Bad touch theme park and other stories : a collection of short stories and an exegesis

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**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**

**Bad Touch Theme Park and Other Stories: A Collection of
Short Stories and an Exegesis**

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

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Short Stories and an Exegesis**

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requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Ever grateful,
Huda

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SUMMARY

This MA thesis titled *Bad Touch Theme Park and Other Stories* consists of seven short stories and its accompanying exegesis. The short story collection is about living and grieving in a city enchanted by ghosts. At the heart of each story is a seeking for a future not yet set in concrete, ending often on an ambiguous outlook, an opening for other possibilities.

BAD TOUCH THEME PARK AND OTHER STORIES

“... as we read these little stories about nothing at all, the horizon widens; the soul gains
an astonishing sense of freedom.”

- Virginia Woolf, A Common Reader

AFTERDEATH

Years before he was diagnosed with stage 4 colorectal cancer, parts of Aliah's father were already dead. She was fifteen when she learnt that death did not come all at once.

For the past two months, Aliah's grandparents had been staying with them. Their arrival from Malaysia had been a pleasant surprise, at least for Aliah's father. Hassan had been overjoyed when his mother offered to do the cooking while she was visiting. Every morning, he would go to the wet market to buy breakfast for his parents and the ingredients his mother required for the meal she would cook that day. After breakfast, Hassan and his wife would leave for work. Hassan would kiss his mother's hand and slip her a fifty dollar bill. His parents would often take a taxi to a relative's house after his mother cooked and they would return by taxi when the sun was setting. At dinner, his father would sing praises about the relative's hospitality while his mother shared how she had not slept well since arriving in Singapore. Must be that my body just can't take all that travelling anymore, she said as she plumped a cushion. Hassan's wife had stayed silent except for her cough. Selina's throat had started to trouble her around the time her parents-in-law had arrived and was only getting worse much to her doctor's puzzlement. He had given her all kinds of medicine and subjected her to tests but still could not pinpoint what was causing the cough. The doctor's lack of diagnosis did not trouble her. If anything, it had strengthened her suspicion.

Selina was the kind of person who kept a running tally of everything that people did or did not do in her head. She especially took note of everything her parents-in-law did or did not do. Whenever her husband defended his parents' actions, you could see in her

stony glare a record of what he did scratched into her soul. When the tally of injustices got too heavy to bear, she would explode, offloading the pressure by bringing up divorce.

The day her parents-in-law returned to their home in Shah Alam, Selina scooped the meal her mother-in-law had cooked for dinner into the garbage. She emptied the fridge of leftovers from previous meals. Hassan entered the kitchen just as she threw out the salt in the salt pot. Stunned, he wanted to know why she was acting like a crazy woman. I'm not the crazy one. Your mother's trying to kill me with her cooking. I'm not kidding, she said when he started to laugh. Your mother's gone and done something to the salt. It's making me cough my lung out.

When Hassan just stared at her in incomprehension, Selina explained it to him again. But I'm not sick! He blurted. Aliah's not sick. And why would my mother do something like that? How could you think that?

Selina could feel the familiar rage coursing through her body. Of course he would refuse to believe her. When had he ever taken her side in any matters concerning his parents? She could read to him a list of how his parents had shamed her in public or had muddied her reputation among the relatives and he would still choose to proceed as though those incidents were mere trivialities. All the times she had yelled the truth at him had failed to pierce through the veil he had wrapped around his eyes. Even now, he continued to insist that his mother had been taking care of them. But I'm hurting, your wife is hurting! The words burst out her mouth but all her husband heard was a long rattling cough. You should drink some water, he suggested tentatively. Selina glared at him as she gasped for breath. I know one thing for sure, she hissed. Your parents will only be happy after I'm dead.

That night when the house was finally still, Aliah ventured out of her room for a snack only to be gob smacked by the sight of her father crumpled over the dining table. She watched from the end of the corridor as his shoulders stooped forward, too weak to carry his tear-heavy head. Aliah learnt that she cried the same way as her father - silently at first, followed by wet gasps like their pain swelled with every shuddering inhalation and crashed harder against their ribs with every breath released. Pressed against the gloom of the corridor, Aliah didn't know when she started to cry. That night, there were two bodies drowning, eight stories above the ground.

*

If Hassan had been a carton of milk, he would have had multiple dates of expiration stamped on his body. When he was first diagnosed, his prospects were grim but doctors predicted that there was a high chance that concurrent chemo and radiation therapy could wipe out the cancer in his body. The treatment worked and his family celebrated. Barely six months later, the cancer cells returned with a vengeance. This time, they were taking his colon hostage.

The doctors rallied. They diverted one end of his colon through an opening they had slit in his abdomen. Attached to that opening was a pouch for collecting the diverted waste. Before he was released from the hospital, Hassan requested for extra large shirts despite his shrinking body so that his colostomy pouch was hidden. When he stood, he would cup the pouch through the shirt to prevent it from accidentally gaping. In the early days after the operation, Hassan would ask Selina to clear the pouch the moment he felt or saw an excretion. He always kept the television on even when sleeping so that nobody could hear the involuntary sounds his excretions made, like a wet fart.

Hassan was also scheduled for more chemo and radiation therapy. However, he refused any more treatment after one cycle. His decision brought chaos crashing to their door. With loud voices, hot tempers and rough hands, his parents and younger sister blamed Selina for his loss of will to live. They begged him to follow them back to Malaysia to see a spiritual healer who had *cured Cik Aim's son's leukemia*! He was reluctant at first but it was all his family talked about as they crowded his wife out from his bedside. When Hassan left for Malaysia with them, Selina stood by the gate and muttered, they won't last.

Two days later, she received a call from Malaysia. After briefly informing Aliah about where she was going, Selina left the house and brought her husband home within the same day.

Since her father's return, Aliah wondered if her mother had brought back a different sick man. After his visit to his parent's home, he was less conscientious of the state of his colostomy pouch. He no longer cared if his shirt was covering the pouch and his hands remained limp by his sides. When he did leave the house for doctor's appointments, he no longer protested when he was dressed in diapers and drawstring pants.

The expiration dates grew shorter and shorter.

But dying doesn't happen by the clock. Hassan continued dying past the doctors' two year prediction. When he was entering the fourth year of his dying, his body started to reject any form of sustenance delivered orally. After two days of barely eating and throwing up bags of bile, a line of dark liquid started dripping from his nose. He was immediately rushed to the hospital where the doctors ran a tube down his nose.

His body's trying to expel waste but his intestines are all blocked up. That's why it's all coming out through here, the doctor said, pointing to Hassan's nose. The doctors were certain that it was likely he would die in hospital. After the doctor advised Selina to make preparations, she barely made it to the corridor where she collapsed, sobbing. Her cries were guttural sounds and drawn out exhalations like the mooing of a cow that had seen the blade that would slit its throat glinting in the pen. Her heaving sobs made Aliah's stomach churn uncomfortably. The discomfort took her as far as her mother's collapsed form. Words lodged in her throat. What was there to say? Aliah stood frozen beside her mother, avoiding the eyes of visiting strangers who whispered and stared. The nurses simply walked around her mother, inoculated against displays of grief. This was after all the ward for the terminal.

*

The official time on her father's death certificate was 11am on a Saturday morning. What the record did not show was that Aliah's father died several times in his room before the doctor arrived. When her father died, Aliah was at the supermarket deliberating about how many bunches of pandan leaves to buy.

Aliah's grandparents, her aunt, her husband and their five daughters, had driven down from Kuala Lumpur to stay with them when it was confirmed that her father was in critical condition. They were not the only guests to visit the house. Her grandmother and aunt sat in her father's room as relatives, neighbours and friends streamed in and out. Aliah and her mother had a system down. They would usher guests straight to her father's room. When all the seating and standing room were taken, guests would wait in the living room where Aliah would serve tea. When the guests were done visiting her father, she

would usher them to the dining room where they would get tea and biscuits, if there were any left. Aliah felt like Charon for the living, leading people into the room where death resided, and herding them out once they had encountered the dying. Unlike Charon, she required no obolos coin to facilitate the smooth transfer of people between the long hallway separating the master bedroom from the communal living space. Aliah liked the visitors who didn't make conversations with her the best. More often than not, someone would ask her *so what are you doing now?* And the guilt would kick in, a reminder that other people had other things going on in their lives alongside dealing with the debilitating effects of cancer on a member of the family. Other people were twenty-four and productive. The visitors would also say, *you are so strong!* And the guilt would kick in again. I'm not strong! She wanted to yell. I want him to die already so that this can end!

Their system for handling the growing flood of guests was not appreciated by Aliah's grandmother and aunt. *Your guests must be so hungry! They'll blame your father for your lack of manners! You must protect your father's reputation!* As such, Aliah's aunt had commandeered the kitchen and had determined that her signature chicken curry was the dish du jour, alongside an enormous vat of steaming pandan tea. Aliah's mother had washed her hands of the whole affair, her focus solely on the daily routine that circled around her husband. People are here to visit a sick person, not attend a kenduri, she muttered viciously as she passed Aliah. Being the youngest female adult in the house, Aliah nodded silently and carried out the tasks her aunt and grandmother requested.

Which was how she found herself in front of the refrigerated shelves of greens at the supermarket. As she was returning the fifth bunch of pandan leaves to the shelf, Aliah received a call.

Her mother's voice came through the phone receiver, squelchy and thick like raw chicken skin pulling from its flesh. Come home, she sobbed. Your father has passed away.

When the call ended, Aliah's first thought was, Should I just leave the basket of groceries here, by the vegetable aisle or do I put everything back then leave? He can't get any deader. Immediately, shame tried to settle on her but it slid off just as quickly. She tried for sadness next but all she felt was the nagging urge to make a decision so that she could move on to the next task.

A second call came just as she had decided to put everything in the basket back on their appropriate shelves. This time, it was her aunt on the phone.

Aliah? Your father haven't passed away yet. False alarm. This Cik Leha lah, said your father stopped breathing already. Anyhow say only. Long story short, he's still alive!

Do you still need me to buy -

Don't need to buy chicken. Just buy all the pandan leaves. As many as you can find.

Aliah's aunt hung up on her before she could ask for an estimate and a reason.

At the cashier, Aliah's phone rang for the third time. It was her aunt again and this time she was crying. This time, it was for real. Her father had passed away. Aliah was to come home as quickly as possible. Fortunately, she was already in the midst of paying for all the pandan leaves.

When Aliah reached home, her grandmother collapsed in her arms, wailing, Aliah! My son... my son has left me! Aliah's aunt appeared, pushing through the throng of guests in the living room. She gathered her mother into her embrace and instructed Aliah to go to her father's room. Small problem, she said, Go in there and settle it. I have to entertain the guests.

Where's my mother? Aliah asked, perplexed at the chaos.

Your mother's become crazy! She locked herself in the master bedroom toilet after Cik Leha said your father wasn't breathing!

Aliah squashed down a retort in defense of her mother and elbowed her way through the crowded hallway (why were people just standing in the hallway?). She was unprepared for the sight and argument that greeted her in her father's bedroom.

An elderly woman loomed over Aliah's father, arranging a square of white cotton on his face. There was a separate strip of cotton that was wound around his head to keep his jaw closed. Another elderly woman was staring intensely at his Adams apple. I'm telling you, she cried, he's still breathing! I saw his throat move! We need to remove this now!

Just leave it alone Leha! The old woman arranging the square cotton attempted to wave away Leha's hands from Aliah's father's chest. You always complain how you cannot see the TV even though you sit with your nose almost touching the screen, but now you say you can see his throat move?

Tima, are you hundred percent sure his spirit has left the body ready? Are you sure? If you're not sure then this is murder you know! Leha vehemently pointed to the square of cotton on Aliah's father's face. Did you see! It's moving!

Has anyone called the doctor? Aliah exploded.

The toilet door cracked open. Aliah, get inside, her mother demanded from within.

Glaring at the two women, who had stilled at her mother's voice, Aliah strode towards the toilet. The argument that had begun anew outside muffled to blessed silence when the door closed.

What's going on, Bu? Why are you in here?

I called the doctor from the hospice already. And the funeral service.

Who was in the room when Babah die - passed away? Were you there?

No. Her answer was curt, her eyes slitted and flinty as she looked to the door.

*

Most Malay Muslims believe that the soul lingers in this world until the last person standing around the deceased grave takes seven steps away from it. The soul then moves on to the next realm where it would be returned to the body and the person would be questioned either by a beautiful angel or one with fearsome features.

Aliah wasn't allowed to go the cemetery to see her father buried. The elders said it wasn't a good place to go for someone on their menstrual cycle. One of her cousins, a nine year old girl, witnessed the burial. When they gathered at Aliah's home after the burial for some food and prayers, she sidled up beside Aliah. Kak Aliah, can I tell you a secret? When Aliah nodded, she told Aliah that when the man from the funeral service was reminding her recently dead father of his professions of faith, she had heard the sound of a door closing.

What you say, girl? Cik Leha intruded. Tell me what you tell her. Soon, everyone had heard a variation of the cousin's secret and had proceeded to question her. Not like a slamming door, she clarified when some of the elder folks asked her how the door closed.

They nodded their heads and murmured a combination of very-goods and always-knew-he-was-a-good-mans, before petting Aliah's cousin on the head.

The cousin's revelation did not comfort Aliah as it did the elderly. Growing up, her mother never allowed her to close her room doors, claiming that it was like putting barriers between members of the family. Secretly, Aliah thought that her mother just wanted to be able to get ahead of any mischief, especially when she shared her bedroom with her grandparents whenever they visited. More recently, closed doors meant being unable to hear her father's rattling breath or moans of pain. When her cousin claimed she heard a door closing, something inside Aliah quivered.

ADAM MAZLAN IS NOT A BABI

You got to flick your wrist if you want to smoke with style. Anyone can drop a cigarette onto the ground but the wrist flick, the wrist flick catches people's attention. Makes them think you're somebody even if you only got \$2 in your pocket. Then, grind down with the soles of your Macbeths. Don't want to start a fire now, especially not here, at the graveyard. Yeah, we on an Adventure but nobody want *that* kind of trouble.

I'm not talking about the police. Actually, it's usually never about the police. They sensitive man, everything's personal to them. They see you at the station and they say, What you doing here. I thought I say I don't want to see your face in here again? What, want to challenge me is it!

Chill bro. Nobody want to see you or challenge you. Who got time for that?

Unless they got one of our brothers, then the people at the top, the Kepala and Atasan, decide if the brother is worth it. Nobody will say this but it's a good way to get rid of stupid people on our side. On anybody's side. Like this one cheebai at the moving company where I work who cannot shut up. For a while, I just tolerate his nonsense.

And then we had a job at Sentosa Cove. The house... man, the mansion was two stories, with a balcony that faced the beach. It was damn nice. Nicer than the bungalows around Bukit Timah and the penthouse around the Orchard Road area. Rich people have all kinds of barang-barang. One house had a gold life-sized statue of their dog that died. Like real gold. Sial ah. Got so many people do good things but die nameless. This dog just eats, shits, and sleeps. Dies and gets a bloody gold statue. Like that, who don't want to be a dog? Sometimes I imagine what living this kind of high-flyer life is like but I don't have a lot of time to daydream. Everyone tension when unloading the furniture

because we're trying to make sure that nothing gets damaged. Some clients see a small scratch that's not even our fault and they suddenly drop their high class attitude. Then start lah. They yell and swear at us like we kill their mother in front of them. Usually, it's the Chinese and Indian clients who are more difficult to handle. Malay clients? Six months I work at this company and I haven't seen one Malay client before.

For the first time, when I stepped into the house in Sentosa Cove, it felt like I was stepping into my dream home. I had this image of my children chasing each other on the beach. I'm relaxing on the balcony, arms wrapped around my beautiful wife. Could be the sea, could be the space. It was my kind of vibe but then the place can never be mine. Not even if I work a million years. Not with the kind of certs I have. When I dropped out of ITE, my mother said, what you going to do now? Pray for your father and me to die faster so you can take all our money to spend on benda-benda haram? My sister said, so what's your plan then? Don't think I'm going to start paying for all your shit now. My father didn't say anything. He hasn't said anything in a long time. My mother stopped giving me pocket money because I wasn't schooling anymore. Stopped paying my hand phone bills also. They thought it was enough to make me regret my decision. They thought I was some small boy who cannot survive on his own. Just because I don't want to study, they thought I was stupid. They don't know I got contacts in many places. Within one week, I got the job at the moving company.

The owners of the house at Sentosa Cove - an Indian man and a Chinese woman - were super chill. They met us and even ordered lunch for us. The wife said that she *would swing by around tea time to see how everything is going* and then they left the house to us.

I thought the day was going to be good. Nice location, nice client. We don't usually get this kind of good combination. When the owners left the house to us, we all took turns taking selfies at the balcony where you can see the beach. I posted mine on Instagram with #balling. Within a few seconds, I got 50 likes. One of my followers commented: Padahal only got ten cents in the bank.

Fucker.

After everyone took their selfie, we got to work and that's when the cheebai started his nonsense again. This time, he kept insulting our supervisor. Wahlau this apu neneh purposely make me carry the heavy box alone right. Eh you Bangla only, who say you can be my supervisor. You better stand far away from the sofa, later your shit skin stain the white colour.

So I tell him to shut up. This is our supervisor like it or not, so respect sikit, bro.

Then this cheebai tried to start trouble with me. Tried to make me scared of him. He put his head right in my face until I could see all the shit clinging to his fucking nose hair. Acted like his stare was powerful enough to make me back down but I just buat muka selamba. He was so pissed off that I showed no reaction, he forgot that we were at a client's house. He shouted all kinds of racist shit at me while I just stood there, by the balcony that faced the beach.

I know what my mother say about me to the neighbours.

That I'm panas baran.

That I need to go for counselling.

That I need anger management class.

She's wrong.

I don't get angry quickly or whack people for no reason. I don't waste my time with idiots. But everybody got their limit.

My line is: Don't disrespect me or my family.

And this idiot crossed it when he shout so hard his spit landed in my eye.

Bodoh ke pe.

Next thing anyone knew, he was flat on the ground, my elbow at his throat and my fist about to fly. I could have finished him there but my supervisor stopped me from teaching the cheebai about respect. You think that cheebai would learn his lesson already, but no. At the end of our shift, he told me to meet him at a multi-story carpark nearby to settle our problems. The fucking cheebai really wanted to die that day.

The thing with this kind of stupid fuckers is that they don't know that they stupid. I went to the carpark to settle this hal and there he was with his side, all twenty of them. The little fucker was smiling like he already win the whole thing. I also smile. That's how I fight. Smiling all the way because I know at the end, I will be the one with something to smile about.

Before he and I started, his Kepala started walking to me. Damn, I thought, so the cheebai coward wasn't going to fight me on his own. Gonna be a long fucking night then.

The Kepala stopped right in front of me. Sorry ah bro, he said. I didn't know that one so stupid. You do whatever you want. My side won't stop you.

My smile got bigger. Come to me you stupid fucker. You woke up my need for blood.

His side formed a semi-circle behind him as we faced off. He charged first, shouting again. I didn't even move. Let him come to me and then PAK! Never even put

up a fight, just crumpled like a used tissue paper. I crouched over him and started punching - LEFT RIGHT LEFT RIGHT- left my marks all over his body, made sure the lesson sink in good. But that wasn't the only reason why I didn't stop when he was down. Like I said, he woke up something inside me, and it needed to be satisfied.

That's the kind of trouble nobody want to stir up.

*

Even those looking for Adventure try to do it safe. I know, we sound like we're asking for trouble when we purposely got to tempat-tempat keras, places everyone knows is haunted after midnight, but we're not stupid. Adventure's always risky so we always make sure that we bring at least one person who don't lose their semangat so easy. It's not about having people who are fearless; trust me, when shit goes down during Adventure, all those people who act tough will shit their pants first. It's true, I see people who think they big shot with muscles bigger than my head piss themselves or faint before they even see anything. Those who are mentally stronger get scared but they control so there's no weakness that will allow something to take over their body. If something manages to enter someone, then that person is what we call dah kena sampuk, possessed.

Khai, Fik and I didn't plan on going Adventuring today. We've been here at the graveyard since Maghrib, waiting for Zakee to finish his ritual to get special powers. It's the kind of process where the person looking for power must go somewhere in the graveyard where there's no living people nearby. For some reason, it usually fails or goes wrong when there's more than one person in the area when they call the spirits. They'll sit beside a grave and read from a special to call the spirits that will give them powers. It

sounds easy but even I, the person who do lots of stupid shit, don't mess with this kind of thing.

Most people don't want to go the pusara alone. Yeah, in the daytime, the cemetery is very peaceful. There's a lot of activity: construction vehicles dig holes in the ground, a family gathers to bury a body, someone is tiling a grave, someone's trimming the grass on the graves, another family is carrying a body to the correct plot... But at night, the humans disappear. It's still quiet, but the mood becomes heavier. Some areas feel different. Your heart starts to beat quickly and there's that prickling feeling at the back of your head. Your feet don't want to take another step. Your instincts tell you to turn back. This is the point where something in your brain kicks your instincts away and tells you, if you continue, something interesting might happen. You'll have an amazing story to tell. If you turn back, you'll just go back to being bored. You'll be bored and you'll have nothing.

Feeling bored is the worst. Khai, Fik and I have gotten out of the car to smoke by the side of the road. But there's a limit to how many sticks we can smoke, not because we can't but because cigarettes are bloody expensive. Need to budget so I can replace these Macbeths man. The sole's too thin and there's too many holes to be considered stylo any more. You notice these kind of things when you got nothing to do but wait in the dark until sunrise.

Eh Adam, you got your NS letter ready? Khai asks.

Should be coming soon. You?

Khai takes his time to answer. He tries to blow out smoke rings but looks like a fish swallowing air. Come ready, he finally says. But I'm going to defer.

You going to continue studying ah? Fik asks. Fik finished NS already. That's when Zakee and Fik became friends. Now Fik's training to be an aircon serviceman.

Ya, that's the easiest way. I tell my mother that I want to do private diploma course. She write the check already.

Eh then your father ok only? What he say when your mother tell him? I ask. Khai's place is like my second home. The only time I hear his father raise his voice is when he and his wife are discussing Khai's future. Sometimes, when Khai's father got a bottle in his hand, he talks to me about his son. Talks to me like I'm Khai's older brother, even though Khai and I are the same age. He tells me that he is worried about how Khai is growing up soft like tahu. Maybe it's a bit my fault also, he'll say. I didn't want him to experience my life. Follow my mistakes. But now, when the world breaks him... He's not like us, Adam.

I don't tell Khai about these talks.

Fuck my father la, Khai says. Fuck NS. Waste my time only.

NS pay so little some more, I add on. I can use that two years to earn more money sia.

Actually, Fik says as he taps his cigarette, if you got diploma cert, your pay higher. Got chance to sign on also.

Ah who the fuck wants to do more NS shit, Khai says. I just don't want to do NS.

Things get quiet after that. My mind keeps replaying what Fik said. I want more money. But how to get enough money to pay for a private diploma course in the first place? I consider whether it's worth it to ask my mother to help with the fees. What will she want in return? Already now, she wakes me up for Subuh with a lecture about my

responsibilities as a son. Every little thing can start her off. One time, she was going on and on about something when I received a text. When I laughed at the meme my friend sent, she anyhow assume that I was making fun of her to my friends, and then started to cry while scolding me. As if I spend all my time thinking about you, I want to yell back.

Then Fik start walking away from the car. I don't want to think about my mother anymore so I follow. Khai quickly runs after me, scared to be by himself. Out of all of us, he's the most boy.

We walk along the road our car was parked on. When the road splits, Fik turns left. I just follow. But Khai tells us to stop. Eh, we go back to the car ah. I think we should go back.

We turn around.

Khai is a mess. He's shivering and his face is sweaty. His voice becomes more high pitch each time he asks us to stop. I want to make fun of him, but I don't want to attract the attention of the long haired woman floating above him. My mouth is dry. I don't know where to look - I want to keep an eye on the pontianak so I can react if she moves, but I also want to make sure Khai is ok. I got a duty to protect him. I try to think of the right ayat to say to protect us from bad spirits, but my mind is blanking. I mentally push Fik to do something but I think Fik is as stunned as me.

When we didn't go to him, Khai figures out that something is wrong. He keeps saying oh my god oh my god. I can tell he wants to turn around and see what Fik and I are looking at. Bad idea. Khai is one of those people who are mentally weak. I want him to just freeze but he bodoh-bodoh turns around and straightaway faints. The pontianak above him disappears.

You see also right? I ask Fik. Fik went Adventuring a few time but he didn't see anything. Everyone bluffing lah, he says when we watch ghost hunters on TV. They use wires and shit to make things move. My opinion? I think more people get possessed by accident than when they actually go looking for it. Just listen to Misteri Jam Dua Belas on the radio. Everyday got people call in or email the DJ with stories about somebody kena sampuk. Still, even though he thinks going on Adventure is bullshit, Fik comes when Zakee asks him.

Fik nods slowly.

Suddenly, I feel the hair on my arm prickling. We're crouching beside Khai, tapping his face, trying to get him to wake up. My whole body is on high alert. If you're the kind who goes Adventuring, then you know about the gravedigger who interrupted a possession. Tried to wake the boy up. Something woke up alright, and it wasn't the boy. When his friends came to pick him up, he was covered in the gravedigger's blood. No one knows what happened to the gravedigger.

Khai wakes up. His eyelids starts moving. Then his upper body lifts itself up until he's in a seating position. By this time, Fik and I have moved back. Then Khai opens his eyes.

It's always the eyes that change first. For a second, I remember the first dead face I saw.

Possession happens differently every time. Sometimes it's instant – blink and it's someone else in the body of your friend. Then got times when you can't tell when the switch happen until they do something weird, something not human. Fik's about to call out Khai's name when Khai's eyes light up again.

He stares at us, not blinking. He stands. His hips are cocked and swaying, doing what I call classy dancing instead of twerking, and his fingers spider up and down the air near his right cheek, like he's running them through long long hair. He looks at each one of us and I feel like I am being judged by a girl we're all trying to hook up with at the club. Takes me a while to remember that it's Khai and that Khai is a guy.

Shit. Cik Pon is stronger than I thought.

Fik and me, we stand as still as possible. We don't want to spook her and start trouble. Sometimes the host can control the spirit or the ghost, whatever you want to call it, but there are times when the ghost is stronger than the host. Then things get ugly.

When Not-Khai takes one step towards us, I take two step backwards. But Fik, Fik starts to do Something. He reaches out and puts his hand on Not-Khai's head. Says Something. And Khai goes slack and falls to the ground.

When I think it's over, Fik starts jerking, like a fish on a line and I think, Oh shit, it's inside Fik now. But then Fik goes still, before moving into a fighting stance. His knees are bent and his hands move in a way I recognize from silat performances at weddings. Fik's doing some form of silat! His hands and legs are shaking as they move slowly, like they're pushing against a wall instead of air. But Fik keeps going. While his silat intensifies, I crawl to Khai who's starting to wake up.

Suddenly Fik smacks his hands together and it sounds like thunder. Blinks, and he's back.

That's why Zakee asked Fik to follows us.

*

It's going to be Subuh any time now and Zakee should be walking back to the car. Sure enough, I can see someone coming over. One bonus of doing this is that my night vision's improved. Useful when fighting in dim multi-story carpark and lorongs.

Khai and Fik light up again. I also got a fresh cigarette between my fingers. I think I smoked a whole pack just waiting for Zakee to be done. Fuck my shoes. After what just happened, I need to smoke.

Khai says, Eh, Zakee dah datang! And points to the right side of the road where Zakee is stumbling towards us like he had been clubbing all night. When he's closer, I ask if he's feeling ok. He nods and then smiles. It's the same smile he gets when his girlfriend give him a blowjob instead of a handjob.

So how? Fik asks

Two, he says, I got two inside me.

Fik and I start nodding our heads, impressed. Usually, first-timers got no luck. It's always the case that when you want something to happen, it never works out.

My enemies better watch out! Eh, Adam your turn! You always follow but never do. Khai raises a perfectly groomed eyebrow at me. He gets his sister's friend to thread them for him. First time he got them done, his forehead was shiny under the light, like plastic, and we called him Barbie for weeks. But his eyebrows stayed perfect for longer. When he went for his next session, I went with him. Must do what it takes to maintain my looks since everything else is perfect already.

Sorry ah, but I'm full already remember? Nothing can go in, nothing can come out.

That's why I usually say ok to waiting for them at the graveyard. I am sort of protected? All kinds of shit happen to the people around me but so far, nothing happens directly to me. My enemies try to target me with their barang but they have no effect on me. One time, someone sent a tiger spirit to kill me in my sleep. The tiger tried to claw my face, my peccs but it couldn't reach me even though I was right in front of it. Something protected me. When I woke up, I knew exactly which motherfucker had tried to attack me. He tried to use his gift before on my last time girlfriend. He thought I was blind and tried to hypnotize her with his eyes, the trademark of tiger spirits. I called her name Shasha, Shasha, and my voice was strong enough to make her break eye contact with him. Then he thought he could use his barang to get rid of me and take her. Please lah, weak motherfuckers shouldn't try to play in the big leagues when they're not ready.

It's not like I have any particular powers or anything. I can see spirits and ya some of them were ugly motherfuckers, but they cannot enter me or do any damage to me. I have my mother to thank for this. It's not that she passed down this protection to me. We found out for sure when she actually went to a religious teacher to get some kind of ubat to cure my father. But since she was there anyway, she told him about my "behaviour problems". She mentioned my name and the Ustaz went still like stone then said, Adam bin Mazlan, that name rings many bells. Bring him to me.

What the fuck.

My mother then rushed home and forced me to follow her to the Ustaz's house. Of course I didn't want to go – some strange man thinks my name means something, the fuck. But like she always does when she wants things to go her way, she bukak mulut to my father who's already stressed enough trying to tahan the pain and not die from the

cancer in his ass. Like that, of course I had to go, right. Even I got no heart to argue with a dying man who cannot even sit up in his bed.

I didn't know what I was expecting but it wasn't a three bedroom HDB flat in Tampines. The Ustaz's flat was bloody crowded. Most of them were older women or women with children who needed to be caned instead of being read the Quran. I bet they weren't even listening as they chased each other around the flat, stepping on people's feet. Some of the older women scolded them, but they still didn't stop. I was about to grab one of them and teach it to sit, but my mother stopped me. Told me to behave. Ni rumah ustaz she hisses, as if I don't know we're at a religious teacher's house. So I watched the women who were sitting on the floor either reading the Quran or helping to correct the pronunciation of those reading. After some time listening, I could hear the differences between the pairs of women sitting on the floor. A younger woman, about my sister's age, was trying to teach a nenek the melody to one of the ayat in some surah, but I was pretty sure that the old woman was not just deaf, she was fucking tone deaf also. I felt like telling the younger woman to just let it go, it's not like the tune the nenek sings the ayat matters in the end. Spare everyone the pain of listening to her repeat the ayat over and over and over in higher and higher pitch. Maybe that's why she needed to see the Ustaz. Get that fixed so she could sing Allah praises or whatever.

There was no furniture in the living and dining room area except for stools that line the walls. Those who sat on the stools were people like us, waiting to see the Ustaz for help on personal matters. While we waited, a woman in her forties arrived at the flat with an older woman by her side. There was only one seat left in the house and it was beside me. I didn't wait for my mother to say anything before I got up and gave my seat

to them. The hairs on my arms stood the moment they entered the house. Something wasn't right with one of them, the younger makcik, I decided after sneaking a peak at the pair. I'm not an Ustaz or anything, but I was sure she was possessed and it wasn't by choice.

I was surprised to see my mother talking to the older women. She was rubbing her arms and usually that made her paranoid enough to look for the cause. I guess wanting to tell someone about her son who the Ustaz had personally invited to his house could override her usual instincts. I thought about telling her myself so I could see her face change before she try to be polite about wanting to move seats. But I didn't. Didn't think she'd believe me. After all, those two women wore tudong and jubah and my mother was the type who always take the side of religious looking people instead of her son.

When my mother's name was called, we entered the Ustaz's office. He wasn't inside. His secretary told us that he had to go to the toilet or something. Instead of the toilet joke I was thinking about, I asked the secretary what was up with the woman we had been sitting next to. I didn't really expect an answer because I thought it was like how confession worked for the Christians but she told us the story. What happened actually was that the middle-aged woman had just gotten married and wanted to look younger during her wedding. Instead of just packing on the makeup like other Mak Andams would do, her one decided to use a saka but forgot to take the jinn back at the end of the day. That must be one hell of a wedding night. I purposely didn't look at my mother's face. I knew it would make me laugh and then they'd really think something wasn't right with me.

The door opened and the Ustaz walked in. He was dressed like the typical religious teacher – songkok, baju melayu and kain which had wet patches on it. Even Ustaz like him wipe their hands on their kains. I looked at the Ustaz, into his milky green eyes. They weren't that colour from cataracts. Or contacts.

He looked back, not at me but somewhere in front of me. I stared harder, willing him to. Look. At. Me. But he didn't. Just kept his eyes hovering there in front of me and I felt the thing inside me swell up. The Ustaz was being fucking disrespectful to me. In front of my mother some more.

So when my mother told me to salam the Ustaz and sit down, I refused. The Ustaz nodded as if he had come to some kind of fucking conclusion about me. He scribbled something down on a piece of paper and passed it to his secretary who passed it to my mother. I could see some numbers scribbled on it. My mother didn't seem to understand either so he explained. My mother almost cried when he said that there were twenty "things" inside me, half of them good, half of them bad. Fortunately, he said, there was no room for more. Praise Allah.

He asked my mother if she brought a bottle of water like he had requested. Of course she did. She passed it to the secretary who passed it to the Ustaz. He whispered some ayat from the Quran and then told me to drink the water. When finish, he said, continue filling it with water and drink from this bottle, understand? My mother looked at me as if she expected me to drown myself in the bottle immediately. I refused to even touch the bottle. Not because of some setan inside me that stopped me from drinking. Why should I listen to someone who cannot even look me in the eye? So when he invited us to stay to pray Maghrib together, I refused. My mother immediately apologised and

tried to force me to do the same but without my father there, she got nothing to threaten me with.

I sat on one of the stools in the corner of the living room while everyone arranged themselves into lines to pray as the Ustaz began the iqamat. I would have gone down for a smoke but my mother's voice had started to shake when she said, Belum cukup malukan ibu lagi? Which made the secretary look at her like she was the most pitiful case they had seen that day. The Ustaz told her to pray that Allah would show me the right path soon and that a mother's doa was very powerful. And just like that, all my desire to get the hell out of there disappeared like cigarette smoke. By the time he started on Al-Fatiha, I could feel the eyes of every child staring at me, at the one who talk back to his mother and the Ustaz, the one who dared not to solat Maghrib. Instead, I was playing Angry Birds on my phone. Look kids, running around, stepping on people's feet without saying sorry? That's nothing for this one with twenty barang inside him.

Fik pokes my rock hard side. Oi Adam, I know you full ah but you too full for Macs ke?

The rest of the gang are headed back to the car. Damn, it's not safe to daydream in the cemetery. I grab Fik's finger and bend it backwards until he begs me to stop and we run back to the car, stomachs growling for a deluxe breakfast set meal. With wholemeal muffins, because I'm not a babi and can indulge smartly.

Maybe after that I'll go home. See if the NS letter arrive already. Maybe, maybe I'll even talk to my mother about a private diploma course.

STORMS AND SWORDS

A dark red heart pierced by three swords. Dark clouds pouring rain. Reversed position.

Ooh, Zara, that doesn't look very good, New Neighbour Sheila mutters when she sees the tarot card I've drawn from the deck.

New Neighbour Sheila had poked her head out her window our first night at the flat Mama and I had rented. The flat belonged to an old lady Mama had befriended at a Quran reading class at the mosque. The old lady was moving to Perth to stay with her daughter and had been trying to sell the flat for years. But nobody seemed to want the place. Instead of leaving it empty, the old lady agreed to rent the house to us.

We had been shuffling past New Neighbour Sheila's flat as we unloaded the moving truck with the help of movers. Ever since she'd introduced herself and helped us move into the flat next to hers, New Neighbour Sheila had been trying to persuade me to let her do a tarot reading. The first time she brought it up, Mama told her that it was against our religion to believe in such things. Mama then asked where New Neighbour Sheila's family was since nobody else seemed to be home. Mama! I hissed, my face hot with embarrassment. New Neighbour Sheila just laughed, like she was used to such questions, and said she lived alone. Mama's lips pressed in a flat line and she brisk walked into our new flat. Baffled at her rudeness, I hastily uttered an apology. In return for her help, I whispered to New Neighbour Sheila that she could come over with her cards when Mama was out. Her smile was radiant. I could feel the heat in my cheeks as I ran into the flat.

The opportunity arises when Mama starts going to the gym regularly again. When Ayah got sick, she didn't have the time to keep up with her fitness routine. Nor could she maintain her work as a freelance personal trainer, though her clients had been very gracious about her absence. During festive holidays, they would text her, inquiring after her health and my father's. Occasionally, they would visit, and press checks into her hands before they leave. You're like family, they tell her when she tries to return the money. We just want you to come back to us when you can. Now, Mama is getting ready to return to them. That means exercising daily to regain her former sculpted physique. The fridge is stocked with fresh produce and every Sunday, the new kitchen whirs as she preps 'clean and lean' meals for the week.

When Mama leaves for the gym on Saturday morning, I go next door to invite New Neighbour Sheila over. I'm too lazy to put pants on, she says. Why don't you come in? She ushers me to the sofa and offers me a mug of tea. While I sip hot tea, she disappears into a room for her deck of cards. Mama wouldn't like that, I think, spotting books sitting in piles on an open bookshelf. All our books are hidden behind bookshelves with doors so that the wall doesn't look cluttered. New Neighbour Sheila doesn't seem to be worried about clutter and mess. Her living room is lushly decorated in swathes of deep reds that seem to undulate in the light that streams through the sheer burgundy curtain. Plants flow across the room in various sized pots and terrariums; I can only recognize the aloe vera plant sprawled out by the window. They're pretty, but do they attract mosquitoes? When New Neighbour Sheila returns, she sits next to me on the sofa. Her oversized t-shirt bunches up as she tucks her legs under her. The blue green veins that spider across her bare thigh reminds me of Mama. I used to lie in her lap, my cheeks

pressed against her inner thigh, tracing the blue-green lines. I would breathe in deep lungfuls of her scent; it calmed me to know that I would be able to recognize Mama even if I lost her in the dark. When Mama caught on to my ritual, she shoved me from her lap. Don't ever do that! She demanded much to my bewilderment. I was forbidden from lying in her lap again.

Do you have a question for the cards? New Neighbour Sheila asks. I shrug. She hands me the cards and bids me to shuffle them while thinking about the question. The cards feel bulky and almost slip out of my hands as I rearrange them. When I hand the cards back to her, she splits the cards into two decks and turns over the top card on the right deck. After a moment, she starts typing on her phone. I feel deceived when I see that New Neighbour Sheila is scrolling through a tarot website, looking for the card that matches the one she has turned over. Just as my patience is starting to thin, she rattles off a string of keywords.

End of relationship. Grief. Moving on. Stuck.

How do I get 'unstuck' then? I ask New Neighbour Sheila.

I don't know? That part's up to you, Zara. I just tell you what the card says.

*

It has been a month and a lot of our belongings are still in boxes. It is my fault. I am responsible for unpacking the boxes as Mama has no time to do so. Her days are taken up by her clients. They are ecstatic that she is back to whip them into shape. Her phone rings constantly as word spreads that Sarima has returned to the world of fitness and health. They want me back, Zara! They've been lost without me. All the other trainers are useless apparently. She has regained the joyful vigour that all fitness

instructors on the television have. Her strength shines through in other areas of her life. Recently, a stranger had approached her on the train. Mama said, God knows Zara, I put up with a lot of Malay men staring at me like they've never seen an in shape muslim woman before. But this man sat down next to me right, said Asalamualaikum sister, and then had the nerve to "advice" me on how to wear my scarf properly. Told me that my baggy hoodie and my exercise pants were too revealing. I just want to get to my stop without any fuss. But this man kept talking until I finally snapped. Worry about your own hijab and stop approaching women who are not your mahram! People on the train started looking at us and he tried to play it off like I had overreacted. Maybe you should reflect on why Allah's commands have made you angry, he said before he got off at the next stop. My client was so mad when I told her about it. Suggested I cab there next time and include the fare in the bill.

Mama talks about her clients all the time. She sits on the other end of the small sofa and tells me what physical ailments they have and how she has to craft exercise plans made just for them. Tells me how she doesn't just help them lose weight. Tells me how her knowledge of muscles and pressure points help to relieve their aches and pains. Tells me how funny and generous her clients are.

I want to tell her not to sit so close to me.

*

Working as an adjunct teacher at an enrichment centre means that work only begins in the late afternoon, after students have been released from school. My mornings are mostly free, but I can't seem to muster the energy to unpack the boxes. After Mama leaves for work, I lie spread eagle on my bed and just listen. In the morning, New

Neighbour Sheila sings as she putters in the kitchen. A vacuum cleaner roars from the flat above. A baby on a different floor cries. Outside, neighbours greet each other on the way to work or market. Buses exhale. When school lets out in the afternoon, children run, yelling. Someone practices piano. Another gets scolded. More cries. The sounds from this flat are younger. Unrestrained. It is a change from my former neighbourhood where the hushed whoosh of wheels on pavement is common. Bicycles, motorised wheelchairs, regular wheelchairs. Gurneys.

Some sounds are the same as the ones in my old house. When I'm lying still and there is no noise from the window, I hear the dragging of something like chair legs against the floor from the flat above. Sometimes, there is something like the sound of marbles clattering on the ground. Or the sound of keys unlocking different doors in the house. I've stopped running to the kitchen when I think I hear the tap running. Some people say that it's just harmless spirits, jins, making their presence known. They exist in every house. They are the sounds of home to me.

According to Mama and the spiritual healer she invited, our old house had been inhabited by several spirits and something much less benign. The balcony in our flat had always been especially eerie. The hanging clothes created many blindspots and made the orange light diffuse into slivers of swaying shadows. Mama and I would never stay there longer than we needed to, even in the daytime. When hanging the laundry, we tended to look over our shoulders to make sure the sliding doors were still open. They had never slid shut to cut anyone off from the rest of the house. But the possibility that they could would niggle more incessantly at the back of our minds every second we stayed in the balcony. The final straw for Mama had been her sudden uneasiness at being in Ayah's

room. Since his condition had deteriorated to the point where he was awake only for a few scattered hours, he had taken to staring at a spot by the mirror next to the window. Sometimes he would lapse into ramblings about walking home. Where are you taking me? He'd ask, even though he was stationary in bed. I want to go home. Take me home, he'd plead. In the week before his death, he could no longer repeat the prayers Mama slowly recited. I can't be in there anymore, she snapped. That's not your father in there. It's something else.

It's just his mind shutting down, Mama. The nurse said this would happen. I tried to calm her but she brushed off my response.

Don't be naive Zara, she chided. You study until university but you don't know the kinds of people there are in this world. This is a sign. Evil people are targeting your ayah. Targeting me.

The spiritual healer visited every room and squirted the walls with a spray bottle of clear liquid. When he came to my room, he instructed Mama to throw away my dollhouse. It had been my parents' gift to me for acing a national exam at twelve. Like our house, it was apparently a dwelling place for beings our naked eye could not see. Even though it had become another surface for dust to settle, I fought to keep the derelict dollhouse. The dollhouse, complete with furniture and other accoutrement I had painstakingly collected for years, was in the bulky item bin the next day. Although my anger solidified my skepticism, a shiver ran down my spine at the unrestrained laughter that escaped my father when the spiritual healer asked if he had knowingly or unknowingly involved himself with dark practices.

When I listen to the sounds of these invisible inhabitants in the new flat, I recede into the background. The sounds of their daily living resounds, is remarked upon by different people across different homes. Who is home? Who is present? I confided in Ayah once about dreams I was having, where strange beings keep asking for my name. He had clutched my shoulder and looked me straight in the eye. Don't ever tell them your name. Never. You understand? He sounded so serious. I nodded. I didn't tell him that in those dreams, I never get to the part where I reply. I wake up and for a few moments, I don't know who I am. These days, I don't need the dreams to feel that way. I lie inert and silent like the duvet on my bed. In a different bedroom where bodice rippers and romance novels lived under pillows and mattresses, my body had thrummed under the covers. Squirmed. Clenched. Found release.

Now, when I read about protagonists flushing at the daring advances of their lovers, I think about fever and infection. I think about flushing, the procedure Mama performed every few days to prevent blockages in the tube that tunneled through Ayah's back, into his kidneys. Orifices became exit points for the broken down parts of him that his body could no longer contain. While his limbs and face grew skeletal, the core of him swelled, rotting from the inside out. His swollen belly would yield at the touch of a finger, oozing pus, blood and other bodily excretions from wounds that split the flesh anew overnight. Ever since the cancer diagnosis, the body had become more and more a repository for inevitable failure.

When changing Ayah's diaper had become a two person affair, I saw his penis for the first time. A shriveled lump, the size of my thumb, retreating into a tangle of pubic hair, matted by feces. When Mama gave the signal, I would place one hand under Ayah's

thigh, palm against his atrophying hamstring. The other wrapped around his bony back. I would lift and tilt him so that Mama could clean him and slide on a fresh diaper. Ayah's arms would curl around me, his whimpers and yelps of pain loud against my ears. Sorry, I'm so sorry, sorry, I'm so sorry. I chanted it like a zikr, a prayer for it to be over. Just hold him Zara! Higher! Mama cleaned and changed him in a brisk and efficient manner. These were familiar motions to her. I looked up to the ceiling, apologies tripping off my tongue.

*

The doorbell rings. Mama's out with her clients. I don't move from my bed, I don't make a sound. My plan is to lie here until I have to leave for work. It is a good plan.

Zara? You free? Can I do another reading? I've been studying! The heavy front door is not thick enough to drown out Sheila's voice.

We've already met three times. Twice at hers, once here. When she came over, she had helped to remove my belongings from boxes, and put my room together. As we hung clothes in the closet and filled the shelves, we talked. We flitted from topic to topic until the sad bare space looks like a lived in bedroom. Not bad, Sheila said as she surveyed the work we had done. Could use a bit of green. Want one of my succulents? Sitting next to her on the bed in my new room, I could imagine a tiny sprout thriving in this changed environment. Then Mama had barged into the room, saying something about how the house was in darkness. I had been so focused on Sheila and my room that I hadn't kept an ear out for Mama's return. I stood up immediately, ready to see Sheila to the door. I didn't bring up the succulents. Mama would never allow live plants in the house.

That night as I tossed the day's garbage into the disposal chute by the lift lobby, Shelia came stumbling out of the lift. She was laughing the kind of laugh that made other people smile involuntarily. I stepped out to greet her but I swallowed down the words when I saw that her hands were tangled in another's. They made their way to her front gate, all teasing hands and affectionate jibes. The door slammed shut. Sheila hadn't noticed me. I returned home, passing by empty rooms. I briefly glanced at Mama's closed door before entering my room.

Now, Sheila's at the front door. Nothing has changed! I imagine myself yelling at her. The force of my yell will sweep the damn tarot cards from her hands and they will swirl around us like confetti.

I've got cake! Made it today!

I want neither cake nor company. Still, I find myself separating from the duvet and letting her in. Her wild curls are pulled back into a messy ponytail. She is wearing a t-shirt dress that ends mid-thigh. I wonder if she has pants on.

We sit at the dining table. After looking through the cutlery drawer and the boxes labeled kitchen, I find a knife to slice the cake. It is a Japanese cotton cheesecake that jiggles every time my foot nudges the table. Jiggle, jiggle. Suddenly, there is a warm hand on my knee. Stop it, Sheila says. I can't cut the cake when you keep jiggling it. I keep my leg still even after the cake has been cut. Sheila is generous with her cake portions. When I reach for my slice, she tuts and hands me the tarot cards. My hands are used to the cards by now. I shuffle them and pass the cards back to her. She splits the deck and flips the top card on the right pile.

The three of swords again? You're making this too easy Zara!

I don't care. My eyes are fixed on the slice of cake wobbling in front of me as I resume tapping the table leg with my foot. I want to sink my finger into that pillowy wedge, so I do. It is cold and soft. Squishy. I remove my finger, lick it, and then sink four fingers into the cake. My hand curls into a fist and the cake crumples into the space between my palm and fingers. My thumb acts as a stopper. When I open my fist, the cake is flat and ridged at the same time. The shape of anger. Or is it satisfaction? The prattling has stopped. Sheila is staring at me.

I lick the crumbs off my fingers.

The cake is delicious, Sheila. Now go on, tell me about how sad I am and how that's a challenge I must overcome.

You're such a bitch, she says.

When Mama comes home, I am still seated at the dining table. Sheila has left. Half the cake is gone. Mama raises an eyebrow.

Sheila gave us cake, I supply helpfully.

You're going to get fatter and nobody will want you, Mama says as she collapses onto the sofa. Is it halal?

CACTUS HEAD

Cactus #4 sits on a stool that Husna has precisely placed near the window of her new room.

The window stretches almost from one end of the wall to the other and is taller than it has any business being. When the blinds man came to take the measurements for her window dressing, he tutted as if she was to be blamed for the window's lack of restraint. If it's not your window, he relents after a few minutes of silence, it must be your floors. They're higher than regulation. The floors gleamed, preening at having been noticed. Usually, they received no attention, hidden under a deluge of unwashed clothes, scattered books, and a buildup of skin and hair. The stool on which Cactus #4 perches is close enough to the window that the cactus can receive all the sunshine it requires to survive, but far enough to prevent it from getting sunburned.

Husna remembers the first time she learnt that the human scalp could get sunburned. After three days of canoeing around an island and trekking through a jungle with only a thin bandana wrapped around her mostly bald head to ward off the sun, she woke up on the fourth morning and unwittingly scalped herself when she went in for her morning hair pull. The hair had come loose with little resistance, this time bearing a long white piece of skin dotted with red like a flag of defeat.

No, Husna does not want a repeat case of the sunburns, especially not to her cactus. This year, she is determined to keep a cactus alive for longer than three months. At least till April, her mental calendar chimes, perhaps then you won't be a complete failure.

The first cactus she had ever purchased was an experiment. It was a requirement at her secondary school for the Year 3 and Year 4 students to form groups and participate in the annual science showcase. The theme that year was sustainable networks. While other students were excited at the chance to win an internship at a research laboratory, Husna took this opportunity to introduce a living creature into the house. Her mother had an immense dislike for anything living that wasn't human (there were humans she despised as well), and had banned them from the house. When her father had the audacity to purchase a tank of neon tetras, he found all ten red and blue fish laid out on a kitchen serviette on the dining table the next evening. They kept jumping out of the tank, darling. Maybe they just couldn't adapt to their new environment? Her mother patted her father's back consolingly as he lamented his inability to be a caretaker to tetras. The tank hummed and casted an iridescent blue glow over them.

Husna took this incident into account when she suggested that the group conduct an experiment with plants, specifically, cacti. She had decided that a cactus would be ideal on three counts:

1. It was stationary.
2. It required little care, meaning little to no mess involved.
3. The spikes would (hopefully) deter her mother from approaching the cactus.

Keeping away is something that her mother doesn't do, can't do. She knows exactly how many times her father goes to the toilet at work, which finger to pull to make the neighbour's mother-in-law fart and why the lady in the corner apartment of the ninth floor hangs up mirror shards on her gate and her plants. It was inevitable, then, that her

mother discovered Husna's bald spot. While Husna was munching on oatmeal her mother had prepared with rolled oats, none of that instant stuff, she felt her mother's nails dancing on her scalp, before her head was pushed forward. Her teeth clanged against the porcelain of the oatmeal bowl and the pain ringing through her gums almost caused a little bile to spit up from the back of her throat. However, the sensation of fingers stroking her bald patch was comforting and soon her head was lolling on the table.

Then, the fingers curled, nails digging into her scalp, yanking her head back. Husna could feel several hairs pop out of her skin and her scalp swarmed with electricity that trickled down her face, arms and belly, causing certain parts of her to clench and pulse. Too soon, the fingers released their hold on her hair.

Are you turning into a man, Husna? Why are you balding?

I made the bald patch, Ma. I pulled the hairs out. They didn't feel right.

The confused dismay on her mother's face was the exact expression Husna wore when she discovered that her turgid green cactus had frozen into a woody stem. Even the yellow spikes had transformed into brown thorns! Her other groupmates' cacti were thriving with their daily dose of chart toppers and terrible news. Had she not sung enough to keep it alive? Was her selection of news articles not devastating enough? Husna despaired at her newly found power of petrification. This did not bode well for the future presence of non-human organisms in the apartment.

Walking through the garden aisle of a home improvement warehouse years later, Husna would pass by a table of baby cacti tucked in pots, one inch in diameter. Each cactus barely peeked out from the rim of the pots, their spikes sporadic and fuzzy like hair around the areola or on a shaved head, two weeks old. A feeling of kinship welled up

in her for these tiny heads scorching under the glare of artificial lights swaying disinterestedly above. Despite history forecasting a dismal end to these new lives, Husna was determined not to let fate dictate her actions. She was a human, damn it, and humanity was reflected in deviance, or so some great thinker had said. She was sure she had read that in a class on modernism or modernity. Who could tell the difference?

And so entered Cactus #2 and #3 into the house where only humans had survived so far.

For a while, all life in the apartment thrived. Her father's bowel movements remained regular and her mother's hyper vigilance ensured that Husna's bald patches were growing in. The uneven hair length and distribution across her head was quickly fixed by a trip to the salon and an application of eyeliner which made the unavoidable asymmetry look 'edgy'. Cactus #2 and #3 outgrew their pots and even bloomed after weekly watering. Husna had long since learnt that cacti, despite being hardy plants that could theoretically withstand the extreme temperatures of a desert, couldn't survive human neglect. Providing it with sustenance proved her love, and they in turn were swollen with love for her. Flower after flower burst forth around the tips of the cacti, and these majestic plants were her crowning glory, her triumph against inheritance and fate. Until one night, a cell within Cactus #3 burst, love seeping in grey sludge down the sides of its bloated length that was fast diminishing. Unable to live with the knowledge that it was to be the only one of its kind in the house of humans, Cactus #2 imploded, defaulting from within, until all that was left was a wrinkle of cactus skin spilling over its pot.

Staring at the vestiges of her love rotting into the earth, Husna swore that she would never bring another non-human entity into the cursed house.

The first thing Husna thought about when she moved into her new room in a foreign city was: A cactus would brighten this place up. Weeks passed as she made the space more habitable. The room was scrubbed from top to bottom, the bed and the books moved in, and the blinds went up. This time, in this new space, Husna had a feeling that cactus rearing would work out. She armed herself with all the knowledge she could glean online and even consulted with the experts at the nursery. When she felt sufficiently equipped with theory, she made her way down to the nursery and collected the Echinocereus that she had been eying during her consultation with the plant experts. The name of the plant, she was pleased to learn, was derived from the Greek word Echinus meaning porcupine and Cereus which meant large waxy candle. With its association to a small mammal, it seemed to Husna that success in taking care of this cactus might mean that she would be able to graduate to caring for animals next.

Cactus #4 is always under close watch, although Husna tries not to make it too obvious. She notes the movement of the sun's rays as her fingers transcribe interviews with writers that the editorial team has selected for the month's edition. On her way from pacing from her desk to her bed, she will take a detour to the window where she will walk around the Echinocereus and dip a finger into the soil to check for moisture level. As she scribbles notes into the margins of an article, she keeps an eye out for any pests hovering by the window. She makes sure not to water it too much.

From January to March, Husna cares. She cares about the people she is writing about and she cares for the people she is working with. She cares for the Echinocereus. She cares so much that some nights, she feels that she has found her purpose and falls into a dreamless sleep. Other days, she gives so much of herself over to caring that she is

uncertain if she ever gets herself back when she collapses into bed, her eyes shut but mind still whirring, running through the next day's itinerary, caring, caring, caring. Her fingers dig into the tangled mess on her head. Caring, caring, caring. Slowly, they straighten one strand and then another. Caring, caring, caring. They encounter a snag but a quick tug resolves that. Caring, pop, caring, pop, caring, pop pop pop. Gradually, her mind shuts down and she sleeps.

At the start of April, her mental calendar grudgingly allows that perhaps she is not a failure. Cactus #4 is still alive, hooray! Her fingers brush against the silk scarf that she has taken to wrapping around her head, with the absence of her mother's eagle eye and quick-to-swat hands as deterrence. Her strict work ethic and discipline in producing excellent articles and healthy cactus does not apply to her ability to keep her hands from straying into her hair and rooting out those strands that feel out of place. She hides this peccadillo under a stylishly wrapped turban which draws many compliments and becomes a convenient conversation starter. No hair? – it's okay. She has plenty of other crowning glories.

Mid April, she realizes that Cactus #4 has now become Cacti #4 – it has propagated two friends, small, round neon green things which cling onto the original like a hairy tumour. Husna knows that this is a sign of successful cactus rearing, but she cannot get rid of her disinclination for breeding. That it is happening in her room is disconcerting. She strives to continue the same care regiment that is so far successful.

Perhaps too successful.

Before April is out, Cactus #4 has 5 more children protruding out of various parts of the soil and even on its body. Husna is infuriated. She never wanted to be the caretaker

to six cacti, just the one! By this point, she has employed tweezers to provide her with soothing relief. Her head a barren desert, she focuses her attention on the hairs that grew in the spaces between the first knuckle and the second. Stop it, she pleads to Cacti #4, You're going to regret doing this. One must breed responsibly and you should have consulted me. It's too late for that now, so you should just stop it now.

I'll get you a new pot, she adds.

Cacti #4 spots three new growths in response.

Husna decides that ignoring the pot of cacti is the answer. She does not sneak a peek at the pot throughout the whole of May even though she is concerned for its wellbeing. Even plants need discipline, she tells herself whenever the urge to look threatens to overcome her. I'm doing it a favour, she chants as she sends several emails marked *urgent* to various people in the office.

She finally relents two months later. Someone new sitting two seats from her at the communal work table has brought in a cactus. She hears the owner telling another colleague, Don't worry, the cactus is super low maintenance, man.

Yeah I know. Like I see them everywhere, you know? Ok, I don't want to offend you but, like, don't you think their current popularity just signals the mediocrity of the masses?

But it adds so much to the aesthetic of my workspace, don't you think?

When Husna reaches home, she immediately heads to the cacti. She notes that the soil is cracked from lack of water but the cacti seem fine. She tentatively pokes the original stem. It is large and turgid and doesn't give. When Husna retracts her finger, some of the cactus spikes have clung onto her fingertip, like sprouting hair.

She stares at her fingertip for a while. Then, her right hand reaches out and she grabs Cacti #4 by the original stem. The spikes tunnel into her fingers and her palm. Now the entire stem is stained purple from the blood pulsing from the holes in Husna's hand. Cacti #4 dislodges from its clay vessel and the pot shatters on Husna's feet. The sun goes down on Husna strangling Cacti #4 to death.

Later, Husna will take her tweezers and pull the remnants of Cactus #4 from her right hand.

THE CRAIGSLIST CHASER

1.

craigslist > gigs

I want to chase someone

i am seeking somebody who will let me chase them. age
and gender doesn't matter. you can be real old or a lady or
black as long as you can go real fast. it doesn't matter
where it happens (inside or outside) but you have to be fun
to chase. you can't be on a bike because it's cheating. i
want the chasing to last a long time and i want to be sweaty
but i have to catch you in the end. if i don't catch you then
you won't be paid. but you can't let me catch you and be
easy about it and if you do you won't get paid.

after the chasing you should say something to me like
“good running” or “you're very fast” and give me a high
five (one hand high five or both hands high five). not
because I told you to but because you think it. afterwards
you should post a picture of me on your facebook and make
the picture caption say “he caught me”

Let me know

I'm running – legs pumping, arms swinging, counting my breath.

In – in – out.

In – in – out.

The cotton peak above my forehead has collapsed and the tudong is sticking to my sweaty skin. I must look a right fool running in a long sleeve t-shirt and baggy trek bottoms. And the tudong - mustn't forget the tudong. My feet are protesting against the cheap running shoes I had bought at the start of the year when I believed that I would start working out at home.

God, I hate running.

I'm running. I look over my shoulder and I see him behind me. Chasing me. A headband sweeps his hair away from his face. Clad in dri-fit t-shirt and shorts, football socks and running shoes, this guy's not playing. He's here to run, to run after me.

I look over my shoulder again. Catch his eyes.

Don't, he barks. Don't look back. You're slowing down.

I run faster.

There's a turn in the path about a hundred metres in front me. I speed up. My breathing loses its rhythm and I'm panting like an asthmatic cat.

The ten am sun is particularly strong today, keeping those less dedicated to their routine away from the park. I whip past trees – an elderly jogger – a cyclist – an old woman on a mobility scooter – two new mothers chatting – their maids pushing strollers behind them

– the path curves. A gardener stops his grass cutter when we run past. I see the cogs turning and his brows knit in concern as his mouth opens to yell. The air shifts around me and my pulse jackhammers a hole at the base of my throat. The ghost of fingers trailing down my back propels my legs but they've reached capacity. I want to

stop now, claim that he's caught me but my body won't let me. It presses on without me, past the bend, onto another straight path. An arm's length behind me, the man is struggling to close the distance. Behind him, the gardener has joined the chase, grass cutter abandoned.

A hand stretches out and grazes the back of my cotton scarf.

No!

My left knee locks. Our bodies collide. We tumble to the ground, his body an unfamiliar heat against my back. I close my eyes, blocking out the red on my palm, and the jagged tear on the knee of my trek pants.

I caught you, he whispers. I caught you.

Get away from her! Miss, are you ok?

I caught you, I caught you.

Get away from her, or I'm calling the police!

I'm alright, I croak. He's my – We're playing catch. He caught me.

The gardener glares at us like we are deviants tainting the sacred grounds of his garden. He turns his back on us and walks off, muttering profanities under his breath.

My chaser has sat up and is staring at me. The heat on my back transfers to my face as I carefully get to my feet. He reaches towards me and I grab his hand to help him stand but he yanks his hand back, smearing my blood on his fingertips. I apologize and hastily try to clean my palms with the hem of my t-shirt.

No, he hisses, give me a high five!

Oh. I give my palms one last swipe of the t-shirt and give him a double high five. He looks a little happier but still mostly dissatisfied. I run through his ad in my head and realize what he wants.

Good running! I chirped like an aerobic workout video instructor sans the zealous enthusiasm. I want to go home now.

Forget it, he says. You don't mean it.

He fishes out a crumpled bill from the zip compartment in the band of his shorts. He keeps it in his palms. We stare at it. I think about telling him to forget about the payment but then I wouldn't have a legitimate reason for doing this. We stand in the middle of the pavement, the money between us.

Finally, he hands it over.

You didn't do everything I asked for, but I don't have other bills on me, he says.

I didn't bring any money, I reply.

He looks at the fifty dollars in my hand, turns and walks away.

Now the gardener's glare returns.

Wait! I call out. I – I need to take a picture. For Facebook.

He stands in front of me, hands by his side, his face unexceptional. My finger is poised to take the photo on my phone but I hesitate, unsure if that is the pose he wants me to capture. He is unmoving. I snap the picture and post it on Facebook with the caption – He caught me. I want to show him that the picture is posted, but he is gone.

I'm marking essays in the café across my apartment but my eyes keep straying to my phone. Will he call on me again? Did I do a good enough job to warrant a second chase?

The point of my pen stays in place for too long, staining the paper like a fresh wound blooming beneath layers of gauze.

The students' writings are a nightmare to untangle. The thesis statements are convoluted, jam packed with unnecessarily complicated phrases that serve to obfuscate meaning instead of elucidate their thoughts on the novel.

-the availing of the ambiguity of concealment foments the reader –
concording minor subjects with signification connotation – -the binary signifier in
which the subjugated remnants manifest in a corporeal structure –

Why can't they just say what they mean?

Two days pass.

When the email comes, the elation is unexpected, shameful. I tell myself that it is my desire to exercise again, to feel a runner's high. The lie is a coil that strangles the heart. I feel the ache return to my body at the thought of the chase.

We meet in the same park at three pm. I had protested the timing at first, aware that there would be more people in the park then. But he had a deadline at noon and wanted to chase away the stress with a run after the submission. Since I have no tutorials to teach on Tuesdays, I relented.

He is wearing the exact same outfit as our first encounter. I had purchased a new pair of pants. A sales assistant had appeared when my fingers grazed the slick fabric

hanging on the rack. That's a great choice, she said. They're tight so your muscles get support while they work!

I quickly learned all the virtues of that particular pair of tights: they would embrace me as I run. Plus! It's designed so that I feel like I'm running naked!

That sounds mortifying, I said.

What? No, no you misunderstand, ma'am. You're not actually running naked, it just feels like it. Like zero resistance! Just try it, you'll love it!

In the dressing room, I couldn't help running my hands over the curve of my buttocks – thighs – calves encased in blooming pixie raspberry black. Everything felt held in, secure.

Safety tinged with a daring I had never possessed.

I left the shop with the damned thing sliding around its paper bag.

Standing before him in my bold pants, I chastise myself for my indulgent purchase. The park is crawling with students, rowdy after being released from school, and the elderly resting on benches, basking in the bristling energy emanating from youth that now eludes them. When my chaser nods, I try to ignore the second skin embracing my legs and push off. As my strides widen, the worry dissipates. My only concern now is how to increase the distance between us. I run through a gaggle of primary school students sucking orange ice, smirking as they squawk and part to make a path for me. I weave around three couples in a row, avoiding them like they were traffic cones.

I hear the boys yell, Watch it!

I know he is coming.

Tomorrow, when I am silently despairing at the stony silence in the cold tutorial room, I will recall how the stretch of my muscles brings tears. An outstretched hand can jolt the heart. I weep and I sweat. I have overcome my body. For a time, I have even triumphed over his. I am alive.

In this room, I face breathing stone. Fear has petrified the students. They are afraid of appearing stupid and dull in front of their classmates. The most radical act in this room of stones is a raised hand with a question, uninvited, unrealized. I may be the tutor but I am the one who has failed. I will distribute their mangled essays in hope that the sight of the bloody remnants of their thoughts will crack through their insecurity and allow thoughts and ideas to flow through.

This is meant to be a safe space.

He taps me as we near the lake. For ten minutes, there is only the sound of our staccato breaths. Finally, I managed to pant, Good run. Same, he replies. After our heart rates have evened out, we high five. I take a picture of him and this time, he takes a look at it.

Take another one, he says, I'm happy with this chase. I want the picture to show that I am happy.

I take another picture of him. His face is the same except for the barest glimpse of teeth. He nods, satisfied. I post it online with the caption –he caught me. He gives me fifty dollars and we part ways.

We meet an average of three times a week.

Sometimes the mystery around him lifts, just a little. When I suggest we have a session at eight pm, he admits that he is uncomfortable going out at night. He tells me he dislikes sweet things when he catches me in front of an ice cream seller and I offer to buy him one.

The mystery of who he is and what he does gnaws at me. The question sits heavy on my tongue and, gradually, I feel my mouth petrify, afraid to send waves through this tenuous connection. I am back in the cold tutorial room.

In bed, my thoughts swarm in search of a solution. They cycle through all the information I have about him and find that this is not where my discontent lies. I go back in time, to the first encounter, online. I had come across his ad and desired the same thing. To ask for what I need and want, instead of keeping it wadded up in the darkest corner of the closet like the Victoria's Secret thong I had purchased on a whim.

We meet for a session three days later. I run first. He chases me. He catches me. I commend the run. We high five. He poses for a picture. I post it online. He hands over fifty dollars.

I refuse.

Everything stills.

Before the words die on my tongue, I say, I – I want something else.

He doesn't respond.

I want you to shave my head.

He stuffs the fifty dollars in his pocket and walks away from me.

Three weeks pass.

I see his email after class.

2.

My fingers find the knotted ends of the tudong at the nape of my neck. With practiced ease, they press into the ball of fabric, digging into the crevice that will undo the knot. Once unravelled, I leave the ends draped on my shoulders. Next, I reach for the small safety pin under my neck and release it from its clasp. The cloth gapes, revealing my neck and a hint of collarbone that peeks out from beneath the collar of my t-shirt. All I have to do now is to remove the tudong and the undercap that keeps my hair constrained.

In – in – out.

In – in – out.

I am shuddering as I exhale.

I pull off the tudong and the undercap in one move. I wait for the weight of hair to tumble down my back but the pressure doesn't come and I remember that I had cut it the day before, in preparation for this moment. I had cut it in the toilet the way my mother had once used to do when I was little. With a snip of my scissors, seven years' worth of growth fell onto the day's newspaper underneath my feet. Yet all I could think of was the anticipation of another's hand and the cool glide of blade against my scalp.

I place the tudong and the undercap on the coffee table. The coffee table and the sofa have been pushed up to the wall, leaving a space in the middle of the living room. I had helped him roll up the rug and laid down newspapers in its place. He had brought out

a stool and was currently getting the full length mirror from his room. On the console, below the TV mounted on the wall, I spot the electric razor already plugged in.

I slip the rain poncho over my head to prevent hair from getting onto my running gear. It had been almost a relief to encase my legs in my running tights again, after three weeks. I walked to the MRT station feeling a little taller. At the station, I spotted the vivid purple of my pants on the security feed at the gantry. Then, again, in the window of the train, where the reflection stretched so that I was eighty percent blooming pixie raspberry black. An Australian woman with orange streaks in her hair complimented my leggings. I must have mumbled a thanks and something nice about her hair because suddenly we were having a conversation on the train. Strangers! Just casually talking to each other! On the train!

He met me at Senja station and we walked for fifteen minutes to get to his apartment block. I had told him in an email that my house was unavailable because the elderly neighbours who don't go to work will talk if they see that I brought a man to the flat I shared with my mother. It doesn't matter if she is out at work that day. The old people living in my block are great at surveillance and their pity for my widow mother can't be bought off. They will surely inform her. His response was to offer his place as a venue for the shave.

We crossed a running track on the way to his flat.

This is where I will chase you later, he said.

Now sitting on the stool, I wish we had gone for the run first. My right leg is bouncing up and down furiously as I try to calm myself down.

In – in – out.

In – in – out.

He enters the living room, mirror in hand. He settles it in front of me. His body blocks my reflection.

I have conditions, he says. Before I shave you, I must pay you for the last run. You must accept it. Then I will shave your head.

Okay, I say. Okay.

He looks relieved and takes a fifty dollar note from his pocket. He hands it to me. Instead of taking the money, I grasp his hand. He startles. His eyes fly to my face.

I will accept the money if you also accept that I want to pay you for doing this.

The wild look in his eyes calm.

Pay me later, he replies and gently extricates his hand from my grasp, leaving the money in my hand. He walks away from the mirror. I lift the poncho and stuff the money in my pocket. He reaches for the electric razor. He flicks it on and the thrumming fills the room. It grows louder with every step he takes towards me. When he is directly behind me, the sound is a prickly swarm needling my scalp and I am ready for him, for the razor. Our gazes meet in the mirror.

I nod.

I feel his fingertips on my head and the thrumming mutes. My throat goes dry. Look down, he instructs softly. I obey.

A vibration at the base of my skull. The first bite of the razor.

His fingers dance across my head as he whispers commands.

Tilt your head to the right.

Look up.

Stay still.

Turn your head to the left.

Don't move.

Look in the mirror.

I open my eyes. When had they closed? It takes a while for me to focus. The first thing I notice is how quiet it is. The razor is no longer humming. In the mirror, I spot it, still gripped in his hands, its black wire dangling against his leg like an unfurled whip.

Are you happy, he asks.

I let my gaze travel up his arms, to his shoulders, his chest. The birthmark on his neck. Finally, I look at myself.

Yes, I whisper. Yes.

He leaves the living room to clean up. I remain seated, staring at my new head, resisting the urge to stroke it in case the mental imprint of his hands on my head disappears at my touch. Without the weight of hair, my head looks smaller in the mirror. It is strange to be able to see through the space between my left ear and my head. He returns with a black trash bag and a towel. He dusts off any remaining hair on my neck before I remove the poncho. I throw it in the trash, along with my hair, collected in crunched up newspapers. I offer to sweep the room but he is eager to leave for the track. Before we leave the house, I pay him fifty dollars.

It is only in the lift that I realise that I am not wearing my tudong. I freeze when the lift dings. When the door opens to the first floor, I regain function of my body. Instead of asking him to go back up so I can put on my scarf, I step out and take off running towards the track.

I hear him yell behind me but I do not look back. Who is this bold, spontaneous person in control of the body I am in? I start my first lap around the track. At first, I keep covering my left ear with my hand, conscious of it sticking out even more than usual. But my gait becomes awkward so I stop. I focus on the track in front of me, ignoring anyone who might be looking. As I enter my third lap, I start to enjoy the wind licking the sweat of my head, the salty moisture not trapped between locks of hair and cotton. My form is still good.

In – in – out.

In – in – out.

I start to strain at the end of my sixth lap. A fire has started in my lungs and I am beginning to wheeze. But my mind has unlocked a different kind of serenity. I memorize how this feels so that when I next see my students, I will be bristling with so much life that their stony exteriors will turn to dust and the weight on their tongues will disintegrate. As I enter my seventh lap, I strengthen my resolve to make this vision a reality.

And then I feel a tap on my shoulder. I shake it off and continue chasing after answers that have manifested before me. Someone is yelling, Hey I caught you! I caught you! Stop!

No I haven't, I yell back, swinging my arms faster. I haven't caught them all.

Someone grips my elbow and yanks hard. I stumble backwards and fall. He stands over me and berates me.

You cheated! I caught you but you didn't stop. Why didn't you stop?

The laugh starts in my stomach, then travels up, past my oesophagus, floods my mouth, and leaps off my tongue. I am ebullient, I am light as a feather – I understand why fitness instructors are so happy all the time. My laughter silences him. I am still laughing when I stand up and congratulate him for running well. He doesn't answer. Chuckling, I take a photo of him with my phone.

Happy? I ask, showing him the picture. He doesn't say anything. I post it on Facebook with the caption, He caught me!

So are we going back up or what, I say after putting away my phone. I need to rehydrate after that run!

Finally he responds, Yes, and walks to the lifts. I follow him.

In the living room, he hands me fifty dollars and my laughter returns. His hand remains extended, the fifty dollars clenched between his fingers.

It's okay, I say. I think we're past that don't you think?

Take it, he says. His hand jerks towards me, the crisp edge of the note cutting off my laugh.

It's really alright. You know I don't do this for the money, right?

No I don't. Please, take this.

I look him in the eye and say, No. I maintain eye contact. But his gaze is fire.

TAKE IT, he roars. TAKE IT, TAKE IT, TAKE IT.

And he throws the money at me.

I resist the urge to step back but I can't bear to look at him anymore. The money floats to the ground between us.

TOUCH UP

If I could wake up anywhere in the world, I would wake up at Khai's house. At Khai's house, you wake up to quiet and the smell of breakfast that Khai's nenek cooked. You get out of bed and realise that Khai's mother has ironed your clothes for the day and they are hanging by the door. When you walk out, Khai's family is seated around the dining table, eating breakfast. There is an empty seat at the table with a plate and cup prepared for you. They greet good morning when they see you and tell you to sit and eat. Don't be shy. Buat jer macam keluarga sendiri, Khai's mother says.

Treat us like your family. Words like these make my chest feel tight and I have to punch the place it hurts until the skin gets all red and the pain's disappeared. His nenek pats my back. Tells me to tambah lagi and scoops more rice on my plate. I smile at her and tell her it's the best breakfast I've had in my life. His father, not a big talker, nods at me and goes back to reading the newspaper. Khai just keeps eating. He doesn't get it when I tell him he's lucky. He doesn't need to do anything to get this kind of treatment. This kind of family.

Even though I like sleeping over at Khai's, I usually reserve it for the times when my breath stinks of beer or vodka. Or when I've been smoking more than just tobacco. I swear, my mother's got nose and ears like a dog. The first time I tried a cigarette was in my secondary school toilet. I sucked in one time and started choking. Gave the rest back to the senior who called me a pussy. Later, when I was about to step into the house, my mother yelled at me from the master bedroom. Adam Mazlan, you dare smoke a cigarette when you live under my roof? I froze at the door, shocked. She ran out of her room,

stopped one metre away from me and immediately covered her nose. Astarghfirullah Adam! You smell so disgusting. How can you do something like this?

Sometimes, like today when my brain's not functioning, I'll still try to come home after clubbing. Coming home now is weird. The lights are on all the time, especially at the main door and the living room. Instead of the nostril burning smell of hospital grade hand sanitizer mixed with the smell of shit and orange flavour morphine in the hallway, I try not to choke on the minyak attar my mother insists on burning to "purify" the house. The master bedroom, where my father spent his last years, is always closed.

The most stressful part of going home is getting through the front door. Unlocking the gate is easy. Quick turn, snick, open. Easy. No matter how much I try to make as little noise as possible when I open the front door, you don't need my mother's dog ears to hear the key draaaaag inside the lock. Then, I turn the key as slowly as possible, but the door still unlocks so fucking loudly that I might as well have pressed the doorbell.

Adam is that you?

Damn it.

When my mother hears the front door open, she always yells from wherever she's at in the house, asking if it's me. She never asks if it's my sister. It's probably because my sister never goes anywhere except for the university. And the tuition centre where she teaches atas little kids how to write compos. How do I know that they're atas? One time, my sister bought Cadbury chocolate frogs for the little bastards. When she gave the chocolates to the kids, they told her that they don't eat cheap chocolate. What the hell

man. What kind of children say no to chocolate? But I got to thank all the baby CBs because all that chocolate went to me.

I don't know how my sister can just stay at home whenever she's not working and never go crazy. I know she's got friends. They come over every year during Raya and I cannot believe how these atas people can be seating around our dining table eating my mother's curry ayam and roti kirai. One of them is a doctor and has a doctor boyfriend. Another one is like a manager of some big fashion company and also has a doctor boyfriend. Then there's one who is an accountant, carries an LV bag and is on and off with the only son of some rubber tycoon. I guess this is what happens when you go to elite school – you become elite and make friends with other elite people.

But then, my sister doesn't have a boyfriend and her job's not that glam. I don't think she's even gone on a date before. Maybe after she get her PhD then she can work on becoming fully elite. Lose a bit of the weight. Maybe find an equally atas boyfriend. Or girlfriend. I don't know what she likes. Or maybe she's the kind that don't like anything. As long as she's not the kind to get off on children, animals or things, like those people who marry Siri or some shit like that, I don't care. Not enough people believe in the power of love these days. All my brothers celup their dicks here, there, everywhere. Not me. I'm the kind who is setia kepada satu. You can go ask all my ex-girlfriends. They will all say I'm a one woman kind of man.

I asked my mother if she has friends.

Of course lah I have friends! But they're all married and can't just go out whenever they want. They got responsibilities. They must ask permission from their

husbands. Also, I'm a widow now. Can't go out and have too much fun. What will people think?

What will people think? Why would they think anything? It's not like there's a sign on her forehead or on the tudong wrapped around her head saying that she is a widow what. But that's my mother's new excuse for anything she doesn't want to do, especially now during her Iddah. According to my mother, she's supposed to mourn my father for four months and ten days, but she basically made herself a prisoner at home. I don't understand. It's been four months plus, and she's still at the sit-at-home-and-cry phase. Bloody depressing. I tell her to go out and meet her friends and she says, I can't, I'm a new widow. I tell her to go find work again and she says, Not yet, I'm a new widow. We get a card inviting us to the wedding of some relative on my father's side and she immediately throws it away. We're not going. I'm a widow.

My sister got so sick of my mother being miserable at home all the time that she actually googled what Iddah was. She says it's like a waiting period so that people won't gossip about our mother remarrying too quickly.

Like that would ever happen.

The Iddah period is also to make sure my mother's not pregnant. My father couldn't even get up, so how to get *it* up to get my mother pregnant sia? And yes it's also a mourning period but to be honest, we've all been mourning for two years plus already. What even is the point of this?

It's our religion, so must follow, my mother says.

Of course.

Adam? Is that you? My mother shouts again, I think from the kitchen.

Yes Bu. My voice is hoarse. I'm tired and don't want to give her a reason to sound off at me.

Can you message your Sister to come straight home after school?

Why? She always come home straight after work. Message her for what? I shout back from my room which is opposite the kitchen.

I got important announcement! Don't talk back and just message your sister. You all sister brother. Why so hard to communicate?

She's your daughter, I feel like yelling back. Why so hard to communicate? But I keep my mouth shut because I got no mood to start another screaming match. All I want is to bathe and go to sleep.

I'm taking off my shirt when my door opens.

Astaghfirullah, don't change in your room Adam! Especially with your windows open! You don't know who can see you.

But my mother isn't even looking at me. She's scanning my room and I know she's going to say something about the dirty plates and cups on my desk and the lack of bedsheets on my bed.

But there's something different about her today.

She's doesn't look like she spent the day sitting in the living room crying into the photo album. In fact, she's not wearing home clothes. She's wearing jeans!

You finally go meet your friends ah? I ask.

She shakes her head and continues to just stand in my doorway. Looking at my room.

I try again. What you want Bu?

She tells me that when she was on the way to the supermarket that morning, she spotted an interior design firm. And then she tells me that it was a sign. She was finally ready. She was going to renovate the entire house.

I wish I had gone to Khai's house instead.

*

PAK!

Kepala's fist fucks up the brother's face good, got the blood dripping down from the broke nose and that bust up lip. Got the brother down on his knees like he begging for mercy. One eye already swollen shut, can't see Kepala reach out and hook his fingers into the spacer in his earlobe. Too distracted from Kepala's boots making his stomach a football to stop himself from falling backwards. For one second the only thing keeping him up is Kepala's fingers in his earlobe like the brother's some kind of fish he catch on Sunday fishing trips. Then Kepala pulls the ring towards himself and the lobe stretches like a fleshy rubber band.

SNAP!

The brother's on the carpark floor, grabbing his ear, spreading the blood all over his face and hands. Screaming. Crying.

So weak.

Kepala throws the metal ring away like it's an almost finished cigarette. He looks at us and we tighten the circle. It's our turn to make him as rabak as possible. As the first kicks make contact, Kepala has his hands by his side in front of him, observing with sharp eyes like he a referee in an MMA fight, keeping track of when the brother cannot take any more. His face don't change throughout the touch up session. Not even when the

brother is gargling on blood, begging for us to stop, trying to say he's sorry, that he won't do it again. Kepala doesn't hear him. The car screeching nearby don't even make him flinch. Kepala's voice makes us pause, You all need reminder in how to fight is it? Immediately, we hit harder. We tear through skin and flesh with fists and bats until the carpark floor is slippery with blood. Bone breaking echoes throughout the carpark. Kepala is stone faced, his posture perfect in his black t-shirt tucked into bespoke blacks pants, short sleeves folded to show off his biceps. On his wrist, always, his Rolex gleams.

Some heads don't do this kind of touch up session. They say we family and we don't treat our family this way. My kepala only do touch ups when someone breaks his one rule: Sell ice, don't take ice. It's our responsibility to keep clean so we don't compromise the business.

But when you around the product for so long, packing it into bags for drop off, at some point, the temptation hits you. At first, you resist. You want to stay loyal, Kepala's words IS the law. But then parts of your life turns to shit and you need something, anything, to take the edge off so you can function like normal for the parts of your life that don't suck. You turn to clubbing with your boys, where they go onto the dance floor while you stay in your seat, downing drink after drink. Everyone thinks you balling. And you are - you get stacks in your hands every week. Ice is hot shit. For the first time, people are coming to you for money instead of the other way round. Of course, when you got a face like mine and money in your pocket, the girls come tripping in their heels. For other people, women become one more problem they have to deal with. I don't let that happen to me. If I like how the girls look, I make the girls come to me. They do all the work in the 'relationship'. All I got to do is show up, let the girls take photos of us doing

couple poses for the likes and comments, pay for dinner, get my cock sucked. With a condom. Nobody's fronting. We all know who's been with who and who's got what disease. That's why I keep my cock out of these bitches' pussies. Told myself I was only going to make love to The One. The One's gonna make me feel some type of way and is classy enough that I'm gonna go to her and not pull my lazy lion routine. When I'm with her, I'm going to be loyal, going to treat her like a queen. Setia pada satu. That's the type of man I am.

But at that moment, when you got ice in your hands, you don't got The One. You don't even have a father anymore. What you got is problems - problems with your mother who tries to control you like you still a small kid with no knowledge of the world. A mother who thinks she knows what she's talking about but has no clue. A mother who thinks I can't live without her in my life. You didn't grow up without a mother, she likes to say, you don't know how hard it was for me. And you want to reply, Who say I never grow up without a mother. You think you were there for me? Please lah Mother. Strangers know more about my life then you do.

And then she'll never fail to bring up your father's will.

At this point, you've had enough and you'll either retreat to your bedroom with your earphones jammed in, or you leave the house. Most of the time, you leave because your mother will run her mouth louder and louder, her mouth getting more and more laser. You think about Fik's father's advice to be patient, to just let the hurtful words roll off your back, but all you can think of is, What kind of mother are you? And your chest feels like someone stuck a screwdriver in you, twisting it until you feel like you can't breathe. Automatically, your fingers scramble to find your cigarettes and lighter. But this

time, the taste of smoke on your tongue doesn't bring much relief. The tightness in your chest is stubborn and your mother's words are still pounding in your head.

The first time I smoked ice, it was like all the noise in my mind disappeared. I had never felt this zen in my life. When I started something while on ice, I would focus on it one hundred percent. I planned out my budget for the month, even broke that down into weeks. I planned Khai's birthday party and pulled it off like a boss. I watched all the episodes of a TV show and didn't feel bored. For the first time that I can remember, I even finished a book I had randomly pulled from my sister's stuffed bookshelf. So this must be what it's like to have a brain like my sister's, I thought. Pretty soon, I was almost always on ice. I never wanted this feeling to go away.

Ice is expensive. The quality stuff sells for \$50/0.2 grams. Even though I was around it all the time, either packing it or dropping it off to clients, I couldn't just take some. I had to buy from another seller so that nobody in the family found out. Getting your hands on the drug's not the end. Unless you want to fuck up your face fast, there are other things you need to get, like a popeye, the pipe you use to smoke it. When mine broke, I was too broke to get a new one. That's the thing with duit haram, money rolls in fast but disappears just as quick. Desperate, I would go to a shopping centre and steal light bulbs from the toilet to make a ghetto popeye.

Three months later, a jealous brother threw me under the bus. Told the kepala what I was doing. Probably thought that would get me kicked out of the family and he could be the new favourite or whatever. I remember getting to the multi-storey car park and seeing the entire family there, silent. Saw the bats and the steel toed boots through the deepening darkness. Waiting for me. I knew then that I was busted.

Unlike the poor fucker, now lying unconscious on the concrete, I kept my eyes open through the whole beating. I was determined to remain standing and smiling. They didn't call me SQ, the Smiling Qonqueror, for nothing. (People also called me SQ because I got the looks to be one of the members of the cabin crew.) It took several strikes of bats to my knees for them to bring me down. I kept my grin even when I could feel the blood leaking through my clenched teeth. My cheeks were swollen and I was having trouble breathing through my broken ribs. I would piss fire and blood for the next thirty days. When Kepala called for the gang to stop, I thought that was that. I was out. But he decided to keep me. Report back at HQ when you're clean, he said, squatting beside me. I wanted to throw up on his shiny shoes.

When I somehow made it back to Khai's place, his father took one look at me and asked me for the name and number of my Atuk, the man my kepala reported to. I told him I only had my kepala's number. I don't deal with the small boys, he said. Give me the name of your Atuk. I got my ways to contact him.

What are you going to say to him?

I'm getting you out.

NO!

You raise your voice at me in my house?

No sir, I mean I don't want you to get me out.

Why?

Why? Why didn't I want him to do this? I could put it all behind me, start a new life. I don't know what took over me at that moment, but the words just flowed out of my mouth. All due respect ah sir, this is my journey. Do you think you will change your life

if somebody pulled you out when you're not ready to leave? I know you're trying to help me. You don't want me to make the same mistake as you. But I'm not ready to change yet.

Khai's father was quiet for a long time. We were face to face, eye to eye and I could tell my words were making him think. Fucking hell, I was impressed at how smooth that delivery was. Felt like something had possessed me and pulled out the words from my brain. After that, I must have blacked out or something, because I woke up in the guest bedroom to the smell of breakfast.

Detoxing from ice was the worst experience in my life. Everything was normal on day one. Everything went to shit from day two onwards. My body became weak, weaker than I had ever felt in my life. I couldn't move from the bed to do anything. Already aching from the beating by the gang, the pain intensified until I felt like I was just meat that had been run over by a car over and over again. I would get headaches that made me pray for my brains to become liquid and flow out my ears. I desperately wanted my ice fix but Khai's father was stubborn and helped me through the withdrawal process. When he thought I was reaching breaking point, he would offer me a cigarette instead. A regular cigarette. On the worst days, I would go through four packs of cigarette a day easy. Slowly, my need for ice was replaced with the itchy desire to smoke. I was also hungry all the time. When I was addicted to ice, eating wasn't really something I thought about. My figure had become super cut and my cheekbones were razor sharp without having to hit the gym at all. Since my appetite had increased, my cheeks had filled out. I had lost some definition in my abs and back. Unacceptable. Soon, my routine became: Sleep. Smoke. Eat. Smoke. Gym. Smoke. Repeat.

*

Boy, your new partner is SQ. SQ, is one of our best businessmen. Make sure you learn something from him.

Ram, my usual business partner just shrugs when Kepala makes the announcement. He's a chill dude with zero drama. I like that. Boy on the other hand, looks like his name. Small boy, with a face that looks like he stim glue since birth. Every time I look at him, I feel like giving him one tight slap just to see his face rearrange into something other than that blur sotong look. What I can't stand even more is the way he talks. Not just slow but S. L. O. W. Like every syllable that comes out of his mouth uses up every breath he has. I have to keep reminding myself not to talk to him so he doesn't get a chance to open his mouth.

Fuck, I'm missing Ram already.

I finish packing the product in my backpack. We got some big deliveries to drop off today, got to be careful and double check that we bring the right number of packets.

Boy, you clean? Kepala's policy is that all businessmen must have clean urine when doing delivery. If we get caught, the protocol is to run, lose our chasers, drop the bag somewhere that's hidden, then get into a public place or a public transport. After a few hours, come back for the bag. That's not just any bag. That's money.

The goal is to not get caught but if we do, we make sure we don't have product on us and our urine is clean.

Boy blinks and then after a LOONG pause, nods. Something inside me wants to break this idiot boy. But I can't. So I clench my jaw and growl at him to follow.

When the hand touches my shoulder, instinct kicks in and I run, no FLY, forward. No looking back. From the corner of my eye, I see Boy's spider legs working, his eyes bugging out. He's definitely awake now, I think. I'm heading towards the park, on my left. There are more options in there to hide the bag. The stupid Boy follows me into the park. Split up, I yell. Split up! He doesn't listen. I ignore him and start scanning for a good place to hide the bag. I drop it inside a bush in front of a tree with yellow flowers. Then ran out the other exit to lie low for a while. Boy finally listen to my advice and run in the opposite direction.

Five hours later, I'm back in the park, at the spot where I stashed the bag. But it isn't there. The bag. Isn't. There. There's close to \$3000 worth of ice in there. Kepala is going to kill me. Forget my kepala, ALL the gang leaders will probably take me down. Down to hell.

I look behind every fucking bush and tree in the park. When I finally leave to report back to HQ, I am confident that the bag isn't missing. Someone has taken the bag. I don't think it was the officers. I lost them before I dropped the bag. Only one other person knows where the bag is. When I call Boy, his stupid voice makes me want to reach into the phone and choke him dead. Of course, he says he didn't take it. I... never... even... see... where... you... hide... it... ! He says in his stupid blur voice.

Kanina cheebai lah. I kena conned by someone with a fucking stim glue face.

I don't think I need to say what happened to me later that night.

Afterwards, bloody and broken, with the words YOU OWE US \$3000 ringing in my head, I somehow dragged myself to my house.

Or what remained of my house.

The front gate is open and the door is held open by a brick. When I stepped inside, my boots crunch on broken tiles, glass, bits of wall. I have to use the flashlight on my phone to see where I'm going. With my flashlight on, the cement walls glitter like they have tiny diamonds inside them. There is no more floor, there is no more kitchen, no more dining room. Just walls that glitter in the dark.

Hello? I call out. Someone must be here. The gate and door are open. There's a crunch in what used to be the master bedroom. Slowly, I approach the room.

Hello? I say again.

I see shadows dancing on the walls as a small light comes on inside the room.

Adam? Is that you?

Kak?

In here.

When I enter the master bedroom, my sister is standing by the hole in the wall that used to be the window.

I used to ask Babah to take down the grills on the windows. Do you remember what you'd always say?

I nod. I said we need the grills so that we don't jump down.

My sister hisses when the light on her phone reveals my condition. What happened to you? She walks towards me.

Help me, I say. And reach out.

BAD TOUCH THEME PARK

Jo remembers an old wildlife park commercial. Back then, it was just a zoo. In the commercial, a young man of ambiguous race appeared before several exhibits with his “daughter”. The last stop in their whirlwind tour around the zoo was the Sumatran orang utan enclosure. The camera focused on the world famous Ah Meng, the nation’s first and only non-human recipient of the “Special Tourism Ambassador” award, cradling her child in her hairy arms, before cutting to a shot of the father carrying his sleepy child home. In her hands, a miniature plush Ah Meng. When Ah Meng died, the nation mourned. The zoo held a public memorial, the nation’s president offered condolences, and her death was reported in news sites around the world. Jo remembers watching the nine o’clock news and her father going, Tch, all this for a bloody monkey. When he died, she shelled out about two thousand bucks so he could appear in the obituary page of the local paper.

After her death, Ah Meng’s legacy continued. The zoo wanted a new Ah Meng but it wasn’t so easy. Just like the old Ah Meng, the new one had to have her star quality and gentle nature. Ah Meng the first could drink tea from a teacup and looked good for an ape! Royals and celebrities queued up to meet her! She could command fees as high as \$2275 US dollars per hour! It took the zoo eight years to finally unveil the new Ah Meng. By this time, the world’s sentiments towards zoo animals had changed. It was considered gauche to have up close and personal interactions with wild animals. The once popular “Breakfast with Ah Meng” became “Jungle Breakfast with Wildlife” where visitors could watch Ah Meng in the forest habitat next to the restaurant.

Ah Meng the second died of disease just as soft-body robots took the world by storm. Unlike her predecessor, her death was announced in a small article buried under news of soaring food prices and think pieces about soft body robots and their impact on society. A year later, the wild life parks introduced the new Ah Meng to the public.

It started with the happiest place on earth making dreams come true. The first soft-body robots were rolled out in the original theme park, in the form of famous characters from the company's animated movies. For the next six months, the park operated at peak capacity everyday, and every social media platform was flooded with pictures and videos of squealing individuals of all ages interacting with their favourite movie characters come to life.

Oh my god you guys, see there! The camera pans from the face of a British female vlogger to the theme park and zooms in on a blue creature with a wide toothy grin. That's like my favourite character ev- urgh..Oh! Oof! The image on screen becomes jerky as the vlogger takes a tumble. Off screen a clear composed voice is heard. I heard a sound of distress. What seems to be the trouble? The camera is lifted and then the vlogger's shocked face fills the screen. Oh my god, she mouths, and pans the camera to the front where what seems like a walking marshmallow is standing over her. Off screen the vlogger mentions that she tripped and fell. The large inflatable robot cocks its small oval head and asks her to rate her pain from a scale of one to ten. When the vlogger insists that she is fine, the robot replies with a scan for injuries. Scan complete. You have sustained no injuries. However, your increased neurotransmitter and heart rate levels suggest that you are experiencing extreme emotions and giddiness. Please be careful

when walking around the park. The video clip ends. By day end, it had been viewed at least six million times.

Fans and critics of the soft-body robots alike marvelled over the increased immersion into the fantasy worlds of the theme park and agreed that these soft body robots revolutionised the way that guests interacted with theme park characters. Within a few years, these robots replaced thousands of human cast members clad in costumes of iconic characters. The price of entry increased and so did the lines in the theme park.

Other theme parks around the world soon followed suit with soft body robot mascots of their own. Japan took the technology to the next level, allowing the robots to function without their human handlers nearby. They then brought to life their plethora of cute and cuddly mascot characters and watched their economy revive as the world went crazy with an insatiable hunger for cuteness brought to life.

Now, the local wildlife parks have caught the soft-bot bug.

Jo watches the wild life parks' new commercial when it plays before the singalong video her twin nieces had demanded she screen. A girl stares longingly at the animals from behind the barrier. She sighs, despondent, but her face brightens when she sees the new Ah Meng beside her. Ah Meng Jr. is a squat figure. It has all the elements of cute: a round head bigger than its round body, twinkling eyes, a cheeky grin, and what seems like soft long fur that swirls upwards fashionably on its head like orange flames. This Ah Meng could talk to the visitors about friendship and conservation. She could hug you, pour tea for you during breakfast sessions with the public. This Ah Meng would never age. She would stay forever cute. When the commercial ends, Jo's nieces wails

again, again! They watch it again. And again. And then they demand to visit Ah Meng Jr.

It takes a while for Jo to save up for three park tickets that allows them to have breakfast with Ah Meng Jr. She makes decent money driving a taxi but her nieces are expensive. Then, it takes a lot longer to find a free slot; Jo has to be content with being put on wait list. Her nieces do not acquiesce so easily and their patience has to be bought off with weekly tubs of ice cream. The ice cream is good for Jo's stress. Between the ice cream and the sitting in a car all day, Jo goes up two pants sizes.

Lucky for her, the confirmation email arrives just in time for her nieces' birthday.

Are we getting closer, Jo? Fajar cranes her neck as if that would allow her to see over the shoulders of the swarthy man in front of her. It had been a Herculean effort getting the twins and herself to the wildlife park an hour before it opened its gates at 9am. When they arrived, multiple queues had already formed, all of them equally long.

"My legs are tired," Senja whines, slumping against Jo's side. Jo prays they will reach the entrance before Senja reaches the limits of her patience. Her brand of throwing a tantrum was to lie on the ground, with her belly exposed, while proclaiming loudly that she was ready for life to be over. She would try to catch the eye of a passerby and beseech them to stab her in the heart or gut her so her misery could end. The last time Senja had pulled such a stunt, the three of them had been in the fruits aisle at the supermarket. Jo had been deliberating over bananas but Senja had wanted cherries. She had tasted them at a friend's birthday party and wanted them for breakfast every day. When Jo had balked at the price and suggested they buy another fruit, Senja had thrown a fit. Why can't we ever get anything nice! she raged and flopped onto the floor. A

customer whom Senja had made eyes at had hissed at Jo to take care of her crazy child. Fajar who had been browsing the fruits selection nearby had glared at the young man and snarled, She's not crazy! She's an orphan, just like me! Uncomfortable but still determined to have the last word, the man declared that having no parents must be the reason why they had no manners. He shuffled off before Jo could think of a retort. Fajar's entire body rattled with rage and she would have screamed at the man had Jo not blocked her sight by kneeling in front of her. Don't give him the satisfaction. People like him just want to make people around them as unhappy as they are. In my day, we called them trolls. Jo could feel Senja's arms wrap around her waist from behind, a wet patch growing as Senja sniffled and muttered muffled apologies into her back.

Finally, just as Jo feels Senja sliding to the ground, they are ushered through the gates of the wildlife park. First stop, Breakfast with Ah Meng Jr.

The attraction is inside a café with a stage, and ten round tables laden with a selection of fruits and breakfast pastries. Each table had a number prominently displayed on a stand in the centre of the table. A waiter brings Jo and the twins to table three. The café is buzzing with excited children and their guardians. When all the tables are filled, a zookeeper enters with Ah Meng Jr. The room bursts into applause and cheers.

Hi! I'm Ah Meng Junior. You can call me Junior! Let's have breakfast!

The keeper and Junior move to the stage. Jo can't believe how realistically the robot is moving. The reddish fur looks real. Only the cartoonish face and proportion of the robot reveals its artificial nature. Seeing the robot in person, Jo has a feeling that she will be seeing more of them in the future.

The twins refuse to eat breakfast, too engrossed in tracking Junior's every action from where they are sitting. They watch the family at table one interact with Junior. Eww, why would you just stand there. Go talk to Junior stupid, Fajar chastises under her breath when the kids on stage stare dumbly at Junior. When table two gives Junior a flower crown to wear, Senja grumbles that it was lame, but Jo can see the regret in their eyes. Why hadn't they thought of bringing presents for Junior? Jo is ever so grateful when the usher calls out their table number before the twins decide that they needed to buy something for the robot.

The usher waves Jo and the twins onto the stage. You get twenty minutes ok? The twins rush past the usher, eager to touch and hug Ah Meng Jr and make her their new best friend. Hello Fajar and Senja, the robot chirps, Let's be friends! The twins are thrilled that Junior knows their names. Jo stands next to the robot handler disguised as a zookeeper as the twins fawn over the robot. Junior, Junior, what's your favourite colour?

What do you do for fun? Where do you sleep?

Junior, Junior who is your best friend?

Junior, do you have a boyfriend?

Their first time? The zookeeper asks Jo.

Yeah, they've been crazy about coming here ever since we saw the commercial. Jo looks at the twins who are trying to feed the robot the apples she had packed for them. Is that ok?

Hmm? The keeper lifts his eyes from the tablet in his hands. Should be fine. It's got a sac inside it or something where the food goes. They know that kids always want to feed the animals.

You've been its... keeper for long? Jo scans the keeper covertly. He has a boyish face with no facial hair, but his uniform sleeves tight around his biceps and muscular forearms suggested otherwise.

Just started actually. You don't want to go talk to it?

I don't know, it's weird coming to the zoo to see a robot animal. Yeah I know, I know I sound backwards. We've got trees with steel trunks and hydraulic branches in the gardens for ages. It's just... It's just how I feel.

Nothing wrong with that. Hey, I think it's almost time for pictures. You should stand with the kids.

The usher and zookeeper arranges them around Junior who is teaching the kids how to pose. The twins flank Junior while Jo stands behind them. They pose with a thumbs up because Junior tells them to. Then they do a silly face. Then they take one with just the twins and Junior. The camera captures them looking amazed as Junior flips into the air.

Maybe one picture with just the mother and Junior? The girls agree with the zookeeper's suggestion and scamper out of frame. Jo stands beside the robot. Smile! says the usher. Jo feels a hand on her butt. Hey, she calls out to the keeper, can you make its hand move somewhere else?

What's wrong? Junior asks and taps her butt.

Hey! What are you doing? Hey Zookeeper control your robot!

I'm an orang utan and I'm taking a photo. What are you doing? Junior replies and taps her butt again. Jo steps away but the robot follows her.

It keeps hitting my butt! Make it stop!

The keeper taps away on the tablet.

Maybe Junior's just playing, one of the twins suggested.

Yup, let's play! Junior exclaims.

I don't want to play, Jo replies as she feels another tap. The usher steps in to distract the robot but Jo can see that she's holding in her laughter. The rest of the people in the café are laughing, finding the situation amusing. Most of them have their phones out, recording.

Come on you cheeky monkey, that's enough! The robot tilts its head at her and raises both its hands. Then it winks at its avid audience, causing more laughter.

Jo strides towards the keeper. The twins follow.

What's wrong with your robot? Why didn't you stop it?

It's never done this before...I think? Even if I could alter its behaviour, it would take longer. You just had to move away.

I did! It followed me!

Well it's stopped now. Must have been a glitch

But what if it behaves like this with the next group of people? With a child?

The keeper's forehead creases. He instructs Jo and the twins to return to their table. He walks to the usher who has a hold on the robot and speaks with her in hushed tones. Then he contacts someone on the phone. A few moments later, he walks out of the café with Junior.

Hey, what's going on? My sons wants to see Junior! A woman from table four waves her hands to get the usher's attention.

I'm sorry, ma'am. Please be patient while we handle a technical issue.

What technical issue? The monkey's there, it's working. Just let my son meet Junior. Several people echo her sentiments. Their annoyance is palatable. Jo feels like sinking into her chair. For once the twins are silent beside her. The usher explains that Junior had acted in a way that was unexpected. They just want to make sure that she is ok and safe to be around people.

She was just behaving like a monkey! Just being cheeky. That woman is just sensitive! The woman at table four was supported by loud cheers. Jo could see several people tapping away at their phones. She knew, she just knew that they were saying something bad about her.

They're just making sure it's safe, Jo says. Isn't that a good thing? You don't want it to hit your child right?

That wasn't a hit! We all saw it. It just tapped you and made a joke. Next thing you'll say is that the robot molested you!

Jo's protest is drowned out by jeers. The crowd settles down a little when the keeper returns.

I'm sorry to tell you that this attraction is closed-

The crowd roars in anger.

*

You remember that news about the robot monkey?

That whole debate about whether robots can rape?

Uh, the one where the zookeeper got fired? Some journalist tracked down his history and he found out that the zookeeper is part of ...of that anti-robots group.

What anti-robots group?

You know the one where the members all used to be mascot characters who lost their jobs because of robots. Apparently he sabotaged the monkey to protest entering the entertainment industry or something.

Oh. Hey, have you watched the latest episode of FoB yet? I was totally right. The leader of the nightingale faction is a bitch! She thinks she can do better than the hero? All she can do is control birds.

Why you got to spoil it for me! Oh uncle please stop us at the bus stop thanks.

Eh, it's not an uncle. Sorry ah Miss. Miss Jahh-

Thirteen thirty. Which card do you want to pay by?

Glossary

Apu neneh	Derogatory term for Indian people
Ayat	Verse
Babi	Pig
Barang-barang/ barang	Belongings/ items which are vessels for spirits
Benda-benda	Things
Buat muka selamba	Poker-face
Bukak mulut	Reveal secrets
Cheebai	Vagina
Kena sampuk	Possessed
Mak Andam	Event-coordinator who is also makeup artist, customs consultant, and sometimes provider of bridal wear.
Ni rumah ustaz	This is the religious teacher's house
Padahal	Actually
Panas baran	Hot headed
Pusara	Cemetery
Semangat	Mental resilience
Stim glue	Stimulation by sniffing glue
Tahan	Endure

Tahu	Tofu
Tempat-tempat	Places
Tudong	Scarf
Wahlao	Exclamation like 'oh my god'

Exegesis

1. Troublesome Corpus

Where does it hurt? Tash, our writing instructor, had posed the question as he strode into class with a fervent glint in his eyes. Where is pain located in your story?

We had spent the rest of the class analyzing the stories submitted for workshop, searching for the things and places in them that made us ache, that made us want to reach out, that made us twinge in discomfort like a raw nerve exposed. For me, it had been an exercise that required us to discard any aloofness to the text and to open ourselves to the encounter with the story as a wounded body. As one wounded body recognizing another wounded body.

The connection between body and text has long been a subject of interest. The word ‘corpus’ originates from the Latin for literally ‘body’ and has come to also mean “a collection of written texts” (Oxford English Dictionaries). In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine links the learning of charity which is the “movement of the soul for enjoying God on his own terms, and for enjoying one’s self and one’s neighbor on God’s terms” with the reading and interpretation of scripture (III.X.15). Further on in the text, the process of charitable interpretation is connected to the act of healing (I.XIV.13). Sarah Spence explains that

(i)t is the bandaging of the wound that constitutes this virtuous activity; the very process of reading and interpreting is a virtue, charity, itself, while its opposite, cupidity, is the action of focussing on the unglossed text as it is; and that unglossed object, which is called by Augustine “*quolibet corpore*” (any corporeal thing), also perceived as a body that is wounded. (6)

As such, the text is at once a wounded body exposed and, in the glossing, the dressing that veils the body. Interestingly, Spence makes a passing mention of “(t)roublesome texts” which is “that which does not of itself offer a charitable reading”, and compares it to “a naked, wounded body” (7). What does it mean for a text to not of itself offer a charitable reading? Presumably, it is a text that is not scripture. The addition of “naked” alongside “wounded body” also suggests that it is a text that resists healing and concealment. An immodest text. A text whose meaning is derived, not in the bandaging, but in the inspection of wounds and the interior world.

The term “troublesome texts” also echoes the disparaging phrase “troublesome girl” directed towards women and girls who are perceived as bothersome in their disregard for the rules or their place, who refuse to be dismissed. It is attributed to someone whose practices differ from the majority, like in a banal discussion about catering: Aiyah so troublesome, must order halal and vegetarian. Troublesome is associated to those who are considered divisive because their experience and assessment of society threatens to burst the balloon that many are content to live in.

While working on my collection of short stories, I have kept these elements of the “troublesome texts” in mind. In particular, I explored ways to keep the wounds in these stories – that manifest in various kinds of profusion – bleeding, asserting their continued existence beyond the stories’ conclusion, an assertion of long maligned and, paradoxically, ignored bodies and issues that refuse to be glossed over. How can the story disrupt its own conclusion and surpass an ending?

2. Hauntings

I began my research in a type of ending that I was intimately familiar with – death. My father had passed away about two years ago, but my family had been preparing for it for at least three years prior to his last breath. A revolving door of oncologists had predicted a number of expiration dates for my father when treatment after treatment failed, but my father just kept pushing past those deadlines and he was released into palliative care at home.

While watching a reimagining of Henrik Ibsen’s play, *Ghosts*, by the the postmodern duo Markus & Markus, the memory of my father’s refusal to allow doctors to dictate the end of his life bloomed once more. During the play, the audience spent about half the time watching a documentary of 81 year old Margot – the play’s Oswald – who suffers from a laundry list of medical conditions like chronic therapy-resistant pain, osteoporosis, and incontinence. She informs us calmly that she has opted for euthanasia, death by her own terms. The reclamation of her control reaches beyond the screen (and the grave) when we learn that the props on stage are by her instruction. In a review of the play, Ng Yi-Sheng writes:

“So much better to be able to dictate the terms of your own death. A good death. A beautiful death. And to tell young theatremakers you want a photo of your old house on stage, and a lavender flag saying “Friede” (happiness), and your flower trolley full of marguerites, and them wearing top hats, like undertakers do. And to live on in people’s imaginations when you die, just like Tosca and Hedda Gabbler and Juliet...”

To live on in people’s imaginations. Not memory. The open space of imagination allows for transformation, for new configurations of self. When the nurse who administers the

fatal pentobarbital tells Margot that she is a strong woman, Margot replies, “I became one”. Even minutes from her own death, Margot shifts the focus away from her end to that of her ‘becoming’, the journey that is the site of her transformation, and in the context of the play, several Margots are always in the process of becoming.

It takes enormous strength to break away from the dictates of one’s medical history. Even doctors struggle to escape its grasp. When Atul Gawande was a medical student, he read Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”. Unlike Ivan’s doctors, he was confident that he would not fail to have compassion for his patients. Years later, Gawande would operate on a patient in his sixties who had incurable cancer. Reflecting on the behaviour of the medical professionals that were treating the patient, Gawande admits, “We could never bring ourselves to discuss the larger truth about his condition or the ultimate limits of our capabilities, let alone what might matter most to him as he neared the end of his life” (2-6). In his book *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*, Gawande concedes the limitation of modern medicine to regard the aging or terminally ill body as something other than a doctor’s failure to keep a patient alive.

There is a failure here, of empathy, of the imagination. In this way, such doctors become wardens to patients who are shackled by their medical narratives. How then can such strictures be loosened, or even broken? Author of *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur W. Frank, suggests storytelling as a way for seriously ill people to resist being drowned out by their medical narrative. He suggests that by becoming storytellers, they can “recover the voices that illness and its treatment have taken away” (2). Like Margot, their

bodies, no longer insensate and unconscious under the harsh light of the operating theatre, become “cause, topic, and instrument of whatever new stories are told” (2).

This turn away from a standard ending and the emphasis on the power of the imagination remind me of romance elements that endures in the Gothic novel. Margaret Anne Doody suggests that the persistence of romance in genres like the Gothic novel is due primarily to its protest against the ideological forces of prescriptive realism. The *Encyclopedia of British Literature: 1660-1789* summarises her argument as such:

Prescriptive realism discredits the fantastic but goes further to discourage fantasizing about how real life could be different in order... to bolster masculine, English superiority and remove imaginative considerations of lower -class, female, or foreign (especially non-white) power. The new realist novels... represents and reinforces the political, social, moral, and economic status quo. (Woodworth 1046)

The Gothic genre, especially when taken up by women in the 1780s, challenges these elements of prescriptive realism by bringing the heroine and her “female difficulties”, such as assault and abuse, to light, and becomes an avenue through which alternatives to the structures that organize lived reality can manifest (Woodworth 1047). In Gothic novels, grand structures like castles and mansions which are built to endure the test of time, still stand, but not without visible signs of stress and decay, mirroring the flagging hold and popularity of the antiquated institutions they embody. They become sites where family line, social status and physical property converge and become destabilized with the return of the past, be it through recurring visits by spectral forms, or through the sour fruition of long avoided consequences of concealed misdeeds. Fred Botting states that in

“[c]onjoining ideas of home and prison, protection and fear, old buildings in gothic fiction are never secure or free from shadows, disorientation or danger” (4).

Thus, I draw upon these elements of gothic fiction when creating the short story collection. While old buildings in gothic fiction are the incarnations of such fears and threats, the ubiquitous HDB flats in Singapore tend to become the venue in which issues of family, property, and society manifest. Perhaps also an indication of past trauma, such as the unrelenting drive of progress that saw many residents uprooted from kampongs and slums to low cost public housing, many accounts about encounters with supernatural entities inside homes or in the vicinity of their housing estate have flourished and taken root in the cultural imagination. In early January 2017, a humorous infographic by the popular local satire page “SMRT Feedback” by The Vigilanteh was widely shared on Facebook. The infographic displayed the top three things that residents in Singapore think of when they hear a loud noise when alone at home compared to those who live in USA and the rest of the world. At the top of the list, ghosts.

If fortress like structures are the mainstays of the gothic landscape in which ghosts reside, and in which the tension between protection and imprisonment is explored, HDB flats similarly probe at the line demarcating inside and outside, revealing the shaky grounds upon which the structures of ‘home’ is built. ‘Home’ is always on the cusp of disappearance – through constant development efforts that change the landscape and terrain of neighbourhoods, through housing policies that discriminate against family structures that do not conform to a specific mould, through the increasingly diminishing physical space home inhabits or the taking up of space by the presence of too many flat occupants (gods, jinns, and other apparitions included). In a bid to cling on to some bit of

space to call their own, flat occupants operate within the interior of the HDB flat (and its surrounding facilities) in ways that transcend its state sanctioned purposes. When death occurs, the living space becomes a funeral home. It can turn into a classroom, a hospital ward, or a prayer hall depending on the night. Stairwells outside the house turn into trysting places when privacy is absent from bedrooms. Void decks become occupied by children playing, in defiance of signs that prohibit such behaviour. Like the interior spaces of old buildings in Gothic fiction with its stretching hallways, shrinking rooms, and creaking doors with minds of their own, HDB flats are transformative spaces, constantly in flux at the behest of their occupants rather than the state. The stories in my collection are therefore often situated in a HDB flat and take advantage of its amorphous nature to play out situations which the bustle of city living has no time for and drowns out.

Another staple feature of HDB flats is the residents' often casual acceptance of invisible occupants. Residents living in flats will at some point hear the sound of marbles scattering on floor tiles or the sound of heavy furniture scraping against the floor from the floor above at unexpected hours of the day. It has almost become a nationwide inside joke (or is it wisdom?) to attribute these sounds to spirits who are making their presence known in benign ways, bonding people despite their various backgrounds. In response to a query about the place of ghost stories in Singapore literature, Alfian Sa'at highlights the value of such ghost stories, stating that

these stories were 'national' in the sense that they often crossed ethnic and religious boundaries... And yet this circulation and borrowing of beliefs was hardly self-conscious, and [is] a demonstration of a kind of grassroots

interculturalism. If multiculturalism is about respecting other people's beliefs, interculturalism goes further, to the point of adopting these beliefs... It just seemed that whatever your belief system, it was preferable to be a half believer than an absolute skeptic. Hantulah Singapura.

Ultimately, Alfian concludes that ghost stories are “happy enough... to continue haunting the margins” of what constitutes the nation's literature. Here we get the sense again that ghost and ghost stories are located such that they trouble rigid definitions of what national literature is and provide avenues for its expansion. Narrowing my gaze, I wondered then about the function of ghosts in local literature. More specifically, I looked at Balli Kaur Jaswal's novel, *Inheritance*, to explore how ghosts, in their various manifestations, act as provokers of unusual behaviour, disrupting intuitive resolutions, which opens up the possibility for transformation.

In *Inheritance*, grief and ghost are intertwined. At the beginning of the novel we learn that Dalveer had “exited” (26) the family after giving birth to her daughter, leaving her devastated husband, Harbeer, to raise their two sons and daughter. A few paragraphs after this revelation, Harbeer anticipates Dalveer's secret visits to the family home, when their children are out. The combination of the word “exit” and Harbeer's conversations with Dalveer would suggest that she has left her family but is still keeping tabs on her children. Later in the novel, Harbeer's children discuss his diminished mental state; they debate when to let their father know that his grief has caused him to hallucinate his wife who had died in childbirth. In the final section of the book, Dalveer's point of view is presented as the opening and closing chapters. In those chapters, she is a ghost. Kaur Jaswal's masterful control of information sustains the ambiguous nature of Dalveer as she

morphs based on the characters' and readers' interpretation of who and what she is, before asserting her presence as a ghost in the final chapters. What does the confirmation of her ghostly state do for the final section of the novel?

Firstly, the ghost provides a counterpoint to the dominant systems at work in the novel. As a ghost, Dalveer moves unseen within society and the city, unencumbered by the norms, distractions, and necessities of living in the city. While contemplating the shifts in societal behaviour in an ever-changing and increasingly sanitized environment, she notes that Singapore was "no longer a home for the spirits" (251). The hectoring call of progress has rendered the city spiritless, soulless and Dalveer can call it out without repercussion because she is not of the living. In addition, her lack of ability to affect change replicates the living's apathy or inability to do the same.

Secondly, the ghost makes manifest other "invisible" bodies. In the very first paragraph of Dalveer's chapter, we see her aligned with workers at a construction site who like Dalveer, "were present but meant to conduct themselves as if invisible" (185). Not only are their bodies invisible, too often, so are the costs of their labour. Dalveer's manifestation before Harbeer also shines a light on the labour of rearing children, often relegated to women. Harbeer seeks her guidance in bringing up their daughter especially but rankles when the requirements of parenting surfaces the shortcomings of his embodiment of masculinity. While he presents a front of unyielding authority to the public, Harbeer's machismo and aggression in his interaction with Dalveer expose his insecurities and reveal him to be an aging man clutching at straws to hide his vulnerability and the reality of his family's situation. If we can see the dead, we can no longer avert our eyes from the living. All of the living.

Thirdly, the presence of a ghost disrupts the reader's instinct to make easy causal resolutions. Before we gain access to her consciousness in part IV of the novel, we only know Dalveer through the lens of her husband and her children. Harbeer views her almost as a recalcitrant wife making amends for causing him grief. Dalveer's children think that she is a symptom of an aging unwell mind. This explanation is convincing for most of the novel as it presents a logical conclusion for her presence beyond the grave. Furthermore, this resolution is brought forward after the episode in which the daughter's erratic behaviour is diagnosed to be an expression of her bipolar disorder. However, the confirmation of Dalveer as a ghost destabilizes the authority of these character's perspectives, and emphasizes the limits of the medical narrative. Her presence is a reminder that culture and tradition resist attempts at complete sanitization.

I find the choice to open the final section and close the novel with Dalveer's point of view particularly effective. Part III of the novel ends with Dalveer's daughter stepping into oncoming traffic. Part IV begins five years later and does not tell us about the condition of Dalveer's daughter, thus extending that moment of crisis over five years. By beginning part IV with Dalveer, the notion of time as this relentless forward driving force that modern life is organised around is disrupted. Instead, time is presented as fluid. Time can also flow in a circular motion. Just as Dalveer passed away when her daughter was born, so does the possibility of her daughter's death awaken Dalveer's consciousness and solidify her presence as one of the main characters in the novel.

What does it mean to end a story on a ghost's perspective? Dalveer haunts the pages even before she is introduced in her own chapters. Even when her own children

inform her husband that they are leaving the family home in the closing of the novel, Harbeer is reassured by Dalveer's presence and thinks, "You will always be here" (247). While Harbeer is referring to Dalveer, it is clear that it not just Dalveer who will continue haunting him; although the novel ends, the deeper structural and social conditions still remain to plague individuals, families and the nation beyond the pages of the book.

The presence of the supernatural tinges many of the stories in my collection but its appearance is most evident in 'Adam Mazlan is not a Babi'. Like Kaur Jaswal's ghost in *Inheritance*, the encounters with spirits in the short story become the site in which masculinity is expressed and tested. For these boys on the cusp of the age of majority, who often do not possess the social capital valued by mainstream society, tangling with the supernatural becomes a tangible way of flaunting their bravado with successful jaunts earning them respect from their peers who act as witness. Possession while risky is also sought out by some, and is seen almost as a skills upgrade, believed to equip the possessed with abilities that are beyond human. The challenge with writing this story, then, was to make the character's entanglement with spirits beyond a spooky encounter feel like it is a part of Singapore's city life that is not usually glimpsed.

So how does one go about doing so? In a conversation between Junot Diaz and Toni Morrison at LIVE from the NYPL, Morrison says, "If I'm going to have a ghost in a book, then all the other stuff has to be absolutely accurate. It has to be exactly twenty eight miles from here to there because I have all these sort of magical whatever surrounding it." Junot Diaz sums it up succinctly - to make the ghost more ghost, the real has to be as intensely accurate as possible. For "Adam Mazlan is not a Babi" and "Touch Up", I channeled this ethos primarily through the narrative voice. These short stories are

presented in non-standard English. While the narrative voice is not an exact recording of how people may speak, I incorporated words and phrases that are used in the various communities that the main character, Adam, inhabits. The choice to present his story in non-standard English feels true to his character that rebels against conventions but it also demonstrates a fidelity to an identity that is always morphing in relation to another. Adam also adds additional meaning to English words like ‘adventure’ and ‘touch up’ which helps to occlude the nefarious undertones from those outside his group.

I turned to Leo Tolstoy to explore how the conventions of Realism might help to ground my stories in the communities and locations they are set in. One of the stories I read was “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”. The novella is mainly a meditation on what it means to live a meaningful life. The physical presence of the dead is mostly found in the early chapters about Ivan’s wake. Tolstoy’s description of a mourner’s uncertainty about how to behave at his friend’s wake was both humorous and familiar. Like Ivan’s longtime friend, Peter, in the novella, I had been unsure about the code of conduct and rituals of a Muslim funeral (having only watched western funerals and wakes on TV shows), and had taken my cues from hasty googling and copying other people’s behaviour. Below is a snippet from Tolstoy’s novella:

“Whether or not you should bow at the same time he wasn’t sure, so he went for a compromise, crossing himself as he walked in and giving a bit of a bow as he did so. At the same time, as far as hand and head movements permitted, he glanced round the room. Two young persons, nephews apparently, one of them a schoolboy, were crossing themselves as they left the room. A little old woman was standing there motionless. And a lady with curiously arched eyebrows was

whispering to her. A church reader in a frock coat – a hearty character of considerable spirit – was reading something out in a loud voice and a tone that brooked no contradiction.” (160)

Collectively, the descriptions of mourners at Ivan's wake make their actions appear perfunctory and insincere. Tolstoy's detailed descriptions of actions and appearances highlighted the performative aspects of mourning that require little emotional investment, and suppresses other displays of grief. Here, the value of realism, by drawing out the minutiae, the everyday going ons of society can be scrutinised with fresh eyes. I sought to replicate this dedication to detail by creating my own tableau of actions when describing the actions of visitors who have come to visit the sick and dying in the short story “After He Died”. In being precise and a little excessive with detail, the ridiculous and bizarre natures of the norms we take for granted, especially when faced with our mortality, are highlighted.

3. Spirals

You're just making extra work. The walls look fine, my father would whine from the armchair when my mother got in the usual decorative frenzy as the celebratory end of the fasting month, Hari Raya, approached. Fine is not enough, she would snap back, the house needs to look its best. After the walls were gleaming from a fresh coat of paint, the curtains had to be updated. So did the cushions, because they needed to match the new curtains. And after that was done, something else needed to be fixed or changed or removed entirely. Adjustments were made even on the morning of Hari Raya. After the last guest had left, we would stop working on the flat for a few days, months even, but the cycle of touching up would pick up again. It has yet to reach its end.

Perhaps this is something my mother has passed down to me, this resistance against things coming to a complete close. During a writing workshop, we reviewed how different writers perceived their relationship with the sentence. Jhumpa Lahiri's description sent a frisson of recognition through me. In her essay "My Life's Sentences", she writes

In college, I used to underline sentences that struck me, that made me look up from the page. They were not necessarily the same sentences the professors pointed out, which would turn up for further explication on an exam. I noted them for their clarity, their rhythm, their beauty and their enchantment.

Some sentences have the ability to leap off the page and visibly alter the state of the reader. Like Lahiri, we may need to stop reading in order to savour their perfection. We may take a deep breath at a sentence's sheer audacity. Or grit our teeth and brace ourselves for the next sentence. I marvel at how the end of a sentence does not simply lead to the next one. Instead, the experience of reading that sentence is extended beyond the full stop that marks the end of it. The sentence finds new living quarters in readers, in other books; it ends but doesn't close. Rather like a spiral.

Spirals figured prominently in Coleridge's creative process. He associated the spiral with the serpent, considered by the Egyptians as an emblem of intellectual power. The spiral also takes the form of a staircase that "transports the reader up to the highest "landing-place" where he can know God's presence" (Gilpin 639). In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes the reader's ideal journey through a poem: "the reader should be carried forward... at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the

retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onwards.” (640) How does a poet’s line make tightrope walkers out of readers?

*

Watch Philippe Petit step onto a wire towards Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Watch him place his left foot forward, then his right foot. Watch him pause (watch the upturned faces of the crowd below; slack jawed, they cross themselves), and adjust his grip on the ballast – movement forward is a constant and subtle negotiation of restraint and flourish. Watch him inhale, calm, as he kneels on wire – the tension leaves the crowd breathless. Eight years earlier, Petit made history by dancing between the towers of the World Trade Centre, his every step an act of inscription. When questioned about his motivations for performing such a “death-wishing” act, Petit replied

“To me, it’s really so simple: life should be lived on the edge. You have to exercise rebellion, to refuse to tape yourself to the rules, to refuse your own success, to refuse to repeat yourself, to see every day, every year, every idea as a true challenge. Then you will live your life on the tightrope.”(Telegraph)

From 1350 feet below, his body is not discernible from the metal pole he used as ballast; against the backdrop of clouds, Philippe Petit’s silhouette has taken on wings.

Some notes about writing after watching a video of Philippe Petit’s tightrope dance in a writing workshop:

- How to move across the line despite the risk of death?
- How to breathe across the line?
- How to hold other people’s breath?
- How to connect two forms (person/object, person/person, object/object)?

- And how to make them part of something beyond their expectations, something impossible?

I learn again that writing has something to do with survival.

In the hubbub of people trying to fix his cancer-riddled body, my father quietly settled all the paperwork for the bureaucratic processes that would come to life after his death. He wrote a will that delineated how his assets were to be divided. He even took care of his funeral procedures. After he signed his name on the numerous relevant documents, all that was left for him to do was die. Dying took an excruciatingly long time, made even longer by people praying for him to stay alive.

*

In an interview conducted “with himself, by himself”, Kurt Vonnegut dismisses assertions by students - that the lack of confrontations in their writing is reflective of people’s behaviour in modern life - as “laziness”. He states that the writer’s job is “to stage confrontations, so the characters will say surprising and revealing things, and educate and entertain us all” (The Paris Review).

After six months of no contact, I reached out to a friend who had relocated to the US for college. The message simply said “hello. how you”. She replied with a sad face emoji, information about her recent break up, and a screenshot of an ad on craigslist. The poster was looking for someone to chase. She wondered about the type of weirdo the poster was - “my ex didn’t find this weird. that’s def a red flag. right?” – while I wondered about the kind of person who would respond to the post. The poster evidently knew what they wanted. What would the person who responded want? To be chased?

Why? Slowly, the encounter between the poster and the responder played out in my mind.

The resultant short story “The Craigslist Chaser” deals with issues surrounding a Muslim woman’s choice, desire, visibility and hair. But what keeps the reader going is the occurrence of the chase that happens multiple times in the story. The first chase is exciting – the reader doesn’t know if the terms of the chase, as laid down by the poster, will be met. The first chase also lays down the pattern of behaviour, a code of conduct, for the next few encounters. The chases become familiar and almost ritualistic, moving story time forward in a consistent rhythm. At this point, any deviation from the established pattern of behaviour breaks the tenuous bond between characters and forces them to confront their conflicting motivations. The chase then takes on different forms, but is still signaled by the narrator’s focus on her breathing. In a way, “The Craigslist Chaser” is the most explicit of my exploration into managing the tensility of the plotline and the bond between characters.

My friend and I continued to chat online and we promised to meet up when she came back for the holidays. I canceled on her until she flew back to the US. She sends me updates of her life sometimes, but I have nothing new going on in my life to tell her. I’ve just been spinning in the same orbit for months, struggling to break out of this closed loop.

*

I started this project hoping to write death out of my system. Not in that grand way of attaining some kind of immortality through my work. Nor was it in the way of writers facing their impending end because of sickness. I just wanted to be able to write

like before, like I wasn't haunted. Like I wasn't grieving. But death makes concrete the fact that you can never return to the same place again. Likewise, artist John Edmark finds spirals fascinating as they make reference to the fact that

you can never return to the same place again, that nothing ever does truly repeat.

It goes infinitely small and it goes infinitely large; it's endless. And we don't

know where we came from, and we don't know where we're going; we're sort of

this piece of that larger picture.

Edmark's work on spirals is motivated by a yearning to "search for unusual behaviours, things that are non-intuitive, that maybe seem impossible." He turns to the precision of mathematics to clarify relationships in order to create the patterns and behaviours of his spiral sculptures. Then, I suppose, part of the reason I am writing is to clarify the relationship between ghosts, grief, and wounds.

In her foreword to *A Grief Observed*, C. S Lewis' journal entries in the aftermath of his wife's passing, Madeleine L'Engle likens the death of a beloved to an amputation (VI). During the period of my father's sickness, I have observed how primary caregivers lose their bodies to other people's illnesses. My mother quit her job to provide the 24 hour care my father required when the cancer spread. Her life was taken over by meeting and pre-empting the needs of my father. In the last two years of his life, she became so attuned to his body that it might as well have substituted hers. Her body was either ignored or pushed to the limits to provide the care my father required. When he died, she was bereft – she had lost the person who had been the focus of her life for two year, and she was unfamiliar with the body she inhabited that no longer needed to function in the

capacity of a caregiver. In a way, she was without a body and her grief pushed her further to the social margins.

Susan Sontag touches on the threat that love poses to autonomy in her journal entry on 15 September 1962. After many disappointing love affairs, she writes “Love as incorporation, being incorporated. I must resist that” (305). There is a parallel sentiment expressed in the memoir of Sontag’s son. When discussing his role as Sontag’s primary caregiver, David Rieff confesses that “in being in some sense part of my mother’s emotional life support, I found myself to be on emotional life support” (Berman 155). Rieff could not “locate a distance where he can safely care for her or simply be with her” without being “absorbed” (155, 159).

Incorporate comes from late Latin *incorporat-* ‘embodied’, from the verb *incorporare*, from in- ‘into’ + Latin *corporare* ‘form into a body’ (from *corpus*, corpor- ‘body’) (Oxford English Dictionary). So to say “love as incorporation, being incorporated” is to also say love as being taken in, absorbed into one whole, love as being formed into one body. Love also as a loss of self. Love as something to be avoided.

Here is the question upon which the story “Storms and Swords” is built: How do two people who share the experience of caring intimately for the same person resist closeness?

When the closeness of the two characters is contingent upon providing palliative care to their terminally ill family member, impending loss is already integrated into their relationship. The family member’s imminent absence keeps the two characters apart. While the mother works to narrow the divide by keeping on as if the mother-daughter

relationship hasn't changed, Zara restructures herself so that the distance is maintained in order to figure out who she is after this experience. The progress of her relationship with people like her mother and her new neighbour tracks how she is settling into a new life, post-death.

However, Zara finds that her body does not function as it used to. The experience of death and being a caregiver has changed her. C.S Lewis notes this about his body after the death of his wife: "There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can't avoid. I mean my own body. It had such a different importance while it was the body of H.'s lover. Now it's like an empty house" (11-12).

What to make of an empty house? I think first of a shell, and empty home haunted by the voice of the ocean. I think next of an empty structure, in the process of becoming or unbecoming a home. Caught in a liminal stage, like ghosts, waiting to move on to an unclear destination. Move on. (Strange that the language used in freeing trapped souls is also the one used to motivate the grieving. As if the grieving too, transitions into an afterlife, or rather, an afterdeath.) Unlike her mother, Zara does not know how to proceed to the next stage of her life. She is barely at home in her own body and her resistance to forming deeper relationships with people - to being incorporated - places her in a position where she does not find herself desirable nor desire-able. The sick body ravages itself and is depicted unflinchingly in the short story.

The difficulty in writing this passage was in presenting the sick body without inadvertently fetishising or romanticising illness. In a world where every image captured is presented in high definition for the scrutiny of the public, how do I describe the sick body in ways that invite looking beyond disgust or vulgar appetite? Siddhartha

Mukherjee offers a possible solution in his essay about Chekov's time in Sakhalin Island. Anton Chekov had undertaken the arduous journey to a hostile island to escape the "stagnation in [his] soul". He had become numbed from witnessing the constant suffering of his patients and the immense moral and economic depravity of the state and his society. When he encountered the horrors on the island, Mukherjee writes that Chekov "simply looks, and looks again. The gaze is unsparing and penetrating, clear-eyed, clinical".

But clinical does not mean dispassionate. Chekov observed six principles of writing which are:

1. Absence of lengthy verbiage of a political-social-economic nature
2. Total objectivity
3. Truthful descriptions of persons and objects
4. Extreme brevity
5. Audacity and originality
6. Compassion

Mukherjee argues that Chekov invented a kind of literature "inflected with clinical humanity – a literature of keen, nearly medical observation about human nature and its imperfections and perversions, but also a literature of expansive sensitivity and tenderness". Looking at his subjects with compassion forced Chekov out of his ennui and moved him to re-engage with the world in new ways. This new outlook on life was reflected in his writing as well; his stories did not follow narrative conventions of the time, prompting Virginia Woolf to later consider them "inconclusive" as they challenged

the “assumption that stories ought to conclude in a way that we recognise” (176). His short story “A Joke”, ends with the narrator claiming to be in the dark about the reason he joked with Nadia years ago. The joke was that he had uttered that he loved her each time they sled down a hill. However, the words were said so softly that she could never be sure if they were said by him or if she was reading too much into the whistling of the wind. The narrator states “that memory is for her the happiest, the most touching, the most beautiful one of her life”, but his confession can only attest to his infatuation with this memory and his cowardice is highlighted when contrasted with Nadia’s pursuit of love despite her fears. This epiphany comes only to the reader; the story extends beyond the written word and the shift occurs in the reader’s mind. There may be no solutions offered to address social ills or humanity’s depravity, but what we get is a sense that nothing remains stagnant for long.

4. Conclusion

I opened the short story collection with a quote by Virginia Woolf about Chekov’s work which reads “... as we read these little stories about nothing at all, the horizon widens; the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom” (178) because in the grand scheme of things the experiences and stories that I write about are often considered to be nothing at all. Like Jo from my short story “Bad Touch Theme Park”, one person’s traumatic experience often gets buried under the next viral sensation, rants about the most recently released episode of a TV show, news about some politician’s power move, and outcries against the continuing humanitarian crises. Furthermore, experiences of women

and people of colour tend to be dismissed and drowned out more easily. Just take a look at the hordes of people online who insisted that Singapore is a racial utopia, who then proceeded to drag Shrey Bhargava's reputation through the mud after he posted about his experience auditioning for *Ah Boys to Men 4* where he was asked to be "more Indian" by performing a caricature of Indianness. When racial minorities call out racism, they are deemed divisive by the majority. On a personal level, when I shared the first drafts of some of these stories with students in a writing class, someone asked me why my stories chiefly had Malay protagonists. Were my stories mainly for Malay people? The implication was clear. Even though my stories were in English and set in Singapore, the student did not think that there would be a mainstream readership for stories that did not have a Chinese or a racially ambiguous character at its centre. I get why there is such a mindset. In comparison to Chinese writers, there hasn't been that many Malay writers writing in English, but the number is increasingly growing. In 2016, Nuraliah Norasid won the Epigram Fiction Book Prize for her novel *The Gatekeeper*, "an allegorical tale ostensibly about two gorgon sisters but looks to shed light on discrimination against marginalised communities in Singapore". I hope that my stories too, no matter how small, widen the horizon of our cultural imaginary, making space for other possibilities.

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