

**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 suntan. 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 suntan 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 lounge, 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, ghoulish 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 impalpable 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.



## BIOGRAPHY

**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.