"A small delay" and other stories

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**NANYANG
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SINGAPORE

**“A Small Delay” And Other
Stories**

**TAN HUI EN AUDREY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2021**

“A Small Delay” And Other Stories

TAN HUI EN AUDREY

School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang
Technological University in partial fulfilment
of the requirement for the degree of Master of
Arts

2021

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SUMMARY

“A Small Delay” and Other Stories is a collection of short stories accompanied by an exegesis detailing the critical and creative works that have been instrumental to my writing practice. These seven stories revolve around the everyday lives of people in contemporary Singapore, focusing on relational gulfs between characters, particularly familial fissures. They were written with a simple intent: to reveal and magnify characters’ private moods and motivations that speak of our human failings, pain, desire and love. In the Chekhovian vein, many of these stories have a loose plot structure, and afford less emphasis to external action. Inspired by Alice Munro and Tobias Wolff’s subtle experimentations of narrative time, I also explore disrupted chronologies, where memory is a crucial channel for conflict and revelatory moments. These stories also question the ideas of connection and belongingness, as characters are often deeply estranged from their loved ones. Home is the main backdrop of tension, a concept influenced by Jhumpa Lahiri’s early work. Perhaps, the domestic strife prevalent in my work also draws an unwitting parallel to my characters’ relationship with the Singapore state – its hegemony often looms over their consciousness and seeps into their private lives. Ultimately, as characters grapple with being alienated from their own selves and those around them, these stories attempt to seek out the tender moments of absolution that persist in the quotidian.

A SMALL DELAY

Three times the cabin jerked, and each time, the girl standing beside Mr Loh swayed backwards, pretending to fall. She was grasping the metal rail with both hands, her long hair swishing along – trying to make him laugh. Mr Loh did. But he also wanted to reach for her shoulder to steady her. He caught whiffs of a complicated, spiced-floral scent, but that could've come from another passenger. He had just noticed the crystal pendant glowing on the girl's neck. Strung up on a black string, the blue stone had a watery, hypnotic effect. It was the only accessory she wore. The train stopped. It was mid-track, and they were suspended above a forested area up for development. The passengers looked around dazedly, as if they could find answers on everyone else's blank faces. They felt the motor getting cut off, the dead cabin air settling.

The girl caught Mr Loh's eye and said, "Are we gonna die?" These days, when she hyperbolized, it wasn't out of genuine fear or awe like she did as a child. She sometimes said things in this gently smirking way, which made Mr Loh think twice before answering. He wondered if his worry showed – even with small things like this, his forehead would tighten, and he'd find his hand on his head, just resting there for no reason. The cabin was packed with everyone's different scents. There was a tinge of sourness to it all.

"Of course not, Xinnie. Probably just a technical issue, a small delay," he said. He caught a flash of disapproval on her face – she had recently renounced this childhood nickname and insisted on being called "Kai", the first Chinese character of her name. This had slipped his mind. Below the tracks, the vast clearing was fenced off by construction barriers. Chopped trees were piled in heaps, their flimsy branches poking out in all directions, heavy with leaves. The afternoon light struck the patch of land that had been razed to its orange soil. The warmth outside cradled the cabin. Mr Loh could feel a sweat patch growing

on his polo shirt. Two elderly women in the reserved seats muttered in low tones to each other, fanning themselves with pamphlets fished out of their bags. The girl shrugged off the oversized shirt she had worn over a black tank top and tied it around her waist.

Mr Loh checked his watch. The girl was due to meet her mother in an hour at the old theatre that screened arthouse films. His ex-wife was more enthusiastic about keeping up with the girl's tastes, while he didn't mind being the boring parent. Because he saw less of the girl, he found it necessary to sit down with her over a meal, so they could really talk.

Kai Xin had none of the silent, simmering tendencies that Mr Loh believed plagued other teenagers. When she spoke in her soft, authoritative voice, her dark eyebrows would knit, growing even blacker. There was also a velvety mole at the tip of her left brow. People always thought it was a piercing, which made her seem tough, but to Mr Loh it gave her an impishness, like there was always something unexpected she might say or do. Over lunch, he learnt that her A-Level prelim results were so-so, but that didn't bother her. In fact, now her alternate Friday nights were dedicated to the soup kitchen for migrant workers, while Sundays remained as usual: beach clean-up in the morning, and after that, dog-walking at the shelter. How she threw herself into making the world a better place! Mr Loh always felt soothed yet energised when he spent time with her. Still, he could not help feeling tender for the girl, for her ideals and conviction.

There was also a boy in Kai Xin's life now, his ex-wife had mentioned recently. She had called just to thank Mr Loh for the red packet he sent for her nephew's wedding, but could not resist blurting the news. She told him that one time, Xinnie and the boy were sitting shoulder to shoulder on the bed, watching a documentary on a laptop about melting glaciers. "What kind of kids *paktor* like that? Holding hands while watching chunks of ice crash into the sea!" The girl's mother was unusually shrill.

“They do things very differently these days,” Mr Loh had replied knowingly. He wasn’t ruffled by this boyfriend – he never tortured himself with delusions of adolescent purity. He was just surprised that Kai Xin sought common, romantic love, because she seemed so busy with big-world things and carried herself in that set-apart way.

He thought he might bring it up now, since they were stuck, and there was nothing to do. “So, Girl, I heard...” Mr Loh said. “I heard,” he started again. “From your mother.” Kai Xin was twirling her hair into a bun. She frowned at her father. “Girl” was even less acceptable than “Xinnie”. He finally said, “You want to tell me? About your boyfriend?”

“Oh,” she said and exhaled. “Yah... I was seeing this guy. But it didn’t work out.”

Mr Loh followed her gaze. She was watching the remnants of the trees outside. The ruined landscape was as still as a painting. A young man in sports attire was seated close-by, leaning forward with his legs wide open. When he eased back into his seat, he glanced at Kai Xin and began studying her bare arms and chest, taking his time. Then he flicked his gaze back to his phone. This stirred Mr Loh more than he wished it had – he didn’t know what got to him more – the blatancy, or that idiotic, dismissive look.

“We were together for six months,” Kai Xin said. “Hmm. I liked him. A lot.”

Mr Loh really didn’t know what to say. He could feel the wet heat under his clothes. He peered at the next car. The passage was clogged by a bunch of teenagers, younger than Kai Xin, sitting on the train floor. “Is he from school?”

“*Was*. He’s a senior – in the army now. Ma met him a few times. Sorry you didn’t know.”

“So. Okay,” said Mr Loh.

“It doesn’t matter now.” She fiddled with the shirtsleeves drooping from her waist, and looked out of the train windows again.

“Yes. *Aiyah*. He’s not worth it. You’re a very special girl. Better than anyone else. Don’t forget that.” Mr Loh could not help himself. He knew this was condescending, but the truth was the truth, and sometimes it needed to be laid bare.

Kai Xin flushed, but whether it was from the heat or her secret thoughts, Mr Loh did not know. He remembered her as a baby – all those mysterious expressions that could mean a bubbling cry, or a laugh, or nothing at all.

“It’s not like that.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “I guess monogamy doesn’t suit me.” She might as well have been talking about sampling a hair colour.

Mr Loh stared at his daughter.

“I cheated on him,” she said. “I had a thing with someone else at the same time. And he found out.”

Over the train speakers, a synthetic voice went, “We are sorry for the – we are sorry –”. Mr Loh was so hot that he shivered. The teenagers on the floor were wild with laughter, mimicking the announcement. At the corner of the cabin, a man in a motorized wheelchair laid a book on his lap and began to close his eyes.

Mr Loh clung to the dangling handrail, even though the train remained stationary.

“Pa,” Kai Xin said, reaching up to put an arm around him. “Sometimes, things are not what you think they are.” He thought she was about to pat his head too.

Mr Loh knew how it was to misjudge a small thing, as he did, when he got to know his ex-wife in their first year of university. They’d met sitting across each other in the school library, sharing a laugh after a muscly, hulk-like student had dozed off at their table and suddenly let out a string of loud, firecracker farts. They fled the library together, winding

through shelves and corridors, silently howling jokes to each other, until they stood face-to-face at the beeping entrance.

When he asked for her name, she put a hand on his chest as if to stop his racing heart from leaping out, and said, “I know how you feel, but I’m already with someone.” To a young man, this made it all the more delicious. So he replied, “Huh. That stinks.” And they laughed all over again, and there was no way to leave it at that. They went on like this for a semester – skipping classes for trysts in her dorm while she still saw her Naval Officer boyfriend on the weekends. Until one day, she finally cracked. This officer, tanned, stout and large-eyed, had charged at Mr Loh in such a caricatured way, pinning him down with bulging veins and spittle at the corners of his mouth, that frankly, Mr Loh thought it was funny – surely this kind of blazing rage would soon implode. But a week later, the officer leapt from his ship after being deployed out to sea.

Mr Loh realized that his hand had been on his head for a while. A pang seized his temples. He said to Kai Xin, “How is he? Your jilted fellow?”

“I don’t know... He cut me off. Obviously. I felt *really* bad. Honestly, I’m still processing it,” said Kai Xin. She stared down at her thrifted Reeboks and slouched against the pole.

“And the other guy? The one you... Was that serious?”

“Ah,” she said, like someone who has been through a long, eventful life. “I know I shouldn’t say this, but the other boy was amazing.” Mr Loh drew a deep breath. “I think he’s my *person*,” she said dreamily, earnestly, but her father’s eyes were turning hard and glassy like marbles. “Too bad we can’t be together. He’s religious. He cried when we – After I – You know, when we were caught. By the ex.”

Mr Loh thought he might collapse from the stuffiness. He said, “My goodness. So the first guy caught you – in your mother’s house? Does she know?”

“Relax, Pa. It happens. We’re kids lah. We’re not freakin’ married.”

There was a time when Kai Xin was small enough to lift; when he and his ex-wife still believed in the farce of their being together, that they were bound beyond their shared guilt of the young officer’s suicide. He liked to pick the girl up, press her ear to his chest, and drone on and on in gibberish. She had already learnt to speak, so her father’s inarticulateness thrilled her even more. He did this to make her squirm and giggle from the warm vibrations of his chest, but perhaps, to also confess to all the unsayable things inside him.

Now, Mr Loh was staring up at the fluorescent lights of the train. He turned to the girl and said, “Did you apologise? Did you try to make up for it? You made a mistake. How did you make sure he’s OK?”

“I know I was a jerk lah. But maybe the ex wouldn’t have been so upset if he were more... I don’t know? *Chill.*” Kai Xin did not want to look at her father. She burrowed into her bag for her earbuds.

“Do you even know what a horrible thing you did?”

“Ugh. Why did I open my big mouth.” Her face darkened. She pursed her lips to stop them from trembling.

“You hurt someone.”

“Pa.”

“How can you walk around like you did nothing? You youngsters, make such a hoo-ha about those stupid sea turtles and plastic straws, but can’t even treat each other with decency. I tell you, you’re monsters to each other. Monsters! How are you going to undo that?”

The other standing passengers began to move slowly away from the father and daughter. He was a trim man, with a long, striking face and deep lines bracketing his mouth. His hair was still dark and only greying in the sideburns. The girl had his thin, high nose. The man continued to shake, even when he had nothing else to say. Then there was a loud hiss before the train screeched and chugged forward, leaving the dead forest behind. In the next cabin, there was a sarcastic round of applause. It was a twenty-minute delay due to a track fault; the train operator was sorry for the inconvenience caused.

ANTS

On the eve of Annie's twenty-ninth birthday, her mother discovered an ant trail in their kitchen. Her mother, Mrs Choo, had been baking the birthday cake. It was a standard Black Forest cake – she didn't want to take any risks. The troop of ants were crawling along the edges of the wall, forming a long, unbroken line from the laundry corner to the kitchen sink, and when Mrs Choo saw the ants, she jumped back and cried, "Ants!" Her fingertips were powdered with flour and she held her hands out in front of her, open-palmed, with her fingers curled outwards as if they were claws.

Annie shuffled out of her bedroom and said, "What, Ma?"

"Ants! So many! I think there's an ant nest. You know, I've been seeing all these ants the past few weeks. Already suspected there's a nest. Today they all want to come out at one go, is it?" Annie could hear the playful growl in her mother's voice. It was the same tone her mother used on Raina, Annie's seven-year-old niece, if the girl had said something sassy.

When she got to the kitchen, her mother was squatting below the sink, watching the ants. It was the longest trail of ants Annie had ever seen. Their small beady bodies looked hard and focused, advancing across the wall and down to the floor. It was the singularity of their moving – as if they had become one big creature with many legs – that gave Annie the creeps. She felt her feet tingle. Her shoulders curled up. She was glad she had not chided her mother for overreacting earlier, because her own jaw was now hanging out as she said, "Shit. What the – oh my god. Shit, balls."

Her mother didn't turn around. The empty oven was pre-heating on the kitchen counter, giving off a red glow. Beside it, there were bowls of different sizes with all sorts of instruments in them. There was a bag of flour with its top slit open, a large bowl of beaten eggs, a tub of baking soda, a can of cherries, a small bottle of sherry, and two bars of Belgian chocolate.

“All these ants! How can it be?” Her mother said, still crouching down, the green and purple veins popping on her pale feet. Clumps of flour were stuck in her hair, making it even greyer. Annie thought there was a tinge of amusement – almost amazement, in her mother’s voice.

“So how? Faster kill lah,” Annie said, hands on her waist. She stood over her mother at the sink, filled a big bowl of water, and splashed it onto the wall, then the floor. The ants on the wall came skidding down the streaks of water, their wispy legs and feelers fluttering or tearing apart. Those already on the ground were instantly knocked out by the slap of water, floating to the surface of the puddle, their bodies shining like seeds. For the first time, Annie noticed an ant’s infinity-shaped body, where the point of its abdomen and thorax touched. This revelation, and the ease with which she annihilated the ant troop, gave Annie a satisfaction.

Mrs Choo sprang up from the ground. She could never rise to her full height because of a curved spine. She watched her daughter’s indifference, the lazy tumble of the empty bowl in the sink.

“You see lah,” the older woman said. Then she didn’t know what to say next. She stared at her daughter, and the young woman stared back at her. There were dark circles under Annie’s eyes, and her thin legs were scaly and stubbly. What exactly did she mean to point out to Annie?

Annie Choo – one broken engagement, and living in her parents’ four-room flat. She would have moved into a new Build-to-Order flat last month, securing her own place just before thirty. But six months before the wedding, JJ claimed to be down with a quarter-life crisis, and took off on a one-way ticket to Patagonia. He volunteered to fully absorb their losses from the down payment, only eager to resolve all practical inconveniences, and has sent one

postcard since. The card showed grey, ice-capped fjords rising from a turquoise lake. The tops of the fjords were jagged and pointy, crystal-white and austere. The sky was very blue. The colours were so sharp that Annie had to blink a few times when she stared at the landscape.

For their honeymoon, Annie and JJ had discussed watching the Northern Lights from a tent. That must be it, Annie had thought – a real destination – to witness green aurora swirls across the night sky, as if some kind of genie were speeding about overhead, full of magic, luck, and innumerable wishes to grant, while they'd lie in their glowing tent in the snow, suddenly alive and newly in love again. Or, they could rent a caravan, driving coast-to-coast in Australia, as Annie had once seen in a documentary. They'd trundle along, so close to the waters, listening to the tides ebbing and flowing for three weeks straight. Their plans were usually like this – fantasies that felt like really hard work.

At the back of postcard from Patagonia, JJ had written: "For setting me free, I owe you." Annie did not bother tearing it up or setting it aflame. She used it as a bookmark in a library book. A few weeks later, she would absentmindedly slip the book into the bookdrop with the card still tucked inside.

Annie watched the kitchen wall with her mother. It had aged into an ugly pee-like yellow from its original custard cream shade. Still, it seemed innocuous enough. There were no cracks or signs of an ant nest, as if the wall had sucked the remaining colony under its surface, nesting the ants within its plaster. Mrs Choo nodded to herself and said, "I must investigate." Annie got a mop and cleaned the wet kitchen floor silently, watching the drowned ants caught in the fibres of the mop. She rinsed and repeated.

If Annie were in her early twenties, she would have objected to her mother baking the cake, to torment her with such coddling. But now, friction felt tiring, unnecessary, juvenile.

In fact, accepting parental love seemed like the mark of true adulthood. She also did not object to her mother calling it a party, and for inviting her sister's family.

The ants returned that evening. This time, they seemed vengeful and hotheaded, swarming out in all directions. Yet, they moved with a uniformed, industrious rhythm, even as they divided into smaller trails. There were ants crawling in and out of dishes and baking tools drying on the rack, others sliding up and down the sink, and more zigzagging across the stovetop. The kitchen smelt of cake. Annie heard her mother yell.

When she found her mother, Mrs Choo was crouched over the kitchen counter with her arms forming a wall around the cake. The cake was dusted all over with chocolate shavings, and its face was rimmed with swirls of whipped cream. A bright, waxy-looking cherry sat on each swirl.

"Get them! Girl, quickly!" Mrs Choo said, not glancing up from her stance. Annie could tell her mother revelled in this recent adversary.

The next morning, Mrs Choo came back from the market with a packet of pellets. On the packaging, two red lightning strobes struck a monstrous-looking ant, and the words read: "Twice Action, Advanced Kill." Annie was making a cup of coffee when her mother dangled the packet in front of her.

"Bait," Mrs Choo said, eyes alight. The old woman seemed able to stand up straighter. Her cheeks were rosy, and light seemed to be winking off the sunspots on her skin.

"This will lure the ants out. They think it's food, so they'll carry this back to the ant nest. Hardware Store Boss said this will destroy their intestines. After a while, the poison will reach the queen. Then she won't be able to lay more eggs. You want to wipe them out. Slowly, slowly," said Mrs Choo. The thought of an entire digestive system snaking through an ant's body made Annie shudder.

“Cool, Ma. Whatever makes you happy,” Annie replied.

“Oh, and of course, happy birthday Girl!” Mrs Choo said, squatting down to pour the pellets into a petri dish. A few ants came skittering along the floor tiles, doing their job of carrying home the poison.

In the evening, Ames came by with *char siew* and *siew yoke* wrapped in brown wax paper. She was in a white tunic dress, and wore a low braid swept to the side. At the door, she gave Annie a peck on the cheek. Ames always smelled like a scented candle. Something like frangipani and cardamom, or cinnamon mixed with some kind of plant.

“Happy birthday, Mei,” said Ames, and Annie sniffed. Ames took a step back, frowned and said, “Everything OK?” Before Annie could answer, Ames zipped off to the kitchen to greet their mother, then plate the food. She always moved in a whirlwind, breathless from one task after another. No one called her Amelia – the name used to make Annie think of a girl in a fluffy dress, sitting by the window, perpetually stroking a doll. So, Ames was Ames, and it sounded right – as if she were constantly poised, eyes narrowed, ready to score a target.

Ames’s husband, Karthik, was still standing in the doorway. He held out his big, soft arms, and Annie went in for a hug, feeling the stiff swell of his potbelly. Ames looked up just then, giving them a quick look from the kitchen. A balloon floated up behind Karthik’s back.

“Can’t say welcome to the club yet, but you’re close, Aunty Annie,” he said, scratching his stubble. The balloon was printed with a picture of an Old Maid. Annie laughed and stuck her middle finger at him. “Aunty Annie!” Karthik lifted a hand to his lips in mock offence. “Watch your manners,” he said, cocking his head towards Raina. The girl had one arm wrapped around his leg, and her other hand caught the balloon string. She slammed herself against Annie’s waist. Annie could barely lift her niece. The girl was tall and heavy-limbed. Annie pressed her nose to Raina’s head of curly hair. “Mmm,” she said, kissing the

girl's scalp until the girl shrieked with laughter and wiggled out, running into the flat. Annie could hear her mother rattling about the ants in the kitchen. Ames always knew what to say, even to their mother's most banal comments: *What a great idea, using bait – non-toxic and effective! Yes, ants are a very serious problem.* She sounded like a radio commercial.

Karthik was *jie-fu* to Annie; she thought it was cute to address him formally, in Chinese, even though she called her elder sister by her first name. The first time Annie met Karthik, he was just a boy, serving the army. He showed up one Friday evening in his Smart Four, this large brown boy in green. His head was shaved like a prisoner's, revealing the odd, boxy shape of his skull. Back then, he was tall and chunky, but in a leaner way. Patches of his uniform were caked in mud. "Sorry," was the first thing he said to Annie when she let him in, the sweet-sour tang of his sweat and deodorant rushing at her. He stood there grinning at Annie like an old friend, and she stared at the heart-shaped curve of his ears. Her sister had mentioned his visiting just that morning – Ames liked to make big announcements that way, as a side note, as if everything she did had a way of gliding naturally into place; Annie herself never mastered this trick. Ames, just nineteen, was assured and matter-of-fact about the meeting, pre-empting their mother's concerns just before the doorbell rang – *Yes, we are young but we know what we want; yes, fried pomfret is fine; Don't be lame, Ma, he doesn't eat curry everyday.*

It was Annie who went through the whole evening with a palpitating heart, as if she were the one on trial. She stared at him stooping to untie his boots, so fixated on the green curve of his back that reminded her of a gigantic turtle, that she forgot to offer him a stool. Later, during dinner, she watched how he hunched into his wide shoulders whenever he thought of something to say. She was embarrassed of their flat – how its narrow hall and low ceiling seemed unable to contain him.

There was a brief moment where Karthik rested his hand on Ames's lap when their mother wasn't watching. It made Annie go red. She had watched raunchy scenes in movies, and once even clicked on porn, seeing it all – pale buttocks and breasts, bushy genitals, bodies slapping on top on each other, the trance-like thrusting. Then, she felt her body grow hot, but the sensation fizzled quickly. The sounds and motions of sex seemed elemental yet foreign, as if it were an episode on National Geographic. But Karthik's touch excited her. Annie watched the curve of his fingers on her sister's thigh, as if he were holding back an impulse to squeeze her. The sweep of his hand across Ames's skin gave Annie a rush. She saw her sister smile, like a cat being rubbed. Annie suddenly understood the carnality of bodies, the weakness imbued with pleasure. And then, she was overwhelmed with relief that her sister was the desired one, that she could be privy to Karthik's affection but not the recipient of it, so she could go on watching, consuming this intimacy without the hassle of getting involved.

That was how Annie would go on as an adult – as a spectator of her sister's life. It made sense to her much later, after the initial shock and hurt, that her own relationship would fall through. But as a teenager that night, Annie had dreamt about Karthik's large, padded hands on her thighs, then working their way up her torso. She awoke suddenly, her groin sore and full, and rushed to the bathroom to urinate. Just as Annie was about to go back to bed, she stood over her sister in the other bed. Watery moonlight was seeping under the curtains, giving Ames's milky complexion a bright and hard sheen like the surface of a pearl. Annie watched her sister's angular face. Ames's small, almond eyes were shut and her thin nostrils were flaring softly.

Annie felt her small nipples poking under her nightshirt. Then, she did not know why, but she stuck a hand under her sister's blanket. Her sister's thigh was warm and supple. Annie gave it a hard squeeze. Ames gasped and her eyelids flew open, then instantly fell back

into the quiet grace of sleep. Annie darted back to her bed, separated by a small cabinet that had been pasted all over with glow-stars. She lay back down with a dizzy heart, her hands stacked on her chest, locking herself in that position till morning.

Annie would often think about that night. Years later, when Ames and Karthik left for their honeymoon, all that preoccupied Annie was her sister doing it. Those lush, bouncy hotel beds. She knew it was crazy – crazily sick, crazily naïve – that by slipping a condom into each of their bags, it would startle but somehow urge them to get it on when they were back from strolling the gardens and shrines of Kyoto. She was disappointed when Ames texted her pictures of their ryokan, where two tatami mats were spread in the middle of the bare room, a small silken pillow at the top of each mat. Annie would go on to have dalliances with men and women, hoping that with each encounter, she would be relieved of that memory. But after every physical release, a vast lonesomeness spiralled back into her, doing nothing to erase the shame and thrill of her first sexual arousal. Even after she began a relationship with JJ, that night continued to gnaw at her.

But this did not cross her mind on her twenty-ninth birthday. Now, Annie was simply tired, looking across her family at dinner. The oval ceiling light was speckled with mold spots. The roast meat glistened on a plain serving dish. Mrs Choo's contribution was stir-fried vegetables, *cai poh neng*, and chicken feet and peanut soup. An ant ran across the plastic tablecloth printed with grapes. Annie could feel herself aging over the evening, the skin around her mouth pulling into lines if she said something or chewed. And were those tiny twitches on her scalp, the sensation of each strand turning white?

Even Raina, whom Annie doted on unreasonably, failed to lift her mood. The girl filled the seat at the head of the table, where Ames's and Annie's father once sat. The portrait of his young face gazed at them above the wooden cabinet. Weekly, Mrs Choo would light a

candle for him on the mantelpiece. Raina was humming a song while picking out carrot slices from her bowl.

“Guess what Ray,” Mrs Choo turned to the girl, raising her brows. The old woman ate little rice, and the few grains in her bowl were swimming in gravy. She stirred the bowl with a porcelain spoon, and stopped.

“We have an ant nest at home,” she said in a loud whisper.

Annie frowned at her mother’s blunt cheerfulness.

“Ant nest?” said Raina with wide eyes.

“Yes, millions... Billions of ants. Hiding in the kitchen. If you eat all your vegetables, Grandma will show you how to kill them.”

“Ee-yuck!” Raina slammed her fork and spoon down and shut her eyes. Her grandmother laughed.

“Ma,” Ames winced, gesturing to the table of food. Another ant scurried out, following the invisible trail of the first.

Karthik lifted the stray ant with the tip of his finger and said, “Speak of the devil.” He stuck his tongue out at the insect, making sure that Raina was affronted.

“Appa, that’s enough!” The child swung her legs and folded her arms. He laughed and flicked it away.

“Looks like Hardware Boss earned a quick buck,” said Annie, chewing on a stem of broccoli.

“Wait, Girl. Later you see,” said Mrs Choo, with her chin raised.

Ames looked around and rested her arms on the table. The long white sleeves of her dress were draped on either side like wings. She said, “Are we really spending dinner talking about ants?” She paused. “So, what’s new?”

Raina's head swayed from left to right as she said, "Ants. Anty. Aunty. Annie. Ant-nie."

"Ants," Annie echoed her niece. "Really, that's all there is to life."

Everyone at the table fell silent. Even Raina, who was becoming sensitive to the moods of adults, stopped chanting. She looked at her father, then continued to pick at her food.

"I'm sorry, did I say something?" said Ames.

"No, what's wrong," said Annie.

"I mean, the way you said –"

"I said there's ants. Ants in our flat. And Ma's crazy about them."

"It's a serious problem, what," said Mrs Choo.

"Why do you always make it sound like I'm being condescending? I was just asking a question," Ames said, raising both hands in surrender. Her tunic sleeves rippled. "You know what, all I did was show interest in your life, and I get served this passive-aggressive bullshit."

Karthik scratched his chin and looked at the smiling face of Mr Choo on the wall. He had never met his father-in-law, but he was certain they'd be buddies. He put a hand on Ames's shoulder.

Annie's face was growing red. She said, "What? I didn't take any offence. You're assuming that I'm being prickly. About what? About the fact that yes -- you've got your exhibition coming up at the National Gallery. Didn't I just say, 'Congratulations, I love you'? Maybe you can start taking my words as they are."

Ames had been a practising potter for more than a decade – she'd made it as an artist, an artist based in Singapore, a female artist based in Singapore. Annie, though equally intrigued by art, liked to tell people that she had "two left hands", or when she was drunk:

“two thumbs and eight middle fingers”. So she took a double degree in Art History and Communication Studies, but only landed freelance writing gigs since graduating.

“I’m so done walking on eggshells with you,” said Ames, raising her hands again. Raina looked under the table, checking her mother’s feet. She blushed when she remembered that sometimes, adults liked to use words they didn’t actually mean. The girl glanced at her father, and he patted his lap for her to sit on, to take refuge there. She shook her head and stared at her aunt.

Annie squinted and said, “Why do you find it hard to believe that I can be happy for you? That even though I’ve been rolling in real shit lately, I can look past myself and truly celebrate where you are? Damn it. Give me some credit lah. Your guilt about everything is just so condescending. As if I must not only be a failure, but a sensitive, bitter one. Just let me be a happy loser, OK?”

“I know. I can’t imagine –”

“Yah, of course. I never asked you to imagine being me. Thank God there’s just one of me to imagine.”

“You see? You always do this. You make it impossible.”

“For what? For you to be Mother Theresa?”

“Stop it. And I never said you were a –”

“Aiyah, happy occasion, why talk like that? Don’t let the ants spoil the day,” said Mrs Choo. Then she winked at Raina and said, “All the more we have to kill them.”

“OK Grandma,” said the girl.

Ames never said her sister was what? A failure? That the word even crossed her mind made her nervous, ashamed. She hugged her arms, wrapping herself in the sleeves of her dress.

Annie cupped the smooth white bowl and stared into it, as if seeking for inspiration. Two knobs of fat from the *siew yoke* sat in her bowl. Her head felt hot.

Mrs Choo went on, “Annie. So many months already. Time to move on.”

“Ma,” Ames said with gritted teeth and a vigorous shake of her head.

Annie glanced up at her sister. “Ha. Relax. I’m not that fragile.”

“OK then,” said Ames. “If this is what you want. Let’s talk about it. No more skirting around.”

“Yes – thank you!” said Annie.

And then, suddenly, neither sister knew what to say. One thing, though, made Ames open her mouth then close it again. She knew that Annie had driven to the Build-to-Order flat. Just two days ago, after Ames had dropped Raina off with their mother, she caught Annie getting into the old Toyota. Even from afar, there was something off about Annie’s expression – foggy, like she was still in a dream, but with a focus that alarmed Ames. So she tailed Annie, watching her drive along in a rage. When Annie finally exited the expressway and filtered out to Brickland Road, Ames realised what her sister was up to. Moping. Ames knew it was not so much the break-up that tormented Annie, but the fact that she had lost her new home. Ames drove on, slipping back onto the highway in a blur, suddenly angry too, burdened by the knowledge of her sister’s pain.

Karthik picked up the boiled chicken feet with two fingers, and began to chew meticulously on the soft, rubbery flesh. He had come to truly crave the food of the Choo household – he’d nibble on wolfberries sunk to the bottom of soup bowls, go for multiple helpings of bitter gourd slices stuffed with minced pork, insist on having salted vegetables whenever porridge was served. But even after all these years, he could never partake in the Choo women’s coded language.

Raina looked back and forth the adults, then hopped to the bathroom behind the kitchen. She didn't want her grandmother to know that she had been wondering about the ants.

"Wash your hands," Ames called out to the girl, still holding her gaze on Annie. Then she whispered, "No one here is responsible for your feelings, alright?"

Annie said, "Keep it going."

"Whatever's wrong with your life – that's on you, OK? Later, you better flush out this fucking gloom, blow some candles, and cut the damn cake."

Annie leaned back, smiled at her elder sister, and said, "Yes. Thank you."

Their mother blinked a few times. Karthik put his head in his hands. "Babe," he said to Ames, and she shot him a warning look. He turned towards the balcony, feeling for the cigarette pack in his pocket.

But Raina returned, sliding into the chair beside her father. She had a funny look on her face.

Then the girl opened her palm and held it out to the adults. It was full of ants, dead and dying, their bright, black bodies overturned, feelers and legs withered and drooping. Ames screamed. There were two ants, still alive. One was crawling up Raina's arm, and the other was sprinting across the table towards the bowl of *char siew* sauce. Raina's eyes shone. Karthik said something under his breath. Mrs Choo rose, making a sound of delight and horror. Annie found herself gripping the edge of the table. She'd wanted to say something funny, congratulate her niece, perhaps. But Annie felt herself rocking backwards, and a sound escaped her throat. It was an *oh*, she could feel its hot, hollow sound, inside her yet faraway, as if it were her sister's, or her mother's, or both their voices rising from her own chest.

“Look, I found them,” said the child. “I saw the nest. They were all dying. How do you think these two made it out alive?”

So Happy

Yes, I am closing my eyes. Where do I put my hands? Here – one on top of the other. Like a corpse? I’m just pulling your leg, no need to get upset. I understand procedure. I’m a professional myself, you see.

I don’t think you understand. I’m not like your other patients. No what you call, trauma. I’ve lived well; I’m good to others. I even volunteer for a women’s shelter. Give legal advice and what not. Started by a junior partner in my firm. You know young women nowadays – all very hot about women’s rights. It was just like that, back in my day. But I didn’t have time, you know? In uni, when my roommate joined the Students’ Union to fight the Graduate Mother’s Scheme, where was I?

On school afternoons, I would be clocking hours as a temp at a law firm. I’d take the bus into town, ride the lift up this fancy tower, and whenever the bell dinged for my floor, I’d jump, like something had gone off in me too. On the way to the front desk, there were these floor-to-ceiling windows, and when I looked out, I could feel myself hanging over everything below – the cars, the buildings, cranes in the sky. Everything would be moving, even the swirly patterns on the carpet seemed to swim out beneath me. I’d be frozen there until the head secretary called my name, and I could feel myself cracking, actually *thawing*, like my heart had become this icy rock.

Then I’d come back to my dorm and see my roommate Stella kneeling over cardboard sheets, her red marker screeching as she scribbled things like, “Don’t yield to eugenics”. When she finally realised that I was in the room, she would smile at me like this: with the pen between her teeth. She always had this wild expression, but you could tell she was careful about everything.

I can see her now, with those great big glasses that gave her eyes this fogged up, faraway look. It’s late at night, and I’m mugging for my Contracts exam. My side of the

room is bare – other than my new seashell lamp, everything else I own are textbooks and stationery. Stella's half of the room is tacked with movie posters and newspaper cuttings. Books everywhere – under her bed, by her windowsill – French philosophy and Chinese poetry. Her walls are washed in a dark green light, so it always looks like some witchy business is going on. If she isn't reading or making signs, she'll have a friend from the Students' Union in her little corner. Their meetings usually end with her saying, "But that is only the symptom of the problem."

Stella has her legs up on her desk, pen in her mouth, thinking of a slogan. Another girl is in our room – she's petite, and wears nothing on her face but purple eyeshadow. I've never seen her smoke, but she's always got a thin cigarette tucked behind one ear. She's lying flat on the floor, next to Stella's bed. Her shirt is riding up; there's a belly ring, of course. She's also thinking hard about the slogan, but I can feel her watching me. When I turn around in my chair, she gives me a sorry smile. I go back to the Limitation Act I'm memorising. I'm moving my lips so I can absorb the words, but I can hear Stella and the other girl. Their lips are vibrating too, piecing phrases together, testing out the different sounds and meanings. It's like the room hums with our voices.

My back's to them, but I can't go beyond a single line of my notes. I want to swing around and throw out a word too, be a part of it. A letter is sticking out of Stella's typewriter – she's sending it to the school paper. She read the first draft to me weeks ago, and trying to be smart, I told her, "Sure, that's attention-grabbing. But you need more evidence." And she said, "You don't need proof for something *morally* wrong." She said this kindly, although her eyes grew murkier, more troubled. Now, she's tapping her marker on her table. Then the tapping slows, stops. She's thought of the slogan.

I don't remember what it is, if she even says it out loud, but I have this sense that something big is about to happen, so I spin around. You know the kind of premonition you

get just before two cars collide, or someone trips and falls? This is it – the moment I turn, I see all the clarity flooding into Stella’s eyes. She repeats the line slowly then quickly, but the words remain unchanged. The other girl says, “Yes, yes. That’s it. Yes.” Her cigarette falls out of her ear, and now she and Stella are wrapped around each other, jumping about. I don’t even know what they’re celebrating, it’s not like they’ve changed the world yet. The next morning, I wake up and see them both tucked into Stella’s bed, Stella’s glasses pressed against the other girl’s shoulders.

I always wished I could tell my daughter Stella Wang’s story, you know? Not that I was in some corner, quietly buzzing from all the energy. My girl is sixteen; I had her when I was forty.

Was I sour about being left out of something important? Maybe. But I think it was more personal, pettier than that. I was just jealous. Those two – they had a happiness that went beyond the need of possessing someone.

You see, doctor. Once I go back in time, I can’t stop. You want me to talk about what happens when I go to bed? This! People I haven’t seen in donkey’s years, all flooding my mind when I try to get to sleep.

Last night, it was my first boss. Not from the temp job, no, this was my first real job – I joined a small firm working out of a converted shop house. It’s my first day, and I’m wearing this electric blue blazer with shoulder pads, and a matching pencil skirt. There I am, day one out of law school, thinking the world’s my fat, juicy oyster. But the moment I step into the office, one of the two partners of the firm, Mr Liew, looks up from his desk. He stares at me for a good few minutes, and I just stand there at the entrance, letting him watch me without saying a thing. He’s a skinny man with a hard belly and a tanned, balding head that looks like a furry fruit. I don’t know what his look means. But it feels as though he is

watching an accident happen, too fascinated by the destruction to move. My ears are burning, and I'm getting sticky under the jacket, but I'm still there at the doorway, waiting for some kind of proper welcome.

Then he says, "Everyone, see our new girl? Now, that's the standard." He waits, and I'm just staring back at him, like one of those cardboard standees. Then he adds, "For our women lawyers, of course." And he lets out this oily laugh. There isn't much fuss – a few people look up from their desks and go back to work. No one comes up to me to pat me on my shoulder and say, *It's OK – he's just talking rubbish, but he's the boss – what to do?* And it isn't a test either. This sounds crazy, but from then on, it becomes company policy for all female lawyers to wear skirts for court duty. It even gets written in the contract.

Can you believe I stayed for five years at that company? Sometimes I'd think, this would only be a problem for girls like Stella Wang. I used to fantasize about bumping into her on the street, telling her that I ended up passing the bar, that I'd gotten a job, but guess what, there was this stupid little rule. I wanted to see her face when I said, "The skirt thing's just a minor inconvenience." I know she wouldn't go at me with the rapid-fire lecture her friend would make. She'd just stare at me with those calm gloomy eyes, and say something like, "The smaller it is, the bigger a step forward or backward it'd make." Then imagine, thirty years down the road, she finds me part of all these women's work!

Yes, I've tried this technique – bringing the mind somewhere else – the ocean, a nice memory, or a holiday. OK, here's one: My trip to New Zealand last December. I'm visiting my cousin Janey with my girl Lyla. It's just the three of us, and we're in the car with the windows down, the wind whipping our faces, the sun, warm and sweet on our skin. All around, there are these mountains, their snowy heads peeking out over the horizon. We're driving down Lake Wakatipu. And even though I've been to the South Island plenty of times,

I'm noticing for the first time how still the waters are. Even with the wind, you can't see a single ripple on its surface, as if all the water stretching and curving between the mountains has hardened in the sun.

So, Janey's driving, and we're yelling nonsense outside the window – "Watch out! We're Thelma and Louise!" We're just so happy, and we're doing it partly to tease Lyla. I look back and my girl is giggling and groaning *shut up*, her hair all tangled and slapping her face. Everything is perfect, and I want to slide into the backseat and smack Lyla all over with kisses, but I just reach behind to squeeze her knee. You know how it is – she thinks she's this grown-up. In a way she is; so tall, and smart, and striking. Janey is screaming all sorts of crude things in her ashy voice, and all of us are laughing and laughing, the wind making us sound like birds crying. Then I say, "I want to die here." It's meant to be lighthearted, but it's also true – you know, when you've never been this happy, and you so badly need to preserve the feeling?

"You mean you want your ashes tossed here. So romantic, ah?" Janey turns to me and says. She calls to Lyla in the back, "Darling, better take note, your Mummy wants an expensive send-off." I don't check on Lyla, or correct Janey that I actually want to die, there and then. I think Lyla knows this, because I can feel her stiffening, getting sulky. Then she rolls up her window and starts to weep. She pulls her sweater hood over her head, and she's making these mousy sounds.

Janey pulls over at a lookout point and goes to the backseat, rocking Lyla while whispering, *darling, darling, darling*. I say, "Come on, Girl. Mummy didn't mean it," but I can't move, I can't even look at her. I'm just watching the mountains around us – high and vast and untouchable. I forgot that Lyla hates talk like that; she's sixteen and cool, but wants to believe that her parents can live forever. I want to ask why I never know what will hurt her, why I keep guessing and failing. Nothing's changed, you know? She's still a baby –

whole, bright and soft, like a peach. The moment she was born, I could feel all my love welling up from nothing but awe and fear of this child, this god. One moment I want to hit her, and the next, I want to lay out all my wrongs and ask for forgiveness. Not for the divorce, no, not the public ones. But for these regular, off-handed mistakes. Lyla. These days, when I can't sleep, I go to her room, climb into her bed and just lie in her peachy sweetness. I'll stare up at the ceiling and think about how hard I've worked so she can live in a house like this, yet she's next to me, curled up like a secret.

Otherwise, it's no use staying in bed. I'd get up sweating. I'd walk up and down the room. Turn up the air-con till my toes go numb. Pull down my nightgown. Go to the window naked. Open the window and let some warm air in. From my room, I can see my car in the driveway and my little lawn up front, the long green fruits on my mango tree glowing in the dark. I don't really care that my neighbours might awake and find me, sleepless, with my sad old breasts hanging out in the middle of the night. Across the street, there's a Tudor-styled house with a bronze Roman soldier at the gate, and gargoyles on the Greek columns. There's a spotlight underneath each gargoyle, so it looks like each of them is carrying a flame in its chest. I feel less alone, watching the statue staring blindly into the night. Then I wonder what the family inside is trying to ward off, what they're really trying to protect. I'm wide-awake at the window, even though I can feel my spine going jelly, and the rest of my body about to crumble. It's three, four AM. The main road faces the back of my house, but I can hear a bike speeding past, a car swishing by. Everything's so soft and clear.

How much more do you need? I stuck to your prescription for months. It knocks me out, yes, but what's the point? Throughout the day, my mind is all sticky and heavy, and when I move, it's like walking through a tide. What do you mean family history? This is not cancer, you know? How far back must I go?

I'm a child, about ten years old. I'm at a roadside hawker, seated at a wooden table. My mother is somewhere else, I think she's ordering at the hawker's cart. It's after school, and my mother has just picked me up after her shift at the post office. A woman comes up to the table and takes the seat next to me. She hasn't got any food, but I can hear metal jingling as she moves – coins or keys, hiding somewhere in her clothes. Her hair is cut very short, and she has a wide nose and a jutting chin. I wonder if she's a man at first, but I see her small hands and realise she is wearing a nightgown. It hangs over her thin body like a tent. I want to tell her the seat is taken, but I'm so surprised, I forget the right words to say. She is resting her head against one hand and smiling at me, but not in that clownish way other adults do when they talk to children. She smiles at me like I'm a friend. Like we've shared secrets even before we've met. I see some grey in her hair. Her lips are twisting. She is saying something, maybe a hello, but it comes out low and muffled, like the voice is not coming out of her, but stuck in a faraway room with a closed door. I try to hear what she is saying, and when I lean closer, I can smell her hot breath. It is slightly sour and milky, but something about it makes me want her to keep talking, to wait for each word to emerge slowly, fully, as if it were being pulled from a deep, earthy place inside her.

Then my mother appears. She's standing above us with a tray of noodles. She's this skinny woman with a loud voice, you'd imagine her ribcage rattling as she speaks. "Shoo!" My mother says, in the same way she chases mynahs away from our food. I am shocked by my mother's quick anger, her cruelty. But part of me feels ashamed that I did not have the same instinct as my mother – that my natural, tender feelings for the woman have been wrong, have exposed me for being a child. The woman looks around but does not get up. My mother sits down. Her face is all red, her cheeks ballooning from anger. She says, "Don't look, just eat. That's the crazy woman of Bukit Ho Swee. Everyone knows she walks around without her underwear." I feel something cold between my legs after that.

Somehow, I didn't think that people were so powerful, they could reach into everything private inside you without permission. But what terrified me was realising that there'd always be something on your face – open to the world but hidden from yourself, that would always give you away. And that always stuck with me, you know? So what if the woman had come to us with so much openness, asking nothing in return? As we ate, my mother did not once look up when the woman said to her again and again what she told me earlier: *Nice to meet you, I'm so happy.*

Mirror & Way

It was the shock of white that made Miranda gasp as she came up for air. She had been in mid-stroke, her arms circling outwards, about to pull taut, when she saw the head with its silvery hair hovering above the water. Miranda Thomas was not yet tall enough to touch the floor, so she stopped right there, at the heart of the pool, treading water so she could stare. She could hear the twins giggling as they paddled past her, the small waves they produced knocking against her and making her sway, their matching swimsuits flashing in the sun. After all this time, Miranda still could not tell which was which. At first, she was sure that the turquoise girl was Ariel, because whenever the girl was praised by Coach Danny, she'd slither underwater, then shoot up twirling as she sang, "I'm a mermaid, I'm a mermaid!" But now, the other twin, the one in purple – who was supposed to be Aurora, did the same thing, so Miranda did not know anymore.

But never mind, now. Miranda watched the boy with the light hair. He was wearing a navy swimsuit that covered his whole body except for his pale, pinkish hands and feet. He was clutching the wall with his body stretched out, and began kicking in a circular motion. Unlike Coach Danny, who had a bulging chest and wore tiny trunks that made Miranda's mother click her tongue, the boy's instructor was a woman with a serious face. She was guiding the boy's legs by the feet while droning, *in and out*, her voice flowing with the hissing of the drain above the pool. Seeing the boy start from scratch made Miranda feel accomplished; she had long mastered the frog style, and was going to take her Bronze certificate the coming holidays.

Even though Miranda was too far to see her mother in the shade, she sensed that her mother would not approve of her staring, so she slipped her head underwater and finished the lap. When she touched the wall and hooked her arm around its edge to catch her breath, Coach Danny squatted above, raised his sunglasses and said, "Wah, Miss Thomas, treading

water for more than three minutes. Not even a Bronze yet, but trying to get a Gold Star?” Coach Danny’s shiny green trunks looked branded, but he rarely came down to the water, as if his bronzed, sculpted body would rust if it got wet. Some way off, the twins were curling themselves into balls and doing swift, silent somersaults underwater. Miranda wished they heard about her Gold Star timing.

She peeled her swimming cap off and her tangled coils flopped out. When she turned, the boy was behind her, crouched over a float board, his instructor gone. His goggles were pushed up on his forehead, causing his white hair to stick out in a funny way, like a bird’s wet feathers. The boy’s eyes were small and blue, bluer than the water, bluer than the sky – a blue that was almost transparent. It made Miranda think of glass that didn’t just break, but shattered, as her mother always warned. Miranda had just learnt the phrase *earth-shattering* in school, and now, she felt many unnamable things moving inside her, their hard and dark vibrations. It was like she had stayed underwater for too long and everything inside her was about to burst. Most astonishing though, were the boy’s eyebrows and lashes. They were even fairer than his hair, as if dipped in snow or sugar, and blended into the lightness of his skin.

The boy was drifting nearer to Miranda. Up close, she saw that he was a real boy, with red goggle marks around his eyes. Coach Danny was saying something about never stopping in the middle of a lane, but she kicked herself off the wall and plunged downwards, keeping her body small and low, blowing bubbles until the hammering in her chest went completely still. When she let the water push her up, the boy was still there.

“I feel like I’ve seen you before,” said the boy. His voice had a high-pitched confidence, the kind that might get him bullied in school. How long had he watched her? She had been taking lessons at the swimming complex for more than a year now, and it was her

first time seeing him. How funny, that this newcomer thought he could track the comings and goings of everyone else.

“I don’t think so,” Miranda replied. “I’ve never seen *you* before.” Then she wondered why there was something sour in her voice, a stubborn unkindness she could not place.

The next week, Miranda learnt the boy’s name. Their swimming classes ended at the same time, and when they stood dripping before their mothers on the bleachers, the women draped towels over them and instructed them to be friends. His name was Wei Xiang and he was seven, the boy told Miranda, standing with his back arched and small belly tucked out. She could see the ridges of his ribs curving under his swimsuit. Miranda was just a year older but already a head taller.

The boy’s mother, Auntie Feng, had a round, jolly face with dimples. She also had a tattoo of a plant at the back of her neck. Miranda was dying to touch the black wispy vines on the woman’s skin. Auntie Feng carefully rubbed sunblock on Wei Xiang’s face and fastened a visor on his head. She patted his bum and said, “Watch out for the sun, young man.” Then she shooed the children to the wading pool.

Miranda and Wei Xiang were off to the gigantic mushroom structure that constantly rained. Miranda turned back and could hardly believe that her mother was sitting with her head bent close to Auntie Feng, hands swimming through the air as she spoke. If other Malayali aunties came up to her mother at church, she only responded with her shy, tight smile. But she was now laughing with Auntie Feng, throwing her head back lightly, like she was finally relieved of all her heavy, silent thoughts.

Fat droplets fell noisily on the children as they stood under the raining mushroom. They blinked and rubbed their eyes, huddling closer. Two tall slides snaked behind. Toddlers were tumbling about with puffy arm floats as parents trudged along in rolled up trousers.

When Miranda and Wei Xiang climbed to the top of the slides, strangers all around paused to look. Miranda could feel the pressure of their gazes; it made her heart drum in her ears.

“Is it always like this?” Miranda asked, when she splashed out of the yellow slide, falling hard on her bum. Wei Xiang slid out a second later, creating just a few ripples, his visor still firmly in place. They sat cross-legged on the bright blue tiles, the water filling their laps.

“Never mind,” said Wei Xiang. Miranda watched his glassy eyes – they seemed to take a while to find her face even though she was next to him. “My mother says people stare because they have small *world-views*.”

Miranda wondered what that meant. She curled her fingers into a telescope and peered through it with one eye. “So they see everything like this?” she said. Wei Xiang laughed until his eyes disappeared into his cheeks. Miranda spotted the twins by the adult pool. They had this warm-down routine that included splits, and a backwards bend that turned their bodies into an upside down ‘U’. The twin in purple, the slightly taller one with a birthmark on her thigh, broke from her pose and was glancing over at Miranda and Wei Xiang.

The boy thought for a while and said, “Anyway, I like your name.”

“Yah. It’s like that orange drink, right?” Miranda smiled.

“Oh, that one’s fizzy,” said Wei Xiang, making a sound with his lips. Miranda felt suddenly motherly, protective towards the boy. She tapped his visor and he laughed some more.

When they were home, Miranda’s mother said, “Isn’t it lovely to make new friends?”

Miranda looked up from her homework and chewed the end of her pencil. Her mother was having her five-o’-clock tea – a daily, sacred affair of *chaya* and chocolate-coated

digestives that Miranda knew not to interrupt. *Please – it's the only time I have for myself*, her mother once burst out so tragically, that a lump welled up in Miranda's throat. What was so bad about having Miranda or her father around? In fact, her father was only home a few days a month. He was a lanky, affectionate man whom Miranda learnt to stop pining after – he'd been posted to Jakarta ever since she could remember. She used to be mesmerized by his title – *Project Manager*, she'd tell her teachers and classmates in a sing-song lilt. And when he returned, he reserved all his stories, and gifts, and tenderness for Miranda. It seemed to be what her mother preferred. Her parents would move around the house cordially, dutifully, having meals or watching TV one after another, as if security guards on shift.

Miranda's mother blew gently into her mug. The cloud of steam curled up in the evening light, so it looked like gold vapour was floating from her mouth.

"Amma, but why is Wei Xiang... What happened to him?" Miranda asked, even though she did not think her mother would tell her.

But her mother said the word clearly, making sure Miranda heard it right.

"It doesn't mean you should see him differently, Miranda. But you must be patient – he might need a little help sometimes." Her mother's faintly kohl-lined eyes were hazel in the light. At times, Miranda longed to be her mother – graceful and guarded, protective of her energies and affection. But she was often irritated by this reticence, tired of the constant need to coax her mother out. It also grated on her when her mother spoke in this prim, teacher-like way, saying things Miranda already knew.

Then her mother's large eyes went shiny with pity and she muttered, "Poor Feng. Mustn't be easy for her." Miranda felt a hot anger spring up in her. She slammed her pencil down on her Math assessment book, and said, "Amma, I'm hungry. Can I have the other biscuit?"

Miranda wondered if the twins' mother sat around with the girls like this, talking about how sorry she felt for her mother, because many embarrassing things had happened to Miranda. Twice, her goggles broke while she was in the middle of a surface dive, and she lost count of the number of times her hair band snapped whenever she'd forgotten her swimming cap, her mass of ringlets mushrooming out. The twins were also developing that glossy tan of Coach Danny, looking golden and rosy after each class, while Miranda was getting so brown that her mother became increasingly fussy about her wearing sunblock. Its metallic scent on her skin would follow her throughout each week.

Every Wednesday afternoon, they were a little family: Miranda, Wei Xiang, and their mothers. Before heading to the swimming complex, Miranda's mother would fry samosas and pack them in a container. When the day was over, Auntie Feng would send Miranda and her mother home in her yellow Suzuki – the women would sit in the front listening to the radio, while Wei Xiang would be curled up dozing in the backseat, his head on Miranda's lap.

It was all Miranda waited for during the week: hanging by the pool's edge with Wei Xiang after class, watching their mothers on the bleachers. If they were out soaking for too long, Miranda would fetch Wei Xiang's visor. Then she would place the float under him and guide him as they went up and down the breadth of the pool, dodging adult swimmers. He was learning fast, building up a really strong kick. They would giggle when they touched each other's pruney fingers, equally repulsed and tantalized by the wrinkled, waxy feeling. When their mothers finally called for them, they would race to the bleachers, chattering from the cold and laughing at the involuntary rippling of their bodies. They'd fill up with steaming cups of Milo and the samosas, which would have turned slightly soggy – but that was how Miranda secretly liked them.

Miranda guessed that she would be teased for being friends with Wei Xiang, even though they did not like each other in that gross, secretive way, or play the stupid games of older children to get each other's attention. But what she just overheard was something else.

It began as a whisper: *Oreo*. One of the twins said it tentatively at first, bubbling with delight. Then the other one snickered, and the girl was egged on to repeat it. The sisters shared a long wailing laugh. They prattled on in Chinese. Now they saw that they were safe, secured from the consequences of their joke, they chanted the word together, louder, hungrier. They kept laughing, slapping their thighs, thumping their small feet on the ground. Even though the twins acted like they were not talking about her as they kept their shuddering backs to her, Miranda knew. She felt a warm shame roiling inside her. As she pulled her T-shirt over her head, she paused so she could keep her burning face hidden underneath. Her mother and Auntie Feng were far away, buying coffee, and Wei Xiang was already down at the pool. Only she was the butt of it, when it was everyone's fault.

Miranda followed the twins to the pool. Wei Xiang's swimming lesson had started, and she could see a thin stream of bubbles surfacing as his head went under, his breath paced by his instructor's purring inflections. The twins began to stretch by the ladder, folding their narrow bodies to reach their toes. Their goggles were strewn absent-mindedly on the ground, away from them. Miranda sat nearby, dangling her legs in the pool. Then she lifted a loose grille over the drain and threw the goggles in. She did this so smoothly and naturally, as if it were her warm-up routine. When she was done, Coach Danny was just emerging from the bathhouse, looking into the distance with a cocked eyebrow as he fixed his sunglasses on his head. The twins still had their backs towards the spot where they'd left their goggles, and were now seated with their legs out, circling each leg, one after the other, up in the air.

When Miranda looked up, Wei Xiang was looking her way. She had spent the last few months with him, but it felt like she was seeing him for the first time, frozen by the alien feeling of his blue eyes.

After class, Wei Xiang paddled up to Miranda, one arm propped by his float board. He tapped her sharply, and said, “Hey, did you do something?”

Miranda shrugged roughly and turned away from the boy. She said, “So? They’re mean.”

“Oh. What did you—”

“They started it.”

“Started what?”

“Never mind.”

“Are you jealous?” Wei Xiang said, gliding around her. He was getting agile in the water. The droplets on his pink, fair face looked like pearls.

“What? That’s stupid. Why would I care about Princess whatever and whatever?” The twins had hopped off to a smaller pool, and were taking turns to ferry each other on their backs, their torsos becoming one, their slim, bendy limbs sticking out like an octopus’ tentacles. Earlier, they’d not even realised that their goggles were stolen. After stretching, they turned to the empty spot, perplexed, then scurried up the bleachers to report that they needed new goggles. Miranda watched, open-mouthed, at how the twins’ mother had glanced up lazily from her phone, then passed them a silver card. Minutes later, the twins strode out of the swim shop, each with a pair of goggles sleeker than the ones floating in the drain. Miranda thought she might scream.

“They swim fast,” said Wei Xiang.

“So? Big deal. My coach says I tread water better than anyone.”

“Show-off.”

“So? At least, I’m better than you. You can’t even swim one lap. Baby.”

“I hate you.”

“You idiot. They called us Oreos. It’s your fault. There’s something wrong with your skin – that’s why they called us Oreos, OK?”

Miranda felt her head burning, like she was having a fever. She knew she should swim away, but she needed to do real damage; she needed to be seen. So, she hurtled towards Wei Xiang and yanked the float under him. The boy’s legs flailed, then his body sank, shriveling downwards like a strip of seaweed.

Then the lifeguard blew his whistle, and the shrill shook Miranda out of her rage. She thought she’d been caught, and the ringing began to sound like a siren. It took her a while to realise that everyone was scrambling out of the pool. Rain was hailing down on the water. Miranda looked towards the shade. Her mother and Auntie Feng were still talking the way they always did, as if a bubble was wrapped around their heads. Nobody saw. Her mother glanced over, gesturing for her to hurry back. Auntie Feng stood up to find her son. Wei Xiang was underwater. The whistle was still going in Miranda’s ears.

As soon as Miranda plunged in, the boy’s head shot up. His pink mouth looked like it was turning as pale as his face, but his eyes were brighter than before.

“I held my breath,” said Wei Xiang. “I didn’t breathe at all!”

Miranda shoved the float towards him and said, “Let’s get out, stupid.”

They ran quietly back to the shelter. When Auntie Feng shook the water out of Wei Xiang’s hair in a rough, teasing way, he didn’t play along and shake his head convulsively. He didn’t squirm when she wiped him down, or undo the towel tucked around his waist and hang it over his shoulders like a cape. He squinted. He kept squinting, and Miranda turned away. She took two sips of Milo and told her mother she had a stomachache.

“Troublesome girl,” said Miranda’s mother, and insisted that Auntie Feng take home the Tupperware of samosas.

Wei Xiang wasn’t at the swimming complex the next week. Miranda was slapping on sunblock when her mother told her that Wei Xiang had gone for an eye check-up. His condition made his eyesight poor, did Miranda know? Miranda let the white glob of lotion fall on her foot. She hit her mother’s arm.

“Amma, you’re lying. He can see! He’s the only one who sees me,” said Miranda, before she ran to the pool and dived furiously in.

On the bus home, her mother explained that Wei Xiang was taking a break from swimming – his skin was not well because of the sun and chlorine. As she said this, she put a hand on Miranda’s lap. But her mother looked so drained and lost; the woman’s face quivered with the bus as it went over a pothole.

It was a month before Miranda saw Auntie Feng’s yellow car again. She watched its brake lights flaring on and off at the foot of her block. Miranda bounded down the stairs of her third floor flat. She had thought daily about Wei Xiang’s verdict: did he realise what she’d done at the pool, and if so, would he still come and see her?

Her mother too, bopped with purpose around the house, after Auntie Feng texted that morning saying she was driving by to return the Tupperware; it had completely slipped her mind, and wouldn’t it be a good excuse to catch up? All afternoon, their kitchen was hazy with the scents of curries simmering, chutneys being mixed, pappadams curling and blooming in hot oil.

When Auntie Feng got out of the car, her mother put one hand up in a hello, but the other woman swooped in for a hug. Then Wei Xiang climbed out. Miranda’s lips twitched into a smile. The boy looked strange, almost a different person. And it wasn’t because he had

on those chunky dark glasses. His white hair had been razed to a neat, stumpy crew cut, which revealed the high slope of his forehead and made his face look even barer, more fragile and exposed.

Their mothers flew into conversation immediately as they moved into the shade of the void deck. Their talk was so colourful, so engrossing, that they settled on a bench right there, forgetting the agenda of the evening – that there was sweet tea, and tidbits, and dinner upstairs. Wei Xiang and Miranda strolled away from their mothers. Now that there was no water to escape under, Miranda felt awkward. They stopped at the exercise corner.

“Oreo’s not bad, actually,” said Wei Xiang, pushing his sunglasses up his nose then keeping his hands in his pockets. He looked like a spy in a movie.

“Yah. It’s nice. Especially with milk,” said Miranda. She thought it was too mushy to say sorry in person, so she had written a note. She pressed the paper into his hand.

“Next time, I’ll break their goggles,” he said.

“Action. As if you can.”

Then he opened the note and started to laugh. The first line said, “Dear Way”.

“That’s not how you spell my name, Dumb Dumb,” he said, coughing for effect.

“I know,” said Miranda, although she had deliberated over different combinations of letters before settling on the safest spelling. “It’s your nickname, OK?”

“Way,” the boy said, bowled over. Then he said, “Fine. But you must have one too.” He muttered her name under his breath. Then it came to him. “Mirror. Short for Miranda.”

“Mirror?”

“Yah.”

They started at each other, and the open irony gaped at them. They couldn’t articulate it, but they understood it clearly and began to howl with laughter.

Miranda had just learnt a new trick of hanging upside down from parallel bars. She'd seen the Chinese Dance girls do it at her school's exercise corner, their jelly bodies contorting into all sorts of stunts while suspended. But she was content just hooking the back of her knees to the bar, letting her torso swing wildly, feeling the whooshing in her ears, watching the sky turn towards her. It made her mind clear and sparkling, like how it was after a swim.

"Want to try something better than a swing?" Miranda said to Wei Xiang.

She taught Wei Xiang to hold onto the outer bar, then kick his legs up towards the second bar, and hook his legs there. As he flung his body up with a swish, his sunglasses clattered to the ground. The boy was hanging there like a bat, afraid to let go of his hands, so Miranda peeled his fingers off. For a moment, he was stunned with fear, but almost immediately, his eyes began to flash with joy. She could hear her mother calling, "Miranda Thomas! Don't you –", but the boy was already upside down, his shirt flying up his neck, revealing his lily-white body. Perhaps it was the shock of seeing Wei Xiang's bare stomach, or Auntie Feng insisting, *Let them play*, that made Miranda's mother stop short.

Miranda hung herself from the bar and began to swing beside her friend, thinking about their new names, "Mirror" and "Way" – the funny, meaningless combination. She laughed, and he laughed, and it didn't matter if the nicknames wouldn't stick; as their bodies went back and forth, it felt like their faces could touch the sky, and everyone else appeared to walk on their heads, and this view gave the children a happiness that felt permanent and protected and impenetrable.

Lucky For This View

The man and baby are parked facing the green, murky sea. The sky is white – all clouds, as if overhead, a sheet had been draped over from end to end. His baby is asleep, its heavy cheeks slack, head lolling to the side, the folds of its fat arm slick with sweat. Unbuckling himself, the man leans across to the baby in the infant seat. Light whorls of hair are stuck to its forehead, and the shapes of its brows have already begun to form, dark and alert. The man shifts the baby's slouching body and cups a hand around its neck to support it; tries to remember what his wife said about the right angle. The state has just announced that all bubble-tea shops have to close. Over the radio, the newsreader delivers these updates: what businesses are essential or non-essential; what numbers of the infected are local or foreign. So much of the world is sick -- if not, their livelihoods upended; the man ought to feel more urgently grateful that here he is, in the car, with his non-fussy baby. He turns the radio knob to a classical music station and jabs the arrow button of the air-conditioning, although it is already going at full blast. He listens to his baby's breath and imagines a quiet valve blooming and contracting, blood sloshing about. How tiny and fleshy its heart must be – like a plum, sweet to suck on.

There are no other cars around. The palm trees on the beach are thin and still. A mynah lands on the hood of the car, watching the man. Leoš Janáček's "Sinfonietta" is on. He cranks the seat back and closes his eyes. Just as a fog of sleep is about to carry him away, a black car pulls up beside him. He can feel the hum of the other car's engine. There is a sleeping dog in the backseat of the car. Its shaggy head has sunk down into its front paws. The man watches the profile of the woman driver as she pulls the handbrake – her neck slack with fine lines, small nose with a blunt tip, left ear round like a shell. His baby is still deep in its nap. The man clicks open the door and hops into the other car.

The scent in the woman's car is spicy and citrusy.

“Oh, look at the little one – getting so round!” says the woman.

The man peers through the tinted windows and sees his baby stirring from its sleep. Its brows are knitted in a quivering expression that could either blow over or erupt into a great cry. His heart catches for a moment, the way it does before a goal is scored at a football match. The baby doesn’t cry.

“It lives, it eats,” says the man. “Five fat months of life.” He shakes his head. He wants to touch the woman, but doesn’t know where. Her thigh, her arm, her cheek? She is wearing a navy organza blouse and white pants. Her once sharp haircut is overgrown with a floppy fringe and thick sideburns, making her look like a lazy teenage boy.

“Maybe you should grow it out,” the man says, patting the back of his own head. His haircut is uneven, trimmed jaggedly by his wife two days ago, because all hairdressers had also been ordered to shut down.

“Why? You don’t like it?” The woman laughs and shakes out her hair. Some grey roots peek out. It’s the first time the man has made a comment like this to her, Georgina Fong. Georgie. G. G.F. G-spot.

“You know there’s nothing,” the man says. “There’s nothing – I can’t – I don’t know.” Georgina turns the engine off. A green surgical mask hangs from the rearview mirror as if it were an amulet. The windows whine softly as they retract. She leans into him, one hand on his shoulder, and the other cupping his jaw. Humidity pours into the car. Her breath is warm but light. He can feel her palm pressing him into the seat, and his own body, gangly, almost fragile. He allows himself to enjoy the kiss, the softening of his chest, the drifting off. His hands begin to slide under the netty fabric of her blouse. The dog in the backseat stirs. It lifts its head and paws the leather. “No, boy. Down,” says Georgina while resting a hand on the man’s crotch. “Sorry,” she says to the man. “Bad timing.” She begins to cackle. He takes this chance to break away.

“Georgie,” he says, pulling his zip up then patting his shirt. “My baby’s just there.” He puts his face in his hands and his glasses go awry. “And you still do it,” he says.

“Baby,” she says, peeling his hands away. “Oh David,” she continues, in a way he cannot decide is kindness or condescension. “Who’s the baby now?”

He imagines how he looks to her – head bowed and droopy shoulders caved in. A wronged, sulking child. The corner of her lips curls up. She grabs his arm, and they embrace uncomfortably, sideways, over the gear console.

“I’m sorry,” she says, in the same coaxing whisper he uses while rocking his child to sleep.

“How’s everything? How’s your mum?” he says. They are both staring at the dashboard.

“What do you think. Everyone calls her Yew Tee Queen. Staying home all day is killing her more than kidney failure.”

“Circuit breaker,” David says, rolling his eyes back and trembling, feigning an electric shock.

“That’s not how it works,” Georgina laughs, but she repeats, “Circuit breaker.” She reaches out to finger the hanging surgical mask. “The wife’s looking well as ever,” Georgina says. “You wouldn’t have guessed she pushed a human out -- what, five, six months ago?”

“Mia is Mia,” David says. “She puts in a lot of – Aiyah. She has all these creams. And sebums...”

“Serums.”

“Ha. What’s the difference?”

Georgina’s correction is suddenly grating on him. He begins to realise her audacity to make him say his wife’s name aloud. Minutes ago, she’d made him so breathless and furtive; he felt like a teenager feeling up some girl in a stairwell. He turns to face her completely, his

right shoulder jamming against the backrest. She is playing with the mask straps. Even the curl of her lashes begins to look malicious. “Anyway,” he says. “Why? Why the hell would you do that?”

The day before, Georgina bumped into Mia in the lift. Georgina had just completed an evening jog. She had a leash noosed to her wrist and the dog was panting in the corner, staring attentively at Mia. It wagged its tail.

“Helloo cutie,” Mia said, but stopped short of touching the dog. Her cooing was muffled, trapped behind a three-ply fabric mask.

“Good run?” Mia said.

“Yah. Nice weather. How about you? Went to buy stuff?”

“Ran out of garlic. Also, just an excuse to leave the house lah. Really need some fresh air nowadays.”

It wasn’t the first time the two women had spoken. Mia was the sort of person who could exchange pleasantries with strangers easily. She’d moved into the condo two years ago after marriage, and knew of Georgina – the single lady on the fourth floor with a dog: a nice lady who was a little reserved. Mia herself was affable and liked to show that she wasn’t paranoid about anything, surely not the kiasu type who’d let a flu virus make her needlessly guarded against others. She also thought that the new rule of barring non-household members from entering her home was arbitrary, and frankly, quite dumb. So when Georgina said she was on the way to the top floor to catch the sunset from the corridor, Mia said, why not drop the dog off then go up to her home instead. It’ll only take a few minutes, and it was no problem if Georgina kept her mask on.

Mia and her husband were on the twenty-fourth floor, the second highest in that apartment block. Their living room had the view of the reservoir – unblocked. From up there,

you could see the entire stretch of the water, the shimmer of its ripples, and feel the cool, clear air. On wine-and-cheese nights, the couple's friends would stand by the window closing their eyes in theatrical pleasure, marveling that it was just as good as being overseas.

When David saw his wife and lover enter his home, he could only say, "Wow." He knew getting busted would be inevitable, but surely not now? During a global pandemic? But when his wife saw his gaping expression, she said, "Don't look so scared! Just the neighbour. She wants to see the sunset. A few minutes only. Wear mask, it's OK."

"Uh, yah. That's fine. Welcome, welcome," was all he could manage, watching Georgina dressed in lilac tights go to his window.

A baby monitor was on the coffee table. A toy monkey lay on the floor with a soggy, teeth-marked banana in its hand. Puzzle pieces of the alphabet mat were dislodged. The couple stood some distance from their neighbour. One metre was the rule to keep between strangers in public spaces. And perhaps because they were already breaking the law for letting their neighbour in, they felt compelled to observe this one rule.

Pink clouds fanned out in the sky. The surface of the water turned orange, as if aflame. Thick foliage formed an even, green line along the horizon. Far beyond the reservoir, clusters of buildings were soaked in the golden sun. "Beautiful," said Georgina to the window, her hands pressing on the ledge. A yolky glow was pooling on the white tiles. Mia smiled at her husband. "We're very lucky for this view."

The man's baby was asleep in the nursery, and in that moment, he thought he could hear the baby's heart beating in the room down the hall. It was a powerful and steady throb, pulsing in the evening light. The man stood beside his wife, wringing his hands. Their bodies were bathed in the light. His clenched jaw relaxed. And suddenly, he felt for the first time, a pure surge of love and gratitude towards his child, who was breathing quietly in the house.

Life was beauty, and beauty was truth. The man had the urge to take the hands of his wife and lover, and confess to his failure towards both women.

But Georgina turned around and said, “Thanks for letting me...” The sky was turning dark, bruised by the oncoming night. Mia waved and said, “Don’t mention lah. See? The world still goes on. The sun has to set. Tomorrow it will rise again.” David was irritated by his wife’s made-up proverb and how she thought it’d profoundly comfort her neighbour, the single woman who lived downstairs. Georgina chuckled, and it came out low and garbled behind the surgical mask. “Yes, that’s right,” she said, while looking at David. He had a hand on the sofa and his fingers were clawing the leather. “Very nice place,” she nodded.

As Georgina turned to leave, she tripped on the toy monkey. Her right knee landed on the baby’s mat, and the other leg steadied herself, bent exactly at a right angle. She looked like she had gotten down on one knee. “Oh dear,” said Mia, hands flying to her mouth. Then, Georgina flopped down on her bum, and she sat there with her thighs splayed out and started to laugh. Mia began to apologise for the mess, but soon joined in. The women’s voices made the man feel sick. “I’m OK,” Georgina said, wheezing behind her mask. David was forced to look at her. As she bent to push herself up, her pale neck dipped into the dark line between her breasts, and her hips jounced as she rose. David was so disgusted by his arousal that he forgot all affection for the baby. Months of a long, quiet rage began to slip back to him. He was utterly desiring his lover. That very evening, when his wife was feeding, he sent Georgina a text message.

It is starting to rain on the beach. Georgina rolls up the windows. The raindrops fall, like small pebbles bouncing off the car.

“What kind of sick joke was that?” David says.

“Your missus invited me.”

“Of course! The ever-obliging neighbour.”

“Did you see your face when I came in? At this rate, you’re screwing it up all by yourself. Not me,” says Georgina, playing with a small tube of hand sanitizer. A tiny goop pops onto her palm. The sterile scent settles between them.

David says, “If you can’t see, I’m really trying. Last time, you said yes! You said we’d stop. You’re crazy.” He lifts his glasses to rub his nose bridge. The dog begins to bark.

Georgina glances to the backseat and places a hand on the man’s back. Even through his shirt, he can feel the coolness of evaporated alcohol on her skin.

“Always a drama mama,” she says softly.

“I’m an idiot. Sorry. I know I asked to see you,” says David. “But I’m a father now.” He says ‘father’ the way someone would say ‘God’ – with both reverence and uncertainty.

“You sound like an anti-gambling advertisement.”

“Georgie. It’s my life. Why is this all some joke to you?”

“It’s not. It’s never been. But you’re a child. A stupid boy who doesn’t ever know what he wants. And I could see that, right from the start.”

Anger pours out of David’s chest in hard, roaring waves. He sobs and sobs into his hands.

“Please sanitize your hands after you’re done.”

The rain comes in torrents. David feels a chill then panics about the baby in his car -- he did not turn down the air-conditioning. He looks out the side window, but it’s as if the rain has formed a white wall right outside the door. A clap of thunder rips overhead. The dog barks again, piercingly, but Georgina lets it be. David squints hard. He thinks he can make out his baby with its limbs curled in, its face contorted and red with terror, as it pushes each trembling wail out of its chest.

The Bathtub

The bathtub was sitting at our lift landing for a day. That was all the time it took to make my wife swoon. It was a gigantic boat-shaped thing, smooth and white like an egg, with a flared rim as if the whole thing were flowering open. A silver tap sprouted from its side, like the long neck of a swan. Two Jacuzzi spouts shone on the inside of the tub, sleek and flat as discs. It belonged to Gary and Giovanni, the new couple next-door. Gary and Giovanni. As if right out of an American sitcom. Also, a small world: Gary turned out to be Gary Sim, my wife's cousin's husband's ex-classmate. Yen, my wife, and Gary, had apparently attended the same birthday party when they were teenagers.

The first few days after the couple moved in, Yen and Gary would secretly study each other in the lift, both trying to hide the surprise on their faces like they were holding back a sneeze. One day, they couldn't take it any longer, and it was Gary who broke the ice first. He was a stocky guy, barely taller than my wife, and had an ordinary face that would make you think you'd known him from somewhere. The coincidence astounded my wife. Later, when Yen managed to dig out a photograph of that party, she flew out of our flat, waving the picture. My wife and her bright ideas. Gary Sim answered the door in just his boxers. They were blue and silky. Giovanni waved at her from the inside. He also had no shirt on, showing off his wide, beary body. He had a sharp jaw and dark eyes, but a very large nose that ruined the whole smouldering look. When Giovanni saw me latching the gate after my wife, he raised his chin at me in a casual *hey there*.

The rooms in Gary's and Giovanni's unit were configured differently from ours – theirs being the corridor flat, and ours the corner unit. It was like a jigsaw puzzle done wrong. They liked to leave the front door open with the gate closed, the way old folks did, dawdling about on drowsy afternoons. They'd moved in when sandy cardboard sheets were still lining the floor, and all the doors in the house were still shielded by plastic. In their living room,

there was a pale, rectangular scar on the ceiling – probably the ghost of a recently hacked wall. Wiring still gaped from walls. We caught whiffs of unsanded wood. It gave us the sense of things hopeful and settled, even as uninstalled granite countertops were scattered around like stolen marble busts.

But they seemed to cope with whatever was lying about – using the bathroom counter to make cereal in the mornings, or perching on ladders, sitting with their knees touching their chests. In the evenings, they’d spread newspapers over the cardboard sheets, eating takeaway and sipping from plastic wine cups like they were at a picnic. Sometimes they waved if they caught us looking in, otherwise, they remained shrouded in fumes of dust, as though this contentment, this ability to park themselves in the midst of all the flux – the drilling, the painting, the sweaty workmen going in and out – was a mirage, a myth.

A week later, Yen came home saying the guys wanted to meet up. She’d exchanged numbers with Gary that evening, when she was back from work and found him smoking at the void deck.

I put my pen down and watched my wife sitting on the floor in front of the TV, with one leg up. She was still in her work clothes, though she’d unbuttoned the ruffly collar of her blouse, and the fly of her pants was undone. She was making origami trash boxes from the pages of old magazines – something my mother had taught her years ago. Yen used to do this out of ironic fun, calling it her “wifely duty”, but now she depended on it to keep her hands full, to ease her jitters or kill boredom, the way people who have solved the Rubik’s Cube have the compulsion to piece it together again and again. The shelf under our coffee table was piled with Yen’s boxes; there were only so many fish bones, prawn shells and mandarin seeds we needed to dispose of.

“You know, have dinner, something like that.” Yen looked over at me in the dining room. She paused and pulled out her elastic band. Her hair flopped out, thick and stiff as a helmet, with a dent across the centre. She was one of those women who got more striking as they aged. Her face had grown sharper, and her eyes became slightly hooded, giving her this sleepy sensuality. Even her hair, gone coarse, was a sign of vitality, a stubbornness to go limp and fall out.

“Sure, I’ll think of something,” I said, even though I imagined Yen was the one who’d gone up to Gary, asking how the renovations were going, then offering to show him and Giovanni around. She had this fluttery tendency around new people. It was grading season, and I was already feeling irritable from my stack of student essays. I poured myself another glass of whiskey.

“Such a stylish man, this Gary Sim,” said Yen, resuming her box folding. “He wears *cologne*. And he has nice fingernails.”

“That’s very impressive,” I called to her from across the flat. My wife turned back to the news. Some time ago, this sort of remark would make us both laugh. Now, whatever I said kept us from really talking. I had left her dinner in the kitchen – ‘economy’ rice packed in a Styrofoam box. When we first got married, I’d lay out our nicest silverware beside the takeaway box. That had made her laugh too.

I returned to the essay I’d stopped at. The writing was pompous and unbearable. I sipped more whiskey, holding the biting liquid at the back of my throat. My eyes stung pleasurably. I drew a big question mark on the page. The outline of my wife’s body was pulsing with light from the TV screen.

I went to bed when my head began to throb. I couldn’t enter into a deep sleep, but as I closed my eyes in that drowsy, restless heat, I saw my wife floating away on an island. I was on a separate piece of land surrounded by water too. When I looked down, I saw my feet and

the green sea all around. My wife was drifting further on her little island, but when she locked eyes with me from afar, she seemed astonished, as if she were seeing me for the first time in years.

Giovanni had requested for “some *shio*k local highlights”, so Yen picked this *zi char* place – not the one downstairs, but the famous one a few streets down, where you had to walk through a parking lot for lorries and private buses.

Giovanni was ladling curry into his bowl when he hauled up an eyeball. Fish eye, the rest of us exclaimed. Tender, fleshy bits were spilling out of the socket, soaking in the curry. The best part, we said. A local highlight, I added, snapping a finger-gun at Giovanni. He didn’t flinch, just deposited the eye into Gary’s bowl, and said with a grin, “Saving the best for you – grazie.” Yen and I laughed, but did not turn to each other.

“What fine food,” Giovanni continued with a chuckle, shaking his head. He was sweating through his sleeveless jersey.

“Oh!” said Gary in mock offence, sucking on the eyeball. He nibbled on the hard white centre then spat it out. “That’s nothing on *your* cuisine. Chicken liver; maggot cheese.” Curry dribbled down Gary’s chin. His eyes had an always-smiling squint, as though everything he saw was glowering. He was tanned and still had a wind-smarted rosiness, even though Yen said he’d been back in Singapore for a while.

“Aw come on,” said Giovanni. “The grass is always greener on the other side, no?” His laugh was big and deep, something you could get lost in. I turned to Yen – she seemed enveloped, enraptured.

Gary and Giovanni looked at each other, smiling, like there was no one else around. Giovanni rested his large, trunkish arm around the backrest of Gary’s chair. And just like that, without touching, it drew them together, made them become one. But they could be

regular guys – best friends, brothers. I dragged my chair to Yen's. She gave me a small smile and continued to reach for a piece of salted-egg pork rib with her chopsticks.

After eating, the four of us sat in a heavy, stunned silence. Gary lit a cigarette. He exhaled away from the table and said, "You know, not everything's aligned, but I think we found something good here. At first, we planned to leave once I got Mum sorted. But after a year, everything just clicked, you know? There was this peace. We realised this is home, home." He was looking at Giovanni the whole time.

"That's wonderful," I said. "It shows," Yen said. She rested her chin in both hands. "If there is love, you can make it anywhere, right?"

"Mm," Giovanni said, solemnly, carefully. He chewed on a stray curry leaf, and dropped a scrap of fish on the floor for a wandering cat with a black mole on its snout. "Though I was thinking, something feels a bit... Missing, no?"

"Ah, here we go," Gary said, tapping ash into an old tin can. "This one's got his eye on some 19th-century Persian rug." He touched Giovanni's cheek and said, "OK, fine. Let's order it tonight. You have my word. In front of two witnesses."

Giovanni broke into a smile, at once sheepish and sly. He said, "Actually, I'm kind of over that. But we still need something, no? To make it really home. That one, flashy thing. Uh huh, it may be useless, but that's why it gives absolute pleasure. Some people, you know, it's those stereo systems for them. Or a painting. I don't know, what's us?"

We all fell silent again. I finished the remaining beer we'd ordered for the table. Yen dabbed her forehead with a piece of tissue paper, thinking hard. I wondered if she was brainstorming on their behalf, or turning it into a problem of our own.

Some time back, the both of us had sat down like this, wondering what was missing, what could fasten us together. At first, we went to car showrooms, but we struck that off easily – I couldn't bear the thought of being burdened by the instalments, and Yen secretly

felt that owning a car was “one step into the capitalist rabbit hole”. Later, when Yen took me to a dog shelter, I looked at all the wet, trembly noses poking at the cages, and said it was just too much for me: I couldn’t imagine ever leaving a dog alone at home. This, she seemed disappointed by. Finally, because everyone around us was doing it and asking us why we weren’t, we floated the idea of having a baby. We talked seriously. We held our friends’ newborns, wondering if these fragile, bundled-up bodies filled some missing shape inside our arms. Then we chickened out. Then we finally talked ourselves into it, but I didn’t have the heart. That was what Yen said; she could tell, each time we were in bed, I would jam up for a second, like I was just paralyzed by the prospect. Then we got a bit older, and we stopped talking about trying. Then we stopped trying to talk.

“How about a bathtub?” said Gary, after what seemed like a long time, after the tiny embers on his cigarette had gone off, and the stick had shrivelled into a stub.

It arrived on a Sunday noon. We could feel the bathtub being moved in, although there was hardly any commotion, just some muted thumps and the shuffling of footsteps up our apartment block’s stairwell. But perhaps it was the strain of the workmen we felt – their soft heaving through the walls, like the frequency of a faraway signal that only became deafening once you concentrated hard enough.

“Is that – Did you hear –” Yen said, chewing on a peanut butter waffle. She rushed out, abandoning the snack. I trailed after her. The bathtub was just sitting there, blocking the two lifts, its petal-like rim yawning open at us. It had a fluid form, as if it were morphing into a floral sculpture right there. Its marble surface gleamed playfully. It had tricked us, with its paper-thin-looking walls – when you went closer, you’d realise it was solid, immovable, hundred percent stone.

The workmen were gone. Their voices trickled down the stairs. All the light coming through the corridor was drawn to the surface of the bathtub, settling there. Yen put a hand on its rim and went, Oh, like she had touched something very hot or very cold. She began to circle the tub, tracing her hand across its perimeter. I followed. There were more things to discover, like the faint marble veins crawling over the bathtub. Or the fact that we were taking a while to get around it, which meant that it was huge, wide enough for two. Then it occurred to us: something was wrong.

It wasn't that we couldn't put bathtubs in our HDB flats. But a regular tub easily swallowed up three quarters of the master bathroom. To fix this, you had to extend the bathroom's floor-space. That was the problem. You needed a permit. And even if you got one, and eventually carved out that extra bit of space, that area was only permitted for 'dry use' – whatever that meant. An oversized tub certainly fell under 'wet' use. Very wet. But those were the rules. You never know what could happen for these transgressions.

Gary and Giovanni didn't come out to collect the bathtub. Their door was shut, and even after knocking for some time, no one answered. We could only hear short bursts of drilling firing on the inside.

The next morning, as if she'd received a vision at night, my wife said she wanted one too. A bathtub.

"Isn't that a super gorgeous tub?" she said, rolling to her side. We rarely spoke or saw each other in the mornings, because Yen's day at the library started an hour before my first lecture.

"Yah, it's quite something." I sat up, throwing the covers off. It was one of those blazing mornings where I found myself sweating all the way to my balls before feeling properly awake.

Yen was standing at the foot of our bed, still hugging a pillow as she said, “Imagine: What if they get caught in the bathtub?”

“Who?”

She ignored me and grabbed the bedpost with both hands. “One straddling the other.” She moaned and thrust her hips. I tutted, and this encouraged her more – she liked to believe that I was the prude, and she, the provocative one.

Yen went on, “Which do you think would be the more serious crime? Illegal bathtub or illegal sex?”

“Technically, owning a bathtub isn’t ille– Anyway. Why would you even say that? Isn’t Gary your childhood friend?”

“Technically, we were strangers at a party.”

What the hell? I pulled off my singlet. It was rank from sweat.

Yen squashed the pillow under her armpit, and began jabbing at the air. “But anyway, think about it. This whole bathroom rule. Isn’t that excellent commentary on our society? The personal is political. Power being diffused through paternalistic policies.”

“Cool. Please pass the pillow.”

Yen aimed it at my face.

“Yah. I’m just saying – you don’t bring *kueh lapis* over, then joke about their situation behind their backs.”

“I’m not,” said Yen. “I’m not laughing at them.” Then she paused at the bathroom doorway and shot me a smile. “But don’t you ever wonder – in the bathtub, who goes in front?”

When Yen was out of the shower, I said, since she talked so much about Gary, she should really warn him about the regulations.

“They probably know,” She replied. “Who cares?” She had no clothes on. A towel was twisted into a turban on her head. I finally got up, drew the curtains, and tossed my shirt into the laundry bin. The morning light fell harshly on her. She did not seem to mind me staring at the green veins high up her thighs. She took her time to stamp her feet dry on the bathroom mat.

“The bathtub’s still there? At the lift?” I said.

“Yep. It’s a nice idea, isn’t it?” she said, pulling her panties up.

“Yah,” I said, sliding past her to the bathroom. “If you want the *gah-men* to fuck you up.” I jabbed her arm.

Yen began to brush her teeth with a very determined look. Sometimes her gums would bleed. After I closed the shower screen, I heard her say something unintelligible but passionate with the toothbrush sticking out of her mouth.

She gargled and repeated, “Don’t you get it? If *we* install an oversized tub too, it’s a sign of solidarity. We’d be saying fuck you to the law, fuck you to surveillance on our private lives.”

“Well done, Miss Sociology 101,” I said, lathering myself with soap. “But this rule – it’s just a matter of building safety.”

When I was done rinsing, Yen was still undressed. Her breasts quivered as she planted her hands on her waist. “Whatever it is, look at the symbolic picture.”

“Are we really having a conversation about this?” I said. I had a sudden urge to put my mouth to her tit – the one bigger than the other, the one perpetually swung to the left – for old time’s sake. I touched her shoulder instead.

“Plus, it’s a nice thing,” she said. “I never had a bathtub my whole life.” Yen pulled a bra hanging from a hook behind the door. She dressed quickly.

“Mm.” I pointed the shaver at her. “Basic human need.”

“Hey, it’s not just me, OK? The other neighbours went gaga too when they saw it.”

I folded the bathroom door shut. The hairdryer whirled outside. I peered at my scalp in the mirror; the bald patch had grown wider. I made a mental note to shave my head later that evening.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, Yen said, “Why can’t you actually come on board? For once.” She was waving the hairdryer at her temple, as if threatening to shoot herself. I touched my head. It was softer than I remembered.

My wife began to brush makeup onto her face. The colours seemed to twist and change her features. She stood by the mirror with one leg hooked behind the other. I wanted to knock her over. But my whole body felt leaden, weighed down by the shameful need to be tethered to her.

I said, “What about you? You go around acting like Gary’s friend, but you’ve turned him and Giovanni into some kind of parable for your dumb theories. You’re two-faced. Crazy.” I felt like I’d coughed up a bone lodged at the back of my throat all these years: crazy – yes.

Yen’s eyes were calm, like she was watching me behind a screen. She said, “I was thinking we could still re-do the bathroom. Change the tiles. Replace the sink.”

“You’re restless, I know.” I couldn’t stop talking. “It looks like everyone’s got so much going on. And we’re getting left behind. That’s why you’re obsessed with other people’s lives, right?”

She was all done, tucking her blouse into her pants. I crossed the room to her.

“Yen,” I said, putting a hand on her back. “How about focusing on us. Do you want to try again?”

“Now you’re offering me a baby to replace a bathtub?” She took her bag and went to work.

When I left the house, Gary and Giovanni were out at the lift landing. I nearly dropped my briefcase when I saw them. Giovanni was in a too-small bathrobe. Both men had not shaved in days. Gary looked battered, but he made a sound – a cross between some kind of moo and a squeal – as he gazed at the bathtub.

“Good neighbour,” Giovanni said when he saw me, and raised his chin.

“Hey, guys. Good to see you. We were worried,” I said. I didn’t know what to do with my hands. I rubbed them together and jammed them into my pockets.

Gary patted the rim of the tub and said, “Sorry about leaving this out here. Mum was acting up with the new nurse, so I had to stay over. Gio was with us after midnight, so you probably didn’t catch him. And –” he sighed. “Big screw up with the contractors – the subcontractor of the subcontractor didn’t ask for our measurements the first time, they just assumed it’d fit. We thought no problem, we’d just take up some extra space from the bedroom, but did you know you needed permission to expand your bathroom’s floor area? I forgot what I missed most about this place – you step out of your house, walk five feet, and you break a law. Amazing.” Gary’s face had gone all red, and Giovanni was rubbing his back. I stared at them.

Giovanni said, “We’ll find a way. Anyway, we’re sorry for this. For the inconvenience.”

“That’s OK,” I said with a smile. I put my bag down. I had gone round the bathtub to call the lift, and it arrived while Gary was speaking. It went back down again. “Everyone on this floor had a free bath in there. We helped ourselves.”

“Is that so?” Giovanni said with a grin. He gave his big laugh and squeezed Gary’s hand. “How’s Yen Mei?”

“Good, good. You just missed her,” I said. “Anyway, can I help?”

Before I went to class, I called my wife. I said, “Guess what? They moved it in. I helped. It *is* as heavy as it looks. I can’t believe they still want it. But isn’t that Giovanni’s idea? Something you don’t need, for what – maximum pleasure? It’s just sitting in their hall, in all its gratuitous glory, because the contractor refused to fix it up. But I get it now. My goodness. You look at it, and it’s opening its big, flowery mouth at you, and you just want to slide in. You just want to sink in there, and never come out.” My heart was pounding, racing, but the words that came out of my mouth were rushing ahead, stumbling towards a hazy distance. “I didn’t tell them,” I said. “I didn’t tell them we knew about the rules.” I waited for the silence at the end of the line to break. I didn’t know how long it’d take for her to say something or cut the line, but time was all I had, like holding your breath underwater just to reach that sweet delirium, just to see how much your lungs could take.

The Visit

When you see your aunt after her diagnosis, she says, *Help me remember my body as it is*. You stare at the frosted glass bricks embedded in the walls of her house. Daylight gets caught in the translucent blocks, turning into murky squares. The labrador with green eyes is barking outside. It is just you and her in this big house. Each time you visit, things show up in different forms: Isn't the crocheted table runner – the one you were fiddling with while she was speaking – her favourite blue shawl? And those curtains with corgis in bow ties – you swear those had once been your bedsheets in the guest room. On the sofa, two plump cushions are stuffed in old T-shirts with the slogans: “I am Nothing ‘cuz Nothing is Perfect” and “My Greatest Flaw is Being A Perfectionist”.

Even with the slouch now, her presence is permanent, like a statue towering over you. At the dining table, she is taking quick gulps from a Coca-cola glass, and you watch the green juice disappearing down its curves. She stares into the empty glass and asks, *Am I being vain? I just need proof of me*, she says. *Pre-mastectomy, pre-chemo*. She has a tic. Blink, it goes. Blink, blink.

You reply, OK Aunty Joan. But how? You sip on your Milo; no matter how careful you are, you still burn your tongue. She pushes her slim glasses over her head. Her eyes are always bright and wet, like she might cry any time. *This is an uncomfortable task*, she says, leaning forward, spreading her big hands on the table. Her nails are stumpy, clipped so far back that the tips of her fingers have become pink and puffy. You spot a glob of juice on her chin. She has freckles only on her left cheek – the spots look like they're hurrying towards her ear. *I need someone to take photos of me*, she says. Sure, you nod. *Naked*, she says, folding her pale arms. They jiggle. You feel her eyes on you, waiting. You wonder what cancer means, what it really means.

Then she smiles: *It's not porno; it's documentary.* Uh huh, you go. Actually, you can barely look at your own body in the shower. But documentary – you like that. *Are you sure?* Auntie Joan says. Yah cool, you insist. Then you frown, Why didn't you ask Mum? You look at each other while the wooden windchimes in the hall knock about.

Your mother is out in Auntie Joan's Proton Wira for a grocery run. An hour ago, you made the effort to wave her out of the driveway, holding up your crossed fingers, because you know how she feels about driving, *and* the Kuala Lumpur traffic. You watched her start the car, shift her sunglasses up and down her face, before finally shoving them to the dashboard. You wanted to slip into the car beside her while she stayed crouching against the wheel, squinting ahead. But then the engine roared off, so you bent down to pat the dog.

Your mother? Auntie Joan laughs. *Yau mo gau chor.* They laugh exactly the same way, in that throaty register of genuine surprise, chin tilted down, chest swaying back and forth – though they hardly laugh at the same things.

Last night, I asked your mother if she wanted to see the lump, but she went all mumbly jumbly, and said, no, why should she? Auntie Joan blinks. You wonder when her eyes will overflow. You twist your lips, nervous that you are both talking about your mother behind her back. This makes Auntie Joan laugh again, which frightens you a little; her large body trembles like a mountain.

The afternoon you and your mother arrived in KL, she sent you upstairs to unpack, then pulled out a plastic folder stuffed with pages printed from the Internet. After your mother sat Auntie Joan down on the sofa, your aunt shot you a wink when she caught you staring down at them from the top of the stairs. When your mother started to talk about alternative therapies, you were embarrassed for her, for that wobbly urgency in her voice that reminded you of salesmen who'd intercept passers-by at MRT stations back home.

At first, Aunty Joan just hugged her cushion, tracing the slogan on its cover with a finger. Then she finally turned to your mother and said, *Please*, holding your mother's shoulders with both hands. From above, the circle of white on your mother's scalp gaped at you. She waved the fluttering pages and said to Aunty Joan, *There's no harm trying. Can't you just cooperate? And make this bearable for once?* Aunty Joan asked back, *For who? Do you even know what I'm dealing with? You can't even say the word, right?* Your head spun, trying to find an end to these adult riddles. Your mother had no answer; you could feel the tremours passing through her and your aunt. Then, she put her hands on Aunty Joan's shoulders too. It was ridiculous – two large women facing each other with their arms and shoulders connected, as if they were forming a human bridge in a children's game. It is the week-long March holidays, and you thought about a poem you read during the term. But you remembered nothing from it, except that the speaker was on a walk, thinking about his father. There was also a house in the background – a real house like Aunty Joan's, not the flat you live in back home – and this phrase: *whose indomitable love / kept me in chains*. You tried to retrieve the rest of the lines, but its images had disappeared, sounds turned to shadow, and only a heavy sadness remained; you could feel your mother and Aunty Joan sinking from it, pulling each other down.

I just need a witness, Aunty Joan tells you now. *Someone to stare in the face of horror with me. You know, when we were young, your mother and I would fight over who could tell the better Hantu story. Maybe she could handle that because it wasn't real.*

You already know about this childhood game, the ghost stories your aunt and mother twisted so the tales would become so horrific they were improbable, comical. When it was too hot to sleep, they would sit up on their beds facing the window, watching the black steamy unknown of the jungle. While the crickets shrieked outside, they whispered how

female ghosts could shapeshift into other witches, vampires, or Pontaniaks, unleashing a variety of powers and methods of torture on victims. When they started each story, their arms would go numb with goose bumps, but by the end, they'd flop to the floor with laughter. This was how they dealt with the dark – they found *the funny in the scary*, your mother would tell you, raising both hands and wagging her fingers, when you pestered her about her childhood. You wanted badly to know what it's like. You always sensed there was a secrecy between sisters – the telepathy, games, and rituals far more intricate than the tusslings that went on between you and your brother.

The way Aunty Joan stares at you makes you sit up. *But you*, she says. *You're not scared of a stupid lump, right?* She sweeps her gaze around the house. You cannot tell if she's thought about this for a long time, or made up her mind on the spot.

You follow Aunty Joan up to her bedroom. There is still that old, lumpy bed. A dream-catcher hangs by the window grille – you make out a pair of dangly ruby earrings now strung up with feathers. On the ledge of the bedframe, there are some dusty trinkets and a photograph of Aunty Joan and a boy. You know not to ask about this cousin of yours. In the picture, she is lifting the boy by his armpits. He looks about five, pretty and light as a doll, legs floating above the ground. You guess that the green, pillowy hills in the background is Cameron Highlands. Aunty Joan is really laughing there – you can see her chest pitching forward.

You sit on the edge of the bed, humming something to fill the space. Aunty Joan draws the curtains slightly, half-heartedly, as if moving out of muscle-memory – if anyone on the street were to look up, they could see. She slides open the dresser drawer, waves an instant film camera at you and says, *Know how to use this?* You recognise it immediately, this bulbous, plasticky device, happy and silly-looking as a toy. Your noisy classmates, the ones who make a big deal about the latest mobile phones, have been showing off such

cameras at movie outings. They'd snatch for the film the moment it winds out of the camera, still warm and blank. Then they'd pinch its white frame, shaking the film in a wild, stupid way, impatient for the magic, for the picture to form.

Yah, very easy, you reply.

OK, Girl. Just two photos – one front, one back. Don't take the face.

She goes to the end of the room, leaning against the wardrobe. From that distance, Aunty Joan seems younger, smaller.

Ready, Xuan?

She begins to pull her blouse over her head, her arms twisting and flailing upwards, like she is sinking and calling for help. You have never seen her like this, out of synchrony. You hope by the time she is done, the heat in your face wouldn't show. Her belly is soft like her arms, the flesh piling around her waist. For the first time, you really see stretch marks – one of those sacrifices your mother goes on about when she cannot get you and your brother to do what she wants. The lines around Aunty Joan's navel are white but shaped like algae, curvy and running upwards. She untangles her arms from the fabric so the shirt falls back over her torso.

Actually, Xuan. Sayang. I can try it myself, with the mirror.

Huh? Aunty Joan, I really don't mind.

You hold the camera up to your face, squeezing one eye shut, showing that you are professional, that it is too late for either of you to back out.

The room goes silent and rocks, as if everything is happening underwater. Her shirt and pants come off, tumbling into a mound at her feet. After unhooking her bra, she crosses an arm over her chest. She rolls her panties down with the other hand. When she rises, you don't know where to look. There is a dark nest of hair between her legs. She shivers in her

nakednes and looks ahead, blinking beyond you. Aunty Joan's breasts are small and sloping downwards.

Then she smiles and says, *No need to be shy – we are the same, hai mai?* You know she means 'same' as in girl / woman. But you look nothing like your mother or Aunty Joan. You are small and skinny like a monkey. Your hair is fine and iron-straight. They have matching frizzy hair, though Aunty Joan's is cropped at the chin, and your mother wears hers in a ponytail. Aunty Joan could be a stranger. You don't reply, you just do as she says, framing her from the neck down.

She takes a few steps to the book shelf to avoid the sun's glare. You stare at her flesh quivering as she moves, all the lines and freckles on her body, every part of her hotly alive. Then you see it, the lump. It is dark like a bruise, a hard, wrinkly bud pushing out from under her skin. You gasp; the sound leaves your throat like a wind. You drop your arm, the one holding up the camera. Oh my god, you say. Looks like a fruit. Something rotten. You don't know what has come over you – suddenly, your cheeks are burning and and the back of your throat is welling up.

Aunty Joan presses two fingers there and peers down at it. She goes pale for an instant and her eyes narrow, like she is realising the lump for the first time. When she looks back up at you she doesn't look hurt or try to comfort you. Then she laughs her deep, trembly laugh and says, *Hai lor, terribly rotten. So, you see it, Xuan? You see it?* You say yes, feeling her body warm and radiating from the other end of the room. *That's right,* Aunty Joan says. *Thank you.* Her face is streaming with tears, and she tilts her head up, a silly thing you've seen your mother do, as if she could roll the streaks back into her eyes. Her body is still posed for the camera – one hand on her waist and a slight bent in the opposite knee. Somehow, this makes your legs turn jelly, like you are looking down from a very tall building. But what

truly terrifies you is your own indifference towards falling, the secret part of you that accepts death – not the idea of falling.

You carry on. You are amazed by how Aunty Joan fits within the tiny square of the viewfinder. After a click, the film crawls out of the camera. You cup the film with both hands, feeling the miracle forming in the heat of your palms. Before you see the emerging outline, Aunty Joan has already turned around, waiting for her back shot.

When the camera clicks again, you hear the Proton Wira backing up into the driveway, the thud of the flower pot getting knocked down whenever your mother parks. Aunty Joan exhales and says to you, *Alright, thanks sayang*. She leaves her clothes on the floor but grabs a bathrobe hanging by the door. She hasn't even seen the pictures. You pull the curtains open. Outside, your mother is unloading the boot, looping bag after bag through her arms. The weight makes her shoulders droop even more, and her tall frame huddles against itself, as if protecting herself from a storm.

She disappears from the window. Her voice rises through the house, hard and happy: *Anybody home?* This makes you want to rush down and grab her by the shoulders, the way Aunty Joan did the other day, to shut her up. You want to ram a hand into her and squeeze her heart, saying this is how it feels to see cancer on a body. You want to brag that Aunty Joan chose you for the task, but blame your mother for having escaped it at the same time.

Aunty Joan goes down to meet your mother. The voices of the women drift between the kitchen and dining room. Nothing is appearing on the photographs yet. You flap the pictures about, blowing at them desperately.

You hear Aunty Joan say, *I can feel it*. You go out to the banister and see her downstairs, tapping her chest. You study the pictures again, this secret that your mother has not earned her part in. But Aunty Joan is barely appearing on each film. You can only see her

legs, while the top of her body has disappeared into the light, all of her submerged in the camera's flash.

Hmm? Feel it? Your mother says, laying out tubs of capsules on the dining table. The pills inside rattle.

Spreading, Aunty Joan says, her voice rising.

Don't be emotional. You haven't even started treatment. What was I saying about the dosage of Beta-Carotene? And listen to all these testimonials.

The house goes silent, it seems to dim. Aunty Joan walks away, going up the stairs. You feel each step quiver as she climbs. You are waiting for her on the banister, so you can show her the pictures and ask if you should try again.

But your mother calls out, *OK-OK-OK*. She is circling the dining table. Her hands seem to shake, now that they're empty. *Cancer*, she says so sharply, that even from upstairs, you jump. *There. Said it. Happy now?*

When Aunty Joan doesn't reply, your mother says, *You can mourn all you like, but let me keep my hope.*

Aunty Joan turns around, her feet squelching back down the stairs. You rush after her, but by the time you reach the foot of the stairs, Aunty Joan is nodding. At first, you think this means your mother has got the final say, that Aunty Joan is surrendering in the argument. You will realise, years later, long after Aunty Joan dies that Christmas, that it did not matter who was wrong or right, or whose suffering was more justified. Aunty Joan was submitting to love, to the inevitable. And even though your mother thought she had her wall up with her antics and delusions, theirs was a private pain she could never be disqualified from. Up in Aunty Joan's room, you had thought you could help to bear it. But when your mother and Aunty Joan heard you panting quietly by the staircase, they turned to you with equal surprise as if you were an intruder, forgetting you had been in the house all along. And all you could

do was stand there, with one hand in your pocket hiding the overexposed photographs,
waiting for either woman to tell you what to do.

EXEGESIS

(i) Introduction

Set in contemporary Singapore, this collection of seven stories focuses on how private, quotidian moments reveal human failings, pain, desire and love. Here, ordinary characters are confronted in familiar, often domestic settings, and their moments of reckonings often transpire through memory, or intersect with memory. These lead to, or expose the relational gulfs between themselves and the ones closest to them, such as family members and spouses. As my writing practice draws extensively from other short stories, this exegesis maps out the ways I put my stories in conversation with critical readings of these works, and relevant literary theories and cross-disciplinary studies.

I begin by contextualizing my work and its aims with an overview of the formal tradition of the short story. Here, I refer to Charles E. May's *Short Story Theories* (1976) and *The New Short Story Theories* (1990), which contain essays and discussions by writers and critics on the short story's aesthetic, technical and thematic concerns, and its formal evolution. I engage with these theories in my close-readings of exemplary texts, highlighting narrative techniques that have influenced my work. Subsequently, I locate my work in the context of contemporary Singapore, discussing my observations of the existing short story scene, and the gaps my work attempts to fill.

As the short story has been characterized as fragmentary and more nebulous in terms of chronology, many of my stories are time-conscious, structurally and thematically. Hence, in the third section, I examine time and chronology, beginning with Gérard Genette's narratological approach. Thematically, I delve into personal memory as a form of narrative and how this implicates selfhood, where I rely on the interdisciplinary research of narrative and psychology. In the final section, I explore the aesthetics of the everyday, discussing the

object-centric focus of my stories. Here, I look at the classic Chekhovian technique of expressing “a complex inner state by presenting selected concrete details” (May 202) in tandem with political theorist Jane Bennett’s view on “thing-power”, where she sees objects as “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them...” (Bennett 5).

(ii) The Short Story

Many critics describe the short story as a form distinct from the novel, and therefore the short story must be studied on its own terms. It has been described as: closer to the lyric poem than the novel (May and Kostelanetz), “fragmentary and inconclusive” (May 5), and Nadine Gordimer most aptly describes the short story as an “art of ... the present moment” that “(sees) by the light of the flash” (Gordimer 265). In a similar vein, Julio Cortázar offers a lapidary analogy of the snapshot: “The novel and the short story can be compared analogically with the film and the photograph.... Photographs... define their art as an apparent paradox: that of cutting off a fragment of reality, giving it certain limits, but in such a way that this segment acts like an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality...” (246). The story’s fleeting form is also a metaphor for how “the world comes to us as fractured and hollow” (March-Russell 171).

The ‘cutting off’ in which a more heightened reality is framed speaks to the importance and intensity of a story’s mood, a quality traced to Chekhov’s work (May 200). This ‘flash’, or ‘explosion’ by which the story illuminates also brings to mind the epiphanic endings of Joyce’s stories. In an essay published in 1966, Richard Kostelanetz argues that the techniques of Chekhov and Joyce have become less common in the fiction of his time (218). While I agree that many later stories write against a single, explosive revelation, Chekhov’s influence is still relevant and very much felt in short stories today. I draw equally from Joyce

and Katherine Mansfield's psychological insights and lyricism, as much as I admire the detached, plain-speaking observations of Carver and other 'Minimalist' writers like Tobias Wolff and Ann Beattie. The inimitable Asian-diaspora voices of Jhumpa Lahiri and Yiyun Li that emerged in more recent decades have also fed the specific cultural concerns of my work. No matter how varied, these works operate on at least one, if not all the impulses of a Chekhov story.

May observes that the Chekhov story marries "the specific detail of realism with the poetic lyricism of romanticism" (199), where nothing is allowed to "'happen' but only smoothly and imperceptibly to become'" (May 200). Suzanne Ferguson, who argues that the modern story is Impressionistic in that "how things 'feel' or 'seem' to the characters (are) the preferred subject" (220), also observes that the modern story has a "deemphasis of physical action" (221). This changes the nature of plot, which "leaves adjustments of thought or feeling as the true 'events'" (Ferguson 221), concurring with Bader's observation of how contemporary stories work through a "method of indirection" (110). Although later writers like Beattie and Wolff appear to have less tonal affinity with the modern Chekhov story, their works likewise operate through this looseness of plot and minimal reliance on external action.

Beattie's work also continues to demonstrate the modernist mode of presenting a subjective reality (Ferguson 221). Her "flat, stark prose" with "benumbed" characters (Young and Thibodeaux 66) can be seen as reflecting the unsentimental, anomic zeitgeist of post-Vietnam war America, the era in which her early work took off. As seen in these opening lines of her story "Learning to Fall", the diction is plain and clipped, and there is no exposition on the background of the characters:

Ruth's house, early morning: a bowl of apples on the kitchen table, crumbs on the checkered table cloth... "More coffee?" Ruth asks me. I nod yes, and let her pour it... "What about brushing your hair?" she says to Andrew. He gets up and leaves the room, comes back with a wooden brush and begins to brush his hair." (Beattie 3)

Subsequently, the rest of the scenes do not culminate in a climax. Instead, they progress through a "method of indirection", mimicking the unnamed narrator's day-trip through New York City with Andrew, the eight-year-old son of her good friend, Ruth. The present-tense narration also highlights the spontaneity of the journey, so the reader almost feels like he is walking through the city with the characters. Yet, even though the occurrences during the trip seem non-eventful, these moments, interspersed with flashbacks, present "a succession of revelatory moments" (Kostelanetz 218). Personal troubles of the characters are revealed – Andrew has a birth defect due to a medical mistake; his mother Ruth is in financial doldrums; the narrator, who is married, is unable to detach herself from her lover Ray, whom she meets on these trips to the city. Towards the end, Andrew, the narrator, and Ray are in a diner, where Andrew reveals that his mother is now "learning to fall" in her dance class. The story closes as they leave the diner:

Ray looks at me and smiles, it's so obvious that I'm holding the envelope with both hands so I don't have to hold his hand. He moves in close and puts his hand around my shoulder . . . What Ruth has known all along: what will happen can't be stopped. Aim for grace. (Beattie 15)

The ending is inconclusive – while the narrator's desire and restraint is stark, nothing quite changes between her and Ray; life goes on. The sequence is also fragmentary – it jumps from

the present moment between the narrator and Ray, to Ruth, who does not appear in this scene, albeit through Andrew's anecdote. The beautiful, elusive final sentence may be read as the narrator's epiphany, though the analogy is obscure, open-ended. Whose fall is it – the narrator's or Ruth's? Perhaps it could even refer to young Andrew's inevitable descent into the disillusioning adult world. The three words are at once instructive and ambivalent, their mystery drawing the reader to revisit the story again and again.

I experiment with a similar loosely structured narrative in my story "Ants". Similarly, while the events of my story don't result in "changes that occur in, with, through" (Bal 13) the protagonist Annie, I attempt to draw out a similar ennui prevalent in Beattie's world. As seen in one of the opening paragraphs, much attention is paid to the concrete details of mundane domesticity:

The empty oven was pre-heating on the kitchen counter, giving off a red glow. Beside it, there were bowls of different sizes with all sorts of instruments in them. There was a bag of flour with its top slit open, a large bowl of beaten eggs, a tub of baking soda, a can of cherries... (Tan 8)

On the surface, "Ants" is not 'about' much – in the aftermath of a broken engagement, Annie experiences the dread of celebrating her twenty-ninth birthday with her family. There is also a recent ant invasion in Annie's home that preoccupies her elderly mother. While not quite functioning as a metaphor of Annie's interiority, the significance of the ants and paranoia surrounding them are open-ended. The story meanders into Annie's past, not quite following a single succession of events that lead to her confrontation with her elder sister Ames towards the end of the story. Tensions are implied, relying on readers to fill in the missing elements. Nothing really happens outside of Annie's home – while her

fantasies take her to exotic landscapes, her reality is still very much contained within the home, the domestic space trapping her in, preventing her from making a life of her own. The home as “an interstitial space of resistance” (Bordoloi 30) is a concept inspired by Lahiri’s early work, which often delve into intergenerational tensions of immigrant families. While my stories don’t quite grapple with cultural displacement, characters are often bound up in their familial roles and obligations – in “Ants”, Annie is stifled by her mother’s coddling; in “Lucky for this view”, David is a reluctant and unreliable father; in “The Bathtub”, the narrator and his wife hang on to a marriage they have long lost. The quiet strife prevalent in these homes represents the common struggle of conforming to expectations determined by the institution of the family.

Another story that masterfully demonstrates the method of indirection is Tobias Wolff’s “A White Bible”. However, Wolff’s indirection is different from Beattie’s; while the latter’s narrative trajectory does not conform to the plotted story, Wolff introduces a strong, externally dramatic premise, then derails it. The story begins with high-school teacher Maureen being held captive in her own car by a mystery man. At first, the man is sinister; a violent and disastrous end for Maureen is imminent. But the ominous tension soon implodes when the man reveals that he is the father of Maureen’s student, Hassan, whom Maureen wants to report for cheating in an exam. Hassan’s father has acted on an impulse to confront Maureen; he is not even armed in the first place. While there is no longer the threat of real violence, there is more room to develop new psychological tensions, reveal rich character complexity, and to subvert the power dynamics between both characters.

The deliberate diversion from dramatic events can also be observed in Alice Munro’s collection *The Progress of Love*. In the title story, the narrator’s grandmother almost hangs herself from a tree; in “Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux”, a man nearly misfires at his mentally disabled brother; in “Miles City, Montana” a woman watches her daughter almost drown.

While Munro seems to grace her characters with second chances by turning away from these violent ends, these almost-tragedies come with their own set of complex consequences. As the tragedy is introduced but not fulfilled, this ‘what-if’ anxiety will always loom in the characters’ minds. This method of indirection, in which the narrative deviates from a possible climax, seems to parallel the unexpected trajectory of life – it reminds us of the little graces granted to us, yet the imminent threat of our own everyday cruelties and carelessness.

I attempt a similar move in “Mirror & Way”, where my young protagonist Miranda almost drowns her friend Wei Xiang in a fit of anger. The boy is not hurt, and Miranda escapes the consequences for her actions as no adult witnessed what she did. However, her desire and capability for violence opens up new power dynamics between the children. Both Miranda, who is of a minority race, and Wei Xiang, a boy with albinism, are forced to navigate their differences in society as they face discriminatory micro-aggressions from other children. The near-drowning gives Miranda the temporary taste of power over another marginalized person. Yet, because the drowning does not actually happen, the threat lingers over Wei Xiang up till the end of the story, where Miranda pressures him to hang dangerously from an exercise bar in a game of play, reflecting the sense of precariousness that haunts minority persons in their daily lives.

(iii) The Short Story in Singapore

In a country with a one-party leadership that wields hawk-eyed censorship over art, media and literature, Singapore writers have to constantly interrogate their milieu while negotiating their constraints as a writer. Sociologist Teo Yeo Yenn observes that due to the explicit and extensive reach of state ideology, “The Singapore ‘gahmen’ (government), perhaps more so than many other states, looms large in Singaporeans’ imaginations...” causing “Singaporeans to constantly think and talk about the state” (7). With few mediums for resistance, literature

has become the space for such conversations to further develop – our stories often speak of societal ills such as materialism, class and racial inequalities, paranoia and disillusionment, among others. In his foreword to Dave Chua’s collection *The Beating*, Gwee Li Sui declares, “The Singaporean knows alienation in a deeply intimate sense” (6).

A significant collection of stories to look at is Amanda Lee Koe’s Singapore Literature Prize winning *Ministry of Moral Panic* (2013). It features genre-bending tales of magical realism, historical fiction and folklore, conveyed through Q&A formats, diary entries and more, all while reflecting contemporary Singaporean sensibilities. Lee Koe’s version of Singapore is eclectic yet relatable – characters range from a recognizable local TV personality, to migrant workers, artists, and academics. Yet, the stories are not just about its people, but their “cultural, social, economic and political overlays” (Ng “A Shattered Kaleidoscope”). While Lee Koe’s characters are compelling and sensitively crafted (particularly in “Pawn”; “The King of Caldecott Hill”; and “Every Park on This Island”), character motivation is often bound by the author’s desire to highlight structural inequalities.

For instance, the conflict in “Two Ways To Do This” arises from the structurally exploitative relationship between the Indonesian domestic worker Zurotul and her Singaporean employers. While power dynamics are inverted as Zurotul is given sexual agency, her female employer falls into the trope of a condescending middle-class Singaporean, and her male employer is a caricature of a sexually repressed hen-pecked husband. Here is a clear, unambiguous divide between the hero and antagonist – the former being an exploited, under-represented figure in society, while the latter representing the privileged, powerful class.

This divide is also apparent in “Fourteen Entries of the Diary of Maria Hertogh”, as characters feel either cast as heroes or antagonists. While it could have been precisely Lee Koe’s intention to highlight and invert historical colonial oppression, the writer’s judgment

seems to have found its way into the fictional world. In one entry, Maria recalls how a female academic wanted to write a paper on her as “a pawn of symbolism for the last vestiges of the perception of pride for a vacating colonial power” (Lee Koe 142).

Hence, while Lee Koe’s stories are powerful commentaries, I find myself – as writer and reader – careful of clear moral messages. I then wonder if there is room to explore more nuance and contradictions within characters, while situating these within the problematic systems of society.

Alfian Sa’at’s short story collection *Corridor*, published fifteen years before Lee Koe’s, explores ‘Singaporeanness’ among a cast of mostly working-class HDB dwellers, where characters strive for upward mobility and grapple with repressed sexualities along with class and racial inequalities. While Alfian’s delivery of social critique is unmistakable, such as illustrating Chinese privilege in “Umbrella”, he accomplishes this while also surprising the reader with more varied emotional complexities. Characters are clearly products of the system, yet still very much layered with complex relational dynamics (“Cubicle”), unexpected motivations and moral ambiguity (“Project”; “Orphans”).

My version of the Singapore-based short story aims to sit somewhere between Lee Koe’s and Alfian’s works – I aspire towards Lee Koe’s diverse Singapore, while admiring Alfian’s fidelity to the actual and his commitment to exploring the psychological nuances of characters, which speak of a Chekhovian influence.

To gain a broader overview on Singapore’s short story scene, I also sought out *The Best New Singaporean Short Stories* series edited by Jason Erik Lundberg, as it suggests a scope not limited by genre or theme. Through Lundberg’s meticulous cataloging, I discovered affinity with more Singapore writers such as Dave Chua, Stephanie Ye and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow. In many of the stories I read across Volumes One and Two, world-building details such as food, public housing, and Singlish dialogue are often captured with

much richness, nuance and care. Yet at times, the writing would get too caught up in ‘Singaporeanizing’ a story, such that asserting its localness would take precedence, and characters would be reduced to types, leaving much potential for emotional complexities and surprising motivations unfulfilled. Plots also often rely on external action rather than internal shifts, and the thrusts of many of these stories seem largely allegorical.

This is not to say my work strives to deny or disengage from its social milieu. In fact, it is very much plugged in to the culturally specific forces that determine characters’ trajectories. In “Ants”, Annie’s predicament is idiosyncratically Singaporean. Just as Teo observes how “the road to marriage cannot be separated from the quest for public housing” (6), Annie’s broken engagement has resulted in her loss of home ownership, which denies her an important rite of passage into adulthood. In Singapore, unmarried individuals below thirty-five are barred from buying public housing. This subjects Singaporeans “to the Housing and Development Board’s criterion of ‘family nucleus’ formation” (Teo 6), marginalizing not just young singles like Annie, but those who also fall outside the prescribed family unit, such as the LGBTQ community. Yet, while this feeds the situational premise, the revelatory moments are less big-picture statements, but more individual experiences of selfhood, sexual identity, and the trickiness of sisterly dynamics. I bear in mind Flannery O’Connor’s advice to always return to the human aspect of each story, focusing on how “some folks will do, *will do* in spite of everything” (90). Another story, “The Bathtub”, which makes references to real-life housing regulations, deviates from direct criticisms of the state to draw a fuller picture of state-society relations, where I dramatize a character’s hyper-awareness of the state’s presence in their lives.

As I continued my research on the Singapore short story, more questions turned up. What makes the short story so apt in conveying the Singaporean experience? Why does Singapore need the short story? Why is the short story, as Lundberg claims in his

introduction to *The Best New Singaporean Short Stories Volume One*, “experiencing a renaissance” in Singapore (viii)? While he observes how the selected stories here “all deal with loss in one form or another” (Lundberg xi), this theme is not examined vis-à-vis its form. For instance, much could be explored of how the looseness of plot is employed effectively in “The Hearing Aid” by Vinita Ramani Mohan; or how the disruption of chronology in Ye’s “Seascrapers” mirrors her character’s memory loss; or how the unity of mood is well-sustained and prioritized over plot in O Thiam Chin’s “Sleeping”, much like Poe’s classic “Tell-tale Heart”.

Philip Holden answers some of my questions in his introduction to *Hook and Eye* (2018), an anthology of Singapore stories that he compiled. He notes that the length of short stories, which often permits the story to be read in one sitting, allows for the “reflection on marginality” (Holden 13), unlike the longer novel that can cover a “large cast of characters occupying a range of social positions” (11-12). He also argues that the short story’s epiphanic quality encourages this reflection “on our own lives and our relations to society” (13). While Holden’s insights make up a useful starting point, showing how some formal aspects of the short story opens up ways to read these stories in the Singaporean socio-political context, he leaves much room for deeper examinations of the formal techniques employed by writers. Thus, my project, which has been as much a creative practice as it is a critical study, attempts to further formal approaches on reading and writing the Singapore short story.

(iv) Time, Chronology and Memory

In this section, I begin by looking at Genette’s study of time and narrative, in particular, the chapter “Order” from his book *Narrative Discourse*. Genette argues that no matter the time jumps in the narrative discourse, these events can be re-ordered into “sequential relationships” (37). He identifies two kinds of time jumps – one that anticipates future events

from the narrative present, which he terms “prolepsis”, and the other that visits past events, which he terms “analepsis” (40), or what is often described as the “flashback”. He then proposes two kinds of analepsis: the external analepsis is a flashback that provides some background on the character or current situation in the narrative, but does not disrupt the narrative (50), while the internal analepsis “interferes” with the current narrative with “retrospective sections that fill in, after the event, an earlier gap” (51).

However, I’m interested in flashbacks that are harder to identify. I return to Tobias Wolff’s “White Bible”. The story ends with a flashback of Maureen receiving a Bible as a girl. This certainly does not function as an internal analepsis, as it does not “fill in” a gap for the earlier parts of the narrative, which are focused on the confrontation between Maureen and her student’s father. The childhood memory points to a period of innocence in Maureen’s life, but it does not shed light on the climactic event, or her present moral dilemma as to whether she should pardon her student’s cheating. While it could be argued that the flashback is a sort of external analepsis as it provides background to Maureen’s past, the memory is so distant and inconsequential to the present moment that it opens up more questions instead of enlightening the already bizarre scenario. Wolff persistently writes against the “strong epiphany” of the traditional modernist short story (Phelan 56), poetically capturing the haphazard manifestations of memory, which intrigue rather than satisfy.

Aside from the inconsequential flashback in “White Bible”, Wolff experiments with other modes of going back in time which likewise complicate Genette’s theory, as seen in his most well-known story “Bullet in the Brain”. I shall refer to James Phelan’s close-reading of this story – while Phelan focuses on readerly experience, he also offers relevant insights on Wolff’s treatment of time and memory.

After the protagonist Anders gets shot by a bank robber, readers are privy to some memories that Anders does *not* recall in his final moments. Phelan identifies this move as

“disnarration”, a term which he attributes to Gerald Prince (62). This “disnarration” captures, what I call, Anders’s ‘non-memories’, which are relational and tender: his first love, his wife, his daughter; the awe of reciting Greek poems as a student, the admiration for an ex-classmate’s book; the trauma of witnessing a woman leap to her death. In the final memory, where we see Anders in his boyhood, he is completely enraptured after hearing another boy say the phrase “they is” (Wolff 268). The Anders in these flashbacks is starkly different from the Anders in the narrative present, where he is a cynical misanthrope. It shows the span of Anders’s life in an instant – these memories don’t quite ‘flash before his eyes’ as the saying goes, but it flashes before the *reader’s* eyes, as if they were Anders himself experiencing his final moments.

The flashbacks do not serve to fill in the gaps of the external actions in the narrative present. Instead, they appear to contrast his former self to how he is in the narrative present; whereas he has once felt such deep emotions, he is now jaded and cavalier to the point of death. It is clear that the story is not about the dramatic shooting, but about the erosion of an individual’s soul through time – the twist of this story is not on the level of external events, but the way the story is told. It is a powerful way of compressing time, meditating on temporality, and is formally inventive in a subtle manner.

To a different effect, I explore the use of disnarration in “Ants”. After Annie’s sister Ames and brother-in-law Karthik are introduced in the story, there is a series of flashbacks revealing Annie’s initial infatuation with Karthik as a teenager, which has caused Annie to develop sexually voyeuristic desires for her sister and Karthik. Unlike Maureen’s final flashback in “White Bible”, the analepsis that happens in “Ants” is not quite arbitrary – it can be seen as a form of external analepsis, as it provides further information on the sisters’ relationship, which contributes to their bubbling tension in the narrative present. However, after these flashbacks, the narrator qualifies: “But this did not cross her mind on her twenty-

ninth birthday. Now, Annie was simply tired, looking across her family at dinner” (Tan 15). This statement turns the flashbacks into a disnarration, which hopefully adds another layer to Annie’s psychology, showing that while she once felt these complex and conflicting emotions towards her sister, the intensity of her current ennui has overpowered any other feeling. Like Anders, what Annie no longer remembers shows how she has become alienated over time.

Apart from flashbacks, I also explore the fragmented relationships of events in a narrative, and how they operate non-chronologically. In “So Happy”, the episodes are non-chronological and appear independent of one another. The narrative framing here mimics one-half of a conversation between an insomniac woman and her doctor, where “both the addressee and the narrator are part of the storyworld and have an ‘existential’ link” (Mildorf 148). Throughout the story, the narrator divulges specific moments of her personal history that have disturbed her at night. These unlinked incidents do not progress into a narrative climax, but instead seem to repeat a common theme – that of the narrator’s little regrets. Chekhov’s “A Boring Story” that likewise centres on a professor suffering from insomnia, is also structured in a manner that refuses to be read through the “static typology of fabula and *ziuzhet*” (Flath 271). Rather, the narrative is “a metaphor for the passage of human life through time” (Flath 271), “(attempting) a mimesis of a man’s life” (Flath 281). Likewise, in my story, the randomness of recounting reflects the arbitrariness of memory, and my narrator’s hazy state of mind.

As events are not bound to a chronological arrangement, they can operate through a different logic. In “Order, Duration, and Frequency”, Genette observes how the narrator in Proust’s *Sodome et Gomorrhe* tells of “a sequence of episodes not in the order in which they took place but... follow a geographical rather than a chronological pattern” (28). In my story, the memories are arranged in a haphazard pattern determined by the spontaneity of

recounting. It is crucial to note that the narrator does not have full authorial control of her story-telling – the narration is also influenced by the off-stage doctor’s imagined questions. Incidentally, Dave Chua’s story “The Flat” also utilizes the narrative framing which mimics one-half of a dialogue. A property agent does a sales pitch of a flat, but ends up divulging the private lives of the flat’s former occupants. Likewise, the vignettes recounted by the property agent are not developed through chronology, but work towards a unity of mood – that of loss and longing. In the Proustian spirit of letting events flow in a geographical pattern, the narrator’s lead-in to each vignette relies on the physical description of the flat: “See the floor? Marbled. Look at the height of the ceiling in this room. The second occupant of this place watched television sitting on a sofa placed at the edge of the room, beneath the fluorescent light. She was a woman in her fifties...” (Chua 52).

To examine the short story’s use of time, it is also useful to refer to Paul Ricoeur. Unlike Genette’s structural approach, Ricoeur is more concerned with our existential relationship with time. Building on the Heideggerian analysis of ‘within-time-ness’, Ricoeur argues that being in time is a human experience that cannot simply be broken down or measured; it is an “existential now determined by the present of preoccupation” (173). Ricoeur acknowledges that all narratives are “already (reflecting) upon events in order to encompass them into a successive whole” (178). In a sense, the presentation of a narrative is an act of memory-telling; we can even see the entire narrative as an analepsis or a flashback of the narrator. Yet, the narrative is also a mode of making-present. This informs my interest in defamiliarizing the temporal point of narration by using shifting from the past to present tense in certain recollections, just as the narrator in “A Boring Story” tells “almost the entire story in the imperfective aspect, present tense, blurring the distinction between repeated and unique events” (Flath 272). In “So Happy”, the narrator describes her nightly routine to the doctor: “Otherwise, it’s no use staying in bed. I’d get up sweating. I’d walk up and down the

room. Turn up the air-con till my toes go numb. Pull down my nightgown. Go to the window naked. Open the window and let some warm air in” (Tan, 27).

In this instance, it is as if the narrator is *being in* the memory, or “rehearsing” the past in the present. In a psychological study, Fioretti and Smorti argue that “reminiscing about what occurred in the past” is a kind of “rehearsal activity” (40). This rehearsal suggests performance, and performance implies the narrator presently playing the role of a past self, thus simultaneously occupying two temporal points.

This leads to my discussion on how memory implicates selfhood. I examine this in relation to the thematic explorations of memory and the self in my stories. Psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that while time is experienced in other temporal modes, narrative seems to be the only way we can describe “lived time” (692). Likewise, psychologist Mark Freeman argues that personal memory is a form of narrative, or fiction, in a sense. He argues that “memory is always mediated” (273), and “(t)he process of remembering the personal past is always already permeated by narrative as well” (Freeman 274). This is helpful in looking at character interiority in my title story. Towards the end of the story, Mr Loh’s shock is doubly bound up in time. The first would be the dissonance between his beliefs about his daughter – “How she threw herself into making the world a better place!” (Tan 2) – and the moment where her infidelity is revealed. Needless to say, Mr Loh’s impression of Kai Xin has been formed in time, through memory, and her admission resists his long-held narrative about her.

The second thing that throws Mr Loh off is the past uncannily repeating itself. When Kai Xin expresses a similarly cavalier attitude towards her youthful infidelity, it is as if time has gone one full circle; Mr Loh sees himself returning to a small moment of misjudgment decades ago, which resulted in disproportionately grave consequences. Earlier in the story, I hint at Mr Loh’s desire to move on in time – he takes pride in how he has ‘kept up’ with

changing norms, quipping to his ex-wife: “ ‘They do things very differently these days’ ” (Tan 3). This statement then becomes slightly ironic in retrospection, as readers later see that Mr Loh's attempt to progress in time is only superficial and short-lived, as his daughter's confession drags him into his guilty past.

One final comment on time in this story is the symbolism of the train delay. A similar phenomenon happens in Eileen Chang's "Sealed Off", where a tramcar is stalled after the city shuts down. In Chang's story, the journey's stasis is extra time; a married man and single woman have the opportunity to fall in love and fantasize a future together. However, once the tram begins to move, the man and woman circle back to the beginning, as if they had never met before: "The lights inside the tram went on; she opened her eyes and saw him sitting in his old seat, looking remote... Then she understood his meaning: everything that had happened while the city was sealed off was a nonoccurrence" (Chang 250-1). In my story, the train's stasis likewise opens up a way of 'time travel', but instead of visiting a speculative future that will never come true like Chang's couple, Mr Loh simply returns to a past that he cannot undo. Memory is "the spiral movement that, through anecdotes and episodes, brings us back to the almost motionless constellation of potentialities that the narrative retrieves" (Ricoeur 186), and time is fluid yet uncompromising, hauling the character back but not permitting him to make amends. Thus, Mr Loh laments this in his final outburst: “ ‘Monsters! How are you going to undo that?’ ” (Tan 6)

(v) The Object-centric Everyday

In this final section, I discuss how my work is oriented around the everyday. My characters are ordinary, often found within familiar spaces – at home, in the car, at the pool, in the doctor's office and so on. However, their mundane reality is not without revelations. I am driven by Cortázar's observation that a good story "has that mysterious property of

illuminating something beyond itself, to the extent that a common domestic occurrence...is converted into an implacable summary of a certain human condition or the burning symbol of a social or historical order” (247).

My writing strives to paint the everyday, largely in line with the Chekhovian method of focusing on concrete details to reveal characters’ inner states. May cites T.S. Eliot as having coined this technique “‘objective correlative’ – a detailed event, description, or characterization that served as a sort of objectification or formula for the emotion sought for” (202). One of the clearest examples of this would be the melancholic landscape details of Joyce’s “Araby” that foreshadow the child’s epiphany of human darkness at the end. In my story “The Visit”, the home details also speak to Aunty Joan’s carefree personality and her beliefs, apart from filling the physical space:

Each time you visit, things show up in different forms: Isn’t the crocheted table runner – the one you were fiddling with while she was speaking – her favourite blue shawl? And those curtains with corgis in bow ties – you swear those had once been your bedsheets in the guest room. On the sofa, two plump cushions are stuffed in old T-shirts with the slogans: “I am Nothing ‘cuz Nothing is Perfect” and “My Greatest Flaw is Being A Perfectionist”. (Tan 61)

These upcycled furnishings can also be read symbolically, where the character’s dedication to giving new life to things contrasts with her own life being robbed from her by an illness. There is a sense of irony that these material things will outlive her, triumphing over the fragility of human life.

In “Lucky For This View”, objects also work doubly in giving the fictional world verisimilitude and colouring the perplexing, anxiety-riddled COVID-19 atmosphere. In

Georgina's car, "a green surgical mask hangs from the rearview mirror as if it were an amulet" (Tan 43); when Mia expresses endearment towards her neighbour's dog, her "cooing (is) trapped behind a three-ply fabric mask" (Tan 45); and while Georgina argues with David in the car, she distractedly fiddles with a "tiny goop" of hand sanitizer (Tan 48). These little things signpost the tremendous ways the world has changed, even reorienting the ways our bodies behave in space. Yet, these objects are described in a matter-of-fact manner, blending inconspicuously into this post-pandemic world. In reverse, a sunset and a beating heart – both natural, regular occurrences – are defamiliarized in the scene where Mia unwittingly invites her husband's lover Georgina into her home. As the three characters watch the sunset, David imagines the sound of his baby's heart beating, and is overcome with an epiphany to confess to his infidelity. Here, the attention to objects is not only a concern of verisimilitude, but it also adds to the sense of a disordered world, where nature has become foreign and what is thought of as 'natural' is put in question.

I am also interested in concrete details *as they are*, without turning them into symbols of character interiority or the story's moods and themes. Here, I draw from the Imagist sentiment of William Carlos Williams – 'no ideas but in things' – this poetics of "self-effacement" illustrated through his "many descriptions of everyday scenes, where the intensity of observation paradoxically diminishes the sense of an observer" (Phillips 9).

Williams' influence is still deeply felt in today's poetry, and I too draw inspiration from his object-centric poetics in my fiction writing. Contemporary American poet Linda Pastan expounds on the significance of our quotidian, material reality in her poem "The Ordinary": "it is the ordinary / that comes to save you – / the china teacup waiting to be washed, the old dog/ whining to go out" (75). This aesthetic affinity is not unfounded – as mentioned in the first section, the short story has been described as close to the lyric due to its

framing and heightened focus on a moment in time. Carver also argues that both forms have the potential to elevate the quotidian: “It’s possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring - with immense, even startling power” (Carver 275).

Carver’s “power” finds curious affinity with Bennett’s “thing-power”. In an earlier discussion, we’ve seen how Beattie’s commonplace details in “Learning to Fall” contribute to a certain mood – crumbs on a kitchen table, the pot on the stove, a hairbrush, and so on. However, her most acclaimed story “Janus” pushes Bennett’s view of objects being “potentially forceful agents” (Bennett x) even further by muddying the dichotomy between life and non-life forms. The opening paragraphs of the story describes how the protagonist Andrea, a real estate agent, has a practice of setting up houses for sale by leaving her dog and a certain bowl at each house. Here is the first hint that the bowl is not mere decoration – the bowl brings life, just like the dog, making each house feel alive and inhabited.

Subsequently, the bowl’s colours are described as being “mysterious as cells seen under a microscope... Something about the colours and their random placement suggested motion” (Beattie 351-352). The imagery here – “cells”; the colours being in “motion” – again reinforce the bowl’s “vital” essence that is “intrinsic to (its) materiality” (Bennett 3). The bowl is further cast as an “actant”, as “something that acts or to which activity is granted by others” (Latour qtd in Bennett 9), seducing prospective homebuyers and distracting them from their main purpose: “Then they would go immediately to it and comment. Yet they always faltered when they tried to say something. Perhaps it was because they were in the house for a serious reason, not to notice some object” (Beattie 352). Towards the end of the story, the bowl’s vitality becomes even more pronounced when we see how Andrea has established a deeper attachment to it than her human relationships, to the point where she questions its

nature: “Could it be that she had some deeper connection with the bowl – a relationship of some kind? She corrected her thinking: how could she imagine such a thing, when she was a human being and it was a bowl?” (Beattie 354) There is no break in the ‘realist’ world of the story – nothing fantastical about this bowl is revealed – it is an ordinary object, procured at an art fair by Andrea’s former lover. Yet, this relational significance is also played down – we find out that the bowl is one of many trinkets gifted by her lover. Thus, the bowl’s unexplained drawing power seems almost miraculous, offering a kind of salvation that Pastan claims “the ordinary” possess.

My story “The Bathtub” likewise explores this object-centric approach, where a domestic feature becomes a mysterious force and a source of conflict and obsession. Unlike the quiet enigma of Andrea’s bowl, the bathtub in my story is opulent and oversized. It also stands out simply because it is removed from its private context after being stranded at a lift landing of a HDB block. While a bathtub may be a taken-for-granted home feature elsewhere, it is far rarer in the HDB setting due to physical and regulatory constraints. Here, the bathtub asserts its thing-power in a slightly different sense from Beattie’s bowl – it is beautiful, mysterious and seductive, but its power does not end there. The bathtub, described as a dynamic thing – “A silver tap sprouted from its side, like the long neck of a swan” (Tan 49) – resists the cold, architectural uniformity imposed on the HDB landscape. It is a break from the mundane, a source of salvation from banality, as implied by Yen’s excitement when the bathtub is moved into their apartment block:

Is that – Did you hear –” Yen said, chewing on a peanut butter waffle. She rushed out, abandoning the snack... The bathtub was just sitting there, blocking the two lifts, its petal-like rim yawning open at us... Yen put a hand on its rim and went, Oh, like she had touched something very hot or very cold. (Tan 54)

As Yen's fixation for the bathtub grows, the narrator attempts to read her obsession as a sign of wanting to improve her life and her discontentment with their marriage. However, this significance remains ambiguous, and in the end, the narrator also inexplicably comes under the bathtub's hypnotic draw. In the final scene, after helping Gary and Giovanni move the bathtub into their flat, the narrator reports to his wife that the bathtub is "sitting... in all its gratuitous glory" – we see how the bathtub resists its human-serving purpose, asserting itself as an "(existent) in excess of (its) association with human meanings, habits or projects" (Bennett 4). The narrator then adds: "But I get it now. My goodness. You look at it, and it's opening its big, flowery mouth at you, and you just want to slide in. You just want to sink in there, and never come out" (Tan 60). Here, I provide the narrator with some sort of epiphany, though the exact revelation remains unclear to both the character and reader. Still, the bathtub's saving grace recurs, as though it were a kind of physical refuge to hide in. But what do the narrator and his wife need saving from? Their crumbling marriage? Or their everyday failings and disappointments submerged within the quotidian? These are some questions I hope its ambiguous symbolism opens up.

Apart from "inorganic" objects, thing-power also extends to other "organic" non-human bodies. The ant invasion in "Ants" explores how other non-human bodies intrude on the everyday domestic space. This story seeks affinity with Mansfield's "The Fly", which traces the inner state of a grieving man after a fly invades his study. Both "The Fly" and "Ants" follow the Chekhovian technique of having "minimal dependence on the traditional notion of plot", "(focusing) instead on a single situation in which everyday reality is broken up by a crisis" (May 201). The pests are also endowed with thing-power that shows a purer or stronger tenacity than the human will.

In “The Fly”, the boss is weak in resolve, dazed with grief after the mention of his dead son. First, he rescues the fly from his inkpot, then paralyzes and kills it, and is finally confounded by his own actions towards the tiny life. While the fly dies in the end, it never wavers in its will to survive, which shows up the boss’s human weakness and contradictions. In my story, Annie likewise takes a dark fascination towards killing the army of ants, though unlike Mansfield’s boss, she has more hardened feelings towards the pests:

She stood over her mother at the sink, filled a big bowl of water, and splashed it onto the wall, then the floor. The ants on the wall came skidding down the streaks of water, their wispy legs and feelers fluttering or tearing apart... This revelation, and the ease with which she annihilated the ant troop, gave Annie a satisfaction. (Tan 9)

Nevertheless, despite Annie’s efforts, the ants come back later in the day – “...they seemed vengeful and hotheaded, swarming out in all directions” (Tan 11). At the end of the story, when Annie reaches the peak of her frustration, two ants reappear despite their nest being poisoned. Their survival is miraculous and frightening. While the ant’s connection to Annie’s psychology may never be fully drawn, their triumph of survival can be read in contrast with Annie’s feelings of helplessness over her life. In one of the story’s final moments, Annie experiences an ultimate alienation from the self – when she lets out a cry of shock, she does not even recognize her own voice:

Annie found herself gripping the edge of the table... But Annie felt herself rocking backwards, and a sound escaped her throat. It was an *oh*, she could feel its hot, hollow sound, inside her yet faraway, as if it were her sister’s, or her mother’s, or both their voices rising from her own chest. (Tan 20)

Conclusion

This process of marrying research and practice has been extremely beneficial to my early journey as a short story writer. Yet, while wanting to pursue a studied practice, the act of creating is also spontaneous and spiritual. Reflecting on themes and techniques while letting each story find itself can be a tricky balance to maintain. Thus, I constantly return to Flannery O'Connor's advice that cautions writers from starting each story with "a theory or formula or technique" (91). Nevertheless, this research has offered me vocabularies to think and talk about the impulses behind what I write, and has given clarity to my direction at this stage of my practice.

My discussions in this paper scaffold the possible ways my work can be read, though it is a writer's privilege for their work to be considered and explored beyond their anticipated scope. Other pertinent thematic concerns, which are not discussed in this paper due to word constraint, include tracing the everyday female experience and the instability of selfhood formation and performativity.

From here on, I envision the possibilities of two different, though not disparate paths. Firstly, I am interested in furthering research on the Singapore short story, which has received little critical attention so far, apart from Holden's literature. His paper "Unmaking Sense: Short Fiction and Social Space in Singapore" (2013) comprehensively traces the historicity and socio-political context of the Singapore short story, leaving much potential for formal and aesthetic approaches. I also hope to follow in Holden's steps of studying more regional work, while looking at the formal conventions of storytelling in Asian contexts. As for a creative practice, my only goal is to write more stories with greater wonder, insight, and the faith to let each story take me where it wants to go.

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