

“Fascinating.”

—Prof Rajeev Patke, Director, Division of Humanities, Yale-NUS College

# IMPRACTICAL

## *Uses of Cake*



YEOH JO-ANN

“This splendid debut novel is so charming, so whimsical, that its incisiveness sneaks up on you, slowly, gradually, until at last you look up from the last page, dazed, marvelling at how exactly Yeoh pulled it off. *Impractical Uses of Cake* is a wise and wondrous book.”

**KIRSTIN CHEN**

author of *Bury What We Cannot Take*

“A fascinating novel, written with economy, sophistication and wry humour. The porous nature of the boundary between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ is explored with sensitivity, along with a neat balance between the mundanely ordinary and the seemingly nonconformist. Yeoh Jo-Ann exhibits emotional depth in telling her story with tact and nuance.”

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“Yeoh Jo-Ann exposes the cracks in Singapore’s gleaming facade with wit and compassion. An impressive debut.”

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Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of *State of Emergency*

# IMPRACTICAL *Uses of Cake*



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## YEOH JO-ANN



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*For my parents, for putting up with all the noise*

*A man and a woman are in a supermarket. They do not speak, except to announce items on their shared shopping list.*

*“Eggs, check.”*

*“Cereal.” The box lands with a thud in the trolley.*

*“Pears.”*

*There are fifteen items on their list.*

*The woman is dead. She died today. The man knows this but isn't sure how he feels about it. Why should things be different now? But they must be.*

*They finish their shopping and he drives them home. It's his home, really, but he has grown used to sharing it with her. Sharing his books, his bathroom, his kitchen, his television (which she doesn't ever watch, but he would be fine if she did), his six-seater dining table and three-seater sofa. One of the pillows on his bed smells of her, combined with his shampoo. He hopes she won't leave, now that she's dead. Her death has put a ring of anxiety somewhere between his chest and belly.*

*They go to bed and he holds her, wondering what he wants from all of this. It cannot be reasonable to want anything, and he is a reasonable man.*

*She lets him hold her, wondering what he wants from all of this. It cannot be reasonable to want anything, and he is a reasonable man.*

THE DAWN SKY is full of pinkish clouds, but Sukhin goes out anyway. None of the other early-morning runners are about, not even the nutter from the condo down the road. He feels a little smug. *Hah. Afraid of a little water.* The smugness makes the next couple of kilometres much more bearable than usual, and a little while later he is halfway through—finally. As the air around him thickens with the smell of a thunderstorm brewing, he strains to run a little faster, willing himself to take longer, quicker steps.

Sukhin hates running. It bores him. It makes him feel stupid, all this ridiculous gasping and heaving, this inelegant, unimaginative pavement-pounding that he practises every morning to get from his flat to...his flat. Zero displacement—how ridiculous. But he is sticking to it. It's cheap, it's convenient, and he needs the exercise.

“Unfit people just aren't productive,” he heard Ken tell the new coordinator a few months ago. “They tire easily—there's just no stamina. It's not even a question of being willing or unwilling to work.” They were in the staff pantry and Ken was looking right at him—clearly, he meant that Sukhin was unproductive, tired easily and had no stamina, and, just as clearly, he wanted him to know this.

There was a time when Sukhin would have said something cutting, when he would have refused to exercise on some prideful principle, not wanting

to prove Ken had any sort of point. But denial took more energy now than it did when he was younger, and he found himself looking closely at his growing paunch in the mirror, checking his energy levels throughout the day, comparing his stride to Ken's and Tat Meng's and Dennis', and, after exactly a week, coming to the decision that exercise would have to be dealt with.

This morning, as the rain courses down in streams, drenching him all the way to his insoles, he wonders if he should have joined a gym instead.

The trouble with gyms, though: the people who go to them.

Years ago, Sukhin went to a gym. The people maddened him. Men in front of wall-to-wall mirrors, trying to isolate obscure back muscles. Women in perky ponytails, checking themselves out in the same mirror, gushing about how much their thighs hurt after class. And bright Lycra, everywhere he looked. Why would anyone dress in bright Lycra to engage in repetitive actions with other bright-Lycra-clad people, usually while being falsely cheered on by a gym-appointed bright-Lycra-clad chieftain, whose employment depends solely on people being unable to motivate themselves without being shouted at while dressed in bright Lycra?

This was all lost on Dennis, who had dragged him there, who only rolled his eyes, saying: “Sweetie, relax. You sound crazy. Worse—you sound angry. With Lycra.” And off he bounded to spin class, whatever that was. Sukhin went home.

So no. No gyms. No bright Lycra.

Sodden, Sukhin reaches his apartment building. He can hardly see—his glasses are misted up, the rain is in his eyes—and it takes him five tries to punch in the correct code at the gate. He feels like shouting but doesn't. Instead, he takes comfort in stomping across the lobby and jabbing repeatedly at the Up button, even after the lift doors open.

“Zero displacement,” he growls, once the doors close and the motor starts to whirl. “Zero displacement.” There's a metaphor in this somewhere, he feels—he just hasn't pieced it together.

“See? #04-03 talks to himself.” The night guard gestures at the CCTV monitor marked Lift A. The morning guard has just clocked in.

“Mr Dhillon? Teacher lah.” The morning man is older and used to be on duty in the CBD, where he saw all sorts of crazy types and stored them as anecdotes for friends and family. “Lawyers, teachers, all the same. All talk a lot, all crazy. Have I told you about the one who took off all his clothes and threw them into traffic?”

The digital wall clock in the security booth beeps twice. It is six o'clock.



It takes Sukhin exactly thirty-seven minutes to shower, dress and cycle to the junior college where he works. He is exceedingly proud of this. Every two months, he uses the stopwatch app on his phone to make sure he's keeping the proper time.

Two minutes to chain his bicycle to the gardening shed and walk to the canteen. His morning *teh si gao kosong* is always ready—he keeps a tab with Mrs Chan, and she makes his tea just before he arrives at 6.45. Four minutes from the canteen to his office, one minute to start his computer, ten long, beautiful minutes for his cup of tea. Then he gathers his books and notes and heads down to the courtyard for morning assembly. He takes the back stairs to avoid meeting any of his colleagues. Sukhin likes to keep his mornings his own for as long as possible.

Today, he finds Dennis waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. Sukhin grimaces.

“God, you're hot when you're angry.”

He wishes he had a clever retort, but he's never ready for Dennis. “Just tell me what you want.”

“Cover for me—I've got 2SO2B for first period, but I need to run out and do something very quickly.” Seeing Sukhin frown, he repeats, “Very quickly.”

“I might have a class for first period, Dennis.”

“You don't. Thursdays you have the first two periods free.”

“Ah. How convenient.” Sukhin realises—as usual, too late—that Dennis hasn't even factored in his option to refuse. While he fishes for something snide to say, Dennis dashes off, waving, mouthing: *Love you*.

Also as usual, Sukhin feels equal parts affronted and impressed by Dennis' thickskinnery—a word that, in Sukhin's head, exists just for Dennis. Sukhin would never, ever run off and leave someone else in charge of his class. But of course he will cover for Dennis—it's easier than getting him out of trouble afterwards.

The walk to the Science block feels a little odd—he never has cause to be there, and the last time he moved through this part of the school was back when he was still a student here himself, lost on his way to a talk at LT6, the small, damp-smelling lecture room that was killed a few years ago and resurrected as the art studio. After ten minutes of increasingly frantic searching, he finally finds 2SO2B.

Expecting—some of them even having prepared for—their Thursday morning Further Maths tutorial with Mr Yeong, the students are baffled at Sukhin's entry. He rather enjoys this. He hands a stack of photocopied poems to the nearest student and tells her to pass it around.

“Mr Yeong has gone to see a doctor,” he tells the kids, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. “Today, we're going to do what's called practical criticism—something neither practical nor really critical, but rather fun to do if you like to show off.”

He starts by reading out an old favourite by Philip Larkin, his face straight and serious, his voice dry and pedantic. It's the poem he uses for the first lesson in poetry with every new class he takes on, but he still enjoys the rush of dropping that first line, that rueful “They fuck you up..” cutting through the classroom, cutting out all the chatter. And just like his did when he was seventeen, as Mr Brooke's booming *fuck you up* sliced through the tepid afternoon air, their eyes light up with something like glee and they lean a little closer towards him. Ah, the power of the four-letter word in the

Singaporean classroom. For the rest of the lesson, Sukhin coaxes as many awkward responses as he can from the class, marvelling at their sheer pep and how it makes up for the lack of instinct and sensitivity. He dishes out the usual prac crit prompts: “Why ‘fucked up’, guys? Why not just ‘ruined’? Or ‘miseducated’? Read the last stanza out loud—what does that sound like?”

It ends up being his favourite lesson of the day—fresh blood is always sweeter, he tells the new teachers. They always laugh—but these days he’s a little suspicious of the laughter, now that Mr Narayan has retired and Sukhin has taken over as head of the English department.

“Call me Ramesh,” the illustrious Mr Narayan said to Sukhin on his first day, nearly eight years ago.

Sukhin tried. But he couldn’t do it; he couldn’t casually say something like “Ramesh and I are thinking of making Beckett part of the required reading this year” without feeling like an asshole or an iconoclast. So Sukhin went on calling Mr Narayan Mr Narayan, just as he had done when he had been fresh blood in the man’s classroom. He knew the other teachers always laughed at *that*.



“Mr Dhillon is so handsome...those eyebrows!”

“He’s okay lah—nice face, but everything’s a bit too...pointy. Do you think he and Mr Yeong are dating?”

“Oh my god, really?”

“I’m *asking* you. Jesus.”



In the canteen, it is the usual lunchtime frenzy. Waving away impatient orders for coffee and sandwiches from a group of students—“Wait lah! Or you come back later!”—Mrs Chan is looking out anxiously for her favourite,

her Mr Dhillon. It is 1.15—he should be here already. His lovingly prepared sandwiches are all wrapped up, and his extra-large cup of teh si gao kosong is ready. She checks the clock again—another two minutes and she’ll make him a new cuppa. No extra charge—there’s no way she’d let him suffer lukewarm tea.

Ah, he’s here. She fusses over him as much as she dares, telling him that he must “drink more water, sleep more, cannot work so hard”, pressing him to accept a free banana.

Hers is an irrational devotion—she knows that Mr Dhillon has never done anything to warrant any of it, but she can’t help wanting to make this grim, tired man a little less grim and tired.

Today, she forces him to take a banana *and* a curry puff—poor thing looks more tired than usual, and is he getting thinner? Must be working late. Probably not sleeping well. She sighs as he walks off, laden with carbs and tea. *Aiyoh, Mr Dhillon, must quickly get married.*

Marriage, if it had entered the mind of the irate Mr Dhillon, would have very quickly made its exit. It is the hottest time of the day and Sukhin is at his grumpiest, his sense of charity dulled and tongue sharpened. Making his way through the loud, tireless horde, he tries very hard not to frown. Or shout. It will be the noise, surely, that will one day make it impossible for him to continue. A class of kids—fine. But the cacophony of a whole sea of them, with their easy, unfettered chatter and their stupid boundless *energy*—it makes him want to kick things. The tea sloshes around inside its tight-lidded paper cup, a little storm in his hand to match the one in his head. He eats a sandwich but doesn’t really taste it.

There is hardly anyone in the staff room—most of the other teachers are eating their lunch together in the adjoining pantry. When he first arrived, Sukhin had felt obliged to join them. And so he endured the small talk, the whingeing and the occasional unwanted confidences, and then one day, just as he’d unwrapped his sandwich, someone said, “Hey Sukhin, it’s been a year! Happy anniversary!” The horror—he’d spent a whole year essentially paying court to these people, most of whom he didn’t have anything



in common with, all of who he suspected thought him unreasonably quiet and strange even when he was trying his best to be pleasant and good and sociable. The next day, he ate his lunch at his desk while reading *Dune* and felt content for the first time since he'd joined the school. He never ventured near the pantry at lunchtime again.

And now, in the tiny, windowless office that used to be Mr Narayan's and is now Sukhin's, he eats his second sandwich.

The door opens and Ken walks in. No knock, no hello, just: "Saw you with 2SO2B when they were supposed to be having F Maths. What was that about? Where was Dennis?" Ken is speaking in his interrogator voice—pitched low, slightly gruff—the same one he uses to grill the boys on misplaced balls and bats, the one he always uses when he wants to convey that what he's talking about is a Big Deal.

"Hey. I'm busy, actually." Sukhin's computer screen is off; he's reading Stephen King's *Christine*. He hopes he sounds rude.

"Hmm." Ken doesn't budge from the doorway. "So you took his class, right? Don't think that's allowed."

Sukhin goes back to reading. "Okay. Thanks."

"I won't tell anyone."

"Yup. Okay."

"You owe me. You and Dennis."

Sukhin refuses to look up from his book. He starts counting backwards from twenty in his head. At the count of twelve, he hears the door shut.

Ken is head of PE—in Sukhin's mind, head of nothing. He joined the staff just two years ago, and from the very start they detested each other. Sukhin can't remember how it began, possibly something to do with a misquotation—but it ended with Ken saying he would never allow his children (he has two) to take "a nonsense subject like English Lit" and Sukhin saying he couldn't imagine anyone taking serious academic advice from a PE teacher. And from then on, regular volleys of barbs and darts flung both ways.

Sukhin believes he could cheerfully watch Ken drown. Ken isn't just

Other People—Ken is Vermin. Ken must be removed or destroyed...when Sukhin has the energy.

Ken's name isn't even Ken. It's Kheng Joo.

Ken had Lasik surgery done last year.

Sukhin squirrels away scraps like these whenever he finds them. One day there will be a war, and he will win it with one (or all?) of these seemingly insignificant details.

Ken is allergic to penicillin. And macadamias.



"Who's the cake for?"

"The diligent, dapper Mr Dhillon." Dennis is arranging candles in concentric circles on a cream-engulfed monstrosity.

"Did you make it?"

"No lah—Advocakes and Solicitarts. Their yuzu coconut cream is the best."

A gasp, exactly as Dennis intended. "But they only accept orders three months in advance!"

Dennis smirks. "My sister knows the owner—they used to work at the same firm. So I managed to order this three weeks ago."

"They deliver?"

"I wish. A bakery like that doesn't have to bother with delivery. I picked it up first thing this morning—it's been sitting in the pantry fridge all day. I've had to watch it like a *hawk*."

"This morning? Didn't you have class?"

Dennis laughs. "Made Sukhin take it."

The candle arrangement goes on and on.

"Wow, that's a lot of candles."

"The man is older than he looks. Ageing very gracefully, in spite of all the frowning." He steps back to survey his handiwork, then resumes the task. "Almost done—go gather people. We're ambushing him in his office."



Sukhin is sleeping. This isn't intentional—his last class of the day is done and if he hadn't rested his head on his desk for a moment just before packing up, he would already be cycling home. He is dreaming—he is walking in a field of giant saguaro cacti, all identical, all with thorny arms raised skywards.

“Happy birthday, Sukhin!” says the nearest cactus.

*What the fuck.*

“Sukhin! Sukhin!”

He springs upward and awake. There are about twenty faces looking down at him. Feeling violated, he glares back at them. Dennis sets the biggest cake he has ever shared a space with on his desk. Sukhin is horrified—this is for *him*, he realises. The cactus was right. It really is his birthday. God, so many candles.

“Happy birthday! Did you think we'd forget?” And then, seeing Sukhin's odd expression, Dennis realises that it is he who has forgot. *Nuts. His own birthday.*

A pause. Everyone eyes Sukhin. Sukhin eyes the cake. Dennis congratulates himself again on the choice of yuzu coconut cream.

And then a tuneless warble, rather heroically led by Dennis: “Happy birthday, dear Sukhin, haaaaaaappy...” Sukhin feels like crying, or throwing up. *I'm thirty-five and this is my life.* And then, the next instant: *Oh god, I'm thirty-five and I'm about to have a mid-life crisis. How cliché. How sad.* All he wants to do now is get as far away as possible from these smiling faces, this stupid song, this ridiculous cake. When the singing finally stops, Sukhin forces himself to smile, thank everyone, then cut up the monster into little bits so that everyone can stuff their faces while seeming not to eat very much. He even pretends to eat a slice. Anything to have them think he's pleased, anything to have them get the fuck out of his office as soon as possible.

*Sometime during the night, the woman awakens. She finds herself on her side, facing the wall. Behind her, he's breathing softly in the way she has learnt to recognise as a sign he is sleeping deeply. Carefully, she turns over. He is turned towards her, but his face is half-buried in his pillow, under which both his hands are tucked. His knees are raised towards his chest, making it all look like an elaborate yoga pose.*

*The woman slips her hand under the man's pillow and onto one of his hands. How warm this feels, nestling between his skin and the weight of the pillow. He stirs slightly.*

*In the morning, he will remember this weight on his hand, the sudden cold of hers.*

*In the morning, if he asks, she will deny everything.*

## ||

THE FORTUNE COOKIE reads, “Be sincere with all you meet. For the charming social networking.”

Sukhin pops the cookie fragments into his mouth. What awful advice—even if he were the kind of man who’d take ungrammatical advice from a cookie. Be sincere? With all you meet? How...unsound. Charming people lie—how else are they charming? And people expect to be lied to, and they’ll lie to themselves, believing they believe in honesty and all that crap about just being yourself. What if being yourself meant not liking other people being themselves? Sukhin could think of a whole lot of people who could be improved by being other people. If only everyone had a reset button—though that would mean having to wear some sort of security vest all the time so that people couldn’t just reach out and reset you because you said something mean about their hair or something.

Had he been mean about Vera’s hair?

His thoughts wander back to the afternoon. He was getting a glass of water in the staff pantry. Dennis was there talking about something—what was it? Some new gym routine he was trying out. Something like that. Vera, the new geography teacher, the transfer from Methodist Girls’ School, bounded into the pantry and said hello. As she approached, Sukhin noticed how tall she was—nearly as tall as Dennis, who was only a little taller than Sukhin. Which made her, very possibly, his own height.

“You’ve done something to your hair.” Trust Dennis to notice this.

“Yes! I decided to go shorter. What do you think?” She patted her hair and grinned.

“Very nice, very nice. Makes your neck look longer.” Where did Dennis get all this from?

She turned to Sukhin. “And what do you think?”

He stared hard at her hair, searching for something to say about it. It wasn’t very interesting, just hair. At last, he noticed something worth pointing out. “Is it meant to be lopsided?”

“Lopsided?”

“It’s longer on the left side. Just a bit—about a centimetre here.” He gestured at her left ear.

She tugged at the section. “Really? I don’t think so.”

“It is. Dennis, look. Isn’t this bit longer than this bit?” He added: “Should be easily fixed. I’m sure you could do it yourself.”

“It’s not lopsided!” She turned a little red.

He wasn’t going to argue—he hadn’t planned on having a conversation with her about her hair; she had forced it on him. He was happy to let her win this. “Hmmm. Okay. Maybe your left ear’s higher than your right ear? That would explain it.” He was rather pleased with the reasoning. It was perfectly logical, and most people didn’t have symmetrical heads anyway.

Her eyes widened. “Now my ears are lopsided?”

“No, they’re not lopsided—lopsided describes unevenness on a single object,” Sukhin explained—rather patiently, he thought. How did people get these things confused? “So your hair is lopsided. A mouth could be lopsided—no, not yours. Ears are two separate objects. So your ears—I’d just say they aren’t level. Yes, I think that would be *best*.”

“That would be best?” She glared at him.

“The best way to describe them.” He tried to reassure her: “But yours look level, actually. So it’s your hair that’s lopsided—and that’s much easier to fix.”

At that point, she turned and walked away.

Dennis cackled. “You must find her attractive. Usually it takes more than a week for you to offend anyone new.”

No, he hadn’t been mean about her hair. He only pointed out that it was lopsided—not her fault, and not even a permanent state. If his haircut were lopsided, he would like someone to tell him. He would want to know. Why wouldn’t anyone? That woman was clearly far too attached to what she thought her hair should be. Delusions of symmetry. What a nut.

Sukhin makes himself a cup of tea, wondering if he does find Vera attractive.

The second fortune cookie reads, “Breathe deep and often.”

What rot. Who wrote these things? Manufactured Chinese exoticism for the simple American—and now the simple Singaporean. Dennis had seen them at a shop in Chinatown and bought Sukhin two giant packs of fifty. One hundred ridiculous cookies. (“Look, sweetie, you can read *and* eat! Your two favourite things in a convenient little cookie. You love me.”)

Vera isn’t his type. Far too tall. And far too unappreciative of symmetry.



At the old house, Sukhin arrives to find his mother in the kitchen stirring sugar into a pot of coffee. It is blacker than ink, completely opaque—if you can see the spoon, she’s told him since he was a child, then it’s not strong enough.

“Kopi?”

“It’s okay, Mum. I’ll make some tea.”

*It’s been years since I gave up coffee*, he wanted to say. Mum, I don’t drink coffee any more. He satisfies himself instead by creating a louder clatter than necessary as he fills the kettle and puts it on the stove, then reaches into a cupboard for the tea.

Usually, they sit in silence, needlessly stirring their drinks over and over again. But today she appears determined to have a conversation. She tells him about her morning, about the bargain she managed to pull off at the fishmonger’s, about the phone conversation with her sister. He says nothing, only half-listening, refusing to press her for more information. She stops and looks at him expectantly. He stares down into his mug.

“How was your day?”

Sukhin sighs. “It was okay. Exams in three weeks. The teachers are going nuts; the kids are going nuts. Of course, quite a few are pretending not to care.”

“Teachers or students?”

“Both.”

Sukhin watches as his mother removes all her rings and bracelets, puts them in a pile on the table, then puts them all on again. He has never asked her why she does this. He doesn’t ask now.

They sit in the kitchen because the living room is never used. It must have once been meant for lounging around, perhaps even entertaining guests—there’s a sofa somewhere, an armchair, a coffee table even.

But then the boxes took over. The largest squat in the corners and line the sides of the room, sentinels against marauders. Inside these boxes: more boxes, arranged neatly, to maximise space, and gently, so no box presses uncomfortably against another—no box, little or large, will stand for being squished. Other boxes in boxes have sidled up to these giants over the years; some perch rather audaciously on their smooth cardboard tops. In the centre of the room, the cool crowd lolls about on the former coffee table. These delinquents—hexagonal, pyramidal, heart-shaped, star-shaped, panda-shaped (just one, but one is enough)—won’t fit into other boxes and resist all attempts to put them into orderly piles, but they are the best loved.

After tea, Sukhin goes into the living room and squeezes himself into the narrow space between a pile of boxes and the delinquents’ pedestal. With a hand-held vacuum cleaner, he carefully removes the dust from every odd-shaped box. The panda is the hardest to do—so many awkward flaps—

but Sukhin hasn't done this for years for nothing. He's a pro, nudging every flap open with the vacuum cleaner's blade-like nozzle, then swiping left to right in quick, even strokes. He works meditatively; he forgets where he is, who he is, even what he's doing.

Some of the boxes have been around since Sukhin was a child—the box that the rice cooker came in, the one that held the family's first microwave oven and the Cadbury tin, once full of chocolate eggs, that Aunty Siew Peng gave them for Christmas when he was a boy and still liked sweets. One of the cardboard sentinels once protected the (at the time) state-of-the-art front-load washing machine that remained the apple of his mother's eye for years because it meant she didn't have to hand-wash all the clothes she'd had to protect from their previous washer, a pale violent monster whose sole purpose was to push Hooke's law to its outer limits. Elsewhere in the cuboidal sea: boxes that once were home to various electronics, crockery, lamps, toys and many other objects long dead and discarded.

Once he's finished with the delinquents, he moves on to one of the weekend's designated stacks, one that nearly reaches the ceiling. As always, Sukhin is efficient. He splits the stack into two, carrying the top section off and into the narrow pathway through the living room that the boxes have decided to allow the family. Then he sets to work on each demi-pile, cleaning, checking for damp and damage, until every box is cleared—and then they all go back into the stack to wait for their next round of TLC. Sukhin moves on to the next designated stack.

Not every box makes it here, to what could be called the Dhillon Family Retirement Home for Boxes—there is a stringent selection process.

To qualify, a box must fulfill at least one of the following requirements:

1. It is large enough to be useful should the family decide to move. "Large enough" is a completely arbitrary measurement, decided entirely by Sukhin's father, Dr Jaswant Dhillon. (The family has not moved houses in the last thirty years, but if they decide to, they would be very well equipped where boxes are concerned.)

2. It is a box that once contained:
  - a. What Sukhin's mother, Doris Dhillon, considers a "milestone" electronic.
  - b. A set of something or other—Doris believes that things that come in a set must always be transported in the box they came in, because it was designed for that very purpose.
  - c. A good memory—a vague, often exploited, category of box.
  - d. A "first" anything.
3. It is a Really Nice Box. For a box to be kept under this category, the entire family must be in alignment that it is indeed a Really Nice Box. (The panda was a point of contention in its day—Sukhin and his mother were keen on it, but his father thought it was too kitsch. Eventually, he was won over—with veto rights over the next Really Nice Box.)

Over the years, with very little success, the family has tried to edit their collection, trim it down, get rid of excess. Most attempts are spurred by the threat of some impending visit by relatives, but the last one was brought on by an attack of home-envy Doris experienced while looking through the pages of *Home and Decor* in the waiting room at the dentist's. Suddenly, she found herself dreaming of Scandinavian-chic interiors, all soft, poetic edges and stark walls. The family spent an unhappy weekend arguing over which boxes to keep, which to give to the karung guni man. In the end—exhausted, angry—they gave up and put all the boxes back in their old spots. Doris has not breathed on an interiors magazine since.

The old turntable, a relic from Doris' single-girl days as an undergrad in 1970s London, plays an even older Beatles record. Sukhin doesn't realise this, but under the calming influence of the family boxes, he is singing along to "Lovely Rita", a song he despises.

"Are you staying for dinner?"

Sukhin turns off the vacuum cleaner. "No, I've got to go to Chinatown. Need to buy decorations for the staff party."

It isn't the answer she wants, but she knows better than to try to ask again. "That's nice."

"No, Mum, it isn't. It's a pain." Sukhin moves, crab-like, out from among the boxes. He doesn't notice his mother's poorly concealed disappointment. "And it's stupid. No one enjoys the CNY party. Everyone just pretends—it's just a big show for the Tay. She likes to think we're all a big happy family."

"But it's not *unhappy*, right?" Doris wonders for the nth time why her clever, prickly son decided to be a teacher. Probably to irritate his father.

As if on cue, her husband's car pulls up outside. The automatic gate whirrs into action, and a few seconds later, the car is purring on the other side of the living room wall. A sudden quiet as the engine is shut off, and then Dr Jaswant Dhillon bursts into the house, talking rapidly, already in mid-paragraph as he removes his shoes and socks.

"...rubbish 'Punjabi' food—not even close, darling, we must never go. I tell you, that Ranjit couldn't tell proper Punjabi food from random curry house stuff. Spent too much time abroad—not even in England, where some of the Indian food is the real thing, but in Scotland. But of course he had to go to Edinburgh lah, couldn't get into Cambridge."

Sukhin's father is a big man, taller than Sukhin, towering over his petite wife. His voice is even bigger—rich and strident, with all the drama of the old-time storytellers. In another age, he would have been one of them, the men who went from village to village telling stories of Hang Tuah, Hang Jebat, Badang and the rest of the old Malay heroes.

Now he holds up a small plain cardboard box like it's a jewel. "Anyway, the rose barfi was decent enough—not too sweet, so I got you some. Don't eat all of it at once, yah? And keep it away from me!" A loud laugh as he presses the box into her hands. "You know what happened when Meera Auntie's daughter—Rina? Rani? Rathi? Something starting with R, what is it?—got married and she made us take home all that jelebi." Another loud, happy laugh, accompanied by a dramatic gesture, a cross between it-was-this-big and the standard both-arms-waving. "Two days and it was gone!

Gone! For weeks I couldn't look patients in the eye when I told them to please, for your own good, cut down on the sugar."

"Hey, Pa."

"Sukhin!" His son's presence is unexpected and Jaswant needs time to warm up. He stalls by offering nuggets of affirmation: "Ah, you're looking well. Doing a good job at school, I'm sure. Hard to be a teacher these days, children so different from what they used to be."

*The same combination of personalised nothing each time.* Sukhin has often wondered if all doctors needed to master this technique, if this is, at root, the foundation of a good bedside manner. *God, my father is a fortune cookie.*

Sukhin only half-listens as his father talks on, saying something about seeing an article somewhere about English Literature being taught in schools "with outdated books, from centuries ago, that have nothing to do with our way of life now".

Five years ago, even two, that would have been enough to send Sukhin into a rage. He might have jumped on his father, even knowing that he had only brought up the article as a matter of interest and not as provocation. He might have raised his voice; he might have roused himself into a sneering, growling thing.

But now Sukhin only manages a tired shrug. He picks up the bag he left on the shoe rack earlier. "I'll see you guys soon. If I don't head to Chinatown now, all the shops will be closed." He pauses. "Should I buy any cookies or whatever for Ah Mah?"

"Your grandmother doesn't need any more encouragement—your Auntie Lillian is already killing her with cake."

"Jas!" his mother shouts.

"It's true lah, darling, your sister really needs to stop all the baking and baking. Can't she get another hobby? It's a miracle Bobby doesn't have diabetes..."

Doris hisses. "How can you say things like that? So suay. Every year you eat so many of Lillian's pineapple tarts, so don't pretend..."

Sukhin slips out the door and out the gate, which he opens by flicking a switch next to the front door. The automatic gate used to annoy him because it deprived him of a step in his routine—the flick of the switch didn't have the finality of the heavy, clanging latch of the old gate. But these days, the soft whirring, followed by the click, of the new gate has come to suit him, now that his exits have, over the years, lost their drama. The boy Sukhin was a slammer of doors and gates, a shouter of rude things calculated to shock. The man Sukhin doesn't like noise.

As Sukhin gets into his car and drives off, his parents notice that he has left.

“Why does he do that?” says Doris, irritated. Absently, she has opened the box of rose barfi and is nibbling on a large piece. “He never says bye properly.”

Dr Jaswant reaches for one too. “He makes me worry, you know.” He adds quickly, knowing his wife's protective instinct will launch her into an argument with him faster than he can pacify her with sweets: “Yes, yes, he's a good boy, good job, seems to be fine. But something's missing.”

“Ah, don't start—if you're going to try the matchmaking again, he'll stop speaking to us. Remember what happened the last time.”

He does, and eats another piece of barfi to stifle a sigh. How do barfi-less parents cope?

*The day they met, the first time, they were enduring a chemistry lecture in the coldest lecture theatre in school. They were both late, and this meant having to sit all the way up front. She had the seat next to the aisle. He was two seats away, having left an empty place between them—exactly as unknown-persons protocol demanded.*

*He fell asleep. She didn't. When the lecture ended, she grabbed him firmly by the shoulder and shook him. He jumped, ran out and didn't look in her direction for the rest of the year.*

*For years after, she would recall the horror on his face and laugh.*

*For years after, he would drink copious amounts of coffee at lunchtime.*



BUYING THE CAR was a mistake. He doesn't drive to work, so he feels he must drive on weekends. Which means he must endure parking on weekends, a special circle of Hell designed for the local driver, that privileged class of Singaporean willing to part with more money than it takes to put a child through a lifetime of school for the pleasure of not putting up with public transport and its promise of other people.

But three years ago when Johan told him he was relocating the family to Brunei and offered him the car at fifty per cent off the market value, Sukhin had jumped at the chance and bought it. Which was so unlike him, he who never made any big (or small) purchases without careful research. He'd felt weak and stupid for weeks afterwards, but put it down to the fact that he'd been rereading *King Solomon's Mines* at the time and was therefore in a bit of a state, wondering if he'd ever feel compelled to follow a map into unknown deserts and jungles and mountain ranges. *Victorian adventure novels—always a bloody mistake.*

For the third time, he drives through Mosque Street, then Trengganu Street, eyes peeled for a parking spot. No luck—everyone and his brother are in Chinatown. And probably for the same reason that he is: to buy hyper-kitsch Chinese New Year décor and ridiculously expensive snacks that no shopkeeper would be able to shift from his shelves if it weren't for

the mixture of sentimentality and desperation that drives people to fritter away hard-earned cash on things they don't even want—everyone decorates to please everyone else, and stocks up on cookies, fried seaweed, peanut brittle and cashews to feed other people.

In the end, he finds a spot far from the chaos of Chinatown and has to walk fifteen minutes to reach the main street. By the time he gets there, all Sukhin wants to do is turn around, walk back to his car and drive home.

“Towkay!”

Sukhin sets his teeth. He hates being called “towkay”—sure, it's meant to be deferential, but it also means that anyone using it on him thinks he can be buttered up by being called boss. He waves the man off.

“Towkay! You looking for what?”

Sukhin looks at his feet and walks to the end of the street without stopping to look at anything. Feeling ridiculous, he turns and goes down the next street. Here, it's even more crowded. Appalling. Even though it's past five, the heat is thick enough to grill steaks on the pavement. The people make it worse, crowding around the shelves, squeezing past each other. Someone brushes against him. Sukhin stares at his forearm, at the streak of sweat the stranger has left on him, wanting to scream. He can already feel the beginnings of a Very Bad Headache.



The tall man is hardly making sense, but she nods anyway.

Ai Ling knows his type. Desperate, completely pliable. Everything fast fast fast, never mind the price. Her favourite kind of customer—much, much better than the little old ladies with plenty of time to kill, the ones who want to inspect every last item and bargain down everything to its cost price.

“What about pineapples? Do I need a gold pineapple? Is that still a thing?” He is babbling, looking down at a handwritten list. It is wrinkled and damp; the ink is already smudged.



“Ong lai,” she pronounces with a sweeping gesture towards the store ceiling, from which hang hundreds of pineapples of different sizes. Cardboard, plastic film, crepe paper, sequinned, glossy, covered in glitter—all he has to do is choose. “Which one you want?”

Her customer stands very still for a minute, blinking at the ceiling. Ai Ling realises she shouldn’t have bothered asking—you had to be very careful with his sort. They got scared easily—one wrong move and they’d give up, run off.

Smiling widely, she goes to a shelf and takes four large flat packs, each holding a folded-up pineapple. “Nice one. Okay?”

He nods, looking grateful. She picks out more things for him and piles them into his arms—strands and strands of plastic firecrackers, cardboard cutouts of the god of prosperity, two dozen carp made out of bright red felt, a three-metre golden banner proclaiming the arrival of the new year. Ai Ling wonders how far she can push him, then decides to take a risk—she lifts a large furry yellow lion from the middle of a display table and plants it right on top of the pile. He looks at it for a moment, confused, but says nothing.

“Okay! Can already!” Her work is done—any more and the man will crumple. She leads him to the cashier counter, where he pays for everything without protest, then leaves the store with three bulging plastic bags, bumping into everyone in his way.

If every customer were like this one, Ai Ling wouldn’t mind her job so much. She might ask for a bit more overtime pay today—Mrs Lee will be so pleased when she hears that the lion from two years ago has finally sold.



A light drizzle keeps Sukhin company as he trudges back to the car, cumbersome plastic bags swinging in every direction, and, inside them, plastic and cardboard in random motion—*not Brownian, that’s only for particles in suspension, or is it? Better ask Tat Meng.* He glares at the sky.

*Of course.* He stops and checks each bag he’s carrying to make sure it’s tied up tightly enough to withstand the rain—there is no way he’s coming back here, so these stupid, garish things *cannot* be ruined. And he’s forgot all about the snacks—well, too bad.

The rain gets heavier. Sukhin’s first instinct is to launch himself and his plastic charges forward in as much of a sprint as he can muster, but very soon this proves to be a poor decision—one of the bags breaks, and a heap of plastic firecrackers spills onto the pavement.

All he wants to do is throw himself onto the ground and howl, but that would just be wasting time. Grabbing the firecracker strands, he winds them around his neck, then picks up the two remaining bags and dashes into the nearest shelter. This is a multi-storey public car park, and as Sukhin waits out the rain, walking aimlessly around the first level, he finds himself mulling over how effectively soulless it is designed to be—no one would ever linger here longer than necessary. Like its fellows all over the country, it is floor-to-ceiling concrete, a hollow cuboid with punctures for air circulation that could never count as windows. No one growing up in Singapore could be faulted for not having the capacity for poetry, Sukhin thinks, feeling a sudden indignation on behalf of all the students he’s ever heard say, “I just don’t get it”—*the Romans took concrete and made the Pantheon; in Singapore, we just keep making more and more of these things.*

There is a lull in the rain and he decides to make a run for it.

He dashes out of the building and into the nearest alley, a long and darkish gap between the backs of two buildings he doesn’t quite recognise, but at least there’s shelter—the roof of one of the buildings extends across most of the gap, and only a sliver of light and rain passes through. He isn’t sure where this alley leads, but tells himself he will figure it out once he gets to the end. The bags bounce along, mocking him, depriving every step of its potential speed.

Near the middle of the alley, a pyramidal stack of boxes is piled high against the more sheltered wall, taking up most of the walkway. As he



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

YEOH JO-ANN doesn't eat vegetables, drinks far too much coffee and exercises far too little. Growing up, she dreamt of becoming a cat, or a rock star. Instead, she worked in publishing for eight years and ended up a features editor at SPH Magazines, then gave that up for a career in digital marketing. Her fiction has been anthologised in *We R Family*, *In Transit* and *Best New Singaporean Short Stories: Volume Three*. *Impractical Uses of Cake* is her first novel and the winning entry of the 2018 Epigram Books Fiction Prize. She still dreams of becoming a cat, but would gladly settle for some sort of bird or squirrel.



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“Yeoh Jo-Ann exposes the cracks in Singapore’s gleaming facade with wit and compassion. An impressive debut.”

—Jeremy Tiang, Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of *State of Emergency*

Sukhin is a thirty-five-year-old teacher who lives alone. His life consists of reading, working and visiting his parents’ house to rearrange the family’s piles of “collectibles”. He has only one friend, another teacher who has managed to force Sukhin into a friendship by sheer doggedness.



While on an errand one afternoon in Chinatown, he encounters a homeless person. They recognise each other. This chance reunion turns Sukhin’s well-ordered life upside down, and the pair learns about love and sacrifice over their shared fondness for cake.

FICTION

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