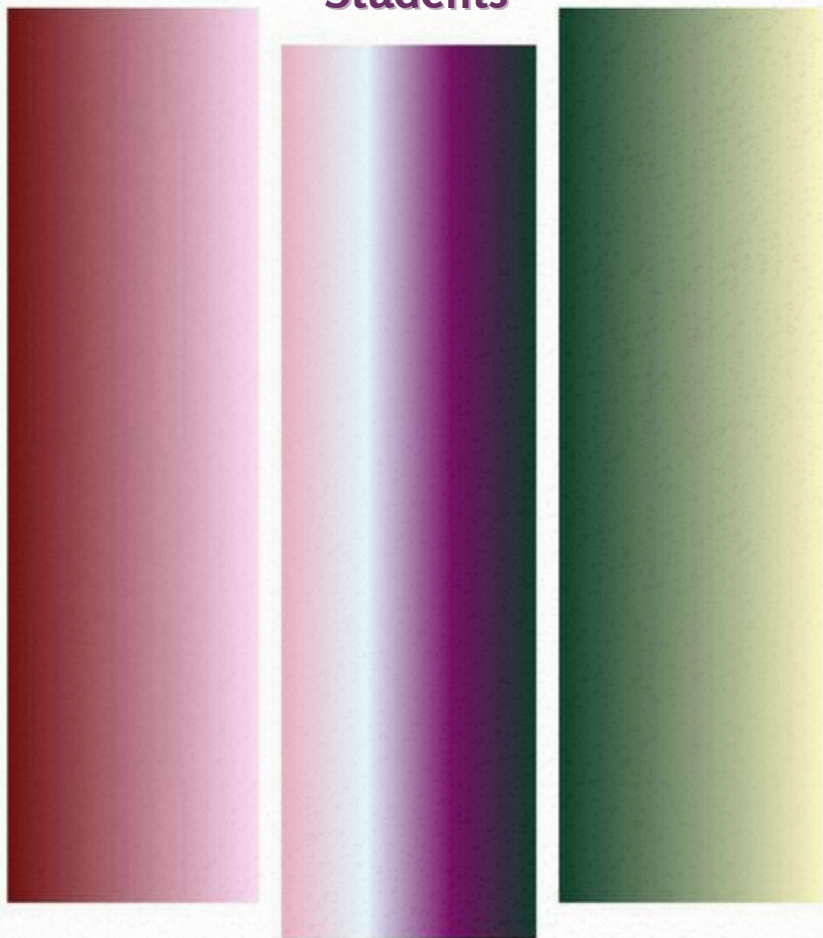


Poetry & Stories
by UCSI English Language & Communication
Students



THE MÉLANGE

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Preface

The Melange, a potpourri of rich experiences captured in a collage of poetry and short stories, is the result of many labours of love. Love of writing, love of language arts, love of expression and imagination, love of supporting each other. Readers can find themselves wandering into captivating fantasy, swimming in the sea of emotions of human experience and going over the moon under the fascinating spell of romance. The writers mix the expected and the unexpected, the highs and the lows, the seen and the unseen, leaving the readers with an aftertaste of everything they desire or fear.

I hope that this book will be the first of many publications by the students in ELSA, the English Language Student Association members in UCSI.

Preface

To the readers:

Thank you for supporting this book. I hope that the stories and poetry can enrich you as much as the experience of writing and publishing them has lifted us.

To the student writers:

Your love of writing and dedication to it has produced this gift. I hope you've learned from the arduous process that is necessary but is emboldened by the process instead of surrendering to antagonism and fatigue.

To my co-editors and UCSI Press:

Thank you for putting efforts in publishing creative writing although there is hardly any monetary reward in it. It is this faith in literary artistry, creativity and empathy that will ultimately feed the human spirit.

May creative writing prevail in human history through our labours of love.

Jill
Editor

Fantasy



Flowers

by Shaid Shaqqiq

Flowers

Shaid Shaqqiq

Clara Huang woke up in cold sweat. Pale colours melded into one massive blur as she blinked her vision back. Those colours moved, and she was sure it was her brother. She was ready to kick the living hell out of him. Clara groaned and winced, lifting her upper body up from the carpeted floor.

“Hey... Hey, you okay?” her brother asked alarmingly.

She whacked him. Her brother cursed in Cantonese, ever so rarely did he do it, which deserved an Oscar-winning whack. “You think?” Clara groaned again when her brain became a construction site with the sudden mental hammering. She squeezed the sides of her forehead where she last remembered her brother gripping them seconds before the blackout. “Benji, what the hell was that?” She felt nauseous. It took a while for her to be on her feet. Rubbing her eyes, Clara saw better. The crease on Benji’s forehead was apparent as he gawked at her.

“Pick that pen up,” Benji said. “Hold it for a moment.”

Clara snatched the pen from her brother’s messy-as-usual desk. Made of metal, it was slightly cold from the air-conditioned room. Together the siblings anxiously stared at it. Clara sighed after a moment. “So, whatever you said was just total crap and a waste of our time? You idiot.” But when he first explained it, having them sit on the floor in the centre of the room, doors closed and all hushed and serious, it seemed so real. She shook her head and tossed the pen back on the desk. “But that passing out thing? Were you and Arjun, like, high or something?”

In actuality, Benji and Arjun, his ride-or-die as he would call him, were high the morning he decided to hang with him, but that was something best kept away from anyone. Even from his family. Annoyed, Benji said, “I got it. He did the same thing, and I got it. You should be getting it too.” He eyed his gaming chair and pointed at it. “Put your palm on that.”

“Benji.”

“Just do it!” Benji scowled. He hissed, gripping his right arm. He dished out the frozen bag of peas from the bowl on his desk’s edge and pressed it on the arm.

Rolling her eyes, Clara did as he said. She gave him a look while at it. “I’m sorry, but *that* was the stupidest thing you could ever do, even if this is real. We gotta see a doctor for that, and then I have to play nurse and take care of you.”

“Trust me, it is.”

“If it is, you sure as hell won’t see me trying to slam a door in my arm!”

“What’d you expect? I panicked. Things were turning here and there.”

“Yeah, and apparently, they still are, right? You’re so—,”

Clara couldn’t feel the vinyl of the gaming chair anymore. The weight from pressing on it disappeared, and she stumbled backwards at the loss of balance. It was a loud land on the floor. Their mother was not deaf to miss it. Vibrant lilacs that first shaped the chair burst and showered all over her. Her bare shoulders and arms, as she wore a tank

top, felt the lush softness of their petals. Clara's mouth was agape. She looked at her brother. She wanted to scream.

Until Benji cupped his good hand around her mouth, never mind his injury, in time for their mother to yell at them from outside the door. "Ah, *mei shi* [1]!" Benji hollered back. "Just tripped!"

Once their mother shuffled off, Clara ripped her brother's grip away and ran to the back of the room, pressing herself against the wall as if she wanted it to consume her. She was breathing hard. Benji warned her before not to have either hand touching the wall. While the culprit was her left, Clara didn't dare risk it and instead held both hands out like she was caught in a store robbery.

"Please tell me it's just hands..."

"Just hands."

Clara sighed.

"And it's super random. When you touch things. So, watch out."

Her eyes grew wide. "You mean you won't know when the next..." Benji nodded. He looked down at the monumental pile of lilacs. Clara too. *It was real, alright.* What excuse could she give seeing flowers on the floor? That the wind picked them in? The windows were shut as far as she and her brother knew. The pile was there in front of them. It wasn't

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[1] Mandarin for "It's nothing."

there before. Now it was. A one-sided smile crept across Benji's face. "No, screw you!" She stormed up to him, jabbing her finger at his chest. Her right finger. "Stop smiling. It's gone for you, but now I'm in this mess!"

"Hold on, what time is it?" Benji gasped, quickly averting his eyes to the hanging clock. "Okay, you need to watch the time. This thing literally eats you up." Clara was silent. "Like... this..." He took off a sock, the one sock he wore on one foot only. Clara realised that before but didn't question him because she rather let her brother be the certified nutcase. But when he showed his bare foot, it almost took the air out of her lungs. Tiny white Lily of the Valleys encrusted his big toe and bright gold yarrows his second. Not a flesh was found with how the flowers crowded with one another to perfectly shape the toes. Were his toes under all of those plants, or were they no more? "Again, random for some stupid reason. Just be careful."

Clara swiped the closest thing she could find out of the corner of her eye and threw it at him. His Gundam figurine. It transformed before it could even leave her grasp, from plastic to the velvet frailness of iris petals. They spewed at his brother's chest and delicately bounced off falling to the floor. Clara shut her eyes and took in a deep breath. "...Pass it to who you really trust and who trusts you, that's what Arjun told you?"

She would be caught dead having an innocent suffer like her. *And it's someone I trust?* Their parents were clearly out of the damn question. In fact, everyone from the family must stay out of this. Still, even if she could pass it to someone who she wished should have a bus run over, she couldn't. She wouldn't.

But there was no choice.

Someone had to share her fate. *Or I'll turn into a garden topiary.*

“It’s three already,” Clara glanced at the clock. “Great.”

Benji rushed to the window and peeked out from the curtains. “He’s on time as usual.”

Without another word, Clara quickly left the room. Benji trailed behind a little later because his arm was a nuisance and that he remembered to put on his socks for the sake of his life. Running down the steps, Clara acknowledged her mother with a nod letting Benji know that she was here. The bell rang once she reached the door. Louder than usual in her ears. Clara swallowed her anxiety and swung the front door open with her right hand, her left arm folded behind her back.

“Hi,” her voice faltered, for which she mentally scolded herself, though she kept an unwavering smile.

Fuad Zaidi stood before them, huffing, puffing and chest heaving. Beads of sweat freckled his forehead that he had left bare from the parting of his hair. Clara could tell it was all neat at first, but now a few strands jutted out as though he had carelessly raked his fingers through them. He smiled a wide smile, studded ear to studded ear, revealing his gorgeous upper set of pearly whites. *Handsome regardless*, Clara marvelled and laughed. “Did you run a marathon or something?” She pointed at a smudge of crimson under his eye. “What’s that, paint?”

Fuad felt the taint on his cheek, and his smile turned sheepish. “Yeah, I was at Petaling Jaya.”

“The children’s home?”

He nodded. “Helped them out with a mural this time. ... Uh, before I forget, here.” Daintily pinched between his fingers was a single thin stalk of blooming baby’s breath. Its shade could never be more cotton.

“One of the little girls thought this was something nice I could give you,” he said. “It’s nothing, really...”

“No,” Clara gleefully plucked it out of his hand. She admired it. “I love it. Tell her thank you. And thank you.” She looked up at him and leaned forward, ready to give her approval, if it weren’t for her brother stepping between them.

“My guy’s sweating buckets here. Let him come in first and *then* go ape? But not in front of me *lah* [2], please.” Benji pulled a face, earning an eye roll from Clara.

“Eh, your arm *sia* [3]!”

Right. The two siblings totally overlooked that. Clara warily eyed her brother, but he confidently spoke. “I’m good, just a minor accident. So don’t worry about it, bro.”

Clara briskly pulled her boyfriend in and dragged him straight to the living room as soon as he opened his mouth.

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[2] *Malaysian slang used for confirmation, disregards, exasperation, or interjection.*

[3] *Malaysian slang used for emphasis. Close English equivalent is ‘bloody’ or ‘freaking’ as in “Your bloody/freaking arm!”*

Along the way, they bumped into Clara's mother. Her eyes lit up at the sight of him, though Fuad only uttered a simple 'hi, aunty' as Clara continued hauling him. Clara reassured him with an apologetic smile once he sat on the plush sofa of the Huangs' lavish living room - knick-knacks and trinkets from the family's travels decked every shelf and cupboard of the room. "We won't take long, okay?" She said and dashed back with Benji to her brother's room.

Clara's mind swirled and circled. If one were to enter it, they would witness a Formula One circuit with its race cars zooming round and round and round on jagged tracks. She wished she could pass out again. Maybe all this was a dream. Maybe she didn't have enough sleep. Maybe she should stop her late night *The Walking Dead* marathon for now. Letting the back of her head rest against the shut door, Clara sighed.

She dropped the little gift that she twirled between her finger tips, her reason to admire it, to hopefully ease her mind with it gone. *Oh my god*. Clara bit hard on her lips, glaring in horror at the crown flowers clustering the tip of her forefinger. She shook her hand, but they stayed intact. Numbness soon engulfed her finger when she bent it. She feared to pluck them out. Clara looked at Benji, asking for a sign for help.

"Pass it to Fuad." Benji wasn't proud of saying it.

"I figured you'd say that." Clara wasn't proud of her possible idea being projected.

“No way, you were thinking about it too?”

“Do you even see anyone else in the house?” Clara raised her voice. “And I swear, if you say Ma...”

“God, no.”

Looks like he did have some sense in him. Clara was relieved.

“It’s just so convenient that I can’t give this back to you, am I right?”

“So you’d actually do that?”

“Well, yeah! ...No. You know what, yes!”

Benji feigned hurt, clutching his chest.

The hum of the air-conditioner accompanied the momentary silence that fell between them. Clara checked the time. Her eyes shifted to the lilac pile. It should have been drying out, but they stayed pretty and undrained of its colour. So was the baby’s breath. “He won’t believe this,” She finally spoke. “He’ll think it’s some stupid prank. Or maybe that I’m *siao* [4].”

“Hey, he trusts you. He’ll believe you... Maybe.”

“Gee, thanks, add in the maybe.” Clara huffed.

“Okay, sorry, he will believe you.”

She hated that it didn’t make her feel any better. “Wait, no, I’m not going to rope him into this!”

ooo

[4] Hokkien for “crazy.”

“By the time you’ve figured out someone, you’d be at least half a garden. It’s Fuad or nothing.”

Clara didn’t know if she should laugh at his optimism that she wouldn’t die a full-on topiary or curse him for being an insensitive prick to Fuad. She hoped he didn’t have a long-kept grudge against him. It didn’t seem like it in the past years. Unless... “Do you hate him?”

“This whole thing is getting into your head now, *Clar*.” It stunned Clara that he called her by that nickname. It was only when he was pissed. And he sure was. “I don’t! Now are you just gonna stall or what?”

He was right. But Clara took a while to convince herself. The longer it took, the deeper remorse carved a pit in Benji’s stomach. He was regretting it all. Regretting going to see Arjun. Regretting not running away from him. Would he even do that to him, though?

Soon enough, Clara told her brother to keep an eye on their mother while she brought Fuad to their back garden. All the while bringing him there, she made sure not to touch anything with her bad hand. Too cautious she was, and with panicking thoughts of what would become after she had passed the thing to him, that she had Fuad repeating himself.

They sat on the outdoor swing. The weather had cooled down for them to engage in a serious conversation. The problem now was how Clara would start that conversation without scaring him away. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him.

Did she really want to pass it to him? She feared how he'd go about his day after this. Sure, he might have someone he could trust and pass it on, but to have him be burdened by it, Clara couldn't fathom.

"Eh, Stevie *mana* [5]? The house's surprisingly quiet today."

Okay. Casual talk first. Okay, we can do that.

"Swimming classes. At Damansara." Clara said the words one by one as if they were foreign on her tongue.

"Dad again?" Fuad laughed.

"He woke up one morning and wanted an athlete." When Fuad tilted his head, she explained, "That's *exactly* what he said. 'I want an athlete.' I said no, my brother's busy with his gym stuff, so he bribed Stevie."

He laughed again. "With what?"

"Lego sets. Can you believe, two lessons and he's already swimming in the deep end?"

Fuad started clapping like a proud father, and Clara couldn't help but smirk at him. "Power *lah*, Little Huang," he said.

Little Huang. Only he called the little brother that. No one else, and to Clara it felt special.

"Looks like we gotta change tuition timing here and there..." Clara tried to shush the voices in her head

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[5] Malay for "where."

threatening her that there wouldn't be a change. That he wouldn't care anymore.

“No problem, babe, I'm pretty flexible right now. Just let me know.”

“His Malay's getting better and better, for the record! My dad has got to treat you big some time.”

“Ah, he already has. With you?”

Rolling her eyes, she nudged him before looking away, muttering in her mother tongue as her cheeks seared in embarrassment and awe. Fuad laughed at her then. They'd been together so long yet she hadn't gotten used to his stupid-hot antics. She liked them, that was the problem, but they would come up randomly.

Clara let the sound of calming waters from her family's decrepit pond fountain fall upon them. She focused on it. Meanwhile, Fuad shifted uncomfortably, looking over at her once. Twice. Thrice.

“Everything okay, babe?”

A brief *yeah*, a brief smile. She was too preoccupied. She wondered what the crown flowers looked like under Benji's hoodie, which she brought along. Crushed, obviously. She had dug that hand deep in it. Her other hand stayed as far away as possible from the two of them, avoiding any contact with the swing too. To be safe, it was in a tight fist. She nestled the fist in the sleeve of her 'armour' - her own oversized hoodie, with the hood up and tied around her face, and her baggiest pants that hid

her feet. Yes, she looked ridiculous, but it was for her own good. Not having both arms move freely, she was trapped.

Clara, just tell him now.

“So... Miss Shanti’s asking you to mural paint now?”

Way to go, stall again.

“It was a last-minute thing, actually. You should see it!” His eyes sparkled. Clara loved whenever that happened. “I’m half done, though, going back tomorrow.”

Will he really be done tomorrow once he gets... this?

“What painting?”

“Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*,” Fuad said shyly. “With a local twist.”

“Totally waiting for a picture.” She really was. She really was blessed to have such an artistic boyfriend.

“You bet.”

Will he care enough to take that picture?

“But guess what?” Fuad leaned in, causing Clara to tense her shoulders while she slightly backed away. “She suddenly wants to pay me this time.”

“The woman loves it when you’re there, of course she’s willing to pay. Now, I’m jealous,” Clara teased.

“I kept refusing but she insisted.” *Of course he’d refuse. What he loved, he’d do it for free.* His voice lowered when he said, “A good amount actually.”

“What could you possibly be saving on?”

“A little birthday gift for Fahmi. I thought this time, the present comes from me. To get that satisfaction, you know?”

“And the Best Big Brother Award goes to...”

Fahmi... Oh my god, what if he gave it to Fahmi. Will he give him though? That's stupid, right? Giving a kid? Right?

It grew quiet again. Clara hoped that he—

“Clara... What's up?” His thick eyebrows knitted together to form a line. Fuad scooted over but Clara kept backing further. She stood in the end.

Yeah, I turned a gaming chair and a Gundam into flowers. As if he would believe that. “What? Nothing’s wrong.” That didn’t sound the least bit convincing. Clara knew this would end badly.

“Then?”

What? What could she possibly say? Why must it be so difficult? All she wanted to do today was to watch a movie with her boyfriend and brother at the mall and hang out afterward. Unfortunately for her, she had to deal with the most outrageous situation yet. She suddenly had a thought.

Why not show him first.

...But that meant she was ready to pass it on.

One of her ears then tingled. *Oh, no.* Clara scratched the ear with her shoulder. She couldn’t feel it. What she could, however, was faint prickliness. As for hearing? Blocked.

Forget it.

Clara popped her fist out from the sleeve. She looked around the front yard for something she wouldn't regret losing later. A shovel. Her father could buy a new one. She would tell him that he might have misplaced it. She threw her brother's hoodie on a nearby garden table, not forgetting to hide her crown-flowered finger with her sleeve.

With the shovel in her right hand and doom in the other, Clara was set. Fuad merely watched.

Her left hand gripped the shaft of the shovel.

Nothing.

She could imagine her curse screwing her over, cackling and shouting at her, 'Wrong timing!' But she held her grip and prayed. She told Fuad to wait.

Nothing still after a moment.

Clara stared hard at the shovel. With no shame and resembling a lunatic. She was indeed *siao* now. She dropped the shovel and stared at her hand. *Stop freaking randomising!* It didn't help either. Figures.

"Come on." Fuad picked up the tool. "You're scaring me."

She yanked it back. Alas, the shovel was still a shovel.

"Babe, what are you trying to do?" Fuad pulled it toward him.

Clara pulled it once more. "I'm showing it to you!"

“Showing me what!” Back to Fuad.

Thunder reverberated in the sky. The clouds had gone dull grey and a strong breeze picked up. Clara wrenched the shovel from her boyfriend’s grip. When Fuad told her they should head inside, she glared at him. Her famous, bone-chilling glare that would shut Fuad up once in a while throughout their relationship. “*Wait*,” she said. Fuad stilled. Rain soon spattered on them and when it shifted to heavy drums of droplets, Fuad told her again. “*Aku cakap tunggu, kan [6]!*” She snapped. On rare occasions did the switch happen. Occasions much like this one.

The first strike of lightning sufficed Fuad to snatch her and attempt to pull her inside.

She shoved him away.

A palm met skin.

Her left palm. The bare skin of his arm.

Within seconds, *they* replaced his face.

His body.

His clothes.

His existence.

They contained his figure and burst.

A drenched pool of deep red spider lilies on the wet grass.

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[6] Malay for “I said wait, didn’t I!”

Description

Cursed to turn everything she touches into flowers is the last thing Clara Huang needs in her life right now. To make matters worse, her newfound ability behaves by its own rules. Thankfully, there is a way to get rid of this. Or is there, really?



Shaid Shaqqiq

Shaid Shaqqiq is a craver of magic, fairy tales, and petty high school melodrama. (A blend of all is his kryptonite!) He spirals in fake scenarios, pondering what-ifs, and painfully creating multifaceted characters — all of which forces him to sit and, for the love of god, *just. Write.* Hailing proudly from Shah Alam, Shaid now peacefully resides in Kuala Lumpur.

Little *Red* Riding Hood & Mr. Wolf

by Leng Phooi Jing

Not all crows are black,
and not all lions roar.

I Flaming Red

“Little Red Riding Hood! How are you doing? Today’s weather is good, eh?” He greeted her.

“Oh. Hi, Mr. Wolf. It sure is good.”

“I just came back from helping Hoppy Bunny with her carrots, and here are some she gave me. You want some?”

“No, I don’t, thanks.”

“Where are you heading?”

“My grandmother’s place in the forest. But I... think I’m lost.”

“Oh! You are going to visit Granny Red!”

“Granny.....Red?”

“Well, she is your granny, and you are Little Red, so we call her Granny Red,” chuckled Mr. Wolf. “I don’t see you very often here, and that’s probably why you’re lost. This forest can be deep.”

An awkward silence followed.

“Uh...you...need help?” Mr. Wolf broke it.

“Ah, sure,” she uttered, in unnoticeable reluctance.

“Great! Follow me, I’d guide you,” he beamed.

“I’d love to, but my mother asks me to not follow a stranger, or even an acquaintance. She says even the friendliest person may have the worst intention,” Little Red Riding Hood blurted out, her eyes cold as ice.

If awkwardness could run, it would have run from Earth to Pluto, then back to Earth.

“Erm...well, understandable. Maybe I could hand you a map. It’ll help.”

“Thank you then,” her voice volume was for the ears of ants.

The forest was so deep. Even a forest resident like Mr. Wolf himself would probably end up seeing the same tree without a map.

But the day was a day a little girl needed help, and how could a kind wolf do nothing? The map then had its owner changed.

“Why would Hoppy give the brown wolf carrots? She is my good friend and she ought to give it to me. She knows I don’t even like that brown wolf,” Little Red Riding Hood murmured while looking at the map and walking. “Was it because I ditched her on harvesting her carrots together two days ago? That’s so narrow-minded,” she grinded her teeth. “And now, the wolf gave me this map, that’s not even well-drawn. And his hypocrite smile. Ugh!”

She began to think about her father, and the link between Mr. Wolf and her father. There she got more in *red*.

“Why do I even need his help? Is he looking down on me? Does he think I could not find my own way to granny’s place? How dare he.” She wiped her tears of resentment and anger with the back of her right hand as fast as she could. “He stole my carrots, stole Hoppy, and who knows what he’s going for next?”

Like an evil seed planted underneath the ground waiting to birth despicable fruit *red* and bright, terrible thoughts started to grow in her mind.

Just when she wanted to bury the seed, a familiar voice interrupted her.

“Little Red!” Tiny Grey Deer hopped like a kid who discovered a toy.

“Oh, hey, Tiny Grey!” Replied Little Red, her frustrated face turned into a beaming one.

“What are you doing here? I seldom see you here in the forest.”

“I’m going to visit my granny.”

“Visit her? Why? You seldom visit her.” Tiny Grey tilted his head.

“She’s sick, so I have to visit her,” she shrugged her shoulders.

“I think she’d be both surprised and shocked to see you. Haha!”

“You know, please don’t tell my mom we sneaked out to play every time she asked me to visit my granny, getting grounded is the worst.”

“I won’t tell her, and.....I think we shouldn’t sneak out again. I feel so bad,” his face was guilty-red.

“Well, well, we had fun, hadn’t we?” She said so confidently as if it were something to be proud of. “And no one will know about that,” she brazenly added whilst smirking.

She has been acting like a difficult child ever since her father passed away. She sought her value in that. Not the best thing to do? She probably did not even have the heart to care.

“I think my mom found out...” Tiny Grey Deer raised his head only to catch Little Red’s eyes looking like they were straight out of a horror movie, he was a needle-width close to crumbling from fear.

“Found. Out. WHAT.” She gave out a death gaze.

“I...I...I just...overheard my mom asking...Mr. Wolf’s advice on th-this.”

WHY. DOES. HE. ALWAYS. HAVE. TO. DO. WITH. SOMETHING. I. DO. NOT. LIKE? She thought.

“O...ON. WHA..AT?” Keeping her cool was futile when her trembling voice decided to betray her.

“About.....about us sneaking out to play when you should have...vi... visited your granny.”

“HOW. did she FIND. OUT?” Her patience thinned a thick layer.

“Mr. Wolf...he saw us once, and he mentioned it to my mom...But, but...it was when my mom happened to run into him by the lakeside, it was nothing intentional!” Tiny Grey almost cried.

“And WHY ON EARTH would HE mention THAT to your MOM?” Her hands formed tight clenches, creasing the map in her right hand.

“I...I....”

“SO, you are saying, HIS OBLIVIOUSNESS got US into TROUBLE?” If her eyes were to be described with a colour, it would have been *red. Bright and flaming red.*

“I- It wasn’t that serious! And if we got into trouble, it would be our...our...own fa- fault.” His voice went softer and softer.

“WHY ARE YOU SIDING HIM?! YOU KNOW! YOU KNOW I DON’T. EVEN. LIKE. HIM!”

“I’m not siding him, UGH, RED! I’m just telling the truth! And why don’t you like him? He’s the good of the forest, just C’MON, RED! WHY?”

“I.....I JUST- JUST DON’T! WELL...WELL.....It’s because- ‘cause of his smile! Yes! His smile is so FAKE! FAKE! I don’t- I ha- hate it! Yes! STOP ASKING!” If her rage level had gone to the peak a second ago, her panic level at this moment went beyond the peak.

“Little Red... Mr. Wolf, is a good wolf. He is, a good wolf.”

How could the fire of disliking Mr. Wolf not burn at this point? Her best friend decided to side with the person she disliked, or even, hated?

A fire that had simmered now seemed to burn, or, shall we say, the fire never truly got simmered, and now it even started burning more furiously.

The fire burned and became awfully wicked ashes.

She decided to do evil.

II Bloody Red

“I would hate to tell you this, Grey. But I saw him stealing someone’s carrots this morning.”

“Carrots? Huh? What do you mean?”

“Carrots. Carrots. Who got them carrots here?”

“Hop-py?”

“Hoppy. Our good friend, Hoppy.”

“Red, I hope you know what you’re saying.”

“Well, I saw him with Hoppy’s carrots, my eyes are justice,” she crossed her arms. Unscrupulously.

“How do you know it wasn’t Hoppy who gave him the carrots?”

“Come on! Hoppy knows I don’t even like him, why would she give something to him?” Her eyes were bloody *red*. “He. Must. Have. Stolen. It.”

The two pairs of eyes did not look at each other.

“He’s going for my granny next.” Little Red completely abandoned her conscience, at this point.

“WHAT?! WHY?! LITTLE RED, you know how HURTFUL it can be to just simply ASSUME THINGS, RIGHT?!” Tiny Grey jumped as if he were burned by fire.

“Don’t you remember what he had done 10 years ago? People say he almost ATE PEOPLE, HE’S A WOLF THAT COULD NOT CONTROL HIS CARNIVOROUS URGE!”

“THAT WAS SO LONG AGO! I- I’M I’M SURE he learnt how to control himself no- now...”

“All crows are black, all lions roar. A wolf will always be a wolf.” She crossed her arms arrogantly.

“RED, STOP! We were not even born 10 years ago, how do we know it’s not a rumor? PLEASE.”

“Well, if the rumor is NOT just a rumor, my granny will be in great danger. They say the one he almost ate was someone who’s SICK and paralyzed in bed, that’s why he had the chance to attack.”

The rumor was made by someone who was afraid of all the wolves. Most importantly, the rumor was proven to be faulty. Tiny Grey knew nothing about it already proven untrue.

But Little Red Riding Hood, oh, Little Red Riding Hood.

She knew everything. But still, she decided to hide this part of the story, and highlighted what she should not.

“I better get going, I don’t want my granny to be eaten, by HIM.”

“RED!” Tiny Grey screamed, and there was no response.

Little did they notice, there was a brown silhouette behind them.

It was far enough to not be noticed.

And it was Mr. Wolf.

He wanted to make sure Little Red would arrive at her granny's safely, so he followed her.

But now? He did not know what to feel.

There was another shadow, a slightly hunched and small one. It moved closer to him.

III Warning Red

Little Red Riding Hood really took her time to stroll on the way to her granny's house.

She stopped by the path to look at the flowers, to count the rocks, and to sing with the birds. By the time she arrived, it was already late evening. It took her a long time to arrive for she had left her house in the early morning at 6.

Her granny's front door was already open.

An intense buzz struck her head stronger than a thunderbolt followed by the most disastrous typhoon. She felt that something sinister had happened, and she was too late to the rescue.

“Granny! I- I'm here! Little Red here! Are...are you there?”

There was no response.

She only saw a brown silhouette moving in the house.

“No way. No way, no way, NO WAY..... I was just joking. I- I was just joking.” Her head shook at a scary speed. “GRANNY! GRANNY! No way, no way, NO WAY!” She cried out her lungs, and dashed into the house so fast that she almost fell.

Who she found was Mr. Wolf. Standing in the middle of the living room, looking straight at her.

“You evil wolf, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY GRANNY?!” She howled while her eyes were hunting for clues – under the bed, in the wardrobe, in the washroom, in the kitchen, everywhere she could think of. Now she looked more like a wolf, hungry for clues.

But her granny was still nowhere to be found.

“What... have I done...? What do you mean...?”

“YOU ATE HER! YOU ATE HER, DIDN'T YOU?! YOU CARNIVOROUS CULPRIT! A MURDERER!”

She made up an extremely hurtful lie, and was she going to pay for it?

Sometimes a person who lies, fears most that the lie no longer stays just a lie. Little Red Riding Hood at the moment, was the perfect example for this.

But oh lucky Little Red, her lie stayed a lie.

“Little Red, have you not heard that one should think before speaking?” A familiar voice flowed into the house.

“Gra- granny?! GRANNY!!!” Little Red turned her head to the front door, and saw her granny standing there, safe and sound.

“How could you speak like that?” Granny Red looked at Little Red Riding Hood like a teacher looking at her heavily blundering student.

“Granny, are you not sick anymore?! You seem all fine!” Little Red burst into tears while giving her granny the tightest hug she had ever given to her.

She seemed to be genuinely happy and relieved that her granny was safe and sound, be it no longer sick, be it not eaten.

“It was just a mild cough, I get that often. You are clueless because you are always not around to drop me a visit. But there is this one thing I will not let you get away with, unless you apologize.” Granny Red’s expression changed in a split second.

Little Red felt like her soul left her body.

“The things you said about Mr. Wolf to Tiny Grey. You know what I’m talking about.”

“.....” Little Red had never looked so panicky in her life.

“Little Red.....” Mr. Wolf tried to talk to Little Red to chase the awkwardness in the air away.

“You... you heard it all?” Little Red glared at him.

“Yes.” Mr. Wolf looked straight into her eyes.

“.....” Little Red remained silent.

“Little Red, WHY?” Granny Red’s eyes dimmed. “If I wasn’t out for my cough medicine, I would not even know about the things you said! Not even after my death!” She let out two hard coughs triggered by anguish.

“Granny, I’m sorry.” Little Red Riding Hood dropped her head down. “Did he tell you everything he heard?”

“Mr. Wolf did not tell me a single thing, I heard it with MY OWN EARS. MY OWN EARS. I was in the forest when you had a conversation with Tiny Grey!”

Ah, the small, hunched shadow was Granny Red.

Granny Red looked at Mr. Wolf gently. “Mr. Wolf is a good wolf, and what you said was horrible, Little Red. It really was. You owe him an apology. A SINCERE apology.”

“.....” The blunderer turned silent, again.

Her silence became the flame that triggered Granny Red’s bomb.

“APOLOGIZE!” Granny Red exploded.

The three of them stood there, vexation filled the air.

“Granny Red, let me talk to her.” Mr. Wolf stepped forward, confronting Little Red Riding Hood.

IV Remorse Red

“Mr. Wolf, I.....” Little Red spoke, ounces of guilt trembled their way through her mouth.

“Little Red, why did you say that about me?” Mr. Wolf longed for an answer.

“I guess I know I’m in the wrong.”

“May I please, at least get a reason?”

“I- I.....ugh!.....Fine, because of my father.”

Granny Red was stunned. “Little Red.....” Her eyes storied a lot.

“My father..... He was killed, by a carnivore.”

Mr. Wolf shook. “.....He was?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a wolf, just like you. I hate your kind. I admit that.” Little Red clenched her hands as if she were trying to kill all her destructive emotions with her tight fists. “I always tell myself, if my father was still here, maybe,” she paused. “Maybe, I wouldn’t be so pathetic.”

“Pathetic?”

“Pathetic, yes. I am aware,” she decided that there was no point to hide. “I have few friends, and I am not a noble.” Her lips shivered. “Unlike you. You are liked by so many people..... and.....you are nice to everyone, even if they have done something...terrible to you.”

“.....”

“He was eaten by a wolf, an animal of your kind. If he was still here.....I probably would have been friendlier to the people around me.”

“What about your mom?” Mr. Wolf breathed in.

“...She is always busy, doing her chores, planting, she never spends time with me,” her eyes storied like her granny’s.

“Little Red, you know I am here for you.” Her eyebrows frowned in concern. “Your mother is always busy because your father is not around, she needs to work, to take care of you.”

“The only thing I need from her, is her love and time.”

“She loves you, but in a different way,” Granny Red’s frown deepened.

“I can’t feel her LOVE if she doesn’t spend time with me!” She shrieked, her voice quivering in pain.

“Little Red, I think there’s something you need to learn about me,” Mr. Wolf spoke.

“.....What?” She murmured.

“You said I have always been liked by the people, and I’m always nice to people. But that wasn’t who I was back then.”

She held herself back. “.....Really?”

“My parents were killed by the hunters when I was young. I didn’t have anyone with me. I...I really did not grow up with a lot of friends.”

“They were killed?” This time, it was Little Red who shook.

“They say they are carnivorous and big. Those sharp teeth and sharp claws were their reasons to kill. So they took them away from me, and I was sent to the market waiting to be sold as a pet.”

“.....”

“So it hit me hard when I overheard you telling Tiny Grey that I..... ate people..... because of my carnivorousness.”

“.....I’m sorry.” She finally said it.

A hush invaded.

“You said.....you were waiting to be sold.....? Then how did you end up here?”

“I escaped. The cage was old and the lock was unstable. I ran and ran endlessly, it was raining and I was shivering, but I met someone who shielded me from the downpour.”

“Who was it?”

“He was a hunter’s son. He protected me, but his father’s kind slaughtered my parents. I could have hated humans.” He exhaled. “But because of him, I know I should not hold grudges towards all humans.”

“You gave up on your grudges just because he protected you from the rain?”

“He took me back home. He bandaged my wounds and took care of me. Although I still had scars cut by humans, I was grateful to him. But that didn’t heal the wounds in my heart. So, I again escaped, from his cottage, into this forest.”

Mr. Wolf had to stop speaking for a few minutes, for the memories were too heavy.

Little Red Riding Hood looked at him. Her eyes were at that moment, empathetic. A feeling she had not experienced in a very long time.

“I wish I could meet him again, and tell him the reason I left. I was too afraid of everything. I did not want to get hurt anymore. But I now grow older, wiser, and the heart to express how grateful I am took over my fear. I could see it from his eyes, his intention was so pure, he only wanted to protect a weak animal in front of him. And at that moment I know, even though my parents were killed by humans, I should not hold grudges towards all of them.”

“I can’t believe you chose to forgive.”

“I did not forgive exactly, but all I know is that it’d be very unfair to punish those who did not do anything wrong.”

Little Red Riding Hood remained silent, but this time, a silence of consensus.

“Not all humans are bad.” Mr. Wolf reminded. “And not all carnivores are evil.”

“.....I’m sorry. For everything. Especially the things I said, you know, to Tiny Grey.”

No one spoke anything until Mr. Wolf summoned up his courage.

“It must have been hard for you when your father was gone.”

This sentence seemed to hit so deeply in Little Red’s heart that her tears of sorrow gushed out uncontrollably. “I missed him, I have always missed him.....”

Granny Red went forward to embrace Little Red while Mr. Wolf moved closer to her and patted her head. He too, shed tears.

“Let’s not hate each other just because of our kind. Not everyone is bad. I learnt this, and I know you will understand this someday too.”

“I still need some time, but I’m sure I will. I will understand someday.”

Little Red Riding Hood looked at Mr. Wolf. This time, no hatred and no malice.

The two pairs of eyes looked at each other.
Just two pairs of eyes who now understand each other.

Not all crows are black,
and not all lions roar.

Description

Memories are sometimes heavy, memories are sometimes overwhelming, memories are sometimes *red*, but memories are not a ruler for everything.

Memories of a white crow shall not tell the crow that he should be black just because he grew up around black crows; memories of a lioness who does not roar shall not force her into roaring just because every other lion she has seen did roar.

Because not all crows are black, and not all lions roar.

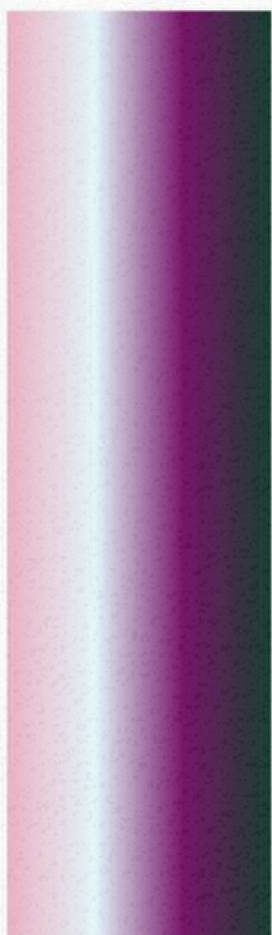


Leng Phooi Jing

Leng Phooi Jing finds herself in her readers;
her readers find themselves in her,
the writer and the readers find their wounds in each other.

Who she is isn't that important,
what's important is how her readers find who they are in
her writing,
and discover themselves from there to grow with her
together.

Human Experience



Two Square Tiles

by Siow Kah Yi

Two Square Tiles

In this house of a thousand square feet
There reserved two square tiles
where her knees bend every morning.

Her prayers offered;

Her concerns sincere;

Her muffled cries for salvation heard.

In this house of a thousand square feet

There reserved two square tiles

where her head drops low when she thinks of the Calvary -
where the incarnate of Grace and Truth came to sacrifice
So that justice is served and peace may reign on earth
And, over the souls prayed for on the two square tiles.

Description

“Two Square Tiles” is inspired by someone the author honours. Her discipline and yearning for the Lord always points back to the Creator-God and His goodness displayed in His saving work in Christ. Despite our flawed struggles to grow in our understanding of our eternal God, having been transformed by God through His Words, she is definitely an exemplar of the Christian way of life.

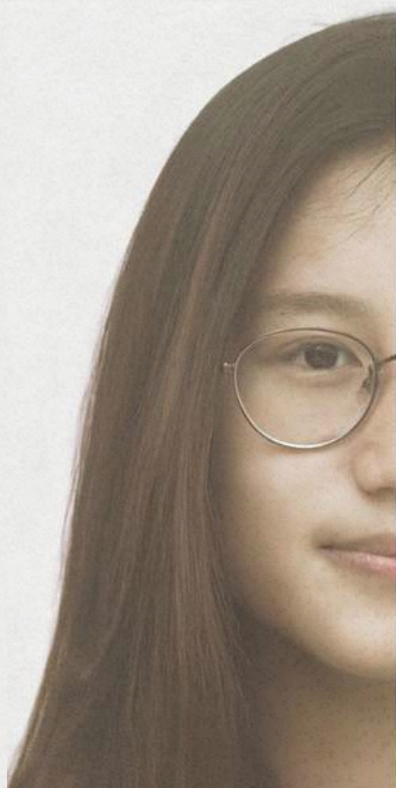
Eggplant

by Siow Kah Yi

Long
and
purple
can be
wrapped in
one hand
hard but soft
when cooked
celebrated by
tall grown-ups but
abhorred by little ones
mushy and seedy a texture
unaccustomed yet can be
acquired through the years till
one day your taste buds awake they
start to accept its taste so now you can
celebrate with the grown-ups who teach you
to taste something you once hate
but have now learned to
appreciate.

Description

The eggplant as a delicacy is known to be savoury. But not quite so to the writer's 8-year-old tastebuds. "Eggplant" reminisces the gustatory experience of the writer as she recalls what adults often say to children who hate eggplants, "One day, when you grow up, you will like it."



**TWO
SQUARE
TILES**

**EGG
PLANT**

Siow Kah Yi

SLOW KAH YI was not an avid reader as a child. As she grows, she gradually realises how books, poetry, and speeches play a big part in shaping her worldview and influencing her emotions alongside actions. She now sees words as a wonderful and powerful medium. As she slowly navigates her way to be a keen writer and an eloquent poet, she hopes to live up to the mantra commonly shared among writers - the pen is mightier than the sword.

The Noise

by Megan Padmini

The Noise

I speak in masses, yet I am not heard,
I drown in the deep, and they watch from a height,
I cry for help, but it goes by unheard,
Suffering in silence, is this my fate?
The voices are loud, it is easy to blend in,
Their company unappreciated, nonsense just spewing,
Questions back and forth, makes one's head spin,
Try this instead, stop the gathering.

It touched the spots that felt raw and rough,
Tearing it apart felt like it was a game,
Jerked to the rear, she had enough,
Fixed up to speak up, no time to be tame.
It hurt them in their hearts,
But I had the capacity no more,
To keep the noise miles apart,
When I was in a deadly war.

It was every woman for herself,
Selfishness was a forever sin,
The people seemed to all be deaf,
But now in their pain, I will grin.

Description

'The Noise' draws on a personal event from the author's youth to convey a heartbreaking sense. Being a female in an Asian household has many advantages, but this poem lets you in on some of the less desirable aspects of growing up where jealousy and competitiveness drive everyone's behaviour. Escaping from it would be like starting a conflict with every moral teaching you have ever received, as well as with yourself. The three phases of the war—the struggle, the conflict, and the resolution—are expressed in "The Noise."

TO
H I
E S
E



Megan Padmini

Megan draws inspiration for all of her writing from her personal experiences in a society where feminism is both celebrated and denigrated. Megan brings individuality to everything she has experienced owing to her fondness for writing and vivid imagination.

I Will be Okay

by Tan Hui Jin

I Will be Okay

Once I thought,
I can never escape from
A cheated past love
That is beyond suffering.

If you were to ask me,
It is “a toxic-torturous love
That every day is gloomy.”

But as time ticks by,
I am nudged and encouraged
To embrace myself,
To live life just the way I am.
So with that
I have found myself, a renewed self.

Now that I know,
All the shattered pieces
Have not been in vain,
All the deep wounds are slowly healing
Though it took me about four years
But at least,
I can make peace with myself
In my own grace.

What is seen as a closed chapter
Is not a sad ending
For the journey I explored
As a traveller of many years
Has grown and transformed me
To be a better person.

So here I am,
Knowing that
No matter how heart-rending
A situation can be,
I can turn darkness into beauty
Filled with hopes and optimism
I now stand strong to say,
“I will be okay.”

Description

Who would have thought falling in love with a guy would become a serious nightmare for her? Being innocent and loving, still she finds it hard to swallow and worst of all, loving him means to undergo a rude awakening.

Love seems blind, and love seems hurtful but it doesn't stop there because love has its lessons to teach too.

Of all the heartbreaks she experienced in loving him, she then intended to turn darkness into beauty, and this is how her poem came into existence. This poem is dedicated to those grappling with immense hurt and despair from cheating or manipulation.

Fleurs d'amour

by Tan Hui Jin

Fleurs d'amour

Oh flowers,
sprinkling you with water
I notice you are blooming
gorgeously.

Your blooming beauty
mesmerise my eyes
and I am in awe of it.

Darling, how can I
not fall in love with you?
Thus, I bloom
along with your beauty.

And..., when a butterfly
flutters to my hand
as I am watering you,
that means a good deed, taking care of you,
is reciprocated and appreciated.

Oh flowers,
along with your colours and beauty,
you show me remarkable
love, hope, purity and strength

Thank you.

Description

The writer has always been mesmerized by the feminine beauty in flowers. With a bouquet of flowers she received, this is where her nurturing heart takes place. Awed by the beauty of it, she too learned a lot from flowers, from its glow to its strength, fragrance, and delicate physicality.

#theucscat

by Tan Hui Jin

#theucscat

I saw a cat,
a cat who passed by me as a passer-by
that I couldn't help
but walk towards.
There, a tall-specky guy
with an amiable demeanour patted her
because who wouldn't stop by
to touch the furry feline?
Enigmatic yellow eyes,
which you couldn't help but stare
with wonder and amazement.
Rolling her body left and right,
wagging her tail with docility,
she wanted you to play with her.
A moment later, her grumpiness came by,
hinting you to stop patting her
so be careful
with this mischievous child
when a furious side of her is shown!
Thank God, she did not hiss you
as her targeted prey or else,
you would be more than frightened
as if cats were your Vampire Diaries!
Standing still on the grassland,
another side of her revealed,
behaving like a meditative monk,

her body piqued one's interest
to wonder "is she perhaps human?"
White whiskers of moustache Lucy,
drawing her mark on the land,
walking gently with unique paws,
she left your vicinity with a goodbye.
Thereon, you miss her dearly
as your unforgettable friend
so sometimes,
a cat is more than a cat,
a cat is worth melting for
and here,
is the hashtag:
#theucscat

Description

Cats have never caught the writer's attention since she has always preferred dogs more. Until one day, she came to adore felines unexpectedly with a sense of wonder and amazement.

Who will she meet beside the cat? How will the cat impact her?



Tan Hui Jin

Hui Jin's bubbly side is always a gift from heaven. However, when you get close to her world, you notice the quiet suffering that she tries to pick herself up from. Strength is never an easy one to find and feel when it can be so easily shattered.

Thankfully, music and writing are her cherished sisters that inspire her to heal. A wounded soul evolves silently to make as many pieces of art as possible.

Fingerprints On An Abandoned Handrail

by Derrick Pang

Fingerprints On An Abandoned Handrail: The Adventures of a Malaysian Grandmother

derrickpang

When does a dream die?

A dream dies only when it becomes reality.

And so if we dream in imaginary, made-up anecdotes, our dreams can never really die.

They exist as stories, fictional artifacts of the human imagination withholding within it the legacy of its characters.

I like to dream about my grandmother.

This way, in my story at least, she never really dies.

New Cases: 8342

The Day Grandma Went On A Holiday

It is another day spent locked up in my bedroom. We never get many chances to venture into the eerily-silent, foreign, outside world, now that the pandemic is raging, billowing all around. We are in a nationwide lockdown, the iron-fisted politicians in their diamond-encrusted Vellfires and penthouse suites enforcing quarantines and curfews and mandatory vaccinations. Outside is an authoritarian regime disguised as protection - a dictatorship masking as diplomacy. The days are marked not by the date, but by how many are infected.

It no longer matters how far we are from the birth of Jesus, we care more about when we can escape our homely prisons.

Outside the confines of our home (which now feels like a jail cell) is a pandemic of majestic and microscopic proportions. We are living with an airborne virus that insists on embarking on a massive unannounced world tour, infecting and mutating uncontrollably throughout the population, not unlike an annoying Ed Sheeran song that stays rooted in your brain for an unprecedented amount of time, emerging every time you enter a retail store. I think that's why people call songs like these "earworms": they burrow through your ears into your subconscious, protruding into your brain cavity only at the most inconvenient of times - blasting between your ears when you're trying to do an exam, or when your boss berates you for singing 'Shape of You' in the workplace.

And so the human race has locked itself in, away from schools and offices and ginger-haired pop stars, behind closed doors and face masks, and chosen instead to present itself in front of webcams and hideously tacky virtual backgrounds on Zoom. Tedious journeys to work are replaced with a click of a button on a laptop that never seems to sleep. Hours stuck in traffic have turned to days staring at screens of various sizes; our daily yelling at incompetent drivers has changed into complaining about the Wi-Fi connection.

The virus itself is unrelenting, impervious to anything modern medicine tries to throw at it.

In many ways, it reminds me of my grandmother. She too was unrelenting, in a way that cockroaches are unrelenting in the face of natural disasters, of which many perished under the swat of my grandmother's broom instead. It wasn't that the medicines were sustaining or healing her; she just allowed the pills to take refuge in her body, as if the act of seeping into her bloodstream was helping the concoction of drugs more than they were helping her. She was defiant in insisting that she continues to exist - her mind willing life into her octogenarian body. You could practically see her greasing her own gears as she cooked her next meal, swept her next floor, made her next bed...

Today, as the news reporter on TV confirms 8342 new patients of the pandemic, I receive news about my grandmother's holiday plans. Dr. Lee was in the middle of giving us yet another assignment - one of those tedious, labor-intensive assignments that required weeks of research, reaped little satisfaction or learning outcome, and was due in three days. It was no wonder my grandmother disrupted my class with her news. Even she is fed up.

She is going to climb Mount Everest. She is already on her way to the airport from the hospital, where she previously resided.

She has said her goodbyes.

New Cases: 5201

The Day Grandma Wanted To Prepare A Meal

“As long as you’re happy.”

The last thing I heard from Grandma was those 5 words muttered under her breath. This was a few days ago, when I was planning to go on a holiday with my friends: a road trip down to the historical tourist town of Malacca, where Grandma was originally from. When she knew I was going down there, she quickly made plans to get her house cleaned and started planning what to cook for 5 rowdy teenage boys.

“No need lah Ama, we’ll be going out the whole time. You stay in KL.”

Word of advice: Never say this to an Asian grandmother. Like many grandparents across the Eastern archipelago, Grandma subscribed to the ancient philosophy that is Asian hospitality. She had endured a world war, lived through the reigns of multiple Malaysian prime ministers, and most impressively, survived the daily berating and mental torture that one traditionally experiences by living in an Asian household. It was frankly insulting that I deny her the pleasure of catering to her grandson and his friends.

This hospitality reached its peak during Chinese New Year. If you're not familiar with the traditions associated with this celebration, it is customary for the family to gather around a table, a table that is shaking under the weight of the frankly obscene amount of food on offer, and for your relatives to grill you with intrusive, personal questions with a sadistic determination comparable to that of a Nazi interrogation officer.

My Dad once told me that our family was renowned around Malacca for throwing the biggest party for the New Year. It was an honor equivalent to having your house festooned in the most lavish Christmas decorations, or throwing the hippest graduation party where all the popular kids would go and get drunk. Our family home was the go-to place in town, where the people gathered and complained about how much hotter the climate was that year compared to the last.

Legend has it that there would be a huge crowd surrounding our house in the morning of the second day of Chinese New Year. Grandma would be hidden in the throngs of people, donning her infamous pink cheongsam, giving out traditional New Year snacks that she stayed up all night making. There was one year where she fed 5000 people in one morning, the never-ending flow of snacks coming from the metal tin she held in her hands was akin to something of biblical proportions.

This obsession with hospitality led Grandma to places far and wide. I remember her stressing over what to cook for the Prime Minister's inauguration party. I recall her telling me about the time Elvis Presley came to her house to taste her infamous "*buah keluak*" - a poisonous nut that you had to boil to death for it to be safe to consume, which covered your rice with a dark coat of black, delicious bitterness. In fact, my last conversation with her was at her home, around her home-cooked food, the back of my spoon prying open a *buah keluak*, shining light into its dark crevasse to retrieve the dark paste hidden inside. As usual, she was convinced that I didn't have enough to eat, and offered me a generous second helping of rice, as if she was compensating for the food rations she received during the war.

"Ama, seriously, no need come all the way down to Malacca to cook for us."

"Haiya ok lah I stay here. As long as you're happy."

New Cases: 1

The Day Grandma Got In An Accident

As a young boy growing up in the car-producing, oil-rich country of Malaysia, you are preconditioned, almost algorithmically-destined to love cars. Our lives are segmented into moments experienced in or around a car, cars that highlight certain memories and milestones like a reminder on Google Calendar. You remember getting your first model car as a 7 year old and racing it around the house, which had conveniently been converted (for the afternoon only) (in your imagination, at least) into a certified Formula 1 race track. You remember your first fight with your brother in your Dad's Proton Exora (the big one with extra seats to throw your little brother around on). You remember sitting in your rich uncle's BMW and feeling like a billionaire on a private jet. You remember inheriting your first car, a Perodua Myvi, and subsequently crashing that same car, into another Myvi, on Jalan Tun Razak (because rush hour traffic in KL is a menacing, contrived puzzle of vehicles meandering in and out and through each other).

My most vivid memory in a car was when Grandma crashed hers.

At 80 years old, Grandma had the same driving capabilities and disregard for mandated speed limits as an 18 year old who just got their driver's license.

She would drive me and my brother home from school every day, grilling us on everything that happened in school like a TMZ reporter shoving a microphone in the face of a B-list celebrity emerging from a big night at the local drinking hole, while occasionally honking at some unsuspecting vehicle who had the audacity to cross her paths without flashing their turn signal.

The incident happened the day after a notorious road accident involving a few kids on modified speed bicycles hit the news. The children were racing down a dark, winding road in rural Malaysia, the road in front of them illuminated only by their dim, kinetically-powered brake lights and the light between their eyes. It was a flagrant disregard of pre-established regulations and a bold exploration into experiencing physics first-hand. They had modified their bicycles to enable less drag, translating into more speed and decreasing the burden on their young knees. Some weren't even using their knees, laying on the saddle on their tummies like yogis in harrowing plank positions. The children acted like they had missed the induction course on bike riding, or skipped the software update on common sense that comes pre-installed in most other humans. Eight children recklessly rode into a car (which was going well under the speed limit). The automobile driver was charged with 12 years in prison.

The day after this incident went viral on social media was a petrifying time to be on the road in Kuala Lumpur. Motorcyclists and bicyclists and anyone else balancing on two wheels were emboldened, almost empowered by the Supreme Court's ruling. They were the new kings of the road, above the law. Every driver that day was equalized and united in their fear of the motorcycle - from the banker driving to work in his Honda Civic, to the student driving to university in her red Myvi, to the self-driving Tesla transporting its billionaire oil tycoon of an owner (who probably was himself morally ambiguous at best). The capital of Malaysia was a battlefield, and cars were simply trying to dodge the motorcycles' punches.

Grandma was coasting on the slow lane on the highway, the one connecting various semi-congested areas of the Klang Valley, notorious for its propensity of setting the stage for road accidents of various severity (reports have shown that in 2022, Kuala Lumpur was witness to one accident every minute on average!). I was sitting next to her, my eyes wandering, observing the moving canvas of city life whizzing past our windows. In a split second, I saw a flash of pink in the rear view mirror, a blur of metal glinting in the afternoon Sun, and suddenly I felt a hard knock on the door beside me. A delivery driver had veered off his lane and swerved into our car, denting the left passenger door and traumatizing Grandma against delivery drivers for life in the process.

Grandma picked herself up and continued driving after that day. She had seen worse in her lifetime, this was just a miniscule blip in her consciousness. Sometimes I wonder if therapists would have run out of business if they existed 50 years ago, everyone seemed to have really strong minds and even stronger coping mechanisms.

Life moved on. We did delete the delivery app from our phones, though. Just in case.

New Cases: 591

The Day Grandma Finally Rested

For as long as I can remember, Grandma was either doing something, preparing to do something, or on her way to get something done. Her schedule would always be jam-packed, she always managed to occupy herself with something to get her hands on. One second she would be doing the household taxes, the next you would see her ransacking the kitchen to prepare our lunch, the next she would be in the garden tending to her flowers, which only seemed to grow and cooperate if Grandma had planted them.

Grandma had that superpower - anything she touched, grew. Abundantly. She always stayed in the shadows, silently brooding and observing in the background as her labors of love went forth and prospered. Her daughter became a successful, annoyingly over-achieving woman. The house she bought in Malacca for RM1000 would now be worth over RM1 million because of the work she put into renovating the place. Her snacks multiplied during festive seasons, and the stack of postcards hand-drawn by children with disabilities seemed to grow taller every year, a reflection of her love for others which grew exponentially. She had lived a life of helping others to be better than herself.

On the day she rested, she wore red. Her face was lightly

dusted with makeup, the first time she even went near cosmetics since her wedding day all those years ago. The tubes going in and out of her nose and mouth were gone, like shackles on a prisoner being cut away. She was finally at peace.

And she was smiling. Because her life would be remembered for her stubborn, enduring smile, which still insisted on brandishing itself on her wrinkled face even after she broke her two front teeth chewing on sugarcane. (Yes, a raw sugarcane!). I never could understand her persistent happiness - her unwavering, incessant need to help others, her undying enthusiasm even when faced with death itself.

She certainly always looked happy. Looking back, I don't think she even realized she was happy. I doubt they even believed in the notion of being happy back in the times of her youth. In the era of zero social media, when people didn't psychoanalyze and over-scrutinize things like feelings and emotions and mental health, you never knew what you were feeling. You just felt, and then you were gone.

Grandma was happy. She didn't know it, because nobody told her. But you could see it in the glint of her eyes every time her grandsons won an award. You could see it in her smile when Mom got that big promotion. You could see it

every time she liked one of our Facebook posts (and subsequently announced to us that she had liked our post). You saw it every time she helped someone.

You never find happiness, because happiness is an arbitrary feeling. But Grandma taught me that you can see happiness. I see it in the refugee kid getting a new school bag for Christmas. I see it in the family picnicking in the park, enjoying each other's company. It is there when your favorite football team wins a tournament. It is in the arms of the person who hugs you at your worst.

It is there when I taste my grandmother's signature dish. A joy I never fully appreciated until it was wrenched away from me forever.

But the beauty of happiness is that it can be seen in stories. Our lives are a conglomeration of stories passed down by word-of-mouth - stories are our legacy we leave behind, like fingerprints on an abandoned handrail. As long as someone tells a story, the character never really dies. Stories that may be total fiction, or conjured up by a child frightened by the world who saw his grandmother as someone larger than life - an undying figure of strength and stability, like Queen Elizabeth, or the legal team at Facebook. But stories that are told nonetheless.

I make it my mission to tell my grandmother's story through emulating her. To be happy, but more importantly, to yearn

to see happiness in others. And hopefully when I finally go to rest (probably from doing something incredibly ridiculous), I will be remembered not by my achievements or accolades or Instagram followers, but by my endeavor to make others happy.

Grandma's life was a collection of happy stories told by the people around her, a narrative crafted by good deeds instead of good writing. It was a celebration of someone who dared to write her own story through the lives of others.

A person who dared to be happy.

Description

Wherever we go when we die, our stories live on forever. In that way, stories keep us immortal.

Fingerprints on an Abandoned Handrail tells the story of the author's late grandmother through three distinct recollections, told by an innocent "unreliable narrator" that struggles to grapple with death, love and sacrifice amidst a global pandemic. It depicts the conflicts and complexities of mourning, and lives in the space where we contemplate which reality about our loved ones to tell ourselves.

This is a caricature of a child's psyche that is clutching onto the memory of his grandmother, as he reconstructs what he thinks is real, and what he doesn't mind being fiction.

Dedicated to all whom God has called home. May their stories live on forever.

FINGER PRINTS ON AN ABANDONED HAND RAIL



Derrick Pang

Derrick Pang is an aspiring communicator who dreams of illustrating the human experience through storytelling. He believes that a story is told through its details, whether real or imagined, and sees life through a network of layered metaphors. Derrick also loves people-watching, banana leaf rice, and telling lame jokes.

Romance



Liquid Courage

by Deffiny Michael

Day 1

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Esmæ's fingers tapped the elevator button furiously, willing for the doors to close as quickly as they could. She knew she was going to be late...again. The fault lies solely on her since she deliberately chose to press the snooze button for her alarm, which led to this frustrating situation. She had to be in the office by 9am, with the meeting amongst department managers starting at 9:30am, she had a couple of things to prepare for her manager, and the time shown on her watch indicated that the clock was nearing 8:40am. She had to leave her apartment now.

Mentally cursing herself for procrastinating in the morning, she watched in relief as the elevator doors shut close. Just as the doors almost closed, a hand appeared between them. Judging by the silver ring on the index finger and the bulging veins on the wrist, her heart began thumping. For a moment, she forgot about the fact that she was going to be buried 6-feet under by her manager when she stepped foot inside the office.

The elevator door opened again, revealing a tall, lean-muscled, wide shoulder figure and she braced herself with the view that was about to invade her line of sight. He has a

head full of wavy, dark hair that was now slicked back; sharp nose, high cheekbones, defined and strong jaw, adorned with dimples that appear when he smiles. She internally sighed at the sight of him with the usual pair of glasses that framed his hazel orbs and dark lashes; adding on to the fact that she has always been a sucker for males in glasses, especially him, she could almost hear the devil cackling at her gawking expression. He was wearing a dark blue button-down collar, paired with a pair of black dress pants that complement his long legs. With the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, she could see the tattoo that was peeking out from his right bicep. He was carrying a briefcase on one hand while the other held his phone.

Jeremiah Matthews entered the elevator, showing her the familiar lopsided smile that made his dimples pop which her heart struggled to get used to. Before she could form a response, he looked away and pressed the button for the elevator doors to close, and then he looked down at his phone again. That was it. She immediately felt her heart slowly sinking to her stomach.

Despite living in the same building, same floor and living in opposite units, she could count the handful of times they have had a proper conversation within the 6 months of living here. Thrice. All three times starting from her side with it ending from his side. Never once has he looked at her for a full minute, let alone 10 seconds, even though they take the elevator together almost every day.

Yes, she counted.

Unless she reminisced the very first time they had met, with her knocking on his door to introduce herself as his new neighbour. From the moment he opened the door to greet her until she walked away, his gaze did not waver from her figure. Even then, he barely spoke a sentence. To add on, the fate that befell her where they both worked in the same company, with her working as an assistant to a public relation manager while he worked as the manager of the financial accounting department on a different floor. Even if they did see each other in the office, they never greeted each other. She tried not to be bothered by this, but the emotions that raced through her mind made this situation overall pathetic.

As the elevator descended, she decided she had no dignity left to lose when it came to him. Mustering the courage, she opened her mouth, “Running late?”. Her question lingered in the air for 5 seconds before he stopped moving his fingers across the screen of his phone and he lifted his head, his gaze falling onto her face. Tightening her grip on her bag strap, she looked up at him, taken aback by his sudden stare.

Barely reaching five-two, it was evident that Jeremiah towers over Esmæ. She’d say he’s about six-one at least, way taller than her. Standing in an enclosed space, his height overwhelmed her.

Moreover, she realised he is indeed very much more handsome up close from the first time she saw him. The kind of handsome that everyone notices, and she was sure he basks in the glory of the attention he receives.

He smiled at her, a little half smile to acknowledge her presence accompanied by a fractional nod of the head. The dimples did not make an appearance this time, causing the disappointment to resurface.

Calm down, Esmae.

She looked away, for the first time, though it was not much of a difference seeing how they barely spoke. She realised it was a futile attempt to start a conversation now when they were rushing to work.

“What about you? Decided to hit the snooze button?” He asked.

Her head snapped up so quickly that she was surprised she did not hear a pop sound. Was she surprised at his question or the way he phrased his question? In their previous conversations, he was never playful. However, the stance he was in right now; the hand he held his phone now shoved into the pocket of his dress pants with his head cocked slightly to the side, his smile slowly broadening as he stared at her, patiently waiting for a response.

Was there a hint of tease in his tone?

Shaking her head, she opened her mouth to reply only to clamp it shut after seconds. She was dumbfounded and flustered at his questions since he never once continued the conversation she started. For the second time throughout their encounters, his gaze did not waver. She definitely did not expect that.

She opened her mouth again to reply only to hear the *ding* of the elevator reaching the ground floor, halting the conversation they barely started. However, neither of them moved. She heard her heart pounding loudly, the sound of it echoing in her ears, tempting her to place both of hands on her chest in hopes of calming herself in front of him but she knew she would be making a fool of herself. She could only mentally pray that the sound was reaching only to her ears and not his. Once again, Esmæ closed her mouth. He then shifted his gaze to the elevator doors, removing his hand from his pocket and reaching out to hold the elevator door on his side.

“Guess I am right.” He said as he turned his head towards Esmæ, his smile still dancing on his lips. He continued, “Go on, Esmæ. Time is ticking.” Amusement sparkling in his eyes, he waited for her to step out of this elevator.

Is it the coffee?

The sound of her last name from his mouth snapped her out of her trance. Immediately looking down at her heels, she meekly nodded her head and exited the elevator.

Day 2

Esmæ knew she would be early to work today. After the close call from yesterday, she knew she could not afford to make the same mistake. Yet, she lingered in the foyer of her floor unit for a while, shamelessly hoping to see Jeremiah even though the chances of him appearing this early in the morning were slim. Unfortunately, her car decided to give up halfway on the way back home. Sure, it was a second-hand ten-year-old car, but it took her from point A to point B until last night. Now she had to use the public transport which would take up an hour of her time, hence she had to wake up at an ungodly hour to accommodate her needs.

Realising she was being an idiot for waiting, she pressed the button. Just as the elevator reached her floor, she heard the sound of footsteps nearing her presence and turned her head. There he was. His wavy hair was unruly this time, some of the strands falling in front of his eyes, a briefcase in his hand.

Her eyebrows raised in surprise at the sight of him, lifting her right hand to wave, to which he responded enthusiastically. The doors opened, and he ushered her into the elevator.

“Oh.” She awkwardly mumbled and looked away from him, shuffling into the elevator with her head hung low when she realised she was gaping at him.

“Did you get to work on time yesterday?” *That husky voice.*

She nodded her head, pressing her lips into a tight line, still struck mute by his sudden appearance. He continued staring at her expectantly, his eyes trailing over her head down to her face. “Stop staring at me.” She wanted to tell him. Did she have something on her face or does her curly hair look messy?

“Are you waiting for a reply, or do I have something on my face?” She blurted out. The second the words left her lips, she wanted to smack herself on the face. Now that he was making a conversation, she was throwing away the opportunity. What is wrong with her?

Surprised by her question, his eyes widened for a moment before he chuckled. His gaze left her. “You tell me, Esmæ.”

Deciding to give this conversation a try, she mumbled, “Barely on time, seeing as how my manager was trying to shoot laser beams at me with her glare when I entered the office.”

He immediately looked at her and chuckled, his dimples mesmerising her. *Curse you, Jeremiah.* She saw his lips moving but no sound coming from them, she shifted her gaze to his eyes. The amusement in his eyes slithered through her, prompting her to narrow her eyebrows.

“What?” She snapped, suddenly tensing at his smug stance. She hated the fact that she was very much affected by his presence more than she could care to admit. Jeremiah shook his head and looked ahead; the smile still intact. She pursed her lips and squinted her eyes, wondering how he could be so energetic while she was struggling to stand on her feet. “I saw you walking back home last night.” He added.

“My car gave up on me, hence the early morning.” She paused when the elevator reached the ground floor. “Public transport can be a killer.” She continued as she stepped out, his footsteps falling behind her as they walked. Sneaking a glance at him from the corner of her eyes, she wondered how it would feel to be enveloped by that faint yet clean mint scent outside their elevator ride.

“Want a ride?” She froze in her tracks, eyes wide as she met his hazel orbs. He stopped in his tracks and turned his body to her, his expression softened when he looked at her. Her eyes lighted up in naïve hope, grateful at his act of kindness. “Really?” She whispered.

“Come on, Esmæ.” He nudged his head towards the direction of the entrance as he started sauntering, prompting her to keep up with his long legs. Mildly shaking her head in bewilderment, she turned and jogged a few steps to reach his pace before he changed his mind about giving her a ride.

“Oh, why are you up so early?” She asked him as they exited the entrance of their building.

“Isn’t it too early for questions?”

“Jeremiah!”

Day 3

Placing one hand on her hips, Esmæ stretched her hand out towards the elevator call button and pressed it. Removing her index finger, she frowned in confusion when the call button did not light up. Leaning forward, she attempted to press the call button another time, waiting for it to light up but it did not.

“That’s odd.” She muttered, taking a step back to stare at the digital elevator display at the top, seeing the floor number that was being displayed before looking down at the call button.

Why is she seeing double though?

“Stupid elevator.” She hissed as she stumbled backwards. All she wanted to do after a night out with her friends was to take a hot shower and lie on her soft bed. It was nearing 12 midnight and work starts at 9am tomorrow, yet she was nowhere close to accomplishing her task. Without luck on her side, the elevator was not functioning.

A presence appeared at her back. The faint scent of mint and warmth enveloped her from the tip of her head to her toes. Before she could turn around to smack the individual that was invading her privacy, she felt the hot breath teasing the top of her head. She tensed, stumbling a step

forward when a hand grabbed her forearm and pulled her back.

“What are you playing at? Especially on the wall?” Jeremiah questioned.

Yanking her arm out of his grip, she turned around and faced him just as he leaned forward to press the elevator call button that was appearing in double form in her vision, only to see it lit up. Jeremiah leaned back and stared at her. His brows were lifted, his eyes were bright with humour. A smug expression on his face. Instead of his usual office attire, he was wearing a dark green sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and jeans. His wavy hair was unruly as though he ran his hands through it a couple of times.

Esmæ rolled her eyes, “Let me be, Jeremy. Stupid elevator.” She said loudly, a hint of annoyance lacing on her tone. Outwardly ignoring his presence while her insides squirmed in nervousness, she tapped her foot nervously on the shiny marble floor as she watched the numbers descend.

“Who is Jeremy?” He questioned in accusation, to which she blatantly replied. “You, you doofus.”

Finally, the elevator stopped at the ground floor and the doors opened. Jeremiah gestured for Esmæ to precede him into the elevator. Internally ensuring she could make it into the space in a straight line, she pressed her floor number, 23.

Throughout the act, she felt Jeremiah's stare lingering on her as he followed into the elevator, for what felt like forever, his expression questioning.

Crossing her arms, she snapped, "What?"

He ignored her question, leaning forward deliberately slowly and pressing the floor number 23, that is right below the one she just pressed and stood back. The elevator door closed.

She blinked.

She was sure she had pressed the right button.

"Are you drunk?" He asked in disbelief. She immediately looked down at her shiny black heels, pretending to be interested in them when all she wanted to do was to hide inside her blanket.

"Whatever." She mumbled and crossed her arms, feeling the embarrassment creep in. Sure, she had some drinks with her friends. Despite knowing her tolerance for alcohol, she needed to release the work tension that was wearing her down. It was a Saturday night after all. Plus, seeing Jeremiah laughing and leaving his home with a beautiful female before she left her apartment brought a painful twist in her chest, being another excuse that led her to drinking more than her weight could carry. A guy is allowed to go on a date, after all. *A handsome guy, at that.*

Jeremiah is handsome. She acknowledged that. Adding on to the fact that she has seen the kind of ladies he went for, they were jaw-droppingly gorgeous which drove the knife deeper into her chest because she knew where these one-sided feelings were going to lead her.

Before her brain could comprehend a proper sentence, she blurted out, “So what if I am? I had fun. You did too, didn’t you?” Sensing the confusion Jeremiah was emanating, she snapped her gaze up to find his eyes on her. “What?” He cocked his head to the side, dark eyes appraising, both of his hands were shoved in his jean's pockets.

“Your date, Jeremy.” She paused, feeling her head sway slightly. “I mean, Jeremiah.” She sputtered. “I saw you, looking all smiley and jolly. Of course, you had fun! Well, you could do better.” She exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air to add emphasis to her statement. She knew tomorrow, when this moment hit her, she was going to cry in humiliation and lock herself in the bedroom, possibly never coming out again. However, at this moment, she took advantage of her tipsy self.

Humour flashed across his eyes, a stark contrast to the blank look on his face. His nonchalant behaviour somehow angered her. Why was she bothered?

“Well, someone’s bold today.” His comment caught her by surprise. “Excuse me?”

Is it the alcohol?

“What brought this on?” He questioned, this time crossing his arm and turning his body to stare at her. “You could barely look at me in the eye during normal days.” He added, smirking at the sight of her clenching her fists.

She gasped, “Are you calling me a coward?” He continued staring at her, smug.

“Stop staring at me!” She exclaimed, pushing his shoulders. His eyes widened in uncertainty. Taken aback by her bold attitude, he stumbled backwards, grabbing her wrist and pulling her to him as his back hit the wall of the elevator. Esmæ gasped at the sudden action, leaning onto him. Shocked, Esmæ placed her hands on his chest, feeling his muscle contract at the contact as she stared at him with wide eyes.

For a moment, their breathing was all that could be heard.

“Somebody’s quite bold now, huh?” He repeated. The teasing glint danced in his eyes as he looked down at her, a smile forming on his lips as he stared at her, swiftly glancing down at her lips before meeting her eyes again. He did not even look flustered. The doors of the elevator opened, saving her from making anymore foolish actions.

Pushing herself off him, she immediately exited the elevator. Head hung low, she walked as quick as her legs could bring her, possibly, far away from him. Standing in front of her unit, she took her keys out, ready to unlock the door.

“Breaking into someone’s home is a crime, you know?” Esmae stopped herself, hand gripping the doorknob tightly. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly as she took in a deep breath before lifting her gaze up at the unit number. Humiliation burnt her face.

‘Of course, I would have gotten the wrong unit.’ Esmae thought.

“I am moving out.” She mumbled under her breath.

Hastily releasing the doorknob, she quickly turned around, ready to bolt into her actual home only to find herself staring at Jeremiah’s sweatshirt.

Glancing up at him through her lashes, he was already staring down at her, wearing the familiar dimpled smile that stole her breath away. He let out a sigh and glanced away for a moment before he looked back at her. “Esmae,” he whispered.

Time stood still as she felt his fingers ghosting over her bare shoulders. Before he wrapped his hand around the nape of her neck, gently rubbing it, he tilted her head back so she

would look at him. She thanked her lucky stars for choosing to wear her black off-shoulder dress that has received many compliments for the way it hugged her figure. Jeremiah leaned in close, his hot breath fanning over her lips, his mouth just inches away from hers.

“Since you are a scaredy cat who chooses to only stare from afar and not do anything about this, this is what’s going to happen.” He said, low enough that only she could hear it. “You are going to go back to your home, have a hot shower, and a good sleep.” He continued while she stared at him. “Tomorrow evening, you and I. It’s a date.”

She scoffed, smacking his hand away to seem unaffected despite feeling giddy on the inside. “We’ll see.” She walked past him towards her unit, her fingers shaking from excitement as she unlocked her door. When she stepped inside, he called out.

“Oh also, I will let my sister know,” he paused, lifting his hands to air quote, “about how I could have done better tonight.”

Esmae paused in her tracks, letting his words sink in. *Sister?*

That was his sister?!

With the thought of wanting the ground to swallow her up, she slammed her door on his face and his deep booming laughter reverberated through the hallway.

Next Day

Jeremiah

Hands firmly pressed against the door; Jeremiah leaned forward as he peeked through the peephole. The sound of the clock ticking throughout the living room spiked his nerves as he patiently waited for the door on the other side to open.

A creep much, Jeremiah?

He immediately winced at the mocking thought from his subconscious self, taking a few steps back, away from the door. He wanted to make sure that his time aligned with hers when he walked out of his home, just so he could spend a few minutes in her presence. The thought of Esmæ overwhelmed his mind to the point, he was almost convinced he was crazy for behaving like a fool whenever she came into his line of sight. It was near impossible for him to remain calm when his heart always screams for help when he is around her.

The vibration of his work phone snapped him out of his thoughts. Grabbing his phone, he stared at his digital clock on his wall. A frown formed on his lips, his mind wandering to Esmæ as he walked towards the door. He had to leave for work.

Did I scare her last night?

The thoughts swarmed his mind as he locked the door of his unit. Sighing in disappointment, he sauntered towards the elevator. Tapping the call button, he turned his head to the door of her unit, hoping for one last time she would appear. Moments passed, the elevator dinged open, he stepped in.

Maybe I came across as too strong last night.

Just as his finger reached for the floor button, he heard her voice, echoing down the hallway. “Wait!” Warm contentment settled in his chest at the sight of the familiar short silhouette, speed walking towards his direction.

Not you, the elevator.

Suddenly, she lifted her head, only to lock eyes with him. Her eyes went wide for a fraction of a second when their eyes met, before her gaze darted away. Lowering her head, she entered the elevator. He knew that she could sense his gaze on her from the moment their gaze met yet she was trying so hard to not look at him.

“What?”

His brows quirked at her biting tone, the sharp slant of her eyes as she glared at him.

“Tardy as always, Ms Esmæe.”

Rolling her eyes at him before her lashes fluttered as her eyes fell shut for a moment, and she pushed a quiet sigh past her lips like she needed a second to get a handle on herself. Fingers tightening on her bag, she muttered, “Shut up Jeremiah.”

Chuckling in amusement, he cajoled, “Come, catch a ride with me.”

She pursed her lips and stared at him. For a moment, he felt conscious of himself. Feeling his nerves spiked as he felt her lingering stare, he was curious to know what was running through her mind.

You look fine, idiot.

“No.” Her answer rendered him speechless.

What?

Composing himself, he quickly formulated a question in his mind before he asked, “You rather be late to work then?” As he waited for a response, the elevator door dinged open. Swallowing the disappointment that was rising in his throat, he walked out of the elevator. “Fine by me.”

Few steps out of the elevator, he felt fingers wrapped around his forearm. Running his gaze from her hand up to her face, he stared at her in surprise.

Where did the bold Esmæ come from?

“What time will we be meeting...tonight?” She questioned, dragging the last word as though she was not sure of her own question. She held her chin up high, trying her best to not cut off eye contact. With the confidence that surged through his body, he smiled as he dipped his head, holding her gaze. His smile became wider when her gaze darted away, looking everywhere except at him while removing her hand from his forearm.

“Excited much?” He probed, feeling smug. Without waiting for a verbal response that he now knew she was too shy to say, instead he grabbed the hand that was previously latched onto his forearm. The beat of his heart increased tremendously as he wrapped his hand around hers, his pulse roaring in his ears as he felt her warm palm against his. His smile turned bigger as she gasped, the pad of his thumb ghosting over her skin.

He secretly hoped her heart was beating as fast as his.

“What are you doing?” She asked, nervousness lacing onto her tone as she tried to remove her hand from his to which he tightened his grip.

“There’s no need for such questions when I’m picking you up from work too.” He said, walking towards the entrance with her hand in his.

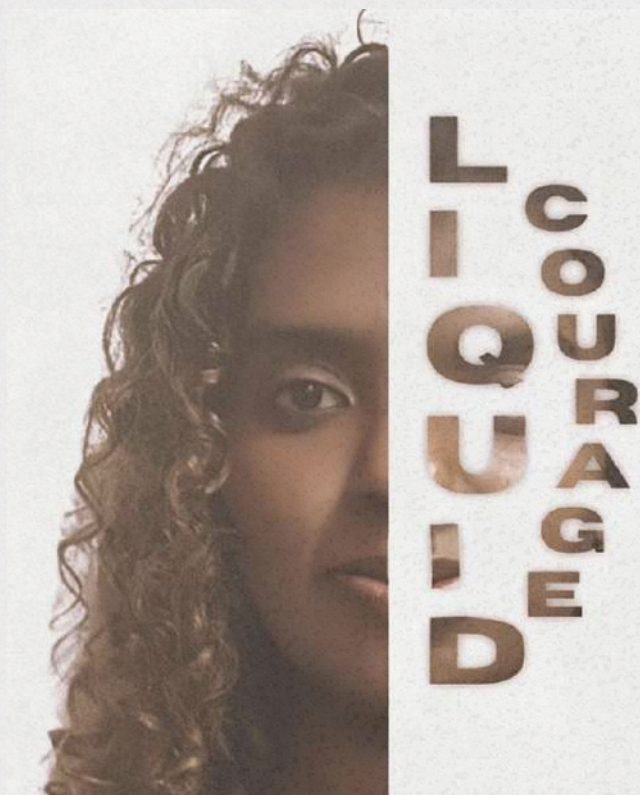
“I- I’ll look like a mess!” She exclaimed.

“I can handle that. It’s our first date after all.”

“Jeremiah!”

Description

Sometimes, love takes root in the most unexpected places, surpassing the need for grand confessions; it blossoms through the quiet warmth of shared moments with subtle hints of courage. Esmae and Jeremiah live in the same apartment building, work for the same company yet they remain strangers in the confines of the silent elevator that carries them everyday. Just when Esmae resigned to the idea of never speaking to the guy who has captivated her heart from the moment she laid eyes on him, Jeremiah takes the first step by breaking the silence.



Deffiny Michael

A hopeless romantic at heart, Deffiny Michael's fascination with romance started at a young age through the world of "Wattpad". A female who finds solace in writing, she attempts to express her thoughts into words that she hopes to evoke the same emotion in readers as she feels herself. Whether she is weaving stories or baring her soul in a journal, writing always serves as her sanctuary.

An Array of : THE MÉLANGE's Writers

"Every piece of writing derives from the emotion and passion of one's heart."

We carved our creativity into words
in the genre of Fantasy.

Shaid Shaqqiq
(Flowers)



Leng Phooi Jing
(Little Red Riding Hood & Mr. Wolf)

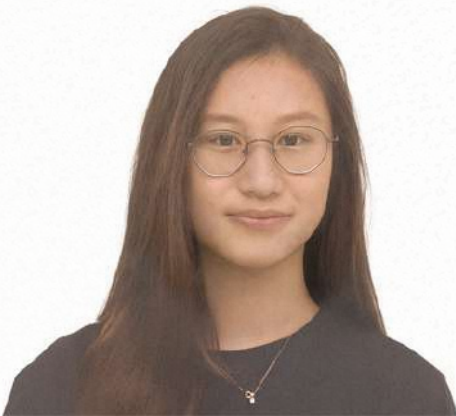


An Array of : THE MÉLANGE's Writers

"Every piece of writing derives from the emotion and passion of one's heart."

We expressed all that we have experienced in the genre of Human Experience.

Siow Kah Yi
(Two Square Tiles;
Eggplant)



Megan Padmini
(The Noise)

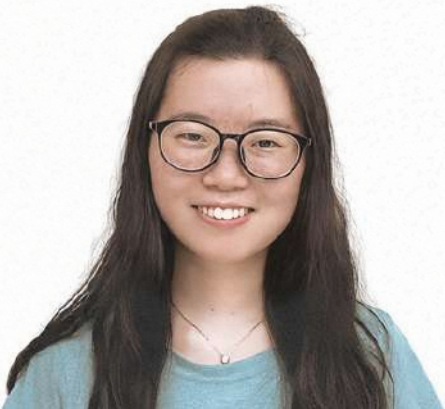


An Array of : THE MÉLANGE's Writers

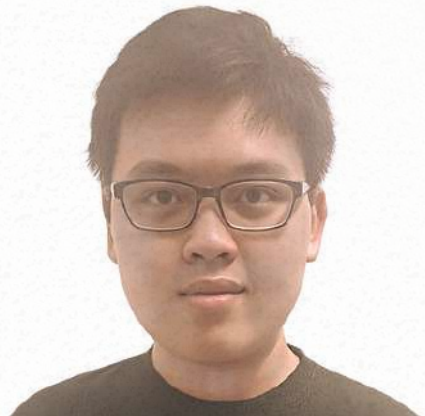
"Every piece of writing derives from the emotion and passion of one's heart."

We expressed all that we have experienced in the genre of Human Experience.

Tan Hui Jin
(I Will Be Okay;
Fleurs d'amour;
#theucsicat)



Derrick Pang
(Fingerprints On An
Abandoned Handrail)



An Array of : THE MÉLANGE's Writers

"Every piece of writing derives from the emotion and passion of one's heart."

I brought the imagination in my head to life in the genre of Romance.

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