

# BENG BENG REVOLUTION



A NOVEL

LU HUIYI

**BENG BENG REVOLUTION**

# BENG BENG REVOLUTION

A NOVEL

Copyright © 2019 by Lu Huiyi  
Author photo by Joanne Goh. Used with permission.  
Cover design by Chee Jia Yi & Ong Hiang Ling.  
Typesetting by Joanne Goh.

All rights reserved  
Published in Singapore by Epigram Books  
shop.epigrambooks.sg

Published with the support of



National Library Board, Singapore  
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name: Lu Huiyi, 1990–  
Title: Beng Beng revolution / Lu Huiyi.  
Description: First edition. | Singapore : Epigram Books, 2019.  
Identifier: OCN 1101140657  
ISBN: 978-981-48-4516-8 (paperback)  
ISBN: 978-981-48-4517-5 (ebook)  
Subject(s): LCSH: Singapore—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 2019.

LU HUIYI

  
EPIGRAM  
SINGAPORE · LONDON

## **ALSO FROM THE EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE**

### **WINNER**

*Impractical Uses of Cake* by Yeoh Jo-Ann

### **FINALIST**

*The Movie That No One Saw* by May Seah

*The Lights That Find Us* by Anittha Thanabalan

### **2017**

*The Riot Act* by Sebastian Sim (winner)

*Sofia and the Utopia Machine* by Judith Huang

*9th of August* by Andre Yeo

*Nimita's Place* by Akshita Nanda

*If It Were Up to Mrs Dada* by Carissa Foo

*18 Walls* by Teo Xue Shen

*Kallang Basin Adagio* by Khor Kuan Liang

*Band Eight* by Tham Cheng-E

### **2016**

*The Gatekeeper* by Nuraliah Norasid (winner)

*State of Emergency* by Jeremy Tiang

*Fox Fire Girl* by O Thiam Chin

*Surrogate Protocol* by Tham Cheng-E

*Misdirection* by Ning Cai

*Lieutenant Kurosawa's Errand Boy* by Warran Kalasegaran

*The Last Immigrant* by Lau Siew Mei

*Lion Boy and Drummer Girl* by Pauline Loh

### **2015**

*Now That It's Over* by O Thiam Chin (winner)

*Sugarbread* by Balli Kaur Jaswal

*Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao!* by Sebastian Sim

*Death of a Perm Sec* by Wong Souk Yee

*Annabelle Thong* by Imran Hashim

*Kappa Quartet* by Daryl Qilin Yam

*Altered Straits* by Kevin Martens Wong

*Dedicated to my family, with love.*

PART ONE:  
THE DEPRIVATION

## CHAPTER 1

“WHATEVER AFFECTS THE world is going to affect us,” said Father one day, as he nursed his morning coffee. “It’s all linked. We can’t run away.”

The news was flashing on television, but the volume was muted because Mother was still sleeping in. Huat had long since gone out, because he had a strange penchant for doing meaningful things with his life. Beng, who was slightly less inclined towards productivity, made himself comfortable at the dining table and glanced at the screen. Another war, another conflict, another crisis.

“There, see?” said Father, gesturing at the screen. “All linked.”

The Deprivation had begun in the Middle East, early in the year. Nobody had really thought the day would come when national leaders would declare, in sombre, bewildered tones, that their societies were finally running out of raw energy to harvest and use. But there they were, and the rest of the world watched in shock and dismay as oil prices soared.

“So you think the Deprivation is going to affect us?” Beng said, watching the programme with more concern than comprehension.

“If it’s as bad as some people say, then maybe,” Father said, but he didn’t look all that worried, as though he didn’t quite believe it himself.

“They always say until so bad, but—” Grandfather shrugged and took a swig of his coffee. His eyes fluttered shut in a display of bliss somewhat disproportionate to the consumption of three-in-one instant coffee off the discount rack. Beng had an enduring suspicion that Grandfather had a habit of lacing his coffee with something out of the liquor cabinet, and nine in the morning was really pushing it, even for Grandfather. But Grandfather had turned vice into a subtle art and was very good at not getting caught.

“They’ve been saying it’s bad for a very long time, though,” Beng persisted. “Don’t you think we should worry?”

Father and Grandfather exchanged good-humoured looks of derision. Or at least, Father’s look was one of good-humoured derision. Grandfather was probably just good-humoured because he was buzzed as hell.

“Worry for what?” said Father. “It’s not like we can do anything even if it’s bad.”

He got up to refill his mug. Beng shrugged and reached for another piece of toast. It was a pleasant, lazy kind of weekend morning, and Beng had errands to run and a social appointment or two to get to. The conversation subsided into the realm of the frivolous and was soon forgotten.

But Beng, as it turned out, was eventually proven right—although Father, as it turned out, wasn’t wrong about that last bit too.



“I’m sure the world won’t just *run out* of oil,” said Huat that same night, rolling his eyes. Beng frowned. Huat was a full eight years older than Beng was, and the only one in the family with a university degree and a freshly-landed executive job. This apparently allowed him to make declarations about the state of the world with far greater arrogance than the average man, but not necessarily a corresponding degree of accuracy.

Father huffed a little unhappily as Huat’s voice cut above the drama

serial that he was watching on television. It was some kind of period drama—Father was a sucker for Chinese imperial dramas and watched them religiously every evening, though for some reason he didn’t like acknowledging it to everyone else. Possibly because Mother tended to make snide remarks about people hooked on outdated shows that just recycled the same plots over and over again, and because Grandfather tended to laugh uproariously at every tragic exile or imprisonment scene that the dramas offered. By way of self-defence, Father usually claimed that he only watched it because people had left the television on, which was technically not untrue if by “people” he meant himself.

“Why are we talking about politics? TV time is family time,” he said.

“Technically, you’re the one who began talking about it in the morning,” Beng said.

“And why’re you still watching that?” Huat said, just as the programme flickered and jumped wildly before resuming as though nothing had happened. “Reception’s been terrible.”

“Probably because of the power cuts,” said Mother at once.

“Correlation isn’t causation, Mother.”

“My colleagues were talking about something in the Middle East,” said Mother, but Huat merely shrugged.

“They’re all over-reacting, that’s what,” he said.

“And how do you know you aren’t under-reacting, Huat?” said Beng.

Huat blinked. There was a bit of a pause, broken only by the weeping of an abandoned concubine, Father’s stifled snuffles and Grandfather’s low irreverent chortling.

“Don’t call me that,” Huat said at last.

Beng was understandably bewildered.

“*Under-reacting* isn’t exactly an insult, Huat—”

“No, not that,” his brother said, closing his eyes briefly as if mortally offended. God. What a drama queen. “My name’s Archibald. Call me Archibald.”

“When did you become *Archibald*?” Beng said, so loudly that

Father sighed and glanced away from his show.

“I’ve told you before. You weren’t listening.”

“Ahh-kee-ball—” Father attempted obligingly, having given up on his show as lost. The name was so badly butchered that both Huat and Beng cringed as one. The conversation devolved into an involuntarily-imposed exercise in pronunciation, and the discussion was momentarily forgotten.

Admittedly, most people had shared Huat’s view on the whole matter at that point in time. The Deprivation had begun in brief, alarming flashes—alarming because nobody had ever believed that the world would run out of power—but in brief enough spates that everybody could pretend it wasn’t happening or spreading with vicious, unstoppable urgency.

Beng had heard about the oil and gas crisis overseas, which every week seemed to bring with it updates on conflicts being escalated, and gloomy doomsday predictions from anxious, withered-looking professors on TV. Something about a global shutdown, an end to all modern services and the potentially unstoppable nose-diving of the world economy. But somehow, in spite of all that, it didn’t occur to anyone that the fear should transcend beyond a low-grade passive sort of worry. It was the kind of worrying that people usually indulged in when they talked about how vulnerable Singapore was as a country, lacking in natural resources and so very small, and how every major conflict would bring with it ripple effects that the state could not quite evade—ideas in abstract, but spoken with the confidence that all consequences could be effectively mitigated, if not prevented.

After all, wars had been fought and lost over oil before, and the world had gone on ticking. The country continued in its bubble of stability, albeit with more frequent blackouts and electrical shortages than its people had ever remembered; the siege mentality remained more of a cautionary bedtime tale than an actual cause for mass hysteria.

To fret with others was to entertain a legitimate concern, but to fret alone was an indicator of paranoia. Beng, whose attempts at discussing the situation were laughed off by almost everyone he spoke to, thought

that their reactions were hugely uncalled-for. To be fair to his friends and family, Beng had never really been known for his astuteness as a political critic (or for any other sort of astuteness, if he was being honest), but he hadn’t expected such a uniform dismissal regardless.

Then one day, one of the northern towns in Singapore experienced a complete blackout that simply could not be reversed. A power outage, the news said with bland composure, and furnished few other details by way of clarification.

“Okay, so what do you say to that now?” said Beng, with more triumph than was probably socially appropriate.

Huat’s eyebrow twitched a little, but he otherwise retained impressive composure.

“The news said it was a power outage,” he said.

“Yes, because we’re running *out of power*, Huat,” said Beng, slowly, as if talking to an idiot. Which, to be fair, sometimes felt like the case with someone as stubborn as Huat could be.

“Look,” said Huat, who was good at multitasking, even when it came to being stubborn. “I’ve told you—my name is *Archibald*.”



The Yishun town outage was never properly resolved. People began carrying lanterns around when in the area, and the loss of functioning traffic lights turned driving in Yishun into quite the adventure, but nobody really expected this state of things to last forever. Of course, there was a lot of complaining and some angry Internet postings and a flurry of online jokes in very bad taste. But other than that, nobody was *too* fussed for the rest of the week.

At least, until the next town went dark, and the next, and the next, and then the entire island.

Beng went to the nearest supermarket for torches. It was a mess there—the entire place was dim and bleak—the *Hougang supermarket meets film noir* aesthetic, he thought to himself with a sudden flash of humour. There were hundreds of frantic people thronging the aisles



and sweeping whatever they could off the shelves. By the time Beng had shoved his way to the correct aisle, it was empty.

“Huh,” Beng said.

Not a single torch remained.

An auntie strode past him, her trolley loaded high with what looked like a hundred torches—hand-cranked, battery-operated, the works.

“Eh, I wanted one,” Beng said.

“Issit?” said the auntie with casual, infuriating unconcern. She walked faster.

Beng reached out and grabbed the trolley; it jerked to a halt.

“I’ll just take one,” he said, plucking the top one off the heap.

She snatched it back with incredible swiftness and strength.

“Who said you can take?” she snapped.

“You took *all* of them!”

“My house got blackout what!”

“Your house got blackout then nobody’s house got blackout ah?”

She bristled like an angry cat. “I was *first!*”

Beng made to reply, but the pin-drop silence behind him gave him pause. He turned slowly to find that everyone in the supermarket had gathered behind the two of them, watching in deadly stillness, undisguised *want* in their eyes.

“Um,” Beng said, with all the eloquence and charisma needed for such a delicate situation.

“First come, first serve,” the auntie sniffed with reckless abandon, all ready eloquence and no charisma at all.

The crowd charged.

In retrospect, it was a bit of a stupid fight, because more torches were smashed than actually obtained, and the folks who got themselves just one or two of the torches probably weren’t going to make them last for more than a week at most. The auntie emerged from the wrangle with a sizeable bump on her head and three torches clutched tightly and indignantly to her chest, but already she was doing better than most of the other participants in the fight, and infinitely better than Beng, who wasn’t very good in any kind of physical pow-wow.

“And you think we were overreacting? Come on now, Huat,” said Beng an hour or two later, as the family dined in the flickering glow of tall altar candles.

“I haven’t die, then already light funeral candles,” smirked Grandfather, with his morbid and thoroughly inappropriate sense of humour. His comparatively more squeamish relations responded on cue with outraged cries of “Touch wood!”, accompanied by vigorous smacks on the wooden table surface. That unfortunately jarred the table so much that all the candles went out at once, and dinner was put on hold while everyone felt around for their precious supply of matches to re-light them with.

“You sure these were the only things you could buy?” Father complained, once the candles were re-lit. “So unlucky.”

Grandfather was still laughing.

“On the bright side, I haven’t been treated to a candlelight dinner in a while,” said Mother, with a hard brightness that was equal parts humour and bitterness. Everyone at the table winced a little except for Father, who promptly shut up and began chewing on his food as though the bok choy had done him grievous wrong.

“See, Huat?” said Beng, refusing to let his point go. “You can’t pretend everything’s still working.”

“My name is *Archibald*,” said Huat in a long-suffering voice.

“You have a terrible sense of priorities,” said Beng.

“You have a terrible face,” said Huat.

“And when did you even decide you were getting that name anyway?” Mother chimed in, switching targets.

“I wrote Beng Huat on your birth cert,” Father clarified, in case anyone was suspicious of his intentions in this whole debacle.

“You converted, is it?” said Mother.

Huat went from exasperated to mildly confused.

“What’re you all talking about?” he said. “I just wanted a professional name. For networking. And meeting new clients. What’s wrong with Archibald?”

“What’s wrong with Koh Beng Huat?” said Father.

“A lot of things I could think of,” said Beng, unable to resist.

Huat abruptly lost all his dignified eldest-son composure and flicked a piece of bok choy at him.

“*Well,*” said Beng, as oyster sauce dripped slowly down his face. He snatched a slice of meat off one of the communal dishes in what he fancied was a stealthy and dangerous manner.

“You started it,” said Huat, picking up his glass pre-emptively.

Beng smirked. “I love the smell of bok choy in the evening,” he said.

Huat snorted in spite of himself, but did not put his glass down.

“*Boys.*”

Their mother’s glare quelled the imminent food fight at once. Huat lifted his glass to his lips as though that was what he had meant to do all along, while an outraged Beng settled for peeling the greasy vegetable off his forehead.

“Anyway, it’s not that there’s anything *wrong,*” said Huat. “I just wanted something a bit more...polished.”

“*Archibald?*” the whole table said in unison.

Huat was a little taken aback, and considerably wounded.

“It’s aristocratic,” he said defensively.

“I thought your name was Archibald,” said Grandfather. He sounded a little upset, and rightly so, because he had had to put in a lot of effort to get his grandson’s new name right.

“*Huat* means prosperity,” said Father, at the same time.

“I meant that it’s classy,” said Huat, before anyone else could get a word in. “The first part means something precious—and the second—”

“Means *bald,*” said Beng.

“*It does not.*”

“Our family has good genes for hair,” said Mother reassuringly.

“Fifty-five and never had to dye it black!” Father chimed in helpfully.

“So is your name still Archibald?” Grandfather wanted to know.

Huat made a wordless appeal to the ceiling for sanity and patience.

“Anyway, I’ve introduced myself to all my colleagues as Archibald,” he said. “So can we please move on?”

A pause.

“Archibald Koh Beng Huat,” Mother said, experimentally.

A longer pause.

“Nobody cares about the power outage anymore, do they?” said Huat hopelessly.

“Wasn’t someone being a power outage denialist just five minutes ago?” Beng said.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t happening,” retorted Huat, who was, as usual, ridiculously easy to rile up. “I just think it will pass.”

Beng shrugged. “You didn’t see what it was like at the supermarket just now. Looks to me like it’s all going to shit,” he said. “No point hoping for a miracle.”

“City Hall’s still going,” said Huat, with that feverish stubborn faith that he tended to hold when he really wanted to. Sometimes, it was inspirational. Now, it was just irritating. “You’re too pessimistic; the newspapers have that effect on everyone. We aren’t down for the count yet.”



City Hall was the central hub of the little island-state of Singapore. It was where the malls and major events and big companies and fancy historical buildings could be found—a financial and entertainment hub of sorts. It was also the last to be hit by the full effects of the Deprivation. When it finally fell, everyone knew that the world as they had known it would never be the same again.

Not long into the crisis, it had become commonplace for everyone’s table-tops to be coated in dried spots of wax, defaced like a public park after Mid-Autumn Festival. Beng learnt to study under flickering candlelight and to angle his head and hands so that he didn’t cast shadows on the pages. Every week, he and Huat would make a trip on foot to the nearest operating supermarket to haul bags of charcoal or wood chips home for cooking; but sometimes people hoarded it all and the family would have to rely on rations. Eventually, a national quota was implemented in stores around the country, though it was

not followed as well as it ought to be.

Amidst the doomsday mutterings and price hikes and the general undercurrent of panic, City Hall alone remained brightly lit. The last of the electrical generators were all devoted to keeping the city centre alive. For the first time ever, office-workers in the Central Business District were excited to get to work, where you could get artificial light and electric fans and sometimes, if you were very lucky, a functioning phone or fax machine.

But from the moment when they had lost power everywhere else, it had become increasingly obvious to everyone that the whole City Hall shebang wasn't going to make it for much longer either. The whole thing just wasn't sustainable. The energy that the country had left in reserve could not fuel even the city centre forever, and after a while, it seemed like people were all just waiting in predictable futility for this last farce of functionality to fall apart. After a while, the government took to redefining the boundaries of the city centre, whittling it down bit by bit, so that they could say that the city centre was still operational. But the people knew the end would come, and it did in just a few confused, dim and messy months.

"The government wouldn't let City Hall crumble," Huat kept insisting. He was obviously trying to sound sure and confident, but even his faith was wavering in the face of indisputable facts. "I'm sure they have a back-up plan. It'll be all right."

"Are you putting on your Archibald voice again?" Beng asked.

Huat ignored him pointedly.

"They wouldn't let City Hall fail," he repeated. "It won't come to that."



What it did come to was a short-lived attempt at using alternative energy sources. The government drained the remaining shreds of its money on a small army of solar panels, strategically positioned on the fringes of the Central Business District. For a while everyone was exceedingly

triumphant and there were high praises of the government's ingenuity and innovation, as well as *a lot* of smug, vindicated comments from Huat. There was talk of extending the use of solar panels beyond the heart of the city, and Beng began to think that things would eventually go back to normal.

Then the smog hit.

It came out of nowhere; the day before, they were still taking the sky for granted. The sight of blue skies was as natural as breathing—always there, and pretty much the last thing on anyone's mind. But about a month into the solar panel trials, the country tumbled out of bed to find their world shrouded in a thick swirling smog, so thick that one could barely breathe through it.

Beng woke up in the middle of a vicious, hacking coughing fit.

"What's happening?" he spluttered. He could taste blood in his throat. There was a mist of brownish-grey dust suspended in mid-air, drifting before his very eyes, even though they were indoors and every window already shut tight.

"Beng, take this."

Beng reached over; his mother had soaked a hand-towel in water and was passing the damp square of fabric to him. He tied it around his nose and mouth. The towel helped a little, though not by very much.

"I guess they'll cancel class today again," he said. He had only begun his polytechnic course mere months ago, but the school was closed more often than not nowadays.

"Maybe it'll pass," Mother said, but in a manner that showed she didn't quite believe it herself.

The onset of the smog was, as most things were, a confluence of factors. Higher temperatures, leading to swifter ozone formation. Deforestation in neighbouring areas, leading to massive dust storms that sent loose sand particles swirling wherever wild winds took them. In any case, the smog showed no signs of dissipating, and only thickened in the coming days and weeks. People began to get used to dim dusty mornings, the lingering smell of smoke, and walking around with stinging eyes and dry throats. The solar panels stopped working

once the smog was bad enough that hardly any sunlight could cut through it, and the trials ended without so much as a whimper. People fashioned their own face masks out of towels and handkerchiefs, and tried to go out as little as they could manage. Beng gradually got used to seeing his cheeks and arms coated in a stubborn film of dirt and dust every time he so much as stepped out of the house.

Even Huat was a bit thrown off by this development. Not that he didn't try to stay optimistic through it all, in his usual fashion.

"Other cities have experienced smog before," he said one day. Beng stared at him in poorly-concealed incredulity.

"It's been going on for a *month* now, Huat. And look at that!" said Beng, gesturing to the windows. "We just got out of bed and it looks like it's 8pm outside."

Huat did not turn to look; he knew as well as Beng did that the odds were not in their favour this time, even if he did not care to admit it.

"It'll be fine," he insisted half-heartedly, as he tried to start a cooking fire with crumpled newspaper. "You're going to be really surprised."



It wasn't fine, but Beng found that he really wasn't surprised at all. When it came down to it, neither was Huat—or anyone else.

The news that City Hall had finally come to a standstill spread like wildfire. The radio stations had unceremoniously ceased operations a few hours ago, and computers and televisions were all nothing more than junk pieces to be discarded, but Beng and his family heard the very same night anyway. His neighbours had heard from relatives who had heard from colleagues and friends, and everyone was stunned upon receipt of this fourth-hand news. The smog was especially bad that night, but everyone in their housing estate gathered in void decks and at community playgrounds regardless, hungry for updates from anyone with something to tell. It seemed catastrophic, even though the bulk of the nation had been living without light and power for a few

weeks now. That the last bastion had fallen—

"It's over," said one of the neighbours, and Beng could tell that many around her shared her despair. "We are going to starve—there's nothing left."

"I should have migrated," said someone, a man with a reedy, nasal voice, who dressed poorly but was said to have come into a vast family inheritance a few years back. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew he was loaded; he had made no secret of it when he had fallen into fortune—which meant that he went around making piteous offhand remarks about how inconvenient and stressful it was to suddenly be in possession of an immense inheritance. It was too late now; none of the planes worked anymore. A few people were beginning to look at him with the sort of speculative viciousness that stemmed from need, and Beng thought he had better try to get away via any remaining means left.

"We need to go see the MPs," another voice declared.

"Don't know if they die already or not," someone said bitterly, because with the lack of any way to make far-reaching announcements and the streets getting more unsafe, most prominent figures had been laying low, ostensibly working harder on crisis management than on public relations. In the meantime, conspiracy theories had been rife—maybe the Deprivation was unique to Singapore, maybe other countries had resources, and only this country, or the region was in darkness, maybe the leaders were hoarding the remaining electricity sources, maybe their leaders had offended some oil-producing state, maybe, maybe, maybe—

It was simply easier to buy into stories of political corruption or diplomatic folly, because it was nicer to believe that this current crisis still existed within the realm of human control. The end of the world's oil supply hit everyone even harder than they had expected. It was not so much horrific as surreal, at the beginning. The roads were empty, and the traffic lights and street lamps were metal husks. The way people made social appointments had changed, now that it was no longer possible to go from one end of the city to another via a

two-hour train commute—anything that wasn't accessible on foot or by bicycle wouldn't cut it. Most companies had ceased operation and the malls were out of stock for just about everything.

Suddenly people were roaming the streets, vaguely lost and unsure.

At first, Beng did the same too. Especially when all the schools closed indefinitely, and his world was suddenly a lot smaller, but also far too big to traverse at the same time. He found himself getting into the habit of slipping out alone for a walk at night, just to clear his head. The smog never quite went away, but it did let up a little in the evening. In time, after he had gotten used to the poor air, Beng could get around at night easily, if not comfortably, as long as he masked his face in some fashion.

The bougainvillea bushes along the roadside were now messy, untrimmed and starting to wilt, and the street signs getting defaced. Richer folk went about at night with little lanterns to light their way; from afar they looked like bobbing lights. Beng paced in the pitch-darkness, barely able to see before him, trying to pretend he wasn't afraid.

He did that for a good week or so, at the very start of the Deprivation. It was a good distraction, and tired him out nicely so that he could crash out promptly upon getting back home. Then, one night, when he had barely gotten two blocks away from his house, someone caught him.

He was just turning a corner when someone's arm shot out and wrapped itself around his neck. Beng choked, but the someone did not stop. He or she was prodigiously strong—already moving, dragging Beng backwards into what felt, and what smelled, like a rubbish dump.

Beng flailed wildly but it was no use. In his struggles, he cracked his head against the sharp corner of a wall and felt, almost instantaneously, a warm gush of blood. Dazed from the impact, he nearly blacked out for a moment and only dragged himself back into consciousness by sheer force of will.

*I'm okay*, he thought frantically, blinking blood out of his eyes. *Head wounds bleed the worst*. He had read that in some book. No clue

if it was true or not, but there was nothing he could do even if it wasn't.

Disoriented and dizzy, he thought he glimpsed a movement amongst the shadowy backdrop. There were people around. Passers-by. They had seen him being taken. But nobody made a sound, and nobody came to rescue him. He felt the beginnings of panic and squashed it down using the dwindling remains of his willpower, forcing himself to breathe slowly and steadily.

They finally stopped moving.

Beng was flung, like a rag doll, against the wall. It hurt. Half-blind, he tried to feel his way around. It seemed like a rubbish collection point of some sort; the kind of square brick structure where great bins of rubbish were stored within a housing estate. Someone wrenched his arm behind his back before he could make any significant movements. He let out a startled gasp of pain; nobody paid any attention to the sound.

This would be a terrible way to die. He thought, fleetingly, that he hadn't even said goodbye to his parents.

A faint light shone in his face. They had somehow obtained an old-fashioned gas lamp. He blinked against the light, momentarily blinded, before his eyes got used to it and he could make out his captors. There were about five of them—a girl and four boys, who all looked a little older than he was. They loomed over him, boorish, flinty-eyed, unkind.

"What do we do with him?" said one of them. His hands were busy even as he spoke, patting down Beng's clothes and feeling for any valuables, but Beng hadn't brought anything of real importance out with him.

And he sure as hell wasn't going to wait for them to plan. He tried to jerk upwards, to break the hold on his arms by the element of surprise, if nothing else. There was a grunt and a Hokkien curse, and then a solid punch in the gut that left the other boy wheezing. Beng wasn't the kind of guy who was built to win in a fight, and right now he was sorely outnumbered anyhow. He slumped back against the wall as more of them joined hands to pin him down.

“He doesn’t have any money,” said the one who had searched his pockets. The lamplight illuminated his features. There was a raised scar that zig-zagged down his right cheek, making him look even more intimidating than Beng had initially thought.

“We can sell *him*,” said the girl.

Well, shit.

She was obviously the ringleader of the lot. The way she held herself and the way everyone listened when she spoke made that clear. There was something eerily sinister about her; she seemed like the kind of person who would kill not because she wanted to do it in cold blood, but because she genuinely believed herself to be doing the right thing. There was a single horizontal stripe of blood-red along her right cheek, like face-paint or an open wound.

Beng was reeling, stunned at what she had so casually said. Sell? But wasn’t that— Surely, they didn’t have such a thing as— But the suggestion didn’t seem to come as a surprise to the rest of them.

“The ships come in the morning. Can we wait?”

“Ships?” he managed. His head was still spinning.

“Tie him up.” The girl again, cool and calm, as though she was instructing a subordinate to make her coffee or do up a presentation.

“Got any rope?”

Someone supplied a thick coil, fraying at the edges. They had him secured with ease—either this bunch had been part of the Scouts in school, or this wasn’t their first foray into the lucrative trade of human trafficking. He was pushed into a sitting position of sorts; limp and uncomfortable on the cold, sticky, dirty floor.

The grime didn’t bother this gang. They made themselves comfortable and began a hushed game of cards to pass the time. Beng focused on taking deep breaths till the world steadied itself. Once he was certain he wasn’t likely to either puke or faint or both, he spoke.

“What *ships*?” he began, his voice ragged and weak.

Everyone ignored him.

“Look, I didn’t do anything.”

Still silence.

“What’s all this?” he snapped, and they finally turned around briefly at that. Or perhaps it was the combination of hysteria and defiance in his voice that had caught their attention at last, because he was *terrified*, but he couldn’t leave things well enough alone in spite of—or because of—that. “Is this your idea of a good time? Catch up with friends, go out at night, play a couple rounds of *daidee*? And oh, I don’t know, abduct random strangers in between, just for kicks?”

The girl looked up lazily at him.

“You think you’re some big shit,” she said.

“What ships are you taking me to?”

She went on staring at him. Her eyes bore into him in a way that unnerved him a little. She seemed like the kind of person to remember a face.

“You probably shouldn’t talk like that on the ships,” she said. “Don’t say nobody warned you.”

“What do you—”

She turned back to her game before he was done talking, obviously losing interest in him. The rest followed her cue.

He retaliated by making as much noise as he possibly could, trying to get a reaction of some sort. For a while they seemed intent on letting him talk himself hoarse, but at some point, they finally recognised how annoying he could be when he really applied himself, and scrounged up some tape to seal his mouth shut.

Okay, maybe he should have thought this through better.

He waited, afraid they would never go to sleep—but eventually, a few hours later, they did.

Beng saw his chance, and he knew that his survival depended wholly on it. As soon as the last of them dropped off, he began to wriggle around as much as he could, trying to find a rough spot on the wall he could snag the rope on, to weaken it or loosen the knot somewhat. He wasn’t too sure what he was doing or whether he was making things better, but the blood circulation in his arms was beginning to get cut off and he figured any action was better than none at all. Fear coursed through his veins and kept him going.

After a while of futile scrabbling, he felt his wrists catch on something—a hook or nail of sorts, pressed into the wall. The height wasn't ideal—to get to it, he had to hold his bound wrists up behind himself, high enough that he felt like he was going to dislocate his shoulder. But in the greater scheme, the ache was nothing. He began, as quietly and as quickly as he could, to try and saw his way through the rope.

It took forever to break free. When chunks of rope finally fell to the floor, Beng wanted to cry from relief and exhaustion. His hands ached something awful. As he began to tear at the binds around his feet, he noticed that his forearms were streaked with blood. Pain blended together with fear so seamlessly that he didn't quite know what he was feeling. He must have cut himself while trying to get his hands free, he thought absently.

“Hey!”

Beng jumped violently. One of the boys had woken up. As soon as he saw that Beng was free, the boy jerked up and scrambled to his feet. Like a hunted animal, Beng staggered up as well, frenzied and trying to keep his eyes on five different aggressors at the same time. The scene before his eyes was splintered by panic into multiple, overlapping panels of action, and he could only process everything in the most primal language of starts and stops.

He had managed to work on the ropes enough that he could move again, but his right ankle was still encumbered by a short coil of thick rope. No matter. Instinct kicked in and he broke into a desperate sprint, just as the rest were roused into wakefulness.

Beng ran like he had never run before.

For a while he thought there was no way he could outrun them. He kept stumbling on the rope trailing from his ankle, his steps clumsy and a little unsteady from having been tied up. It was still pitch dark, but he couldn't stop to get his bearings. If anyone was still outdoors at this hour, nobody gave any indication of it. Nobody was going to save him if the gang caught him again.

He had to go home. Home was safe. He had to go home.

A turning presented itself; it felt familiar and yet not. He took it.

He was very afraid that he might be going further and further away from home, opening himself to attack from his pursuers. His legs burnt but he kept going, graceless and panting and desperate. They were quick. At some point one of them nearly caught him; he yelled and dived forward and away. For a few minutes, it was a close thing, then his attacker gasped and backed off as though burnt, but it was such a tangle of limbs and such a flurry of violence that Beng wasn't quite sure what he had done or how he'd managed it. All he could do was to start running again before the other party recovered and lurched back at him—somehow he got away, ripping his shirt in the process—he missed a few steps but caught himself clumsily and kept on going.

The L-shaped building...the fence...he knew where he was...

Then he was dashing up the staircase, three steps at a time, shouting and yelling as he went. He didn't know what he was saying—he was probably incoherent, barely able to get fully-formed words out of his constricting throat. But it had the desired impact of alerting just about everyone in the apartment. At the fifth storey, he found the door to his unit slightly ajar—it swung open the minute he approached and his father's hands pulled him in. There was a frenzy of movement as they slammed the door shut and double-bolted it before the hooligans could get near enough to fight.

Beng and his father stayed very still and listened. There were a few violent bangs on the door, some muffled speech—and then they were gone. Maybe a break-in didn't seem worth the effort or risk to them, but Beng didn't know if they would come back. Maybe they would. They seemed like the revenging kind.

Beng stood in the living room, probably looking like as much of a wreck as he felt. Father's hand was on his shoulder, and he removed it with uncharacteristic gentleness, as though he was afraid that Beng was going to shatter. Beng looked up and saw that Mother and Grandfather were staring at him, wide-eyed. Or rather, Mother was. Grandfather was giving him this massive shit-eating grin, because the old man, even in docile agedness, had spirit and ferocity aplenty in his blood.

“Did you hit them good?” asked Grandfather in an inappropriate outburst of childlike glee.

“You’re bleeding,” said Mother, at the same time.

She was right. The small gash in his forehead was gushing like a waterfall; maybe it was actually deeper than it looked. His shirt was torn to shreds, and he could feel the twinge of half a dozen stinging scrapes that he didn’t think were necessary to mention.

“What happened?”

Beng looked up to see Huat at the other end of the living room, having just emerged from his bedroom. The shock in his eyes was mingled with a sort of protective anger that Beng hadn’t seen since he was little and tormented by bullies, and Huat had gotten revenge so thoroughly that he had had to surrender his prefectorial board position at school, but he had said it was worth it, and—

“Beng!” Huat snapped, his voice sharp with worry. Beng forced himself to pay attention. “What the hell happened to you?”

Beng grasped at words that did not come.

“I’m fine. People are horrible,” he said, by way of succinct summary. The past few hours were a mad blur that he didn’t know how to talk properly about.

“I know,” said Mother, instead of denying it or providing a “yes, but...”

“I’m never going out again,” he told them, and at that point in time he really meant it.



Three months into the Deprivation, the family had begun to worry quite a bit about Huat. He was permanently exhausted, sometimes to the point where he looked like he might keel over any moment. He had gone out job-hunting every day since the insurance company he was working at had unceremoniously shut down, and the exertion and suspense combined had taken its toll. Yet he refused to give in or take a break, and was usually out from dawn till dusk, cold-calling every

company or office that was still running, and trying his hand at any stint or job that would take him, no matter how menial or dirty.

“You’re going to kill yourself like this,” Beng told him one evening, unable to keep up the front of tense, watchful patience that the rest of the family had chosen to adopt.

“Couldn’t wait till I’ve got both feet in the house, could you?” said Huat, who didn’t like neighbours hearing about goings-on in the family.

Beng waited pointedly until the door had clicked shut behind them, and then spoke again.

“Well, you can’t expect me to wait for anything when you’ve got one foot in the grave already,” he said.

Huat shrugged. He sank gracelessly onto the floor and began to wrestle with his shoes. Caked with grime and sopping wet, the laces of his ratty sensible sneakers had somehow knotted themselves into an inextricable mess.

“There’s got to be work out there,” Huat said.

“Mother’s worried about you.”

“She doesn’t have to be.”

“You could come back earlier.”

“What does it matter so much?” said Huat, looking a little harassed.

“All the companies hire through connections now,” said Beng, trying a different tack. “Going door-to-door is kind of inefficient, don’t you think?”

Huat glanced up at him briefly, irritation suddenly flashing across his usually stolid expression.

“The family needs to eat,” he said. “I don’t see you guys complaining when there’s food on the table.”

The sudden out-lashing of spite soured his sacrifice. Beng’s well-meant platitudes dissolved into ashes in his mouth.

“I’ve been going out to find work too,” he snapped. “You don’t have to martyr yourself like that.”

Huat looked up again, this time meeting Beng’s eyes. Huat looked visibly surprised. That was the way he had always been, caustic in words



but benign in deeds, always taken aback by the unintended backlash of his careless words. Beng sometimes thought that Huat, despite being the most educated and scholarly member of the household, had been built more for the bluntness of war and labour than the delicate dance of office politics and verbal warfare. Now he looked a little contrite, contrite without understanding, the way he had always been. The sudden gentling of his expression made him look tired and worn and almost vulnerable.

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” Huat said slowly and confusedly. “But the insurance company used to pay me quite a lot. We can’t do without some of that money, at least.”

“Huat, what are you trying to prove?”

“My name is Archibald,” Huat said absently, instinctively, but then he stopped himself. “Anyway, stop worrying about everything. There’s work out there. I just need to look harder.”

## CHAPTER 2

THERE WERE BAD days.

On those days, it seemed to Beng that the world, undulating and inexorable, was a great wave of grief that crashed with destructive regularity over the pathetic little castles that men boldly built out of coarse, crumbling sand. Mother was the kind of person made brave by bitterness and enduring through erosion, who would sink to weary knobbly knees and re-craft her work, knowing full well it would fall again. And Huat, whose rage was so fierce and hard as to be almost brittle, was the kind to plot and reconstruct, to plan a whole fortress of cement that no wave could take down. And Father, poor lost prideful man, would stand at the shores ranting and raving at the sea, as though the sea had time and patience to pay attention to the frustrations of one mortal man.

But Beng—he knew he was not in possession of any such strength and resistance. It was a disappointment, but not a surprise, to realise that he was the kind of person who would indulge in long introspective musings about metaphorical waves and then proceed to wallow in passivity; Beng was used to defeat and the laziness that it imbued into lesser men.

The key question was essentially this—whether one could move,

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Epigram Books for giving this story the opportunity to see the light of day. Edmund, Jason, Joanne, Jiayi and Chris have been amazing throughout the process of editing, designing, and marketing *Beng Beng Revolution*, and I have learnt so much from working with them.

I am also immensely grateful to my family (Mum, Dad, Huihui and Zhi Yang) and friends for always believing in me and my writing, for listening to my stories, and for celebrating my smallest successes and supporting me through my toughest setbacks.

Finally, thank you to all the teachers and instructors who have ever given me feedback, comments or encouragement with regards to my writing. Thank you for making me believe that I can write. I will continue to hone my craft, and hope to become a better writer in the future.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lu Huiyi holds a degree in English Literature from the National University of Singapore, and is currently pursuing a post-graduate course at Singapore Management University. *Beng Beng Revolution* is her first novel.



The annual Epigram Books Fiction Prize promotes contemporary creative writing and rewards excellence in Southeast Asian literature. It is awarded to the best manuscript of a full-length, original and unpublished novel. Originally restricted to Singaporean citizens, permanent residents and Singapore-born writers, the EBFP is now open to all of ASEAN for novels written in or translated into the English language.

For more information, please visit **[EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG](http://EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG)**

# FINALIST FOR THE 2018 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE



Beng Hock and his brother, Beng Huat (who prefers to be called Archibald), find themselves navigating a tumultuous Singapore that has run out of oil and gas. Jobs are scarce, food scarcer, and falling afoul of the growing gangs could mean slavery or death. Home for the brothers is a crumbling shanty-town behind the City Hall Steam Engine Station.

And as if these changes aren't drastic enough, a great power awakens inside Beng Hock, and he must learn how to control it before it destroys everyone and everything in his way.

YOUNG ADULT

ISBN-13: 978-981-48-4516-8



[www.epigrambooks.sg](http://www.epigrambooks.sg)