



STRINGS OF OUR HEARTS

Dr. Jill Lee Sze Seau

Strings of Our Hearts

*A collection of stories and poems by students from the
English Language Student Association*



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Table of Contents	01
Foreword	02
Preface	03
Love, Pain & Memories	04
There is no one like you by Hui Min	05
My Grandpa, My Champion by Hui Jin	20
The Blessing by Lydia Soon	30
Turning Points by Tana	67
Zero O’Clock by Angelina	77
The Plastic Flashlight by Shen	88
7 Minutes by Lyssa	94
Cradle of Grief by Dhivya	125
Goodbye, My Love; No, My Mistake by Lim Kai Yi	129
Fear, Violence & War	135
Echoes of War by Hawraa	136
Masquerade by Ying	141
At What Cost by Shaid Shaqqiq	164
Dearly Beloved: A Collection of Ghost Stories From Those Around Me by Sheryl	187
Nightmares of the Undead by Audi	229
Satire & Humour	248
A Damn Hot Mess by Lucas	249
The End	254

Foreword

It is with great pride and heartfelt admiration that I present *Strings of Our Hearts*, a vibrant tapestry woven from the creative expressions of our students. This anthology is more than a mere collection of writing; it is a testament to the imagination, courage, and emotional depth of young minds exploring their inner worlds and the world around them.

Each piece in this compilation resonates with the unique voice of its author — some soft and reflective, others bold and unrestrained — yet all connected by the common thread of authenticity. Whether in the form of poetry, prose, or personal reflection, these writings give shape to thoughts often left unspoken, echoing the quiet longings, fierce hopes, and tender joys that dwell in the hearts of the writers.

The title *Strings of Our Hearts* beautifully captures the spirit of this collection. These strings are not just chords of emotion; they are lifelines that connect writer to reader, heart to heart. As you turn the pages, you will find stories that move, verses that linger, and voices that deserve to be heard.

May this book inspire not only appreciation for the talent and honesty of these budding writers, but also remind us of the transformative power of creative expression. Let us celebrate their courage to write, to share, and to be seen.

Dr. Christiantine Della
Editor

Preface

Strings of Our Hearts is a collection of creative works by undergraduate students from the English Language and Communication programme, showcasing their diverse voices, insights, and literary talents.

The contributions in this volume are grouped under three broad thematic categories: love, identity, and memories; fear, violence, and war; and satire and humour. These themes reflect the varied concerns, emotions, and perspectives of the young writers whose works are featured here. Whether through heartfelt verse, powerful narratives, or thought-provoking reflections, each piece offers a unique glimpse into the minds and hearts of its author.

This collection not only celebrates the creative expression of our students but also affirms the importance of storytelling as a means of understanding the self and the world, whether real or imaginary. We hope that readers will find in these strings of poems, stories, and personal reflections moments of connection, introspection, and inspiration.

Dr. Genevieve Flores Dipolog
Co-editor

Love, Pain & Memories

There is no one like you

by Hui Min

Preamble

Love is an extraordinarily powerful force, something beyond what we can even imagine. It has an extraordinary ability to mold our lives in the most unforeseen and breathtaking ways. But what does love truly look like? Have you ever met someone who changes the way you see the world? Someone whose love makes you believe in something greater? I have, and for me, that person is my grandmother.

Love took the beautiful shape of my grandmother, a remarkable woman whose steadfast affection and wise guidance have been the cornerstone of my life. She is far more than just my caregiver and mentor; she is the very essence of selflessness, a true hero in my eyes. In a world that often seems to be draped in selfishness, hers is a rare light—a beacon that radiates love so abundantly that it leaves me in awe. This is why I regard her as a true hero, my ultimate role model. Through her, I have absorbed profound lessons about family, faith, and resilience that continue to color my outlook on life. Her story not only stands as a powerful testament to the depth of familial bonds but also echoes the timeless values of love and sacrifice that beautifully transcend generations. She is a reminder that in the grand tapestry of life, it is the threads of love and selflessness that hold everything together.

Love is such a strong force that really shapes our lives, you know? It changes how we view things and how we treat people. For me, my grandma is the epitome of love, in every beautiful shape and form. Her constant affection and care have not only shaped how I understand love, but they have also affected how I perceive superheroes and romantic relationships.

In Asian culture, there is a common belief that a man must attain financial stability, even wealth, before a woman can truly regard him as a suitable partner. This notion, steeped in tradition, has been lovingly passed down through generations, with the older generation often sharing this wisdom with the youngsters. My grandma is no different. When the topic of romantic relationships surfaces, my grandma will repeatedly tell me to search for a boyfriend who is financially stable so I will not have to worry about money. Looking back at it now, she isn't wrong to make that statement. But deep down, my grandmother really just wanted me to find someone who truly loves and cares for me above all else. She has unfailingly poured her heart into sacrificing her time, her money, and so much more, all for me. Similar to many Asian parents, she tells me she's guiding me on how to care and raise my future children, in hopes that I settle down and start a family of my own one day. My heart fills up with warmth and gratitude towards her as everyone around me, including myself, can see how much she truly values me. It is heartwarming to know that, even when I have my own family to fret over, my grandmother

is still incredibly willing to support me in everything, as long as it brings me solace and ease. Her selflessness and unwavering love for me leave me feeling incredibly blessed and grateful.

Just like I said before, my grandmother is truly a source of love and warmth in my life, showing her love through her actions, words, and gestures. In my eyes, she embodies the characteristics of a superhero — always by my side to offer support, guidance, and unconditional love. Our bond is like an ancient oak tree, its roots deep and unshakable, offering shade and strength through every challenge life throws our way. I will never forget that one fateful night when I was merely a child that brought me relief and peace, as the sound of a soothing voice and the touch of a warm hand accompanied me during a fierce storm.

It was during my secondary school days, a time when the world felt heavy and tumultuous. That night, after a fierce argument with my parents, I found myself adrift, consumed by a sense of loss and unease. But then, as I ran into my grandma's room, everything shifted in an instant. That's when I moved to my grandma's place to stay. On that particular night, I couldn't bear to sleep in my own bedroom; I dashed into my grandma's room and nestled beside her. She gently stroked my hair, her touch as comforting as a lullaby, whispering soothing words that melted away my distress and sadness, which was where the chaos of my heart began to dissolve. Her whispered

words flowed like a balm over my soul, melting the sadness that had gripped me. Her very presence wrapped around me like a warm blanket, making me feel safe, as if I had stepped into a cozy shelter during a storm.

My grandma embodied love in its purest form, radiating it through her actions rather than mere words. Like many Asian parents, she never openly stated, “I love you,” but I could feel it in every little thing she did. She always welcomed me with open arms, maintaining a calm demeanor as she took the time to truly understand my feelings and struggles.

That night holds a cherished place in my heart, a moment I wish I could go back to relive those precious moments. Whenever I was scolded by my parents, she was the one I turned to for comfort. Those warm hands and the melody of her voice wrapped around me like a soft blanket, bringing peace at a time when I desperately needed it, reminding me of how deeply she cared for me. I will forever treasure that night, when I was just a child seeking comfort, and she embraced me with unwavering warmth and understanding. The sweet sound of her soft singing and the gentle touch of her lingered in my heart, bringing relief and peace in ways that words never could.

I can vividly recall the moments from my childhood when I would receive a scolding from my father, and without hesitation, I would seek solace in the comforting presence of my grandmother. She was always there to soothe my

emotions with her gentle touch, standing as my unwavering source of strength—an anchor that would steady me. To me, she was nothing short of a superhero, always ready to shield me from harm and protect my tender feelings. I remember a time when I confided in her about my craving for sweet candy, a forbidden treat in my parents' eyes. She secretly bought me some, but then got in trouble when my parents found out. They said candy wasn't good for my teeth because I hated brushing them back then. (Oops, secret's out but nobody knows about it, this is our little secret!) Yet, through it all, my grandmother's love shone brightly, TRULY surpassing even that of my own parents. In her, I found a love so profound, so pure—a love that knew no boundaries. Her love felt like the first light of dawn—gentle yet persistent, kept bringing me hope and kept giving me the sense that I belonged to this family.

Her love not only comforted me in my darkest times but also ignited a flicker of hope when it seemed like there was none to be found. At that time, my parents were far too young to truly care for me, and eventually, they began to push me into the shadows. I find myself with no joyful childhood memories. But, I truly believe that my mother suffered from depression after giving birth to me. Layers upon layers of struggles—financial difficulties and the overwhelming responsibility of being a new parent—left her emotionally unstable. In that period, I felt so unloved and alone, constantly asking myself, 'Why am I here? How can I have parents yet feel utterly parentless?' These

thoughts consumed me with a deep sense of hopelessness, filling my heart with a sorrow too deep to articulate, as love seemed a distant memory. Yet, my grandma, a radiant light in my life, who truly saw me and embraced me with a fierce love that transformed my world. She stepped up, shoulder to shoulder with my burdens, and in her unwavering love, I began to understand that I was cherished by someone, that I was not alone in facing the challenges as a child. Thanks to her, I found my rightful place in this family and grasped the beautiful truth that my existence truly mattered beyond measure—that I was indeed, carved into a special place in her heart, forever cherished and never forgotten.

My dear grandmother is more than just a guiding light in my life, she is like a comforting beacon of pure love and wisdom. Her presence is both mysterious and reassuring, and her thoughts are like a gentle whisper that I strive to understand. The stars above twinkle like distant treasures, inspiring me with hope and aspirations for what lies ahead—much like the treasured memories and invaluable teachings my grandmother has bestowed upon me. She has imparted upon me the importance of grace, even in the midst of chaos, and her love has shaped me into the person I am today. From the moment I entered this world, she has cared for me unconditionally, leaving an indelible mark on my heart that is both profound and deeply touching. Her love is a treasure chest, always open, filled with priceless gems of care, wisdom, and unwavering support.

She has always been there for me, caring deeply for my feelings, standing steadfastly by my side and supporting every decision I made. I can vividly recall the day I graduated from my secondary school, when my school offered an exciting 4-day, 3-night graduation trip. My heart raced with eagerness to go, but my excitement was met with a heavy cloud of disappointment when my parents hesitated, their hearts led by the weight of the RM500 cost. In my desperation to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I turned to my beloved grandma, hoping she would help me cover half of the expense. I felt certain that if she could lend me her support, my parents would surely come around.

I remember the tears streaming down my face as I begged and pleaded with my parents, trying to convince them to let me experience this unforgettable moment with my friends. In the end, it was my grandma who made my dream come true. Without a moment's hesitation, she generously offered the money, her heart filled with the simple wish that I would be happy and have the chance to experience this adventure. And even after the trip, she never once asked me to repay her; her kindness, selfless and pure, driven only by her desire to bring joy into my life.

For all that she has done, I am genuinely grateful. She wasn't just a guardian; she was a radiant source of unconditional love, a wellspring of support that I will carry in my heart forever. I cherish every moment with

her, for she has shaped my life in ways that words can hardly express.

My grandmother has had a significant influence on me by leading me towards Christ. At first, I was simply interested in visiting church, with no intention of becoming a believer. But everything changed when I witnessed the unwavering trust my elderly grandma has in God. And you know what? I ended up accepting Him as my personal savior. She has truly impacted me in a way that has led me to make this life-changing decision. Her impact on me has been immense, and I am forever grateful for her role in shaping my faith. She is like a shepherd's staff, gently guiding me toward the flock, ensuring I find my way to God's grace.

My grandmother has always been my rock, my safe haven. She never hesitated to spoil me, especially during our shopping trips. Every time we went out, she would eagerly ask me what I wanted to buy, not even waiting for my response before tossing all sorts of goodies into the trolley. She believed in me wholeheartedly, always handing me money without a second thought whenever I asked. I am truly grateful for her endless love and support, for through her, all my dreams have blossomed into reality, filling my heart with an indescribable joy. She even fulfilled my biggest wish of owning a Barbie doll, a luxury my struggling parents could not afford. My grandmother is the one who always finds a way to make the impossible possible, and for that, I will forever be

grateful.

As if icy water had been thrown upon my face, reality struck me with unyielding force—I felt like I had plummeted from the heights of security into the depths of despair. It pained me when I couldn't stop my parents and relatives from sending her to a nursing home after a major surgery. The hurt and sadness transcended all logical explanations. It breaks my heart to think of her there, unable to care for herself after her surgery. She struggles to walk, relying on others for assistance due to the weakness in her legs. I did not have the courage to tell my parents that I really wanted her to stay with us instead of going to the nursing home. I kept quiet and now I regret not speaking up. I always wonder, if I had told them how I felt, would she still be at home with us? As the years go by and days turn into nights, her memory of me is gradually fading. Sending her to the nursing home escalated her condition for the worst and my heart holds nothing but regret within.

As I reached a certain age, a realization struck me—it is time to show my grandmother just how much she means to me. So, what did I do for her? I made a conscious effort to take care of her, ensuring that I am by her side whenever possible. Despite a busy schedule filled with tuition and homework, I prioritized spending time with her. I no longer made excuses like having too many tutoring sessions or homework, or the lack of air conditioning, because I understand what truly matters to

me. So, there are no more excuses to be made—it is time to cherish every moment with my grandmother. Expressing my love for her sooner rather than later has become my top priority, and I am determined to make every second count.

In the past, I often turned down the chance to stay at her place, complaining about the lack of air conditioning or feeling too lazy to pack my things. I convinced myself I was too busy with my studies, using school as a convenient excuse to avoid the effort. But now, I regret it deeply.

I can't help but constantly think about what I can do for her and how I can genuinely take care of her. Whenever I have a semester break, I rush back to my hometown, eager to be with her. I take her out to savor delicious meals, making sure she feels cherished and has everything she needs. Now, it's my turn to care for her, to be right by her side, and to make every moment we share truly meaningful and unforgettable.

The valuable lessons I learned from my grandmother's love have shown me the significance of empathy, patience, and compassion in my relationships with others. Her teachings serve as a moral compass, guiding me through life's challenges, shaping the way I engage with people. She is my constant motivation to strive for academic excellence as she never once fails to remind me that I am her biggest pride. Once she recalled that I excelled

academically especially after she was sent to the nursing home, but what she didn't know is that I am an average student working extra hard to make her proud—to make myself proud too. I didn't tell her about my struggles as I refused to make her worry and stress herself out, but deep down, I longed for her to understand that her granddaughter is giving her all to fulfill the dreams she holds dear in her heart. So, she is truly my motivation to strive for academic excellence. If it wasn't for her, maybe I would end up lost—wandering this earth like a ghost without a purpose.

My grandmother was a successful businesswoman in her generation. With her own two hands, she built her restaurant from the ground up, pouring every ounce of her sweat and unwavering determination into a dream that would sustain her six beloved children. She envisioned a warm home where laughter echoed, where each child could indulge in nourishing meals, sleep soundly in the embrace of security, and savor the beauty of life without the shadow of worry looming over them.

All the while, she stood fiercely independent, resolute in her refusal to lean on her husband for support. Learning more and more from her priceless cooking sessions, I feel more and more knowledgeable about the intricacy of cooking, through the boundless love and warmth she pours into everything she does. Her secret ingredient was passion and it was evident in every bite of her meals, especially her unforgettable rice dumplings, which truly

emphasized her outstanding cooking skills. She always stressed the importance of quick thinking and action in the kitchen, emphasizing that in the culinary world, speed is key to success and improvement over time. Her invaluable lessons serve as a beacon of hope as I continue to face the challenges life poses to me, preparing me for what's to come. She has always been my biggest supporter, encouraging me to strive for excellence in my academics. Even though she may have some misconceptions about my abilities, I never wanted to worry her with my struggles. I want her to know that her faith in me motivates me to work hard and achieve my goals. Her influence has given me the drive to excel in my studies. Without her influence, I might have been lost, drifting without direction. She is the light that guides me on my educational journey, and I am determined to make her proud each step of the way.

Love is a powerful force that bridges generations and offers us strength and direction. It brings us together, no matter the time or distance, showing its incredible power to change lives. Love is limitless and continues to motivate us on our life's journey. I just wanted to take a moment to tell my grandmother how much I love her. Saying those three little words, "I love you," may seem simple, but for me, it is something I do not say often enough. Growing up, my family did not express love verbally, but rather through their actions—a lesson that has remained deeply ingrained in me. So, I want to take this opportunity to express my love for you, grandma,

and also apologize for not spending as much time with you as I should have. I promise to make more of an effort moving forward, just for you.

I LOVE YOU, GRANDMA. FOREVER AND EVER.

Writer's Biography

As someone whose first language is Chinese, Hui Min often struggle with English. Yet, Hui Min writes with sincerity, driven to honor her grandmother's love and sacrifices that have shaped her. Writing is Hui Min's sanctuary—a place where she find her voice, allow herself to be vulnerable, and bare emotions she's long kept buried.

My Grandpa, My Champion

by Hui Jin

Preamble

Born in the Motherland of China in 1925, Mr. Tan Ah Lai had spent about seventeen to eighteen years in his country of origin before heading to Malaya in the 1940s as a worker at a sundry shop. Thereafter, he met the love of his life, Ng Eng.

Settling down and living together in an attap dwelling, the couple had nine children to take care of and life was not a piece of cake for both of them, particularly to the writer's grandfather as he was the breadwinner of his family.

However, to the writer's heart, he is a hero and an inspiration that she wrote him a poem. The poem is in a multilingual mode which incorporates a raw Malaysian voice since the writer comes from a Malaysian Chinese identity, and it is meticulously crafted in remembrance of her grandfather for she believes, "A poem is beautiful, is alive in pages, is a lyrical music to one's heart."

BEGINNING

Dear Grandpa,
As I grow older,
I am more interested to know about you,
unlike when I was a kid.

I have been asking Dad a number of times,
And he told me about you
From your history to your qualities,
And that is how I started to know
Where you came from
But more importantly,
Who you were as a person.

With that, from time to time,
I am reminded of you,
The you of many things:
Diligent, Kind, Faithful, Responsible and you...,
Loved singing too.

I: Diligent

Grandpa, I have been told
That you worked at a *kedai runcit* ¹
As a diligent worker
Throughout your years on Earth.

You worked endlessly
By mounting sacks upon sacks of rice,
By selling red dates and mushrooms to earn a living,
To sustain yourself and your children
Solely for a roof of stability and food on the table
As a provider to my father, uncles and aunts
Because back in the 1940s to 1970s,
Poverty was the only thing we knew.

However, your story does not stop here because...
The more I listen to your ‘diligent sagas’ from Dad,
The more I am driven
To paint the sky with colours of my dreams,
So, why should I *curi ayam* ² when you did not?

This is to say,
Indolence is NOT my motto
As profoundly, you have inspired me
To work harder, to learn and appreciate
The beauty of DILIGENCE so that one day,
You can be proud of me and I, as your granddaughter,
Will be on top of the world
Leaving a good name to our family.

¹ Malay for “sundry shop.”

² Malay for “be idle.”

II: Kind

Grandpa, besides your diligence,
 Your kindness matters too,
 From the memory that I could recall,
 You were so kind in giving away your smiles,
 You were so kind in giving away your *ringgit* ³
 As if it did not even cost you a single cent.

But honestly, these deeds you committed
 Truly reach the very core of my veins
 And I have always felt,
 You are someone that is worth melting for;
 A precious pearl that cannot be missed.

This is because, as time fleets,
 And as I become a more mature person,
 I realise such a simple act of giving is gold,
 Is love which aligns with Anne Frank's quote:
 "You are never poor by giving."

Deep down, you wanted to show me that
 "When I get, I give;
 When I learn, I teach"
 As per Maya Angelou's saying
 And that would resemble a good karma
 Of one's kind deed.

³ Malay expression for the standard
 monetary unit used in Malaysia.

III: Faithful

Ah Kung, as much as I admire your diligence and kindness,

Your faithfulness has also left an imprint on my heart,

You showered Ah Ma with love and it was beyond,

Beyond what a marriage certificate could say.

You were a faithful King to your Queen

To have 简单的爱 ⁵ for her,

You were the soft-sweet marshmallow to her as always

Because no matter how HOT-TEMPERED Ah Ma was,

You tolerated her terrible temper,

You cooked for her, making sure she was full and satisfied,

You held her hands and grew old together with her

不管是晴天、阴天、还是雨天。 ⁶

Even in sickness and in health,

In life and in death,

Your all was given to her and ONLY HER

In the name of love,

In the name of loyalty

Like a dragon to his phoenix in the moonlit sky

And nowadays, such an act is a rare gem.

Thus, I learned that your loyalty knew no bounds

You merely wanted to stay

简单而纯粹的爱 ⁷

With Ah Ma for the rest of your life,

For she was, the apple of your eye.

⁵ Mandarin for “a simple love.” (Pinyin: jiandan de ai)

⁶ Mandarin for “No matter if it was sunny, cloudy, or rainy.” (Pinyin: Buguan shi qingtian, yintian, haishi yutian.)

⁷ Mandarin for “a simple and pure love.” (Pinyin: jiandan er chuncui de ai)

IV: Responsible

Ah Kung, as much as I write about you
 From my own musings,
 NOTHING truly beats your accountability
 Towards your family.

You conducted your duties responsibly
 As a husband and father,
 Making sure family needs were met,
 You did not let go of *Ah Ma* and your nine children
 But willingly committed, willingly sacrificed
 In bringing up your family
 For a brighter future for themselves
 Because deep down, you loved them a lot, a lot
 That to you, they were the marrow of your bones;
 The song in your heart; the moon to your night.

Ah Kung, if you were NOT an accountable man,
 Would my Father prioritise 'family' in his family;
 Would my Father learn to be a family man;
 Would I have a Father that I am 100% proud of?

So to say, without this responsible trait you upheld
 solidly,
 I would not be able to imagine
 The POWER of my responsible Father
 On nurturing his family as a man
 With utmost care of his duties
 That amplifies a home of warmth and love.

V: Loved singing

And before I forget,
You loved singing,
Dare I say as much as I do.

I never knew you had a taste for Mandarin songs
Until I have been told
Because I, too, am head over heels with them.

From classic oldies to modern Mandopop,
From Teresa Teng's The Moon Represents My Heart
To Jay Chou's Orange Jasmine,
The distinct genres portray the depth,
The depth of my emotions
Of expressing the art of music through lyrics.

And every now and then, near or far,
I am reminded of you,
Reminded of our 'shared interests'
That I should NOT forget my roots
Because after all,
We are interlinked by blood and genes.

ENDING

To my cherished-beloved Grandpa,
Frankly, you have touched me,
You have empowered me
In a multitude of ways.

You may think you were a cone of plain vanilla
That was long forgotten,
But, from the bottom of my heart,
You are my all-time favourite chocolate mousse cake,
Hence, without you,
I would not have learned
From a man of wisdom with respectable traits,
And this is a genuine-lengthy confession
From your granddaughter
In the name of love,
And on behalf of our Tan (陈) family
As the pride and identity
Of our clan and hearts.

Ah Kung, you, who lived for our Tan family,
Continuing the generation because,
It was due to your persistent spirit of living
That we are still here,
And no matter how far you had gone
As a distant star, as the silent wind,
You are always the precious photograph
That etches eternally in my mind and heart,
My dearest Champion.

Writer's Biography

When you meet Hui Jin, you will notice her as the shorty-small-sized woman. However, she eats more than you know. You can never miss her fondness for food such as char kway teow, Hokkien mee, nasi lemak, karipap and mouth-watering desserts: durian cake and ice cream.

Her tagline: “Food is scrumptious, dessert makes you smile—Happy eating!”

The Blessing

by Lydia Soon

Preamble

When Laura discovers her late father's journal—his struggles and unwavering faith are the last thing Laura expects to shatter her deep-seated resentment. As his words resonate with her, Laura faces a choice: Will her faith in God be restored or will she continue to remain lost in grief?

Mom and Carol never blamed you for abandoning us, but I did: The hate and resentment I harbored for your departure was immense but I knew there was nothing I could do.

You weren't always the greatest Dad. Each day, I looked upon the sky and asked, "How could you just leave me when I was only 16?" but you never answered, you never did.

Ever since I—we realize that you weren't coming back, everything—from taking care of us 24/7 by her own, paying the school fees, to comforting us when we cried—just fell upon Mom's shoulders instead:

At least that was what I thought.

“Laura, come downstairs. It’s time for the cake!” Carol’s voice broke through my thoughts, pulling me back to the present. I made my way to the dining room, where Mom sat with a soft smile, her fingers gently tracing the rim of her precious teacup—the one you gifted on the 20th anniversary.

Every year on her birthday, she reminisced about you, hoping you were there to celebrate. She’d taken out the old photo albums from the boxes she stored in the upper room, recounting the moments when you worshipped with your guitar, resolved fights with comforting words from the Bible, and the song you wrote for her, perpetually at the top of her Spotify playlist.

Five months after you disappeared, I found a bundle of letters addressed to her in your neat script. They were tied with a red, silk ribbon thanks to Mom's flair in embellishment. Mom referred to them as the "love letters written when Dad was young". Though I couldn't imagine my no-nonsense Dad writing love letters, Mom insisted on reading them aloud.

"No, Mom, please...It sounds corny to me," I said. Though deep inside my heart, the heartbeats told of an envy of Mom because you never wrote anything for me. To me, you were just a black-and-white painting hanging on the wall, alongside the marriage photo: hair parted, gaze fixed, a slight smile beneath your mustache (you said you looked good with that mustache, a claim we all disagreed with). You were a stranger who never seemed to age to me, but I recalled your pride, tears and laughter vividly.

Everyone loved you, at least Mom and Carol did.

...and we really wished you had never left.

It was 2024.

Mom and I revisited this place together—the house where we lived together as family.

Our family photo was still there, hanging on the wall beside the pencil lines that marked my height every time I grew; it was as if nothing changed since the day you left. As much as I didn't want to admit it, just like our family portrait, somehow you still had a place in my heart too.

Looking at the photo, I was overwhelmed with the acute nostalgia of the father-daughter bonding moment...

“Is everything okay, Laura?” Something that you'd always ask whenever I arrived back home from school every single day.

No Dad! Time wasn't exactly nice to me, never was. And now I wished you would be around to hear me.

I became a target of ridicule in my new school, whispers from my classmates echoed in my ears with taunts, labeling me as “the Poor fatherless child.” The words cut deep, carving scars on my already weary soul. The school that was meant for learning became a battlefield of emotional torment. Financial struggles became a relentless companion for us ever since you left, and it has yet to turn for the better, not even today.

Your absence left a void that manifested in more ways than ONE. For now, I don't even know what I hate more: the fact that you left us, or the reality that I live in now.

The journey through my early twenties was a tumultuous one. I navigated the maze of adulthood unlike my peers who were in college, from distributing brochures to delivering food and washing dishes in dimly lit restaurants, wondering why the lights were not turning green for me. I fueled my resolve for financial stability with the unnecessary sarcasm and jeers from my peers.

At the front door of my childhood home, Mom, Carol and you were standing still. The moment I approached, your faces were a blur and everything around us began to crumble. Everything became a white emptiness and I tried to cry out, "Don't leave me, please!" I attempted to choke out, desperate for them to hear my cries. I stood there, trapped and helpless, as my pleas fell on deaf ears. My feet felt like they were encased in a block of lead, refusing to move. You all turned your backs to me, and the sense of abandonment washed over me, drowning out the words that couldn't escape.

“Don't leave me aloneeeeeee!!!!!!” The anguished cry reverberated through the dream.

I jolted awake, gasping for breath. I was certain that it was a dream but it did not make this any less real. The suffocating sense of helplessness lingered, tears glistening at the corners of my eyes. The room illuminated with the morning sunlight filtering through the curtains. I checked my phone screen, 8 o'clock in the morning.

Eight!

I leapt out of my bed. Despite the unease, I slipped into my indoor slippers, berating myself for not setting the alarm.

I was late for work.

Navigating myself through the familiar cubicles in the workplace, each one a small fortress of focused activity. I felt the steady hum of productivity surrounding me, a comforting rhythm I had come to know well. My desk, cluttered with papers and post-it notes, greeted me like an old friend. The first morning meeting was arduous, with the amount of updates and deadlines thrust upon me, my day was already starting to look far from ideal. As I shuffled through emails to check on the important notes from the client—

RING~ RING~

A familiar sound entered my ears.

Not now!

I fumbled the phone out of my pocket. I recoiled at the name shown, and my fingers hovered over the keypad for a moment before I answered it.

"*Jie Jie*," came Carol's voice.

"I'm busy, call you later," I whispered, aware of the waiting eyes around me.

I pressed the red button and shoved the phone back to my pocket. Taking a deep breath, I refocused on the meeting at hand. The clock on the wall seemed to tick louder, each second echoing with my concern about why Carol had called me. I then scribbled on the notepad as a reminder to phone Mom after work.

"Mom, is everything okay?" I dialed.

"..."

There came only a few seconds of silence, my anxiety worsened as her voice became monotone and sorrowful.

“Laura, your sister hasn't been feeling well.” She said, catching me off guard.

A chill ran down my spine. My heart sank upon hearing about my sister's condition. The weight of responsibility I had been shouldering suddenly intensified.

“I'm coming home,” I declared, hanging up the phone. I immediately emailed my supervisor to request leave, explaining the situation with Carol to him. Recalling the sound of Carol's voice when she phoned me earlier, weak and subtle. I didn't waste time booking the first flight back home for the next day. Worry consumed my mind for Carol; the worst thoughts came to mind as I drifted around the airport hall, hoping none of them were true.

I knew I shouldn't have ended her call.

I am a terrible sister.

What if... What if I never got to see her again?

I stood before the aluminum door, a familiar scent drifted across the air; a blend of lavender from the garden's edge,

the floral scent of detergent on freshly washed clothes and the tantalizing fragrance of Nyonya curry chicken. It was a symphony of scents: curry powder sizzling in hot oil, infused with notes of lemongrass, chili, coconut milk and turmeric.

The smell of home.

I lingered there for a while, torn between the urge to knock on the door and the temptation to turn around and avoid the sobering realities awaiting me.

Was Carol all good? Or was she still suffering from her illness? There was no way to know, unless...

“Mom! I’m back. Open the door for me!”

“Carol, your sister is back!” I could hear Mom’s distant shout for my sister as she made her way to the entrance of the house.

The door creaked open slowly, Carol’s familiar face came into view. Her eyes widened in surprise, a mix of joy and relief sweeping across her delicate features.

“Laura,” she breathed out, her voice barely audible, weakened by the recent struggles. Tears welled up in her eyes, struggling to stay in place before spilling down her fragile form.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her, concern etched in my voice.

She managed a weak smile, “Oh, you know me, tough as nails. Just a little under the weather, but nothing to worry about.”

Inside, the air was heavy with the scent of familiar spices and the warmth of a home-cooked meal. Mom stood in the doorway of the kitchen, a pot of curry chicken simmering on the stove. Her eyes and the charcoal-like bags around them, however, told a story of strain and concern that she tried to hide beneath her aged exterior.

“Laura, my dear, you’re finally home,” her voice attempted a comforting melody. Wrinkles and veins lined her forehead, creating deep grooves on the once firm skin. Dark spots stained her pale skin. Her lips were chapped, and her cheeks sunken. Whiteness has begun to creep into the fringes of her hair, and there were stray strands of gray among the black, the long hair tied into a neat bun. Despite this, her warmth remained evident.

“Come, sit down. Let me get you something to eat,” Mom insisted.

As we gathered around the table, the aroma of the familiar dishes brought comfort and nostalgia. The clinking of utensils against plates filled the room,

accompanied by the muted sounds of the radio broadcasting the news. How I wished this peaceful moment would last forever.

“Mom, is there something you're not telling me about Carol?” I finally mustered the courage to ask after dinner, in Mom’s room.

Mom hesitated, her eyes closed and her curved smile turned to a saddened frown. She opened them back up, looking back at mine, seeking for understanding. She opened her lips, wanting to say something, but stopped herself to rethink what she should say.

Then, she spoke.

“Laura, your sister has been diagnosed with a chronic illness. It’s a rare autoimmune disorder that weakens her immune system. She’s been fainting quite a lot recently. The doctors said they are doing everything they can but it will be a difficult battle ahead.”

The air grew thick with the weight of this revelation. Memories of Dad’s death flooded my mind and the helplessness that haunted me resurfaced.

“I thought we were past this,” I murmured, my voice

barely audible, my hands gripping the edge of the chair for support.

“I couldn’t bear to burden you with it, especially with your busy life in the city,” Mom admitted, her eyes reflecting a mixture of guilt and concern. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

My heart sank. The fear of losing another loved one weighed heavily upon my heart as the sense of helplessness consumed my being.

Wrapped in silence, tears fell as I sat by Carol on her bed, caressing her hair and reflecting on how far she had come. How could she endure this without confiding in me?

Internally, a storm brewed within me. Should I resign from my job to be with Carol? The responsibilities of work, the clamor of city life, and the career I had fought so hard for tugged me in one direction. Yet, the sight of my sister, her vulnerability and silent struggle, pulled at my heartstrings, urging me to forsake everything for the sake of family. Each option felt like a betrayal—a betrayal to my aspirations or to my sister, who needed me now more than ever.

In the quiet hours that followed, I made my decision: be there for her.

Days passed, and Carol's excitement buzzed in the air as her school field trip drew near. It was Carol's wish to have Mom whip up her favorite sushi for the occasion, but I insisted on taking charge, determined to craft a culinary masterpiece for her.

Nightfall draped the kitchen in shadows as I toiled away, the rhythmic swish of bamboo mats blending with the savory scent of seaweed. Meanwhile, Carol and Mom slumbered peacefully, oblivious to the culinary chaos brewing downstairs. Yet, with each roll, I poured my love and devotion into the sushi.

Morning arrived, and with it, a tray full of sushi rolls awaiting Carol's delight. But, fate had a different plan. The rain poured relentlessly, canceling the much-anticipated field trip. Looking at the sushi rolls that I had wrapped with care, bitterness crept into my voice. "I made these with so much love," I muttered to myself, disappointment etched on my face. Carol's sadness filled her face, she hugged and comforted me, "It's okay sis, I will finish them all."

Spontaneously, a spark of resilience ignited within me.

“Let’s not let the rain ruin our day,” I declared, determination cutting through the gloom. Without another thought, we hopped into the car. The drive took us to a beach far away, a place woven with memories of family outings with Dad and Mom.

“Remember the picnics we used to have here?” I mused, a nostalgic smile playing on my lips. Carol nodded. “Those were the best times,” she said. “But, we are going to create a new memory today!”

As we approached the shore, we rolled down the window shield, listening to the rhythmic sound of crashing waves greeting us—a familiar melody of comfort.

“BEACHHHH!!!!!!” Carol’s jubilant scream filled the air as we stepped onto the sandy expanse. The rain, now a gentle drizzle, failed to dampen our spirits. Together, we built sandcastles, picnicked with the sushi rolls that held the essence of my labor of love, played in the sea water, and captured the fleeting moments with photographs.

Someone had mentioned that if we wrote our names on the sand and let the sea wash them away, it would take away all the diseases we have. We then etched our names on the beach, feeling the grains of sand beneath our fingers. As the waves kissed the shore, carrying away

our names into the vast expanse, illness and worry were but distant memories, swept away by the tide.

Three of us gathered around the dining table.

“Is anyone going to bless our food?” Mom asked, her eyes sincere.

Carol and I exchanged glances, choosing to keep our heads down.

“Well. I suppose it’s on me then,” Mom began the prayer.

“Lord, today we gather at this table before you, grateful for my daughters and my husband now in heaven. I trust that you’ve intertwined our lives for a purpose, a purpose known only to yo-”

Thud!

Our eyes snapped open to find Carol lying unconscious on the ground, her body unnervingly still and unresponsive. Panic surged through the room like an electric current, seizing our breaths and freezing us in a moment of terror.

Rushing to Carol’s side, I felt a surge of gut-wrenching anxiety knotting in my stomach. “Carol! Wake up!” I

pleaded, my voice cracked with desperation, a raw cry piercing the air as I shook her gently, praying for any sign of life, but to no avail.

“Mom. Mom! What do we do?” I turned to Mom, my voice trembling with fear as I sought guidance amidst the chaos. Her face was pale with worry and urgency as she fumbled for her phone, her hands shaking uncontrollably.

Every passing second felt like an eternity, each heartbeat echoing the uncertainty that gripped our souls.

At the hospital, doctors worked frantically to determine the cause of Carol’s collapse. Mom and I stood together, clutching each other’s hands, praying for answers in the face of unimaginable dread.

I sat by Carol’s bedside, the machines humming with a disconcerting melody. The dim light casted shadows across the room, mirroring the darkness that lingered within me. I couldn’t contain the question that had long simmered beneath the surface.

“Why, God?” I murmured, the words escaping my lips like a plea. “Why does it feel like you’re taking everyone I love away from me? First Dad, and now Carol.” The bitterness in my voice betrayed the resentment that had

festered within me, a knot tightening with each passing day. Mom entered the room. She took a seat beside me, her eyes reflecting exhaustion but also a resilient hope.

“Laura,” she said softly, placing a gentle hand on mine. “I know it’s hard, darling. It’s hard for me too, watching Carol like this.”

She spoke with a quiet strength, “Your sister is strong,

Laura. She’s fighting, and I can feel it. I’ve prayed for her every day, and I believe in God’s plan. I’ve no idea what God will do for Carol. But what we can do now is to be alongside her and entrust that God will breathe life into her.”

“Mom, I just don’t understand. Why is God doing this?”

“Let’s sit and pray over this, Laura. Come and kneel here with me. Anything can be set right by prayer.”

I recoiled. “Maybe for you. But not for me. I can’t lie about that anymore. I don’t feel it, Mom. I do believe in God. But when I pray I don’t feel a thing. Not the peace He gave, not the solace, and certainly not the answers. What kind of benevolent God would allow this to happen to Carol? He even took Dad away from us.”

Without waiting for a response, I pushed myself up from

the chair and stormed out of the ward, tears in the corner of my eyes. The hospital corridor, a stark contrast to the emotions raging inside me, was silent and bare. Each step felt heavy with the weight of loss—not just for Carol but for Dad, whose absence still haunted my life, if not theirs.

Lost in my turmoil, I barely noticed the nurse passing by with a sympathetic glance. My thoughts were interrupted by a sudden collision. I bumped into someone, my hands trembling badly as I tried to steady myself.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” a voice exclaimed, and as I looked up, I found myself staring into the eyes of a stranger. A middle-aged man with a warm, comforting smile stood before me.

“Are you alright, Laura?”

I hesitated, studying his face. “You know my name?”

He smiled warmly. “It’s been years. I’m Ho, your Dad’s friend. How have you been?”

My heart sank. I didn't want to be reminded of Dad, not now, not here. “Excuse me.”

I tried to walk away, but he caught my arm gently. “Wait, Laura. Give me a sec,” he pulled out a journal envelope from his waistcoat pocket, saying, “Your father wanted

you to have this. He entrusted it to me before he passed away. Said it was important for you to have it.” With a solemn expression, he handed me a worn journal envelope.

I remembered the innocence of my childhood, the

curiosity that led me to ask Dad, “Daddy, can I sneak a peek at your journal? I saw you bringing it along with you anywhere you go, even in the bathroom.” My fingers pointed at his journal, eyes blinking with the hope of softening Dad’s heart to say ‘YES!’

Dad chuckled, “Honey, this is a secret between me and the Lord. I am not going to let you sneak it away unless I pass away one day. But you're gonna wait for decades.”

“Dad, I’m not gonna let go of your hands. You can have the journal. I’m not going to read it anyway.” I hugged Dad tightly.

And now, here I was, holding the precious thing that meant so much to him.

Seated on the floor, I leaned against the wall at the corner of the hospital’s interior rooftop garden by myself. With

Dad's journal cradled in my hands, I couldn't suppress a smile as I reminisced about those innocent moments with him.

Flipping through the entries, I discovered a date that stood out—December 15, 2010.

His words painted a vivid picture of a father's elation. *"Today is a day to be remembered. Laura achieved straight A's in her PMR exam¹. I am beyond proud, honored and grateful to be her father."*

I never knew my academic achievements meant so much to him. Dad never scolded me for not doing well in my exams, nor did he express disappointment if I fell short in my tests. He consistently encouraged me to do my best, never seeking more than that. He even remembered so vividly the date when I shared the sizzling news through a phone call.

In the quiet of my room, I traced the circle on the journal page, a symbol of a father's pride and unconditional love. In celebrating my success, he found his own fulfillment, a sentiment I hadn't fully appreciated until now.

Flipping through the pages, I then stumbled upon a verse that Dad had inscribed with meticulous care: The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; He delivers them from all their troubles. (Psalm 34:17).

¹ PMR (Penilaian Menengah Rendah) was a national lower secondary school examination in Malaysia, taken by students around age 15. It was abolished in 2014.

Unbeknownst to me, Dad's business had faced unforeseen predicaments, casting shadows of financial strain that threatened the very foundation of our home. Dad, the unwavering pillar in my eyes, had weathered the storm in stoic silence, never revealing the cracks beneath the surface. Always adorned with his warm smile when facing us, playing around and teasing us with his endearing lame jokes, he had chosen to bear the weight of his worries in solitude, surrendering himself to the Lord in his secret place. Tears welled up in my eyes. The man who shielded us from the storms, crumbled before me, revealing a father who faced his fears with unspoken courage.

“The worries of financial burden distract me from keeping my eyes fixed on You, O Lord.” The ink seemed to blur, as if mirroring the tears that had accompanied those heartfelt confessions.

“So please Lord, hear my prayer. Provide for me...” His words hung in the air, a plea echoing through the pages of the journal.

Little did I know that the next pages would document a miraculous encounter with divine intervention.

“I was driving home after a late-night worship practice from the church. As the crossroads junction approached, an oncoming car emerged, hurtling toward me with

speed. At that moment, I felt that I was going to die young.

Panic ensued, but I wasn't hysterically screaming; it was like something just came upon me. Peace. 'If I just go, then go lar.' I closed my eyes, and whispered the name of Jesus three times: 'Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.'

Bang! My car spun in circles, somehow, I found myself miraculously unharmed.

Then it hits me – a second chance at life. Before I knew it, someone dragged me out of my car onto the grass patch, and there I lay, looking at the stars in the night sky, mesmerized by how beautiful life is.

“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:19). “Lord, there is nothing that it's going to be hard for you, neither my financial issue nor my life, you are my shepherd, and you saved me from death.” For that I will love you more, as much as my love for Annie, Laura, and Carol.

As I read through the pages, the scar of tears on the journal seemed obvious, particularly on the last part where he mentioned our names. What surprises me even more is the part where he crossed out something, something that seems unimportant to jot down but is

important for me to know what's his thought at the time:

~~Annie~~

~~Laura~~

~~Carol~~

~~I love you~~

Lord, thank you for the extra time I have with my family.

"The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."

As religious as Dad was, I would never have thought that in his heart we are as important as this. Behind his usual nonchalant smiles and everyday jokes with us, his soul resided with his trauma, which was tightly intertwined with the fear of losing his family. I never knew Dad had encountered such a terrible accident before. The realization of how close I came to losing him decades ago, swept over me like a tidal wave of emotions.

In the midst of these emotions, I stumbled upon a folded piece of paper tucked within the pages of the journal. Unfolding it, I discovered a letter addressed to me—the words on that paper carried a tenderness that only a father could express.

My Dearest Laura,

As you read these pages, I won't be in this world anymore. I pray from the bottom of my heart that when you read this, Annie will still be around to be the pillar of your life. I know you always love Mom, and I know she loves you all the same.

I know you're going to miss me deeply, as you're closer to me than my wife, haha. There may be moments of resentment about my leaving, and I understand my shortcomings as a father may cause you hurt. I write not to justify, but to share the thoughts of my imperfect soul.

Do you still remember those little moments? Sunday school, bedtime stories about David and Goliath—you never got tired of it. Your cheerfulness and kindness, sharing food with friends...

As you grew older, entering lower high school, I didn't get to spend as much time with you due to work. I apologize for not being a perfect father. Yet, I see how you have grown up- caring for your little sister, excelling in academics and co-curriculars, and voluntarily attending church and youth fellowship.

I've encountered God personally, seen miracles in my life and others'. God, as He said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5). He provides for us financially, sustaining us even when I couldn't recover my business or earn extra income. I'm glad and proud to

be your father. Three meals a day, education, groceries, nothing lacks.

I like every aspect of you, always curious about God, promising to be His disciple, and praying in your secret place. Don't conform to the pattern of this world, and carry the cross to follow Jesus.

You are the daughter that I love. I am proud of you.

I'm sorry I wouldn't be able to walk alongside you for the rest of your life. But, my soul will always be with you. Please take care of our clumsy Carol just like you always do, okay! =)

*With all the love a father holds for his cherished daughter,
Dad*

My Dearest Carol,

By the time you read this, I wis

(The unfinished letter for Carol drops down from a corner of the journal)

.

This letter is 8 years too late. Dad!

But compared to the letter to Carol that father never gets to complete, having one is more than what I could ever ask for.

The silence of the night enveloped me like a comforting blanket. As I sat there alone, surrounded by nature's tranquility, my thoughts wandered to the newfound peace that had replaced years of resentment towards Dad and God. The weight that had burdened me since Dad's passing seemed to evaporate with every breath I took. A calm settled within me—a peace I had longed for.

Memories intertwined with my thoughts, like threads weaving a tapestry of understanding. I thought of Good Friday, a day of sorrow and mourning as Jesus was crucified for our sins. The quiet sadness of Saturday, surely it was tough. Friday's disappointment was Sunday's empty tomb—the sound of dry bones rattling, the dead man walking again, Jesus rising from the dead, triumphant over death.

At that moment, an overwhelming surge of emotions engulfed me. The realization that Dad had reunited with his Father in heaven flooded my soul like a rushing river. Tears streamed down my cheeks, each drop carrying with

it the weight of years of resentment that had haunted me. But these were not tears of sorrow; they were tears of release, of letting go. With each sob, I felt a sense of liberation, as if the heavy chains of bitterness and anger had finally broken free. In that moment, amidst the solitude of the night and the gentle rustle of leaves, I found myself renewed, my spirit lighter than it had been in ages.

Though Dad was physically absent, his presence lingered in the letters and journal entries he left behind was a testament to his love and wisdom. I no longer harbored resentment towards Dad or God. Instead, I embraced the knowledge that Dad's departure was part of God's plan, just as He had protected Dad during his accident.

As I walked down the hospital corridor, a gentle whisper resonated in my heart: "Be faithful to me." There was no one around me, yet the words echoed with a profoundness that transcended mere sound. It was a reassurance, a promise from God, of His divine guidance and the promises He offered to me.

Returning to the ward, I found Mom sitting beside Carol's bed, her face etched with lines of concern and exhaustion. The sterile hospital smell lingered in the air as machines hummed softly, monitoring Carol's shallow but steady breaths.

I approached Mom, the weight of my recent revelations still settling within me. “Mom,” I began, “I am sorry for being rude and resistant to what you have said earlier.”

Mom turned her gaze towards me, her eyes reflecting understanding. She took my face in her hands, cradling my head as if it were the most precious thing in the world. *“Laura, it’s okay. Your Dad wouldn’t want you to carry that burden. He knew how much you loved him. Your Dad said at the last moment, ‘I am so happy to be your father,’ and that love never fades.”*

I have heard Mom recount Dad’s last word countless times, but they hit me differently this time. Before I knew it, tears stood in the corners of my eyes—not tears of sadness, but tears of newfound clarity and acceptance.

The doctor’s words rang in my brain. “We did the best of what we could, there is nothing else we can do now. You have to prepare yourself for the possibility that she either recovers within a week, or it would take a miracle for her to wake up ever again.”

And so we waited.

Minutes gone.

Hours passed.

Seven... eight... nine long days. Each one dragged its feet like a prisoner shackled in time. I kept counting, clinging to the numbers like lifelines, terrified that if I lost count, I'd lose my grip on hope too. Mornings bled into nights without meaning; the sterile smell of antiseptic clung to my clothes, my skin, even my thoughts.

Meals were tasteless, laughter felt foreign, and the ticking of the wall clock mocked me with its slow, deliberate rhythm. Every footstep down the hallway sent my heart racing, hoping it was the nurse with good news—fearing it was the doctor with something worse.

Then came the tenth day.

I grabbed Carol's hands and wrapped them tight in mine, still trying desperately to warm the icy cold palms. They stayed cold as ever, an echo of the piercing chill that sliced into my heart with every piece of calendar ripped off.

I lowered my head, and my blurred sight focused on the sodden torn piece in my hand. I could not read it, but I knew the date all too well. 20th July—the twenty-eighth day since Carol last talked to me.

I blinked my eyes, feeling the tears thud onto the piece of paper. The ward was enveloped in a heartfelt silence, save for the sound of the life-support machine and soft ticking of the clock. They seemed to be amplified in the room,

and the ticking reflected the hope draining out of me with every passing second.

The torment grew, all felt closer to reality than ever. I turned towards her, my voice a weak whisper. I held her hands and pulled them to my cheek. “Carol, they had given up. The doctors do not expect you to ever wake up again.” Her palms were cold to the touch of my warm cheek. “But hey, remember our promise? We will be together. That’s why I am still here. You won’t let me down right? Tell me you’re still fighting. There is still time.”

I sank to my knees, the cold hospital floor offering a stark contrast to the warmth of my prayers. With my hands still clasped around Carol’s, I closed my eyes and began to pray.

“Lord, breathe your life into Carol. Let Your Holy Spirit be with her. Lord, I can't do anything, but You can. You can do more than any of us can fathom. So please, heal her, revive her— bring back the life that seems to be slipping away...”

Suddenly, I felt a rising finger trying to escape from my holding hands. It wasn't mine. I froze, lifted my head, and took a look. I blinked. I looked at Carol's finger. There was nothing. Did my sensation just play a trick on me?

"Jie..."

There were gasps. I was not aware that others had entered and were watching as well. My eyes immediately darted to her face. Those dark brown eyes were open, radiating warmth like they always had. I stood rooted to the ground as time seemed to freeze around us. How many days had I dreamt of those eyes staring into mine again, entrancing me in their hypnotizing beauty.

A smile formed on her lips, breaking the spell. Figures in white coats rushed to her side, sending bright lights into her eyes and checking her vitals. I stood giddy, a smile forming on my lips. Shouts of laughter erupted around me. Somehow I managed to remain standing despite my weak knees. "Lord, thank you. Thank you."

This is the confidence that we have in approaching God: *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10: 23).*

He heard me.

She had returned.

For me.

Epilogue

Five years had passed since that life-changing night.

Today, Thanksgiving dinner at Mom's house has become a cherished tradition. Instead of turkey with giblet gravy, we savor fragrant *nasi lemak*² with *spicy sambal*³, *tender rendang*⁴, and aromatic chicken curry. Emily brings her homemade *roti canai*⁵. Mose grills savory *satay*⁶ skewers, and Christiana insists on her all-time favourite, *laksa*⁷. The room buzzes with chatter and laughter as ten family members gather to celebrate this special holiday. Dessert is a vibrant spread of *onde-onde*⁸, *kuih seri muka*⁹, and *cendol*¹⁰ drizzled with *gula Melaka*¹¹—a sweet end to a tradition we have made our own.

As Uncle Ho says when it is his turn to add a blessing at the table, “Lord, bless the fool who can’t find something to satisfy both soul and stomach at this meal!”

Preparing wine and juice for the Thanksgiving dinner, Joseph, my husband’s cheerful voice echoes through the open window, calling out to me, “Laura, come join us!”

² Translates to “creamy rice”, it refers to a fragrant rice dish cooked in coconut milk and pandan leaves.

³ Spicy chili paste.

⁴ A dish of meat cooked slowly in coconut milk and various spices.

⁵ Pan-fried flatbread of Indian origin.

⁶ A dish of small pieces of meat grilled on a skewer.

⁷ A dish consisting of rice noodles served in curry sauce or hot soup.

⁸ A southeast Asian sweet treat made from glutinous rice flour filled with palm sugar and coated with grated coconut.

⁹ A two-layered dessert with steamed glutinous rice forming the bottom half and a green custard layer made with pandan juice.

¹⁰ A dessert consisting of shaved ice topped with green jelly made from rice or mungbean flour, coconut milk, and palm sugar syrup.

¹¹ Palm sugar syrup.

With a tray of wine and juice in hand, I hurry to join my family. Walking towards them, I can't help but smile at the sight of my loved ones. Despite the challenges we've faced, we've grown stronger together.

Mom welcomes me with a warm hug, and as we settle down to eat, she insists we say a prayer of gratitude.

“Thank you for bringing us together, for the strength to overcome hardships, and for the love that binds us. Although Carol fell sick again recently, it is by Your grace that it is a false alarm and we shall still be ever grateful to Your love,” Mom spoke, her words echoing my own sentiments. “In Jesus name, we pray.”

“Amen. Let's eat!” The sound of clinking cutlery fills the air as everyone eagerly takes their plates and starts digging into the delicious spread before us.

“Christiana, how do you feel about being the cheerleader in your school?” I ask Carol's daughter.

Christiana shrugs. “I love it! It's so much fun. Aunt Laura, you know Sarah? She's always so focused on her dance moves that she forgets everything else. The other day, she tried to do a pirouette in the hallway and bumped into the wall!”

I chuckle, “Oh no, poor Sarah!”

Meanwhile, at the kids' table, there is a playful commotion as they 'fight over' their favourite dishes. Two of the younger ones, Adam and Moses giggle and tug at a plate of roti canai, each claiming they deserve the last piece.

"I saw it first! This is mine." exclaims Adam.

"No, I did!" argues Moses.

"Guys, let me divide it into half for you both." Christiana says. She grabs the last piece and puts it on her plate, which we all laugh out loud for her best solution.

Uncle Ho's wife, Emily chimes in with a radiant smile. "I may be pregnant."

Surprise ripples through the gathering, and even their only son, Adam, is taken aback by the news. He stops his playful argument with Moses and rushes to his mother's side, his eyes wide with excitement.

"Mom, really?" Adam asks, his voice filled with awe and anticipation. "Am I going to have a sibling?"

Emily nods, her smile widening as she pats her stomach gently. "Yes, my dear. You might have a little brother or sister soon. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Adam's face lights up, and he nods vigorously, running joyfully in the backyard.

“That's such fantastic news!” Mom exclaims, her eyes sparkling with happiness.

“Congrats, Uncle Ho and Aunty Emily!” Carol and I say simultaneously, our voices filled with genuine joy.

Looking at Carol, who sits beside me with a joyful smile, I feel a surge of gratitude and love. Raising my glass, I propose a toast, honoring our journey and the moment of being together. “Here's to us!” The clinking of glasses and shared smiles encapsulate the warmth and strength of our bond.

As the evening sun casts a golden hue over us, I know that no matter what challenges come our way, we will face them united, with unwavering trust in His divine plan. Everything may have to change along the way, but my feelings towards my family will never waver, ever.

Writer's Biography

Lydia Soon, once indifferent to reading, now sees how books, sermons and God's words shape her worldview and guide her through life's storms. To her, words are a double-edged sword. She is passionate about writing stories that reveal her journey with God, inspiring others to encounter and experience His power and unfailing love.

Turning Points

by Tana

Preamble

Maya, Talia, and Ava each face personal struggles and life's uncertainties, from family pressures to self-doubt. Their journeys unexpectedly intertwine, leading to a bond that transforms their lives. Set against their final year of university, a time of major decisions and self-discovery, this moving story explores resilience, friendship, and the strength found in shared experiences.

Ava, Maya, and Talia each had their own battles. No matter their birth order, whether they were the youngest, the middle child, or an only child, the emotions remained the same. The big day was approaching, and it was daunting, to say the least. How were they going to find their way through it? The days leading up to the event were something they could never truly prepare for. Nervousness, excitement, and the overwhelming weight of what lay ahead consumed their thoughts, refusing to let go.

Three girls, one day, and a whirlwind of emotions they had to control. They came from different backgrounds and walked distinct paths. The comfort they longed for felt just beyond reach. They were alone in the journey until they were not. It was strange how life unfolded in ways no one expected. All that inner turmoil began to fade when they finally discovered what true comfort meant. Their paths had been meant to diverge, but the struggles they faced ultimately led them to each other. Those battles had been fought bravely, but in the end, they were never meant to fight them alone.

Maya

It was unnerving. The banging of pots and pans, the screeching screams of a little one, the loud booming voice of her father. Maya's thoughts wandered back to a time where peace was the norm. Things had changed so drastically, and it was happening faster than she could catch up to. She could feel the unease of her situation creeping up her neck.

“Maya, what time will you be back to help me today?” said her mother.

Maya responded begrudgingly, “Probably around 3.30pm mum,” knowing what awaited her.

Maya was never seen as anything more than a tool, something to carry the weight of others' responsibilities. She was never recognized for anything beyond a means to ease a burden whether it was staying up late to care for her younger siblings, managing endless household chores, or silently enduring her father's temper. It was a burden she knew she had to carry, born out of duty to her family. But sometimes, it felt unnecessary, as though her sacrifices were taken for granted.

The closet was bursting at the seams with clothing, yet nothing felt right. Every outfit she tried seemed to work against her, as if the fabric itself doubted her choices. With each discarded piece, Maya's confidence slipped

further away. She knew an outfit could say a lot about who she was, what she wanted to convey, and how the world would see her.

She got into her car and drove off to the place that would either shape her or break her. The new environment had potential, and she felt it the moment she arrived. It seemed like a place where a different kind of challenge, one that she was ready to face, was waiting for her. As she looked around, she recognized some familiar faces, ones she had only seen through a screen, while others were completely new. She felt out of place, as the warm reception she had expected never came. Just as doubt began to settle in, glimpses of her future walked right in, reassuring her that she was exactly where she needed to be.

Talia

Whenever Talia stepped into a room, the dull walls seemed to brighten with color and warmth, as if they were welcoming her presence. She had always carried an energy that was impossible to ignore. However, today was different. She felt like a mess, overwhelmed by nervousness. At twenty-two years old, she did not feel anywhere near ready to face the world.

This was not the version of herself that others usually saw. She was known for her warmth and kindness, qualities

that went beyond words. Socializing came naturally to her, and she had a sharp mind that allowed her to speak up for what she believed was right. Yet, despite her confidence in standing up for others, she often had the habit of putting herself last.

Rain pattered the ground, but the sun still shone brightly. She told herself that a beautiful rainbow would appear soon. As she prepared her breakfast, a wave of anxiety washed over her, and she could no longer hold back the tears that streamed down her cheeks. She had been keeping it all in for as long as possible, but the sight of her in that moment shattered her parents' hearts.

“You’re anxious, Talia, but I hope you know that it is fine that you are. In fact, I would be surprised if you are not. Wipe those tears now, you are a big girl, and you can handle it,” her father said, while her mother gently patted her back.

She knew the response was expected, but she could not help feeling like the expectations that weighed over her might drown her soon. Pulling her thick, unruly hair into a tight ponytail, she smoothed down the creases in her worn denim jacket. Beneath it, a simple cotton blouse clung to her skin, still warm from the iron. Her shoes, scuffed from countless walks, tapped softly against the pavement as she adjusted her bag strap. Fully dressed, she stepped out into the cool morning air and made her way

to the bus stop, the faint scent of damp earth lingering after last night's rain. As she stood waiting, the hum of distant traffic filled the silence. She glanced around, but not a single face in the growing crowd offered solace.

They had their cliques, she could not force her way through those, even with her social skills. Giving up on that idea, Talia made her way to the middle of the room and sat down. It was bursting with people. Talia did not know then what her future was going to hold, but she was certain that she was going to make lasting memories with the people she would soon meet.

Ava

The scalding hot shower awoke her, but did nothing to chase away the emptiness she felt. She opened the new closet of her now 'home', and took the outfit she had carefully planned the night before.

It had always been that way with Ava, planning ahead, which more often than not, contradicted with her spontaneousness. That was how she felt that day. She had been waiting for this for a long time, but at the same time nothing could prepare her for what was to come. Excitement and tension both bubbled in her chest while she sipped her freshly brewed coffee in hopes of easing her nerves.

The eagerness of taking the first step to self-discovery, the

possibility of making new friends, and the countless new experiences she could have were all battling in her mind.

“I can do this. It’s gonna be okay,” these were the words she kept chanting to herself while she walked to the place that would change her life. Her optimism started to dwindle down the closer she got, and instead she was filled with dread. Many faces, none which she knew of or seemed friendly. Reminding herself that she should never show weakness, Ava pulled herself together and walked keeping her head held high.

From the outside, she looked composed and in control, while her inner turmoil raged on. She took her seat and saw two faces to her left. She didn’t know it then, but this was the beginning of a long friendship that would change her life forever

Maya, Talia and Ava

“Sorry guys, I’m late,” said Maya.

“Yes, again,” replied Ava with a smirk.

“Did something happen with your family, Maya?” Talia asked with a concerned look.

“Just a usual morning, you know how it is,” Maya replied nonchalantly.

“Ahh, she’s fine. Let’s go, I just want this over with already,” Ava grumbled as she got out of the car.

The semester was nearing its end, and the stress levels

were at their peak. Exhaustion was evident on their faces as they walked to their final class, their tired eyes and sluggish movements revealing just how much they had been through.

“You sure you’re alright?” Ava quietly asked as they took their seats in class.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good. Don’t worry about it,” Maya reassured with a smile.

Time passed quickly, and soon they were heading towards a well-deserved break, even if it was only for a short while.

“McDonald’s?” Ava asked with a grin.

“McDonald’s,” Maya and Talia replied simultaneously while nodding.

It was a tradition after all. The one place where they could relax for a while, a place that made their burdens feel lighter. Their usual booth awaited them. With food on the table, coffees in hand, and laughter all around, it was a carefree feeling like no other. The troubles they faced seemed foreign whenever they were together. That fateful day they met, they had no idea it would blossom into something worth cherishing. It was a friendship filled with endless banter, joyful moments, and unconditional love. A chaotic trio, yes, but a perfect combination for sure.

Writer's Biography

With a love for words and a curiosity for life's smallest details, Tanageswary finds endless stories in the moments others might overlook. A contemplative thinker, she blends reality and imagination, crafting possibilities born of wonder. Her writing and observations bring to light the raw beauty of human emotion and experience. Once rooted in Johor Bahru, she now draws her inspiration from her life in Kuala Lumpur.

Zero O' Clock

by Angelina

Preamble

There was a time in my life when everything felt like an endless abyss, a hollow echo of days passing by without meaning. I didn't think I could keep going, and truthfully, I didn't know if I wanted to. But writing became my anchor, the one thing that reminded me there was still something worth holding on to, even if I couldn't see it yet.

Zero O' Clock (00:00) is a reflection of that darkness, of grief and regret so heavy it feels impossible to carry. It's about losing everything you thought mattered and finding light in the most unexpected places. It's about those fleeting moments of connection and kindness that can pull you back from the edge, if only you allow them.

This story isn't just fiction; it's a piece of me. As you step into Adelaide's world, I hope that if you've ever felt really lost, you would remember that even in the darkest shadows, there's still a chance for light to break through.

“Seek to be courteous, seek integrity, and both you shall find. And always choose light.”

They say a story loses something with each telling. If that's the case, this story has lost nothing, for it's the first time it's been told.

It was a queer and sultry summer day. The car was speeding along the freeway and the windows were rolled down, as always. Charlie made us a playlist specifically for this day, from Taylor Swift's 'Cruel Summer' to the usual Little Mix hits. Charlie liked spending time with me despite his hatred for my actions and I couldn't care less that he was always thinking about death ever since our parents left, though I would have probably beat him there first. They told me it was cancer... I think? All I know is that my entire body projected on the screen lit up like a Christmas tree during my CT scan. It's the kind where they would tell you you've only got about 6 months left and, at this point, people usually bury themselves into their parents' arms with tears and snot. The only difference is I couldn't afford that nor would I want to, not with my parents laying in the morgue next door.

When they died, my dad left us a fortune and my mum, well, left us with no more of her life lessons: Mum and her never-ending lessons on compassion and courtesy. Her death affected Charlie the most that he wept so much that day. As for me, I couldn't care less.

Anyways, where was I again? Oh yes, me in the car with Charlie's reckless driving. He's always going on and on about seeing Mum and Dad again, whatever that means. "I went to visit their grave this morning and they didn't even invite me in," he mumbled without taking his eyes off the road ahead. "Could you just stop with the nonsense?" I yelled. "Courtesy, Adelaide. It doesn't hurt to be pleasant and listen once in a while." Suddenly, a blaring honk shattered the air, raw and urgent, like it held the weight of a final warning. In the blink of an eye, my feet were on the dashboard, time suspended as the world tipped on its axis. With a violent burst, the airbag exploded forward—a shockwave of force and silence wrapped in white, pressing against me like a fistful of wind, catching me mid-breath before I even had a chance to inhale.

And my entire world went dark.

...

The dead silence was detailed with the faintest whispers as I tried to gather my senses. The muddy canvas before me transformed into a white-tiled ceiling as my vision cleared. There was a blanket cocooning me in its warmth as I stretched my rock-solid body that felt as if it hadn't moved in weeks. I examined my surroundings. There was an IV drip connected to the back of my hand, the nurse next to me realised my awakening, and said with much delight, "Welcome back, love."

That's when it dawned upon me, I had just awoken from a coma.

My doctor arrived not long after, summoned by his will to help the injured. He was no stranger to me—this was the same man who was there through my parents' final days, though the memories stirred absolutely nothing in me. I shot him a sharp, unimpressed glare as he wrapped the cuff around my arm, his focus intent on the blood pressure gauge, oblivious to the obvious disgust in my eyes. "Where's Charlie?" I demanded, my tone sharp and unyielding. I barely looked at the doctor, my patience thin; he was just an obstacle standing between me and my brother. All that mattered was finding Charlie. "He died in the crash two weeks ago, Adelaide." I thought I never cared much for him, yet a shiver and a sense of numbness crawled up my body, robbing me of words. My eyes pooled with tears and for the first time in so long, I felt something I swore once upon a time to never feel

again. “He was your only family left, and now he’s gone too.” The words hit me like a blow, leaving me hollow and speechless. I jerked my arm back, wordless and numb, retreating into silence, not a single sound escaping my lips. The doctor must have realised this was the longest he had seen me gone without a smart comeback because he stared right into my eyes and said “You know, you could’ve treated him better—been there for him when your parents passed. But you didn’t. You kept him at arm’s length, your so-called brotherly bond, paper-thin. You’ve shown him neither respect nor care, all while wearing that indifferent mask. Courtesy costs nothing but buys everything... Weren’t those your mother’s last words to you? Even as she lay there, fading, that was her final plea.” I barely registered his words as tears trickled down my face slowly, each one carving a path of burning agony and regret, leaving a trail of what could have been in its wake. And all I could think about, could feel, was it should’ve been me.

I should have been the one to go.

...

I was informed I had to be bedridden for at least a month due to the impact. They placed me in a shared room with another girl. During the first few days, to say that I hated her was an understatement; she was the complete opposite of Charlie. I despised her. Not for who she was, but for what she represented – her incessant need to suck me into the orbit of her unrelenting optimism, as if her saccharine words could somehow patch the gaping chasm that grief has hollowed out within me. Her cheerful aura wrapped around her like an impenetrable shield, a glaring reminder of everything I had lost, everything I will never have. It was suffocating, that forced positivity. A mirror held up to my hollowness that I wasn't ready to confront even, much less mend.

I wanted to be left alone. I craved solitude, not for the comfort it could offer, but for the permission it granted me to fall apart. To grieve without an audience, free from the expectations of “healing” and “moving on.” Above all else, I longed to sink into the quiet, where the sharp edges of memory and loss can cut through me. I could sit with the weight of his absence, letting it press down on me until it felt like I might collapse entirely – and maybe, just maybe, I hoped I would.

But somewhere in that darkness, a new thought began to take shape. No, it wasn't hope, or redemption; it was a shadow, coiling tightly around my mind, seductive in its simplicity. The idea arrived unbidden, yet once it took

root, it felt almost like destiny. A dark realisation that there are swifter paths to reunion. It whispered to me, soft and inviting, of ways to see him again. Painless and swift indeed. A release from the torment of waking up to a world in which he no longer existed.

For the first time in weeks, I felt something other than grief— resolve. Cold, dark resolve. It wasn't fear or guilt, but a strange sort of relief. A trick up my sleeve, my final card to play.

But she never gave up, and she was the kindest and sweetest person to me. Courteous would be the right word, funny isn't it? She'd talk for hours about how wonderful life could be if we gave it a chance while I laid there in silence with a smile, acknowledged as a secret between me and her. She was there for me when I was feeling my lowest and didn't think I could go on, but she made me see the light mum was always going on and on about through kindness and warmth in just the way she speaks to me. Now I want to live, and not just for Charlie, but for me.

Last week, she decided to roll me out for a stroll in my wheelchair, her gentle hands guiding me into the embrace of the world I'd long forgotten. The sun greeted me like an old friend, its warmth spread within me, a heart that was cold and empty before. As we moved through the winding streets, her laughter mingled with the rustling

leaves, a melody that made my heart stir with something dangerously close to hope. We were crossing the streets when a car came swerving in our direction, its screeching tires shattering the fragile stillness. Time seemed to halt, the world suspended in a fragile balance. And for the first time, I saw her – really saw her. Her smile, radiant and achingly familiar, caught the sunlight as though it had been waiting for her. Without hesitation, she thrust the wheelchair forward, sprawling me to safety and all I could do was sit there and scream.

She never told me her name. She never even spoke of her own pain, her own battles. What was her illness? I can only wonder. But perhaps it doesn't matter. Perhaps she was not a story to be told, but rather a fleeting presence, a whisper of light cutting through shadow. She taught me what it means to live, to truly live.

And all of a sudden, like a sunbeam at dusk, she was gone.

...

I soon got to learn that her name was Grace, how fitting. Grace was so full of life yet she gave away hers for me to live, and so I will. I'll live and breathe and smile with the distant memory of Grace and Charlie far away, but never forgotten. Mother said courtesy costs nothing but buys everything, she was wrong. It cost Grace's life and it bought me a new beginning and a second chance to live.

A dawn that came too late, my delayed zero o'clock.

Maybe in another universe, in the upside-down, I'll see them again.

Writer's Biography

Angelina is a psychology major with an undying love for coffee and all things fitness! Her current favourite ways to sweat are pilates, spin, and boxing. Growing up, Angelina fell in love with Cassandra Clare's The Mortal Instruments series, which still holds a special place in her heart and deeply influenced her writing style, even to this very day.

The Plastic Flashlight

by Shen

Preamble

We all have those precious items that were given to us by a precious someone, or perhaps a cherished item that held interesting backstory or memories of a bygone time. Whatever it represents, that precious something means something to us, and in my case, or in the case of the protagonist, it is an ordinary plastic flashlight.

You could say the plastic flashlight is the last living memory that he has of the one who gave it to him. When he was little, he probably thought nothing of it, but looking back at it now, he could only seek to cherish it more.

With the flickering beam of hope guiding his path forward, he wouldn't just simply give up now, would he?

Shen

Click

An inquisitive toddler had his routine tear-dropping session once more, waking up the whole house of exhausted kins trying to catch some well-deserved winks. Yet, gracious grandma fretted not, taking out her plastic flashlight in the pitch darkness, a blinding beam of light that penetrates the abyss surrounding them, as she sung a string of melodies as an attempt to soothe the wailing child. Softly and sweetly, she went, “我是一只小小小小鸟，怎么飞啊飞却飞不高¹。。。 ” Miraculously, the toddler fell warmly asleep in her arms, as if nothing happened, his face adorned with a warm smile that shimmered brighter than the beams that emanated from the flashlight.

Click

A woeful youth laid comfortably on his grandmother's small lap, silently having his ears cleaned by her. It made him feel so blissful, an inescapable display of silent affection he took for granted. The plastic flashlight flickered as she readjusted to peer into the cavern on the side of the boy's head. As he fell into a slumber without a single care in the world, the grandmother caressed his head, assuring the naive boy of the love she showered on him, and that she would be by his side whenever he needed it.

¹ “I am a bird, but no matter how much I flew, I could never reach the sky” Song lyrics of the song “I am a bird” by Zhao Chuan.

Click

A cowardly lad tried to venture through and beyond the dark attic, scourging for treasure troves beyond his reckoning. Only to be met by fear and dark apparitions looming over him, seeking to devour him. Yet, grandma granted him her plastic flashlight, which helped him triumph over the monsters in the darkness. The light felt dimmer than before, yet he still felt empowered, stronger and more willing to conquer the scary unknown with the flip of a switch. Grandma stroked his head and reassured him, “Whenever and wherever you are, if you are scared, if you feel afraid, remember that grandma will always be here to fight the horrors with you.”

Click

...?

Click

...

Click

An inexperienced adult stood around his relatives and families, one by one, their faces all covered in a single blue hue. The concrete floor flooded with knee-deep streams of tears, the air perpetuated by silence and sorrows. His

mother, aunt, uncle and all the familiar faces—he couldn’t seem to recall the joy that once donned on their faces anymore. The man took out his plastic flashlight, in an attempt to illuminate and fight off the darkness shrouding his heart, yet the light that was once a beacon of hope diminished within his grip. Tried as he might, all that remained was the sound of clickings. Alas, a mere flashlight was no different from the human heart— both would succumb to eternal slumber, never to awaken once more.

Click

A weathered old-timer sits in front of a tombstone— his eyes—once failing to hide its tears—now only has a warm smile across its irises. He reminisces about how he’sd always cried without her presence, without her protection, but he cries no longer. As all the offerings and foods are laid out in preparation to pray for her once more, his families gather around to mourn her too. As the man pulls out a plastic flashlight from a pouch, a sound of a click echoes throughout the quiet sanctum, and the light shines upon the urn of his grandmother, unveiling the tender smile she always had. He switches off the flashlight, as he gently whispers into the vast blue sky,

“Miss you, grandma.”

Writer's Biography

Since childhood, Shen has felt like a lone sailor adrift in an ocean of possibilities, uncertain of which course to chart. Life presented him with countless paths, but none seemed to align with his heart. Medicine? Too boring. Business? A definite no. Over time, he discovered a knack for writing, particularly during moments of boredom. Writing became his outlet—a means of channeling emotions and weaving fragments of his personality and experiences into his work. Whether this belief holds true or not, it's a notion that fuels his creative process and keeps him exploring the possibilities of the written word.

7 Minutes

by Lyssa

Preamble

“As humans, when your heart stops pumping, your brain will remain active for seven minutes after you die. There is research that suggests your whole life will play out within this time, from the day you were born until the final moment; but, what happens when only your significant memories are displayed during that short amount of time? If not your memories, then who will be there and what will you see?”

This story portrays the ups and downs of life, and how one tries to seek freedom; the predicaments one experiences and the consequence of one's actions: regrets and grief, love and relationships, and life and death.

The body and mind may die, but memories live on forever, even beyond death.

This story is dedicated to those who are silently battling with demons of their own; you never walk alone.



There was a knock on the door.

Another one soon followed.

Her eyes twitched slightly as they gradually cracked open to the sound. She looked around, somewhat disoriented and suddenly felt sick to her stomach.

She hunched over and started regurgitating. It was painful. Her entire body and soul were in pain, as if a hundred swords were piercing her stomach and chest simultaneously, and she didn't know why; but, she soon found a bottle of sleeping pills knocked over onto the floor. It was empty and the cap was missing. There was also an old-fashioned glass of what looked like whiskey on the coffee table or maybe it was a mixture of several kinds of alcohol—Vodka? Soju? Midori? She wasn't sure, but her head felt like someone had repeatedly stomped on it when she was unconscious.

Perplexed, she rose to her feet, stumbling and struggling to stand; unbeknownst to her was a silhouette with a scythe watching her every move in the corner of the room.

Am I... dead? She wondered but she had no clue whether her attempt worked this time; her eyes scanned the area.

What the hell is going on??

There was a clock on the wall that indicated the time—6:53, the sun had yet risen. She continued to glance around and found that her pet Bombay and Golden Retriever, Luna and Fei, were asleep peacefully next to the television where they squeezed in one dog bed.

Another knock on the door.

This time it sounded like the person behind it was getting a little agitated, but surprisingly, it didn't interfere with their rest. She struggled to walk towards the door, feet wobbly, as she grasped the coffee table by the couch she was laying in to support her weight.

Jesus Christ my stomach hurts... The palm of her hand clenched her abdomen as her legs weakly approached the peephole of the door and peered—only for her to not see a soul on the other side.

Weird... She thought.

Her parents taught her better when opening doors for strangers, especially when the person on the opposite end was unseen. However, she felt like their lesson didn't really apply in this situation and her curiosity got the better of her. She held her hand out to the doorknob, somewhat feeling a little anxious—maybe excited, but she wasn't afraid. Her hand twisted the doorknob and swung the

door open.

Ack! She shrieked as a blinding light greeted her— it was so bright that she had to shield her eyes with her arm to avoid getting blinded herself.

While still blocking her eyes from the overwhelming light, she valiantly took her first step, hoping that it would be heaven or paradise, or whatever the afterlife had to propose when the souls of the dead finally rested.

She thought that would be the end of it, but that couldn't be much further from the truth as her body transformed into a wisp of smoke and carried her away to the land of the unknown.



As the light gradually faded and her eyes adjusted to the sudden change, a sense of familiarity hit her in the guts as she recognised where she stood. Her mouth was slightly agape and her eyes widened— she was in her childhood bedroom, back in Malaysia.

The interior was just as she remembered, decorated with vibrant colours with a hint of earthy beauty. She glanced around her bedroom, trying to soak in everything that had occurred and comprehend what was going on. There was no light illuminating from beyond the curtains, only her ceiling light shone the room.

Why am I here...? Is this a dream? It felt like one but her mind was trying to wrap around the situation as she slowly crept around her room; her heart was rapidly beating within the prison of her barred ribs. She couldn't help but rub the eyes that bore fatigue as her silent footsteps trudged the wooden floor.

The walls were painted in pastel pink with a tinge of matcha green, two colours that surprisingly fused well together; succulents and small plants on her organised desk next to Anime figurines and merchandise, a laptop, stationery, and other miscellaneous items that an average teenage girl usually owned. She delicately touched her favourite figurine and recalled the day she purchased it; a

gentle smile appeared as she thought of that fleeting moment.

Can't say I was proud spending my entire monthly allowance on a Gojo figurine, but definitely no regrets. Anna felt nostalgic as she continued to scrutinise her room, and it was just as she left it five years ago.

Her queen sized bed was in the centre of the room where a pink shark plushie rested. Looking at it now, her room was quite spacious. There were books and novels lying on the floor where she used to read in her pastime or when she needed an escape from reality— she even noticed her favourite book, *Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* by Haruki Murakami. She could barely remember what it was all about, but she does recall how she used to enjoy dissecting every single sentence of Murakami's prose for any symbolic meaning, and frankly, it was difficult; but it made her feel like it was worthwhile doing so.

Although his writing can be questionable at times, especially with the way he depicted women, she still enjoyed his books and the symbolism they portrayed.

She picked up the book from the floor and flipped through the pages quickly, trying to get a whiff of the book's faint woody scent. To some people this behaviour may be weird, but the smell of books was pleasant, to her

at least. As she continued skimming through the pages of the book, her nose caught the scent of pancakes wafting through the air.

After setting the book back onto the floor, she opened her bedroom door and headed downstairs.

Is there someone else in the house? I wonder who. She thought to herself. She realised this before she answered the knock on the door, but she couldn't speak or produce any sounds from her mouth even if she tried. Though, at this very moment, she wished she could call out to whomever it was downstairs.

Gradually descending the stairs, the whiff of pancakes and eggs had gotten stronger, which made her stomach growl silently. As she got closer to the bottom of the stairs, she suddenly halted.

That smell...

She could almost punch herself right now— why did it take so long for her to recognise her younger sister's cooking and the pitter-patter of her footsteps? Not only could she hear her in the kitchen, she managed to catch a few more voices in the dining area.

"No! Not like that, idiot!" A familiar voice was heard.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was greeted with the sight of her siblings getting ready to eat breakfast, and there was a birthday cake at the centre of the table. She looked at the two that were in the dining area— her eldest sister and youngest brother. Stumped, she continued to stare as if it was her first time seeing them in years.

Well, it kind of was.

"Anna?" A voice called out to her, making her snap out of it. She turned to the direction of the sound, and all she saw was the tender and radiant smile of her sister as she was holding a plate of omelette in her hands.

"Happy birthday!" Everyone's voices reverberated throughout the entire house.

Startled, she jumped slightly.

B-birthday? She was dumbfounded, mouth left agape.

"Of course it's your birthday, silly. Don't tell me you've forgotten?" The eldest teased and placed her hands on her hips as if she could hear the voice in Anna's head.

What? What are you— Words were caught in her throat as she tried to get a hold of this bewildering situation she was in.

In almost an instant, memories came flooding back.

Anna recalled this day, it was her birthday celebration with her siblings. The reason why this particular day held a special place in her heart was because it had been a while since they sat down and celebrated her birthday. Prior to this, it was either everyone was busy with work and school, or there were other important events that hindered them from properly celebrating her birthday on the day itself. She never held a grudge towards this, though. Anna was very understanding of everyone's circumstances and she was almost never upset about it.

However, why was she back to this day?

Is this some kind of trick that God is playing on me? If it is, God sucks at being a comedian.

She could only stand motionless, still awestruck, as they gave Anna a tight group hug and a kiss on her forehead; it was normal for them to be very affectionate towards one another, it was a rare and beautiful sight, and something Anna didn't take for granted. While they took their seats, her eldest sister helped by putting food on everyone's plate as they ate together.

Just the four of them and no one else.

No yelling or the sound of furniture breaking—just

tranquillity and silence. Anna glanced around the house. There were many portraits of the four of them on the wall and graduation pictures set on the shelf. She could see a lamp tucked weirdly in the corner of the living room, as if it was not meant to be there. Anna caught a glimpse of snacks, candies, and chips on the coffee table in the living room.

If there was one thing people ought to know about us, it was that we all loved eating. It was very apparent. Her lips curved upwards at the thought.

Anna continued to survey the interior design, which now felt surreal. The way the house was structured was that the dining area and living room were not separated by anything. Both were basically in the same area, but there was a door leading to the kitchen; which would mean the stairs led directly to the dining room and living room. From what Anna knew, most Asian households were built this way but she didn't want to generalise.

She shoved eggs in her mouth as her eyes wandered. Soon, they landed on a clock hung up on the wall above their kitchen door—it displayed 6:55. She shrugged to herself, paying no mind to the time, but for some reason, had a bad feeling in her gut that kept on nagging at her to look at it.

It's probably nothing. Shaking her head, she decided to

push those thoughts down and focus on what was happening now.

It's so nice to be back here again... Anna basked in the silence of it all. Although it was silent, not one ounce of discomfort was seen on their faces. This was a safe space for the four of them.

"Anna," her younger sister called out. "Can you get milk? I forgot to take it out." Her sister's voice was muffled as her mouth was stuffed with pancakes. Anna looked at her sister and grabbed a napkin to wipe her mouth that was smudged with whipped cream; her sister's face looked pure and adorable as ever.

Don't talk with your mouth full! Anna sighed softly as she got up from her seat and walked into the kitchen, but in almost an instant, her surroundings started to alter. Everything started to haze like vapour emitting from a coffee cup.

What's happening?!

Her vision and mind were swirling as her corporeal body began fading together with the mist; her limbs could no longer grab a hold of anything in the environment but she still reached her arm out to them, thinking maybe they could pull her out of this strange occurrence. Of course, her efforts were in vain in the end.

No!!

The last thing she saw was her siblings peacefully eating, blissfully unaware of her dissipating surroundings.



It all happened in a blink of an eye.

The haze has yet to clear up but she knew it was no longer her childhood home now. It kind of pained her that she didn't get a chance to say farewell to her siblings one last time. Still, everything was puzzling to her, but she was glad to see the three of them. At least for now.

As the fog gradually cleared up, she could make out some objects in the new environment.

"Anna."

"Anna!"

Anna's eyes finally caught a glimpse of the person calling out to her, and it was her two friends and partner. That was when she realised three pairs of eyes staring right at her. One of her friends seated in front of her had her hand out as if waving to catch her attention.

"Are you okay?" The three looked at her with slight concern in their eyes. She stared at them for a few more seconds before she dropped her hand in embarrassment.

Yeah, I-I'm fine. She stuttered.

This time, the sun was up and breathing life into the place.

It seemed like the time of day was arbitrary, but it all remained the same, no matter if it was morning or night.

Time relentlessly continued on; it stopped for no one.

Where the heck am I now?? Her head was pounding after the transition but still studied her surroundings.

Wait, this is... It took Anna a while to finally recognise the location; a Chinese restaurant just right outside their university. The thick aromatic smell of spicy broth filled the air and it was absolutely divine. She gazed downwards to the table and there were four bowls of the restaurant's most popular dish, their spicy prawn noodle soup, and chicken dumplings as well as *xiao long bao*¹.

Chinese cuisine was Anna's favourite. Not only because she was Chinese herself, but because it brought her comfort. Whenever the four of them had time after class or just simply craved the chewy noodles, they would walk down to eat. If there was a place Anna had many memorable moments, it would be her time in university—minus the responsibilities she shouldered. She met the three of them there, and they grew close to one another. They were glued to the hip, some would say.

As Anna sat there silently, words failing to leave her mouth, her heart shattered every so slightly. Heck, they made her break out of her shell and she finally became

¹ Chinese soup dumplings

the person she had always wanted to be. It absolutely pained her, but she held it together. She was a strong person after all; even when she was hurting, she would still plaster a smile on her face. But, it seemed like her partner noticed something was amiss.

“Hey,” he rested his palm on hers, thumb stroking her skin gently, as his voice whispered only for her to hear. “You okay?” She could only stare into his eyes that looked at her like she hung the moon and stars.

Y-yeah, I’m okay. I promise, just a little headache. It wasn’t really a lie but her mind was scattered. Akin to her siblings, it seemed like he heard the voice in her head as he merely cocked his eyebrow but dropped the subject altogether.

Anna’s head was throbbing as she attempted to make sense of the situation, and it didn’t help that the restaurant was bustling with customers who were eagerly awaiting for their food. The noise was worsening the migraine but she put up a brave face.

Why would I be here? What even is the connection...? She tried to piece the puzzles together, but the amount of ruminating only made her stomach grumble in hunger.

Yes, again.

Anna reluctantly gave in after a while and slurped her noodles and soup, soaking in the company of her mates.

Delicious... The taste was just as she remembered; nothing could top this dish in her opinion.

As usual, their table was the loudest one in the restaurant — laughing with high-pitched voices and speaking to each other as if they were deaf. She had thought this before and had a feeling that people didn't really like to be around them, only because they were rowdy and unrestrained whenever they hung out. She felt quite sorry for those who had to witness their shenanigans but honestly couldn't really care.

*We were somewhat that 'annoying group of friends' people hated to be in the same space with. Kinda ironic how we would talk sh*t about those who act like that in public as well.*

She glanced at them, her heart grew warm as she was able to see them again. Being with them meant there was laughter, jokes, and gossip; the conversations never seemed to end when the four of them were together. It was like there was always something new going on in their lives.

"Yo, have you seen the guy's research paper about the human brain?" A new topic arose from the many subjects that were spoken about.

"The one about how it functions for seven minutes? It was interesting... but damn creepy." Her partner answered as his body shivered at the recollection of the paper's contents.

Huh? Her hands stopped midair as she whipped her head around to look at her partner.

Then, it dawned on Anna.

A few months ago, she read this phenomenon somewhere online about the brain being active for seven more minutes before completely shutting down, and that seemed to be the case right now. She really was dead, but her brain was replaying her most significant memories instead of her entire life altogether. This was what made her even more bemused but she comprehended her situation... slightly.

Ah... so that explains it. You guys are just memories. She leaned against her chair, a sombre expression formed and her lips curved upwards into a wry smile. But, just like the wind, her smile passed just as quick as anxiety started coursing through her body.

What time is it? Her eyes immediately shot downwards to look at her wristwatch, but to her dismay, her wrist was empty. Her heart was beating so hard that it felt like it could rip out of her chest, and she didn't know why. She

felt a sense of foreboding that she couldn't shake off.

"Shoot, it's 6:57. Y'all ready to go?" Everyone nodded in unison and started leaving their seats after chugging their cups of green tea; they swung their bags onto their shoulders as they made their way towards the exit of the restaurant.

It's been four minutes already?! Anna was the last one to leave the restaurant and that was when everything started evaporating again.

Guys! She cried out.

Guys, wait for me! Please!

Just like she tried when she was still alive, she attempted to catch up to them, but they couldn't hear her as she watched them walk away with smiles painted on their faces. She couldn't do anything at that moment so she shut her eyes, afraid of who would stand in front of her when the haze clears.



After a few seconds, she could feel a cool breeze drifting through her hair and the heat from the sun hitting her skin.

Flowers... She peeled her eyes open when she caught a whiff of floral fragrances. The sunbeams greeted her with delight and the flowers swayed to the zephyr of her presence from where she was lying; this was a completely new environment.

She sat up, basking in the scenery that was ahead of her. There she was, enwreathed by a garden of flowers—it was never-ending as it kissed the horizon. The sky was so clear and blue that the ivory clouds happily danced within, colourful wings on the butterflies were fluttering and jumping from one blossom to another; the vibrant and harlequin florets soothed the migraine that came after the alteration. It felt bizarre to be in this kind of place.

A park? Wait, no... it's a meadow. She had never been to a meadow before but her soul felt at ease; there was no one around as she became one with nature that embraced her with open arms. Her lungs were filled with the fresh spring air as she took a deep breath, and it felt like she hadn't breathed like this in a while.

I don't mind spending the rest of my time here. She mused as tranquillity coursed through her body, albeit feeling

downcasted at the sheer thought of not seeing her loved ones ever again. Soon, her peace was soon shattered as a small voice came from behind her.

“Who are you?”

With widened eyes, Anna whipped her head back and locked eyes with a little girl, who seemed to be 9 or 10 years old, who had a picnic basket in tow. She had soft features, short auburn hair, dark brown eyes and pink lips; her cheeks were mirroring the colour of them, a pastel pink hue. Anna’s mouth was ajar as the little girl innocently tilted her head, her big brown eyes sparkled with confusion and wonder, puzzled by the lady sitting down on the mat she had laid out earlier.

Shifting awkwardly, she quickly snapped out of it.

Oh, my name is Anna. What about you?

Something felt off... because she looked just like—

“My name is Anna too!” The little girl’s eyes lit up like stars and she formed the brightest smile that rivalled the sun as if she heard something incredibly amusing.

Y-you’re Anna...? The look of disbelief washed over Anna. “Mhm! My sister gave me that name when I was born.” That was when something clicked in Anna’s brain.

The little Anna standing before her was herself.

What is the meaning of this? How is this possible? This wasn't part of the research at all. Anna mulled over the possibility of it being some kind of dream, but it didn't make sense.

She was dead; and the last time she checked, dead people didn't dream. Maybe this was an exception?

As she was racking her brains for an explanation, Little Anna cheerily walked over and sat next to her, propping the basket in between them; it seemed like it was filled to the brim with snacks and tidbits. Anna couldn't peel her eyes away from the little one and watched her every move, disturbed yet fascinated by this phenomenon. Thinking about it now, nothing about whatever had been occurring was normal—in fact it was *very* abnormal.

“This is sooooo cool! I'm Anna and you're Anna... it's like fate!” Little Anna was joyous and carefree, unafraid of the future that awaited her.

...Have I always been this happy? Anna couldn't recall her personality to be so outgoing when she was a kid; maybe she'd forgotten after so long.

“Since we have the same name, it'll be confusing if I call you Anna.” Little Anna placed a finger on her chin,

pondering as she puckered her lips to the side. A few seconds passed by and Little Anna sighed in defeat, “Nevermind, I can’t think of anything.” She bore a disappointed look on her face.

Anna chuckled at her younger self’s antics, it was adorable.

Fate, huh...

Don’t worry about it. Isn’t it special that we both have the same name? She lifted an arm to caress the little one’s head and displayed a warm smile. Little Anna giggled with a high-pitched voice and her eyes formed crescent moons, “You’re right! Hehe!” There was naivety and gullibility that Anna adored.

She had always believed that children should always act like children, but Anna never grew up that way; so, seeing her younger self act so extroverted in front of her only meant that she felt safe with her.

“Well, since you’re here, let’s have a picnic together!” Little Anna brought out grape juice and chicken and ham sandwiches as well as a handful of fruit gummies for dessert. It was simple and childlike, but more than enough. As Anna munched on her sandwich, her heart grew heavy as she watched little Anna, without a worry in the world, peer at the flowers around them.

The little one suddenly stood up and plucked two tiny daisies from the ground, and without hesitation placed one behind Anna's right ear, "There!" She clasped her hands in satisfaction as she was proud of herself and slid the other behind her own ear. "Now we're matching!" Her face bore a broad grin as she plopped back down and ate her sandwich away; she was chewing when she glanced at Anna who hadn't taken more than one bite and knitted her eyebrows, "Is the sandwich not yummy?"

No no, it's delicious. Thank you. Anna quickly waved her hand in disagreement.

The little one relaxed her facial expressions and gave a soft smile, then shifted her focus to the flowers again.

After a beat of silence, Anna couldn't contain it anymore.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Anna.

She hung her head low as she apologised with tears forming in the corner of her eyes. Startled, Little Anna was quick on her feet to soothe and comfort her by rubbing her back, "Don't cry, Anna. You'll be okay!" She tried to cheer her up but concern was painted all over her face.

Anna lifted her head to lock eyes with her younger self.

I'll be fine... that's where you're wrong, little one. I've hurt you so much... you didn't deserve whatever happened to you, and I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you until the end.

Anna's tears came like waves, and she noticed her body started to vaporise into mist. She glanced at the little one's Barbie wristwatch and it displayed 7:00.

Her time was up.

“Anna? What's happening?” Little Anna's shaky voice pierced Anna's ears as she observed her body gradually disappearing right before her eyes.

Both of her arms cradled Little Anna.

But, I can assure you, little one, that you did nothing wrong and it wasn't your fault. You'll meet lovely people and love them with all your heart and soul, and do things that you're passionate about. I promise you that I tried to heal myself—to heal you. I tried my damn hardest but I wasn't strong enough. But then again, you were a child. You didn't need to be strong.

Little Anna embraced her tightly as tears also started forming in her luminous eyes, but as Anna's entire figure transformed into a cloud of haze, Little Anna struggled to keep her grip on her. “Anna? Why can't I hold you anymore?!” Urgency and anxiety laced her voice as she

attempted to hold Anna, but to no avail; the little one was in shambles as she wept in agony.

“Anna, what is happening to you!?” She tried again and again to feel the warmth of Anna’s body.

Anna unsuccessfully tucked a strand of hair behind Little Anna’s ear and patted her head in adoration; she took one last look at the little one before her—it was a look full of love and affection, but guilt was also apparent.

I love you so much, Anna. I wish I could’ve taken care of the both of us... I wish I could’ve changed our fate.

Although Anna couldn’t hold her anymore, she still raised a finger to wipe away Little Anna’s tears; of course the attempt was futile.

You are the best thing that has ever existed in this world. Remember that.

“Anna!” Little Anna screamed out. “Anna, please stay! Please, I beg you!”

Little Anna sat there as her body was shaking in sorrow; she could only helplessly watch a part of her slowly die. Her palms shakily rested on Anna’s untouchable ones.

There were so many things Anna wanted to tell the little

one, but no amount of time was sufficient to say the words she'd wanted to impart; but then again, she never had enough time to begin with.

Goodbye, little one.

She finally uttered her last words and flashed a beam of fondness; attempting to make Little Anna remember her smiling as the inevitable unfolded. It could've been Anna's mind deceiving her or maybe because it was etched onto her skin, but she swore she felt the warmth of the little ones' hands. Her surroundings became a blur, so she closed her eyes, accepting her fate. She wasn't in despair, more so of the opposite; her heart felt safe and at peace. She could finally pass on, but could she say she didn't have any regrets? In her heart, she knew she was deceiving herself.

Soon after, she succumbed to the darkness and dissipated into a cloud of white mist; silence subsequently ensued as her life and dreams became one with the gentle breeze, forever remaining as memories and nothing more.





As I stand in Anna's living room, her face is pale as ivory, she starts foaming in the mouth. Her partner will soon arrive home to the sight of this tragedy. It was neither his fault nor was it hers. The house that was once filled with the sounds of laughter and endless chatter, the fragrance of cinnamon perfume and expensive shampoo, now has no more smells and noises.

I sympathise with her, but I have a job to do. I'm not like your average Grim Reaper who simply reap the souls of humans mercilessly, I personally have been able to feel the raw emotions of those who are dying. I frequently feel this uneasy sensation in my hollow chest whenever I have a duty to fulfil; but, I still follow the force of nature and order, and guide the departed souls safely to the afterlife, which I did with Anna. Though, it was slightly different with her. I'm not so sure myself but I always had an odd attachment to Anna, as if I were her guardian angel.

It's a shame, really.

The thing is with her, she was a compassionate and an altruistic woman, though she gave herself less credit than she deserved. She was someone who everyone depended on, and above all, she loved writing, especially about other people's stories. Her dream was to be the voice for the voiceless. That was her motto.

Humans are such complex creatures. She knew how heavy her actions would affect those involved, and yet she proceeded. They were the last thing on her mind before she decided to take her own life.

If she knew, then why carry it out? Why put them in such a heart-rending position?

Again, I can feel the authenticity of a human's emotions when they die, but that doesn't mean I understand the meaning behind her actions. On second thoughts, I think humans don't understand themselves either.

Anna wasn't a perfect human being, and obviously had her flaws. At times, her anger would get to her, and regulating her emotions was arduous. That was one of her hurdles. The resentment she had suppressed from her childhood came back to haunt her in her adult years.

She had nasty scars to hide, figuratively and literally.

She lucked out though, the people around her showed her the beauty of freedom; something she sought for so long until her final moments. She honestly wouldn't trade them for anything. Well, maybe for a bowl of the noodle soup.

Throughout my existence, I came to an understanding that being surrounded by loved ones and having them show the wonders and mysteries of life is more than

enough to go on, at least for a fleeting moment.

So, dear reader, please stay just a little longer. Even for a minute.

This is why I'm here, to serve as a reminder that there is always light at the end of the tunnel... pretty ironic, huh?

Writer's Biography

Growing up, Lyssa has always been imaginative; daydreaming all day and creating vivid images and visions in her head. Turn the music up and she will be in a constant reverie! In a world of hardships and obstacles, Lyssa writes as a way to escape from harsh reality— she prefers living in her own whimsical fairytale full of romance and mystery, plot twists and drama. She delves into the genre of angst because that is where she feels most vulnerable and contrastingly content. During her 21 years on this boundless earth, she still floats aimlessly like a ghost, attempting to search for something that can fill the gaps of her overwhelmingly lonely heart. Writing, however, gives her a sense of purpose.

In hopes to be someone who can influence people with her prose, Lyssa longs for her stories to bring solace to those who seek for at least one person to understand them and the parts they mask from others.

Cradle of Grief

by Dhivya

Preamble

This poem was inspired by Frida Kahlo's Henry Ford Hospital, 1932. When I was presented with this artwork, it evoked so many feelings. It felt very personal and resonated deeply with me as it reflected the fragility and resilience of womanhood. It led to me exploring grief, loss and strength through this poem. I hope the readers will enjoy my attempt to give voice to unspoken pain and courage.

Is that what you felt, my dear?
Anguish; as you bled out motherhood,
As you embraced the emptiness of your soul,
With each moment slowed,
As pain consumed us whole.

How did you bear it, my dear?
Agony of knives in your delicate shrine,
All to salvage pieces of our broken dreams,
Our symbol of love and sunshine;
Our lifeless son.

What was it like, my dear?
To see our life crumble in the darkest night,
With the hands of clocks moving slow,
With no hope and strength in sight,
Will life leave us only with woe?

Why must it be you, my dear?
To carry a loss that can't be undone,
With memories that will haunt.
To be placed in a void that will never be gone,
Searching for our dearest,
In our cradle of Grief.

Writer's Biography

Dhivya writes to explore the deep feelings that make us human. Life—raw, unfiltered—shapes her stories, drawn from personal scars and fleeting moments observed. She tries to tell stories that touch the heart, stay in the mind, and speak to the soul. Her writing is about moments that linger like whispers in the soul's quiet corners.

Goodbye, My Love; No, My Mistake
by Lim Kai Yi

Preamble

Written in response to the Russian track “Love of Tired Swans” by Kazakh singer-songwriter Dimash Kudaibergenov, this piece depicts two lovebirds symbolised by swans which cannot live apart, meticulously crafted to be sung like the original.

The poem aims to form a contrast with the original song, wherein “Love of Tired Swans” depicted the deep connection and love which two lovebirds have for each other; where as “Goodbye, My Love; No, My Mistake” demonstrates how a cheater now regrets his unwise and foolish decision.

Count to three, don't give up;
Do you miss me? Do I still love you?
You were once my star; from afar,
Raised the bar, now my heart yearns for you

Life is hard; always is,
Fears and worries, for what to prove? But;
Move on with a grin, stand by me;
Died to live, to destroy the truth, love

Not quite that faithful but not too late to be,
Look at me, there's more to see
Near the abyss, not the stars; far from Thee,
Dear, that was our creed

Fear, hesitation, grief, anxiety,
Heresies, all places I've been

Mouthful, but shades of grey;
To God, I need to pray,
What else to do, to save the day?

My dear, let it be;
I chose wisely, you'll find your sweetheart
We were meant to be, yes, indeed
Supposedly, not till she had torn us

You pursued; you gave in,
My true love; you hurt and forced us
We once had a pledge; we were free
Let me be, let me sleep in the dark

Near mountains, screams of pain levitate,
Resonate, never fade
Fear takes over me like a tsunami,
Leave my heart to bleed

Near all my dreams, but why the larceny?
Sophistry, mystery

Oh, for the price I've paid!
Your voice, your love, how fake
Wish I could start this life again

Dread overwhelms, best if I died than lived;
Cut my wings, won't you, please?

For I have loved in vain;
New voice, new fate, new day
Yes, I was wrong, but will you stay?

Thrust with your might, you may,
I'm not your toy to play,
Goodbye, my love; No, my mistake

My mistake

Writer's Biography

Lim Kai Yi is a 132-time Official Guinness World Record holder who is fluent in six languages. He is obsessed with creative arts, often showcasing his abilities in disciplines like speedsolving puzzles such as Rubik's Cubes; or through the power of writing.

Fear, Violence & War

Echoes of War

by Hawraa

Preamble

This piece is inspired by my personal experience and the events that took place in Iraq during the American invasion. I once read that some of our memories are not real but constructed by our brains, fabricated to fill in the incomplete gaps. Admittedly, I tend to be forgetful; however, no matter how much I try, the memories of those times are still vivid, echoing endlessly in my head. Like a broken record, these memories are played repeatedly whenever they're triggered, for example, by a helicopter sound.

I was looking at the sky the other day, a clear blue that stretched for miles without a hint of clouds or any disturbance. At that moment, a thought occurred. It is funny, now that I think about it, here, I rarely hear helicopters in the sky. Whenever one propels overhead, a mixture of emotions that was long forgotten churns over; a suffocating, unbearable feeling. Then, a loud, sharp whistle starts ringing in my ear. I close my eyes, and all the memories flow back again. The sound takes me years back, back in Nineveh, back in my childhood house, where I used to play hopscotch in the front yard and hide whenever a military vehicle came by. I used to ride my bike with my friends, but must be home by 5pm. It was curfew time, and not even adults were allowed to roam the streets. By evening, the neighborhood becomes a ghost town, not a single soul in sight. But they stood there, holding onto their iron fists, surveilling every nook and cranny, watching us from the inside of their khaki mobile fortress, making sure no one escaped their gaze.

My mother used to say:

*“Always stay close, always nearby
do not go far, avoid their prying eyes”*



The mornings brought the helicopter noises. The loud rhythmic sound of their wings reverberated in the air from dusk till dawn. Going over and over, over our house. Sometimes accompanied by gunshots, but we carried on with our chores. Like it was the most normal thing in the world. One day, during the chaos, I couldn't seem to recall why, the horrors of it all that was happening until that moment suddenly hit me. I imagined that it was the end, the final day had come, when the sounds would stop piercing my ears. Not because their operators shook hands for peace, but that we would be out of the equation, removed from the game, like a finished chess piece; mere pawns whose death would not inflict harm or benefit. Simply playing our role, controlled by the upper hand, controlled by them.

Now, the ringing stops, the whistle fades away. I open my eyes, and I see a clear blue that stretches for miles without a hint of clouds or any disturbance. There is no helicopter in sight, no noise, nor commotion, and I sigh in relief.

Writer's Biography

Before Hawraa became the woman she is today, she was a little girl who navigated her way to school, squeezing between military vehicles, hiding away from the surveillance of foreign soldiers, and doing her daily chores while hearing the sound of gunshots, like background music. She rarely discusses the topic of war or conflicts. But she wants people to know the horrors that were committed, the regular peaceful days that were taken away from children, and to tell you that the war scenes that you see in movies were real before being adopted.

Masquerade
by Ying

Preamble

In a land torn by endless war, a young girl named Caitlyn is forced to restore peace and balance, as she strives to lead her rebellion, stopping the forces of The Empire, into victory. However, Black Mask, the merciless tyrant, the leader of the Empire will stop at nothing to forge a new order through the flames of pain and death. In a world where trust is a blade that cuts both ways, a place where masks hide not only faces but, betrayal, bloodshed, and broken promises, Caitlyn is tasked with the weight of the world to end this dark nightmare and shine the light of the glory sun, even if it meant sacrificing love for peace, amidst the eternal darkness.

War. The battle of eternity had been raging on the planet, Katara, for years and years as nobody refused to stand down and surrender. The Empire, evil reincarnated, began forcing their people down on their knees to give in to their authority whilst the rebellion fought for their freedom and lives. Ever since The Empire took over the planet after murdering the royal family, they believed Katara should be governed by a new order of fear and oppression. Black Mask, the ruthless leader of the empire, will stop at nothing to bring the people to their feet, to bring together a new order he will reinstate on the planet. A new order that the royal family should have established, yet their misbegotten plans and ignorance for the past centuries are contrarians to the notion of a new order.

Day by day, the cries of fallen warriors enveloped the barren land like a blanket of death, as mothers wept and grieved over their children; Katara fell into a never-ending cycle of bloodshed and anguish. Caitlyn Kalis, the leader of the rebellion and veteran warrior, would always dream about the peace and serenity of Katara. There was never a day where she stopped hoping to step out of her home to see the villagers dance around the village in happiness and bliss; to see the light in people's eyes, in contrast to the sight of her people cowering in barrels and crates as The Empire's soldiers marched down the streets. As the daughter of the former captain, Caitlyn had witnessed

and endured horrifying experiences which then contributed to her natural skills and talent to fight for her people. Her gift of immortality and traumatic experiences became propellers for her crusade, slaughtering her way past enemy lines and securing territory after territory; though, that was never enough.

All was well for Caitlyn as she had gotten closer to her goal until the day she set foot in the forest of shadows. She and her army decided to set up camp for the night before continuing to their next destination. As she ventured further into the forest to collect more firewood, she spotted a man lying near the river bank, unmoving. Keeping her guard up, she silently placed the wood on the ground and slowly made her way to the man, gripping her sword in case of a trap. As she got closer to him, she found the man unconscious with a black mask shrouding his face. Fully clad in armour that was decorated with red markings of ancient symbols, along with a robe that wrapped around, he seemed to be someone of high power. Despite not knowing his identity, there were tinges of familiarity that struck her... maybe a little too familiar. Looming over the man, Caitlyn firmly placed two of her fingers on his neck, checking for a pulse, only to find a faint and slow heartbeat. As her eyes wandered over the man's body, she discovered a deep cut on the side of his abdomen, causing blood to seep out and paint the grass crimson.

‘This is such a horrible idea.’ Releasing a sigh as she shook her head. She stood up, awkwardly swiping her hands against one another, and started scouting around her surroundings before analyzing the man on the ground once more. Besides the gnarly wound, she couldn’t find any other injuries or marks that would indicate struggle or a fight.

Her eyes darted around the body, examining his armour again.

‘These markings...’

She muttered as her fingers began tracing the outlines of each symbol. Caitlyn recognized some of them from her studies before the war, however, its meanings were too difficult to decipher. It had been too long since she had seen symbols of the old religion as its language dates back hundreds of years before the makings of The Empire.

She began searching for more clues, digging through empty sachets hanging from his belt. ‘Great,’ sighing for the millionth time. ‘Nothing close to an identification.’ She rubbed her temples, debating every consequence that may happen. Her eyes traced his figure again, weighing each consequence in her head. As her gaze laid on his wound again, guilt stirred within her chest. ‘No matter his origins, a warrior wouldn’t leave a broken man in the

forest alone.’ Her principles echoed louder than the doubts that plagued her mind.

After countless inner monologue debates with herself, her fingers gently traced the outlines of his mask once more before picking him up and slinging his arm over her shoulder, dragging him back to the camp base where the healers could tend to his wounds.

Arriving back at camp, several jaws were agape at the sight of their leader dragging a heavy unconscious figure ten times her size on her back. Gasps echoed throughout the camp as they scrambled hurriedly towards her, their feet shuffling frantically towards her. “Oh dear, let us get that.” They urged, carrying the man off her shoulders and rushing him into the bay.

“My lady, who-”

“I have no clue,” she interrupted her trembling medic.

“But we can’t leave him bleeding out all alone in the woods.” Caitlyn sighed, attempting to persuade her medical staff who stared at her in worry and disbelief. Her pupils shook anxiously, at the last part. “You mean you found a man lying unconscious and bleeding out, in the MIDDLE OF THE FOREST?!” Michelle’s voice

reverberated through the tent, head in hands as she stared at her leader in incredulity.

“Well...I’m pretty sure it’s not Ren. Even if it was, we’ll be ready.” Michelle gaped at Caitlyn in shock at her captain’s sheepish smile. Did she hear her right? Was the toxins from her lab causing her aphasia? She couldn’t believe that her leader had done a completely reckless move by bringing a man that resembles their nightmares to their base.

“Fine, have 5 men guard the door and stand by in case anything happens as you heal him. Notify me immediately if anything happens.” Caitlyn instructed, making another attempt to soothe Michelle’s worries. Her nurse silently nodded and followed the commotion back to the bay.

Hearing herself, she felt a faint pang in her heart. ‘Why does hearing your name hurt me, even after centuries?’ She sighed, shaking head at that thought as she rolled her back slightly from unknown discomfort. She started heading back to the woods to continue where she left off before she got distracted.

The next day, the man had awakened and was fully healed, however, they discovered that he had no recollection of the previous night.

“Where...Why...” he groans, propping himself up on the medical bed. “Who are you?”

“I’m ...” Caitlyn paused, looking away abashed. “You were passed out and heavily wounded. It was merely the right thing to do.” She shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

His eyes widened in astonishment, staring at her from behind the mask; and without hesitation, he let out an audible chuckle, causing her to glance his way once more.

“What’s so funny?” She raised a brow at him, confused as to why this man found comedy in her heroics, cheeks slightly flushed.

He shook his head, recomposing himself before quietly responding, ‘Nothing’.

The man scrutinised the room and his gaze landed back at Caitlyn. “I’m assuming that you are not here to sell my organs to feed your people. I heard you people were cannibalistic that way.” He smirked, deliberately pushing her buttons. Though, he was unsure of his motives for it, the urge to taunt her continuously sparked a glimmer in his eyes.

Caitlyn's eyes glared sharply at him. “Oh forgive me that my humble abode may be animalistic for your posh looking-”

“I’m just joking, milady. No need for sarcasm and unpleasantries.” He raised his hands up in surrender, flashing a small cheeky grin, but it quickly vanished as he winced slightly from the wound. She rolled her eyes, huffing as she walked towards the man, folding her arms across her chest. “Pardon my lack of manners, sir.” She said, standing next to him by the bed as she continued her sarcastic tone. “Excuse me, I think I left out an introduction earlier. My name is Caitlyn Kalis, the leader of the resistance.” She stuck her hand out in front of him, inviting him into a handshake.

His eyes dropped to her extended hand, seemingly to be pondering about something.

“Raven. Raven Valor of the house of Valor.” He finally spoke up after a moment, shaking her hand politely. “Valor? You mean, the general of The Empire?” She asked, gripping his hand tightly. A knowing smile painted his face, “You don’t have to worry, Captain.”

“I’m a distant cousin but having that name does have some privileges.” He assured her. Caitlyn, growing skeptical of the man, tightened her grip. ‘*Didn’t The House of Valor only produce daughters?*’ She thought as doubts began to echo in her head. Her eyes narrowed as her suspicion grew.

“How about this milady.” He leaned closer. “I’ll do whatever it is you want. Be it, errand boy or decoy, I will be at your beck and call. If I don’t, well, kill me.” Raven gave himself confidently. “Besides,” he added. “The Empire has no use for me.”

Caitlyn stared at him again, somehow, buying his words. Of course, she had nothing to lose. If Raven Valor did betray her, she could just kill him. Easy.

“Can you fight?”

“Top of my class.”

“You’re hired.” She let go of his hand, making her way towards the entrance.

“What?” He stared at her in disbelief, eyes wide, hand stuck midair.

“Raven Valor, you,” Caitlyn pointed. “Will be my second sword. You will fight beside me and make sure no one ever lays a finger on me.” She declared, turning around to look at the startled man. “You think you can handle that?” She challenged, smirking confidently.

Valor huffed, mirroring her enthusiasm. “Be careful *sweetheart*, you’ll thank me later.” accepting the challenge.

From then on, Caitlyn and Raven fought side by side, acting as if they were one as they demolished the soldiers from The Empire, with a marriage of his skills and her strength. Years had gone by and their bond had gotten stronger as the flames on the battlefield grew hotter. So were the flames in their hearts. Though, there were times Caitlyn had felt that Raven felt too familiar. As if she knew him before the war. The way he manoeuvres during battle and his prediction towards her moves to match with her felt too familiar. It was as if he was him. Without seeing his face, she could only depend on giving him the benefit of the doubt as during those years, not once had he attempted to hurt her nor her people. Though Raven had proven to be quite friendly and capable, always proving her judgements wrong, yet Caitlyn couldn't help but feel a tinge of worry over her perception towards the man. She had long recognized him as her partner but it was because they worked too well together that made her palms sweat and heart weary.

That was, until, one day, Caitlyn had succeeded in stealing a few crates of weapons from The Empire's cargo ships to help supply her army. However, she managed to sustain some injuries, dislocating her shoulder in the process. As soon as they rode their horses back to base, she immediately strode towards her tent to treat her wound. She could feel the searing pain of her shoulder

intensely, aching throughout the journey back, which may not have been a good idea as each gallop her horse took, the sharper the pain grew. Crashing into her study, cold sweat dripped as shallow pants began escaping her mouth, she grabbed a cloth that had been laying on her desk and stuffed it in her mouth, muffling any noise that she may release. There was no way she could allow her pain to be heard by her soldiers. She lifted her dislocated arm over her head, placing it at the back of her neck, reaching for her opposite shoulder. ‘1...2...’ she mentally prepared herself as she yanked her arm in agony using the other to pop her shoulder back in place.

‘I’m never doing that again.’ Caitlyn groaned, removing the cloth while lowering both hands. Exhausted from everything, she slumped down in her chair, grabbing her notebook from the drawer of her desk. Though she felt completely wiped, she needed to record the additions towards the armoury. She sighed as the numbers couldn’t amount up to the goal she had in mind. *‘Three crates short. If we head for the eastern camp in two days, then maybe-’* a knock interrupted her thoughts.

“Come in.” She called out faintly, sluggishly propping herself up.

“Heard about your arm,” Raven gently pushed through the door, entering with a drink in his hand. “Thought you might need this,” he offered, smiling slightly as he passed

a cup of water to her. She shot him a smile. “Please tell me that's mead. It's better than whatever elixir Michelle coughs up from her lab.” She cried jokingly, extending her hand out for the cup.

“You do know alcohol can't solve everything right?” He chuckled, handing the drink to her. “Mmmhm, sure.” She quipped jokingly, accepting the drink.

“Being chewed out by Michelle for a whole evening is not part of my agenda after that one time we got drunk celebrating our victory of taking over one of The Empire's bases.” He rolled his eyes, remembering the time the head nurse scolded them while mending a harsh hangover.

“Well, we did go quite overboard with chugging down imperial grade liquor in less than a tick.” She shook her head at the memory as she hurriedly gulped the contents within the cup. As the cool liquid trickled down her throat, a bitter sensation stung her tongue. Her eyes widened as she coughed uncontrollably.

“I agree. We do make a mean drink.” Raven smiled smugly, tilting his head tauntingly as he watched Caitlyn struggle in her seat. Her chest clenched achingly as tears threatened to leave her eyes. Clutching her chest with one hand, attempting to steadily stand up with the other, her knees buckled. Her vision began to blur. She fell to the

ground, gasping for air— this time trying to steady herself on the ground using her hands. She looked up as the hazy silhouette stepped closer to her, kneeling down beside, saying nothing.

Her fingers instinctively reached down, searching for the knife at her belt. Before she could graze her hilt, her vision drowned as her body slumped motionless on the ground.

Caitlyn gasped as she awoke from her unconsciousness, frantically looking around in panic. An intense migraine tormented her.

Confusion echoed through her head as she tried to grasp what had happened to her. Pushing herself to a seated position, Caitlyn groggily sat up, knees curled besides her. She glanced around, scanning her environment.

‘*Carpet?*’ She questioned, lifting her eyes off the ground. The room was gigantic, built with dark deep slated stones; candles were placed around the room, lighting it up temporarily. Her eyes widened as she realized the wick had been burned and melted off half of the candle. ‘*Crap, I’ve been out for at least 12 hours.*’ She cursed. Worry settled as she was afraid that something may have happened to her people. Without her protecting them, how long could they hold out. Unless with her right hand-

Caitlyn paused with her thoughts, the gears in her head were connecting the dots. Her eyes burned with newfound anger as she frowned, “That backstabbing bast-”

“Ahem.” A cough came from behind her.

Her body froze, not wanting to turn around to meet the gaze of the owner of the voice. She could recognize him anywhere, everywhere—even in a room full of people.

“Hello there, Cait.”

Caitlyn begrudgingly turned around, fighting the urge to hold resistance in believing, yet her eyes needed to see it for herself. Her gaze shifted slowly as her lens met the man she once believed had a future with, but now looked like a stranger to her, sitting on a leather throne. The fury she felt before she slipped out of her consciousness came back, flooding her head. Her heart pumped as fiery tears formed at the edge of her eyes.

“You *bastard!*” Her voice reverberated through the four walls that surrounded them, as her body trembled controllably. Her violet eyes daggered into his, clenching her hands into fists. She seethed in disbelief, as if her body was lit on fire from her pits of rage. Waves of betrayal and disappointment washed over her, bile pooling in the base of her throat.

He chuckled, lifting himself off the throne. “You should’ve known, Caitlyn”. He huffed, walking towards her. He leaned forward, grabbing her the collar, bringing her face close as he glared into her eyes. “IT WAS BECAUSE OF YOUR FOOLISHNESS THAT BROUGHT YOU HERE!”

Caitlyn knew the moment he revealed his identity to her — no, she knew the moment she found him laying half-dead in the forest. In the back of her mind, there were doubts of his identity but she shook it off, living in her state of denial because of her reckless trust in him. He was her life but fate was far from fair. A man who hid his face and name from the world— a world different from hers. His fingers brushed against the edges of the mask, dropping the mask as it clattered onto the ground, leaving a dreaded echo as it hit the floor. He looked up at her, revealing the face of the enemy as his cold crimson eyes stared at her.

Maybe it was her mind playing tricks on her but she swore she saw a flash of guilt glinting within his eyes as he studied her face. Her vision blurred once again with raging anger as her fists began to tighten, knuckles turning white.

With great strength, she attacked him immediately. Grabbing his neck and pinning him against the ground, throwing hit after hit from the rage clouding her mind

and vision. She honestly didn't know whether she was more furious at her own naivety or his betrayal—the lines seemed to blur ever so slightly. He tried to fight her off without hurting her as he dodged her punches and pushed her off of him.

As she fell to the ground, she grabbed his sword by his belt. The sound of clanking then filled the room as they clashed their swords against one another.

"You don't want to do this." He backed as she thrust her sword towards him. They were engaged in a battle of clashing swords and emotions, a cruel yet passionate dance of fire and ice as two opposing souls fight between their conflicting feelings and their duty towards their country. Their responsibilities weighed heavily on their shoulders—abandon their mission or their love for one another.

"Enough commander! This has to stop!" He pleaded as he repeatedly deflected her harsh hits. "I'll stop when you end this god forsaken war you raged on us." With every passing moment, her moves became more and more aggressive. "Stand down Black Mask. Any move you make can and will be taken as a death order," she steeled her resolve as her attacks grew in strength.

"You know I can't!" He flung her prying grip away from him, maintaining a safe distance once more.

“Yes. You. CAN!” She lunged at him with her sword, aiming her blade to his neck. Emphasizing each word at each heavy attack she thrust.

“No. I. CAN’T!” He caught and spun her, slamming her against the wall as his hand pinned her arms above her head as his blade leaned against her neck without making a mark.

They stared at each other, feeling each other’s heavy breaths, eyes bearing into one another. Her fingers gripped her sword tightly as he held his sword against her neck. They were in the midst of an eternal battle. For countless lifetimes, Caitlyn knew in every century, every universe, she’d fall for the same scarlet eyes again and again, without once considering escaping from the shackles that chained her— maybe deep down, she didn’t want to.

“You lied to me.” She seethed.

“I did.”

“You poisoned me.”

“I... did.” He hesitated. A truth that he was ashamed to admit.

“You promised me an end, Ren. YOU PROMISED

ME!” Tears began to trickle down as she could no longer contain her posture.

“I KNOW!” He exclaimed as he removed his grip on her arms, dropping his sword as he stared deeply into her eyes, pleading for her to believe him. Yet, the pair of violet eyes in front of him had been clouded with years of resentment and trauma.

“I just want to end this carnage.” She begged as she lowered her sword. Her gaze stared back into his, pleading with him to fulfil his promise.

“And you think I don’t?” he scoffed sarcastically. “*He* has me in his grasp, Caitlyn. For years, how many times have I proven to you that I cannot go against *that man* or shall I spell it out FOR you.” He huffed as he crossed his arms.

He had no choice. Ren was forced into a blood bind with his master, making him obey every order he received from *him*. Ren, too, was tired of the bloodshed he had witnessed. All he wanted was to be free but he couldn’t do that until the time was right. As a Lord of The Empire, he had subjects to deal with and he couldn’t risk them in danger. He believed that the moment his plans were secured, he would undoubtedly go after the emperor. However, to Caitlyn, Ren had waited too long and immediate force was necessary.

Caitlyn glared at him. “The lies of a soldier.” She barked, lifting her sword at him again.

“The delusions of a dreamer!” He argued, gripping his sword tighter.

“That’s it? You’re just going to leave this all behind and let more innocent people die?” Caitlyn grew tired at their banter as it was getting nowhere. She knew the longer they waited, the more people were going to lose their lives. She could not allow more bloodshed on her people as her heart ached at the thought of more blood on her hands.

“Caitlyn-” he attempted to reason.

“You promised to end this misery together, Ren. How many more of MY people have to bleed, how many more HOMES must be burned because of your selfish desire?” Her voice cracked as a lump was forming in the back of her throat, suppressing her true feelings as she reminded him.

“Selfish desire?” He scoffed. “The only selfish desire I bear is for you to join me and together to restore a new and improved order for Katara!” He exclaimed, walking towards her. His eyes beamed, reaching out his hand towards Caitlyn.

“It’s wrong, Ren. Katara was in peace before The

Empire flipped it over.” She whispered softly, reasoning with him as she raised her sword. In Caitlyn’s eyes, the planet had been fine as everyone was happy during the reign of the King and Queen.

It was The Empire who selfishly took control, overthrowing her leaders, bringing darkness to loom over her people. Caitlyn only had one dream and she swore to live by it—to bring back the freedom and justice the people deserve. Even if she had to go against him, the man she loved so dearly, her mission was clear and no one could stop her from reaching her dream.

He stared at her, opening windows to his soul as pain reflected in his eyes. He knew that she would never choose him yet he made a choice to cling onto a piece of hope that she would change her mind, or would at least show hesitation in her decision. At least. At the very least, Ren could find peace in that. But no. In the end, she chose her people and left him in the dark. Where there was trust, betrayal would follow; and both of them understood this well.

“Well. If you are not with me, then you are my enemy.” His eyes darkened, stepping back, as he moved his sword to an offensive position, allowing her space to fight him.

“I will do as I must for the rebellion. For my people.” She

declared, mirroring his position.

“Under different circumstances,” his voice lowered. “Things might’ve turned out better for us, but you leave me with no choice. I will end things here and now. Forgive me.” Those crimson eyes darkened as he prepared to lunge.

“You were always better at ending things anyway.”

Once again, they charged towards each other, continuing the eternal war despite their efforts to end it. They swore to never raise their swords against one another, once upon a time, yet now with sparks flying as blades collided, the promise they made towards each other drifted with the wind together with their unwavering resolve.

Writer's Biography

Ying, a young novice writer, aspires to further improve her writing, in hopes of bringing her wildest imaginations to life, on paper, for the world to enjoy. Though she may be just a mere student who has layers of generational trauma to unpack, Ying embarks on a journey to turn her jagged roads into smooth swirls, writing with 7 cups of coffee on 3 hours of sleep over the past week. Nonetheless, she craves challenges and emotionally constipated leads who save the day. In this, Ying attempts to write out of her comfort zone, carving masks out of belief and love, using the fine line of right and wrong, and good and evil.

At What Cost

by Shaid Shaqqiq

Preamble

We make choices with the best intentions, driven by hope to overcome challenges. We aim to be heroes, proving our worth. Yet, we often overlook the chaos we unleash. Follow Yuno as he confronts this harsh truth—in a world overrun by the undead.

With every swing of Yuno's hatchet, branches cracked and snapped. He smiled at the sound his weapon made, an airy whistle as the blade sliced through the air before biting down deep into hard wood. Collecting enough branches for a fire, Yuno caught a glint of light in the periphery of his vision. A cluster of walnuts hanging deliciously in the canopy, bright green and rain-speckled. Yuno angled himself on top of a boulder. His hatchet above his head, he flung it with the might of a thousand armies, and it flew exactly like how he had envisioned. There was a satisfying thud and the rustling of leaves.

Gotcha.

Henry chuckled. "Dude." He deposited the walnuts in the pocket of his small sling bag. "This is why we all love you."

"Can't wait till you all start hating me. This stuff's getting boring. Besides, I can't catch a whole buck like you." Yuno really couldn't. Skilled as he was as a forager, every chance he got to catch a buck or deer or boar or really, any animal that was massive and stupid-sensitive to the slightest sound, would end with it scurrying off. Yuno would watch, enraged and embarrassed by his loss.

"Never letting that go, huh? Chill, man, you'll get one. Your time will come." Henry had said this a lot, three

times to be exact. The same amount of times he'd captured a buck or other big animal. Three! Yuno was speechless and amazed. And a little envious. What with it only being Henry's first few days in mastering the art of scavenging. He was a fighter, still one, seeking to expand his skills.

"Currants." Henry was pointing at a bush with a smug smile.

Yuno rolled his eyes playfully. "Good eye." Within seconds, he stripped the succulent red berries off their stems. "An oak tree's just up ahead. Wanna check for hens... Hen?" Henry laughed. One might ponder the correlation between chickens and a tree, but it wasn't the kind of hens that would first come to mind. Standing in front of the towering oak tree, the boys saw, hugged by two giant outgrowing tap roots, mushrooms with their proud, blossomed rosette fonds. Henry laughed again. Hen-of-the-woods became a running joke for its name. Maitake wasn't all that funny anyway.

While Henry plucked out the hens, Yuno recalled today's finds: wood, metal scraps salvaged from a lone pickup truck, five boxes of revolver ammo and first aid supplies from an abandoned campsite, the walnuts, other kinds of nuts, currants, and now, the dearly beloved buck. Reaching out to lend a hand, Yuno noticed claw marks

on his sleeve. He froze. Remembering. Replaying. Squirming. He would have died hunting down that buck. Have his arm nearly torn off. Mauled. Not by the buck, but by... it. Henry became his hero, driving his bowie knife into its slushy brain, thick red gushing out. Yuno could have fought back. Shake off the paralysis. Shake off seeing his mother's face—

“Yuno.”

Yuno blinked. The mushrooms had been cut clean.

Henry took his eyes off Yuno's sleeve, his lips a thin line. Worry creased his brows. “Let's head back. Get some rest and have dinner with the gang.”

“I think we can squeeze in a bit more resourcing.”

“Nah. We don't wanna go off too far. Remember, we got that big boy to carry back.” Henry gestured to the direction of where they left the buck.

Yuno silently nodded. It was getting a little dark too, which he'd just realised.

The boys returned to the carcass. Thankfully, it was left untouched, save for a few pesky bugs that they waved away. The buck laid on a large tarpaulin that Henry

found. With Yuno on one end of the sheet and Henry on the other, they lugged the bulky thing back to their people.

Henry was bothered by the lingering silence from Yuno. It happened often after near-death experiences with the undead. He knew what the younger boy was thinking about—or, rather, grieving about. Attempting to distract him, Henry stifled a smirk and said, “So, at the river yesterday...”

“Oh, here we go,” Yuno deadpanned.

“What tacky romance movie crap were you two acting out? Splashing around and giggling like freaking kids?”

Yuno tripped on a rock trying to explain himself in embarrassed stutters. Henry caught him, his laugh growing louder.

“Now, I know you missed out on prom.” Henry kicked away some twigs on his path. “But you better not let me catch you guys slow dancing under the stars all of a sudden.” Henry braced himself for a playful but potent punch, but there was none. Unless Yuno was saving it for a deadly surprise attack.

Yuno grimaced, but responded, “Why? Too shy to join?”

“Sure, man. If ya want me to.”

“Bug off,” grunted Yuno. “Let’s hurry up. This thing’s getting heavier by the minute.”

And for the remainder of their journey, the boys talked about their group’s plan to relocate once again within the month. To find somewhere more secure, preferably less forest this time. Like clockwork, they would battle the undead again. The living too, if necessary. And hopefully be one step closer to reaching New Gardens Quay, taking their survival on water next. Henry snickered, “And bam, you and Lia endgame—Ack!” There it was. The surprise attack.

The view from lying in Yuno’s hammock wasn’t at all pretty. Anyone who lay in it had the underside of a lookout tower cabin staring straight at them. To watch the stars or get lost in the drab night sky, the person needed to poke their head out, reaching out the edge of the cabin platform. Very inconvenient, but Yuno could care less. It beat sleeping up in the cabin with two families—one two-parent and the other with a single mother. Oh, and Lia with her little sister Skylar. Those requiring utmost safety stayed up there. How about Yuno? He demanded to stay below with Henry and the other adults,

including the group leader.

Yuno's eyes were wide open tonight. No amount of grilled venison in his stomach could send him into a food coma. He desperately needed it. To stop that near fatal encounter looping in his mind. Yuno thought that waking up in cold sweat from a nightmare seemed better than staying awake from a looping memory. How that zombie lunged at him, snarling and ready to feast. This time, he wasn't seeing his mother's face. It was his two brothers. Their faces mashed into one. Yuno's breath quickened.

"Hey, hey, you're okay. C'mon, deep breath," Henry hushly said.

Yuno inhaled. Exhaled. Inhaled again. Then exhaled again. "Sorry."

"Gotta stop saying that."

"Right. Sorry. I—Forget it."

Henry returned to his book, his small flashlight shone on a page. His lower half was snug in his sleeping bag, while his upper body against the tower's wooden support beam, where Yuno had secured one end of his hammock.

"I'm ready," Yuno said, interrupting the chorus of

crickets and cicadas that almost lulled Henry to sleep. “To fight, I mean. Can you train me? We have a more private space now, bigger too, so that’s cool.” Over dinner, the group had unanimously agreed upon a warehouse situated beyond the forest, past a town. Several group members—some scouts and a few fighters—were already there to keep the coast clear for when Yuno, Henry, and the rest arrived.

“Is that even a question?” Henry snuggled deep into his sleeping bag. He had set aside his book and was looking up at, well, the bottom of the tower. He yawned. “Twenty-five push-ups before every lesson though.”

“Ha-ha.” Ten was Yuno’s maximum.

“Make that thirty.” Henry softly chuckled hearing Yuno grunt.

“...I don’t always have to be the resource guy, you know? I can be in the front lines. I can save somebody. I’ll do more good for all of us.”

“Being the resource guy is just as important, Yuno.” Henry began slurring his words. “Thanks to you, we’re always full of supplies.”

“You’ll continue that.”

“I’m flattered.”

“So what’s first on our training agenda? Shooting?” Yuno always wanted to get his hands on a gun.

“*Handling.*”

“Uh, fun.”

“Sure will be.”

“A gun?”

Henry had fallen asleep. Yuno’s eyelids were starting to feel heavy, and he, too, let out a yawn. He drifted off not long after, drowning out nature’s sounds.

Until he had to do a number one near some bush. On his way back, Yuno stopped, catching a figure descending the last few rungs of a rope ladder. He had seen the ladder rolled up in the tower’s emergency chest. The moonlit sky made it easy to discern who it was. He recognised that high ponytail anywhere. Yuno was sure that Lia didn’t need to go to the bathroom. She would use the normal steps for that.

“What are you doing?” Yuno approached her.

Lia cursed, looking around. “Just... go back to sleep, Yuno. Please.”

“What’s wrong?” He leaned closer and noticed her wet eyes. “Lia, what happened?” But Lia had dashed straight into the forest.

Yuno’s level of concern penetrated the exosphere. Rarely did Lia react that way. So, he ran after her, berating himself along the way for not bringing his flashlight, since stumbling on the wet and muddy forest ground slowed him down. Still, he persisted, never once letting Lia out of his sight. Yuno found himself leaping over boulders and passing a creek. How far was Lia running? Where to? She headed in one direction, so Yuno thought she knew. His legs were turning into rubber, the air in his lungs hot. His marathon came to a halt when uneven earth turned into asphalt scraping beneath his godforsaken slippered feet. (Who would have thought he’d be running at night anyway?) That didn’t faze him, though.

It was a waste dump of an A&W restaurant that did. He took in the unfortunate chaos that had uglified its exterior, one that would have been a modern-retro look with stark orange and brown and blinding neon lights that curved every edge. He could reminisce about the good times in a place like this. Big burgers, salty fries, a cold, tall glass of foamy root beer float.

But the yank of his arm stopped him in time. His view was now all bush.

Catching their breaths, Yuno and Lia stared at one another. One glared while the other begged for an explanation.

“Skylar’s in there.” Lia looked up at the restaurant. “I need you to wait here. Wait until I get her out. We go back, and you don’t say anything to anyone. Not even my dad.”

Disgruntled moans overrode the night’s peace. Up ahead, three undeads had wandered in from behind the restaurant.

“I’ll help,” Yuno said.

“No.”

Yuno wanted to tell her that he had his pocket knife. It seemed stupid. He could practically hear the crossbow strapped around Lia’s body cackling at him.

“I can do this alone,” she told him. “You’ll hurt yourself and I don’t want that.”

Yuno was quiet. Was he that easily hurt? Obviously. He

sucked. Looking back at the still wandering zombies, he found a rusted pipe lying near them. A surge of adrenaline pumped in his veins. He bolted for it, wincing at the groans coming his way.

Alas, arrows whistled by the moment he swiped the pipe. They pierced into the three heads flawlessly. Like heavyweights, the bodies fell. Lia caught up with him.

“We’ll find her quicker if we do it together,” Yuno tried to persuade. Not even a word from Lia.

They were met with more zombies entering the restaurant but Lia’s arrows had rid them all of their snarls that grated the ears of the living. Yuno took his chance when another one appeared, yet there was no swing. His eyes bore into greyed irises, bloodied and haunting. He wouldn’t move. Lia robbed his target eventually, which he tried not to get annoyed over.

“How do you know she’s here?”

Lia began scouring every booth. Yuno did the same. “Checked the map and this is the closest place to us. If she’s not here...” She sighed. “I’ll still find her. You go back, and you all move to the warehouse the next morning. Don’t worry about me.” She fumbled with the necklace hanging around her neck. Yuno remembered

how she had almost lost it. She refused to continue her journey that day despite the group's pleas. Honestly, Yuno wouldn't either. The necklace belonged to Lia's mother.

"She wouldn't go off too far at a time like this. What are the chances that she's here, right?" Yuno said.

"Right."

"Now, I'll take the kitchen, and you go upstairs."

Lia overtook him on his way to the kitchen door. "Nice try, but you stick with me."

"Just give me a chance."

"I did! And you could barely take that dead meat out a while ago. I doubt that pipe's going to last long either. Probably a few whacks and you're dead."

Sometimes, Yuno forgot how horribly, God-awfully direct she could be. But it was what he liked about her. She spat facts people were afraid to admit. People like him.

"I'm not going to die," he said.

“Don’t be a hero, Yuno. Not... not right now.”

“Then when?” Yuno was blocking the door with his body. He hated that she hesitated to answer.

“Please, for me, don’t make this difficult.” Lia’s face softened under the wash of the moonlight pouring through the broken restaurant windows.

Yuno was quick to avert his eyes, to stop all the churning in his stomach and all the fluttering in his chest. That and to stand his ground, of course.

“Fine,” Lia resigned, already walking towards the stairs.

“I’ll be quick.”

The very idea of himself taking the kitchen was a brilliant one, Yuno thought. He could find materials to fashion a better weapon. Maybe embed his pocket knife with the pipe. The kitchen was hidden from the outside by a wall, unlike other fast food restaurants that had it on full display for customers to witness the havoc of a shift. His first thought was to find a light switch, but surely, the lights wouldn’t work in a rundown trash site like this. Nevertheless, he felt for a switch and flicked it. An LED light shone to reveal a cutting station. There lying conveniently on a cutting board was a butcher knife. It

was his now. A pipe in his left hand and a knife in his right, he chose to believe that he was unstoppable. Yuno squinted through the darkness, scanning the vicinity and wondering where a child would even hide in. Would she even be in here? The distinct, lingering scent of urine and dung—human or animal, no one would know—rust, and sewage corroded Yuno’s nostrils.

Light glinted off the knife blade and grazed the surface of what appeared to be a steel door. Yuno angled his knife and spotted a lever handle. He approached it. He reckoned it was a walk-in freezer. He ran his hand on the wall and his nails scratched on glass. It must be a thermometer. And it was the minute yellow light flashed on it, startling Yuno. It came from Lia’s flashlight.

“She’s not up there,” she whispered.

No way Skylar could possibly live inside the freezer, but it was worth the check. Panic constricted Yuno’s throat as he conjured the worst image ever upon peeking inside. Lia’s light illuminated the room.

Nada. Rotten meat, and that was all.

Yuno shut the freezer. “We’ll keep searching.”

They searched the rather sprawling kitchen. The sound of

a guttural growl came from outside the kitchen. Growls, in fact. There were several.

Lia ignored them, and instead casted her light on a grimy brass plaque hung on a door. The restaurant's bear mascot was on it, smiling and holding with its furry paws a sign in bold letters: Manager's Office. Within seconds, the two raided the office. The kitchen door swung open. Lia aimed and took an undead down. Another entered, one more tagging from behind. "Is she here?!"

Yuno shook his head.

They had to get out.

The backdoor Lia found wouldn't budge, as if something heavy was blocking from the other side. Through the groans and growls was their last resort. Chills spread across Yuno's back as he tightened his grip on his two weapons.

A zombie sprang toward him.

Yuno's feet were glued to the ground. Bile nestled in his throat, Yuno took in such hideous features. Mouldering yellow teeth that had bits stuck everywhere and peeling skin. Suddenly, it all morphed into a face so familiar. His father's.

Now, he had seen his whole family. They were back to haunt him. Haunt him for his failure when the world began to end. He couldn't save them.

Could he save himself? He should. He must.

And he will.

Yuno hacked the zombie across the face with the butcher knife. That was a start. He wouldn't wither. Nor would he shrivel. The things were just wonky beings. Dead, empty bodies. Jaw clenched, he imagined the zombies as branches, slashing them. He would use the pipe to shove them back.

Reaching the foyer, undead after undead clawed their way inside the restaurant. Yuno and Lia finished them off. "Behind you!" Lia yelled. Yuno tackled one, but his hand had slipped from the knife as it sunk in its brain. It was too late for him to retrieve it when Lia pulled him away. "There will be too many, and I'm running out of arrows. We have to get out of here!"

"But—But Skylar?"

She didn't answer.

Yuno and Lia fought their way out of the restaurant, and as they were about to bolt, a loud shriek behind the restaurant jolted them. They ran to it and found

themselves at the restaurant's loading dock. Skylar had her back pressed against a dumpster that blocked the door Lia had tried to open from the kitchen. An undead got her too late. Yuno had bashed its brain dead, scooping up Skylar on his shoulders then.

“We have to go from the front,” Lia instructed, reloading her crossbow. “Go straight and don't look back. Go, go!”

Back in front was a deafening horde ready to rip them limb by limb. Lia had no other choice but to use up all that remained of her arrows to clear a path. Yuno, on the other hand, went to town with the whacking. Enough to escape, the three of them charged forward at breakneck speed.

But Lia's scream tore through the night. An arm had hauled her by the hair.

More undead arrived in the scene. Yuno's rusted pipe snapped with a final hit. Lia swung her crossbow to defend herself.

To no avail.

The horde had swallowed her.

Yuno didn't look back since then and ran and ran and

ran. “Watch out for branches, Sky!” He ducked a little. Soon, towering and thriving fauna brushed their bodies. He was back in the forest, going nowhere but straight, the zombie chase relentless behind him.

Skylar’s fingernails dug into his chest moments later. She pointed at a wide hole under a rotting tree. It was big enough to fit them. He slid in right after Skylar, pulling along thick moss and roots, which hung over the opening and sliced moonlight into fine lines. They provided little view of the outside and inside. Yuno and Skylar stiffened at the moans and shuffles swelling in volume. Once they assured themselves that the agonising wait could come to an end, Yuno climbed out of the hole. He surveyed the area for good measure and gestured to Skylar to come up.

Guilt and shame bore down on Yuno like the crushing weight of a collapsing mountain when Skylar began sobbing. His first instinct was to wrap her in a hug. He did not expect her to push him away.

“I want Lia. You made Lia gone.” Skylar glowered with glassy eyes. “Lia gone! Lia gone!”

“I... I couldn’t save her.”

“Lia gone!”

She would not have understood.

Skylar reached into her bag. It was glittering, purple, and in the shape of a Care Bear. Henry had picked it out for her as a birthday present when the group made a quick pit stop over at a strip mall. What she had in her hand made Yuno pale. A hunting knife. She held it out, taking small steps towards him, as it trembled in her hand.

“Why do you have that, Sky? What were you doing out at night?”

She sniffed her drooping snot. “I saw mama. I want save mama.” Yuno knew her and Lia’s mother had died from being eaten. That was one thing Yuno and Lia shared in common. “Now no more mama and Lia!” She wailed, tears streaming endlessly and staining her shirt.

Now Yuno’s cheeks were wet. “I’m sorry, Skylar. I’m sorry.” Yuno wanted to grab the knife away from her, every muscle in him clenched. Despite the pain he felt from the scratches and marks all over his arm, the knife hurt more as it sank into his foot.

He was on the ground. No scream escaped his lips. He held it in, biting his tongue so hard that he thought he tasted metal.

Realising what she had done, Skylar fled, leaving her bag.

This was what he got for playing the hero. Life had its own plans no matter how good his intentions were. Were they good or were they reckless? Yuno couldn't decide. He agreed to rescue Skylar but lost her. He was stubborn and fought alongside Lia but lost her as well. What if he had listened to Lia and went back to sleep? Something would have happened to her. But something happened even when he didn't go to sleep. Exhausted and frustrated, he remained on the grass and closed his eyes. Let the undead have him. Whatever.

Yuno heard footsteps. "What the hell! What happened?" Henry knelt in front of him. Quickly, others huddled around, asking the same. They quieted down when a burly man appeared, all out of breath.

Rhett, the leader of the group.

"Where are they, Yuno? Where are my daughters?"

And a father who was now alone.

Writer's Biography

Shaid Shaqqiq crafts young adult fiction featuring magic, fairy tales, high school drama, and occasionally, zombies. He even blends these elements for crazy twists! His first fantasy short story *Flowers* was published by UCSI University. Often, it's world off and earbuds in as he daydreams about scenarios and characters for future stories.

**Dearly Beloved: A Collection of Ghost
Stories from Those Around Me**
by Sheryl

Preamble

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in remembrance of those who have left our earthly home and passed on to the next life. Those who walked with us, laughed with us, cried with us and loved us.”

“We especially remember those who were not yet ready to leave us and who still walk amongst us from within the shadows, those who try with all their might to be seen or heard by us.”

‘Dearly Beloved’ is a play on words of the commonly heard beginning of eulogies. A four-story collection inspired by encounters with those from beyond the grave; reworked and kept alive through the tales from those that I call my dearly beloved.

The Accident

“No one would have been able to tell at first glance that my Granduncle Bennett was the most feared assistant superintendent in the police force back in the day. The way he softly spoke and the way his eyes kindly crinkled made it almost impossible to believe he was such. However, as a police officer he had his fair share of stories from the field. Policemen must always be ready to face any dangerous encounter thrown at them. But what they don’t always prepare for are encounters with those from the cryptid realm.”

“Tuan¹, we’re about to leave.”

The sharp voice snapped Bennett out of his focused gaze at the window. He turned to see two corporals standing in his office doorway, jackets on and briefcases in hand. Bennett glanced at his watch—three minutes past 10 pm. He nodded at them in approval and they saluted before leaving, each wondering out loud what their wives had made for dinner. Bennett glanced out the window again. His home was somewhere among the rooftops below, though he couldn’t tell which. He too, then found himself lost in thought about what dinner his wife had prepared.

He rose, ignoring the abandoned paperwork, and gathered his things. The day had been tiring—fines, disputes, accidents, welfare checks—but upper management had left him buried in paperwork instead. Bennett reached for his jacket and slung it over his arm.

¹Tuan - formality used to address males in higher power

He headed towards the doorway and switched off the lights with a soft click.

He was ready to head home.

Riiinnnggg!

Bennett whirled around and stared at the phone on his desk. The rings blared throughout his silent office.

He glanced around and noticed the officers working the night shift staring at him. It would not be a good impression to leave without picking up a call, especially one made directly to his desk. Pinching his eyebrows, he made his way back into the dark office.

“Bennett speaking.” He said rather firmly into the receiver.

He recognized the voice on the other end—one of his best sergeants. There was a trace of puzzlement in the sergeant’s tone, the kind Bennett usually heard from suspects unsure of their own stories. He didn’t dwell on it, however. The sergeant requested his presence at the hospital immediately. Two new officers had been in an accident, and they needed Bennett there to take their statement.

“I’m on my way,” Bennett replied and cut the call. As he strode to his motorcycle, he stole a quick glance at his

watch—10:15 PM. If he hurried, he could take their statement and still make it home for dinner. Snapping on his helmet, he sped toward the hospital. This was routine. He had taken countless statements before. This would be no different.

The hospital room wasn't hard to find, at least not with the hallway filled with blue clad officers. They saluted Bennett as he passed. Inside, the sergeant sat by the occupied bed. The other was empty. The driver was in surgery and wouldn't be out for another hour. That was fine. One officer was enough.

But something was off about the officer in bed.

The department's newest recruit laid in the bed, a stark contrast to the man Bennett knew. He was supposed to be stoic, the kind of man who handled house calls and criminal confrontations without so much as a flinch. Yet here, wrapped up to his nose in a hospital blanket, was a wide-eyed, trembling youth. His gaze darted around the room, scanning for something- or perhaps someone- his colleagues couldn't see.

Bennett sat on the empty bed, fishing a pad of paper and a pen from his pocket. The officer avoided his eyes. Classic body language, someone unwilling to talk. Bennett tapped the coils of his notepad, raising an eyebrow as he did. The officer finally looked at him, only

to glance away just as fast.

Bennett sighed. The poor kid had just come out of an accident, after all.

“Look, just walk me through what happened before the accident.” He said calmly, hoping it’d get the officer to relax.

The officer hesitated. “*Tuan*, with all due respect... my story won’t be easy to believe.” His voice was barely above a whisper.

“There’s no such thing as a wrong statement—only no statements. You know the rules as well as I do.” Bennett tried again.

The officer sighed and lowered the blanket. Bennett readied his pen as the officer began to speak. Around them, the other policemen listened in silence, curiosity flickering in their eyes.

**

The voice on the other end of the call was raspy and low. Odd, the officers thought. Who would request a welfare check this late at night? Still, they both had elderly relatives of their own. If a senior citizen was in distress, they couldn’t ignore it.

They donned their police caps and alerted the superintendent of their departure. The address given to them led to a small winding road between the trees. As they drove, the officer in the passenger seat eyed the surroundings warily.

“*Bang*²...Are you sure we’re in the right place?” He asked the officer driving.

“That’s what the sign boards say, *Dik*³.” The driver shrugged.

Eventually, the trees parted, revealing a hidden village. Tiny attap houses dotted the woodlands in disarray, their faint interior glows giving away the only signs of life.

“I remember this place,” the driver muttered. “I was here with Abang Shahril a few months back for an arrest.” He went on to recount how they’d pursued a man accused of murder through “*bomoh*⁴” rituals. The suspect had escaped through the back door and dove into the river behind his house. The officers could only watch as his body was dragged away by the currents, only for it to vanish beneath the surface. Despite multiple search attempts, the body was never recovered. The officer in the passenger seat nodded at this tale when the driver suddenly stopped the car. They had arrived.

The house was a wreck. The shingles were missing, the

² Bang - shortened word for ‘abang’ meaning big brother

³ Dik - shortened word for ‘adik’ meaning little sibling

⁴ Bomoh - A Malaysian witch doctor

wood was rotting, and the front door was boarded up. The officers exchanged glances. Was this a joke? They circled the home, but there was no sign of forced entry—no sign of life at all.

Back in their patrol car, they agreed to check with the neighbours. This was proven to not be very helpful as the elderly residents and their young grandchildren did not seem to understand why the *abang polis*⁵ showed up at their doors. With no other leads, they called it off and headed back to the main road.

The car was silent as the officers were weary from the day's shift. The soft hum of the radio filled the silence as they drove, the empty stretch of road extending endlessly before them. It was indeed a silent night. The officer in the passenger seat turned towards the driver to say something when he noticed two yellow gleams from within the jungles they had just come out of. The more he stared, the brighter they became. They were not able to see the glows of the houses from the main road so whatever this was, was pretty close to the main road.

The driver instinctively switched to the lane closer to the trees. And that's when the gleams surged forward, attached to something that leaped onto the windshield.

A humanoid.

⁵ Abang polis - A phrase used to acknowledge policemen as big brothers

The gleams turned out to be the creature's eyes, bulging and yellow with black, hollow pupils. Its bloated face twisted into a gruesome grin, revealing jagged, bloodstained teeth. Its body sprawled across the glass, ribs jutting out beneath translucent skin—some shattered, some shifting unnaturally with every movement. Its blackened nails clawed at the side mirrors.

And then it screamed.

The officers barely had time to react before the creature slammed its head against the windshield, again and again, leaving behind streaks of grey matter and dried blood. The officer in the passenger seat felt a lump in his throat which was what he could only assume was the *karipap*⁶ he had eaten for tea before leaving the station earlier.

“HOLD ON TIGHT!” The driver suddenly roared from beside him, pressing the accelerator and turning the wheel.

The passenger clung desperately to the handrail of the car as it spun violently across the empty road. Tires screeched and the world blurred around them. The creature flew off the car as it spun, and the driver steadied the wheels of the car back to the right of the road and sped off into the night. The road stretched endlessly, despite the speedometer climbing past 80 miles per hour. The men were silent, neither one being able to find their voices.

⁶ Karipap - A Malaysian savory flakey pastry filled with spiced meats and potatoes

“Just drive.” The officer in the passenger seat eventually said within panicked breaths. The driver did not respond but he did step on the accelerator even harder.

Eventually in the distance, they noticed a small, dimly lit shack and someone waving them down. A man in white clothing stood outside the shack, waving at them. His large straw hat obscured his face, but his frantic gestures were unmistakable. The officers hesitated for a moment but eventually pulled over. The car jerked to a stop and the two men could hear nothing but the sounds of their breaths and their hearts hammering in their chest. That humanoid was nothing like they had seen before. They let out small yelps when they heard tapping on the driver’s window only to realize it was the man who had waved them down. It was dark so they couldn’t really make out his features well. The driver rolled down the window.

“Hey you two! What’s got you speeding down the road like that?” The man said in a low, raspy voice.

Still bathed in adrenaline and shock, the drivers did not make eye contact with the man but instead looked beyond him at the leaves in case the humanoid reappeared. “We—” The driver swallowed. “We saw something. Something jumped onto our windshield.” His voice wavered. “It had the most horrifying face.”

A chuckle.

Both officers stiffened. Something about that laugh sent a deep, primal dread down their spines. They both looked at the man. “That's terrible! What kind of face did it have?” He asked, reaching for his hat. The officers looked at each other and both telepathically agreed to not drag out the conversation. The officer in the passenger seat responded with a clipped voice. “We don't know. It's hard to describe. It was too scary.”

The man standing on the side of the road had gone quiet.

“Well.” He chuckled once more as he yanked the hat off. “Why not get a better look at my face again?” He screamed.

The officer's heart's dropped, and their screams tore through the night.

Sirens blared throughout the night as backup officers from the main branch arrived at the scene of distress calls. The car of their colleagues was found crashed in a ditch, exactly where the small lit shack had been.

The Call

“Back in 2018, a new priest had come to serve in my town’s church. Father Carlyle was a bright and jolly priest who everyone loved, including my family. Father Carlyle was not only known for his special prayers of healing and blessings. He was also known for his powerful prayers of protection. Especially protection from those that we may not usually notice walking among us when night falls.”

“Good morning Father Carlyle! That was a wonderful sermon!” a cheery voice rang throughout the church compound. Father Carlyle turned, smiling. "Thank you! I always pray you take something from it— even just a sentence." He shook hands with the parishioner.

The morning sun bathed the church in gold as Mass ended. As always, Father Carlyle would make his way around the church compound, mingling with his fellow parishioners and catching up with them. It was Saturday, and attendance was larger than usual. Some visitors from his previous church had come by, chatting over karipap and coffee from the hospitality ministry.

“Hello, Father.” A small voice called out.

Father Carlyle turned towards the voice and found a well-dressed woman in her 30s. Her hair was slicked back into a neat bun, and she was wearing a brown pantsuit with a

satchel by her hip. She stared at Father Carlyle calmly from behind her horn-rimmed glasses. Father Carlyle grinned even wider. This was a face he hadn't seen in years. "Hello Heather! Fancy seeing you this far away from your workplace." He noted.

"My case was moved to an afternoon slot as my client had transportation issues," Heather replied.

"I suppose the judge wouldn't have been too pleased with that change, considering it's the weekend." Father Carlyle chuckled.

"Well, I'm not too sure about that..." Heather said, her voice trailing off. As she said this, her eyes darted from left to right. A mask of worry fell over her face. Father Carlyle realized that she was not looking at him, but rather behind him. His own face fell too.

"They're behind me, aren't they?" He eventually said, confusing the parishioners standing nearby. Heather silently nodded, her gaze dropping to her shoes. With a sigh, Father Carlyle gestured for her to follow him inside the church.

Heather Xavier is the daughter of a prominent woman from Father Carlyle's previous parish. Years ago, the woman had come to him pleading for him to protect her daughter from nightly terrors plaguing her since they moved into their new home. But after speaking to 17-

year-old Heather, Father Carlyle knew the blessing he had given was only temporary.

Because Heather Xavier could see spirits.

“Most of them just want me to help them, Father. They need someone to finish their unfinished business so they can rest. But when I can’t help them... that’s when they get out of control.” She had confessed this the night of her first blessing. Father Carlyle always found it ironic that Heather went on to study law, helping the living when she couldn’t help the dead.

“Who was behind me this time?” Father Carlyle asked Heather once they sat down in a pew right in front of the altar.

Heather had always seen spirits lingering around him. He had long accepted that his parishioners loved him too much to leave, even after death. He wanted to try helping them himself, but Heather could never see their faces or features. Even after he moved parishes, he always wondered who was standing amidst his other parishioners that he wasn’t able to see. He hadn’t spoken to Heather in a while after she moved to the UK for her studies and got busy as the new recruit of a well-known law firm in the city, far away from Father Carlyle’s small town parish.

"A man in a red button-up shirt and a woman in

traditional Indian clothes," she murmured. Father Carlyle chuckled.

So, basically, every parishioner I've ever met who has passed. He let the thought go, instead watching as Heather finally relaxed. The spirits were not able to follow them into the church.

She soon explained why she had come. The case she was handling involved a construction site where human remains had been found, believed to belong to a worker who had fallen from an unstable beam. The site manager, afraid the news would ruin apartment sales, had secretly buried him rather than report the death. Heather, unfortunately, was the manager's lawyer. The construction site happened to be near her home, and she conducted many interviews with the workers and nearby residents. They all swore the manager was a kind man who treated his workers well. No one could believe he had done such a thing.

"This case is going to be a hard one for me," Heather admitted. "I need a blessing, Father. A blessing to stay strong. And who better to ask than you?" She said with a small smile.

Father Carlyle beamed sheepishly at her praise and nodded at this. He then began his prayer.

When it was over, Heather thanked him and checked her watch—she had to get to work. She bid him goodbye and hurried toward the car park. Father Carlyle waved, then stepped back outside to rejoin his parishioners.

Father Carlyle awoke to the shrill ring of his phone. Groggily, he cracked open an eye and glanced at his phone on the nightstand. The digital clock that sat behind it indicated that it was a little past 3 in the morning. With a tired and rather annoyed groan, he reached for his phone. After a long day filled with Mass, meetings, hospital visits, and house blessings, the last thing he expected was a call at this hour. He squinted at the screen. Heather Xavier.

That woke him up just a little. Curiously, he picked up the call. “Good evening, Heather. A little late for a call, isn’t it?” He asked firmly, sleep still lingering in his bones.

Heather’s voice was calm, composed, yet there was something off, a slight tempo in her words that made him uneasy.

“Hello, Father. Can you pray for me?” She answered.

Father Carlyle was silent.

This was an odd request, at 3am, nonetheless. But knowing Heather, it was another night terror she was having. Who was with her this time? Father Carlyle must have been thinking for too long because Heather's voice broke the silence.

“My case got moved to tomorrow,” she continued, tone cool. “I’m a little worried. I need another blessing, Father.”

Father Carlyle raised an eyebrow. No mention of spirits. No plea for protection. Just a simple blessing. Strange. But Heather had never been one to hide things from him—not when it came to them. If she was being cryptic, then perhaps she truly was just anxious about the case.

Still, something gnawed at him.

“Alright, Heather,” he said finally. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...” He prayed for strength, for discernment, for wisdom in the courtroom. But even as he finished, Heather remained silent. He listened. Her breaths were soft but rapid. Controlled yet uneasy.

Something was wrong.

There was a shakiness that made him believe that there was something else. Or someone else.

Without another word, he began a prayer of protection, a strong one against evil. Against any unseen presences that tormented Heather. The words flowed instinctively, surprising even him. She hadn't requested such a prayer in a long time. Yet, something told him it was needed. Once he was done, Heather finally spoke.

“Thank you, Father.”

Something about the way she said it sent another scary shiver through him. He glanced at the clock—3:58 a.m. Too late for questions. But there were questions. They'd just have to wait until the next time he saw Heather in church. “You're welcome, Heather.”

“Goodnight, Father.”

With a sharp beep, the call ended, leaving an eerie silence in its place. Heather had ended the call herself, which meant that she was fine now. Father Carlyle laid back down and stared up at the ceiling. He still felt the wisps of the shiver from his spine. Was she truly just nervous about her case? Or was something else at play?

Perhaps... she really was just nervous about her court case tomorrow...

—

It was another beautiful Sunday morning after Mass, and

as always, Father Carlyle thrived in the warmth of his parishioners. Rather than draining him, the lively crowd filled him with energy. He greeted everyone, exchanged pleasantries, and listened to their life updates with genuine joy. As the morning bustle died down, he finally sat at a table, ready to indulge in the *thosai*⁷ and *dhal*⁸ breakfast the church had prepared. Just as he was about to take his first bite, a familiar satchel came into view.

“Heather! I wasn’t expecting to see you here. Especially on a Sunday!” He exclaimed out loud.

Heather tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She then sheepishly apologized for calling him so late in the night and thanked him for his prayer. Father Carlyle munched thoughtfully on his thosai while recounting the shiver he had. He swallowed hard and then lowered his voice.

“Heather...was it really just a tough case?” He asked.

Heather stared down at her balled-up fists.

“You could say that...” She replied softly.

“Tell me everything,” Father Carlyle replied.

⁷ Thosai - South Indian wholemeal pancakes

⁸ Dhal - Lentil curry usually eaten with thosai

Heather Xavier was fast asleep when her eyes fluttered open. Her heart pounded violently against her chest. It was the first thing she noticed, how loud her pulse had become.

Everything was silent.

The hum of her air-conditioner? Gone.

The faint ticking of her wall clock? Gone.

Even the distant sounds of the city outside? Vanished.

Something had awakened her. A deep, sickening feeling twisted in her gut when she realized that she may not be alone.

She lifted her head ever so slightly, eyes darting around the room. Even the rustling of her pillow sounded unnervingly loud in the oppressive silence. Has it always been this loud? Or had she simply never noticed before, because the room had never been this still? She scanned the shadows. The corner of her cupboard. The windows. The ceiling.

Especially the ceiling. Once before, she had searched around her room for a presence only to find it crawling above her.

But tonight, nothing.

Maybe it was just the weight of the case pressing on her subconscious. The trial had been brutal. The deceased worker's family had wept openly as the manager sat unfazed, knowing he would likely walk free. The final decision will come today. Maybe the guilt had followed her home. Heather exhaled, ready to roll over and force herself back to sleep.

Creeeeak.

Her desk chair shifted ever so slightly.

Heather froze in bed and dared not move a muscle. She had searched the wrong places. She had forgotten one spot. A blind spot. Her breath hitched as her eyes slowly trailed toward her desk. More specifically, underneath it. The dark silhouette of a man sitting in a fetal position sat under the desk.

It curled into itself, its knees pressed under its chin, arms folded over its knees. It was fairly large and it was almost as if it had squeezed itself underneath her desk. This brought Heather's mind back to the first time she saw the body of the construction worker. The man was big and burly, his corpse stuffed into a small cavity where some bricks were removed and promptly sealed off and hidden thereafter. The position the silhouette sat in was almost

identical to how the man was found.

Was it him?

But Heather was pulled out from her wonder as she noticed something that almost made her throw up.

For the first time, Heather saw the features of a spirit.

The black silhouette had a pair of visible eyes that were watching her.

Its eyes were red and burning.

It blinked. Slowly. Deliberately. The fury in its stare was as thick as tar in the air. She stared at the entity, and it stared back at her. With each blink, she feared the next moment would be the one where it lunged at her. But the entity did not make a sound. It continued to glare angrily at her. Heather's fingers twitched under the sheets, but she dared not move. Dared not blink herself.

It wasn't the guilt that had followed her home. It was a spirit.

Her gaze flickered towards the digital clock on her desk. It was 3 am.

Her eyes flew back down to the underside of the desk. The red eyes of the entity still glowed brightly against its dark shape. But she noticed that now, one hand had left

the silhouette's knee and its long, knobbly, dark fingers curled around the leg of her desk chair like a mist. Her stomach turned, and she almost let out a groan.

She had to act. She would not spend the entire night paralyzed with fear, waiting for it to decide when to move. Closing her eyes, she began to pray. The words flooded her mind like a desperate chant. Powerful prayers—ones her mother had whispered over her as a child and ones Father Carlyle had taught her.

Father Carlyle...

With all her courage, her trembling hand inched out from beneath the sheets. The silhouette's eyes followed her hand. It had stopped blinking this time, as if afraid it'd miss her next move.

The silhouette seemed like it had crept out further from under the desk for she could make out the shape of its shoulders now. She could almost hear the blood roaring in her ears as she plucked her phone off her desk. It felt like lead in her hands. With shaky fingers, she managed to dial the number of Father Carlyle.

—

Father Carlyle dropped his piece of thosai. Every hair on his neck stood on end. His stomach turned and an

unshakable, ice-cold feeling crept up his spine. He even found himself instinctively glancing beneath the tables next to him.

Heather on the other hand, looked bright as a button.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, Father,” she said, amusement lacing her tone. “You should know your prayers always work. The figure disappeared after you finished.”

Father Carlyle exhaled deeply, shaking his head as he picked up the fallen piece of thosai and popped it into his mouth. “So, what are you going to do about this case, Heather?” He asked curiously. If the case did not end fairly, the entity would return.

Again. And again. And again.

Heather glanced at her watch before standing, smoothing out her coat. “I’m going to do the right thing, Father.” With a confident nod, she turned on her heel and strode off.

Father Carlyle watched her go and a silent prayer formed on his lips. He had a feeling she would need it.

The Bicycle

“The Portuguese Settlement in Malacca was no stranger to the tales and dangers of the supernatural. Parents always warned and educated their children with tales of blood-thirsty flying women or men that would kidnap and take them to the other side if they were to play hide-and-seek after dark. Now this all may sound hard to believe, but take my abunyuk⁹’s story into mind. For he had the trajectory of his beliefs changed for good the day he encountered the supernatural in person.”

“And don’t you kids be playing hide and seek after sunset unless you fancy a visit from the *kuruchache*¹⁰!” Arthur’s mother warned his nieces and nephews. Arthur rolled his eyes and set his focus back to his textbook. If he had 20 cents for every time he heard that, he could buy a new bicycle—he needed one after all those mornings peddling his mother’s *kuih*¹¹ and *kanji mungu*¹². His father, catching his scowl, smirked.

“One day, Arthur, you’ll encounter a *kuruchache* yourself. Only then will you take the legends seriously.” His father’s voice boomed.

“Dad, you didn’t even know what a *kuruchache* was until you married Mom. Pretty sure kids in the Philippines still play hide and seek at night.” Arthur shot back, dodging

⁹ Abunyuk - Malaccan Portuguese formality used by children to address a parent’s godfather

¹⁰ Kuruchache - a demon who kidnaps children after dark. He stuffs faeces in their mouths to keep from screaming. His main targets are children playing hide and seek at night

¹¹Kuih - Malaysian pastries

¹² Kanji mungu - sweet green pea porridge

the rag his father tossed in response. Arthur ducked from it and couldn't help but grin, for he knew his father couldn't rebuke his statement.

His mother sighed, picking the rag up. "Stop fighting, you two and stop repeating its name. Do you wish to invite it into our home now?" She said sternly, disappearing into the kitchen. "Oh, come on!" Arthur exclaimed. "There's no such thing as kuruchache or anything of the sort!"

Arthur grew out of believing in the supernatural when he was just 9 years old. That day, he had fallen asleep in a chicken coop during a game of hide and seek. When he woke up, it was already nighttime. Alone in the dark, he had expected the kuruchache to appear. He sat frozen, waiting—nothing. No demon came for him. After his eyes adjusted to the dark, he finally stood up and made his way out of the chicken coop, helping himself to some of the freshly laid eggs there.

He quietly swung the chicken coop door open and discovered something astonishing.

Ever since he was young, he was made to believe that every family in the village hid in their houses after dark and adults had to risk their lives going outside to run nightly errands or to visit friends. However, the village wasn't asleep or hidden in their houses. Adults bustled about, laughing, singing, even playing card games at

folding tables under trees. Everyone was having a grand time and Arthur stared in marvel at the sights. He then heard a familiar voice calling his name. His mother!

“You little-! How dare you stay out this late!” She said, grabbing his arm.

“I fell asleep while playing hide and seek and when I woke up it was all dark.” Arthur explained as his mother yanked his hand in the direction of their home. The lane they walked on took them past the village square.

Lights twinkled in the square, stalls sold cakes and pickled goods, and by the sea, people picnicked and ran with sparklers. Not a single child in sight. The adults stared at little Arthur as he walked past them. He must have been the only child who had ever been out at that time. When his father returned from work, he told him what had happened. The man wagged a finger at him. “You’re lucky the kuruchache didn’t take you. But there won’t be a next time.”

“There won’t be a next time, Dad, because it’s not real. I waited for it. It never came.” He replied rather rudely. He was promptly sent to bed right after receiving a smack from his father. As he rubbed his sore backside, he wondered why his father was so twisted about the supernatural.

Even now, at twenty years old, his father still pushed those stories on him. And Arthur still refused to believe them one bit.

Suddenly, the front door burst open. Arthur's five-year-old niece, Isabelle, stood there, wide-eyed and trembling. "*Mama*¹³! The older cousins joined the neighbourhood kids for hide and seek near the seaside and it's almost sundown!" She exclaimed.

Arthur's mother dropped the rag in the sink and bolted. "Those little *bichu*¹⁴!" she cursed as she ran out. Isabelle remained frozen in the doorway, horror still etched on her face.

Tears welled up in her eyes, then spilled over. Arthur sighed, rising from his seat. He took her small hand and led her to the sofa. "There, there. *Mama* will bring them back. No need to cry now." He wiped her tears away.

"But *baba*¹⁵, what if the *kuruchache* gets them before *Mama* does? What if they can't scream fast enough? What if-" Isabelle started speaking frantically, but Arthur hushed her.

"There isn't a *kuruchache* out there. *Mama* and *Papa* just say that to scare you kids and to get you all back home on time." He said softly, patting her head.

¹³ *Mama* - Some Malaccan Portuguese children will refer to their grandparents as *Papa* and *Mama*

¹⁴ *Bichu* - little insects (usually rice weevils). Also used by Malaccan Portuguese parents as a nickname for naughty children

Isabelle wiped her tears away with her bunched-up fists. “Really?” She said, looking hopeful.

“Don’t listen to your baba. He has no idea what he’s talking about. Your cousins were wrong to play out till sundown. If the kuruchache gets them, they deserve it.” Arthur’s father suddenly said, which made Isabelle start crying again, but this time she was sobbing out loud.

“Dad! How could you?” Arthur said standing up. What a horrible thing to say to a child! Isabelle was practically still a toddler.

“The children need to learn, Arthur. Just because you don’t believe in ghosts, does not mean others have to not believe in them too.” His father said, getting some tissues for the sobbing Isabelle.

Moments later, the door swung open again. A parade of sobbing children filled the sitting room with Arthur’s mother behind them, ranting profusely, which only made them cry harder. Arthur soon learned the cause: on her way to retrieve them, she had picked up a stray slipper and placed it near a fresh pile of cow dung. Then, gathering the guilty children, she presented the scene with ominous authority. The kids had gone pale before bursting into wails.

¹⁵ Baba - formality used to address uncles in Malaccan Portuguese. Can also be used as a term of endearment for younger male cousins, younger brothers or sons

Arthur, frustrated, got up and grabbed his textbooks. “I’m late for my study group with Donovan.” He announced with a twinge of annoyance in his voice. Tomorrow’s exam was important, and he intended to ace it. His notes were neatly packed in a folder, and his textbook was bristling with brightly colored tags, markers for important information.

He patted the crying kids’ heads, kissed his mother on the cheek, and headed for his bicycle. As he secured his books in the basket, his mother stood at the doorway.

“Be careful, will you? And please avoid the tree. Donovan’s house is just past it.” She remarked. Arthur rolled his eyes again. “Mom, will you ever stop being superstitious?” He swung onto his bicycle. “I’m off. Don’t wait for me.” He called over his shoulder as he pedaled away.

The tree.

An ancient willow, older than even his grandmother. The tree was said to have too many spirits residing in it to count. Others believed it was used during the war by the Japanese soldiers to hang the heads of the beheaded. Some even speculated that it was the portal to hell itself. To him, it was just a tree. A perfectly fine tree. A lovely spot to read on warm afternoons. Not that he himself had ever tried to.

The village had an unspoken rule: stay away from the tree after sundown. Even the concrete walkway curved unnaturally around its roots, as if afraid to get too close. People would rather take dark alleyways than walk beneath its boughs. Arthur, however, had no such fears. He rode straight down the path, following what he fondly called "The Yellow Brick Road". It always led him straight to Donovan's door. However, he always found it odd that none of the adults ever set up folding tables for their gatherings underneath it, despite its ample amount of shade. He never mentioned this to anyone however.

Arthur spotted the tree the moment he rolled onto the walkway. It always disrupted his smooth ride to Donovan's house, forcing him to stop. Once he reached closer to the tree, he pressed the brakes on his bike and got ready to carry his bike around the tree to the walkway on the other side. But for some reason tonight, he looked up and stared at the tree.

The tree's bark was so dark it seemed to swallow the light, and its willows hung in tangled, lifeless knots, like a mop soaked in the shadows. A tiny shiver crawled up Arthur's spine. He clenched his jaw before mounting his bike again.

Just as he was about to pedal away, a strong, cool wind began to blow. Arthur froze and turned back toward the tree. The willows whipped around violently, thrashing

about like the writhing snakes of a Gorgon. He knew he shouldn't have kept staring, but he couldn't take his eyes off the monstrous tree in the wind. When he finally tore his gaze away, his blood ran cold.

Across the street, the other trees stood perfectly still. The plants in the yards were motionless. Not a single leaf trembled.

That was when he realized that the tree wasn't moving because of the wind.

There was a wind BECAUSE the tree was moving.

He slowly backed away on his bike before doing something he calls 'The silliest statement of his life.'

"I'm not afraid of you!" He shouted, jabbing a finger at the tree in defiance.

The moment his foot hit the pedal, ready to speed away, his bike refused to move. No—worse. It began pulling toward the tree.

Arthur's eyes widened in horror. He pedalled harder, straining against whatever unseen force had claimed him, but it was useless. His bike was gravitating toward the tree, as if drawn by an invisible hand. He tried to leap off, to pull the bike away, but his feet skidded against the

pavement so hard, he could feel the tar road graze his soles. He was now under the willows. They tickled the back of his neck and ears as if mocking him for his earlier statement.

Then the impossible happened.

The front wheel of his bike lifted off the ground—

Latched onto the bark—

And began climbing.

Arthur watched, frozen in disbelief, as his bicycle scaled the tree like a possessed insect. His bike. Of all the bicycles in the world, why was it his that defied the laws of nature?

He yanked at the handlebars, desperate to free it, but it was no use. The tree had claimed it. Arthur had a choice: hold on and be devoured or let go. His fingers uncurled from the metal bars. Arthur was then thrown off his bike by a powerful force. Arthur crashed onto the pavement, skidding painfully along the concrete. His elbows burned and his chin throbbed. He looked up just in time to see the back wheel of his bike vanish into the treetop.

All was then silent. It was finally over.

Suddenly, with a violent snap, the willows of the tree shot

back out in his direction. This made Arthur get up off his knees and run back home screaming, leaving his bike and books with the old tree.

Following that fateful evening, no one ever saw his bike or books again. Not that anyone had even dared to go search for them. Even Arthur refused to go back. He couldn't even look at any tree the same way after that night. "Payback for your unnecessary statement." His father had told him when Arthur stumbled home, dishevelled and breathless.

"So did you pass the exam??" I asked when he was telling me this story.

"Gee... I wonder about that myself; Had I actually gone for the exam." My abunyak would reply with his voice trailing off.

The Intruder

“For as long as I can remember, I was always the one who got the ghost story requests going at family functions. My love for ghost stories and the supernatural always pushed me to collect any ghost stories I could from the people around me. My mother finds this trait about me very amusing, for she tells me I would not be a fan of ghost stories had I not grown out of “it”. The “it” in question was something that she had refused to explain to me until I was at the age of 15. I used to be able to see spirits.”

My mother recounted the moment after my birth when my father, gazing adoringly at his youngest daughter, remarked something strange. My face was covered in a waxy grey sheen, which the nurses hastily wiped away. They both dismissed it as an excess birth membrane. But a few months later, my mother noticed something unsettling—I saw things others couldn't.

Although my mother applauded the nurse's hasty act of wiping away my “veil”, it was proven to have been of no use. I would scream and cover my eyes whenever we drove past highways near the woods, airports, or schools. Once, after returning from a cemetery, my mother picked me up without first washing her hands and feet, a Catholic ritual meant to keep the presence of the dead at bay. That night, I cried inconsolably, red-faced and wailing, until exhaustion wore me out. This torment lasted a week, ceasing only after my father prayed for

¹⁶ Veil - People born with “the veil” are said to be able to see ghosts

protection over me.

This is a story I remember clearly—the sights, the sounds, even the giddy excitement of putting up Christmas lights. Yet, my parents remember it differently, as if parts of that night in November 2007 had been wiped from my mind.

I was six. Christmas was near, and my mother was weaving lights into the wreath—warm white, my grandfather’s favorite. Mum and Dad had both clearly inherited this liking, too. As my mother busied herself with the wreath, my father checked the sockets for when he would hang up the wreath. I was accompanying my mother in the hall where she sat busily with the lights. Christmas always excited me, and I would partake in any activity that involved Christmas as much as I could, even if it meant just watching. I sat nearby, chattering to my mother about the latest scandal between my Barbie dolls, my legs swinging over the chair’s edge. She often tuned me out, letting my voice blend into the carols playing on the radio.

Then—silence.

Not a word, not a movement. My mother turned, expecting mischief. Instead, I sat eerily still, head bowed, dark hair veiling my face. Every so often, I leaned forward, peering outside. The front door was wide open, and my dad whistled along to the carols on the radio as he

worked. ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem by Jim Reeves’. Each time, I snapped my head back, eyes wide, as if recoiling from something.

Or rather... someone.

After doing this act a few times, my mother was finally spooked. “What is it, Sheryl?” she asked, trying to make sense of my odd behaviour.

“There's someone outside the house,” I replied.

I peeked again, then quickly looked away. My mother caught the fear on my face—this wasn’t one of my Barbie stories. Her eyes darted to the open doorway, scanning the outside. Nothing. “Are you sure? There's no one there.” She replied. “Yes there is,” I whispered back. “He's standing next to the car,” I said.

A man. My mother’s stomach twisted. She thought of the recent break-ins in our neighbourhood. Was someone lurking and waiting for the right moment to dart through the open front door? Her voice was steady, but her hands clenched the half-lit wreath.

“What does the man look like?” She asked me again. I hesitated before leaning forward, just enough to peek—but not enough to let my ‘hair shield’ drop and then turn back to her.

“He’s tall. So tall. And dark. So dark I can’t see his face. His clothes... they’re dark too. I can’t see any drawing on them.” I said rapidly.

My mother began to get worried. She still could not see anyone and was worried she was missing a blind spot only I could see.

“Dear.” She called out to my dad. “I think there’s someone outside the house.” She said.

My father heard the tremor in her tone. He dropped his tools and stepped off the ladder, making his way to the front gate. A few minutes later, he returned. “Nope, there's no one out there.” He announced. My mother turned back to look at me, who was still hunched over, hiding behind my hair.

I hadn’t moved. I was still hunched over and shielding myself behind my hair. “Is the man still there?” She asked. I nodded. I didn’t even need to look. My mother’s arms folded across her chest. Suspicion crept in her mind. “Alright, then. Where is he?”

My father leaned against the doorway, watching. Maybe I was weaving another imaginary tale, like the scandals of Barbie land.

But this time, when I turned to look, I froze. A small,

sharp gasp escaped me before I slammed my mouth shut. “What?” My mother asked with confusion in her tone thanks to my strange reaction.

“He's...he's standing behind daddy,” I said.

My mother saw the color drain from my face. My tiny fingers gripped the cushion beneath me, making my knuckles white.

My mothers blood ran cold. Fight or flight instincts settling in, she didn't hesitate a second longer. She ran to the door and slammed it shut. She didn't care if it was a man, a ghost, or something worse—whatever it was, she didn't want me looking at it anymore. She grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the hall, away from the door, away from whatever stood behind my father. He lingered for only a moment, staring at the spot I had pointed to, before slowly stepping inside and locking the door behind him.

The next morning, the incident lingered like a bad dream. My mother and I curled up on the couch with a movie playing.

Then we heard the scream. It tore through the house sounding raw, terrified and very, VERY wrong.

We turned just in time to see my father at his work bench convulsing and arms flailing as electricity coursed through his body. He shook violently; fingers locked around the object in his hands. He was then flung into the wall behind him, and with a sickening thud, he slid and crumpled onto the ground. My mother ran to him, her hands shaking as she pressed against his chest. “Call an ambulance!” she screamed to my siblings. “Get help! Now!”

I stood frozen, staring as my mother desperately tried to bring him back, her palms pressing against him again and again.

Sharp buzzing noises behind me made me turn. The timer plug. It was still jammed into the socket, crackling, tiny sparks flashing in the dim room. The same timer my father had been testing the night before.

I turned back just as he let out a weak groan. He was alive. I rushed forward, reaching for his hand—then stopped. My breath hitched.

Clutched in my father’s fingers, held in a death grip, was the wreath. The same one my mother had been stringing with lights.

The same one we had been working on when the figure had appeared outside the house.

Eighteen years have passed since that night. Every Christmas, my parents still put up the same wreath. No supernatural being was going to stop them from reusing their favourite wreath! My love for the holiday too, had never faded. But no matter how much time goes by, one thing remains burned in my mind.

As I stare up at the twinkling lights each year, I wonder—

Did the figure I see that night have anything to do with my father's electrocution?

Was it just a coincidence or was it making sure I saw it... so I would remember it forever?

Writer's Biography

With her bat winged brooch and black platform heels, Sheryl Anne Richard wears her love for the supernatural in her outfits and on her sleeve. A lover of history, cryptids and cemeteries, she is usually found poring over paragraphs of hauntings or chasing after her elderly relatives, seeking the tales of their ghostly experiences. However, despite her macabre interests and fashion style, Sheryl is quite fainthearted and has a low tolerance for watching gory media. She hopes to never run into the ghosts or creatures she writes about and prefers them to remain fictional.

Nightmares of the Undead

by Audi

Preamble

I told you, you can run,

But you can never hide.

An apartment with an eerie myth about a possessed uncle on the fourth floor and six friends about to enter college life, what could possibly go wrong? The myth is told in slang that is familiar to many young Malaysians.

“FUIYOOOOOOOOO!!!¹ SPM is finally over, I feel like I can finally breathe again,” Irene huffed out as we got off the bus. The apartment loomed over us, neglected and unmaintained, but a hundred times better than Amber Court. I looked around and internally agreed that if I were to pick between both apartments to host our getaway, this would be a solid win without a doubt. As we moved into the lobby, the smell of mold and an unidentified musk hit our noses, the lobby dingy with a bright oval RGB neon light that said ‘Ria Apartments’ in cursive. At the counter sat a middle-aged malay man, clearly unbothered by the entry of new guests, and a cleaner off to the side, wiping down the dirty windows with what looked like an even dirtier rag. It clearly did not complete the job it was intended to do. My nose scrunched up in mild disgust as I padded towards the man, who still sat down looking at his book.

“*Ahem, hi bang, boleh check in?*²” I coughed out as he looked up, evidently annoyed by our disturbance. Without looking up, he keyed something into the computer, “*Nama?*³”

“May,” as I continued looking around the lobby, a potted money plant at the corner where four sofas are situated facing one another. Also conveniently, where our group was, lounging and whispering amongst themselves. The

¹ Malaysian slang term to express amazement, relief or surprise

² “Hi bro, can we check in?” in Bahasa Malaysia

³ “Name?” in Bahasa Malaysia

walls were covered in what looked like black mold, and combined with the tacky yellow striped wallpaper, it looked as though some dehydrated twat peed on it multiple times.

“Huh, looks haunted.” I muttered to myself nonchalantly before the agitated receptionist snapped me out of my thoughts, loudly slapping and sliding the keys of the room towards me, after which he sat back down with a huff and continued minding his own business.

Turning back to my friends, I waved the keys at them, beckoning them to follow me as I walked to the lift, pressing the revolting looking button to call for the lift. It wasn't long before the lift dinged eerily and opened up, all of us shuffling into the lift with much haste to rest in our room. Exiting the lift and entering our room was a blur, as our group's monotonous chatter buzzed around me. The room was cozy enough, with hardwood floors, a living area of four nicely placed bamboo sofas and a standing IKEA lamp, the view overlooking the mountains and Genting Highlands in the distance. There was a singular room with three bunk beds adjacent to one another. The vanity against the wall by the exit, and a tiny bathroom to the left opposite the room. It was by no means luxurious but had a homey feel nonetheless, akin to that of a nostalgic childhood home.

“Finally, I’m going to take a nap, wake me up for *makan* later *lah*,” my sister Susan mumbled with a yawn so wide that one might think she was a snake in disguise, Lydia trailing after her in agreement. I sat there with Irene as she flipped through the pop magazine on the glass table and I, drifting off into a lulling sleep, dreams of food and alcohol consuming me.

And just like that, the sun eventually sank into the horizon as the moon awoke from its routine slumber.

We went to Genting for dinner at some snazzy restaurant I’d forgotten the name of and sauntered back with a truckload of alcohol in our arms. Tequila, Whiskey, Gin, you name it, we had it. The plan was to drink to our hearts’ content before facing the reality of college applications and real life. Sitting around the living room, a continuous flow of burning shots and boisterous laughter bounced off the four walls that surrounded us, from reminiscing about the hottest male teachers we had to the nastiest memories in high school. I was having the time of my life watching as one by one, my friends started slurring their words, faces red and hiccuping.

“Ssshhhhhhho thaz wa Ms. Sharifah *hIc* told Mr. Tan as heee hehe,” Agnes giggled, swaying around with the bottle of strawberry flavored Absolut Vodka. I merely laughed at her before urging her to take another swig. By

this time, it was already 2 am, Agnes, Jasmyn, and Kim were hammered, with the occasional hiccups amusing the rest of us to no end. Irene had gone down for a quick smoke. After 10 or so minutes, she came back up with a sleepy smile, bidding us goodnight. My sister, Lydia, and I were still outside the living room with the others, egging them on with more alcohol. Both of them were slightly tipsy, the red slowly but surely creeping up on their faces.

“Oh oh oh oh, no girl’s night cannot be complete without a horror story,” Lydia’s face gleamed in the warm light as we all quietened down and listened.

“Did you know that this apartment has a really creepy myth about an uncle in a rocking chair on the fourth floor?” Her eyes were unfocused with a slight slur in her words. “If you look him in the eyes, allegedly something bad will happen to you,” she cackled.

Was the story funny, or was it because she’s too drunk?

Confusion seeped into our beings as we stared, wide-eyed at her as we anxiously teetered on the edge of our seats, waiting for her to continue.

“Yeah *horr*⁴, I’ve heard about that, didn’t some girl accidentally look at him and then jumped out the window or *sumn*⁵,” Susan said as she gulped another shot down.

⁴ Malaysian slang term to express “Right” or “Isn’t it?”

⁵ Shortened “Something”

There was a girl who killed herself here before?

“Well, doesn’t matter, as long as we haven’t seen the ominous uncle on the fourth floor yet, we’re good,”

Keyword: yet

I merely shrugged before standing up and dusting myself off, “Oh well, anyways, I’m going to hit the sack now, see you in the morning,” I sang as I floated to the room, a yawn rippling from my chest. The room was dark as I entered, the only source of light from the foggy moon, bathing the room in a dim glow. As I tucked myself into the bottom bunk, I looked over to see Irene dead asleep. Soon, my eyes fluttered shut as I dreamt about drinking more alcohol.

...

“Shhiiiing!!”

“Shrrrrrrrrriiingggggggg!!”

What was that?

My bleary eyes got used to the darkness as I groggily sat up on my bed, head pounding from all the alcohol we had consumed. What was that noise?

the high tide.

Could it be?

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice Irene had risen from her bed and started thudding her feet onto the ground, making me snap my head up.

“Irene?” I called out.

She slowly trudged towards the vanity.

“*Woi*⁶ Irene, are you good??” I continued, but it looked as though she was sleepwalking, clearly paying me no heed.

As she stopped in front of the vanity, I saw her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes hooded and white, her hair covered her face, and her lips pale and chapped, as she raked her hands through her hair.

Okay, that's weird.

“Irene ..? Babe you're freaking me out here leh, what are you doing?” I called out one more time, just to make sure I really wasn't hallucinating and maybe the alcohol was playing tricks on me.

But of course, that was my biggest mistake.

⁶ Malaysian slang term used to beckon/call out someone

She paused, her body freezing mid-motion. Slowly, she turned back to me, an eerie, almost predatory smile creeping across her ghostly pale face. Her head tilted at an unnatural angle, making a faint, sickening crack. Her eyes, dark and hollow, glinted with a malicious, inhuman light. The air grew icy, and a palpable sense of dread washed over me, a cold shiver racing down my spine as her gaze bore into my very soul.

What the hell-

I slowly prepared to run, my legs slowly moving down onto the floor, as I stared at the door behind what was likely a very very very possessed Irene. In a flash, I dashed. As I passed her, she made no move to stop me, but a croaky old voice rang in my head.

“You can run, but you can’t hide ah May,”

I thrust the door open and stumbled out, my heart pounding as if a drum was being played throughout my entire body, the yellow lights that illuminated the living room blinded my eyes that I couldn’t help but squint them. My sister and Lydia had gotten drunk by now, Agnes passed out on the floor, drool dribbling down the corners of her mouth; the rest of them continued finishing the last of the alcohol.

⁶ Malaysian slang term used to beckon/call out someone

“MaAy ahhh, wut arr yew *hic* doowing out heeeeree,” Lydia slurred as she wobbled her way towards me and wrapped her hands around my neck. I merely let out a strangled laugh, “Wanted to see you mah, you okay or not?” I held her up and guided her back to the table. As I wobbly sat back down, I turned back to look at the room, wondering what the hell I witnessed back in there. Then it suddenly hit.

The uncle in the rocking chair.

Fourth floor.

Bad things.

The pieces in my head slowly formed as I got up and slammed past my drunk, hollering friends out the door.

I need air.

With quivering steps, I entered the creaky elevator, trying to calm my beating heart.

It's okay, it's okay, nothing bad's going to hap-

‘Ding!’

The bright number of 4 cruelly stared back at me, daunting and taunting me, a promise of the bad things that are about to happen. The elevator doors slid open

with a soft, echoing ding, revealing a hallway swallowed in darkness. The faint light from the elevator cast long, flickering shadows that seemed to writhe and twist along the walls. My heart pounded in my chest as I stood still, my ragged breathing echoing in the oppressive and choking silence.

At the far end of the hallway, a solitary figure sat in the shadows. It was an uncle well over in his fifties, slouched in an old, decrepit rocking chair. The chair creaked with each slow, deliberate rock, a sound that grated against the silence like nails on a chalkboard. His eyes, dark and lifeless, gradually glinting with a malevolent gleam that sent a shiver down my spine.

His lips twisted into a chilling, unnatural smile as he began to whistle a slow, haunting rendition of “Rockabye-Baby”. The melody, once soothing, now felt like a sinister dirge, each note piercing the air with an eerie clarity. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and my breath caught in my throat.

Yeah... no.

My hands flew to the close button, each poke faster and harder than the last. A pitchy giggle escaped the uncle’s lips, growing louder and louder as he threw his head back and erupted into a maniacal laugh, the sound bouncing

⁷ A nursery rhyme used to make a baby sleep

off the walls and filling the hallway with a cacophony of madness. His laughter was a twisted, unhinged cackle that seemed to pierce my very soul.

The elevator doors began to slide shut, and I made the horrible mistake of glancing at his eyes, wide and wild, gleaming with insane delight as his laughter grew louder and more frenzied. Just before the doors closed completely, his face contorted into a grotesque mask of glee, his laughter echoing in my ears and leaving a lingering sense of horror that clawed at my mind long after the elevator began its descent.

The number 4 stared at me cruelly in the face as I continued to frantically ram my finger onto the 'G' button, the uncle's eyes invading every corner of my brain, never to be erased from my memories no matter how much I urged myself to shut out the image of his manic eyes that could plunge anyone headfirst into a chasm of insanity. Windows to a mind so deathly haunted, whirls of darkness and pure evil with each cackle emitted. There was no escape—once his gaze locked onto you, it was as if your soul was caught in an endless whirlpool, struggling against the inevitable and suffocating pull towards death.

It wasn't long after I stumbled out of the elevator into the courtyard. Mind in disarray and jumbled, I pressed the

palm of my hands into my face.

Irene saw him. That much was clear to me. The million dollar question however, would the same fate befall me?

But it was just a glance.

I pondered over the possibility of me getting possessed, but stopped before I could spiral into madness. *Okay May ah, happy thoughts, happy thoughts, pretend nothing happened and go back to sleep.* I took a deep breath and got back up, walking back into the building, and this time opted for the stairwell.

Given the choice, I'd rather get drunk than see a ghost.

...

My fiance gaped at me.

“I find that hard to believe, you know that right?” he muttered as he got up, an empty coke bottle in his hand. I merely shrugged, “Well, if it were fake, why would I be so scared of the number ‘4’?” My hand was playing with the engagement ring snugly sitting on my ring finger. He quickly padded to the kitchen and tossed the can into the bin, cheering with a quietly mumbled “Score!” as it flew headfirst into the bin opening.

“Well it might’ve been a dream that was too vivid,” he reasoned, while grabbing a small fruit knife and an apple from the fridge.

“So you don’t believe me? Even after how much I told you,” I let out a small scoff while tucking myself further into our couch. “I never said that I didn’t believe you, I am just saying that you might have been hallucinating at some point during your trip,” he handed me a slice, “After all you were pretty drunk when you went to sleep.”

“Yeah but-”

“Let’s talk about.....something else, alright? I think you’re getting pretty riled up,” hugging me tightly with a small peck on my forehead.

“But Max-” I tried to reason, my hands pushing him away. “How do you feel about watching ‘Wicked’ tomorrow? It just came out after all,” I turned away from him.

“May? Babe, come on, it wasn’t that serious,” he urged, trying to hug me as I inched further away from him.

“You don’t understand, Max, his eyes, you should’ve seen it –it was horrendous and so eerie–it’s never left me ever since, I don’t even know how-” I flipped back around

to face him.

“Max?”

His eyes were unfocused, as wrinkles formed around his eyes and mouth, thin red vines of red slithering from the whites toward the pupil of his eye. He blinked once. He blinked twice. He caught my hand in a bone-crushing grip, as he tilted his head and dropped his jaw.

“Max STOP. You’re hurting me,” I wiggled from his grip, as he continued staring at me.

“Si....si.....si.....si.....sI....SI,” he gargled, voice booming louder with each second. I violently threw his hand off me and backed up, grabbing the fruit knife and aiming it in front of me.

He slowly rose from the couch, the weird noise still emitting from his mouth, until I realized.

四.⁸

I let out a strangled scream as I watched his eyes turn dark and hollow, glinting with a familiar, malicious, inhuman light, his words turning into a choked cackle as he frigidly and haphazardly stalked his way over to me.

⁸ Four in Mandarin, an unlucky number in Chinese/Japanese culture due to it sharing the same pinyin as “death”

“GET AWAY FROM ME!” I shrieked, flaying the knife in the air. I watched as the same chilling feeling crept into my very being, reminded (reminding me) of the events that happened a decade ago.

With a loud battle cry, I charged forward, tackling him onto the floor with a loud thud. I wrestled his hands, trying to grab my throat as I straddled his stomach. I raised the knife to my head and dropped it with a vigorous conviction, a final desperate attempt at sealing away the dark memory that plagued my mind.

STAB

STAB

STAB

STAB

It was as if something snapped inside of me, and I came to my senses. The figure of my dead fiancé sprawled onto the floor, blood poured from the gaping wound in his chest, pooling into the grooves of the hardwood floor and staining the cracks a sickly crimson. The bright orange handle of the fruit knife protruded grotesquely from his chest, his opened eyes painted a mix of horror and confusion.

What have I done?

I shakily crawled away from him, my back hitting the back of my kitchen island. I gazed in trepidation, my mind whirling in panic. *Call the police. Call them and explain to them your situation. I'm sure they'll understand,* my wobbly legs carried me to my couch as I clumsily grabbed hold of my phone. Dialling 999, I was about to call, but only to feel a puff of breath near my ear,

*I told you, you can run
But you can't hide.*

Being too caught up in my own thoughts, I hadn't realised my fiancé's mutilated body was standing right behind me with the knife in his hand.

Writer's Biography

Growing up reading famed authors like Enid Blyton, J.K Rowling, and many others, Audi has always harbored fond feelings for reading. She'd sit on the aisles of the Popular Bookstore in Leisure Mall every Saturday just to read and immerse herself in the wondrous world of words. As she moves forward into adulthood, these nostalgic memories motivate her to create stories dug from the crevices of her mind.

Satire & Humour

A Damn Hot Mess by Lucas

by Lucas

Preamble

Mornings are chaotic, especially when you're running late. This poem captures the frantic rush of oversleeping, the struggle to function before caffeine kicks in, and the inevitable disasters along the way. From mismatched socks to spilled coffee, it's a relatable mess—because, honestly, who really has it all together?

I woke as the sun burned through my window bright,
My mind hazed from sleep, no rest through the night.
Tossed and turned, my thoughts were a mess,
Remembering friends, family, and all that stress.
I thought I had five more minutes, maybe ten,
But to my stupidity, I was late again.
I jumped out of bed like a madman in haste,
No time to tidy, just a frantic race.
I dashed for the shower, a wild, wet dog,
Refusing the wash, just a dripping fog.
No time to dry, I grabbed the towel in flight,
Patting my skin, “Good enough,” I thought.

Hair still dripping, I threw on my clothes,
Shirt inside out? Well, nobody knows.
My socks didn’t match, but who really cares?
I was already halfway down the stairs.
Shoes half-tied, my bag slung wrong,
Running on fumes, but I powered along.
In the morning’s rush, I set the pot to brew,
From the moka’s depths, the coffee’s aroma drew.
Sweetness mingled with bitter undertones,
In anticipation, my heart softly groans.
As the pot hissed and sputtered awake,
I dreamed of the latte I soon would make.
But alas, in my haste, to taste the bliss,
I grasped the hot handle—a foolish miss.

F**k, F**k, F**k! The handle's cruel bite,
Burns my fingers, in the harsh morning light.
The coffee spills, the cup hits the ground,
Shattered expectations, with an echoing sound.
Staring at the mess, no need to confess,
What a f**cking mess, oh, what a f**cking,
-mess.

I slipped on the floor, my dignity crushed,
But I had to keep going—no time to fuss.
Muttered some curses, grabbed a new cup,
Poured what was left, and drank it up.
Too strong, too bitter, but at this point, who cares?
Caffeine was caffeine—I was getting nowhere.

With a sigh, I grabbed my keys and my bag,
Stepped outside, still feeling like drag.
Another morning, another regret,
But hey, at least I wasn't late—
...*Yet.*

Writer's Biography

Hong Ka Shing, or Lucas, has been an avid fan of sarcastic and humor-driven literature since his childhood. This love for witty, sharp writing has shaped his unique voice and personality. Through this poem, he celebrates the very qualities that have influenced his passion for humor and satire.

THE END

