselves around the plump girth of his cock, which the man was teasing through the thin fabric. The sweltering heat was clouding my thoughts, and the air felt tighter, denser, harder to swallow. Even while I was staring at what the man was doing, my mind was skipping across scenes that had taken place in similar situation, in different saunas, in different steam rooms: a hand reaching out, grabbing, a mouth on a cock, face deep in the damp husky stench of a man's crotch, tongue on silken balls, lips wrapped around the cockhead, the flickers of a tongue-tip on the slit, edging out the pre-cum, the cum, the gush, the creamy flow. These visions slid and slipped over one another, flaring up and fading, teasing, edging.

Yet I sat there, paralysed, unable to will myself to stir, to move my hand or mouth towards the man, to take what was given, offered. And the longer I sat there, musing over his words, the further he was drawing me into a spiral that he had conjured up with his words, leaving me with nothing to pull myself out of it. Even the mere act of listening to him was an act of collusion, of braiding his thoughts with mine, insofar that I couldn't help but see what he was seeing, and feel what he had allowed me to feel. Where was all this leading, where had the man wanted me to go—was it just understanding he wished to cull from me, empathy, approval, or perhaps acquiescence, submission?

My mind, a hive of clashing thoughts now, and every thought a distorted diorama: Stephen, asleep, kicking off the blanket, his back arching to meet the absence on the other side of the bed; the girl, in the blue lapping water of the pool, her swimsuit glued to her skin, the pink bud of her mouth, hollering, her shadows shattered in broken jagged waves below her, on the cold beige tiles; the rude slap of a cock on my face, across my cheeks, my hands sticky, stroking, a blur of motions, fast, urgent, coaxing; a siren, then a chorus, shrieking, drawing me away, somewhere; a reflection in the water, mine, no, the girl's, commingling, the man beside me now, gentle, then rough, putting my



head under, holding still, and I was breathing everything in: the air and the water, the heat and the light.

The man let out a sigh and paused his stroking, dropping his hands to the sides. His towel had slackened at the waist, parting to reveal his semi-hard cock. He gazed at me, his eyes burning a straight path into me, a puckish smile playing on his lips.

“Do you not understand a thing about your own desires? Do you not know the thing that drives you to do what you do, why you fuck, who you fuck? How many guys have you fucked, how many have fucked you? What do they really mean to you? Just a number that keeps growing. They’ll never be enough, I tell you, they won’t be enough to give you what you want.”

The man leant into me, the warmth of his shoulder touching mine. His gaze, fixed forward, was distant, preoccupied. He brushed his little finger against mine, and I curled my finger around it, pulling it into a lock. He turned to look at me, and again, he smiled.

“You don’t understand a single thing I’m saying. It’s okay, you’re still young, you’ll learn.”

“Learn what?” I asked, moving to hold his left hand, which was large and rough, his strength evident in his grip. Taking a long breath, the man continued:

“She’s going back to her mother, my sister-in-law, tomorrow. That’s why she’s acting up today. My brother has lost the custody, which is not surprising. He can’t even take care of himself, let alone a kid. Who will trust him with anything, really? Once she’s gone, I don’t know what to do. I don’t think my sister-in-law will want me to babysit or even see the girl, after this. I’m not sure she likes me at all. Well, what can you do? I don’t think I’ll stay here any longer, there’s no point, I can’t stand my brother anyway. Maybe I’ll go somewhere, do something else. Who knows, maybe after tonight you won’t see me anymore, maybe I’ll just be a ghost to you.”

The man paused, as if waiting for me to catch on, waiting to see how I would react. He made a slight motion with his hand, and his towel finally came loose, a side of it falling to the ground, his cock a thick slab of meat leaning against his inner thigh.

“My niece loves me, I’m sure you can already see. She listens to me, does what I tell her, she obeys me. And she adores me, and I adore her, if not more. She brings me so much joy, she makes me so happy. My life now is all about her, what she wants, what she likes, what I can do to make her happy. She doesn’t know what I have to go through every day to make my love real to her,



to make her feel loved. She only knows her own happiness, her own enjoyment, and it's fine with me. What love calls attention to itself, makes a show of itself? Shouldn't love be selfless, unconditional, all-giving? Maybe you won't understand this, maybe you haven't known this kind of love before, maybe you would never understand love even if it hits you in the face. But then again, like I said, you're still young."

I let the man's words slip through me, a knife cutting through shadows. He was only raving, spouting his own brand of nonsense. There was nothing in his words to mean anything; his voice mere tremors in the stuffy air, disappearing into dim corners. His large resting cock, again stirring awake, stiffened juicily, a shiny bead of pre-cum leaking from the hole. The man's haughty smile, his deeply sour breath, leaking out of his open mouth like hot scorching fumes. My body, too, was moving, shuddering, agitated into reckless life, the soft frail wings of a moth breaking the husk, caught between worlds.

Then, in a sudden vision, I saw the young girl in front of me, by the pool, her twig legs crossed at her ankles, her stare fixed on me. Her innocence and beauty a sack of stones and hooks, clumsily, cunningly borne. Her mouth quietly quivering, whispering, as if she were trying to tell me something urgent. Her words, now the man's, now mine, merging into one, a constellation of bright voices, all light, incorporeal.

And yet, when I tried to listen, when I held my ears and heart to it, all I could hear was the silence.





## RAHUL SINGH

### Hunting Men

It was the first time I had felt that I couldn't breathe. Breathing came in gasps and knots as I let my head drop in my hands and waited for a withdrawal of some kind. An incandescent pain had been stabbing my weary head that felt like a punishment, more severe than a heartbreak. I suppose it were the glasses of Cuba Libre under the dim lights and the sound of the music, loud enough to make my lungs feel its thrumming against the ribs. The blackness of sight, the jumping on the dance floor, the shivering nerves on the sides of my forehead and the ocean smell of him came together like uninvited guests at a private island; all rejoicing and teetering into my seclusion. He had called me to the pub with a word of endearment, *Munchkin*, that's how he addressed me, 'Munchkin, come to the pub ahead of that shitty KFC counter at Park Street.'

Munchkin, I wonder why no man ever called me that. I was called baby, babe, bitch, babydoll, slut, life, kitten, puppy by the men I had been with; however longer or shorter the tenure of that bonding. Munchkin was new. I liked it. It signified difference, in a good way. 'Maybe this was going to be different', I had said to myself reading the text. I ran the trimmer across all the regions of my body letting cottons of hair fall on the white tiles of my bathroom. In hurry I hurt my perineum but a rub of Boroplus after the hot shower healed the stinging burn. When the towel fell off my waist and I stared at the reflection in the long mirror I realised what a thin man I had grown to become with ass like two dry peas clung resolutely to my cylindrical thighs. The waxy glow after a massage of a chocolate-smelling butt oil made me feel sympathetic toward them. I had ordered the oil from some online queer shop of America, it made men smile when their mouths went down. Perhaps, it compensated for what my body lacked. I wore a black shirt with a pair of blue denims and then I doused myself in all the perfumes I owned, from *Houbigant* that was gifted to me, to *Victoria's Secret*, the one I always bought for myself. For my face, I dabbed a frosting of foundation, in pure beige shade, it smoothened the rough texture of my ageing skin replete with dentures and scars of adolescence. I never believed in making my skin appear fairer or brighter, I hated the fairness creams I had seen my mother and sister use when I was at home back in a small town of Uttar Pradesh. They were still there, thankfully. I dreaded their visit to Kolkata. It was always embarrassing when I took them out with me. At McDonald's they would order the cheapest cones of ice cream. At restaurants in Park Street they would use hands to eat rice and not know how to fork their



noodles. I stopped taking them there seeing eyes from other tables fixed on ours. In malls, they would eye products with hunger, my mother and sister would get shades of lipsticks swatched on the back of their palms, my brother would get perfumes sprayed all over his hands and leave the shops without buying a single thing. When my brother flashed his hand under my nose telling me how beautiful he smelled my teeth gritted with bitterness and bile. I would clamp my mouth shut and wish for them to be gone.

From the drawer, I pulled out my Tom Ford mascara which my friend had got when she visited the States. Of course, I paid for it. My lashes came alive with two gentle strokes. I had seen the magic of this mascara in a makeup tutorial on Instagram where I have been spending most of my nights for the past few months watching clips of makeup, work-out, make-out, and food recipes. For my unusually thick lips, I ran a blueberry-flavoured chapstick. My lips turned a shade of pink covering the grey left by merciless sticks of cigarettes. Men loved my lips. They said it was the best part of me because a pair of lips so thickly lined and luscious between theirs wasn't common among gay men. I picked up my wallet and counted the money that lay slapped against each other. Four thousand rupees seemed adequate. My job at the bank paid me well. Well enough to rent a two-room flat which I had shared earlier with a partner of mine. When he left I was worried if I would be able to pay for the flat alone because I had no intention of leaving it. A little sweet talk and casseroles of food with the landlady worked for me. She decided to reduce the rent because I was gay, heart-broken, and alone in a city away from home. She was a professor in Film Studies at some prestigious college in the city. We went for a LGBTQIA Film Festival the previous year. I met quite a few men there but the presence of her elder brother with us made it difficult for me to forge a connection with any other man. He smiled radiantly at everyone, flirted with men dressed in leather pants and suspenders touching their sculpted abdomen and biceps. At a tea stall, he held me by my waist, with those same hands, to move me on the other side. I felt my stomach tighten into a knot with a desperation for him. Unfortunately, all my need for him disappeared when after that festival we went to dinner and he introduced us to his fiancé; a woman of sharp features and slanting curves who worked in the Bengali film industry.

I unplugged my phone from the charger and entered the location of the pub in Uber. The price was staggering. I checked Ola too. Ola was cheaper, unsurprisingly, I booked a cab. The cheaper rate meant a longer waiting time. I didn't mind waiting. Days and months of being an inactive gay man teaches you patience, a skill of waiting that by now I had inherited from my house. There were no texts by him anymore. I acted as though it didn't matter since I would be there anytime soon but it did matter. I wanted to see the neediness. The *want* for the munchkin. The partner with whom I had shared the flat called me jaan (life) to tell me how significant I was to him. I was his life he had said and written in many texts, letters and emails. In bed he called me kitten



because I was smaller under him, a furry body because I barely shaved when I was with him and my moans were mewling of a cat's child. He was a lawyer. He was two-years elder to me. I was twenty-eight when I met him. He earned more than I did. In fact, his parents had a bungalow in Salt Lake but he left that and moved in with me after a year of being with me. We divided chores and finances at home like two roommates sharing a flat. He was obsessed with buying decorative items for the flat. He told me he wanted to make it feel like home rather than a rented apartment. From soft white curtains to pastel coloured ceramic vases and bowls housing succulents and stones, the apartment boasted of wealth which my family envied. My mother complained how I didn't care for our house back in Uttar Pradesh where I had to eventually return to, that was *my* own and not a temporary matter. He laughed at my family when we were together in our room. He would tell me he didn't mean to look down upon them but there were some things that was funny. He said my family could be cast in an entertaining comedy serial. On most nights, I laughed with him. I told him he was right. Against his educated, well-mannered Bengali parents who saw a corner of the world at least once every year, my family was a joke. He would ask me why my father never accompanied them. I told him he doesn't like me. He wanted to know why. I would push the question away saying later and straddle in his lap for a kiss.

I clambered down the stairs as the lift that worked was moving upward. My cab was waiting for me at the gate. I boarded my cab giving him the code to verify my ride. The driver nodded with a smile and said, 'That's a lot of perfume, sir.' I smiled in return not caring if that was a compliment or an expression of suffocation I had caused entering the air conditioned box. I checked my phone for another message but there was nothing. I stared out seeing the scenes of fruits stalls heaped with pyramids of apples, pears, pomegranate pass by. The man I lost my virginity to loved pomegranate. When we were taking off our clothes he told me he had its juice daily to keep his sexual health intact. It made him last longer on the bed and that was painful for me because it was my first time and I feared shit and blood. I didn't bleed and there was no shit, fortunately, but he seemed unhappy. He never wrote back to me again. He blocked me from all social media when I tried to reach out to him. I was eighteen, I was stubborn. I made a fake account on Grindr and messaged him and asked him why he blocked me. He blocked me from there too but he left a text before doing so. He had written, you're too skinny for me. I kept losing my erection inside you. Bye. That night I deleted the application and refused to tell anyone about what had happened. I got busy in college and then took up jobs of content writing to pay for my expenses as my father didn't send enough money. After a couple of months, I downloaded the application again with a new profile, I saw him. I went through the pictures he had uploaded. He looked as charming as he had when he was on top of me without any clothes. I wanted to write to him. After a moment of restlessness, I did. We had a conversation but I didn't reveal who I was. He said that he



enjoyed our talk and would like to take me out for coffee. I was excited I said yes. He flirted wittily and then requested me to show my face. I didn't respond for a couple of hours. I didn't know how to deal with that. I was impatient for him, the idea of a man and the future of a romantic relationship. Maybe he had forgotten who I was, I thought. At 1am he sent a question mark. With hopes of him having forgotten my face, I sent the last picture I had of myself in a classroom of my college. He saw the image and blocked me without saying a word. He hadn't forgotten.

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The woman's voice blaring from the Google Maps on the driver's phone directed him in a crisp tone to the destination where I was to be dropped. A relief struck me. The voice irritated me throughout the ride. It reminded me of my partner I had shared my apartment with. His dependence on the voice when he took me out to a new place in his car. I would mute the voice every so often and offer to read the map instead. He would smile and allow me to do that. I knew the streets well. I didn't need the Google Maps. I had walked through the city. I had taken innumerable buses, auto-rickshaws when I was a college student. The twisted lanes, circuitous highways, laps of roads of this city was in my mind, set in my eyes like lines permanent on my palms. I had taken my partner on the streamer across the Ganges. He wanted to hold my hand when we stood at the railing watching Howrah Bridge float above our heads. I had held his fingers and let it go immediately. The other sweaty passengers stared at us. We had walked along the footpaths of Sovabazar ignoring sex workers approaching us for five hundred a night. He had smiled at me with amusement when we sat in a coffee shop. He asked if I had ever been with one. I shook my head and asked if he had. He nodded thoughtfully and told me that he paid a guy after sex once. It wasn't for the sex exactly. He smiled and said that the guy wanted to get home and had lost his wallet at the pub where they had met. On other days, my partner would take me outside the city for dinner with the woman's voice blaring in the car. We did that often. Long drives on a weekend somewhere outside the city. I knew he loved me. We waited to be married lawfully someday.

The cab stopped at the entrance of the tall building. The crowd at KFC was booming with kids and parents and balloons of different colours. It was nine. The night life at Park Street was coming to life. I stepped into the glassed building and was directed by the security toward the lift. The lift shot up to the fifteenth floor. My landlady told me about all the gay boys in her college when we were in the lift leaving for work. She would describe them as chocolate or vanilla. The manly ones as chocolate and the feminine ones as vanilla. I would proscribe her from doing that but she would do it anyway the next time we met. She didn't like my partner. For her, he was chocolate but not the kind that made her excited. She said he intimidated her and that she got a wrong





vibe from him. She would show me pictures of the chocolates from her college. There was a professor she showed me who was married to a woman but she was sure he was closeted and that if I did make a move he would succumb. The students were too young for me, I told her. After my partner left me, she hitched me up with one of her students. He wasn't young like the ones I had seen on her phone. He had graduated college just then and was looking for a vanilla. We met at her place and then I took him to mine. He smelled awful but I continued to sleep with him until he left the city and moved to San Francisco. She couldn't find anymore chocolates for me after him. She told me she would and that she was on the lookout. The last messages sent by her on my screen are a link and a screenshot of the Facebook profile of the professor she wants me pull out of his closet.

I marched into the pub with confidence mumbling, 'munchkin'. When I went on dates before or met any man, my heart would hammer in my chest. There was excitement in my steps and sweat around my nipples. My mouth would remain half open until I ordered a drink and put a straw between my lips. On the first day of my job at the bank, the man who handled cash had asked if I wanted a smoke. I nodded my head and followed him to the tea stall. I had never smoked before. As I held the cigarette between my fingers I wondered why I had said yes. The man flashed the lighter at me and asked, 'why are you shaking?' I shook my head and began to light the cigarette holding it between my fingers. He started to laugh releasing a puff of smoke. He asked why I had agreed to smoke if I hadn't before. I smiled nervously and shrugged. He put the cigarette between my lips and stared in my eyes. He clicked the lighter and said now suck it as I light. I did as instructed. I coughed vehemently. He smiled beautifully at me. I still remember that smile below his bald head. He was my first male friend since school. He got lunch for me from his home. His wife cooked delicious food. We would go out for smoke and he would tell me about his two girls studying in primary school. He would show me pictures of them painting on a long length of fabric, reading graphic novels, covering their faces with a glass in a restaurant and running wild in the field under the sun. He suggested me to marry and asked if I was seeing someone. For a long time, I refused to tell him about myself. After two years he got a transfer to another city with a promotion. He hugged me and asked me to call him at my marriage. I released myself from the hug and told him I did not desire women. He was confused and asked if I was gay. I nodded at him. He scanned me from my head to my toes and then looked at me as though I were filth. He never smiled at me after that or cared to share his new number when he moved to another city. My first male friend after school disappeared. What remained of him was the beautiful smile at the tea stall when I had first smoked a cigarette nervously.

'Munchkin, you are here', he said as I spotted him on the high-rise chair at the bar. He offered his hand to me and kissed the back of my fingers. The



bartender smiled at us and waited for our order. I said, 'Cuba Libre, please.' He turned to the bartender and raised his empty glass for a refill. He was handsome in real. His blue shirt was opened at his chest revealing the remnant of the hair he hadn't shaved. His hands were of the same size as mine even though I was a little taller than him. I could see the curve of his vertebra sticking out against his shirt as he swirled in the chair. I put my hand on his bony thigh to steady him. He blinked at me and said, 'I was right. You are just a cute munchkin.' I blushed. As age piled on me I had forgotten what it was to be complimented. I logged into the application looking for sex only. I had stopped expecting love to come my way. My face had last grown red with smile when my first boyfriend had told me that he loved to look at my face when he made love. It made him harder and happier. I was preparing for my competitive exams for banking, when he had come into my life on an awful day after I fought with my family over the phone. I had screamed at them for pressuring me to forget the examinations and find a job. He was in the next room of the men's hostel I stayed in after graduating college. He asked me if I was all right and if I would like to have tea. We went out for tea and snacks a lot after that. He had come from Bokaro to study Literature at Calcutta University. He would catch me staring at his prominent Adam's apple and ask me if I wanted to touch it. I did and he touched mine too. On my birthday, he took me to the room at the corner of the corridor that was mostly locked. He had secured the key from the lady at the desk saying he needed a space to study for his examinations. He had got a cake for me. There were packets of chips and two bottles of coke that had large quantities of rum mixed in it. We sneaked into the room at night and drank and had the cake leaving some for my roommates. Before exiting the room, he pinned me to the wall and kissed me and told me that he loved me. Six months later I found out that he was sleeping with another boy at his university. I slapped him in the same room he had said he loved me and warned him of coming in my way ever again. He tried speaking to me on many occasions. I went my way as though I never heard him speak. In three months, he had graduated and left the hostel. I remained stuck in my room, in that corridor each day reliving the happiness in that locked room, the news of betrayal on my bed and the anger I carried in my jaws, tight and set until I found my partner with whom I had to share my apartment five years later.

I finished my first glass of Cuba Libre and asked if we could take a table as the bar was too noisy to hear a word. He stood up with his drink offering a hand to me. He led me to a table on the farther end. We sat near the glass walls. I could see the city alight with cars running like snakes on the road and buildings clubbed together into fists. I picked up the box of Marlboro and the lighter and asked if he would like to smoke. He motioned me toward the smoking room saying, 'I took one before you came. Go ahead. I will fetch you a drink and wait here.' I thanked him and swayed my way into the smoking room dreamily. The smoking room of most pubs in Kolkata reminded me of my



friend's sneers and laughter after four shots of jägerbomb. She was the only friend from college who remained alive in my social life. She rooted for me in all my decisions and indecisions. She never scouted men for me. She wanted me to be single with her and follow her to pubs on Fridays and have breakfast on Sundays. She defended me when I complained to her about family and gay men. We would lock ourselves in her room and smoke joint until her mother woke up and banged at the door to check if we were making love. On Sundays, we took her dog for a walk around her neighbourhood in our dazed and dreamy steps. My partner enjoyed having her over for dinner at our flat. He would tell me he found her decision to remain unmarried interesting. They would often discuss feminism after dinner over joint. I would grow silent then and watch them argue. He would inquire her politics behind choosing not to marry. She would explain to him that marriage was a marker of patriarchy for her, a submission which, however, equal one could try to maintain would always end up in the woman bearing the brunt. One morning when my partner and I stepped out of our room after a festive dinner with my friend and my landlady and her husband, we found her lying on the carpet and her skirt raised above her waist. When we had said good night the previous night, my landlady's husband was still smoking and talking to my friend. His wife had left right after dinner, complaining of a pain in her back. There was no sign of the man. My friend was on her back stretched out on the floor naked below the waist. I rushed to my room and grabbed my sheets and gently covered her. She woke up and thanked us over breakfast seeing our hesitant faces. She apologised to us and she said nothing had happened last night. The man refused her and returned to his wife. She looked into my eyes and said that marriage may be beautiful. I had tears welling in my eyes that morning over the breakfast table. In the smoking room, I released a trail of smoke and sent her a text saying that I missed her.

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He was stirring the ice in his drink and seemed lost in the world outside the pub. I cleared my throat and took a seat thanking him for the drink. He said, 'Did you notice people staring at us?' I smiled knowingly and replied, 'They always do. Two men being romantic is rare.' He nodded thoughtfully as though I were speaking words of wisdom. He said, 'I want to make love to you. I began laughing but I could feel my cheeks flush. I asked, 'Are you drunk already?' He shrugged, 'I think so.' His phone began ringing. He mouthed Papa and went outside the noisy enclosure. I turned to the world he was absorbed in. To the right, I saw a room inside a house. A man was straightening a blazer on a hanger with a child holding a brush next to him. I thought about my father, his skinny frame I came to inherit. It seemed that's all I inherited from my father. Not his strong arms, or his brilliant smile, neither any wealth I could boast of. I was the eldest son of the family. His pride. I accompanied him to his



electronic shop everyday to the marketplace. I sat at the counter and handled small purchases after I crossed middle school. I ran to the bank and stood at the long lines to deposit cash. When I stood second in my 12th examinations, he proposed to send me to Kolkata to study. He took me to cyber cafés to fill in forms for college. We came to Kolkata together when I was about to start college. I had held his hands as I walked into the boy's hostel. My fingers were curled into his and he held on to them tighter. He helped me unpack my suitcase with whatever clothes I had. He explained to me five times where the washroom was, where the laundry was, where the college was, where the cafeteria was. I repeated to him thrice about his ticket in the inner case of his luggage, his towel drying on the chair, his socks under the bed of the lodge we had booked. He smiled at my roommates who had entered the room, and he came close to me to say goodbye. I leaned into his chest and released a muffled cry. He patted my back and whispered that my new friends were here and that I shouldn't cry, that I should work hard and make him proud. I nodded and he turned around to leave. I went to the window and saw him walking down the road. It seemed he was walking against the wind and dust that rose from the speeding cars while wiping his face of the tears he couldn't show to his son. I had cried into my pillow that night and all the nights to come. When I graduated he had come to Kolkata with my mother and siblings. He took us out to a restaurant in New Market for lunch after shopping. He asked if I had packed my stuff and was ready to return home. I shook my head with a new confidence that wasn't there when I had first come to Kolkata. My family was surprised. I told them I was looking for a job and that I wanted to take the competitive exam for banking. My parents refused saying it was necessary I take over the electronic shop and marry in three years' time. I said no. My father didn't say a word after that and resumed eating. At the station, after they had boarded the train to return home and I was looking at them from the platform, my father said, 'I will pay you for a year only. After that you return to the shop and take up work or I will stop sending money. The train left and I stood transfixed watching the train pass by me. I saw my home leaving the tracks and departing into some unknown, far-off town to which I had become a stranger. A year later, I cracked the examination and secured a job. My father didn't send a penny when I needed it for the first month. I had to borrow it from my friend. I stopped talking to my father since then. He never visited Kolkata and I never returned home. Only my friend knew that I hadn't spoken to my father in more than a decade and that I waited for his call every day when I saw home flash on my mobile screen.

He returned saying that his father abused him in the crappiest Bengali slurs he could imagine. I asked him to recall them and he laughed shouting into the loud music. He asked if I wanted to dance. I bobbed my head to the music and stood up finishing my drink. He pulled me closer to him and began moving to the music and the lights. Women threw their hair in the air and on



people's faces and danced with their eyes shut. I got a whiff of the sweat from his body as he held my waist and moved backward and forward. I shut my eyes and moved my waist as I had done with my friend. I could hear his amused smile brighten before me. I smiled too and kept dancing as though I were traveling to another time. My partner and I danced in our flat when we fought. It was a way to end a fight. Either he or I would turn on each other's favourite music and then pull the other person out into the drawing room for a dance. I would forget my anger and thump on our carpeted floor gasping and laughing breathlessly. I would push him on the brown bean bag and begin kissing him. We would take off our clothes and dance with music loud enough to make our shouts and screams inaudible. We would do some steps of salsa we had watched on TV, head-bang to a song, and then raise ourselves to a ballet dancer's pose. We would try twerking our asses and end up laughing at how badly it turned out. We would put on some Bollywood songs and do the steps exactly as the actors' had done in the music videos. We would dance until we were sweating and my landlady had to call me to put off the music. Lowering the volume to a jazz song, we would begin making love and then orgasm under the light of an expensive lamp in our drawing room. I didn't meet anyone when we fell apart. I went to work and returned home and locked myself in the room. I stopped talking to my friend. For days on end, I stopped going through my social media portals. I wanted to die in my apartment. In the memory of what had been his and mine. I wanted the apartment to collect over my body and make me a part of itself so I would forever be cast in the walls that had bound me and him together like a family. For ten months, I remained that way. Wishing for an end, a conclusion, some form of justice I believed I deserved until I installed Grindr again the previous month.

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He drew me closer and brushed his nose against mine. His forehead was smeared with sweat and his hair was drenched as was mine from all the dancing. I moved aside and sat at our table. He followed me and bent over the table catching breath. He called for a bottle of water, two glasses of Cuba Libre, and a bowl of fries which I suggested as my stomach was growling with hunger. We guzzled the bottle of water in no time. He insisted me on finishing my fries before consuming alcohol. We seemed skinny but our hunger was gargantuan. We called for a pizza when the hot fries dappled in cheese sauce disappeared from the table. Our mouths slowed down at the slices of pizza, we took a bite, exchanged a word about the crowd increasing at the pub and then took a sip of the cocktail. He began planning where we would go out the next time we meet. I nodded appreciatively at that. Maybe it was going to be different. He suggested the restaurant near his house in Newtown. He said that it was new and served lip-smacking Indonesian food. I told him I never had Indonesian food. He fished his phone out of his pocket and tapped at the screen. He pushed the phone toward me with the menu of the restaurant glowing bright. I





skimmed through it with a nod and confirmed the location. I was about to give the phone away when my eyes fell on the name of the restaurant. My heart seemed to have stopped and I said sternly, 'No, we won't go to this place.' He looked bewildered at my sudden change of mind and expression. I was overjoyed at the prospect of a holiday in Bhutan before my partner stole me of it. I had prepared an itinerary and presented to him the money we would have to put together for the trip. I had booked us a fancy hotel that had a spa, a day at a monastery and then another day trekking along the hilly slopes. My online shopping carts were filled with all the clothes, gears, bags I would need for the trip. I had planned for five months and I had thrust it before his eyes. He glanced at the screen of my iPad and put it aside on the table standing against his side of the bed. He held my hands, knotting my fingers with his and kissed my knuckles. He smiled ruefully and I asked what happened, if he did not like the plan, if he wanted a change. Gently, he shook his head. He seemed at peace, it made my heart rise in my cheeks seeing him that serene. I asked him again if there was anything wrong with the plan. He cleared his throat and finally spoke, 'I want to break up.' My hand lost all its strength hearing him but he kept holding on to it tighter as he stared into my eyes and didn't continue further. I was waiting for him to go on, to offer an explanation but he had nothing else to say. He leaned in to kiss me and stood up to pack his bags. In two days he had returned to his house sending his driver and a help to get his things. I wrote long messages to him asking him why he took the decision, if he cheated on me, if he wanted another man, if his family was forcing him in any way. He replied promising his fidelity throughout our relationship. I kept asking why but he took to silence and showed me the picture of a new restaurant he was opening in Newtown. I blocked him at that moment. At night when I couldn't sleep with the injustice I felt I was being subjected to, I unblocked him and spewed harsh words and curses of a miserable life he had ahead of him. He blocked me in the morning. I saw the pictures of the restaurant's inauguration on Facebook. I saw him and a man, slightly taller and broader than him, standing together for a picture. I googled the restaurant and found out it was chain of hotels spread all over India being handled by the tycoon's America-returned gay son. The son's queerness was all over the internet, more than his business plans, interviews after interviews were based on him being openly gay in a country like India. I took screenshots of the articles and interviews and sent mails to my partner asking him if he left me for this man, if he was sleeping with him. To this day, I received no reply. I don't know if they are together. His Instagram and Snapchat had no presence of that man. I keep checking his social media through my friend's phone to see who he left me for. I don't know if he left me because he desired someone else. I don't know if he left me because he ran out of love for me. I don't know if he left for something I did or I didn't do. I threw my iPad across the room when it opened to the page of the itinerary I had prepared. The answers I did not get



and the uncertainty with which I woke up to another day angered me, tired me and I wanted nothing but to see myself wither in it.

'Are you all right?', he asked me seeing tears in my eyes. I smiled energetically wiping off tears and said, 'Let's dance, please?' He raised his glass and I clinked mine against it with a renewed strength that made a splash of the drink fall on your hands. We finished the drink and returned to the dance floor. We threw our hands in the air with others and danced to the rhythm. We held each other and guided our hands in practised steps. He raised my face by my chin and kissed my lips. A couple saw us and began kissing each other too. He sucked my lips and let his tongue slide through them. We released our faces and locked eyes in the zig-zag motion of the light that blinded us and then made us see something beyond the circle of our eyes. I felt breathless with hope. Just then an unbearable pain struck my head, as though someone had hammered nails into them. I held them in my hand and moved to the table. He followed me looking worried. I put my head down to my thighs and asked him to get water. My phone vibrated with a text. I opened and there was a text left by my friend, 'I miss you too, love. Come spend time with me at my home. It misses you. I am so happy you wrote to me.' It put a smile on my face.



## INO HABANA

### Best Before

I used to live in an apartment building without a name. It was a boxy structure painted a non-descript shade of beige, perfect for non-descript folk like me. It stood along F. Agoncillo Street in a despairing quarter of Manila, where wooden homes shared the sidewalk with warehouses, motels, and a vulcanizing shop that doubled as a funeral parlor. The number 305 was painted on the building's gate in what seemed like hurried scrawl. I called the building 305 since I didn't know who F. Agoncillo was.

My room was on the second floor of the building. It was a cramp affair with just enough space for a bed, a cabinet, and myself. When I first got to my room, I saw sheets of newspaper taped against the window. My landlady said that the previous tenant wasn't too fond of the view. As I took down the newspapers, a gargantuan letter Y revealed itself in all its industrial glory. The Y, of course, stood for Yakult. I lived across the largest Yakult plant in the Manila, and its sign was right outside my window.

I moved to 305 precisely because of that. The Yakult plant was where I landed my first pseudo-job. By profession, I was a chemistry undergraduate. I would have been a chemistry graduate with two more semesters of schoolwork, but I wasn't in a rush to get a degree. The Yakult plant couldn't afford the salaries of chemistry graduates, so they just hired undergraduates such as myself. In the plant, I worked as Product Taster No. 4. Of all the tasters, Product Taster No. 4 sat on top of the taster pyramid. It was an enviable spot reserved for only the most discerning of palates. It was my final approval sent thousands upon thousands of tiny Yakult bottles flying to the far-flung corners of the Philippines. They arrived like miniature armies to provinces, towns, barangays, islands, and even tinier islands that appeared and disappeared with the rising tide. This was something that any undergraduate could be proud of, and proud I was.

I've been drinking Yakult since I was a boy. Back then, we would buy Yakult from the doleful old ladies who pushed Yakult carts up and down our street. Through the grainy TV commercials of my childhood, I learned that Yakult was packed with live lactobacilli known as the Shirota Strain, a type of good bacteria that was discovered and cultured by Dr. Minoru Shirota back in the 1930's. All tummies needed the Shirota Strain for a life-long of



gastrointestinal happiness. As Product Taster No. 4, it was now my noble mission to bring the Shirota Strain to all the digestive systems in the Philippines.

Although I didn't earn as much as a real chemist, I felt that being a Yakult taster was the best job in the world. It was a job with a purpose, and I also got to drink my fill of Yakult. The only downside was that my stomach gave off unflattering grumbles at the most inopportune occasions. This was to be expected because I consumed more than the recommended daily dose of Yakult. As a reward for putting my health at risk, my supervisors located my station next to the plant's best restroom. It was tiled immaculately white and fully air-conditioned. It was also fitted with a working bidet. That was enough to assuage whatever protests my stomach had.

I liked keeping to myself at work. I didn't have a lot of friends, but that didn't mean that I had a lot of enemies. It was the same in my apartment building. Mrs. Chung, my landlady, was sometimes my friend and sometimes my enemy. She was my friend whenever she gave me a discount on my rent. She was my enemy whenever she asked me to do her laundry in exchange for that discount. But it wasn't the task of washing of her clothes that got me upset. It was the kind of detergent that she insisted on using. Her regular laundry soap contained di-ethanolamine, a product of ethylene oxide and aqueous ammonia that was known to bring about a vile irritation in the skin and the eyes. Studies have shown that di-ethanolamine causes developmental retardation in the brains of baby mice and other tiny mammals. I told Mrs. Chung about this, but she didn't listen. She got her laundry soap from her good friend in the market, who sold it to her at a ridiculous discount. As a precaution, I made sure to wear heavy-duty rubber gloves whenever I washed using Mrs. Chung's toxic laundry soap.

Hazardous job conditions aside, Mrs. Chung was generally an okay human being. Most of her time was spent in her office-turned-convenience store underneath the stairs. Behind garlands of shampoo sachets and packed peanuts, Mrs. Chung banged away at a calculator in a furious attempt to balance accounts. The phone on her table would sometimes ring. It was a hulking, cream-colored relic from the past. Whenever it rang, a shouting match of soap-operatic proportions was sure to ensue. The people on the other side of the line were collectors from Meralco, Manila Water and PLDT. They were the only callers the building ever got. If they had it their way, I bet they probably wouldn't even call.

Unlike Mrs. Chung, Mr. Chung was always my friend. Our friendship was a lot more predictable, hence easier to understand. Mr. Chung was a



genius, and I was certain that he would come up with an invention that would one day change the world. Several years ago, the apartment building's garage was converted into his lab. Household appliances would go there to die, only to be resurrected a few days later as one of his bizarre creations. Although a lot of what Mr. Chung came up with was junk, there were certain occasions when his toil resulted in inventions that could only be considered marvels of engineering. He fused printers and TV's, electric fans and toasters, radios and air-conditioners, bicycles and karaoke machines—and the list went on and on! It was rumored that Mr. Chung was once a weapons engineer from Taiwan and that he was secretly hatching a plan to take China back from the communists. Given a few more years of plotting, he might just succeed.

I would spend my all weekends in Mr. Chung's lab. In his dimly lit hovel were pieces of scrap that looked like dismembered mechanical body parts. Mr. Chung kept a watchful eye on me as I poked around his collection of gadgets, all of which were in various stages of transformation. When I fumbled around too much—like the time I knocked over one of his monstrous blenders—he would chase me out of his lab with the South China Morning Post rolled up in his hand. We would run into the lobby, up the stairs, down the stairs, into the lobby again, and out into the street. He never managed to land a hit due to his rather unwieldy midsection. After two or three belabored swipes, Mr. Chung would be spent. He would grumble then plod back into his lab like an angry panda. I would follow him after catching my breath and poke around some more. Too tired for another chase, the old man would just glare at me from the corner of his eyes and remain silent.

Mr. Chung was a silent man. In fact, he was always silent. According to Mrs. Chung, her husband lost the ability to speak after an unfortunate incident involving a TV antenna and a wayward bolt of lightning. He was on top of the building when she heard the explosion. As a result, Mr. Chung was now clinically mute. But that didn't stop me from talking to him. There were times when I would ask him questions, just rhetorical ones of course, since I wasn't really expecting a verbal reply—Mr. Chung, what's the meaning of life? Mr. Chung, is there a god? Mr. Chung, define love? The good thing about conversing with someone who couldn't speak was that silence was sometimes the answer I needed to hear. I enjoyed Mr. Chung's company, and I liked to believe that he enjoyed mine as well.

Aside from Mr. Chung, I had another friend in 305. He wandered into the building one September afternoon just as a typhoon was wandering into Manila. The weather bureau called the typhoon Maxima, and coincidentally, he was called Max. To the sound of howling winds, Max trailed mud and rainwater into the room next to mine. He was tall and scruffy, like a cat that was handsome in a world-weary way.





“Hi,” Max said, as he was hauling his bags into his room. He was wearing a black raincoat that was dripping all over the floor. “My name is Max. I think we’re going to be neighbors.”

“Hi,” I replied, and turned away. I realized that that my cheeks had started to flush, and that for a split second, I had forgotten my name. It was just like in the movies.

I never quite understood what my new neighbor did for a living. All I knew was that he kept the strangest hours. There were days when he was out the door before dawn. Other times, he would start his day just as the world was about to sleep. Whenever I caught him in our building, he was usually in his room, asleep and snoring up a storm. His snores were so loud that the wall between our rooms was about as useful as paper. For the first few nights, his snores kept me up until the wee hours of the morning. As I tossed and turned in bed, I couldn’t help but think of what to write in the complaint letter I would file with Mrs. Chung regarding the building’s policy—or lack thereof—concerning the disruptive sleeping habits of some of the tenants. There was one bleary-eyed night when I actually took pen to paper and wrote out my complaint. It was never sent though, because I fell asleep in the middle of my exposition on the beneficial chemical reactions brought about by sleep. My half-written letter was eventually lost in the chaos of my room, which I took as a sign from the universe to respect other people’s right to snore.

It was after a few months of enduring my neighbor’s nightly snore concertos that I finally discovered what he did for a living. It was a Friday night and I was watching the news on the TV in Mr. Chung’s lab. The transmission wasn’t that good, but it improved when the TV was given a good smack. On the screen, I could make out the blurred figure of the news anchor cuing in a report about the latest vehicular pile-up on Commonwealth Avenue. The road accident involved a bus, a jeepney, and delivery truck carrying a doomed drove of pigs. The bus driver swerved to pick up a passenger on the sidewalk. As the it swerved, the bus rammed into the jeepney, which rammed into the delivery truck. The truck turned on its side, launching the pigs into a brief and fatal flight. When the airborne pigs succumbed to gravity, the asphalt was littered with broken glass, mangled passengers, and mangled pigs. Then came the sirens. The medics rushed in to save the dying passengers, while bystanders rushed in to grab their dinner. It was two minutes of human and porcine tragedy, and there, wading into the horror of it all, was my neighbor, Max. He was wearing a vest and held a microphone in his hand. His hair was tussled in its scraggly, world-weary way. Amidst all the chaos, his face glowed like a Sunday morning.



I suddenly felt small living next to a celebrity. After that night, I found myself glued to the evening news as I followed Max through dark alleys, burning shanties, and waist deep flood-water. My life as Product Taster No. 4 seemed such a bore compared to his usual day at work. Watching his stories on TV was like getting a front row seat to a nighttime world of mayhem and crime. I could just imagine all the thrilling conversations we would have—assuming we were to have an actual conversation.

It took about a month before Max and I got to speak to each other. The opportunity presented itself on the roof deck of our building, amidst billowing sheets of laundry. I was washing Mrs. Chung's dusters one afternoon when I spotted Max coming up the stairs. He was carrying a basin with a pile of rumpled clothes in it. I was surprised because Max didn't strike me as the type who would wash his own laundry. After all, there was a perfectly functional laundry shop just a block away.

"Hello," Max said in a neighborly manner.

I gave him a neighborly nod and went back to scrubbing Mrs. Chung's duster.

He placed his basin next to mine. From the corner of my eye, I watched him fill his basin using a hose that extended from the faucet in the wall.

"Is that yours?" he asked.

I gave him a puzzled look. It took a while for me to realize that he was referring to the duster in my hands. It was baby blue and had tiny sunflowers.

"No!" I said, almost shouting. I thought that I might have given Max a bit of a fright.

"No," I said again, calmer this time, now more aware of the volume of my voice. "These are Mrs. Chung's. I do her laundry. Not all the time. Just sometimes. When she asks me to."

"I hope she pays you for it."



"She does," I said, which was a lie. It was a white lie though, since Mrs. Chung did give me some kind of discount on my rent in exchange for washing her clothes.

He poured some powdered detergent into his wash. It had the faint scent of lemons. As Max scrubbed, a landscape of bubbly hills and valleys started to rise from his basin. Somehow, I felt compelled to carry on the conversation.

"Does your soap have di-ethanolamine?"

Max stared at me.

"Di-ethanolamine. It's a compound chemical found in detergents. Unsafe for use. It can cause abnormalities in the brains of tiny mammals, which means it can potentially cause abnormalities in your brain too."

"I certainly hope not," Max said, shaking his head.

He looked into his basin and started to scrub. He scrubbed and I scrubbed. That was the end of our conversation. I noticed that Max was a particularly vigorous scrubber.

I didn't know what else to talk about since Max obviously wasn't into chemicals. And besides, I already knew the answer to my question. Like ninety percent of laundry soaps in the market, his detergent probably had di-ethanolamine and he just didn't know it. But ignorance is bliss, as they say.

Max and I scrubbed away much of the afternoon to the smell of his lemony laundry soap. It was a sunny day blessed with a constant breeze. A gentle wind tickled the back of my neck. We didn't speak a word to each other, but that was fine. I caught myself smiling and tried to hide it by minding the sunflowers on Mrs. Chung's duster.

After Max finished rinsing his clothes, he got up and made his way to the clothesline. As he was wringing a pair of jeans, he asked me something which at first I didn't hear. I was lost in the bubbles of my wash and the scent of lemons in the air. "What's your name?" he asked, probably for the second time around.

"Billy," I answered with a stammer.



"Billy," Max repeated with a smile. "See you around, Billy." He picked up his basin and made for the stairs.

My gloved hands were deep in the basin. Even with the threat of diethanolamine finding its way into my pores and eventually reaching my brain, I felt that all was right in the world.

The following day was a Saturday. Like all Saturdays before that, I spent it poking around in Mr. Chung's lab. He was working on a hairdryer that now resembled something like a shotgun. As he tinkered away at his latest invention, I sat across the table asking him questions which I knew I wouldn't get an answer for.

"Mr. Chung," I began, "I don't know if you still love Mrs. Chung, but there must have been a point in time when you were in love with her, right?"

Silence.

"How do you know if it's really love? I know that love is the product of three neurotransmitters, namely adrenaline, dopamine, and serotonin. Add in oxytocin, and people start cuddling. Do you and Mrs. Chung still cuddle?"

Mr. Chung fumbled around his toolbox until he found a pair of pliers.

"I take that as a no. Which is normal because oxytocin does deplete with age. I'm telling you this because I believe my levels of dopamine have recently spiked. They say that it's the same feeling as being high on cocaine. But no Mr. Chung, I didn't take cocaine. I'm not even sure if you should eat it, smell it, or drop it in your eye. So before you start calling the police, I would like to establish that my high dopamine levels are not due to any illegal substance. Do we understand each other?"

Mr. Chung blew into the nozzle of the hairdryer. A mosquito buzzed around my ear. I shooed it away.

"Anyway Mr. Chung, the point of this discussion is that I think I'm in love."



The mosquito landed on Mr. Chung's cheek. He slapped it. Then he wiped the mosquito bites onto his white undershirt.

"Lovely," I said, looking at the mosquito's mashed body parts. "Love is lovely." I flashed the thumbs-up sign at Mr. Chung in an attempt to catch his attention. He glared at me and flashed a thumbs-up sign as well.

"I thought you would never agree," I said. "But right now, I don't want to tell you the name of the person I think I'm in love with. Let's just say it starts with an M and ends in an X. It's also made up of just three letters, so if you don't know who it is by now, then you must be pretty slow."

Mr. Chung yawned. I could see his tonsils. They were a healthy shade of pink.

"So what to do, Mr. Chung? I don't even know where to start."

Mr. Chung pointed the hairdryer at me. I dodged, expecting a bullet, or lightning, or napalm to shoot out. When hairdryer buzzed and still functioned as a hairdryer, I got back on my chair.

"Mr. Chung!" I exclaimed. "You're not supposed to shoot your tenants." I straightened myself and recomposed my thoughts. "Anyway, I wanted to ask you if I should give this person some kind of gift as an outward manifestation of my feelings. I believe that this is customary practice, is it not? What do you think about, let's say, flowers?"

Mr. Chung tightened a screw on the handle of the hairdryer and grumbled. A grumble was rare. It was very rare for the very silent Mr. Chung. This made me smile.

"Flowers it is!" I said, raising my hand to give Mr. Chung a high-five. He looked at me and narrowed his already narrow eyes. He didn't oblige my high-five so I just waved my hand in front of his face and ran out of his lab to get some flowers.

But that didn't turn out too well. Since it was my first time to give anybody flowers, I didn't know where I was supposed to get them. I was under the impression that I could just pick them from the meadows like they always did in movies. But this was Manila, the epicenter of urban decay, and there





were no meadows in sight. Instead, there was an abundance of dog poop and uncollected garbage. I couldn't find a single flower to pick, no matter how hard I looked.

So I ended up at a flower shop near Taft Avenue. It sold giant wreaths of white flowers, most of which found their way to the vulcanizing shop along our street that turned into a funeral parlor at night. The flowers were pretty, but to my dismay, they weren't being sold per stem. The salesclerk said that I needed to buy the entire wreath. I shook my head and said that it was too expensive. But salesclerk was persistent and said that If I bought the wreath, he would throw in the dedication ribbon for free. He assured me that the dedication would be done in his impeccable cursive. I gave it some thought, but I still found it too expensive. I left the flower shop and made my way back home. As I wandered through the cloud jeepney smoke, I realized that falling in love was a pricey affair. I also realized that I was allergic to pollen. I was sneezing the entire way home.

That night, Max wasn't in his room. He was probably chasing some crook through the slums of Tondo or standing at the site of yet another vehicular pile-up. I waited for him to come home just so I could say hello. But the night grew deep and I fell asleep at exactly eight-thirty, which was my usual bedtime.

It didn't take long for me to think of a substitute for the flowers. This time, I didn't need to consult Mr. Chung about it. The idea literally dawned upon me at dawn, just as I was getting ready for work. The answer was right outside my window, spelled out in enormous letters. Why not get Max a pack of Yakult? The Shirota Strain would do wonders for his digestive system, especially since his action-packed schedule probably took a toll on his eating habits. I thought it was genius.

So the following day, I visited the Yakult store by the plant's entrance. It was my first time to enter the store. I was pleased to discover that it was just as immaculately clean as the restroom. From the rows of refrigerators, I took a pack of Yakult and placed it on the counter. I realized that this would be my first time to pay for Yakult ever since I started working at the plant. I didn't know how much it would cost. When the cash register blinked a digital 45.00, I breathed a sigh of relief. From my pocket, I retrieved two crisp twenty-peso bills and a shiny five-peso coin.

With my simple gift tucked underneath my arm, I crossed the street to 305. I wondered if I should giftwrap the pack of Yakult, tie a ribbon around it, or include a little note. I agonized over this for what seemed like hours until I decided to just leave the pack of Yakult by the side of Max's door. I attempted



to stay up as late as I could that night in order to catch Max coming home. But as expected, I fell asleep the moment the clock struck eight-thirty.

The following day, I woke up to the sound of Max's snoring. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, half dreaming of Max's face lighting up like a Sunday morning as he discovered the surprise by his doorstep. When I opened my door and stepped out into the hallway, I saw that the pack of Yakult was still there. I paused and forced a smile. I smiled despite the sinking feeling in my stomach that seemed to linger there for a while.

He might have just missed it. This was perfectly understandable since the hallway was heinously dark at night due to a busted light bulb that was never replaced. Mrs. Chung should really replace that light bulb. For the rest of the day, I decided to keep myself busy by poking around in Mr. Chung's lab.

But the days went by and the pack of Yakult sat unnoticed by Max's door. It was never moved, opened, picked-up, or even kicked aside. It just sat there, invisible and non-descript, like the non-descript building we lived in. I entertained the thought of just handing the pack of Yakult to Max, but I decided against this. He would probably find the gesture weird, judging from our first and only conversation about di-ethanolamine. So I just left the pack of Yakult where it was, waiting for Max to take notice of it. A couple of days went by with Max going in and out of his door. My little gift sat there, patient and hopeful.

After about a week, the sight of the pack of Yakult caused my dopamine levels to slump. It slumped so much that whenever I passed the hallway I would purposely avert my gaze from Max's doorstep. I knew that the pack of Yakult would still be there, despite my most fervent wishes that it wouldn't. On days when my eyes would accidentally glance over it, I would feel its loneliness. The pack of Yakult looked like an eager pet waiting for its master's return. It looked like the loneliest creature on earth.

One week passed into two weeks, and two weeks passed into a month. Still, the pack of Yakult remained untouched. I crouched in front of it one morning and read the expiry date stamped in black letters on its plastic wrap. It would expire the following day. Five tiny bottles of joy that stood brave and steadfast through many unnoticed days and nights would now start to sour and turn rancid, losing all their loveliness. Although the pack of Yakult still had twenty-four hours to go before it expired, I felt I was already mourning a dead thing.



The following day was a Saturday. Instead of spending it in Mr. Chung's lab, I spent it in my room. I stayed in bed staring at the ceiling, not wanting to go out. I was trying to understand the chemical reactions in my brain, and why they were making me feel the way that I did. I thought of Max, his snores, his messy hair, and his face that lit up a Sunday morning. I thought of the pack of Yakult at his doorstep, expired by now and good for nothing, just like anything that lives beyond its designated time. Then I thought about love, or what I believed to be love, and wondered if love came in a pack with an expiry date stamped on it as well.

I got out of bed and walked into the hallway. When I reached Max's door, I picked up the pack of Yakult and gripped it in my hand. I gripped it as tightly as I had ever gripped anything before. Then I marched to the end of the hallway and dumped it in the trashcan. I observed the unopened pack of Yakult as it swam in a tiny sea of life's discarded things. I could feel a tightening in my throat as I stood over the trash. The situation struck me as funny when I realized that I was literally crying over spoiled milk.

The following month, my friend Max moved out of 305. Mrs. Chung said that he needed to terminate his lease earlier than expected because he was being assigned to cover more daring stories in Mindanao. Max moved out in the middle of the night so I never got to say goodbye. All that was left of him was the empty room beside mine, with his ghostly snores floating in the stale air. And just as quickly as he came into my life, Max disappeared. As Mrs. Chung was cleaning his room to make way for a new tenant, I imagined her sweeping Max's snores out the door, along with the dust and all the other microscopic things people leave behind. I never saw Max again, not even on TV.

With my friend on his way to greater adventures, I decided to have a small adventure of my own. Not as thrilling as the jungle-clad mountains of Mindanao, but an adventure nonetheless. After Max had left, I decided to terminate my lease as well. My mind was set on finally becoming a real chemist. I was going back to school to finish my degree. Over the course of the next year, I returned to the routine of schoolwork and completed all my requirements with no further delays. Although I had stopped schooling for about a year, I still managed to graduate close to the top of my class. My work experience as Product Taster No. 4 was even credited as an internship, thanks to a glowing review from my one of my former supervisors at the Yakult plant.

A few days after my graduation, I decided to pay my old home a visit. It was late in the afternoon and a gentle breeze was in the air. As I took a tricycle down the familiar street, I felt a sense of pride come over me. It wasn't because I was a freshly minted graduate, but because I finally knew who F. Agoncillo



was. After doing some research in our school library, I discovered that Felipe Agoncillo was one of the first Filipino diplomats. He gained notoriety for trying to block the Treaty of Paris in a courageous diplomatic battle that was doomed for failure. The City of Manila decided to name a street after him because of his willingness to fight a losing fight. Too bad he has remained largely unknown. If he were still alive, I think that old Felipe would have gotten a kick out of living on the street that bore his name. He and Mr. Chung would have gotten along splendidly.

The tricycle stopped in front of the Yakult plant. It looked the same as it did over a year ago with its gargantuan sign dominating the street. Across it was a non-descript building, still boxy and still beige. I stood before it, observing the building in the ochre glow of the late afternoon sun. The gate was closed, and from it hung a tarpaulin *For Sale* sign. All the windows were shut, including the window of my room on the second floor. My gaze drifted to the top of the building, hoping to see sheets of laundry billowing in the breeze, but there were none.

I stood on the sidewalk taking in the sight of 305. It was hard for me to believe that my former home was now nothing but a concrete shell, its usefulness already spent. I remembered my friends from the building—Mrs. Chung with her toxic laundry soap, and Mr. Chung with his lab of mechanical wonders. I wanted to ask the neighbors where the couple had gone to, but there was nobody around to ask.

Before leaving, I went into the store by the entrance of the Yakult plant. I chose a fresh pack of Yakult from the row of refrigerators and paid for it using two twenty-peso bills and the shiniest five-peso coin I could find. I crossed the street and placed the pack of Yakult at the gate of 305, as a gift of sorts to the old building and the people who had lived in it, including myself, all disappeared now and belonging to a different time. I wasn't expecting anybody to take notice of it, but the pack of Yakult would stay there just in case anybody wanted it.

I walked back up the street with a gentle breeze tickling the back of my neck. Somewhere in the area, someone must have been doing their laundry. The street smelled of lemons.



## BIOGRAPHIES

**O Thiam Chin** is the author of *The Dogs* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2020) and six collections of short fiction. His debut novel, *Now That It's Over* (Epigram Books, 2016), won the inaugural Epigram Books Fiction Prize in 2015.

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**Ino Habana** studied Literature at the Ateneo de Manila University. He attended the Iyas Creative Writing Workshop in Bacolod and the Silliman National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete. He is currently finishing his MA in Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, where he is focusing on writing for children. His works have been published in the *Philippines Free Press* and in *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*. After living much of his life in Manila, Ino has recently moved to the island of Palawan. When he isn't exploring beaches or learning how to surf, he is at work on his middle grade children's novel. His dream project is to record the myth and folklore of Palawan's Tagbanua people, and collect these in an anthology of stories for children.