



**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
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**BUT WE HAPPENED ANYWAY: SHORT STORIES  
ON DISORDER**

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# **But We Happened Anyway: Short Stories on Disorder**

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## Abstract

This MA thesis, *But We Happened Anyway: Short Stories on Disorder*, consists of a collection of five short stories and an exegesis detailing my research and writing process. When researching mental illness narratives in Singaporean literature, I found that they aimed largely to raise awareness, or validate personal experiences with mental illness; I wish instead to portray the mentally disordered without having them explain or justify being mentally disordered.

The collection of short stories is my attempt at capturing what it means to be mentally disordered in Singapore, and to reclaim autonomy over our – the mentally disordered – narratives. The writing is highly stylized, varying in form and structure, the rhythm of which juddering and rocking offbeat, to portray the disordered mind. They were written in an attempt to answer the questions: What do stories written *by* the mentally disordered look like? What do stories written *for* the mentally disordered look like?

**But We Happened Anyway: Short Stories on  
Disorder**

## Sleeping Beauty

"How about," says Vincent, head cocked, one arm over the back of his seat, "you write a story about mental illness?"

I look up from my 3DS and it flashes sadly as my character is blasted into oblivion. In the hot, bustling canteen, bushy-eyed freshies scurrying around in packs, our table is enveloped in a sudden pocket of chill. Skittish, I lean back against the mint green plastic chair and scrunch down so that my thick hair flairs out around my head and neck like a helmet. It is a weak line of defense but considering that I'm in a sundress and heels, it's better than nothing.

"I mean," he continues, oblivious, "you have anxiety, right *anot*, Audrey?"

"Actually, anxiety's only a symptom. What I actually have is bipolar disorder – but you die also cannot tell anyone ah," is at the tip of my tongue but it's the sort of thing you spend your life hiding shamefully, so I swallow it and say instead, "Yes. I have anxiety."

"Then you've got like, an insider's perspective to all *those* people." When Vincent lounges in his chair like that, he reminds me of a cartoon king on his throne. As the student editor of the English department's monthly publication, *Epitome*, I bet he fancies himself as such, the curator of student opinions, educating the masses of important, trending social issues. Instead of a cloak, he's got a fashionably distressed black leather jacket (in Singapore's heat!) and he's crowned by an impeccable high fade. With a careless flick of his wrist, he gestures to a wider audience, the canteen, all those people, his people, and drawls, "People like to read this sort of drama nowadays. Mental Health Week is coming, I'll give you a feature. Centrefold. You can contribute to the publication."

"Hey!" Never mind that I had only followed blindly him into *Epitome*, NTU's English Drama and Literature club, I'd been properly contributing! Being a socially redeemable member of the student population. Wrote a bimonthly column of modern fairy tale adaptations. It's the most I've ever been part of the school.

There's something in his laugh that always feels placating. "I mean, to the *special* features."

"But I'm so narrow. It's not the sort of thing I write." Already, however, I feel a secret thrill. I *am* a narrow writer, but it *is* the sort of thing I write. I never knew how to tell him, but I'd put bits of my disorder into all of them - social phobia into *The Little Mermaid*, hallucinations into *Aladdin*, dissociation into *Beauty and the Beast*... I'd been writing mental illness all the while. But in secret. Always in secret.

"*Ya lah*, but it's not impossible. Look, I'm normal, but I wrote one before. *The Centre Cannot Hold*. Got read?"

Three months ago, published in the January issue. The protagonist was well written, complex, and humorously self-deprecating in the way that is currently trendy. His girlfriend was crazy and his noble, self-sacrificial love set her on the idyllic beachside path to recovery.

"I don't think so," I reply, averting my gaze, "but I'll check it out." Pause. I watch his plate of *nasi lemak* instead of him. It's gone cold since he keeps playing with his tablet. How many people read *Epitome's* monthly magazine? For whatever small number that is, I could show them a – deviation. An alternative. "When's the deadline?"

He grins. He knows he's won. "Second week of April."

My blood test, the one that makes sure my medication isn't sweetening my blood to sugary rot, is in the same week. I'll have to start taking my meds correctly again, and they'll



wreck me. I'll have to start writing at once. Nothing like a deadline to spur me into action. "Ya, sure. I'll try."

"Great! I'll look forward to it." He claps once, and then puts me as a memo into his bullet journal.

#

Oddly, both Ma and Pa are home when I get back from school. Home. At the same time. While the sun's still shining. Shouldn't Pa be in his office? Is Ma's auntie boutique closed for the day? Neither of them has fixed schedules, but. I'm shocked. Slightly fearful.

The last time they'd spoken to each other for an extended period of time was – my fault. It'd been my birthday. Resigned as I was to celebrate my 21st birthday alone and with little fanfare, they were not. Bought me an expensive cake smothered with fondant, fought over whether my first adult dress should be red or blue. Why did it matter? I hadn't any friends to celebrate with. Came the big day, I sat in that blue, off-shoulder dress on the living room floor, and ate that cake with the neighbour's kid I babysat. It was fun, and yet.

I call from the doorway, "My family!"

"My daughter!" Pa waves from the living room, eyes never leaving the TV. Ma pokes her head out from the kitchen.

"Oh good," she trills, greeting the *dabao* in my hands instead of me. "Dinner! Come eat with me. I'm watching *Goong*. We can watch together." She unplugs her headphones from her iPad and her Korean actor of the week cries for my affection. It clashes with the explosions from Pa's western action flick in the living room.

"Can't. Gotta go meet friends in a bit. Got Project Work. I just came home to use Wi-Fi, research a bit."

Bless the dining table, giant beast that divides the house into its two territories. A neutral zone, piled high with bills and papers and the family's lone laptop. I don't know where to start. Singaporean mental illness books? Everyone already read *Off Centre* for A levels, and it was too old to be relevant. *The Sound of SCH*, but the crazy one wasn't the protagonist. Even Google only spits out statistics, last updated in the 90s. The odd smattering of books written by the friend's step cousin's wife of the mentally ill. Research reveals that the most common method of suicide is jumping. Must be our iconic HDB landscape. I'm a common Singaporean; I can do that.

"What's that?"

I slam the laptop shut. Ma makes a face, but carries on to her food. Thank god for myopia.

"Porn ah?" shouts Pa, and then he laughs at what a cool, hip father he's being.

"Ya, porn!" I hurriedly start deleting the browser history.

I mustn't let them find out or even get suspicious. Ma likes the manic part and Pa likes the depression part. If I could suck the manic part out and scrape out all that fleshy depression, I'd be empty like the coconut husk piggy bank that sits in the middle of our TV bench, the one from our last holiday together three years ago. Then neither of them would like me, but neither would *dislike* me, and I'd be worth displaying.

Escape.

Escape – escape! Phone, earphones, foolscap, pencil case, enough money for drinks – keys, slippers – halfway down the corridor, I turn back to yell bye, almost run into neighbour's stupid plants that clog the corridor – escaped!

My favourite place to write is the void deck three blocks over, tucked behind the one with the mama shop so no one ever notices it. It's the cat *macik's* favourite place too. She puts paper plates of fish or minced chicken out everyday, so it always reeks of cat piss, off milk, and mouldy meat. But cats! At least one will sit next to me while I write. Some let me pet them. I don't know what that says about how I smell, but it makes me feel more like I actually have the friends I lie about.

Set up before I write. Bag on lap, you can never be too careful these days. Pencil case out. Foolscap out and spread across the table's concrete surface, for protection – the last time I fell asleep on the table's naked surface, I got rashes on my cheek.

Drink water.

Music.

Pat cat.

Write.

*When she returned to the five-room condo after school, it was empty. Her parents' bedroom always felt the emptiest. There was something about the wardrobes hidden into the walls, or the bare bedside table, or the bed in the stark centre of it all with nary a crease in its sheets that screamed, no one real lived here.*

*The ceiling-to-floor windows that flooded the room with clean light faced only an MRT station in the distance. Between them sprawled an unoccupied lot of overgrown grass.*

*No one could possibly look in. Beneath the window, fourteen storeys down, was a wide, decorative flower bed of bougainvillea. No one could look up.*

*After a moment of deliberation, she deposited her school bag by the door and walked in, shoes and all. The shoes, she finally took off by the bedroom windows, the socks as well. Her uniform, the full white of a Christian school, stained, she kept on to feel one with the clouds.*

*It was almost too easy to clamber onto the ledge, one foot on the bedside table, the other swung over the water stained glass. The steel-grey support beam protruded below the window just enough for her to balance on, feet slanted carefully. One deep breath, hands behind her on the window sill, she hoisted herself up. The sudden breeze was exhilarating, more than anything she'd felt in weeks. For that split second, she imagined herself pitching forward and falling. Instead, she leaned back, hooked her ass on the window sill, and sat.*

*This had to be the best view in the entire house, or as it were, outside the house. The sky opened up at her feet, a vibrant cerulean dashed with painfully white clouds. The glare stung her eyes but she refused to squint; this was a once in a lifetime experience after all. From this vantage, the lot became a lush green field, rare in Singapore for a piece of land to be so underdeveloped. If she leaned with her heels against the dirty glass and dug her fingers into the edge, she could see the large shady tree in the corner that she used to run away from home to. Or further, and she –*

*Not that she particularly wanted to die, but there was a hollow in her that didn't mind either way. The fear of falling was tight in her groin, and her knees wanted to pee?*

No, not that. Peeing knees, while accurate, probably didn't make literary genius.

And it has to be a work of genius, doesn't it? I've only got this one chance. Be all end all Mentally Ill. Stamped with my name on it. Not quite a confession, but a confession all the same.

Try again.

#

Vincent's supposed to be here an hour ago, to sit with me. He isn't, but that's okay. Normally I don't want to be the loser sitting alone in the canteen playing games by myself, but this time I'm sitting alone playing games with someone online. Big difference. Not loser.

*She's* sitting there right now, Phillipa, three tables down, with her friends from her department. Occasionally she looks up to laugh at me when I lose, shakes her fist when I win. Never too obviously or her friends would call me over; I don't want to sit with strangers, and she knows that.

The miracle that is Phillipa. In Singapore, usually, you've no luck playing online unless you're at a con, but these past few weeks I'd been playing with someone constantly on Super Smash Bros like I am. Her avatar was cute, big round eyes, kitten mouth, crown perched atop their fluffy curly hair. Knowing my luck, I told myself, it was probably some creepy loser in a t-shirt with some little girl character on it. It's not like I mind that type of nerd, or I do, but I've also put so much effort not to look like... That. All makeup and painted nails and quaint skirts past the knees.

And then she'd popped up, the splitting image of her avatar in cute t-shirt, denim shorts, and wet market flip flops. Smiled at me with her kitten mouth, and held up her 3DS, its green light winking at me in greeting. I looked down and mine was winking back. We started a PvP match. I'd already known her habits, how she rushes for items no matter how

useless, how she's so much better at getting Smash Balls. I felt like I already knew her, once upon a dream.

When Vincent finally arrives, he is out of breath. He begins to excuse himself, student leaders meeting ran late, then stops to peer at me. Mid-smile, I freeze, and stare back.

"You're fine?" He sounds surprised. Which, fair enough, the last time I couldn't sit alone, too much self-conscious anxiety, I put my head down and napped instead of writing the essay due the next day.

"I have grown up!" I declare.

"Good. So you can handle some critique then." Vincent takes his laptop out. When it whirs out of sleep mode, my draft is up on screen. He jabs the screen, leaving grease marks. "I'm not saying it isn't a good piece of writing, because it is," he starts.

*But*, I think.

"*But*," he says, "what we want is a more... Hard hitting. Still a story, but also social critique. You know, Tumblr rant level stuff. This is too... Scenic."

Which, expected. But I still have time before the deadline right? I want to play a bit more.

#

My week is spent rushing home to check the letterbox before Pa comes back pays off. There, padded white envelope, my pills. I stuff it in my bag as I ride the elevator up. Ma doesn't even turn as I beeline to the room, only waves her chopsticks at me, roasted duck from the kopitiam downstairs caught between them. She will appreciate the fixed me. More energy. Bright blown eyes. Awake.

My excitement, however, is short lived. Even as I shake the bubbled foils out of its flimsy box, and pop the pills into my pill bottle – the brown plastic one, the *official* one, the one that my own prescription comes in – I am reminded I cannot take them for another week. The blood test is soon.

The packaging and foils are thrown straight down the chute. Back to my room. So much to do.

I sit and stare.

My phone calendar glares up at me. Four days left to the blood test and seven to the magazine deadline. On my desk, my pill cutter and rejected story drafts sprawl out to watch me, morbidly curious.

What do, what do?

The happy pill is so small that it makes the cutter – palm-sized, translucent pink plastic, scratched up and cracked in places – look like it's over-compensating something terrible. The cutter goes back into the drawer. Happy pill, chill pill, kill pill, and one more for the side effects of all the rest. I don't – I can't – if I don't take them all, I cannot –

With great reluctance, I press my thumbnail into the wee little white tablet's groove. The happy pill resists. It wants to be whole too. It wants to be accepted for all that it is too.

Bad break, and the pill tablet shatters. The nice half goes into the bottle. The other... I pick up the paper that the remaining half is on, and tilt it into my mouth. The jagged clumps of powder hit the back of my mouth but what sort of pill junkie would I be if I had a gag reflex? Swallow. Lick off the remnants. Bitter. Nasty. I wash it down with Milo.

The building rocks as I get into bed. When I close my eyes, it tilts hard enough that I nearly slide out of bed. No sleep for a while then. OneNote app.

*She wanted to sleep.*

*The black little creature dwelling in the swamps of her stomach refused to settle that night, climbing up her ribs with its spindly limbs, then squelching its oil-shiny bulk up her throat, making her dizzy from a lack of oxygen. Her eyes watered, then thick tears slid down the side of her face, soaking into her sideburns and pooling in the whorl of her ears as a cold, uncomfortable wetness. She fretted at the ceiling, then squeezed her eyes shut sulkily. There were anchors at her wrists that prevented her from wiping the tears away.*

*Depleted and cranky, she cursed that black creature, but it had resided in her for as long as she could remember; she knew there was no use wishing it away. All she yearned for was sleep. She only wanted to sleep. As she twisted further in her thin blanket, the worn-soft fabric tightened around her bruised limbs. This assault on the creature's vessel infuriated it, and its mass expanded beyond her torso, breeching her limbs, those stick legs pressing pushing unsticking her muscles from the bone. Her tendons began to ache with the effort to keep herself together, especially around the joints where they interweaved.*

*Then began the tremors, little spasming quakes that buzzed through her body, as the creature thrashed in its displeasure. Once upon a time she had feared these impossible earthquakes, but now she recognised them as the temper tantrums that they were. The tremors turned into aggressive juddering, punctuated by short, rasping breaths. The thing would tire itself out soon. All she had to do – all she could do was weather it quietly and hope that it would soon pass. She convinced herself that she was being rocked to sleep. Eventually, with luck, she would drift away.*



#

I oversleep three days in a row and don't leave the house in all that time until 3pm on the last day for the blood test. The Institute of Mental Health (IMH) is just twenty minutes away but still I spill through their glass doors just barely on time, lipstick on my teeth, skirt crumpled.

The clinic that deals with blood work is tucked into the dead end of a corridor, as though hidden away. It's my favourite room. I like the pierce and slide of needle into skin. Lucky for me my inside elbows are such scarred, scratched up messes that they always have to try several times. And my veins are deep, the nurse tells me, and prone to running away from the needle. Eventually she gives up, turning to yell in a coarse Chinese. The head nurse yells back in a China Chinese and grunting and huffing, lumbers out from behind the baby blue curtains that partitioned off the rows of medical equipment. She's a tall, skinny thing, but that jaw is a fierce jut and her lips are a dark slash of mauve. When her fingers encircle my wrist, they are threaded with steel wire. I sit a bit straighter.

China Chinese nurse starts to flick the rest of my arm, sharp snaps from her fingers that leave red marks. Finally she makes up her mind and tells me, the back of the hand a bit more pain, but I don't mind. Exciting really, haven't done that since the CAT scan years ago. This needle is thinner, but the skin here is also thinner. It doesn't actually hurt more, but it's different, so it's fun. I watch the needle creep and reach and – the vein really does run. When finally the needle point connects with its target, my blood spurts out in thick reluctant globs.

Low blood pressure? Low blood pressure. We grimace.

My appointment is booked exactly at the end of the hour it takes for the test results to be released. There isn't much to do at IMH. It's not a very hospital-like hospital. There is no

smell of antiseptic in the air. No odd, brimming pharmacy to wander about in. There is only the occasional odd coloured pillar so that the receptionists can say, turn left at the pink pillar for the cashier. Do other hospitals have this? I don't recall.

Not much to do but sit around, enjoy the view. Less screaming and crying than when I first came through Accidents & Emergencies (A&E), where there were only criminals and then the two of us teenaged girls – this skinny Malay sweetheart, don't know what happened to her, bandaged wrists, couldn't sit straight – since I'm at the regular block now, so when the screaming does happen – an *ah pek* warbles and his walking stick hits the tiled floor like a gunshot – we all flinch. He wails in this gibberish Hokkien, furious and defeated and suicidal all at once. The nurses perk like rabbits, and several of the younger ones glance over, but they do not break stride, striding past with their noses in their clipboards, the rhythmic tap tap tapping of keyboards does not miss a beat.

I want to block it out with music but I might miss that beep that announces the queue numbers. My 3DS is in my bag but when I play, the world sort of shrinks. I cannot miss my number. The doctors are overworked here and see nearly thirty patients each day. If I miss my time slot, the next time I see her for my prescription might be in another two hours, or another month.

Maybe I'll write a thing.

The nurse at the little table outside Dr Lim's office is having a fit with one of her co-workers, something something Tagalog something lost paperwork. I'm almost too afraid to interrupt but I'm here because I'm crazy and everyone knows it.

"Hey, excuse me?"

She turns with such a sudden smile I'm surprised she didn't get whiplashed. "Yes ma'am, how may I help you?"

Haha she thinks I'm a ma'am. "For my school project –" ah, I forgot to plan the question –" do I write about now or last time?"

"What an interesting question!" Her voice is all cotton-fluff, like I'm delicate glassware, and when I fumble and drop the chance to explain, she doesn't miss a beat: "Write about last time! Now is always very hard to write about, because haven't end yet, right? Last time, had a lot of time to think about already."

This is model customer service.

I settle down into my seat, facing the door, and pull up my writing app.

*Shilin's room in particular faced A&E, so even if she wanted to people watch, she mostly saw the handcuffed prisoners, with their bored police escorts. Whose uniforms were more shameful? Their orange jumpsuits or her mint green hospital pajamas? At least she got to wear disposable slippers, while they were barefoot.*

*Although the grills were bolted shut, the windows were covered in chicken wire. They were on the fourth story! Where was one to escape to? Shilin could not figure it out, try as she might on all those hours she had confined to her bed. She raised her hand and pressed. The chicken wire gave slightly, but otherwise resisted and pressed back. In a sudden burst of inspiration, she drew her hand back, and slammed her hand against it with all her might. A sharp pain erupted. Shilin cried out, and clutched at her fingers. Her pinkie nail had caught on the wire, and now it was dangling by a wee scrap of skin.*

*There was a short bark of laughter behind her.*

*"Kau gila ke?!" Her roommate, Afiqah, points at her bleeding finger, her own wrist swaddled in dirty gauze, then cackles again. "You know, that's why got wire, because last time they used to bang the glass! Now what, they put padding?"*

But this sort of writing is lying. I'd gotten the tour around the facilities, clutching on to my mother's skirt as she looked rigidly ahead with that thousand-yard stare, but never committed to being an inpatient. If I took offence to Vincent's story, then I can't write this. There's a validation to being an inpatient that I don't have – not sick enough. I need to remember i'm fortunate that I'm sitting in this wing instead of the emergency department and its ward. Count my blessings that the last time I attempted suicide, I was too young for a diagnosis. But I've been sitting here an hour to see if my prescribed pills have raised my blood sugar to dangerous levels yet – *yet*, an inevitability, but I'd rather die early than *feel* like I want to die early –

Then the doctor calls me in. Her room is wide enough for shelves and that sprawling computer desk but the furniture is empty, no books nor papers, only a wire pen holder with three pens and an A4 plastic sleeve that contains a single piece of paper listing the clinic's contact details. There isn't anything interesting to look at besides her and her permed hair, and her red lipstick, and her manicured nails tap tap tapping at the computer from which my prescription will be issued. She smiles at me. I nod back.

First is to get through the formalities. I've been fine. My mood is fine – for someone like me. I point out my mood level on the graph I drew on my second visit – she's scanned it into my file. How hi-tech. She asks if I can roll up my sleeves. Sure. No problem. Few bruises. She asks me if I've had any episodes. Of course, be lying if I said I hadn't, but small ones, nothing broken, nothing's even fractured. Is all good. There are more pressing matters at hand. Can we get on with business?

"Now, about your medication."

Remember the cotton-fluff voice. Use the cotton-fluff voice. The trick to getting the meds you want, is never saying the meds you want. Learn the side effects, then avoid them. Subtly. This time I'm aiming for antidepressants, which may cause paranoia, agitation, and mania. But I want to be awake. So:

I tell her I got really angry, but rationally angry, at Vincent, a childhood friend of mine. Otherwise, I'm sad. Or, not too sad, I made a friend! Phillipa! We play games. My mood is stable. But I cannot do anything. No spoons, health bar at red, half a heart left, controller jerking. I cannot stay awake.

Dr Lim frowns at her computer. "Well your blood test was fine, so I suppose you can stay on the same prescription for now."

Damn. I wanted to up the dosage for the anti-depressant but this was a victory in itself. Last time she wanted to take me off the prescription entirely. I cannot stay awake with just my mood stabilizers and mail order pills alone.

She continues to speak but I'm doing pill math in my head. My anti-depressants only last half the time, since I don't split them as prescribed. I'll have to scour the forums again for back ups. Bit short on cash right now, but if I'm lucky, I'll find another crazy to swap with. See, our doctors always think it's enough to be not sad, or not want to kill ourselves. It isn't. We want to be able to move. Do something. Be worth something.

"If you want to talk to a psychiatrist, I can arrange it." What? Why? Then I realise she's been glancing down to the bottom right of the computer screen a lot. The clock is there. Our time is almost up. "So you can properly talk to someone, but it'll be \$40 a month."

Math math. I can't afford that. The money would be better spent elsewhere, on different pills. Mail delivered for convenience.

We make an appointment for another blood test in three months.

#

*She woke with a monster sitting heavy on her chest, claws digging between her ribs and squeezing, splintering bone to get to her heart. She gasped, desperate and terrified, as its eyes, ceiling high and sickly yellow, stared down at her. She thrashed, and in her thrashing, she caught a glimpse of a figure in the corner, looming, watching. Her heart tripping as it ran, mind a static mess, she tumbled out of bed, taking the sheets with her. Sweat stuck them to her skin. She clutched at her tangled hair, squeezed her eyes shut, and tried to wrestle her breath back into control.*

*When she opened her eyes, the air was still and empty. Dawn's light had begun to seep through the blinds, illuminating her humiliation. Her blood made a faint rushing sound in her ears, telling her, she would not have a good day.*

"See, now you're getting somewhere!" Vincent grins, poster boy stuff. He's ripped the pages out of my foolscap pad, and spread them before him on the stained canteen table. The corner of one page has dipped into a ring of stale coffee. Every time a student rushes by, the breeze generated makes the papers flutter, which in turn makes me flinch. "Now let's think. What's the catalyst? Motive. Trigger." All these buzzwords. I miss every other word between them. "What's the special day?"

"It was Thursday?" I had class but couldn't wake up. Not even for the toilet. Good thing I'd passed out on my bedroom floor, but it's kind of difficult to recover from wetting

yourself like that. Mail order pills, not long enough yet before they start working. Phillipa was sad to miss our gaming session, but she understood. Nice girl. Best girl.

"Right so – a traumatic event one Thursday ruins all her Thursdays henceforth?" He is saying words. His voice comes from a remote place I cannot pinpoint.

I sit on the canteen chair and my nails are trying to gouge crescents into the rim of my seat but they only skitter over the too-smooth plastic. I am trying to think straight but my mind skitters over concrete thoughts.

"You seem like you've got a handle on this." He reaches out to pat my hand, catches himself, pulls back. He remembers I do not like touching. "That's good, you know? Mentally ill people should have the right to write their own stories. That's why when I wrote that one, I couldn't make the ill person the main character. But you can, you have the authority. No one knows better than you."

He's a good person.

Has tolerated me for years.

Lets me put my writing up.

Sits with me so that I'm not alone.

Friendship is equivalent exchange, give and take, but all I'm doing is take. I refuse to be indebted to him. I'll have to think of something that isn't peeing. *Peeing knees*. Why so much piss? Piss doesn't make good literature.

#

I put another Mentos in my mouth. Roll it with my tongue, careful not to bite. Mentos smooth and slick tastes like choking so I can't fall asleep. The void deck table is littered with wrappers. I've eaten enough Mentos that I don't have to eat anything else today.

My foolscap pad is out in front of me, and it looks like a tetris game in progress, odd-shaped paragraphs twisting around each other, trying to form a single story block. I've even written each paragraph in different coloured ink for clarity, in hopes that I can make sense of them later and piece them together into something coherent. Some sentences don't even end. They cut off halfway. Many halt abruptly and are punctuated prematurely with question marks. Is this the right word? The right turn of phrase? The right way to spell 'me'?

I cannot find the answer.

*The first two years of secondary school, a classmate lent me her pen knife and let me break to a clean blade every time as long as she could watch as I scored the flesh above my knees. In Secondary Three, Pa sat by my hospital bed where I couldn't (failed to) escape and demanded why I wanted to make him cry. Reluctantly, almost resentfully, Ma took me for a mental health assessment, and although I qualified for extra time during examinations for my fault memory, Ma tore up the letter and told my teacher I was good and fine and normal. The girl from my JC class with the same birthday as me climbed the toilet, peered over the cubicle wall, and caught me with my blouse in my hands, sodden with vomit. When she asked, I told her the econs class made me wanna die sia, and the class, we all laughed, so I kept my pill bottle in my locker and forgot it there at graduation.*

Maybe there is no answer.

*On the day after my 21st birthday, I put on my blue adult dress to check myself into the Institute of Mental Health. My parents don't have to know. The doctor at the polyclinic*



*saw my dress, laughed, and asked me if I was there for an MC to escape work. I laughed back, and told him I was there for a referral to IMH, on account of all the hallucinations I have. He didn't laugh after that, like I'd made some particularly distasteful joke. Two weeks later, a different doctor gave me round white tablets that stopped me from killing myself, and in exchange, they would slowly taint my blood with sugar. If they work, I will take them for life. I am hopeful.*

Pen to paper, pen to paper.

*My teeth are chattering as I speak, except I can't speak from the chattering, which makes chattering ironic.*

Is that even how to use ironic? I ask the cat next to me, but she's unsure as well.

*I can say I've tried to commit suicide three times with a perfectly straight face. It is perfectly true. It is as easy to say as ordering lunch, easier, probably. My first was at eleven after all. It is a truth I have been living with for a decade. That's a long time to keep being upset. It sounds tedious. I cannot do it.*

I try to explain to the cat, this is the problem with my writing. Tedious. What is the point? Where is the climax, the dramatic conclusion to my life's story? The other characters, the complex and humorously self-deprecating love that fixes me? Was sick, am sick, will be sick. It just keeps dragging on.

But isn't that how all life is?

#

Past 7pm, lectures have largely ended and most of the students have wandered home. The canteen is nearly barren, save for the clusters of exchange students who live on campus.

The sky is post-dawn, watercolour swashes of blues and greys that darken with each passing minute. The pale yellow light is slowly being choked out. I feel like that light. Technically I'm awake, but I feel myself sagging into the seat and becoming one with the plastic. I yawn. My eyes are wet and brimming. The exchange student at the next table is shooting me concerned looks over her *mee pok*, unaware that her blond hair is dipping into its soup. When I blink at her, her ham-fisted grip on her chopsticks tightens. If she comes over, I'm going to reward her kindness by showing her how to use her chopsticks properly. After long seconds, she returns to her noodles, and doesn't look up again, which saves me from being a pretentious asshat.

"You looking where?!"

Vincent's snapping voice jolts me out of my hazy stupor. After pressing the heels of my palms to my eyes, careful not to smudge my eyeliner, I realise disappointment is rolling off him in cresting waves. I'm disappointed too, but I suppose this is why crazy people don't write, only get written about; we don't have that sort of ability to write, or be honest. I duck my head, lest I drown.

Vincent huffs, "Were you even listening to me at all?! What to do with all these scraps? Got good writing but is not story! And I already gave you so many tips!" His Singlish is seeping in – a sure sign of frustration. I can only gape like a fish.

I am saved from answering by a great crashing that resounds through the canteen. Phillipa comes bounding through the aisles of the long tables, this great furrow between her brows. She clutches her silver Macbook like a shield in one hand, and brandishes her 3DS like a weapon.

"Eh, sorry to interrupt *lah*," says Phillipa, who does not sound sorry at all as she flings herself into the chair next to me, "but I can hear you scold her from across the canteen *sia*!"

Vincent, in his black shirt and perfectly coiffed hair, does not take kindly to being chided by a girl in shorts and flip flops. He leans back on the chair, chest puffed, and snaps impertinently, "Who you?!"

"Yah, you wouldn't know, because no one's shouting your secrets all over!" She presses forward against the table, chasing him, glowering at him. "Say so loudly, what her mental illness this, what write wrong her mental disorder that, you wanna tell the whole world is it?!"

Briefly, I make eye contact with the exchange student, whose rounded blue eyes quickly dart back down to her *mee pok*, but she sits frozen, clearly eavesdropping. I want to sigh, but the world is molasses, and Vincent and Phillipa are still going at it.

Phillipa clicks her tongue and demands in my stead, "You want your crazy so much, write yourself *la*!" It is strange in the first place that Phillipa is here despite her midterms. In fact, this is the first time we've been in such close proximity. I could almost reach out to touch her. She says she wanted to play with me to destress, but it's almost as if she is here just to defend me. Save me. I don't particularly need saving but this – the stuff of stories.

Vincent says, "I have no authority –"

Phillipa says, "But you keep yelling her story wrong!"

Except she doesn't need a sword nor to slay a dragon. All she's doing is suggesting this wild unconventional concept that I am fine the way I am. Amazing. Groundbreaking.

"There *is* no story!" Slaps the table. "Only bits and pieces, disjointed moments. Where is the resolution?!"

The voices are getting to me and all I can focus on is the agitated tapping of her stylus against her front teeth. We were playing until Vincent showed up. She sat a table away, alone. I was losing, but it was a good game. Then suddenly I was winning, but it was a bad game, and then she was sitting with us and they were arguing and I was melting. A bad habit of hers, with the stylus, smears saliva on her screen, but she's too mad to realise this now, tap tap –

It stops. I look up to catch her gesture wildly at me. Her stylus catches me in the mouth and stabs a bloody hole into my gum.

"Shit, shit, sorry, you okay?" She sheaths her stylus hurriedly. "Okay or not?"

Does this count, do you think, as an indirect kiss? Like in fairy tales, the sharp sting breaks the spell I hadn't realised I was under, and I've finally woken up.

"I think," I say slowly, "we can compromise."

"Hah?" Her brow furrows. "Are you bleeding?"

"Well, yes, but." I grin. She is stunned, though more, probably, at the blood on my teeth. "Why don't I write both my fairy tale, *and* crazy people?"

Vincent eyes me suspiciously. I dodge. "You can't make a Disney villain crazy, that just plays into the trope that –"

"You think I don't know that?!" I snort. Fake indignation. Lends authenticity.

"Oh. Not the villain." Phillipa's caught on. "She going to make a Disney *princess* crazy."

I nod enthusiastically. Knew she'd understand. It was more a video game trope than a literature one.

Vincent is starting to give. He tries, "You only have three days to write it."

Here's another thing I never knew how to tell him. All those other fairy tales I published were rushed out the week before the deadline, one great manic rush, can't stop won't stop. It'd be the same this time too, just. I have to name it, the instabilities, the compulsive tics, the illness. The illness. Bipolar disorder. "I think I can handle it. It's my *thing* right? I can write it, easy."

Finally, both are satisfied. Phillipa leans over eagerly. "Which one you writing?"

I'm yawning, my words slur, but I manage to tell her, "*Sleeping Beauty*? Aurora with bipolar disorder, flitting through the trees, meeting strangers in the woods, trying desperately to avoid the depression that would send her into an impenetrable slumber." And then, I even smile at her through my tears. "I'll even give her a happy ending."

."

## Pot, Kettle

The doctor, therapist, psychiatrist, shrink, *Debra* – empty answers, placating, obnoxiously neutral, until she had, just barely, an almost inaudible huff of air, *snorted* and told me, *for now*. Her voice dragged me back to attention, the room, that grey beige shoebox of an office, two plush armchairs very pointedly centre of the room, quaint little coffee table between us. I asked her, wide eyed, what? She repeated, but in that looping manner she must think neutral but to me just sounded like she was dodging responsibility, well, Cheryl, you might want one in the future! The room is grey beige but suddenly red. *I snorted*, a good and proper HAH. As if I'm some sort of child, as if I don't know my own – what is the term? Mental physique. Neurology. As if I haven't spent two decades jerked around by this utter nothing in my chest, as if I'd pretend I wouldn't spend decades more in the same manner. No familial love, only obligation. Friendships counted in hours spent together and nothing more. As though when I said to her – *her*, thin as twigs in that creaseless pantsuit, wedding ring like an extra knot of knuckle – I do not want relationships, I had decided that by choice. As if I had given up companionship, convention, convenience, by choice.

But – and this revelation came creeping, reluctant, impatient drum of fingers against oil-tacky table top of the McDonald's I went to after – this wasn't what angered me most, was it? This inability to form relationships, the way people flit about like ghosts no matter how I try to hold on. What really made my blood sing was how she kept talking about – other people. Those beady eyes and flaking eyeliner skittering across my face, tripping on the scratches from my chin to my neck – and then talking about other people, my non-existent partner, or my family. Absent father, absent-minded mother, and my sister, ah, poor thing, the shining example of what I should have been and bearer of all that expectation to do well, good job, good husband, good grandchildren because hell, it won't be *me* – ah, that's what lead to Debra's snorting.

The fake leather of the armchair turned sticky as I squirmed on it. It itched. I was talking about family but thinking instead how horrible the sound I'd make peeling myself from the seat when this session finally ended. I am here to fix me, not them. It isn't any of your business, Debra, that sometimes I catch a glimpse of baby sis on campus, she, she's like me but she can't be like me, so she takes my pills to not end up like me, because that isn't legal. Or how my father tells people he's afraid of me or how my mother tells me I am all all all she has because I'm the only one absent-minded like her... But we're here to fix me, not them, can we move the fuck on.

Of course, there's never enough time. She doesn't try to teach me tips or coping methods anymore, knows I've tried so many already – exercise, journals, drink more water, fucking *breathe* – to no avail. At the end of the session, like all sessions, she led me to the computer on that desk tucked by the door. How useful was she? Rated 1 to 10. Spoiled the mood, honestly. All those numbers felt like a test. How well did she do? Not enough for \$40 an hour. I think I'm hilarious; I asked, do you have feedback for me? She hummed, she hummed, perhaps next month we can talk about your tendency to gloss over things.

So by the time I reached the Macs at Seletar Mall, a good hour early for the study date with Po, I was already, mad, pissed off, the lower sec brats looked at me and sat two tables away instead, so that my table now is a one-person island. By the time Po came, I'd been staring blankly at my notebook, page equally blank, for a good fucking hour. She, drapey cardigan and preppy pleated skirt parting the crowd of slouchy students and lifeless housewives, flounced towards me, worn pullover and shorts fitting right fucking in – I closed the notebook to hide the blank page but, this was fine, my notebook had cute lizards scampering all over the cover, this was – whatever. Po is from my Creative Writing module, right? Write. We would write together. The pressure of her presence should force my pen.

Except she came with only a Macbook in a graphic sleeve, no charger, to my tablet and my notebook and my pencil case and *Tender is the Night*. Pleasantries – Cheryl, hi, oh my god, sorry I'm late, how's your writing going? I answered truthfully, it hasn't happened yet so who knows? She laughed like I'd told a joke. Twirled her rebonded hair around her finger and said, actually, regarding your stories, I hope you could help me with something.

Or before this, the first warning sign, before she'd even been here five minutes. I can't eat anything at Macs, oil and sugar exacerbates disorder, so when she offered to buy for us both, I told her, I just want a Milo, the biggest they've got, forgetting that the sizes have shrunk but the prices have not. To which her face did a scrunch, and then we were an entire minute into this *debate* whether I required sustenance or not, when I remembered, she's from my Creative Writing: Non Fiction class and –

Wow, that was a story all in itself, this class, in one of the tutorial rooms that have no windows and tables shaped like hexagons. We're a multiple of six plus one, so I sat alone at the side waiting for my turn. Then Po twisted in her seat to watch as I read a paragraph from my piece on child neglect, then the girl with wet glimmering eyes asked, just to clarify, you're writing about an *eating disorder*? I stared at her blankly, voice pitched high like I was in customer service, no, I am not, I don't have one and I wouldn't dare write about something I knew nothing about. She didn't believe me, none of them did, she held my gaze and quivered, I used to have an *eating disorder* so I understand, you're safe here. I really don't have an *eating disorder*, I squeaked, sounding weak even to my own ears, but I wasn't going to tell them my parents just didn't feed me and I was too busy wrangling in *borderline personality disorder* to notice, so now they all think I've an eating disorder.



Finally, I told Po, fine, I'll have the grilled chicken salad, so before me were now *two* disappointing Mcdonald's products, fuck. Anyway. She said, I know it's not quite the same as your eating disorder, but –

I don't have an eating disorder, no, really, I – fists clenched, leg shaking – have a personality disorder.

Po said, oh! That's *serious*. Well, I have an *anxiety disorder*.

Taken aback, I said, *okay...?*

She took it as, go on, so she did, unfortunately. I've been seeing this therapist, she continued, which, okay, fair enough, then what do you need me for? Till three months ago, I hadn't a therapist and now I've only seen Debra twice. I asked her how often, she replied twice a month, I said fuck, you must be loaded, they're like \$30-40 per session and that's with subsidy. She, ah, no, looked sheepish, shrugged, I see this volunteer therapist at this non-profit, they normally counsel caretakers of the mentally ill, but they said, my therapist *said*, I'm a *severe* case, so they scheduled more sessions for me. At that point, I cast around furtive looks. Amazingly, we were still sitting in a Macs brimming with customers but hey, if she didn't mind, then I didn't mind. So she went on about her birth control pills fucking up her hormones, giving her *mood swings*, haha, *mood swings* oh gosh, and a selfish bastard of a boyfriend who couldn't take this of her, so now he is her ex.

By then I saw where her tirade was going, something about my being unabashedly annoyed at being sick, that has people flocking to me for advice. I don't know why they think I know any sort of solution when I show up to class with bruises stretched out between my shorts and my sandals, that foil crinkle noise from the depths of my haversack whenever I rummage. But I have learnt, over time, to help them best I can, best they want. The right

response to *I feel suicidal* isn't huh, you wanna die ah? How? But to preface it nicely, don't worry, you are valid, I only ask because there's a hierarchy, see? If you cannot yet imagine how you want to go, then you're not there yet, and I have been there, and I have been far over there, and if you're not there yet then I do not know what there is to be done. The right response to *I want to kill myself* isn't I'm calling the cops (or at least your mother), but *aw oh no*, I will always be here for you if you want to talk, and they always want to talk.

So her answers went, I can't imagine it *yet*, how she wanted to die, and, *well*, it's good that you're taking their threats seriously, which, I was glad to hear, even if I had to hear it as a grandma and her ducklings shuffled to the table next to us. Or maybe it's fine, even if people overhear. De-stigmatisation. Two university students with their swotty books in Macdonald's, freely having earnest conversation about mental illness and suicide. Po, after reading my workshop piece, had reached out to me. Then she was sitting opposite me, nibbling delicately on a fry, watching me through rounded eyes. Taking me seriously. Taking herself seriously. This – my fists had been clenched and I unfurled my fingers slowly, nails lifting from the furrows they left in my palms – had to be why I write. I told her as much, as I fumbled with the pack of sesame dressing and squeezed half of it out onto my salad, and she... jolted?

Those liquid metal eyes sparked and Po was illuminated, brighter than the florescent lights about us. Her chest heaved in an excited breath and she leaned across the table towards me – but a gulf between us had formed. it took me a few seconds to catch up with the sudden torrent of grievances spilling from her mouth, how her boyfriend doesn't take her seriously, how he can't take her moods anymore, because he can't help her and, her voice rose, she'd been holding on to the same fry for five minutes now, he feels bad that he's failing her. Which, could go either way, I ate my salad with half a packet of sauce – the sesame sauce was better than I remembered, *nice* – and I told her, warned her, just so you know, I don't know a damned thing about relationships. But ye, the guy sounds like a dick. Po lights up –

right?! Finally she ate the fry. Then she went on to complain about how he's a selfish fuck, literally, never checked if she came after he'd come – I stabbed a chicken strip, plastic tine piercing the skin and soft overcooked flesh easily, and tried to move her along. I can't say anything either way, not with Debra's voice in my head, for now, for now.

So finally, after I started to get more air than Milo through the straw, she continued her story and – here was what I'd expected of therapy to begin with: Po recounts her struggle with the therapist, whether the birth control pills were worth the trouble. What are you using it for? Cramps and well, birth control, duh. I blinked at her. Right, I knew this I think, when I'd first been added to the Facebook group for class, I'd clicked around and – she'd scripted some sort of blog post declaring her pills a feminist triumph, that everyone should take, no excuses. I tried not to think about how I can't take them, and how I'd really wanted to write and how she told me we were gonna write, but none of this would be *polite* out loud, so instead I sucked hard at the straw and then I was out of fucking Milo. She talked coping methods next, thank fuck. But then she looked sheepish, she sipped her drink, those coping methods, techniques, strategies, they all don't work as well as I thought they would, drew herself up straighter, maybe I'm too defective, you know? (I don't.) Or maybe, she chewed on her straw, my disorder, I bite my straw too, *disorder*, is too dire for therapy, and I need to go on medication.

No! My knee jerked and banged against the shit filthy underbelly of the table. Medication, *medication*, laundry list of bullshit side effects as Debra's colleague plays trial and error. As I started listing them in earnest – heart palpitations, muscle fatigue, the weird manic twitch to my left eyelid that stays for hours, god the nausea, I ain't enough fingers to count how many buses and taxis I've thrown up in, that weakened immune system, I still have scars from the last infection – her eyes glinted like she wants to weather it for – pride? Fuck. If you can't handle birth control side effects... It's a month to get used to them, the

medication, or, no, not the medication, the side effects of the medication. And *after* that then the medication begins to take effect in earnest and *after* that you decide if it's right for you. An afterthought – ah, the blood tests every month are pretty annoying too, I guess, but you gotta have them because the medication are very very bad, all those chemicals, so unnatural. But yea. Worse than birth control pills.

She pulled such a doubtful face as she jabbed a fry into her chilli. No, really, I bit my lip, I stared down at my empty notebook, at the tremors quaking through the cracked landscape of my palms, its crescent-shaped troughs, patches of skin rubbed red and raw. My last prescription took two years to decide if they work (they didn't), or if they were fucking with me, or if my head's fucking with me because that's always something you gotta look out for – what are your current symptoms anyway? *God*, the anxiety, she told me, the physical pain, the ghost claws gauging real gashes into her *heart*. So much crying. Can't concentrate. And sometimes, sometimes I feel as though I'm just watching myself from somewhere else. Dis-association? I asked, surprised. She wrinkled her little button nose at me, isn't it called *dissociation*? I... don't know. I've never heard it said aloud before. But well, that's legit. See? She beamed, all that wholehearted resolve, *see*, I've been through some tough *shit*, I've been on birth control pills for four entire goddamn fucking *months*, if I can *tahan* that, I think I can *tahan* psychopharmaceutical medication, and I. Well. I squinted at the loose corn kernels in my salad, tried very hard to gather them onto my fork instead of having to stab at each one, and I thought hard, and finally I went with: It's such a Singapore thing. Don't talk about feelings, just take drugs and go be productive. You did the right thing. Therapy first. And anyway, you can't be on birth control while you're on the stuff I'm on, and there you go, her face fell, can't give her rebellious, feminist triumph up.

So the uhh, I stumbled but I needed the conversation to move, I've picked up my fair share of fancy vocabulary from IMH – *reactive coping mechanisms*. Maybe I can help you

upgrade yours! Because fuck it, anxiety sucks no matter what the root, I don't know shit about her life, maybe I'm her Debra, though she has her own Debra, cheaper even – anyway. I even tore out a page of my notebook for her, like how Debra always has printer paper on hand. I wrote in leaky purple ink, breathing techniques? But I made a terrible face, I hate breathing techniques, she laughed like we shared an inside joke. Maintain a positive attitude? Wink and a thumbs up, she laughed again. Then she took my pen from me and scribbled – hold your anxiety in your hand, and imagine it a small, insignificant thing. Ay yea, I do that one, I like that one. She looked surprised over her fish burger. Yea, no, really, hold all that tangled yarn ball of panic inside me, but my outside, my face, pure and untouched as freshly fallen snow. Then I get to think, fuck, I'm a fucking genius, professional actor, witness this mask, impeccable. She laughs yet again, incredulous, and slightly, if I might say so myself, impressed. This method really does work, the drama, a distraction, a focus on the body that isn't the knot of anxiety and rot. She told me, yeah, that sounds... good actually. I'll give that a go. And finally, finally I thought, we have an understanding, right?

I was laughing as she tried out that coping method, to wipe clean the anxiety from her features, her blank face resembling more squinty constipation. Then she laughed, then she said, see, I always thought you were being dramatic, you know, in your stories, but now, she smiled beatifically, *now* that I'm going through the same thing, it really is quite bad. I'd stopped laughing. I *snorted*, a loud HAH, see Debra, that's how you snort. And. God, what was I supposed to say to that? I always thought you were being *dramatic*. I always thought *you* were being dramatic. Now that *I'm* going through the *same thing*. Quite bad, arh? I was, I'm fucking tired, I don't – maybe, yea sure, it's the same thing, I mean, it's not *comparable*, it's not a *competition*, but ye, ye sure, what the fuck ever. She'd been satisfied, got a new toy to try out, finally she took out her laptop, the Mac covered in stickers, of course, we could finally start writing, she told me excitedly, now that we're the same type, now that I get *it*, I

think I'll write a story about anxiety disorder, pass this wisdom along. And, yea. Go ahead. If she knows *it*, then good for her. I was born with this and still don't know what *it* fucking is. And it'd help no doubt, exposure, representation, if four fucking months have taught her that fucking much, taught her *it*, then hell, it'd be educational too. By her next workshopping, she could damn well enlighten me. I don't know anymore. I sat there, and I scraped the last of my salad, sauce just congealed enough to clump on the fork, and I.

I realised I'd been leaning towards her, and where my belly had trapped my poor notebook against the table's edge, I could feel the indignant thrum of my pulse. Carefully, I inhaled through my nose, letting the breath expand my stomach and crumple the paper further, then exhaled through pursed lips. Po had opened her Mac already, typing away, eager to manipulate the validation of her illness that she took from me into a new story, so she didn't notice the creaking way I reclined back in the plastic chair. So I tried to write too but I couldn't help imagining the next Creative Writing class, Po sitting at her table of six, bravely confessing in her workshopping piece that she battles an anxiety *disorder*. And maybe the girl with the glimmering eyes tears up over her story too. And maybe when Po glances at me, eyebrows all slanty and seeking sympathy, I'll find it in me to flash her a smile and a thumbs up. And maybe –

I was tired, all of a sudden. I am tired still. I don't understand. What is the point of writing if I can't even convince an undergrad class of shit? What is the point of writing if it hasn't helped me make sense of – anything? Or, when did I begin to expect this of my writing? Arrogant is what I am. Go years back, the first stories, I only meant to *produce*, I only meant to be *productive*, purpose and quality be damned. There, in them, at least, was some sort of discernable proof of what I had felt. Strange things. Wrong things. Unnatural things. I only meant to leave a mark, I never wanted to name things, I never wanted readers who would name things for me, I never –

Belatedly, I realised I had been hopeful when I agreed to meet up with Po, and expectant, and anticipatory that someone would hear me, not the sum of my problems nor the family who made me, but. Me. The incomprehensible me that I tried to articulate in my stories so someone would hear me, not – not pull apart for a checklist of symptoms to validate themselves. But maybe this is my fault, Debra is right, I gloss over the things that matter, the people around me, and this is why I can't write anything good about mental illness and its consequences. This is why Po feels free to talk to me like – *I just thought you were being dramatic*. This is why I sat there chewing on the straw of my empty Milo cup and tapping the prongs of my fork over my teeth because the salad bowl was just as empty. Though I couldn't find words to put on that poor creased page, Po was typing away about her *panic disorder* and her *generalised anxiety disorder* and –

Then I remembered Debra and her coping techniques. Obediently, I visualised all the anxiety and misplaced resentment and envy as a tonsil stone, dense and putrid, but dislodged by a great hacking cough. I spat that stone down the straw and I was free, in theory, at last, expression clean like freshly laundered sheets, and I. I started another draft, I'll write another story, a cheap thing about an eating disorder in guise of a personality disorder because, may as well, why not? I'll just have to keep writing.

## Housekeeping

There is a handsome man passed out in the stairwell. Near hidden in the potted plants that threaten to turn the narrow space into a jungle, he's collapsed between floors three and four, arms reaching up like a prayer. His dark hooded jacket and loose faded jeans give nothing away about his identity.

Yi is perplexed.

She's read enough manga to know how this goes, but quite honestly, she's too much of a skinny runt to bring him back to her apartment, nurse him back to health, and have him fall hopelessly in love with her, then discover that he is actually the troubled heir of a multibillion dollar estate, only willing to accept his duty and his wealth if she will marry him and be by his side forever.

However, she also just turned nineteen, which is quite a bit older than the heroines of such contrived romances. The other, more age-appropriate possibility, she frets as she squats and sucks at her teh bing, is that he is some sort of demon here to bestow upon her some magical power, and the tiny island of Singapore would transform into the battleground of Good and Evil, whereupon the fate of the world would be decided.

But nothing that exciting ever happens in Singapore, and Singapore has a lot of billionaires, so she is pretty enthusiastic about her options.

When it becomes apparent that she will take a while to decide the appropriate course of action, she gathers her ankle length skirt carefully to take a seat on the step next to his head. He doesn't move still. She leans down to peer at him again. The face that peeks out from beneath the hood and that dark tousled hair doesn't speak of class, something about the



scruff of his facial hair and frankly, the dark colour of his skin, that her father would sneer at and call uneducated. But, she decides, there's a sort of allure to it.

"Are you alive?" she asks, and is surprised by the sound of her voice.

The man reserves any judgement. In fact, he doesn't react at all. She leans in and he smells of cigarette smoke and some sort of fragrance, a cheap deodorant. So he's not filthy. That's good. She reaches for his neck.

Soft. Warm. The underbelly of a void deck cat. The fingers of the fresh-faced barista handing her change. The child who, laughing and scampering, collided into her last week. She shivers, though at her impudency or with repulsion, she cannot tell. At nineteen, she is too old to ask her parents for physical affection, even if her mother hadn't passed away, her father left. She has not held hands since lining up in two rows as a wee primary school student. Human touch is alien and disconcerting, but she has a fundamental intent, and searches his sweat-sticky skin for his pulse. She pins down his writhing heartbeat in the dip beneath the bony jut of his jaw. Before she can finish counting to ten, she finds the problem. His heart's a convulsing mess. Put together with the clammy skin, the salty tang of clean sweat, the skittering of his eyes beneath his thin eyelids...

"I used to be like you," she half-whispers to him, as though they are children trading secrets on the playground. "I don't suppose your circumstances are quite the same, but I was terrible at following my prescriptions. I took too many pills and ended up like you, so my father took all of them away."

Sharp spike of adrenaline despite the sudden fatigue in her limbs. She'd hid in the school toilet and the halls of the cubicle would not stop shimmering. The world lit with some fantastical light. And then her father, yelling and crying at her, at her mother who only

smiled, conspiratorial, from her sprawl on the bed. And then that terrible, twitching, short-tempered month of cold turkey. No one deserved that awful withdrawal, not any sort of substance abuser.

"This is your last chance to escape," she tells him, very apologetic that she is the one to come across him, that she has to be the one to help him.

Yi has to google how to move him. An arm over her shoulder, she hopes to hell he doesn't have a spinal injury, and heaves him up. The sudden weight of him almost throws the both of them down the stairs. Yi gasps and grabs at the banister to steady them. Despite his size, just barely taller than her, the man is solidly built and heavy. He opens his eyes but is unseeing. Has just enough presence of mind to prop himself against her. It isn't his weight, in the end, that almost topples her. It is his – humanness. Skin. Flesh. The press of ribs. Shallow breathing. Hair at her cheek. Alien. Unfamiliar. There should be a knee jerk repulsion, but no.

She leads him home.

Thankfully, through her front door is a straight path to the balcony. On the left, the two bedroom doors present no obstacle. On the right, they totter steadily enough past the dining table with its messy papers, then step delicately over the wires where her laptop is set up on the coffee table in front of the TV. Only one pit stop to deposit him onto the sofa so that she can prepare.

He's lucky that he chose an old HDB block to pass out in, where the balcony was built spacious enough to qualify as a room in itself. With hers, it is long enough to lay out a single mattress, if snugly, and the parapet is brick and concrete stretching halfway to the ceiling. There is even a netting of chicken wire stretched across its length to prevent birds from coming in to shit. A quick check beyond the grilled gates shows her that all she has to do is

sweep away the fallen soil from the hanging orchids. Then, two sofa cushions to make a bed, bucket lined with a plastic bag, wet towel, the blanket off her bed.

He starts when she picks him up again, but becomes pliant when he finds out she wants him to lie down. She doesn't quite know how nor want to strip him, so she wipes down whatever skin is visible with a wet towel, and pushes the hair off his forehead.

He really does have a nice face. A boyish charm there in his cheeks, the careless stubble around the quirk of his lips. His eyelashes are very long.

Before she is further distracted, Yi hastily turns him onto his side, lest he should vomit and choke. Then she slides the gate shut, and locks it. With a slight hesitation, she padlocks the extra latch, the one her father had installed when her mother would spend hours in the balcony, no matter the weather, and refuse to come back inside. In her mother's last, bedridden months, Yi had been her primary caretaker, so she is familiar with the nursing of invalids, she brings and puts within arm's reach, a bottle of water and straw, and two peanut butter sandwiches in an easy-open ziplock bag.

And then there isn't much left to do but wait. Yi takes a seat on her bare stripped couch, springs digging into her thighs, and retrieves her 3DS from the coffee table. Before she even gets past the game's title screen, he rolls over onto his stomach, and wheezes as his face sinks into the sofa cushion. With a sigh, she moves closer to sit next to the gate. Both arms through the grill, Yi shoves and heaves until he turns again onto his back, then leaves her hand light on his shoulder to keep him still.

When he doesn't wake still as the sky turns dark, there isn't much to do but sleep.

That night she sleeps in her parents' bedroom as she always does, with the fear all home alone children are familiar with, that there is something else in the house, a dark figure

in waiting. It is exciting that for once, her fears are founded. The master bedroom's ceiling-length windows lie on the same plane as the balcony. Should she have led the devil himself into her house, an oil slick trailing from the balcony to her window, watching, at least her night terrors would all be justified.

#

Yi is watching anime on her laptop at the coffee table when there is movement in the balcony. The trees below grow very high and very close, and all sorts of large insects visit the orchids, so she almost forgets the man in her balcony.

A hand grabs the grill. Yi jerks so hard her knees bang into the coffee table. Yelping, she tumbles off the sofa, then stumbles as fast as she can into the bedroom.

"Hey?"

He speaks! And in just that one word, his Singaporean accent is undeniable. There is something about the Singlish accent that dispels any sort of fantasy she might once have had of billionaires and battles between Good and Evil. God. It sinks in that she must now be a criminal.

Cautiously, she steps out of the room. He stands facing her, rigor mortis, jacket clutched in one hand. For a moment she's distracted by his graphic tee, the crumbling logo of some death metal band. Then she looks up and their eyes meet.

The TV blares suddenly, the thrill of violins, a shrill Japanese voice sings. They turn to look and she flushes. How much of her, she wonders, resembles the girl on screen. Childish long black hair, wide eyed, foolish.

"Hello," she replies belatedly.

"Hi." He snorts. It might've been a laugh, cautious, testing. "So, I'm locked out. Any reason why?"

"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. But you're – you were sick! Collapsed in the stairwell by my house, and unresponsive! So I, I thought I should do something. But I'm – small, and. It's dangerous? To let strangers in!"

He stares at her, mouth a stern slash, and her throat constricts.

No, not now, she turns around and screws her eyes shut but it's too late. Shoulders heaving, Yi fights the deflating of her lungs. The world darkens. With a practiced ease, she pulls the hair away from her face for clear passage of air, then sinks carefully to the floor. It is just another minor attack, she knows, she tells herself it will pass, but this time – more than the pain of suffocation, there is the burn of humiliation that has her close to tears. Trying to help him was a mistake when she could not even help herself, and now she was trapped, they both were –

There is a warm touch at her wrist, and it holds her steady until she calms.

Yi looks up and she almost laughs. The man is pressed up awkwardly against the grills, cheek against the metal, so that he can reach her.

"You okay?" How he bleeds concern for the girl who's locked him in her balcony is beyond her. Still, he carries on, "Anyone else here can help you?"

"No, I stay alone." She swallows thickly. Takes his bottle for a quick sip. "I'm fine. It's a – lung thing. I'm sick. I'm fine."

"You sure?" When Yi nods furiously, he holds his hands up in defeat. "So... I was fainted at the stairs ah? How you find me? Why were you the stairs there?"

"I always take the stairs. The lift is scary!" And she doesn't want anyone questioning her. The pills came with paperwork that didn't fit into her purse, so she had been carrying the hospital's plastic bag out in the open. His look of doubt jars her thoughts. "Oh! You don't – it's not scary to you? But what if it falls? Or if, they have these windows and you see someone outside, the someone on every level, or someone behind you in the reflection –"

"Okay, okay I get it."

He is looking at her weird; Yi sulks. "You were in the stairwell too!"

"I was high as fuck man!" He laughs then, this strange lilted thing that she immediately wants to hear again. "Can't do that all in the open, and the plants nice. Very green."

"Very green?" Yi frowns. "That's as stupid as my reason for being in the stairwell!"

And he does it again, that laugh. She grins.

"You really okay?" It seems his wariness has all but dissipated, no reason to fear a cripple like her.

"Yea, I'm fine. It's just a lung thing. I'm sorry." Yi stalls, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. "Oh! Are you okay? Can I–?"

Although she's at a loss for words and starts gesturing at her own wrist instead, he holds out his arm willingly enough. Gingerly, she takes it and presses her thumb to his wrist. His skin is clammy but his heart beat is – too fast, but much better than the erratic staccato it was before. "You're fine too!" She breathes a sigh of relief but when she looks up, he is unmoving. "Um! If – if you want to leave, I'll unlock the gate for you."

"Just gonna let me out like that? Is that safe?" He begins to smile, then catches himself. "Are you contagious?"

She laughs. "No."

"Then what's the rush, man? I thought you said I dangerous." He tugs at the gate, making it clang in its rails, and grins like he wants to reassure her he can't get out. His arms, veiny, are nearly twice as thick as hers.

"I'll unlock the gate and then hide in the bedroom while you exit!"

He laughs, which is mean this time because she was very earnest about it. "And I don't exit then how?"

"I'll call for help!"

He glances back out the balcony. There are trees and bushes, then an empty, undeveloped field. "Who's gonna hear from here?"

No one at all is the answer. Yi frets. "I'll jump off and escape!"

"We on what floor? Will survive meh?"

"Fourth, and no." She laughs. "Probably not."

"We're not that high. Can jump to the tree, break the fall a bit. I can probably make it." He presses against the netting and peers out at the nearest tree, as though truly considering the possibility of escape through the balcony. Yi is very certain of its impossibility but then again, this man is not like anyone she's ever met.

"You could," she agrees, "but I can't."

He moves back to the gate to smirk at her. "Never say never."

"No," she repeats, "I really can't."

He tilts his head at her and, afraid, she ducks hers. It occurs to her abruptly that she is still standing in the centre of the living room. Yi fidgets, one step to the left to switch off the TV but the silence would be more unbearable, one step to the right but she doesn't want to sit on the sofa while he stands.

"So what's your name?"

Yi's head shoots up. "Oh." Right. Social etiquette. "Yi."

"E. Like the letter E?" He lifts an eyebrow. "Is it a secret name?"

"No, Chinese Yi like, Y-i."

"Ee."

She tests, "Ee," carefully, Mandarin intonation lost, and decides, "Yeah, that's my name. What's yours?"

"Ah-dahm." He sticks his hand out through the grill. She stares at it a beat – his upturned palm seems to demand something of her – before realising its purpose. When she shakes it, she can feel the mild tremor leftover from yesterday's trip. "Nice to meet you!"

"Oh, uhm, likewise?" The way he's watching her – she's forgotten to let go of his hand. She dithers. "I! Uhm, I'm not used to Malay names. How do you spell that?"

"A-d-a-m."

"Oh, eh-dum," she replies, then flushes right after.

"Oi, on purpose right?"

They laugh.



"So," Yi says, hesitant, "What next?"

"I stuck in here," Adam points out, "Up to you, man."

"Should I – do I let you out?" Yi cannot identify the pang that follows her words. The fear of letting him out and endangering herself? The anticipation that this house, stagnant since her mother's death, would finally change and start moving onward again? Or maybe regret, a type of disappointment, though she does not know why.

"Do you *want* to let me out?" He sounds like the trick question at the end of an exam.

Yi has awful test anxiety, and does terribly in exams; she refuses to answer definitely.

"I can. Up to you."

Adam assesses his surroundings. He rubs his chin then looks down at his hand. Yi imagines, from her experience, that they are still cold and numb. Finally he says, "You're watching *Hyouka* right? I'll watch with you."

"You know the anime!" Yi gasps. They share a smile. Finally, the antisocial nerd and stoner *mat* has ascertained common ground. Rapport is now possible. "So, you're staying?" There. Here. In her balcony, with her.

Adam grins. "Sure, for a while more, why not?"

#

There's a thrill to having another life in the house again, one she could take care of, one that needs her. Not quite like when she was her mother's caretaker in her last months. More like when she'd gotten two hamsters for her birthday, that then became twelve hamsters, and she was put in charge of their entire lives inside the cage she'd spent an hour picking out at Pet Safari. Or like when her father bought *luohan* fish for luck, then went

overseas for work and she hated those fish eyes but couldn't let his luck die, so spent a month struggling with the giant tank before they died anyway, because she couldn't take care of herself then, much less another.

Although her father never blamed her, he'd kept all the evidence of her murders in the bomb shelter, that small reinforced room attached to the kitchen of every HDB apartment, which her house used as a storeroom. Swinging open the heavy steel door, Yi retrieves the pump she used to replace the water in the fish tank, a long coil of white plastic tubing with a blue hand pump at the end she squeezed to get the water flowing. She sets it down proudly by the balcony, and is disappointed when Adam doesn't at once see its brilliance.

"What's that?" He asks, cross-legged on the couch cushion.

"Your new shower!" Yi beams.

He blinks. "How long am I staying here?"

She blinks back. "As long as you want to? Didn't you say you were staying here for a while? After all that sweating you did when you passed out, don't you want to shower?"

"Your head different sia!" Nodding to himself, Adam straightens, back arching, and suddenly, strips his t-shirt over his head. When Yi squeaks, he throws the t-shirt at her with a grin. "Okay, let's do it!"

A sudden scramble, he threatening to strip, a thumb hooking into his waistband, she rushing for a towel and toiletries. He stacks the cushions and everything else in one tight corner, and she carries over a large bucket of water. While pumping water, she stares obstinately at the ceiling and nowhere else. Then she tells him about the drain in the corner, for water and for, waste, she adds impulsively, then rambles on about the dead leaves she's

swept into it with no problem of clogging. He cackles despite her efforts, and calls her dirty-minded.

And then there's a half naked man in her balcony, drying under the sun. Life is amazing, Yi wonders. It gets more amazing when he stretches in his underwear and decides it's a good time to get his muscles loose.

As they wait for his clothes to finish drying, Yi finally thinks to asks, "Hey, you don't have anywhere to be?"

"Nope."

"What are you, destitute?" At his grunt of confusion, she reddens with embarrassment, and corrects herself, "Got nothing to do? Nothing going on in your life?"

"I in a private U. But recently, take one sem off, got no motivation. This world's fucked up, you know what I mean? All this violence. Very hard to move."

Yi knows the feeling, but she doesn't like thinking about it. "No one's looking for you?"

"Nope?" His eyebrows come together like he doesn't understand the question.

"Oh." The way he's got his feet up on the balcony's low wall as he does his push ups doesn't speak of illness. He isn't like her, housebound and lonesome by necessity. "That's sad."

"Hey, it doesn't have to be sad." He kicks off the ledge and for one glorious moment, teeters on his hands. "Got all type of people go missing and no one notice."

She gets her hopes up just a little bit. "Like disowned heirs of rich billionaire families?"

And he laughs at them. "Like a lone wolf wanderer, can't fit in society, go his own road."

"A criminal on the run."

"Renegade with his own sense of justice!"

She huffs, "Which one are you?!"

"Me?" Adam spreads his arms, holds them for a moment, then shrugs. "I'm just me, man. Why I gotta be a label?"

She snorts, then hiccups at her rudeness, then sighs relief as he barks with laughter.

"Wait, how old are you?"

"Wait, how old are you?"

"I asked first!"

"I twenty seven."

"Oh, that's –" Yi bites her bottom lip. Twenty five is an age she cannot make sense of, not when Singapore's education is so carefully structured. She herself is a freshman at nineteen, the junior college route. That he is twenty seven and still in a private university – did he take gap years after polytechnic? Why so slow, so late? Somehow, she doubts he's in graduate school. That he has the time to loll in her balcony baffles her, but she dares press the issue further. Instead, she says, "Oh. That's older than I expected."

"Because I'm so young and handsome?"

She blushes, doesn't want to say, because you're so small and free, as though her balcony was his bird cage. "I'm nineteen!"

"Eh you young ah! Still in school right?"

"University. Just started."

"I never see you go."

Yi shrugs. "I'm not good at going." She pauses. "I do the work online though. Sometimes it's too difficult, but I try."

"Your sickness ah?"

"Yeah. I mean, I'm not dying or anything and I really should be going, but it's hard, you know? To have all your classmates see you hyperventilate or cry suddenly in class." Yi hasn't been in school since the first week, to pick classes with more understanding professors. The last time she picked blind, her prof had failed her essay for not being sick enough. "Dad says as long as I graduate with the degree, the honours part is negligible. Unimportant."

Adam pauses, doesn't know how to ask. "Where's your family?"

"Dad's in Hong Kong for work. Ma's in Changi." And her voice doesn't even crack. She's proud.

"So..." He looks skittish for a moment. "Your mum gonna come home soon?"

"I hope not; she's dead." Less proud.

"Oh." Such a silence. He watches her watching him, and there must be something in her face that has him relaxing. "So she buried at Changi or what?"

Yi shakes her head. "Cremated. She's in the ocean!" She likes to tell this story, it's a much nicer story for their last moments together. "After we took her ashes home, Dad rented a boat. We sailed out from Changi this sunny Saturday, Ma's favourite day, and dad bribed

the boat operator to look away." She couldn't cry at the funeral, there were too many things to settle as her mother's only child, but at the feel of brittle bone shards, she had bawled huge heaving sobs. Because of all the ash, she couldn't even wipe the mess of her face, but on that boat in the middle of the sea, under the hot sun, maybe that was a relief.

"That's pretty cool man." Somewhere along the line, he's gotten closer, pressed up against the gate, and Yi is sitting on the floor next to him "You ever think of visiting her?"

"She's all over in the water now."

"You can go fish there!" Adam lights up. "No? Never go fishing before?"

Yi hasn't. Adam tells her all about it.

#

There is a knock on the door, a loud rapping that resounds through the flat, the first reminder of the outside world in quite a while.

Adam and Yi flinch from the MMORPG he is playing with his arms shoved through the gate. On the television screen, his hero character is mauled by the bear he was trying to escape. Carefully, as though another bear is at the front door, he hands Yi the controller and draws his arms back through the grills. For a long, wide-eyed moment, Yi sits rooted to the sofa until the controller judders in her hands, signalling the hero's death and jolting her into action.

With her best young girl voice, Yi calls out, "Daddy's not home, and he said I can't open the door for strangers!"

And the stranger calls back in that nasally auntie voice, "I not selling la! I from downstairs, your neighbour! You know or not?"

Yi doesn't know any of her neighbours.

"Shouldn't answer if you don't wanna to deal with her." Adam's voice is a smug drawl.

"Your game was so loud!" she hisses back. "She sure know someone's in!"

The neighbour bangs on the door three more times, impatient. With great reluctance, Yi shuffles over to the front door. On the way, she pulls off her hair tie, as though she can hide behind her hair.

"Hello, can I help you?"

"Girl ah, your water from on top ah, keep spilling on my balcony, you know?!"

Generic auntie doesn't even bother with pleasantries. Was Yi supposed to be familiar with her brassy permed hair and leopard print smock? Did the auntie look at her, then recognise her as undeserving? "Is very rude leh, all that dirty water, your house can lah, but my house cannot! What if my clothes all wet how?!"

"Oh, were your clothes out to dry?"

"No lah, I said if!"

"I'm sorry, I was just watering the plants."

But the auntie just keeps going on, "Suddenly got so much water meh," no matter how hard Yi tries to deflect, "then before how your plants survive huh," steamrolls past her frantic arm waving, "sure or not, not hiding something," and ignores her even when Yi begins to tear up anxiously.

It's a false outrage that Yi recognises easily, and then that insatiable curiosity of old aunties whose worlds are limited to within walking distance of their blocks. An orphan is irresistible, even if she isn't technically one. She was never any good at dealing with this pity

and even now, she feels her lungs compressing, panic tightening around her throat. In desperation, she flings open the door, hoping the sight of a strange man locked in her balcony would explain itself or at least shock her into going away. The door knocks into the wall, exposing the empty house and... empty balcony. The orchids sway peacefully in the breeze.

"They're Ma's flowers." Ma, whose funeral in the void deck was the talk of the neighbourhood, pretty young face in the black white portrait, closed casket. Ma, who stained the pavement for two weeks before management gave up with the bleach and repainted the entire walkway. "I have no choice."

And with that, Yi knows she's won. Auntie's face twists with dissatisfaction but she cannot suspect the empty house nor argue on without seeming crass.

As soon as the door lock clicks, she's rushing across the house. Stands at the gate and presses against the grills. She steps back to get the keys - starts. Adam is crouched atop the bamboo poles for hanging clothes, weight braced with one foot between the grills.

Yi freaks. Knees given out, she drops, her forehead clangs into the grills.

Adam drops, concerned.

"Eh relax, relax! I fine." He pats her hair, makes soothing shushing sounds. "I had to hide. Someone like me? In the house of a girl like you? You kenna trouble. I kenna throw off the balcony!"

And then Yi sees them as they are. They do not match. She doesn't know how she feels about that, but for now, it is exciting.

#



Yi wakes up without a body. The walls of the master bedroom are unreachable far from the bed even as they bore down over her. Breathing carefully, she clenches her toes in the sheets and squirms on the bed, trying to take stock of her body. She can breathe fine but there is a hollow under her ribs where her lungs should be, as though they've been crumpled like paper balls and now sat wadded in the centre of her chest like a tumour.

Adam greets her sleepily from the balcony. She turns and recognises that face pillowed on his arms, squashed a bit against the grill but the eyes have become a foreigner's eyes and she has no idea who or what they are looking at.

It is strange to think he had slipped her mind. Normally, she'd take to her laptop and bury herself with game, but with him there... Her hiss of resentment surprises her, and then it does not, because she's swerved away and made a beeline to the kitchen, instead of watering Ma's orchids, instead of pressing up against the netting and seeing what Ma had seen in her last moments then feeling relieved when fear thickened in her throat; if she was still afraid of dying, she could still carry on.

She closes the door on him.

Once, years ago when Yi had wanted to impress Ma that she'd learnt to cook all by herself, she'd knocked into the rice cooker. The metal rim of the pot burnt a thin dark line into her bicep. The charred line was almost tattoo like, and it dried and peeled like a sunburn, and after shedding, there was no hint left that it ever marred her skin at all. This is far different from a scald. Scalds clung, and bit, and wept, and scarred.

Later, when she emerges, he calls out, "Hey, what's cooking?"

She looks up, hands braced on the dining table. "What do you want to eat?"

"You never cook ah? I heard the stove."

"I suck at cooking."

He laughs, reaching through the grills as though to soothe her. "Gonna buy back?"

"Yes." She looks at his upturned palm dully, then repeats, "What do you want to eat?"

Ayam panggang. The kopitiam macik laughed at her pronunciation. She complains as they eat.

"You should be the one laughing man," Adam waves plastic cutlery at her. "Hear you talk like ang moh, you better than her!"

"But what worth in pretension?" When she hears herself, she grimaces. "See, who in Singapore talks like that? I talk like this because I hadn't any friends, so I talk like how books talk, or characters from western TV shows. So awkward."

Laughing, Adam ruffles her hair. "It's only awkward if you make it awkward."

"I am very awkward!"

Adam shrugs, a languid movement. "Not to me."

Later, full and content, spread across the living room floor, Yi dares to say, "Hey, do me a favour."

"Is that a question?"

Another frisson of... what was it? Resentment? Annoyance? Excitement? She will let him decide. "Could you please do me a favour?"

When she hitches up her skirt to the knees, Adam makes a sharp hiss. In her haste to leave the house, she hadn't wrapped the bandages properly, and now they pool around her

ankle, held there only by her cartoon sock. The calf of her right leg is angry red flesh and yellow pus.

"Shit sia, what happened?!"

"I'm really really bad at cooking," which still isn't a lie, so she doesn't feel any more of a burden than she already is, when she hands him the ointment and the bandages. "Could you help with this?"

"Yeah, sure." His eyes are bright, assessing. "Don't need bandages. Just let it air dry."

He takes the ointment at least. Careful not to touch the grills, she sticks her leg through the gate. "There are germs in the air!"

"Not your air. Got so much plants, they filter the air. Mother nature man, it's a miracle." As he speaks, his face screws in concentration. He sets her leg in his lap and after a moment's deliberation, carefully takes off her sock first. Her sock has little yellow chicks on them and they distort when he slides a finger in and gently eases it off. Next to untangle the bandages. Finally, he uncaps the ointment.

The first dab doesn't hurt because the greasy glob of ointment touches only the layer of pus. Then he smears it out and it hits the edge of the wound, where her flesh is inflamed and raw. She winces. "I hate those plants," she spits more vehemently than she feels. "They attract bugs and shit."

"You still water them everyday." Working his way up from her ankle, he slathers on a thick layer of white, then pats it in. "Or like now, you make me water them."

"They were Ma's. Dad won't let me throw them away. They were the only things they could agree on."

Adam shrugs, and Yi supposes broken marriages aren't a big deal these days. "They're pretty," he offers absently, watching her wounds. She thrills in secret.

When the task is done, Adam's fingers drift along the edges of her burn, bumping over old scars as they go. "Don't do that again ah."

If Yi were braver, she would snarl, but instead her voice quivers when she asks, "Do *what?*" Her heart pounds against the tightness of her chest.

"Lift your..." He flusters suddenly, eyes fixed on her ankle. "Cute girls can't just lift skirt like that."

And just like that, her chest starts to expand instead, like it would burst. Ridiculous. Incredulous, that he manages the exact opposite of what she was going for. "You think I'm cute!" she exclaims in disbelief.

"You are cute!" He defends, dark red. "Not the point, man!"

Yi has to hide her grin behind her hair because it refuses to go away.

"Anyway!" Adam's fingers still. Then they tighten distractedly, and pus pushes to the surface. "When you go hospital tomorrow, ask doctor look at your leg also."

Yi's expression falls. "It's not serious. Anyway that's why girls have nude stockings right? To hide all these," she gestures to her burns, "imperfections."

The joke falls as well. Adam tilts his head and says instead, "I know lung doctor not the same type of doctor, but he should know basic first aid. Should be can help."

"I don't want to go to the doctor." Yi knows she's whining but it can't be helped. "Scary."

"What type of reason, scary?" He gives her foot a smack. "It's for your own good. Not your fault you sick what, what else you can do yourself?"

"The meds they give me, they calm me down so my lungs slow down and go haywire less, but they might make all of me slow down. Muscle fatigue. Can't move, can't do anything. That's why I'm going for a check up tomorrow." She clenches her fist to make her veins surface, faint dirty green lines. Her fingers tremble with the effort.

Adam takes her hand and smooths out her fingers. "Doc won't give meds that aren't worth the side effects."

So, the next day, she goes.

#

It has become routine that Yi swallows her pills in front of Adam before she retires to her parents' bedroom to sleep. Adam never lets her miss a dose, even through the first week of side effects. He lies with her when she's stuck on the living room with nausea and muscle fatigue, then plays quiet jazz when she starts to sleep more often.

They talk less now. Her time awake is reserved for chores and homework. Although she's the one occupied, the silence begins to get to her. Is it satisfying? Spending all day playing League of Legends and watching anime, or when she needs the laptop, smoking and staring at the trees. Sometimes she scrolls through news sites to check up on the outside world, but he gets this weird twisty frown at every bad news story, so she stops. They don't talk about her school assignments that she downloads from the school portal because he doesn't understand. It's not a bad thing, but she can't tell stories like he can, cannot entertain with literary theory the same way he can with fishing trips and jazz and futsal till 4am. She cannot express herself and this makes her feel like there is nothing to her worth expressing.

Once, Yi wakes up as though sprouting from thick mud. The mud, thick and putrid, treacles into her mouth, making it unpleasant to breathe, and weighs down her limbs something awful. She only manages enough strength to turn her head. There's a face watching her from the window, like all the nightmares. She jerks and falls out of bed. Adam jerks and falls out of sight.

It takes a breathless moment for her to comprehend what's going on, and then she's scrambling to the balcony.

"You made me worry," he calls, sprawled amongst broken pots. There is a harsh rasp in his voice.

"You made me worry," she wants to shout back, but what comes out is, "Jesus fucking fuck shit fuck."

There's that strange laugh of his again, except she has to wonder if it always sounded so thin. "Are you okay?"

"I was sleeping, why wouldn't I be?"

"Where got sleeping? Already two days." He considers the street lights, then turns back to her, strained. "Past midnight already. Three days. I got hear the toilet sometimes, then nothing. But you never come out of the room."

"Oh." She pauses. Scrubs at her face. No wonder her eyes are so crusty and her mouth so vile. There's a lethargy in her body that aches more than the pills had made it. She feels emptied out, and in desperate need of being refilled. "You must be hungry."

As soon as she voices it, a rush of guilt smothers whatever self-pity she was about to wallow in. Starving in another futile attempt to fix herself is one thing, but she's got someone

to look after. She rushes to get him water, then almosts let him out, but he insists it's too dangerous, and she has to move to buy food. For this badly-veiled attempt to force her into moving, she is as grateful as she is resentful. She doesn't want to get up, get out, but she knows she cannot continue hiding at home.

The only thing open at this time of night is 7-11. If the chilly air and sudden exposure aren't enough to shock her to full sobriety, then the bright lights of the 7-11 do the trick. She thinks, so he could exceed the confines of the balcony this entire time. By peeling the netting away? Climbing over the plants? He'd made some of Ma's orchids fall, just short of falling himself. Even if he did fall, maybe he could survive, as he had said on that first day. No wonder he'd been so complacent living trapped in a stranger's balcony.

Yi brings home a feast, microwaves the instant meals, boils a kettle of water, then takes the whole lot to the living room. They eat in silence.

Finally, Adam asks his microwaveable nasi lemak, "So what did your mum die of?"

Yi looks up from her second cup of instant noodles at him. She looks at him a moment longer.

Adam holds up his plastic spoon like a talisman. "Hey, if one day I must yell for help because you in the room cannot move again," he explains, "I need some legit info to tell the ambulance."

It's as good of a reason as any. "Ma committed suicide."

"Oh." He says, then says again, "Oh."

"Oh." She takes a sip of oily soup, then adds, "Oo. Ah."

"That means..."

"I'm crazy," she tells him helpfully.

"Don't say that." Knee jerk reaction – he winces. Puts everything down and scrubs his hair back. "It wasn't a lung thing?"

"It results in the lung thing."

"Well," Adam ponders carefully his next words, "there's only insanity because man invented sanity."

Yi blinks. She's used to people telling to her face that she is making up her problems, but here is someone who thinks society is making up her problems. Slowly, Yi raises her hands. There has always been this slight tremor that she stopped noticing long ago, but held up like that, her fingers twitch in erratic spasms that cannot be ignored. "Do you think society's making my hands shake?"

"Eh a lot of my friends hand shake."

"Are your friends also junkie chain smokers who pass out in public?" At the back of her mind, she thinks maybe this is too far, but there's a spike of anger she hasn't felt fully since she first retreated from society. "I was like this before the pills. I am better now. My hands still shake, but I haven't killed myself yet. I don't even *want* to."

How strange that she learns only now what suspicion looks likes on him. "Then the medicine... Where you get the drugs from? What hospital were you going to? Woodbridge?"

How old school. "It's called IMH now. Institute of Mental Health."

Adam scowls. "Singapore doctor only know how to give drugs. Don't believe in talking it out. As if everything can be fix with money and drugs."



This, Yi has heard many times before. Abruptly, she announces, "I have homework to catch up with." She stands to clear her empty cup noodles, then as an afterthought, unplugs the laptop and takes it with her. "Sorry to worry you, we're all fine and fed now, right? You can go back to... whatever it is you were doing for two days."

#

Their – break up, break off, drifting apart, they weren't that close, to begin with, whatever this disengagement is called – is such a familiar process that Yi doesn't think twice at first. When the conversation becomes stilted, she dismisses it as her ineptitude at being sociable. When he shirks her touch, well, she isn't worth touching. But even when she slowly realizes the strain between them, she cannot tell if her ineptitude is at fault again, nor does she know how to lessen it.

Adam gives in first. In the middle of a stilted dinner, he says suddenly, "You're turning into the type of person I don't..."

"Like? Don't like?" Yi saw this coming, so she can only laugh. "Just say hate. I'm turning into the type of person you hate."

"That's not what I was gonna say."

"But it was what you meant." There really isn't any resentment in her, no matter how Adam frowns at the balcony floor, at the hanging orchids, anywhere but her. "It's fine, you know? You're not the first one, and you'll certainly not be the last."

His mouth twists further. "Don't say until *lidat*."

"Until like what? Is *hate* too strong a word? Cannot use hatred arh? Then *loathing* how? Also can *revulsion*, also got *abhorrence*!" She can't help laughing at how terribly her

tongue slurs over her unpracticed Singlish, a mockery of his accent twisted into words she is certain he does not understand. The context, she hopes, is enough for him to guess what they mean. "Don't worry, I'll be fine. I know what i am. I don't particularly fancy myself either. Just that, I want to change myself, you know? I've been trying to change myself, to be worth... something. To someone." She breathes, she breathes. "I was useful once, to my mother. Figured even if this body wouldn't let me be happy, I could live for Ma. In her final days especially, when her pills made it so she couldn't move, couldn't hurt herself, I was needed. I had worth. Then she died. Then no one needed me. Only this house and its orchids need me."

And even then, Yi is all too aware that she needs this house far more than this house needs her. Her father and his wealth and his months-long business trips had outgrown this drab little HDB flat with the dull-whirring fans and the every-persisting ants and the cramped, haunted jungle of a balcony. Her father doesn't need the house, and he certainly doesn't need her, but he keeps them both. Yi wants to be worth his effort and his money and this house.

Adam, watching her with those dark, liquid eyes, says, "What?"

Yi lets out a sharp pop of laughter, then deflates. Figures that the most she's ever spoken isn't understood at all. Attempting to explain herself, Yi opens her mouth and sucks in a breath, and then another. She tries, "I don't mean – Never mind. Sorry. I'm sorry, are we – are you mad at me? You don't like me anymore? Do you think I'm mad?"

When she rubs at her eyes, Adam shakes his head. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"I don't like me either, but the me that I used to be – I was useless, less than useless, I was a fucking burden." Yi blinks hard. "Now, I am not."

Any protest from him would only come weak-willed. What did he know? Stranger in her balcony with nowhere he needed to be, they hadn't existed to each other mere days ago. He settles at last on, "Sorry," which Yi finds odd because she should be the one apologising.

#

One day, Yi comes home with dinner for two in hand, and finds him missing.

She rushes to the balcony. The orchids hang as they always have with their flowers dipping in the wind, the bamboo poles are bare, the blanket is folded atop the neat stack of couch cushions, and he is not there.

When she tries to slide the gate open, Yi is surprised to find it still locked. The keys she finds tossed onto the coffee table and forgotten all those weeks ago. Could he have reached them? Right now, she can't imagine there is anything he can't do.

In the balcony at last, she notices that the netting above has pulled away at the corner. She has to climb up onto the ledge to get a closer look. It is harder than she expects to keep her balance – Adam made it look so easy – and with each shift, she fears the netting will give way under her weight. For a moment, Yi wants to lean forward, to ascertain whether the fall is truly survivable. The hole is small. Was it always there? It was once there, she knows, but her dad had – and if anyone wanted to squeeze through, they had to get their shoulders and arms out first, wiggling as the wire ends caught at her clothing, fingers clawing to break free, before she finally fell head first –

No. Adam wasn't like her, wasn't like her mother. He was strong. Was capable. Was worth something more than an early death. Yi steps down. Her feet land first on his blanket.

Yi eats her dinner in the balcony, on the same cushion, and tries not to notice how it smells of him under her. The balcony is uncomfortable. There's nothing to lean on and grit gets stuck to her feet no matter how she sits. When she is done, she puts his dinner in the fridge, where the box of *nasi padang* stays for three days, until she eats it out of spite.

It is only when she's thrown up that dinner, forehead against the toilet bowl, that she realises Adam is gone.

For once, the tears come first, before that tightness in her chest and the short heaving gasps. Yi begins to cry quietly, and finds that she cannot stop. No matter how many times she squeezes her eyes shut, and then opens them again, nothing changes.

Adam is truly gone.

In this quicksand despair, Yi is sucked back to her old habit of spending all her time at home, quietly, timidly, lest any sudden movement jar her dry brittle spirit. The days, like grains of sand, slip through her outspread fingers, so that they are over before she is even aware of them. Still, she does her chores dutifully, even cleans the disposable containers that her delivered food comes in, takes extra care in preventing runoff when watering her orchids – anything to keep the apathy of depression at bay. His departure was inevitable, she'd have known if she'd just bothered to think for once.

No, she did know that people leave, and she moves on, as ever. She *knows* this. Just that – their time together was a suspension, removed from the reality of her dead mother and absent father, a reminder that there is more to her than grief, which she had forgotten while mourning her family. He was an opportunity to change herself, that she couldn't spot in her anxieties until he was gone. She still isn't sure what had driven her to lock a man in her

balcony, but for however short a time, she was more than... an abandoned child cowering in an empty house, failing student, mentally ill. She was more.

She *is* more. This sentiment warms her as she picks herself up and continues to function as she had been taught in her time with Adam. Nevermind that Adam remained a stranger on her balcony that she could not keep. She would not have known what to do with a boy who thought her illness was make-believe anyway. It is enough, she tells herself, to know that she can take her medication without his prompting (and later, his protests), it is enough to know that she can finish her homework and slowly work through her readings by locking her laptop in the balcony to prevent distraction, even if he isn't here to stand guard over it. It is enough that she wakes up everyday, even if he is not waiting to greet her.

Late one evening, as she is stretched out on the mopped and sparkling living room floor, reading a pdf for class on her phone, its ringtone blares and shatters the silence of her apartment. Flinching, she drops the phone on her face, crying out as it smashes into her nose. Squinting through her tears, she realises her father is making his weekly call to check up on her. When she answers, her voice quivers in pain and her father immediately panics. She can tell from how abruptly cheerful he sounds. She tells him she is fine, and the floor is cleaned for once so she may as well take advantage of it. He reacts with earnest, if nonplussed, enthusiasm.

Hesitantly, she broaches a fishing trip, and her father is silent for a moment, before replying that it's illegal to fish where her ashes, and morbidity besides. He doesn't know where she'd gotten the idea from, but, he reassures her, if she still wishes to a month from now, on her mother's anniversary, they could fish on the beach. Her father's utter bafflement is slightly hilarious to her; indulgent, or guilty, she agrees to try going to school again.

At night, just before bed, Yi stands in the balcony, in her sleep clothes, and considers the hole in the netting. It wouldn't be good if her father returned and saw that the netting had been torn open again, like it had been during her mother's departure. And the balcony's remaining inhabitants, the orchids, and her, still needed protection from the birds.

On her tiptoes, her fingers only just manage to nudge the green netting's drooping corner back up into place. One could only tell it was loose if they looked closely, like a secret passage. She sneezes suddenly. The night is cold, so she heads in, slides the gate shut, and taps her finger on the key in the lock, but doesn't turn it. Tomorrow is the first day Yi will be back in school in a long, long time. There are preparations to be made, her bag to pack, notes to print, an inconspicuous outfit to plan, something with pockets to keep her pill case close. Yi will not falter here.

## Mama's Little Helper

Doc asks how I've been doing and I've been here – clinic B of IMH, rm 14 of 36, rotates its doctors almost as often as it rotates its patients – two years already, since outgrowing the children's department when I turned nineteen. I'm comfortable enough now with the anonymity this featureless room affords that I tell her the truth: I have not been doing well.

Her brows furrow as they are wont to do during my appointments, except instead of humming under her breath like she usually does, she tells me, if the medication still isn't working, I'm not sure what more I can do for you.

This isn't a question, however, so although I do not want her to give up on me, I do not say anything, not until she sighs and asks, what's bothering you this time?

1. We are together, finally, Mama's retired, Gor is home for the holidays, and I – I'm happy, I think. This is the closest we've come to making a proper family portrait. Even better, two months ago we moved into a BTO apartment, one of many in this new cluster of HDB flats painted grey and pink.

Mama makes Gor lead us around the house with a clay pot of smoke, dried sage wrapped in newspaper because she couldn't get basil in time. And then she makes us clean up after the renovations, the white cement dust and water stains and clinging stench of stale water and sweat. Mama had ordered a kitchen island, that she hopes will become the cornerstone of our home, enough space for picturesque meals and her baking and my marking and Gor's assignments. She spends an inordinate amount of time polishing its marble surface, and leaves the rest of the house to Gor and me.

I am perched upon the window sill, one foot stretched outside and braced against the drying rack that protrudes from the building like a ladder. As my toes wriggle for purchase among the iron bars, the ladder tells me to climb it, and that it's never wrong to move forward. As I peer out – a lousy view, just concrete sidewalk and then parking – I am struck by how familiar this scene is, how truly a Singaporean death it would be if I fell. Mama walks by and her step falters. It must not be familiar to her because she picks up a cloth from the counter, and leaves without a second glance.

In my hurry scrambling down, I knock over a bottle of thinner – one of those massive club-like things, its green glass almost black. It shatters across the tiled floor and I can't stop myself from stepping on its shards. Again, Mama walks by and her step falters. She deposits the cloth on the counter next to me, and leaves without a second glance.

Although I am baffled by Ma's silence (she enjoys the opportunity to magnanimously forgive us for careless mistakes), obligingly I reach for the cloth and – ah, my feet, burning, stinging pain and the floor is a strange watercolour swash of dark crimson blood seeping through transparent thinner. Where they mix, the liquid becomes a bright scarlet. The pool at my feet spreads, really, quite pretty, I don't know what to do –

Abruptly, Gor is shouting, an arm's length away and stretching across that distance to snatch the cloth from me. He flings it down, cursing, steps on it and uses it to sweep aside the mess of glass between us. Grabs my arm, makes me hop one footed to the small kitchen table. The glass shards already lodged in my foot seem to burrow further, frightened by my movement. I have to argue against calling an ambulance. He



puts me on a moving trolley and takes me to the neighbourhood clinic below the HDB block.

When we return home, Mama has finished polishing her island, and it gleams in the centre of the empty apartment. She looks up, hesitant at first, only looking at Gor, but when I hobble in, suddenly she springs into action, tutting at the bandages wrapped around my foot. She wants to insist *now* that I call myself an ambulance, but I manage to stave her off; who will help her clean her house if I'm gone?

2. Those fat gel capsules they sell fish oil in, bloated, golden. I've swallowed two at a time, dozens of times, easily. It is a point of pride that I've been able to swallow pills since I was six years old, all by myself, isn't that cool? I get arrogant. I get cocky. I shake out two bullets, their gel casings melded together so that they are side by side, and fat. With a splash of water from the pitcher on the kitchen counter, I swallow them easily. They slide into my esophagus. They stop.

Suddenly, I am choking, trying to swallow more water, the water hits the capsules, I vomit water. Heave. I vomit stomach acid but still it only slides past the capsules instead of pushing them out. I drop the cup, I grab the entire pitcher of water. The capsules stand firm against the water, against my throat desperately working around them. My mother walks in. I'm thinking, this is how I die. She looks at me. I must be dying. She walks out.

I do not die. I flail and stumble into the bathroom, collapse onto the shower floor, lest I spill more water – hilarity, stuttering laughter, it'd be a pain to mop the floor later. Water in, vomited out, water in, vomited out, until eventually the casing melts. It is the strangest feeling – a pop in my neck, the miniscule amount of oil searing a line down my throat.

I swallow – properly at last. I can trace their rough, torn shells as they are pushed down. I chug water until my stomach is bloated. I relish its clean, smooth glide down into me.

When I stumble out of the bathroom, hands tight around the doorframe, then the kitchen table, I am drenched. Hair wet, t-shirt wet, shorts wet all the way to my briefs. I have to change.

When I return to clean the mess I've made, Mama is drying the floor.

I always talk too much. It is a character flaw. My new clothes are deliciously dry and I am high on survival. I ask her... I ask her.

It upset me only lor, she chuckles, to see you die. You know how de-li-cate I am. De-li-cate – an inside joke.

It'd upset me too, I don't say, to die. I guess I laugh back, or at least I smile, or maybe I just stare. But I did ask.

3. There's this hole in my chest and it is cavernous, the type white men spelunk in. the mouth of the cave is hidden in the great, fatty folds of a hillside, and inside it is dark and wet and they nearly slip on the glossy smooth teeth. And inside, water would drip on and on and make these loud dot sounds that echo through its hollow depths. And bats hang upside down from the ribs, anticipatory, ready to take flight at the first flicker of a torchlight. And then they would, they'd take flight, a screeching plague, shitting dirty white splotches onto the men's shoulders. And then the hole would be even emptier.

I'm thinking, as I stand by the marble topped island in the dead centre of our living room, I should fill this hole. The silver sheet of medication, most of its little

domes punched out, has left three pills of chalk. I have to take them with water so that they'd churn into a concrete slush, and then that slush would coat the treacherous surfaces of the cave, slowly but surely forming trails for the spelunkers to follow. With enough time, those trails might become nice, even paved. And then the spelunkers would have a clear, safe passage to travel through, so they'd get bored by the lack of thrill and hammering heartbeat, so they'd leave, and the bats would finally get their rest.

But that's too slow. I could douse the hole with concrete all at once, stop the spelunkers all at once, drown the bats before they make a mess of the place. I pop a pill out. I pop another pill out. Each time they make this loud crackling snap as the foil gives in.

Soon, the foil is empty, but so is my chest, still, so I look for another, beneath the stack of Ma's bills I've yet to sort through, abandoned Chinese compositions, crumpled chemistry notes. Every time I move something, a pen or a stapler or correction tape slips from between the papers and clatters loudly. I bend down to pick up a pencil, and straightening up, I catch Mama's eyes. She looks at me, her face says nothing, she says nothing. I look back at her, I meet her eyes, I realise it must feel as though I am challenging her, but really, I'm just tired and I don't know where else to look.

I tell her, they aren't working fast enough.

Her face, her mouth, barely moves, but I hear her telling me, she says, oh, your own medicine, you decide la. The careful way she says that, me-di-cine. And then she turns back to the TV and I can take a hint, I go to my room so as not to bother her. I only have a scant fistful of chalk, but this is good. Too much would

stiffen my torso entirely, and, turned to stone, I would crack apart entirely. Resisting an old party trick to swallow them all at once, I take a single pill between my fingers. I swallow it. I take another pill. I swallow that. Steadily, I fill the hole.

When I wake up, there's crackly, gravelly vomit on one side of my face, in my ear, my hair is clumped and crispy like short cow grass. My bed is rough beneath me, mattress bare, because Mama has pulled the covers out from under me to put in the wash.

(She used to do this a lot, when I was younger and slept in on weekends to well past noon. Her chirping laughter, and suddenly I was rolling across my bed as my Digimon sheets were yanked out from under me. Then I'd lay pressed against the wall like a sausage, incredulous, and then I'd laughed with her.)

Mama is standing in the doorway of my room. She does the oddest thing – she walks in. I turn my head so that vomit doesn't get on her mattress. She touches my forehead anyway. Unlike my forehead, her palm is cool and dry. When she pushes my hair aside, I can feel how thin her skin has become, I can feel it shift over the bones in her hand. The knots of her fingers get caught in the knots of my hair. The sunlight is the early type of sunlight, a clean white with no real heat to it. I could doze off.

Mama says, you need to get up now, if you want to wash up before school. You can still make it for the second half. I ironed your uniform.

So I get up, because Mama rarely tells me to do things, and she rarely does my laundry, let alone iron my uniform. And anyway, the bats are still slumbering and the spelunkers have been driven off by the stench.

I tell this to my doctor, because my doctor asks, even though I am here to fix me, not her. Then I am watching my doctor's face crumple, like it's a piece of paper that I've placed my hand in the centre of, then made a fist.

The doctor says, that's terrible.

I'm thinking, what's terrible is now I'll always see the crinkles of her face, there's no way I can smooth them out.

For a moment she considers her computer screen, then me, then finally asks, do you want to talk to someone?

I'm talking to you, aren't I?

No, to like, a psychologist.

I don't, but it is better than her giving up and anyway the earliest available date for therapy evaluation is in a month and a half. I doubt I'll be seeing the poor, overbooked psychologist often.

At last, she offers to double the dosage of Wellbutrin, which I gladly, gratefully, accept. Just like that, my problems have been dealt with for the next two months.

## Pushing Daisies

On the cusp of sleep, a voice above Nik asks, "Hey, dyou think I could have some of that water?"

Her breath stutters in her chest and her senses sharpen to hyper awareness. All should be still in her house. Her mother, the only other person in their five-room apartment, sleeps across the corridor. There is only the quiet whirring of the air-conditioning and cold air brushes against her feet. Carefully, she opens her eyes.

Her room is dark and still. Going in a neat clockwise circle, she started from the windows by her side, then to the desk, the door still shut, her wardrobe taking up the last wall with its impressive bulk. Few nooks for shadows to hide in. Good feng shui. Failsafe. A solid room, all in all. And yet that voice was as clear as her own breathing.

"What, so you can't hear me after all?" the voice drawls, but Nik is Chinese, knows better than to acknowledge the supernatural, much less answer it. And it has to be supernatural for how present it is, the voice is unplaceable. Not quite high nor low. Familiar in that way where you hear a recording of yourself for the first time. "But God said you would. So he's a liar – who knew?"

"God?" Impulse control has never been her strong suit. "What did God say? Wait, so there is a God?"

"So you can hear me!" It sounds like it comes from above. "Do I get a drink now? You know, you haven't taken care of me since you stole me."

Stole me? In a careful, precautionous movement, Nik cranes her head back as far as it can go without leaving her pillow. Her headboard is barely visible in the darkness, but its clutter catches the moonlight – YA science fiction, her Pratchett collection scattered, the odd

sleeve of pills, Hello Kitty's strap... the flower pot she had shoplifted from the mama shop downstairs two days ago. It's a Grow Your Own Flower kit, a small, white plastic mug with pastel pink trimming. When she'd first placed it in her room, a trophy upon her mantle, she watered it once, then never again. It had been enough, evidently, for a seed to sprout, and now a pale green, skinny thing has pushed out from its grainy soil.

"You're the potted plant." Surprise, disbelief, ornery suspicion. "Plants do not talk."

"That's true. The only true interaction between plant and human is when the human waters the plant."

Fair enough. She's always strived to be responsible, and since she did steal it... Hello Kitty goes back to work.

"Blargh – the water's boiled!" For not having a face, the plant manages to convey its dismay very well.

"If it's good enough for me, it's good enough for you."

"Says who, you little thief?" But there's laughter in its voice.

Nik decides to blithely ignore this. In fact, she should be ignoring all of this, and go back to bed. There is just one last problem – "God?"

A pause. "Ah." Dragged out like an epiphany. "You're an atheist."

"That." Nik blinks. "That's not the issue here."

"Right, of course not." Another pause. Its voice is steadier when it speaks again, "The air-conditioning as well, if you'd please."

"It's gonna be so humid later!" But Nik complies, turns off the air-conditioning, and winces as she throws open the windows, and sticky air rushes in.

Demands satisfied, the plant grows quiet. Nik... doesn't know what to do. Uncertainty is not something she is fond of, so she nods decisively to herself, and nestles back into bed, hoping to fall asleep before the cold air completely leeches away.

#

Neha, sitting behind the counter, lanky limbs crammed into the narrow space, leaning unrepentantly against the cigarette display. The air conditioning had been malfunctioning and was sputtering wetly, noisily. She had her earphones in, its wire twining around her neck and into her plaid shirt.

Nik, standing in front of the counter, for a good two minutes since, clutching a carton of soy milk. There is only so long she can consider the sweets selection that lines the counter, but the bulky grey cash register loomed between them, obscuring her view. They'd been friends for so long; she could say hi. Her voice was lost somewhere.

The only witness to her sudden cowardice was the sad withering flower drooping towards her, its teacup pot taped to the register top. There was a row of its yet-born brethren lining the little ledge left of the counter that the cash register didn't occupy. She would sweep them all to the floor. She would pick one up and throw it –

She would pick one up as she left the store, a single finger hooked into its handle and fishing it away with the natural downswing of her arm as she strode away.

She prepared excuses in her mind – chest puffed out, well you didn't even notice me, *me*, your childhood bff – but as usual it wasn't necessary. Left with a cheap flower pot, soy



milk, and the thrumming of her heart. While this must make her a lowbrow criminal, at least she wasn't sick with anger and indignation. At least she had *acted*.

#

Nik wakes up drenched in sweat. Her heart races, her breath comes short, and her skin is flushed and hot. She glowers blearily at the sunlight slanting across her face. The light is cool – her mother should be gone for work but it is early – though the air is stale, humid, stuffy. Abruptly she remembers last night and lurches out of bed. Throws the windows open, and the door, then spins on her heel to confront the plant.

"Tell me I didn't get steam-cooked for nothing." Nik climbs back onto the bed, sitting back on her heels in front of the plant. "You're not a hallucination, are you?" she demands, shoots suspicious looks at the pill bottle next to the plant, bares her teeth at it. "Or like, a nightmare?"

"Aw c'mon. I could be a dream, at least."

Nik freezes, for so long that her sweat dries enough to unstick t-shirt from skin, and her toes begin to cramp. "I mean," she says carefully, "it can't bode well for me either way."

Silence.

"So. God."

"Yes! I am a messenger of God." The voice of God's messenger now sounds like many things at once. A narrow-sprouted kettle brought to boil. Ma giggling as she stumbles home after a bout of drinking with her kaki. Neha's customer voice, pitched high and obnoxious.

"*God.*" Nik rolls the word around on her tongue, testing. In a way she's grateful for this reasoning. God, not a strange disembodied whistling at the back of her head. God, not a possession by demon, her grandma's fearful glances when visiting Pa's urn. She didn't believe, but better safe than sorry, something like that. It's one of those China-made trinkets anyway. It will die in a few days. At most, two weeks, even under her tender, loving care.

"Well," she says, prickling with the need to flee, "best I get started on chores." And then she flees.

#

Lunch is rice boiled on the stovetop, then stir-fried with salmon, all in one pan. Surely she is ready for hall cooking, even if it is mushy, and too fishy. Nik would've have happily gone her entire life never touching salmon, hates that oily taste, but Omega 3, she reminds herself, good for the head, and God knows her head needs help.

God. She drops her plate with a clatter on the coffee table and stomps resolutely to the bedroom to fetch her laptop.

Her room is exactly as she left it; the plant stalk bends towards the door a bit because of the wind coming through the open windows, but is otherwise obedient. Still, she feels eyes on her as she hefts her laptop off her desk.

"Do you," she demands, brow furrowed, "need lunch or anything? Offerings? Ceremonial sacrifices?"

"Yea sure," says the plant, shocking Nik to stillness. "What's for lunch?"

Nik bit her lip, her big mouth. "I can dissolve a bit of sugar into some fresh water?"

"I'm not a cut stalk! I'm not *ornamental!*" The plant is very huffy for a thing without lungs. "Can't you see this lush soil? Just water will do."

"I'll go get you water."

Before she can leave the room, however, it pipes up, "I thought lunch was eaten in the living room?"

"Eh?"

"Because of the ants," it prompts.

At first Nik only stares, before comprehension strikes. The flat had once been infested with ants. Nothing too dramatic, but her mother had just been promoted to a managerial role and the stress of it did not allow her to tolerate well the single file line of ants leading her household astray. She'd doused the house so liberally in pesticide that they couldn't close the windows for a solid week. Nary an antenna nor scurrying speck had been spotted for a good *year* now; how had the plant known?

Nik finds herself seated at the coffee table with an omniscient flower pot placed next to her food – some sort of convoluted lunch date. She stretches out her legs under the table, and glares at the TV. The plant's made her miss the first ten minutes of *The Great British Bake Off*.

"So," says the plant, its voice as real as Mary Berry's, "do you come here often?"

Nik swallows carefully, sighs in resignation, then points out, "This is my house."

"Well, this does rather feel like a first date," the plant replies.

"Okay, well." She squishes overcooked flakes of salmon into her rice half-heartedly.

"Hello, my name is Nik, and you are?"

"Hoh! Excellent question." The plant laughs. It sounds like a strange staccato of ha-ha-ha. "I am Groot."

"I'm not calling you a lame comic book name," Nik retorts around her spoon, trying to finish her meal as fast as possible. She eyeballs the plant. Among its scraggly stem and teeny yellow green leaves, the plant has started to bud.

"Hey, Bud," she replies, to which the plant replies, "Hi, pal."

Back to the drawing board. The bud, should it blossom, would be small and white and unimpressive, she decides. "Daisy."

Daisy is silent all through the rest of lunch, the end of *The Great British Bake Off* episode, and dishes. She rather hoped it would stay silent but it pipes up again as she is in the midst of her chores.

"Daisy," says, well, Daisy. It sounds pained. "Yknow, names are important; I was hoping for something with more... brevity."

"It suits you," Nik tells it as she stalks past.

"Daisy," repeats, again, Daisy, still pained, now also incredulous. "Do you really hold a vision of God in such contempt, Nikolette?"

"Nikolette, of victory," says Nik, off-handed, as she struggles with the heavy bucket of water. She can't resist calling out as she mops, "Mama gave me a good name, and I intend to live up to it."

When Daisy doesn't react in the slightest, Nik is suddenly struck by what a queer thing it was to say. Flushed, inexplicably humiliated, Nik snaps at it, "What?!" It does not respond, and the longer she stares at the pot, anticipatory, the more strange knot of anger

tangles and writhes in her stomach, before suddenly it strikes her that she's yelled at a potted plant.

"The one fucking time," she hisses, glares at the pot, clenches her fists, "the one fucking time someone –" but Daisy isn't a someone. No one ever listens – she draws a measured breath – because she's not saying anything worth listening to. *Victory. Victory.*

Nik seizes it from the coffee table in a move so violent it spills half of the gravelly soil onto the table. For a frozen moment, Nik stands stock still, imagines the plastic crack in her fist, imagines flinging it out the living room window. But she's not that strong, and the living room window is grilled. A measured breath. Two breaths. Three. Nik turns on her heels and goes to fetch a towel from the kitchen.

#

With disconcertingly little effort, Daisy burrows into her life, like a particularly insidious mould, infesting the carefully cultivated flower bed of her life, just as it'd recovered from the last infestation. And far be it for Daisy to be grateful that Nik accommodates the impossibility of its nature. She waters it when she eats, and brings the standing fan in the living room into her room so that the air conditioning doesn't dry its soil – and the damned thing starts heckling her.

"No need to be shy, mortal! I shall deliver you from your woes!"

Nik wonders if Daisy knows cheap plant kits like her only last weeks, a month, if lucky. But it'd be rude, probably, to point this out. Worse still, Daisy might decide its time is too short to be wasted in a three-room HDB bitching at disenchanting youth. It might demand field trips farther than the living room. "Nah, I'm good."

Daisy blithely ignores her, and the fact that she's *busy*. "Open your withered heart to me!"

"Well, recently," Nik tries her best to stare down the plant, "a plant's started talking to me, and you know that only happens to crazy people."

"Well maybe you've got to have some sort of deep traumatic anguish that I've gotta deliver you from."

As far as she's concerned, if she has troubles, she will figure them out herself. Spurred to action, she pushes the coffee table against the TV stand. Daisy yelps, "Careful! You wouldn't want to knock me off!"

Ignoring it blithely, she pushes the sofa out of the way as well. "Gotta have space to exercise." Nik pauses, self-conscious. There's a reason she stays in the confines of her living room instead of going down to jog. "Wait, which way are you facing? I don't want you to watch me flail."

"... A wall. I'm facing a wall," says Daisy. "And a window. Can't see you at all."

Daisy is a liar because when Nik glares suspiciously at it, it clearly balks and hastily changes the subject. "Why you exercising anyway? You don't seem like the type."

Nik blinks, then flexes a bicep. "I cannot defeat foes with this measly strength."

"You have foes?"

"You seem to bloody think so," Nik retorts.

"Some foes cannot be beaten into submission," Daisy informs her sagely, "by physical strength alone."

"You don't know until you try. Uni starts in two weeks. I need to be the best version of me. I'm running out of time."

"But *you* don't got an expiry date, do you?"

Nik looks up, and lets out a sharp bark of laughter. She doesn't ask, and you? Instead, she picks up the plant and puts it behind the sofa, despite its protests. "I don't want you judging my unhealthy flesh vessel," Nik tells Daisy.

There is a sulk in Daisy's voice when she replies, "I wasn't gonna judge you. Who am I gonna compare you with? The shopkeeper auntie?"

"Her daughter is thinner than me. And have you seen her arms? When she's helping stock the shelves?" Nik is momentarily distracted by the thought of her.

"Yea, her arms were turgid. So?"

"My flaccid arms don't compare. Now shush."

Daisy, realising that Nik isn't going to relent, starts to complain from behind the couch. "You humans sure are ungrateful. What I wouldn't do for a body like yours."

"Doubt it," Nik mutters. As Nik warms up with jumping jacks, already her body is heating, her heart tensing with dread. "Ask God for a body if you want one so much."

"Maybe he'll give me one for a job well done," Daisy tells her pointedly.

"All the best, bud."

Daisy doesn't have a tongue, but Nik gets the distinct impression that it just tched her. "If you're going to university, you can't be stupid."

"I'm not."

"And if you're not stupid, you know what I'm getting at."

Nik pauses mid burpee, and stares up at Daisy. Her skin is flushing a dark red, as though it is attempting to expel rot through her skin. "I don't have any problems for you to solve," she repeats. Daisy does not reply.

#

When they were fourteen, Neha streamed into a stronger class, leaving Nik to languish for the last two years of secondary school, any remaining spark in her extinguished. It was a fact that Neha's mother, the wife of a shopkeeper to Ma's profession as a senior accountant, took great pride in, and loudly.

Fortunately, Nik was designated shopper, and left her mother at the counter. Canned soup, the fancy brand. Packets of readymade meat and gravy. A new bag of rice, because that was all she knew how to cook, but she would learn. She would.

"Nikolette!" Neha had just begun to smile, but it contorted into a wince when her mother's voice carried and found them in the back, permeating through the bricks of vacuum sealed rice.

"Don't worry! Now she might be lagging behind my daughter –" the face on her mother, Nik wondered, had to be a thing of beauty – but A Level exams still got two more years, still got time to catch up."

"You know my mother always talk too much. Eh, no more CCA or anything right? Let's go study together like last time. At least three solid hours, then we go play badminton. Like last time."



Nik clenched her fists, and the bruises on her left wrist ached, reminding her that she couldn't play badminton either. All she could say was, "Cannot."

Hurt flickered across Neha's face. "Why not?"

They'd been friends for so long, Neha knew her best out of anyone, that it seemed pointless to keep it from her any longer. One big bracing breath, then Nik rolls up her sleeve.

Lastly, she lit up with recognition. "Oh! So it was real you went hospital, ah? IV drip right?" She was right, but before Nik could respond, Neha barged on, "My cousin have before, when he damn bad food poisoning until cannot eat or drink." She nodded, self-assured. "Okay, badminton next time. But study still can what."

"Cannot." Nik had to elbow her way past Neha to escape. Neha trailed after her quietly, warily.

"No lah, she my daughter. People like us sure get in lah."

She snapped towards her mother's voice. As her mother put a bony arm around her shoulders, Nik abruptly realised that Neha had retreated to behind the counter.

They waved to each other as they left the store, reluctant, jerky movements. Her mother dug her fingers into the crook between her neck and collar, and told her, "I know you will do better."

#

When Nik's mother comes home from work, she is surprised to see her daughter eating her dinner at the coffee table, illuminated only by the flickering glow of the television. Her daughter is surprised too. She hadn't realised her mother wore matched pants suits. When

she did the laundry, she assumed her mother would at least mix it up to stop from looking like a 90s catalogue.

"Hello," says her mother, slapping on the lights the apartment is flooded with harsh white light. She slings her handbag onto the dining table and out spills an empty Subway sandwich wrapper, wadded tissue, scrap paper, and another pen stolen from work, creating another mess that she'll leave for Nik to clean the next day.

After a beat, Nik replies, "Welcome home."

It is awkward, but not as painful as expected. Her mother, despite the accounting degree, has a gift for weaving stories around her vapid co-workers, the jittering customers, her boss made into an awful caricature. She calls out her stories from the kitchen, doesn't pause as she lays her dinner out on the dining table, an easy cadence that has Nik wondering if her mother does this even when there is no one to hear. Certainly, her voice wavers on occasion, around a mouthful of stir fried beef; Nik lowers the volume of her show to hear her better.

Then her mother says, "I'm glad you're feeling better," and Nik tenses because, ah, there she goes, "I knew you a bright child, always know how to take care of yourself."

Nik has envisioned this conversation before. In her daydreams, as she stocked the cabinets with coffee she couldn't drink and sugar she never touched until recently... She would protest, and vehemently. If I'm doing better, it is only because I've tried so hard, she would defend herself, and then attack, are you even listening to me? I'm so tired. Because she is tired, however, Nik only mumbles, "I guess," and shovels food into her mouth so that she doesn't have to talk.

Her mother starts up again, "University will be a fresh start, I know you will –"

Nik stands and stomps to her room. Rips the pot off her headboard and plonks it on the dining table next to Ma's plate, and demands for – her mother, Daisy, whichever, she just needs them to exist in the same place – to speak.

"Go on," whispers Daisy, "Introduce us."

The sounds of her mother's spoon scraping against the bowl stop. She regards Nik with such sheer bafflement, and *panic*, that Nik has to backtrack, stumbling over her excuses.

"I just mean –" Nik is reminded of the way her mother's fingers burrow into the meat of her shoulder, and her own fingers tighten around the pot. Her fingertips slip over its smooth surface. When she tries to dig her nails into that plastic, she can feel the scrape in her teeth. She says finally, "It's good to talk to plants, helps them grow."

Her mother, clipped, "Oh?"

"I'm trying something new. It'll look good in uni hall."

Finally, her mother smiles again. "Good. That's why I say, focus on getting better, now you in uni. I knew you could do it. See, you're all better now."

Nik looks at Daisy. "Okay."

Suddenly her mother snatches Daisy out of her grasp, places it in the middle of the dining table. Before Nik can react, she's already gone off, "What a nice flower! Look so nice on my table! Come eat with me!"

Wordlessly, Nik sits at the dining table, and watches her mother eat.

#

There is a soft touch to Nik's cheek. At first she ignores it, content in dozing a few hours longer. The wet market is closed on Mondays. Then comes the touch again, plush like her own cheek, but cool to the touch, and powder dry. Blearily, Nik opens her eyes.

Neha waves down at her, from where she sits on the headboard. She beams, an innocent thing, as happy and as naked as the rest of her. Nik stares so long until Neha pokes her head with her foot again.

"What," says Nik, not asking, because she's not quite sure what to do with any sort of answer.

"I wanted to be with you," says Neha, and isn't that the stuff of dreams, except Nik would never have imagined it happening like this, "so I asked God to turn me human."

Neha leans further to smile at her and it is at that point that Nik realises two things:

1. Neha is Daisy.
2. Daisy is naked.

It is appalling. She keeps her eyes at a half squint, sees just enough that she can only make out the rough, blurred shape of Daisy above her. She can't move otherwise, doesn't want to see nor touch anything she isn't prepared for. Daisy lifts her leg and stomps playfully on Nik's forehead. Nik can feel the soft pads of her foot musing her fringe. She can feel it as true and real physical sensation. Daisy has become a real girl. Nik's chest heaves in shallow, panicked breaths.

"Clothes," she grinds out, then squeezes her eyes shut again. "Oh my God."

"You should thank Him," suggests Daisy, wriggling her toes atop Nik's forehead, "for giving me this body and giving you some company."

Daisy leans forward to grin at Nik, then teeters over. Nik springs out of bed just in time to avoid Daisy toppling onto the bed, and beelines to the wardrobe to search for her cleanest, newest panties. It is only after she tosses it back towards Daisy that she says belatedly, "head's up." There is a metal clang from the window grill.

"Ah!" Daisy clutches her head. She flexes her fingers, tugging her hair where the bump is. "Is this pain?" she cries, bewildered. "Why'd I move without thinking? Am I dying?"

"You moved on instinct." Nik adds, "And don't be daft. Now put those on." She peeks just long enough to see Daisy holding them up, perplexed. "You've seen me in them. The, like, bigger side, that goes over your ass."

"I have an ass!" Daisy is delighted. "Ah, wait, no. I don't wanna wear clothes."

"Well, too bad!" Nik sticks her head into her hanging clothes to smother her frustrated yell. Then quieter, less hysterical, "And I don't want to invade Neha's privacy like that."

Daisy mutters darkly, "This wouldn't've happened if I was still a plant."

"I would deeply," Nik tells her ceiling, and whatever's possibly beyond it, "*deeply* appreciate it if you returned to being a plant."

Of course, she's ignored. "My head still hurts."

"Rub the bump."

"But it hurts!"

"It'll heal faster that way."

Finally, Daisy manages to wriggle into her underwear, and she sits on the bed with her legs askew. "I have to hurt myself to heal? The human body sure is counter intuitive," she decides, prodding the lump on her head cautiously.

Nik waves her hand high, like the tail of a shooting star. *The more you know.*

Daisy used her newfound lungs to huff and groan, her tongue to click in dissatisfaction. Then there is a whump as she clammers off the bed, frowning down at her underwear as she sways like a newborn lamb. Nik is only allowed to entertain this for a quaint second. Then Daisy lurches on her first step forward, black hair swinging forward in thick clinging strands.

"Do I at least get to choose my clothes?" Daisy asks, tottering to the wardrobe. She must have a sense of humour because she pulls out Nik's secondary school uniform, a pinafore the ugly green of weeds by the roadside. "Help me," she demands as she climbs back onto the bed, pinafore flapping open at the side.

Biting her lip, Nik relents, focusing only on tugging up the finicky zip.

Unaccustomed to having a face and thus incapable to masking its expressions, Daisy is an open book; she perks, frowns suddenly, whole face scrunched, then finally, bites her bottom lip and asks, "Well? What do you think?"

There is something... off about the body.

Unthinking, Nik reaches out, but catches herself right before her fingertips graze Daisy's cheek. Daisy blinks at her hand, then takes it and presses it to her cheek. Nik freezes, sensory overload, so Daisy takes the chance to place her own hand on Nik's cheek.

At once, Nik is hyperaware that she hates having her face touched – her mother, suspecting she is sick, taking her temperature – and that it must be slick with oil and heated with her blush. Then Daisy grins, skin shifting under Nik's palm. Daisy's skin, in contrast, is powder dry, and sprinkled with fine hairs, much like the green stalk of a plant. And when she sweeps her fingertips, exploratory, Nik realises that there is little to no warmth to Daisy, except where her own warmth has seeped into.

As Daisy leans closer, Nik thinks, this is a Moment, then Daisy ruins what could've been by trying to touch her eyeball.

"No!" Nik jerks back, then just as quickly slaps away Daisy's hand when she tries to touch her own. "No, don't do that, you'll give yourself an eye infection."

"God does better work than that!" Daisy protests.

It is obvious that Daisy's body is not fully human, but. Neha does have such a clean complexion. "God does pretty good work," Nik concedes grudgingly.

#

They're watching *The Great British Bake Off* together when there is a knock on her bedroom door. Nik is so confused that she sits stunned, but Daisy leaps into action, scrambling under the covers. Of all the stupid places she could hide – her mother pokes her head in.

"... What?" Nik, still stunned, tries not to move as much as possible lest her mother notice the giant lump next to her isn't pillows or dirty laundry.

"The fan missing so I thought –" her mother pauses. "But there it is."

"There it is," Nik echoes. What a thorny situation. Usually she'd break eye contact and stare at her laptop screen pointedly until her mother leaves. She doesn't dare do this now, better that she keeps her attention than have it wander to the suspicious lump next to her.

"You look better," her mother says, and has it been that long since Nik looked her in the face? She seems older somehow. "Is it all that TV? Then I should watch some too."

"I'll whatsapp you the title," says Nik, then because all this eye contact is weirding her out, unpauses the show to let it draw her mother's attention instead, and doesn't look away from the screen until she hears the door click shut again.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," says Daisy, as she flings the blanket aside, "but wasn't she trying to watch it with you?"

Nik scoffs. "What? You want me to invite her in? What if she sees you?"

Daisy blinks at her. "What if she doesn't?"

#

Daisy is much more difficult to come to terms with now that she possesses a body.

Theoretically, Nik is welcome to continue on as she has, watering her once a day, for her body did not demand sustenance beyond what a potted plant needed. Water, and a little extra vigilance to make sure Daisy was stretched out in a sunspot, clothed.

Daisy doesn't sleep either. On the first night, Nik had awoken to her perched back on her headboard, much like she had the first time she appeared anthropomorphic. Sleep fuzzy, she had watched the stillness of her chest, the damp glint of her eyes – Daisy leaned forward, shoulder pressed up against the window, trying to stare beyond the opposing wall. That dark hair spilled like ink over her shoulder.



She should've thrown the pot when Daisy was still a plant and throwable.

Compromise. She's learnt to compromise.

In the dead heat of the afternoon, Nik sits atop her headboard – she feels the rolls of her ass, her thighs, squelching off the thin piece of panelling, how does Daisy do it? – one fist clenched around the grill. The glass windows are open. She imagines the thin metal panes warp, sees the quiver of her own strain. She loosens her grip. With one hand, she picks up a book.

The nice thing about these hefty high fantasy paperbacks is that there are so many pages pre and post story. The stiffer cover had been torn off long ago, so now the title page and advertisement of his other works acted as a front and back cover, swaddled in tape. But there was no reinforcing the spine, so the pages would always tear off, like so – she holds it between her thumb and forefingers, crinkling the furried tape, and flung it at the opposite wall.

The book struck the wall shelf with a resounding thunk and ricocheted across the room, falling to the floor neatly and intact. The next book is not so lucky; her sweaty thumb drags on the back page and it rips right off. No matter. No one reads the back pages.

So she throws another one, and another, and another, and next to her, dainty with its hands on its knees, the soles of her feet somehow braced flat against the headboard, Daisy sits silently. The timid curve of its shoulders. Doesn't flinch at the noise. Doesn't blink. As though she is a plant again, except those dark eyes are watching her.

When the books run out, her chest is heaving for air. Nik looks at the clock, and realises she has to cook dinner for Ma soon. She slides off the headboard and when she almost slips on a book that fell onto her bed, she punts it across the room.

Steps across the carnage, the occasional loose crumpled page. Nudges the books away from the door frame so that she can close the door with an absent click.

#

"Yknow, we're running out of time," Daisy murmurs as it languishes across her bed.

Nik doesn't look up from her packing. The suitcase splayed open and occupying half her bedroom floor is only half full, but already she's run out of things to fill it with. What more than a week's change of clothes and toiletries? She tosses an old, empty notebook in, and the three of them sit quietly until she cannot bear its awful glitter glue any longer, and fishes it back out. It's a solid thing, cover made not of cardstock but thin plastic. She places it on the pile of paperbacks she has yet to replace. "What dyou mean?"

Daisy waves down the length of her body. She is thinner now. Her limbs bulge in places, and wither in others. A badly stuffed sausage casing – or, no, no meat – the disintegration of cotton in an old bolster. Daisy doesn't have flesh or skin, and soon she won't have a body at all. "My time here's almost up. Whatever God sent me to you for, we're running out of time to accomplish it."

If Nik rolls Daisy up, her crumpled form will fit into the half suitcase. Something twinges in Nik's cold, barren heart. Nik says, "Be grateful you had time at all."

Daisy ignores her. "We're gonna disappoint God."

"God this, God that!" Nik snaps, "He doesn't take well to suicides, does he? Doesn't like people breaking his toys? Well fuck, I've already disappointed Him."

Daisy is silent for a long moment, enough time for Nik to decide which bed sheets she wants to bring to hall. "You never told me."

"I never told anyone." She stares hard at her sheets. Maybe the purple set with the garish orange carrots dancing across the borders. May as well go all out. Neha would recognise them from old sleepovers, but maybe their visitors would take them as a hipster statement thing. "I thought you knew."

Daisy repeats, "You never told anyone."

"Look, it's not a big deal, okay?" Nik slams her luggage shut, but its lid bounces off the bulk of bed sheets. Unsatisfying. She yanks the zipper. Drums her fingers against its scuffed shell. "You want me to go doctor? Well, that's what they said. I wasn't in any *real* danger. If I'm so bright, so fucking smart, I would have counted the pills properly. I would be dead. But I'm not. I'm not sick. There's nothing wrong with me."

When did she yelling? Despite her words – and they're strong words, right? Correct words. There's nothing wrong with me. Uplifting words – heavy tears begin to gather. She rubs at her eyes, furious. Sucks the snot back in and swallows it. Coughs. Concentrates on dulling her heartbeat. Anger. She knows this feeling. It has to be anger. Overwhelming. She needs to do something but with Daisy in the way, she cannot reach her books, cannot bear the weight of her gaze again.

"You're dying," Nik points out spitefully as she rubs her swollen eyes. Daisy curls up next to her in bed. She's never breathed much, only gasped or huffed to express her emotions, but her stillness is unnerving.

Painstakingly, Daisy lifts herself onto one elbow to shoot her a withering look. "I hadn't noticed."

Nik narrows her eyes right back. "You just don't seem all that sad about it, is all."

"I can start crying too," Daisy offers, "if it'll make you feel better about my imminent demise."

"I thought your whole purpose was to make me feel better."

"I'm here to make you better." Daisy collapses back onto the bed. The arm that had been supporting her has deflated like a balloon sculpture that has come apart. "At least I've done my job. God can't chew me out if I've done my job."

"Have you?" Though Daisy has meddled in her life plenty, Nik has no clue what she's actually accomplished. There isn't any doubt in her mind that seeds had been sown – she can feel their roots burrowing into her – but change has not yet sprouted. And there is no predicting the change will be for the better.

"Not a clue," Daisy confesses cheerfully. "I expect you'll only find out how you've grown only in retrospect. You didn't like the self you were before. Moving beyond that can't be a bad thing. I kicked you into action, that's all." She pauses. "I only wish I could've watched you change."

"But you'll be with God, right? And God sees all."

"That's right!" Daisy smiles, such a wide thing that it'll leave crow's feet. Nik would touch it, but she's afraid it might collapse under the pressure of her fingertips. "I'm sure you'll do... something. Whatever it is, I know you can do it."

And for some reason the tension drains out of her. This is different from her mother's false confidence, or Neha's nostalgia. This, from someone who listened.

"Thank God," she mumbles, and Daisy cracks up beside her.

Her room is filled with butter soft sunlight.

Unwilling to leave the bed last night, she'd left the lights on, so it isn't clear when dawn happened. One moment they're whispering as they stare glassy-eyed at how the streetlights turn her window grills orange, the next she's slurring to a pale yellow glow.

"I'll bring you to hall –" she squeezes her eyes shut to crack off the gunk that's hardened between her lashes "– once you're all plant again."

"And if you ever talk again –" yawns, her jaw pops "– we'll go straight to the school counselor."

With a groan, Nik rolls over and the teeny pot crunches under her shoulder blade. The sharp jut of its handle stabs her just so between her ribs, and her entire left torso seizes up in a godawful cramp. Realisation dawns. Her pupils dilate.

Bolting upright, she seizes the largest shard and hurls it, dirt chunk and all. It hits the door and soil explodes in a giant puff. As the dust clears, her door is stained and there doesn't seem a single floor tile that is untouched by the dirt.

Nik sits, chest heaving, fists tangled in her bedsheets. There, in the middle of her floor, a little scrap of brown-green.

On her knees, she sweeps the soil with the sides of her hands towards Daisy. Gathers what she can in the cup of one hand, picking out errant strands of hair and letting them drift back to the floor.

A ziplock bag from the kitchen, a bra snagged off the laundry line, then she is tripping out of her home.

She wants to laugh:

Neha, sitting behind the counter with her earphones in.

Nik, standing in front of the counter clutching what's left of Daisy.

In place of the pots, tiny barrels of slime, the latest gimmick, are stacked in front of the cash register.

"Hey!" Nik cries. Neha snaps towards her. The sight of her stunned face – *that face* – makes that disbelieving laughter push against the back of Nik's throat. "What happened to those pot flowers?"

Neha frowns. "They sold out? Why?"

"I wanted a potted plant for the room." Nik looks down at her plastic baggie. This seems as good a lead in as any. She puts it on the counter. Daisy, in pieces, can barely be seen among the soil. "But I killed it."

Staring down at the wee thing, Neha bursts out laughing. "Not your fault lah. It's just how they're made."

There's that low boiling heat in Nik's stomach, but she tries to swallow it down. "I *really* liked this one."

Neha is already hopping off her stool. "We can go get a proper one for hall."

One last desperate time, Nik says, "But I really liked *this one*."

Something makes Neha pause. "Okay," she says, considering Nik's words carefully. She shuts the lights off in the store one by one. "Let's go get a proper one, and then we can put its remains in the new pot, and let it fertilise the new plant."

Nik laughs, finally, and lets Neha lead them out of the darkened store.

"Okay?" The shutters are drawn down in a clattering cacophony. Neha beams at Nik. "I go with you now. Later you accompany me at the shop. We can like, plan our hall room together. Like we wanted to last time. You ready?"

Sweat plasters her hair to her forehead, her neck. Her mouth is still sour and her hair tangled and greasy. No wallet either; all she has on her is Daisy, and Neha's hand around her wrist. Nik is as unprepared as she has ever been. "Yea," she replies, "I'm ready."

## **But We Happened Anyway: An Exegesis**



## *An Introduction*

In February 2017, I dislocated my ankle at the trampoline park I worked at; a backflip went crooked and my left foot landed on the side padding, under which there was a steel beam. I buckled. For a brief gasping moment, I curled into myself. And then I uncurled because it did not hurt, and I needed to reassure my co-workers that it did not hurt. I let a fellow part-timer, ZM, a strapping, final year sports science major, reset it there and then, with his bare hands, because as exciting as this all was, I did not want to be a bother. The paramedics arrived regardless, so I walked across the trampolines with my ankle rotund as a softball, and asked if I really did need to go to the hospital. They told me, perplexed at my cheer and quite incredulous, that I did. I distinctly remember thinking, in a detached, shoulder-shrug manner: I can write a story out of this.

To transcribe experience into a story is to impose narrative structure upon it, and decide what message it should convey, but I cannot find the heart of the matter. I do not know what story to tell. It could be a story of violence and self-injury, the same way many mental illness narratives are in popular culture. Or I could dissect the events that led me to this moment, in the style of a memoir. Or it could be a story of diagnosis, my psychiatrist suggesting that a manic episode characteristic of bipolar disorder led me to the reckless abandon that dislocated my ankle, only to revoke the mood disorder diagnosis altogether, and then shunt my actions into the category of "engagement in dangerous, risky, and potentially self-damaging activities [...] and denial of the reality of personal danger" (*DSM-5* 767) to fit my next diagnosis. Or that I had worked toward health so desperately – finding work at a trampoline park, compensating physically for my mental weakness – only to have it ruined yet again, and I dared to have the audacity to be unpleasantly surprised. Likely, it is the sum of these things, ever-changing with the continuum of mental disorder.

As a result of my efforts to turn these experiences into stories that the mentally disordered can identify with, *But We Happened Anyway* is a collection of short stories that explores how to express living with mental disorder, and attempts to reclaim what it means to be 'mad'. Rather than aiming to raise awareness or validate people with mental disorders, as is the trend of current mental illness narratives in Singaporean literature such as *Off Centre* and *The Sound of Sch*, I wish to portray them occupying space in Singaporean society without having them explain or justify being mentally disordered. I wrote these stories to answer the questions: What do stories written *by* the mentally disordered look like? What do stories written *for* the mentally disordered look like?

### *On Disorder*

When I speak of disorder, I refer to mental health conditions that are caused by biological and neurological factors, rather than those that are heavily dependent on environmental factors such as trauma and substance abuse. In particular, I write from personal experience, which mental health professionals have diagnosed on separate occasions as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and most recently, borderline personality disorder.

The perception of such mental disorder in Singapore appears to be divided into two distinct camps. First, as Ng Chee Hong found in his review of attitudes and stigma towards mental illness in Asian cultures, "mental illness seems to be accepted as an illness like any other" (383). On the other hand, as stated in *Next Step*, a government commissioned magazine aimed at educating society on mental illness, many Singaporeans believe that "mental conditions are caused by personal weakness," and "people who are depressed could just snap out of it if they tried hard enough" (6). These opposing views arrive from an inability distinguish different forms of mental illness; "severe mental illness with disturbed

behaviour was more easily recognised" (Ng 386), while those that did not fall within that rubric simply did not exist and were assumed to be a fault of the individual's character.

The lack of body-mind duality aligns with my experience with mental disorder. There is a great body of research that suggests emotions cannot be felt without bodily expression, feeling emotions occurs when "the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of" a stimulus (James 189-190). For example, a mood-disordered individual, following the physical turns of their body that give rise first to the physical symptoms of mania or depression, has learnt early that there is no such thing as "emotion dissociated from all bodily feeling" (James 194). Through a somatic portrayal of mental illness, I hope to expose Singaporean readers to a more varied portrayal of mental disorder, such that depression and the like are taken seriously.

However, in first person autobiographical narratives, there is a tradition of ignoring physical symptoms, such as heart palpitations or hyperventilation. As in *Girl, Interrupted* and *Poppy Shakespeare*, evidence of the protagonists' disorders is in the way they narrate their convoluted way of thinking, and a psychological dissociation from reality. They rarely address the physical body, outside of self-inflicted wounds and the effects of disordered eating. This tradition is also apparent in Singaporean literature. For example, in the play *Off Centre*, the audience is made aware of Vinod's deteriorating health almost solely through his dialogue, which reveals irrational thinking, and the physical body is only addressed in the climactic scene in which Vinod appears on stage drenched in blood. By not portraying the somatization of mental disorders, it diminishes the perception of mental disorder as an actual disorder compared to physical disorders. Only portraying the physical manifestation of mental disorder as the sudden, violent punchline to the narrative encourages the misconception that mentally disordered individuals are unpredictable and dangerous.

In my writing, I seek to emphasize that there is no distinction between mental disorders such as depression and the like, and other disorders of the body. When I write of mental disorder, and mental illness, they are thus illness narratives and engage with the history of illness narratives. In researching the medical industry's renewed interest of illness narratives in the early 2000s, Michael Bury notes that historically, regarding physical illness and advancement in bio-sciences, "the study and treatment of disease became separated from the individual, and located within body systems only understood by experts, the need to attend to the patient was reduced to eliciting information about the objective signs and symptoms" (266). Since the disordered body had been splayed open, examined, and cured, it ceased to be worthy of attention. Since then, illness narratives rise with social movements as patients grope for autonomy against grand narratives.

The women's health movement in the 1970s revived illness narratives to highlight the suffering of the female body, and after the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s caused another surge of illness narratives: the sick rushing to memorialise their life stories as the death toll rose at a horrific pace. Illness narratives gained renewed purpose in allowing patients to reclaim autonomy against grand narratives of their illnesses, pushing back against public assumptions and stereotypes. However, in *Illness as Narrative*, Ann Jurecic observes a resistance against illness narratives because they "provoke affective and intimate engagement, responses that have little currency in academic discussions of the arts and literature," and that results in the expectation that they would "fail both as acts of testimony and as works of literature" (10-11).

Though Virginia Woolf writes of physical illness in her essay "On Being Ill," it applies splendidly to mental illness narratives. In the essay, she acknowledges that illness is solitary and difficult to convey outside of the inflicted body, thus "we go alone" (12). In addition, "more practically speaking, the public would say that a novel devoted to influenza

lacked plot" (14). Her portrayal of illness – as an intervention of the body, that "those great wars which it wages by itself, with the mind a slave of it" (15) – is exemplary. It allows the mentally disordered to take control of their own narratives and by paying attention to the body and the somatic symptoms of mental disorder, makes such narratives harder to disregard as fantasies of the mind. My stories portray mental illness as trauma to the physical body as well. Depression in "Housekeeping," for example, is expressed not in emotive language but through the protagonist's body – or lack thereof. The numbing apathy of depression becomes a hollow under her ribs where her lungs should be. This more vivid, bodily manifestation of mental disorder would be more difficult to dismiss, I hope, while at the same time taking some mysticism out of mental illness.

Michel Foucault tracks the history of madness and confinement; in the 1650s, for the mentally ill who could not financially support themselves, confinement was demanded for reasons quite independent of any desire to cure. The first reason was to remove undesirable characters from offending the public with their unsightly disabilities. The second was to provide cheap labour, where a disordered mind and its inability to contribute to society became "a moral ascesis, a punishment, and the sign of a certain disposition of the heart" (69) and as such, labour would be the obvious cure. According to Foucault, the worth of an individual becomes reliant on the worth of what they are able to materially produce. And a lack of that worth becomes a moral failing.

Foucault gives us a precedent for the logic of meritocracy in present day Singapore, which in turn affects the attitudes towards mental health today. For example, returning to the government publication, *Next Step*, its focus with the mentally ill who are not elderly, is on their employability. The publication hints that the main concern with discrimination against

mental illness preventing them from "seeking the appropriate mental health care" is that it has resulted in an estimated 70% of unemployment in Singaporeans with mental illnesses. The goal of confinement towards productivity shifts from cheap manual labour within the institute to the ability to work upon discharge. The goal of protecting society from the mentally disordered remains, though society is well equipped to keep us away by itself.

Modern inpatient psychiatric wards are "the result of a synthesis between the newly perceived need to cure the mad whom their family cannot afford to treat at home and the old need to protect society" (Foucault 18). In June of 2016, the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) opened a new ward, the Mood Disorder Unit, which specialises in complex or severe mood disorders. IMH does not make public the statistics of their wards. However, in my personal experience with the institute, inpatient treatment is offered nearly as freely as psychopharmaceutical medication, even if the patient is as young as thirteen years old. IMH is continually expanding its wards and ward programmes.

The threat of confinement keeps the mentally disordered restricted to the few places that tolerate disordered behaviour, or places wherein the mentally disordered can find routine in so as not to aggravate their disorders. This self-confinement mimics its goals of keeping the disordered out of sight, and struggling towards productivity. My stories most often occur in the house, and even then there are only certain rooms that they reside in. In "Housekeeping," for example, the rooms that the protagonist frequents are not her own bedroom, but the master bedroom where her mother lies sick and established a precedent of disorder, and the living room that represents the house she is supposed to look after and has purpose in; there needs to be justification for her to occupy space.

*On Language and Labels*

Singapore's health care system is excellent, ranked third in the world, and will treat you well, but only if it knows what is wrong with you, and what to do with you.

ZM, while fantastically talented at resetting ankles, is less adept at taking phone camera photos, so the only proof I have of the dislocation is grainy, the jut of misaligned bone just barely peeking from the bottom edge of the photo. No one that mattered saw it dislocated, so the doctor in the Accidents and Emergencies department would not make a diagnosis. Without a diagnosis, they can only fashion around my swollen ankle a makeshift cast, and schedule my MRI for a month later. By then, the muscles of my leg would have atrophied in the cast, and any torn ligament would have shrivelled up and become near impossible to reattach.

I was to be confined to the house, my leg remained in the cast that I never needed for a month, unable to walk unless with crutches. My leg – muscles spanning from toes to knees to hip – atrophied in the meantime.

Instead of being uncertain of the nature of their disorder, the protagonists of *But We Happened Anyway* are uncertain of how to express their disorders to others, or how others would react to their disorders. A diagnosis is mentioned exactly once in *But We Happened Anyway*, in the first scene of the first story, "Sleeping Beauty." The unnamed protagonist reveals to the reader that she is bipolar, which is substantiated by her trip to IMH, implying that her diagnosis comes from trained psychiatrists. In hindsight, this was as much my own way of declaring my credentials, an attempt to prove that I had not written about mental illness as a gimmick. She even declares in the final scene, "I have to name it, the instabilities,

the compulsive tics, the illness. [...] It's my thing right? I can write it, easy." A diagnosis is then never again mentioned in relation to the protagonist, and only once more mentioned by Po of "Pot, Kettle" as a way for her to validate herself in the eyes of the protagonist.

Although it is a means of communicating disorder, a diagnosis is primarily a tool that assists healthcare professionals to manage their patients.

The *DSM-V* is the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a diagnostic tool created by the American Psychiatric Society and used worldwide. A veritable Bible of mental illness, it is made up of checklists of symptoms that decide if one is disordered or not. As Eli Clare eloquently puts it,

Within this framework, all the side effects of antipsychotic drugging – numbness, sedation, cognitive slowdown, tremoring and twitching, along with the possibilities of heart failure, kidney failure, stroke, diabetes and seizures – are deemed preferable to the experiences currently diagnosed as schizophrenia. Disorder doesn't allow for voices and visions to be common – connected to our daydreams or spiritual experiences, the channelling and writing of fictional characters or the terrifying aftermath of trauma. Disorder dictates specific ways of understanding our body-minds and excludes others.

(*Brilliant Imperfection* 43)

The label of disorder becomes synonymous with helplessness, or uselessness. And because, as Clare states, "language too lives under the skin", these implications are internalized by the disordered, and "bodies can be stolen, fed lies and poison, torn away from us" (*Exile and Pride* 11-12). Labels, and words, are then for the neurotypical – people who "(exhibit) typical neurological development" (Neurotypical, n.d.). A neurotypical person who says they are shaking from fear is decidedly different from a mentally disordered who says, in



the midst of a quiet panic attack, that they are shaking from fear. Confronting this issue of language, Clare distinguishes between impairment and disability. According to disability theorist, Michael Oliver, impairment is "lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body, while disability is "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical [and/or cognitive/development/mental] impairments and thus excludes them from society" (Oliver qtd. in *Exile and Pride* 5-6).

If the labelling of disorder "is intended to serve as a practical, functional, and flexible guide [to] aid in the accurate diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders" (*DSM-V* xii), then I have little use for it. I want to write about disordered individuals not for the purpose of informing, raising awareness, or exploiting mental disorder, but for the disordered individual.

And with disorder, comes cure, or, the restoration of health, returning the disordered to their normal, natural selves. Disorder shifted from "deviation from the individual patient's 'natural state'" in the 18th century, to "a deviation from statistical norms, independent of particular experiences or circumstances" in the 19th century (Bury 266). And in the 20th century, which "closes with the ownership of the body and the right to speak on illness profoundly contested" (Porter, qtd in Bury 268), found these terms increasingly appropriated to the benefit of the media and pharmaceutical industry. This is despite the fact that doctors have never been able to specify what 'normal' or 'natural' is. Disorder is not an accusation, and in the case of mental disorders for which there is often no found cure, it should not be treated as a problem that has to be solved no matter what.

My stories refuse to engage with cure. They use, instead, words like 'fix' to illustrate the irrationality in treating the body and mind as if it were a broken toy or creaking door hinge. My characters use prescribed medication to battle individual symptoms instead of the disordered person as a whole. What my characters do is manage. They are not fixed, do not rid of their unsightly disorder – some barely make any sort of empirical improvement other than a tremulous decision to try harder – but it is enough for them to strive for personal progress in relation to recovery. "Sleeping Beauty"'s protagonist is physically suffering from the side effects of her disorder, and her medication, and yet is more optimistic and hopeful at the end of the story than at the start. She has made progress.

Cure polarises, sharpens recovery to a single point, before which the mentally disordered have few options to exist in a redeemable fashion, after which relapse becomes personal failure rather than the pathognomic of mental disorders. Treatment allows for long-term medication, allows people to exist in a redeemable fashion as they wait for a cure. Management at last acknowledges the person that has been diagnosed, puts the person at the helm of their recovery. Management returns the focus to the person with the disorder, rather than the disorder itself. Imagine my surprise when after years of medication and warding off inpatient treatment, I am informed by a co-worker studying to become an occupational therapist that therapy has been heading towards an Integrated Recovery-oriented Model (IRM) that for once is led by the disordered, and instead of aiming to eradicate disorder, advocated "for the adoption of more optimistic, recovery-oriented approaches, based on their experience that recovery was possible, despite residual symptoms" (Frost et al. 3). IMH, however, does not acknowledge that recovery "needs to be explicitly acknowledged that recovery experiences, opportunities, trajectories and evaluations are inherently personal" (Frost et al. 12), and relies more heavily on blanket psychopharmaceutic medication.

There has not been a cure nor a fix for my ankle either. Two ligaments are still torn. I am not prescribed new medication to dull my compulsivity. Instead, rehabilitation strengthens the surrounding muscles that weakened while I wore that cast, so that the bone is less likely to slip out again. I quit my job at the trampoline park, and return only once a week. I run, I jump, I knead those muscles from atrophy back into firm, elastic dough. I managed; I manage.

Homosexuality was once listed as a mental disorder diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), and only removed completely in 1987. In its final iteration, it was termed "Ego-dystonic Homosexuality" and was defined first by a lack of heterosexual arousal interfering with "initiating or maintaining wanted heterosexual relationships" and "a sustained pattern of homosexual arousal that the individual explicitly states has been unwanted and a persistent source of distress" (*DSM-III* qtd, in Spitzer 211). On the other hand, "the World Health Organization (WHO) only removed homosexuality from its ICD classification with the publication of ICD-10 in 1992" (Burton). Ultimately, it was decided that "homosexuality in our culture is a disadvantage because of our society's interference with the pursuit by homosexuals of basic needs" (Spitzer 213) and thus, that any defining distress or other consequential disordered emotions could be classified under existing diagnoses such as panic disorder and depression.

In rummaging through Singapore's queer history, I discovered that queer Singaporean women have long endeavoured without the need of a label. Queer activist Shawna Tang reports, "Singaporean lesbian practices may very well be the realistic undercurrent of queer liberalism in non-Western contexts. [...] we have this peculiar phenomenon of globally conscious lesbian and gay citizens who appear politically apathetic and quite content to lead

their individual lives." Though the lack of labels would make it difficult to find like-minded people to build communities for safety and camaraderie, it is a wonderfully Singaporean approach to deviance.

This pragmatic attitude resonates in my characters. The Prince Charming of "Sleeping Beauty" is Phillipa, no less princely for her performed gender. Nik of "Pushing Daisies" harbours the confusion that often plagues same sex attraction – do I want them or do I want to be them? "Housekeeping" and "Pushing Daisies" both depict the protagonist secluded at home with someone they find attractive, who ends up half or entirely naked, yet I find that my test readers largely picked out the romantic undertones in "Housekeeping". It would appear that the genders of Adam and Yi are more easily identified as a signifier of a heteronormative relationship. The emotional involvement in "Housekeeping" and "Pushing Daisy" is felt most over the development of Yi's and Adam's relationship, and poor Daisy's demise. The protagonists of "Mama's Little Helper" and "Pot, Kettle" are unspecified. In "Mama's Little Helper," I try for a neutral gendered protagonist; their (used here as a gender-neutral singular pronoun) physical traits lean masculine with mention of their briefs and their hair as short as grass, but the nature of the story's themes, of family and household, seems to skew their reading towards the feminine. Because there are no labels, I invite readers to form their own opinions, and then examine for themselves their own assumptions regarding heteronormativity.

### *On Storyteller and Storytelling*

I was determined not to let these crutches slow me down, so in that pig-headed mania I was known for, I returned to work at the trampoline park, I hobbled to tuition, I puffed and wheezed at MRT platforms, at first pretending not to notice, then waving and winking at

those who stared. And many people did stare. They asked as well what happened to me. This was the first time there was visibly something wrong with me. I answered the best I could, with a smile, the apologetic slant of my eyebrows, these were the reasons why my crutches and I were taking up so much space. Within the first week, I learnt what would satisfy them the fastest was a visceral demonstration: Crutches tucked under my armpits so that my hands are free, I put my right fist (medial malleolus) on the upturned palm of my left hand (talus). Then I jerked the fist off the palm with a loud click of my tongue. They winced, an approving nod, and sated, moved out of my way.

Then I began to tire. A sales assistant left his shop and snatched my crutches away from me to help me down the stairs, despite that I was perfectly capable of descending alone without a stranger touching me. A woman, early thirties, blocked my path to the bus stop, demanding the *whole story*. I did not know what to focus on, what she meant by the *whole story*, the sheer entitlement she as a stranger felt over it, or that my bus was pulling in and I had increasingly less time to hobble over.

During the Singapore Writers Festival in 2016, I attended a panel entitled "No One Should Feel Alone: Writing About Mental Health In Youths," led by Jonathan Friesen and Haresh Sharma. Haresh Sharma is the playwright of *Off Centre*. Written in 1993, it was first commissioned by the government, was then dropped, with the head of public affairs at the Ministry of Information and the Arts, denouncing it for presenting "a prejudiced view of mental disorder, its treatability and the therapists, besides ridiculing God, religion and national service" (qtd. in Tan), and for not "[encouraging] adoption of a lifestyle that will promote good mental health. This comes despite reception deeming it successful in its "carefully adherence to factual information throughout" (Yeo qtd. in Tan). Well researched,

the play presents the social realities of the mentally ill, and challenges many preconceived notions of the mental health system. *Off Centre* dodges the stereotype of the mentally ill as unfathomable other. To its credit, though, the play does feature the polarised Vinod, straight A student, and Saloma, vocational student. It is not Saloma that falls, but Vinod.

It is not the play itself, nor Sharma who admits that he can hardly qualify as an expert, but the position that *Off Centre* occupies in Singaporean literature that I take offense to. The problem is that it exists on its own, and without peer. Because it was so well received, the government eventually lent its support to the text. In 2006, "*Off Centre* became the first Singaporean play to be studied as an O-level literature text" (Tan) and has since become the be all and end all of mental illness literature in Singapore. When I read *Off Centre* in my teens for O-levels, I did not recognise myself in its characters nor its Singapore (Sharma does capture the voices of our stereotypes well, but it was written in 1992 and Singapore is famous for nothing if not her rapid pace of development), so I dismissed it. There were other books, surely. As I realised there were not, I grew furious at it, if immaturely, for it seemed the only portrayal of mental illness in Singapore, and had taken up too much space for other mental illness narratives to exist. Because it was the only recognised portrayal of the mentally ill, I had felt that its mentally ill characters became all that the mentally ill are allowed to be in Singapore.

So I was sitting among the ribs of the old Supreme Court, puffed up with righteous indignation, wary. Then Haresh Sharma turned to us in the stands and confessed in his introduction (that I paraphrase here to the best of my ability), I know very little about mental illness – I am no expert, so I am not sure why I am here. Immediately, I was relieved. I, too, know very little about mental illness. I, too, am not sure why I am here. They went on to speak of writing people first, illness second.

Singapore Writers Festival 2017 featured a more pointedly titled panel, "Why I Write: The Social Responsibility of a Writer" and though my friends had accompanied me through the week, I attended this one alone because this was not the exciting sort of panel worth waking up early on a Saturday for. I preferred it this way, because after last year's upset, I was not sure what to expect, not sure what my official stance as a sick person was yet. After the year before, however I was optimistic. One of the three panelists was Danielle Lim, who wrote *The Sound of SCH*, which follows the narrator's uncle from childhood as a bright, promising boy, who falls to his untreated schizophrenia, then dies unaccomplished. In particular, it navigates the social morality of care, that one is bound to take care of family members, even if they have no knowledge or means to do so. She sat next to Lee Seow Ser, the head of Projects to S.I.R (Socially Inclusive Reads) with Love, who sat next to Tan Guan Heng, a prestigious visually impaired writer.

In the end, Danielle Lim made no such confession, though she did declare (again, paraphrased from memory), I know I wrote about the disabled but really, I am writing for the abled. She went on to explain that she wrote to raise awareness of the devastation of mental illness, and how it so horribly taxed the caregivers specifically.

It is a strange thing to be consistently shut out of the literature written about you. I wondered aloud after that panel with Danielle Lim: what do books written by the mentally ill look like? The answer came from a fellow graduate student, that the mentally ill cannot write. They are, after all, mentally ill, and the incoherency of their thoughts will not allow them to write stories that a sane mind would understand. And if they could write, then it clearly is not *proper* mental illness. I become distinctly aware that I write from a position of undeniable privilege, and I find it crucial to acknowledge this. For example, my family is financially secure, which allows me the means to seek treatment. It could be, as people oft remind me, much worse. Perhaps I am not ill enough and my stories would not be considered mental

illness narratives. Perhaps I am drowning out the voices of the real and actual mentally ill. I wonder constantly: what do books written for the mentally ill look like?

Let us first look at what the mental illness narratives that have already been written by Singaporeans strive for. *Off Centre* includes a foreword by Alvin Tan, who mentions, "Imagine how enthusiastic we were in 1992 when the Ministry of Health commissioned us to create a play on mental illness. Here was an opportunity for playwright, director and cast to be exposed to a world through fieldwork research" (i). The autobiographical novel by Mahita Vas, *Praying to the Goddess of Mercy*, begins, "This is a true story of mental illness." The prologue Danielle Lim's *A Philosopher's Madness* ends with, "I feel I am living proof that when it comes to mental illness, there is no clear link between medical history and one's performance at work" (2). In *The Sound of SCH*'s preface: "It is estimated that 450 million people worldwide suffer from mental disorder. [...] Certain names have been changed for reasons of privacy." These mental illness narratives were written with commendable aims to accurately depict living in mental disorder, and spread awareness to dispel stigma and garner support. There is a strong emphasis on fact and statistic, and an insistence by the autobiographers that their experiences are real and true. But again, I want to write stories that do more than acknowledge or inform. I find myself unsatisfied with *The Sound of SCH*, and *Off Centre*, and even *An Unquiet Mind*, though I do not discount the importance of representation, the reassurance that you and your type exist beyond yourself. I do not need an infomercial packaged as novel, teaching me about mental illness. I want characters that the mentally disordered can relate to.

This struggle between what is expected of stories addressing mental illness and a disordered writer's desire to move beyond that is depicted in "Sleeping Beauty", wherein the



protagonist struggles to write stories that are, recognisably, about mental illness. "Sleeping Beauty" is itself an oblique parody of its namesake. The protagonist is our Disney princess, cursed since birth in a manner outside of her control and constantly sleep-addled but enthused to make the best of her situation nonetheless. Vincent rhymes with Maleficent, and he, as the antagonist, demands that she write a 'proper' mental illness narrative that is "hard hitting [and] also social critique." While Maleficent curses Aurora because the king and queen commits a faux pas by not inviting her to Aurora's baby shower, Vincent pushes the protagonist to write the sort of mental illness narrative that he perceives will be better received by readers because "people like to read this sort of drama nowadays." Both antagonists are not portrayed as one dimensional villains but act according to their position in their respective societies. The protagonist of "Sleeping Beauty" finds that she is uncomfortable with writing outside of her own personal experiences, and so she struggles to translate her own experiences into something that is easy for readers to consume.

In my own experience of writing about my own mental instability, I find that realistic accounts of mental disorder lack the ability to adapt to the way a disorder *continues*, and on and on in unpredictable ways no matter how habitual coping methods become. The mentally disordered writer makes sense of an episode by forcing it into a narrative structure, is comforted by their newfound understanding, only for another episode to occur, and that understanding is lost. Then comes the feeling of incompetence; I'd written my illness and made sense of it all, took measures against relapse, so why did I still fall? I'd woven such a neat family tapestry, even spoken to my family about what I'd found, so why did it not predict that my ever kind sister would steal my medication? Perhaps the writer puts pen to paper again, determined to regain order, but they have to tire some time.

If the "central problem with the illness narrative" is that it is "forever in search of meaning," because it is "constantly changing and being renegotiated, depending on changing perspectives and other changes in the illness process" (Hyden 62), then the solution would be to avoid certainty. Avoid realism. Concoct a fantastical situation that you cannot compare yours to, so that your protagonist will remain heroic and someone you can draw inspiration from. I do not deal with facts because I cannot know them, and they are in constant rebellion. I deal with fiction because fiction is a malleable tool with which to learn and adapt.

Specifically, I have chosen to write fiction. Fiction serves the human mind beyond what factual account has to offer, by allowing writing to take mental illness narratives beyond lived experience, describing in its guise "the dense specificity of personal experience, which is always unique, because each of us has a slightly or very different personal history, modifying every new experience we have; and the creation of literary texts recapitulates this uniqueness" (Lodge, qtd in Crawford 237), which makes it an excellent "means of coping in dealing with such contingencies; not so much in what is talked about, but in how the different components of living with illness are confided or presented to others" (Bury 273). Femi Oyeboode makes this invigorating observation: "The psychiatrist, like the novelist, imposes structure on an abnormal phenomenon partly to render it innocuous but also to make it manageable and there is, of course, also the aesthetic delight in imposing narrative structure on chaos. There is little doubt that psychiatrists owe much to fiction" (121). With this consideration in mind, I write speculative stories, of strong, weak, ill women, who take the magical nonsense thrown at them in stride and forge on anyway.

Compared to the popular western narrative structure and its dramatic arc (introduction, conflict, conclusion), my stories do not have any clear resolution nor consequence of the conflict. This narrative style reflects my resistance to viewing disorder as

a wrong to be righted, or a problem that can be solved definitively. Most notably, "Mama's Little Helper" is little more than a framed list of varied almost-deaths by which the protagonist tries to understand her circumstance, but ultimately is portrayed as inconsequential.

For the other stories, I take inspiration from *Kishōtenketsu*, a four act narrative structure stemming from Japanese literature. *Ki* is the introduction, *shō* the development, *ten* the twist wherein occurs a "new unforeseen and unheralded event that sheds a different light on the previous events and makes the reader or viewer question any conclusions they may have formed so far," (Reinhart) and *ketsu* the conclusion. Instead of portraying a conflict between opposing elements (a character struggles against her disorder to achieve her goal), it portrays a turn of events (a character with a disorder achieves her goal). It is considered a plot without conflict, and by extension "without resolution [...] (concluding) by bringing together several disparate ideas to prompt listeners to consider possible resolutions" (*Using Narrative Structures*). For example, "Sleeping Beauty" can be broken down as follows: There is a man in the stairwell (*ki*), who is taken to her apartment's balcony (*shō*), it is outright mentioned that she is mentally ill (*ten*), the man's existence is brought into question, and his disappearance gives her resolve to forge on (*ketsu*). Contrast this with if it were framed by the western narrative structure; there is a girl who lives on her own (introduction), who finds a man in the stairwell (conflict). Yi's actions are portrayed not as driven by conflict nor her disorder, but simply by adapting to the happenings around her. Good. Instead of portraying this character as struggling to cope with her mental disorder, she is instead managing.

As a result of my tenuous, disordered grasp of object permanence, "of cognitive representation" (Settlage 815), a lack of visualisation plagues my first drafts, and the psychic

distance of the narration is often claustrophobically close. Object permanence also refers to, in psychoanalytic terms, "the permanence of the intrapsychic representation of the human love object in libidinal and affective terms," which includes "images of the object as ... both loved and hated, as good and bad" (Settlage 815). As a result, while physical objects become fleeting things, the perception of people snaps unforgivingly between good and bad. In my writing, space is confined tightly in the familiar, and people and objects only seem to exist when the protagonist interacts with them. One day I might wake up with nothing, memories reduced to a half-recalled list of events, sentiment leaked out from the sieve of my mind; I have to choose the objects I record in mnemonic storytelling with great care, to portray the Singapore I inhabit.

The dining table features most regularly. It is the nucleus of the Singapore family where reunion dinners are held, bills are paid, and family members are drawn by its gravity. In "Sleeping Beauty," it acts as a safe space between two duelling parents: "Bless the dining table, giant beast that divides the house into its two territories. A neutral zone, piled high with bills and papers and the family's lone laptop." Her parents are considered good by the protagonist. In "Daisy" which features a more dysfunctional family who actively rebuffs honest communication between its members, only the mother eats at the table, in pretence that everything is fine, while Nik has her meals at the coffee table. Her mother is considered bad by the protagonist. In "Mama's Little Helper," the first numbered segment actively sets the table up as a symbol of the family Mama so desperately wishes for, instead of what she does have. Her mother, whose inaction is not enough to make her exactly guilty, not the way action would – is considered good by the protagonist.

I find the musicality of words so painfully crucial in portraying the slip-slide-stuttering thoughts of a mentally ill character that I often sway towards a less technically accurate word, should its staccato fit better in the perspective of my manically swerving protagonist. By this I mean how the words crowd in the mouth, or flick off the tip of the tongue. I would hope my writing invites "[reading] musically, testing the precision and rhythm of a sentence, [...] patterns, repetitions, echoes" (Wood 182). Consider the opening lines of "Mama's Little Helper" and "Pot, Kettle" respectively:

Doc asks how I've been doing and I've been here – clinic B of IMH, rm 14 of 36, rotates its doctors almost as often as it rotates its patients – two years already, since outgrowing the children's department when I turned nineteen, so I'm comfortable enough now with the anonymity this featureless room affords that I tell her the truth: I have not been doing well. ("Mama's Little Helper")

The doctor, therapist, psychotherapist, shrink, *Debra* – empty answers, placating, obnoxiously neutral, until she had, just barely, an almost inaudible huff of air, *snorted* and told me, *for now*. ("Pot, Kettle")

Both narrate a visit to a mental health practitioner, but the musicality distinguishes the narrator's state of mind from each other. Words spill from the narrator of "Mama's Little Helper" in a careless stream, only breaking in consideration of the reader, to contextualise their surroundings and explain that by "doc," they mean a psychiatrist, and to confess that they are in poor health. This, offsetting the portrayal of their chest as a perilous cavern, makes more effective the portrayal of their depression-born apathy and resignation to their mother's perceived betrayal. In contrast, "Pot, Kettle" features a narrator who can barely go three words before her pace is broken up by jarring punctuation and melodramatic italics, and she ploughs through her uncertain speech with ill-contained agitation. The em dash shows a

break in thought process that unlike in "Mama's Little Helper" is not returned to; the narrator abandons attempt to label Debra, swerves into describing her intangibly, then finally jolts to relating her actions.

Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* follows the recount of a struggling writer who was once driven towards madness by starvation. After a long meandering journey trying to find work, and a good meal, the events of the novel makes a sudden, unexpected sharp turn in the very last few pages of the novel; he spies ships docked at the pier, and abruptly barter to sail on one, away from the city of Kristiana. Here is that turning point, which appears with little to no lead in:

My head was again awhirl with the wildest fancies: What if I secretly cut the hawser of one of those ships? What if I suddenly started yelling fire? I walk further out on the pier, find myself a crate to sit on and fold my hands, feeling my head getting more and more confused. [...] I didn't have any purpose in acting as I did, nor did I expect to get an answer. I said, "Do you sail tonight, Captain?"

"Yes, in a while," the man answers. He spoke Swedish. Then he was probably a Finn, I thought. (142)

Besides the fact that the utter unpredictability of this life-altering turn of events mimics life wonderfully, the narration convolutes the time of telling and the time of action, and this resistance of natural continuity and traditional retrospection of an autodiegetic narrator reflecting on his past. The jump from past to historical present would at first seem to assert distinction between the temporal space of the narrator and that of his narrated self. Yet

his narrated self walks in present tense, disrupting reader assumption that the change in tenses is a logical stylistic device wherein the narrator of the historical present laments his starving self.

The passage is instead an organic shifting of temporal distance between the narrator's consciousness and his past experiences, portraying a disordered mind that has only a tenuous grasp of reality. Where in present tense, the narrator deviates from recalling an event to quite literally reliving the moment in his head. This deviation brings to mind Alzheimer's patients who mistake their grandchildren for their children, the years in between suddenly vanished. Some have rallied against "reading the novel's presentation of consciousness as we would in the case of natural or real-world minds," but instead a purposeful literary device creating an unnatural narrative to portray an unnatural mind "which is not possible in reality" (Alber et al. 123). However, such 'unnatural' minds do exist in reality. Think of people with personality disorders which affect their sense of object permanence (intuitive understanding that an object remains in existence when not in sight – the lack thereof being why babies are so stunned and baffled by peek-a-boo), resulting in a lack of formation of physical markers by which their minds order past events and experiences in chronological memory.

I employ this technique to the greatest extent in "Pot, Kettle," wherein the narration skips to and fro in various temporal spaces:

"But no – and this revelation came creeping, reluctant, impatient drum of fingers against oil-tacky table top here in Macdonald's – this isn't what angered me most, is it? Second session, and she'd needed to know about my family, but what of it? I am here to fix me, not them."

The realisation "came" to the narrator in her historical present, there and then in the MacDonald's, after which the tenses jump to present tense to suggest an ever-present

agitation that the narrator still, in time of her relating this incident, seeks affirmation for. And that stubborn declaration, "I am here to fix me," contains an ambiguous state of being, and an ambiguous "here" that encompasses more than just the doctor's office or the MacDonald's, continuously searching for cure. "Pot, Kettle" is especially difficult to read at first, and if it frustrates the reader, then I have successfully portrayed how it feels to string thoughts with a disordered mind.

### *A Conclusion*

I was on my way home, swinging strong and stable on my crutches, when I froze on the second storey platform of Cheng Lim LRT station – left only a five minute walk I've taken for two years now, the glaring landmark of a half-constructed hospital, copy-paste HDB flats, all utterly unfamiliar – and realised I did not know which way was home.

At twelve years old, an uncle at a family gathering had flinched from his mother too far into the stages of dementia to recognise her own son, and declared to the solemn acceptance of our relatives that he would rather die than forget himself like that. My own mother had nodded, so I nodded along with her.

At twenty five years old, I leaned against the railing next to the broken elevator for a minute, five, idly rotating my ankle in its brace, and when the scenery of my neighbourhood did not transform into anything more familiar, I called my brother to pick me up. It took us ten minutes to get me down the stairs and by the time we started walking down the street, I recognised the way home once again.

No doubt I will continue to progress in ways I cannot, for all my readings and research, anticipate. Human imagination is limited when it comes to disorder, but we can



imagine talking plants and mysterious figures appearing in stairwells to teach ourselves to keep moving forward despite unexpected adversity. I posed at the start of this exegesis the questions – What do stories written *by* the mad look like? What do stories written *for* the mad look like? Simply put, stories written by the mentally disordered look like "Sleeping Beauty," "Housekeeping," and "Pushing Daisies," wherein the protagonists manages to conquer unexplained happenings and irrational situations, while stories written for the mentally disordered look like "Pot, Kettle" and "Mama's Little Helper," whose twisting and jolting rhythms mimic the disordered mind. Perhaps, however, it is answer enough that I write, and that I write for myself.

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