



A Novel

THE
BRIGADIER'S
DAUGHTER

Paul Callan

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For Eve

WHEN LIM TENG JIN stood still, there was a touch of neatness and elegance that had been the chief characteristics of his appearance for decades, despite the slight stoop to his shoulders that gave away his advanced years. If only that damned driver had had just one brandy less, Jin might have come through life physically unscathed, he often bemoaned silently. Though it had been six years ago, he could clearly remember the look of alarm in the eyes of the man behind the wheel. The man had subsequently served a year behind bars, which was of little consequence to Jin. He'd still been sprightly as a chicken before the accident, as he would vehemently remind anyone who was willing to listen. Now, at seventy-two years of age, there were times when he felt like a stranger in his own body.

Absorbed in his early-morning routine, he stood before the mirror contemplating the day ahead and his own reflection. He frowned and stared at one particular feature. Next to the outer corner of his left eye, fanning out over the existing mesh of lines, was a new wrinkle—an imbalance between right and left. Jin wondered if this marked the beginning of a dismal new development; maybe his face would become lopsided to match his unhurried gait. What was left of his hair was grey and wispy. He'd never once dyed it: couldn't be bothered. Now he combed it with his fingers and gently patted it down.

He moved across to the window and took in the view afforded by his uncluttered seventh-floor flat. The spill of light from the rays of the low-lying sun, only moments before hidden behind a

mountain range of skyscrapers, flooded the room. The jagged shapes of cranes stabbed at the sky and Jin marvelled at the heights to which buildings could soar, wondering how many more might spring up in the topography.

A matted canopy of trees hung over the streets far below. Jin watched a small flock of Javan mynahs wheeling about with such natural grace that he became spellbound. In any other setting, it might have been the perfect start to a spring day, but this was the tropics. Awaiting him at ground level was an inescapable fug of heavy moist heat which could subdue even the liveliest of minds.

The calm that had washed over him while he stared out of the window faded as he began to focus on the details of the day ahead. The annual inspection of his food stall was looming.

Jin was famous throughout Singapore for his Hainanese chicken rice. His stall had been awarded an “A” grade, the highest ranking in hygiene, ever since the National Environment Agency started the grading system in 1997. Yet a sense of foreboding always came over him at this time of the year. He hated not being in control of his own destiny.

His flat comprised a bedroom, a galley kitchen, a bathroom and a living room in which he now stood. Apart from the mirror, he had only one picture hanging on the wall, a sketch he had drawn when he was a naïve young man. He hadn't given it more than a passing glimpse in years, but he would never think of parting with it.

He cleared the leftovers from last night's meal, a takeaway of spicy seafood bee hoon, then stepped into the kitchen and cleaned the plate. He had a dishwasher but he never used it; he'd never used the oven either. For years he had been living on meals bought from trusted hawkers, which meant that his kitchen was more or less as he'd found it on moving in to his flat fifteen years before.

Fifty years ago, lost and drifting, the possibility of becoming a hawker came to Jin while he watched his mother prepare the family's favourite dish: chicken rice. Both sets of Jin's grandparents had been settlers from Hainan, and his mother had taken great pride in cooking the dish the traditional way. Jin had clung to that tradition over the years, only upgrading to modern methods and equipment very gradually.

He shut his front door slowly, hoping to avoid alerting his neighbour Yip Wah. His mind was beset by what could go wrong when the inspector turned up, even though nothing ever had in the past. Jin was a worrier, and it was the same every year: less and less sleep as the day of his inspection approached. Once grateful for the regulatory system for Singaporean food vendors, he now shuddered at the prospect of becoming one of those unlucky people who fell afoul of it.

Unfortunately, no sooner had his door clicked closed when the same irritating greeting that Jin tried to avoid every week came from behind him: “Good morning, Jin. Just like a clock, eh? What would we do without our Monday morning meetings?” He had long ago learned that Yip Wah's only early start was on Mondays. His neighbour was dressed impeccably in a lightweight suit and smart tie; Jin guessed he was around ten years younger than himself. The forced jollity in his voice grated on Jin. As the two men stepped to the lift lobby, he narrowed his eyes and tried to assume a sour expression, so at odds with his normally mild public persona that he failed miserably.

“Morning,” he replied, with an angled grimace, dreading the shared ride down in the lift.

He turned at the noise of a door closing to find Yip Wah's wife joining them in the lift lobby. Jin cursed himself silently, wishing he

hadn't dawdled and left earlier.

"Good morning Jin. Alone again, I see," she said archly.

Of course I'm alone, you silly woman. I've been living here on my own for as long as we've known one another.

"Jin's a bit too old for you to be playing matchmaker, dear," said Yip Wah with light reproach, keeping his eyes carefully averted from his wife.

"You single men, I'd find it so difficult...sad, even...being single and all alone up here." She abruptly snatched at her husband's arm, holding on fiercely while the poor man struggled to free himself. Jin forced a grin at the staged display of marital harmony. The air between them grew dense and impenetrable, forbidding any movement. *Oh, for goodness' sake, please don't start arguing,* Jin pleaded in his mind. He hated conflict.

To his relief, the lift quickly arrived; to his disappointment, there was enough room for all three of them to step inside. Luckily the lift began to overcrowd on subsequent floors and he was able to avoid any further inquisition.

Outside, the combination of unforgiving heat, hurrying peak-hour pedestrians and the hum of busy traffic presented the trio with the perfect excuse to simply nod to each other and be on their respective ways.

Jin's first stop of the day was to visit his old supplier, Mrs Ooi, several blocks away from the complex. The woman had looked after his needs for years. He trusted her and knew she would never cheat him. Her family had been in business longer than he had, a fact she often reminded him about, and he would let her remark stand unchallenged, only too happy to humour her. She was a

straight-backed, spare woman whose figure had dwindled as the years rolled by, but whose determination to survive and prosper had only deepened. She had a strong lived-in face topped with a bun of white hair. Jin could remember the days when it used to gleam like black silk.

Mrs Ooi's shop was so consistently, garishly lit that Jin could not imagine it had ever seen a moment's darkness. It twinkled against the drab surroundings of the other wholesale outlets. Apart from the glass frontage and the area where the clock hung, the walls were covered with metal shelves. Each was precisely and comprehensively stacked with every known type of dried or preserved foodstuff, and sacks of assorted grades of rice required by hawkers and restaurants alike.

After so many years of receiving his custom, Mrs Ooi would know exactly what he needed, and what was most important to him. "Old ginger, Mrs Ooi. That's the trick. Not fresh, but old. Aged ginger smells stronger," Jin used to tell her. "And the best sea salt to rub on the chicken." In fact, anticipating a quick jaunt, he had a taxi lined up to take him back to the Chinatown complex before he'd even entered the mall housing the wholesalers.

When he entered Mrs Ooi's premises he found the place devoid of activity. Then he heard a muffled sound from the counter at the far end of the shop.

The slender shape of a spine, clothed in red, gracefully uncurled itself from behind the counter. Catching a glimpse of him through the long black hair that shrouded her face, the young girl breathlessly said, "I dropped my handbag...everything fell out."

When she brushed her hair back, Jin's heart lurched as though he'd been slapped, and he failed to stifle the gasp that rose up out of him. "Oh my God," he blurted. He stood transfixed, his mind

trapped in another time, his heart racing, as if he had literally seen a ghost. Secrets he had striven to leave behind over fifty years ago crowded in on him. *This cannot be*, he thought. The humid air seemed to grow thicker, stifling rational thought. He could barely stop staring at the girl's face. *Who are you?* he wanted to ask, but his tongue felt frozen as images kept reworking themselves in his head over and over again, like a nightmare come to life.

The awkward silence stretched and was only broken when the girl looked downwards and released a deep sigh. Those gestures—the lowering of her head, the soft sound of her breath escaping—were sharply familiar to him. Her hair shone under the overhead fluorescent light just as Stephanie's used to shine, and hung below her shoulders in the precise style that Stephanie had worn hers. There was the same delicacy about her features when she glanced up at him again. He struggled to control his breathing, overcome by a desperate urge to rush to her and take her in his arms, to protect her as he had dreamed of doing so often in the long, painful intervening years.

The eyes that narrowed questioningly at him were strikingly similar to the ones that had kept him awake for nights on end so many years before. Then the girl offered him a faint smile. He recognised the lips that were full but well defined, quick to smile and tremulous in repose. She had Stephanie's inconstant facial lines too: one moment firm and confident, the next vulnerable and uncertain. *How could this be?* This was Stephanie, and yet she was also a stranger.

“Can I help you?” she asked softly, and the voice at least was different, with none of Stephanie's boarding-school cadence.

Panic seized Jin; he swallowed audibly before managing to respond. “Where is Mrs Ooi?”

“Ah Mah? She's taken Grandpa to the hospital for his check-up. She'll be here in another hour,” the girl said, peering at the clock on the wall. “It's the school holidays. I'm just helping her out.”

Jin's mouth had gone dry and he could only nod back. In all the years he had been dealing with Mrs Ooi, he had never once imagined she might have a family, let alone a husband who was still alive.

“I-I've come for my w-weekly order,” he stuttered. “Lim Teng Jin. Your grandmother should have it ready.”

Meeting this girl who was the double of Stephanie from fifty years ago was forcing him to relive those terrible days all over again—the longing and the yearning and the dreadful acknowledgement of his own culpability. Too long enmeshed in his loneliness, as he allowed the shock and fear to escape from him, his mind began to wander back through all the intervening years, to that other miraculous meeting that changed his life forever.

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SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD JIN sat on a stile on the rutted track running along the side of Gunung Lambak, one of a series of undulating hills not far from Kluang, swinging his feet nonchalantly, sketchpad and sharpened pencil in his hands. The jungle growth on the upper slope was shaded from the worst of the sun. This afternoon he hoped to sketch the oriental pied hornbill, a black bird with a white underside and an extraordinary yellowish bill that had a prominent casque on top of it. He had spotted one several times over the preceding days and had been waiting patiently for more than an hour, hoping to glimpse it again.

Due to the lack of teachers, pupils in Malaya attended school in the morning for one term, and in the afternoon for the next. Jin's present roster put him in the morning session. But instead of studying this afternoon as his mother expected, Jin was determined to capture the bird in a drawing. The day was already into its long retreat but he enjoyed sketching at this spot; loved the solitude of it.

A gentle breeze picked up, the soft sounds of dancing leaves blending with the rhythm of his breathing. Jin worried about his hair. He had spent an age earlier that afternoon grooming it into an approximation of the Elvis Presley cowlick with the aid of his father's Brylcreem. Jin expected another scolding from his father when he came home, but he didn't have any money to buy his own.

Jin had become obsessed with Elvis since "Heartbreak Hotel" a year or so back. His favourite song was "All Shook Up", which

he hummed to himself now as he waited. He clamped his pad and pencil under one arm and absent-mindedly rubbed the sides of his face, checking for the umpteenth time for any sign of bristles. For months he had been shaving his smooth skin relentlessly, hoping to encourage some growth that would enable him to develop sideburns just like his idol's. He dreamed of owning some crepe-soled brothel creepers, but as he couldn't even persuade his parents to let him wear drainpipe trousers, he doubted he would own such a pair of shoes anytime soon. Some weeks ago he'd gotten into terrible trouble when his mother discovered him sitting in a cold bath with his jeans on after hearing that it was the best way to shrink them into the new Teddy Boy-style.

A shadow fluttered across the periphery of his vision. At the same time he heard a low-pitched screech, a tenor in the chorus of birdsong. Sure enough, there it was: his hornbill. It was perched on the branch of a rambutan tree, head held arrogantly high, attitude untroubled. Jin cautiously worked his pad open and then began to sketch feverishly. He would refine the lines and shading from memory but for now he wanted to reproduce the bird's contour, the imperious way it held itself as it surveyed all within its view from on high.

While working his pencil across the page, Jin speculated what it might be like to be as free and full of confidence as that bird. "Hey, bird," he said, softly, "I bet you don't have parents going on at you all the time, telling you to do this, do that...don't do this, don't do that...right?" As he spoke he imagined two great hornbills swooping down from the sky to chastise their offspring.

He continued: "And I bet you don't have a baby sister sneaking in and out all the time damaging your things." Yesterday's incident was still raw in his mind. Fong, Jin's only sibling and five years younger than he, had once more entered his bedroom without permission

and played with his gramophone, this time scratching his favourite record by allowing the needle to skid across the grooves. It was a recording of a Chinese opera he loved to listen to while meticulously completing details of the drawings he created.

“I should stick her on the train and watch her slowly disappear,” Jin muttered venomously to himself. He’d often envisaged taking Fong by the hand, walking her to the railway station in the middle of town, sitting her down with lots of sandwiches and a canister of water in one of the carriages, and leaving her to her own devices. He would then reproach himself for getting into this frame of mind.

He worked studiously to capture the hornbill in as much detail as he could, his mind ranging freely as he did so. He imagined pleading with his mother to increase his pocket money so that he could go and see *Love Me Tender* at the cinema in Johor Bahru with his best friend Kok Seng. The two had been friends since they had sat at adjacent desks at school as seven-year-olds. It was a long journey to JB, but it would be worth every mile just to see their hero. The next minute, Jin was dreaming of exhibiting his drawings in a major gallery in Kuala Lumpur before hundreds of admiring, screaming girls.

As he drew he glanced up repeatedly, praying fervently that the bird would remain where it was. It was then that he saw a figure dressed in red moving in the distance. It had to be Seng, whose favourite shirt was red and blue.

But when Jin turned back to the bird, it had left the branch and was flying into the jungle. He slumped with disappointment, then hurriedly sketched all he could remember, meaning to refine it once he reached home.

He sat up on the stile and knitted his brow as the figure he had seen drew closer. It wasn’t a shirt they were wearing at all, but a dress, and the figure had long black hair—it was a girl.

Jin quickly closed his pad and clamped it under his arm while he checked that his hair was still in place and there were no untidy strands hanging loose. Not wanting to be caught gawking, he dropped his gaze. He puzzled over what she was doing here all by herself.

As the girl drew closer he saw how the fine material of her dress skimmed her figure, accentuating her curves. No longer able to avert his eyes, he studied her more closely. The girl had a slender build, with well-formed breasts and rounded hips. Straight black hair tumbled over her shoulders and shone under the blazing sunlight.

Jin’s held breath collapsed into quick and shallow inhaling. An anxious heat entered his body: what if she thought him a sissy, sitting out here alone drawing birds? He wished that he and his sketchpad could just be swallowed up and disappear.

“Hello,” said the girl, almost level with him now, and for a split second all Jin could hear was the sound of his own breathing.

“Hi,” he said in a faltering tone, miserably failing to appear casual. Her eyes were deep and penetrating, so watchful and alive that it was impossible for him to turn away. Her small nose accentuated her prettiness, and when she smiled, revealing perfectly even teeth, he gulped for breath.

She gestured at his pad and asked with an air of mild interest, “What are you doing?”

Reluctant to tell the truth, he blurted: “Nothing. Just...” He shrugged. “Resting, you know.” The words sounded ridiculous to him and he followed them with a sigh of embarrassment.

“I like your hair,” she said, smiling more broadly now.

“Thanks.” She was studying him brazenly, and he imagined being as bold in gazing back at her. In the yawning hush that followed, he found he could not speak. He desperately wanted to check his hair again, certain that the quiff he had worked so hard to perfect had

somehow worked itself free. He wondered why he couldn't just be like his friend Seng, all chatter and cheek, instead of the tongue-tied idiot he was.

"You don't say much, do you?" asked the girl.

Startled by the bluntness of her remark, he watched her transfer her weight from one foot to the other as if about to abandon him at any moment. No, she mustn't. He tried not to stare at her breasts, but failed. When she brought her hands to the line of her chest he felt the heat of shame come into his face; only then did he manage to turn away.

"Are you from around here?" she asked.

"I live in Kluang," he said, his voice tight as he sought to control his venal impulses.

"So you'd know why it's called the town of flying foxes?"

He inclined his head towards the horizon. "When you approach from that direction, one of the mountains behind often seems to depict the head and wings of a bat." No response. "Around here, fruit bats are known as flying foxes. Not that I've ever seen one, mind," Jin added, floundering. He emitted a small awkward laugh, unsure how to continue.

The girl's mouth was a bored, thin line. "I've just moved to Kluang," she said. "Well, near the town."

His forehead creased. "You're new then."

"Yes, I am." She swished back her hair with a slight toss of the head, and he found himself enthralled by the sparkle in her eyes. She had such confidence in her beauty—or so he thought.

Was it his turn to speak now? But she abruptly said, "Aren't you going to ask me where I come from? Everybody else does."

He made it look like he was pondering her question. "Do they?" he said, in a guarded voice.

"Always."

"Oh, okay then. Where do you come from?"

"Malaya. I'm Malayan."

"You don't look Malayan."

"What do I look like then?"

He wanted to say "beautiful" but the word got trapped, like an insect, on the tip of his tongue. Instead he merely shrugged and said, "I dunno."

"My father is British. My mother is Chinese."

In the stubborn silence he was desperate to terminate, he said, "Anyway, you look nice." It came out of his mouth so fast, so spontaneously, that he blushed deeply in fright.

She laughed out loud, seeming genuinely amused. "People never believe me when I tell them I'm from Malaya. Having people stare at you, trying to figure out where you come from—it's really annoying."

Jin pursed his lips, unsure of what to say.

"Or they ask what race I am."

"They do?"

"You don't believe me?"

Jin hesitated. He shrugged and said, "I suppose."

"They immediately think I was born in another country."

"Right." This, plus a nod of his head, was all he could offer in response to her experience, so alien to him.

"Or they want to know what my religion is. That's a real issue in this country, don't you think—you're always judged by your race or your religion? You either have to be Malay or Chinese or Indian, or Muslim or Christian or something."

"I suppose," he said again. "So where do you live?" Was it forward of him to ask? Then again, she had not laughed at his halting reply.

"At the army barracks on the outskirts of town. My dad is the brigadier in the British Army for the region. He says Kluang is the

most central of all the garrisons in Johor state, which is easier for his work.”

“I live on the other side of town,” Jin volunteered.

With an air of excitement she said, “We’re just there temporarily; we’re moving any day now. Mummy hates it at the barracks and so do I. You must know the villa?”

“Of course.” Everybody knew the villa. It was an imposing detached house on the fringes of town, built in the late 1800s and regarded as one of the finest properties in the region.

“We’re moving there. So tell me more about Kluang.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything. Tell me its history?”

And so he told her that Kluang was often blanketed in a thick fog of morning mist. He explained that the town was first recognised as a municipality in 1915 when the railway line connecting it to the rest of Johor state and beyond was built. It was constructed so that the tracks ran straight through the centre of town, causing the main road to close intermittently to allow the train to pass—when Kluang stands still, the locals fondly said.

“See where the railway line bends—there’s a huge tree next to it,” he said, pointing down at the vista.

“Yes,” the girl said, sounding unimpressed.

“I live directly opposite.” He struggled against his congenital dullness. “From my bedroom window I can watch the steam locomotive pulling its carriages along the tracks.” He described the wooden-planked fencing with toothed gaps overflowing with wild leaves and lalang separating the road from the rails.

The breeze picked up again and swirled around them. In the wash of warm air, he came alive as she struck a pose that exposed the outline of her figure. Her red dress with delicate touches of beige

seemed calculated to acknowledge her Chinese side. As he openly scanned her body, a violent quiver ran through him.

Another flush of heat flooded Jin’s face. Unable to distract himself from his own thoughts, he asked despairingly, “Do you go to school around here?”

“I go to a school in Penang. It’s a boarding school. I’m here just for a while.” She answered vaguely, a wayward look passing over her face. “And you?”

“I go to Chong Hwa School.”

“You learn everything in Chinese, I bet.”

“No way. It’s a vernacular school, but a lot of English is taught.”

“Is it nearby?”

“A couple of miles from town. It’s near enough, I suppose.”

She changed the subject: “It must take you forever to get your hair like that.”

He flinched, wanting to flee into the protection of his own private space, into something that he owned. Next time he would definitely use more cream; he was convinced now that there was something wrong. He wanted to run home, he wanted to escape to the safety of his bedroom mirror. “It doesn’t take long,” he said. A corner of his mouth trembled; the same old palsy that afflicted him when he became overwhelmed. Worse still, he had now developed an erection, and hunched over awkwardly on the stile in a pathetic attempt to hide his arousal from her.

She stared at him, and for a fraction of a second her mind was in another place altogether, until she seemed to remember his presence. “What’s your name?”

“Jin.”

“I’m Stephanie.”

“Hi.”

“There’s not much to do around here, is there? What are you going to be doing for Merdeka Day?”

Merdeka Day, marking Malaya’s independence from Britain, was fast approaching and anticipation was mounting throughout the land. After hundreds of years of colonialism Malaya would finally be free. But Jin felt mostly indifferent to the fast-changing political landscape, where the colonised Chinese were surrendering control of their destiny. “I’m not sure yet. Spending it with my friend, probably,” he said with a shrug. “I think the whole country is going to have an enormous party.” Desperate to keep the conversation flowing, he dragged a different topic forward. “What’s boarding school like, then?”

“Okay. Fun sometimes, dull mostly.”

“It must be lonely.”

“Lonely?”

“Missing home, you know.”

She laughed aloud and he squirmed at the banality of his own words.

“I’ve been boarding for years, I’m used to it. Maybe it was lonely at first. For some girls it is, usually when they first start.”

He nodded deliberately, as if this information was somehow of great value.

“Is this a favourite place of yours?” she asked.

“I suppose so. I like the quiet and being by myself.”

She stepped closer and he inhaled her fresh scent and held it in his lungs.

“Is it safe up there...can I join you?”

“Sure,” he said, lips trembling nervously. He edged along the stile to make space and motioned for her to climb up next to him.

As she eased herself up, her dress rose to reveal her thighs and the silky material of it brushed against his hand. A wave of expectation,

like nothing he had ever experienced before, coursed through him and he could not stop his eyes from dwelling on her body. He let his gaze linger, unable to turn away.

“How many times have you been out here?” he asked, his voice uneven.

“This is the first time. And I can see why you like it. It’s so... calming,” she said. But on cue the jungle behind them, only moments ago brooding mysteriously, erupted with high-pitched whistles and shrills.

Jin could not concentrate on what she was saying; his mind was in turmoil. She turned to him and their eyes locked and her mouth widened in a precisely-aimed smile. His whole body ached. He wanted to lavish clever, impressive words on her, but he had none.

“I hope we don’t fall off,” said Stephanie, and giggled.

Agitation mounted in him when he caught her gazing at his lap. In fear and haste he covered his groin area with his sketchpad.

“You draw?” she said.

He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“Can I see?” She held out her hand towards his pad.

“No,” he said, gripping it harder.

“Why not?” she asked, her voice rising.

“I’m just not ready to show anyone my work yet,” he said. Under the cover of the sketchpad, his arousal was hot, awkward, uncomfortable. He feared he might burst out crying.

After a short pause Stephanie said, in a softer voice, “I’m sorry. I was interested, that’s all.”

Terrified that she might attempt to grab his pad and topple him over and compound his shame, Jin opened it at the sketch he had just drawn and passed it to her, careful to ensure that she was inspecting his drawing and nothing else.

“Wow, look at that. It’s really good.”

He drew in a deep steadying breath. Her praise seemed to be genuine, and those black pearl eyes of hers held a glint of real interest.

She asked if it was okay to look at some more pictures and Jin said she could, with a touch of pride. She turned the pages and spent longer than he’d expected examining each drawing.

“Gosh, this is amazing,” she said, eyes wide with astonishment. When she finally closed the book and passed it back, it was with such open admiration that his chest began to swell.

“Do you do anything else? Besides animals and jungle scenes, I mean?”

“Sure, lots of stuff.”

“Do you do life studies?”

“The birds are—”

“No, I mean people. You know, nudes—that sort of thing?”

The word hung in the air. Jin had many times tried to replicate classical nudes by drawing people and surreptitiously removing their clothes when polishing the pictures in the secrecy of his room. But he would always destroy those efforts. Not one sketch survived. He was never satisfied with the outcome: each time he was left with a sense of incompleteness, as if he were cheating himself. Stephanie listened intently while he tried to explain this to her, exasperation creeping into his voice.

“Have you never asked anyone to help you?”

“What, to let me draw them naked?”

“Yes.”

He failed to hide his embarrassment when he told her he had not. He did not admit that he would never have had the nerve to ask.

“Not even your best friend?”

“No.” He swallowed.

“I’ve never been drawn...never posed for an artist. It might be fun. Maybe you can draw me,” she said.

“What, now?” he said in a rush of anticipation.

“Not now, silly. And certainly not here.”

His mind whirled in dizzy speculation. Did she mean what he wanted her to mean?

“Maybe I’ll see you next week?” Stephanie was saying, sliding down from her seat on the stile.

“Sure,” he mumbled as she watched him, terrified of betraying his excitement.

“I don’t know which day though. I’m not sure when the move is but I won’t be free till after that.”

“I come here every day,” he lied. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a Monday, a Sunday or any other day of the week, I’m always here around this time.”

The grating sound of the soldier clearing his throat shocked Jin as he asked, "Then may I speak to her mother, please?"

"I beg your pardon." The Englishman deliberately raised his voice, rage and disdain apparent in his red, boiling face. "Are you the...person...who defiled my daughter?"

Petrified, Jin recoiled from the naked contempt in the man's face as he stuttered, "I...came t-to..."

"Came to what?" the man snarled, his stance threatening now.

Jin shivered violently. "I'm sorry, I—"

Jeremy Titmus laughed—a deep scornful sound. "Sorry? So you've come here to apologise?" he said, labouring the word with heavy irony.

"I want to marry your daughter," Jin replied in a strained voice.

"Marry my daughter?" Titmus roared with undisguised contempt. "*Marry* her? You pathetic excuse for a human being! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't give you a damned good thrashing."

Tears of fright began to seep from Jin's eyes and spill down his face. "Because I love her," he stammered.

Jeremy Titmus momentarily recoiled, as if he had heard something obscene, and then stooped down to Jin's level so that they were eye to eye. "Love," he said dismissively. "Would you like to tell me what that means?" The threat of imminent violence mounted in his voice.

Jin tried to look steadily into the man's furious bloodshot eyes, but failed: he could not find the courage to respond, say something, anything to stop him having to meet the accusation in that contorted, hate-filled face.

"Well, young man, let me tell you this: my daughter, the girl whose life you've done your utmost to ruin, left this morning for Singapore with her mother. There," growled Titmus, "she will bring this whole sorry saga to an end. As for you... If I ever so much

as smell you within a mile of Stephanie, I will whip the living daylight out of you. Do you understand what I am saying? *Do you?*" he bellowed.

Jin started and found himself nodding, unable to speak.

"Now get the hell out of my sight," her father exclaimed, spraying spittle into Jin's face, "before I fetch my whip and give you the beating you deserve, you nasty little slitty-eyed piece of scum."

The door slammed shut in Jin's face. He could still hear it thundering in his mind as he stumbled down the drive and shut the gate behind him.

The following day Jin wandered around mired in hopelessness, unable to decide what he should do from one moment to the next, all the time wishing that Seng would return so that there would be someone for him to confide in. There was no one else he dared approach.

He was dragging himself up the stairs early in the afternoon after school when his mother called him into the lounge. Jin had the distinct impression she had been waiting for him to return. His father too was there, seated straight-backed at the table, his expression unreadable.

"Come and sit down with us, Jin dear," his mother said softly.

He lacked the strength for an argument and did as he was told, taking care to sit as far away from his father as possible.

His mother took her usual place, glanced at her husband and then began speaking. "Your father and I are very worried about you, Jin." She left a slight pause, lowered her eyes, then told him, "I spoke to Seng's mother at lunchtime. You know her sister is a teacher at Fong's school?"

“Yes,” said Jin with a dismissive shrug, while simultaneously trying to hold back the tears that had been spilling since his confrontation with Stephanie’s father.

“Apparently, the sister knows everybody in the teaching profession around here.” His mother paused again, this time to make certain Jin was taking in her meaning. “She’s a friend of the tutor who teaches your...friend...Stephanie at home.”

Jin felt as if two worlds had shockingly collided: the mundane world of home, and the private one he shared with Stephanie. But that enclave was sacred to him, set apart. His mother had no business discussing Stephanie with Seng’s auntie, no business at all. He opened his mouth to protest furiously but his mother held up her hand to prevent him. She didn’t seem to be in any way angry, he noticed. In fact, she looked sad. Suddenly he wanted to escape from this familiar room and the suffocating closeness of his watchful parents. He didn’t want to hear whatever it was his mother had learnt behind his back.

“Jin darling, I have something awful to tell you,” she continued, in that strange soft voice she had adopted, her words stifling him. “I’m afraid I don’t know all the details, but according to the tutor, earlier today, in Singapore, while undergoing some sort of medical procedure, your friend Stephanie passed away.”

Irritated by the self-important way in which his mother was conducting this conversation, for a split second Jin was too distracted to take in what she had said. He shook his head vehemently as if to dismiss her words.

At his confusion, she continued, “Stephanie died, Jin.”

He gaped at her in disbelief. He shook his head. His lips moved but he couldn’t force out a single word. He strained to breathe and found that he could not. At first, he covered his ears, then he threw

his hands over his face, howling, “No. No no no no. I killed her.”

He was sobbing uncontrollably by the time his father asked, “What are you saying, Jin?”

Jin fell forward over the table and buried his head in his arms while his parents stared at one another in complete shock. “Jin, you have to tell us what happened?” his mother pleaded with him.

His face twisted with agony, he raised his head and confessed, pathetically, “I killed her, Mother. It’s my fault.” He turned to his father, shuddering with emotion, and said, “It’s all my fault, Father.”

His father frowned and opened his mouth to speak before he caught sight of his wife shaking her head at him in warning, tears of pity in her eyes.

“I loved her. I loved her, Mother. I truly loved her...”

“I know, and I’m so sorry, Jin. Your father and I suspected you probably did. But what do you mean by saying that you killed Stephanie?”

The room became charged as his parents waited for him to speak again.

Jin sat upright and brushed his damp face with the palms of his hands. The collar of his shirt was soaked in his tears. He announced as clearly as he could, “I made her pregnant. Stephanie’s mother took her to Singapore for an abortion. And she died there.”

His mother gasped in horror while his father fought to catch his breath.

Jin leapt to his feet, then ran down the stairs and out into the street.

If Jin had ever been asked to account for his movements over the next two days, he would not have been able. All he could tell was that time refused to move. His neat quiff was replaced by a wild

thatch of unkempt hair to match his dishevelled appearance. He'd had long talks with his parents, mostly his mother, but whatever they'd said failed to register with him. Deep in a grief so thick that at times he couldn't swallow, he stumbled through the days heedless of anything but thoughts of the girl he had destroyed with his own selfish desires. The scent of Stephanie seemed to hang over him, wherever he wandered, the last physical trace of her both a comfort and a torment to him.

In his misery and confusion he failed to sit his exams. His mind dwelt only on Stephanie and the cause of her death: him. Accepting sole responsibility for it, he decided he would pay the proper penalty for as long as he remained on this earth. He had thoughtlessly sacrificed her life and must pay for that crime with the way he lived his. He vowed henceforth to deny himself any moments of happiness such as he had once shared with her. There would be no second chance at love for him. It wasn't a difficult decision to make. How could he possibly share a happy life with another, knowing that he had denied existence to his one true love? He must make reparation for that—perpetually. Nor would he draw again. He would deny himself that pleasure too. Had it not led to his wanting to sketch her naked, instead of simply cherishing her, Stephanie would still be alive today.

On the second day after learning of her death, he called at Seng's home four times. His friend's mother had to remind him, more gently on each occasion, that Seng was not due home until the following day. Jin had to see Seng, the closest person to Stephanie he knew. He would not divulge to his friend what he had done to Stephanie—although it was to preserve her memory and guard her reputation rather than from fear of revealing his own callous treachery. His standing in other people's eyes was of no regard to Jin whatsoever.

Starving, yet unable to eat, he fell into a dread-filled sleep that night. And then he was up with the cockerels and racing around to his friend's home, hopelessly searching for catharsis. There were no lights on yet so he sat outside on the doorstep before wandering back up to the jungle path.

He'd lost all track of time and was leaning against the fence, watching the play of the leaves in the soft wind, trying to remember the first words he and Stephanie had spoken to one another here, when he caught sight of his friend off in the distance, speeding towards him. The space between them closed so fast, Jin had little time to prepare himself.

"Mother told me what happened," Seng exclaimed, rushing to him. "I dropped my things at home and rushed straight round to your place. Then I came here, hoping I'd find you."

Jin stood before his friend, lips pressed tight, fresh tears stinging worn-out eyes that were already red and sore from days of mourning.

"Jin." His friend stepped forward and held out his arms. Jin fell into his awkward, bony embrace.

He broke down completely then and shook violently as he clung to Seng who pressed his face against the side of Jin's head. "I wish I'd been here when the news broke," he murmured.

"It was my fault," Jin moaned. "All my fault... She shouldn't have died."

"Don't say that," Seng insisted. "It was a heart attack. Her tutor told my auntie that Stephanie was born with a congenital heart defect; she had a hole in her heart. You weren't responsible for that—I don't believe you even knew about it, did you?"

Jin's battered mind struggled to take this in—and failed.

"I loved her, Seng," he finally managed to say.

"I know you did. I loved her too, I suppose, in my own

way... like I love you.” He released his hold on Jin. “Let’s get you home now.”

“No, not yet, Seng. I want to stay here awhile.”

Seng broke free then, rooted in his pocket and passed him a freshly ironed handkerchief.

Jin blew his nose violently and laughed in nervous response to the resonant sound. “I don’t know what to do any more,” he pleaded.

His friend nodded and said reassuringly, “Then stay here until you decide.”

After a prolonged silence, Jin said, “We made love here, you know. Do you remember the day you found us both here?”

“You did?” said Seng.

With a frantic need to confide in him, Jin said, “Not right here... In the clearing.” Then everything spilled out: the day he first drew Stephanie; the time Seng broke into Jin’s home and he and Stephanie were there all along; how they had made love nearby while fearing discovery by Seng himself.

His friend stood and listened.

Driven by a need to share nearly every last detail, Jin said, “Here, let me show you.” A couple of steps along the track, he pulled back the foliage and drew Seng into the clearing. Somehow sharing everything with his close friend made the grief momentarily easier to bear. He had condemned himself to a loveless future, but at least Seng had witnessed Stephanie and the love they had known.

The trees shielding them from view swayed softly beneath a fresh blue sky; the birds sang a lament for what they had witnessed. For Jin there was still an edge of excitement to finding himself in this hidden place with all its associations.

Seng touched his sleeve. His black eyes, without their habitual glint, appeared dreamy and unfocused.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. “I can understand why you’d want to come here.”

A sense of warmth and relief blanketed Jin. He was no longer alone.

EPILOGUE

FOR THE FIRST time in many years Jin was unable to make his weekly visit to his temple, which meant that he could not be there to hear Kevin play as promised. Concerned that he was letting the boy down, he telephoned Shaun Heng. “Please explain to him that something unexpected has arisen and that I will be there the following week to hear him play. Do tell him that I spoke to you specifically about him and that I look forward to learning how he has progressed since my talk with him. And Shaun, can you spend a little extra time with him to ensure he feels that people are taking an interest in his efforts?”

Mrs Leong—Fan—had quietly taken control of Seng’s funeral arrangements with the tact and compassion that Jin acknowledged he had long overlooked in her. The other hawkers contributed their time and the effort they made to ensure that the funeral was a memorable event. It was conducted with due reverence and ceremony, a representative from each stall present, Jin just one of a crowd of mourners. Afterwards, he followed an open-topped truck carrying Seng’s coffin, with musicians playing the traditional cacophonous noises from the funeral drums, cymbals, trumpets and bugles designed to scare off evil spirits, leading the way to the cemetery where Seng was to be buried.

Jin stood alone before the open grave and observed the slow descent of the coffin. Watching the soil begin to rain down from

the gravediggers’ shovels, he felt great peace on two counts. He imagined Seng with that mischievous smile of his, letting out a parting chuckle just for him, and understood that the past need no longer be a burden, not when one day soon he would meet up with Stephanie and Seng again in another place.

In this moment of tranquillity he called Gladys’ lovely face into focus. The thought of her impending wedding acted on him like balm. He was glad that, for this short space of time at least, he could count her as his friend. That alone, he told himself, was more than he deserved.

He had already discussed how much he was looking forward to the wedding with Fan, who had offered to accompany him to the ceremony. He had been touched but had declined, simply because he wanted to do this alone, to see Gladys happily married in the same manner that he and Stephanie might have been, and certainly in the way Stephanie deserved to have been.

He leaned forward, gathered up his newly acquired magnifying glass from the table and resumed his inspection of the old photograph of Stephanie and the wedding-invitation photograph of Gladys and her future husband. In the past few days he had spent hours studying each likeness, in search of every nuance, every hidden expression, every secret emotion. Finally, letting out a long nervous breath, he’d picked up a pencil and begun to draw for the first time in over fifty-five years. At first his hand moved tentatively, as if gripped by fear, but it was not long before his old skill began to return and the same hand swept lovingly over the image he was creating. He resolved that no evidence of his own dishonourable past would be evident in this drawing; instead it would be a picture expressing everything he had ever dreamed of, a study of pure unadulterated joy.

Days later, after working his way through three scores of thick

sketchpads and several overflowing waste-paper baskets, he sat back with a sense of achievement, feeling that Stephanie and Seng had been guiding his hand, content that he had captured the moment of perfect happiness he was after. With only a day to go before the wedding, he was able to set the drawing against a hard mount, covered with glass he had polished endlessly, into a red frame. That night he slept soundly.

At the wedding he knew only Mrs Ooi and the bride and groom. The minute Gladys spotted Jin she drew her husband to her side and hurried to greet him. As they neared him he glanced about, searching for what he assumed would be a mound of presents somewhere, wrapped as his was in glitzy wedding paper, but there were none to be seen.

“I’m so happy you came,” said Gladys.

“I brought you a small gift,” he said to both of them, and passed the parcel to her.

“What is it?” she asked eagerly, tearing away the wrapping.

“Just something I did that you might want to hang on the wall of your new home.”

When Gladys saw the drawing she exclaimed loudly at the detail Jin had captured of the happy couple in their wedding clothes. She held it up for her husband to see. “It’s stunning.” She stepped forward then and hugged Jin hard before kissing his cheek.

Mrs Ooi had learned from her granddaughter that Jin had recently lost his dear friend and so made every effort to ensure he was never left unattended. As it turned out, there was not much chance of that, as every one of the guests insisted on seeing the drawing. If he had taken their ensuing invitations seriously, he would have spent

months producing so many portraits that he would never have had a minute to himself.

Eschewing the traditional hotel dinner, Gladys’ wedding was held in Mr and Mrs Ooi’s wonderful old house. It had a garden bursting with jasmine and orchids displayed beneath a variety of mature trees in the beds surrounding a well-tended lawn. It brought back memories of the villa in Kluang where Stephanie had once lived.

In a moment of private contemplation Jin stood by himself under the shade of a tall, majestic, umbrella-shaped rain tree and withdrew from his breast pocket the photograph of her and Seng together, as well as Stephanie’s letter, which now accompanied him everywhere he went. Gazing at her innocent face once more, he unfolded the letter and read it as he had done multiple times every single day since its discovery.

My darling Jin,

Sweetheart, when I walked away from you this afternoon my heart felt broken in two. I so wanted to turn around and run back to you and take you in my arms and hold you tight and make you feel safe and happy... Most of all, to let you know that you are loved by me always. If I had been honest with you, instead of being so cruel, I would have told you how much I love you and how willing I was for us both to see the future through together. Seeing you so distressed made me cry so much inside, it took all my strength to resist showing you my true feelings.

Daddy is very angry and upset with me for what has happened. I have never seen him like this before and can’t bear the thought that what I have done has caused such a change in him. I want to make you both happy but I know that is impossible and it’s tearing me apart. I love both of you and am trying to do what is best.

Knowing you as I do, I realise you will be blaming yourself for

everything. But, my darling Jin, I am as much at fault—if not more so. Sweetheart, you may believe because of my coldness towards you today that I do not love you, but I want you to know that you would be terribly wrong to think that. I love you more than you could possibly understand. When I saw you that first time, sitting on the stile, something very wonderful happened to me. I don't know what it was but your shy and gentle ways touched my heart. And when I saw your beautiful drawing of that bird, I knew straight away how gifted and sensitive you are, which is why I feel so dreadful now. I cannot stop thinking about you, and on the journey I am about to make you will always be with me in my heart.

As I told you, after my visit to Singapore Mummy and I will go away for a long holiday, but as soon as I return I will visit you immediately. Seng came to see me late this afternoon, telling me how worried he is for you, that you are not studying or concentrating on your exams. Please, darling Jin, if you work hard, if not for you then for me, we will have a much brighter future together. He told me that he is on his way to a taekwondo competition and has kindly agreed to pass this letter on to you when he returns. He has explained to me that he will not have the time to stop by at your home before he goes but will give it to you on his return. Seng is such a dear person and such a loving friend to you that I wish one day to have a loyal friend just like him. He has written down your address for me and I will write to you as often as I can until my return. Because of Daddy's unsettled state I am a little scared that he might see Seng and threaten him, so he is waiting down the road for me while I write this and in a minute I will go out and pass it to him. As he is in a rush, I don't have the time I would like to write down all the things I so want to say to you, but I want you to know that I will always love you.

Do you remember Merdeka night and all the fun we had? Well, I am

attaching a print from that photographer so that you have a picture of me while I am away. I just wish I had one of you also, to put under my pillow each night. You were supposed to be in the photograph too, next to Seng, because that's who I'm looking at—you. But all the shots came out very poorly, and this is the only one of any worth. I wish with all my heart you were in it too, because then I would have got two copies, one for you and one for me.

Sweetheart, please take great care of yourself until I return, and when I see you again I shall give you the biggest and longest kiss in the world.

My everlasting love,

Stephanie

“There you are, Jin.”

Startled, he looked up.

“Oh, I'm sorry, am I disturbing you?” Gladys said in that serene voice of hers.

“No, no,” he said, fumbling as he folded the letter back into place and returned it and the photograph to his breast pocket.

She smiled gently. “Ah Mah will be worried for you if she sees you on your own.”

“Oh, just a moment's daydreaming.”

“I've got something for you,” said Gladys, pleased to be able to return his gesture. “I popped into Nan's study just now and ran this off on her computer.” She handed Jin a large photographic print of Seng.

“Where on earth did you get this?”

Sheepishly, she said, “I took it on my phone...the day you brought him to meet me at the shop.”

“You did?” Jin said with surprise, and immediately recalled how skilled Gladys was at capturing unsuspecting subjects. He could see

at the edge of the frame his own shoulder, half turned away from the camera. He began to focus all his attention on his old friend's features and saw that he was wearing a forgotten expression on his face. Seng was staring at Jin intently. He himself must have been momentarily distracted, Jin imagined. The look was an old man's version of a boyish face fifty-five years before.

"He must have been very fond of you," Gladys said, nodding at the photograph.

He gazed at it for a long time. He felt a small smile touch the corners of his lips.

"Are you okay?" Gladys asked.

"I'm truly grateful to you for this," he told her.

She squeezed his arm, and for the second time that day kissed his cheek tenderly.

"Come inside now," she told him, maintaining a graceful smile.

"The speeches are about to start and I don't want you to miss a minute."

"No," he agreed, intoxicated with happiness. "I mustn't miss a thing."

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The Brigadier's Daughter is a work of fiction, and any factual errors in this book are mine alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Callan is the author of two previous novels: *The Dulang Washer* (2011) and *Shadows Beneath the Fronds* (2013). After many years in business, he turned to writing historical fiction of Southeast Asia. He now divides his time between Kuala Lumpur and London, and is currently writing his fourth novel.



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Jin, a sensitive kampong boy with an artistic bent, is often found sketching hornbills in the jungle. Stephanie is the Eurasian daughter of an uncompromising brigadier, born into a world of racial and economic privilege. Their torrid affair, set in pre-merger Malaya, must be kept hidden at all costs. But the fragile relationship between these star-crossed lovers is threatened by a single secret—and a moment of thoughtlessness that will echo for decades.

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