

"A moving and unexpected story-within-a-story."

— Cyril Wong, Poet and Fictionist

Almost

A LOVE

STORY

CARISSA

FOO

"A moving and unexpected story-within-a-story
turns on the axis of relationship and reading, and becomes a
sustained meditation on literature, listening and the lingering
lessons of lost love."

—Cyril Wong, Poet and Fictionist

Almost A LOVE STORY CARISSA FOO

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Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigram.sg

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National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Foo, Carissa, 1987-
Title: Almost a love story / Carissa Foo.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2025.
Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-51-0598-8 (paperback) |
ISBN 978-981-51-0599-5 (ebook)
Subject(s): LCSH: Authors—Fiction. |
Man-woman relationships—Fiction.
Classification: DDC S823—dc23

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, June 2025.

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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

If It Were Up to Mrs Dada (2018)
(longlisted for the 2017 Epigram Books Fiction Prize)

What We Learned from Driving in Winter (2022)

No Wonder, Women (2023)

It was his hopeless hope that some time he would have an experience that would act on his life like alchemy, turning to gold all the dark metals of events, and from that revelation he would go on his way rich with an inextinguishable joy.

—Rebecca West,
The Return of the Soldier

Thus we never see the true state of our condition till it is illustrated to us by its contraries, nor know how to value what we enjoy, but by the want of it.

—Daniel Defoe,
Robinson Crusoe

Citizens, we shall say to them in our tale, you are brothers, yet God has framed you differently. Some of you have the power of command, and in the composition of these he has mingled gold, wherefore also they have the greatest honour; others he has made of silver, to be auxiliaries; others again who are to be husbandmen and craftsmen he has composed of brass and iron.

—Plato,
The Republic



Erin, sitting by the window, running fingers through her freshly washed hair, thought she had never seen him like that. Clean-shaven and light. She went on to close her eyes—her favourite kind of hope was an appeal to the imagination. Sure enough, An was coming back.

She had seen him earlier in the day. A trick of the eye, she reasoned to herself, standing on the opposite side of the road. It was so brief, the amount of time for a traffic light to remain red before turning green. But he was unmoving. Every second brought his presence to a simmer until she was certain. He was much fairer, hair neatly combed. The face was new to her. It had been twelve years. Any appearance of him would be new to her.

He stood across the road. She saw straight ahead, through the grey lenses of her sunglasses. She had come to a stop by the lamp post, shoulders pulled back, hands gently clenched, feet apart in dusty sneakers. The shadowy forms of people passed close beside him, running. Cars that had come to a halt while she had brought him into focus were beginning to move. The shadows around him clarified to a view of a woman and a man rushing to cross the road, then slowing down to sidle up to the traffic light adjacent to her.

He was there, as if cut out from a sheet of cardboard; she stood mannequin-like. A prolonged minute. She and he, two inactive presences, bringing back to life their childish whims and stubborn dreams.

He began to raise his hand. To support his aching neck, she thought reflexively. Though the unease in the neck was apparent, the habit of his hand reaching to rub his neck was salving. As soon as she assumed so, the thought coursed through her, sending a tingling sensation on her skin. She could not help the tension in her body, intimating a familiar physical discomfort, how his brows used to furrow even as his lips were pressing a smile for her. Without resistance, the niggling worry that she might have had something to do with his poor posture, the shoulder ache, the insomnia, wandered back into her mind.

The green man lit up. And Erin thought to herself, I'll stay where I am.

A rattling sound broke her fidelity.

Erin reopened her eyes to spare one hard look for Danny. The face that gazed out of the dimness of the early evening was slathered with pumpkin puree. A little man with twinkling brown eyes.

With a crochet lion rattle, he snapped her back into their reality. He led her out of the road crossing, which was a piece of concrete space partitioned off from Canberra, stripped bare to be filled up with memories and to make the afternoon coincidence more insolent. Just like that, she was awakened from a teenage fever dream in which, as far as she thought of anybody from her past life, it was always him.

Danny's little hands were in the air, flailing. Bells on the gold bracelet hanging loosely around his wrist composed a one-note ringing melody.

Erin could hear his high, piercing voice, grunting and clicking, offering a wordless comfort to an inarticulable wanting. A blameless face, almost two years in the making. Years that seemed to stretch before her, lengthening the abyss between herself and the man across the road. She pushed the thought down and turned to the boy.

Managing a tender smile, she picked him up and wiped her face in his soiled cotton shirt. Orange salty pumpkin tears. A moment of embarrassment the boy would not remember.

She pulled herself away as he wriggled out of her hands. He shook the rattle, steadied his feet, babbled

“mamamababa” before vanishing into the light of the hallway.

In the quietude, Erin leaned into the armchair. The room was beginning to darken. She waited, casting slow glances at the walls. As if he could appear, through a trompe l’oeil or a lie of the heart, when night fell, only and maybe then.

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The rattling sound drifted in and out of her mind. There was comfort in knowing that he was always going to be there. Her flesh and joy, a definite thing.

Perhaps it was the facticity of him that gave Erin the permission to wander. What could a replay of a few minutes from the afternoon do?

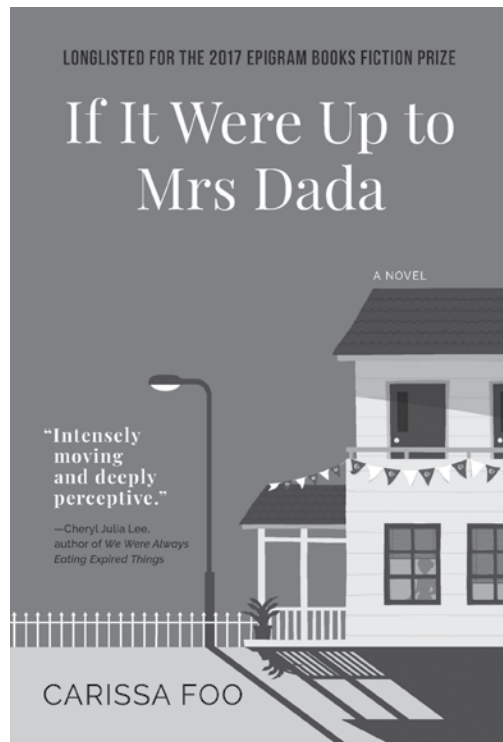
A midday run to the minimart was upturned by the sight of him. He was right there, and she had hesitated. The feeling of not wanting to move was still so strong. She wished she were a tree, entrenched and stuck in concrete, forgetting that roots could exploit existing cracks and push through solid foundations.

Erin could have remained firm, but having been

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Carissa Foo is the author of two novels and a collection of short stories. She received her Ph.D. in English Studies from Durham University, with an interest in twentieth-century women's writing. She teaches at the National University of Singapore.



**IF IT WERE UP TO MRS DADA
BY CARISSA FOO**

Today is National Day. It is also Cheryl Dada's birthday. As Elderflower Home prepares for the celebration, Cheryl Dada too gets ready for her party. Between the hours of noon and seven p.m., she encounters the cantankerous residents and caregivers, her mother and people of yesteryears. What unfolds is a story about a woman coming to terms with age, loss and love.



**WHAT WE LEARNED FROM DRIVING IN WINTER
BY CARISSA FOO**

Three Singaporean university students in London, as unlike as can be, become roommates and then fast friends. Over three winters in the mid-2010s, Gigi, Yi-En and Clare rely on each other through trauma and big life changes. When news comes of Clare's disappearance, Gigi and En take a road trip to retrace her final days—a journey shaped by grief and friendship.



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She thought the story was over. Then he wrote it down.

Erin hasn't read a book in years—not since she left behind her past, her ambitions and Wendell An Ling, the celebrated novelist she once served as amanuensis. Now he's back, after twelve years and a long silence, with a novel. But the story—about a professor and his note-taker—feels too familiar. Memory returns in fragments: unresolved, reimagined and shaped by the story he tells. What emerges is almost a confession, almost a return, almost a love story.



Carissa Foo is the author of *If It Were Up to Mrs Dada* (2018), longlisted for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize, *What We Learned from Driving in Winter* (2022) and *No Wonder, Women* (2023). She also writes short stories and teaches at the National University of Singapore.

FICTION

ISBN 978-981-51-0598-8



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