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O THIAM CHIN

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *NOW THAT IT'S OVER*

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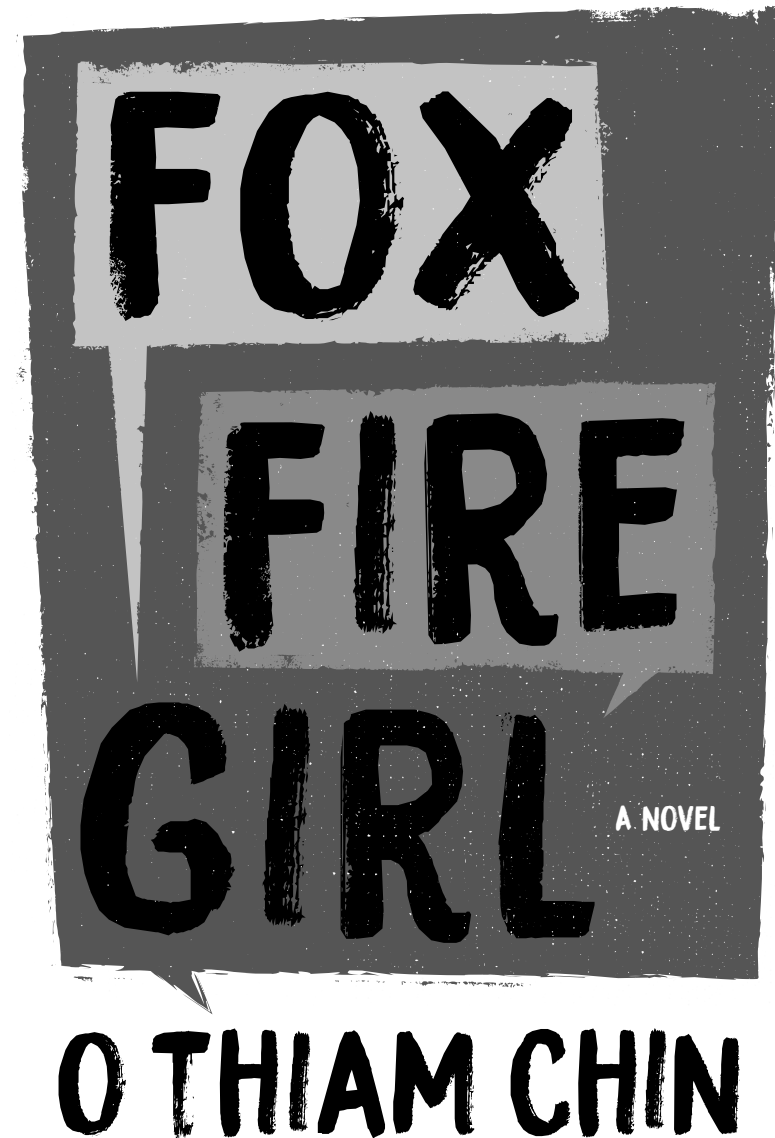
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FOR YVONNE LEE

FOX

BEFORE YIFAN CAME back into my life, and before I knew about her true identity, I had tried to take my life but failed. I had broken up with her six months before then, for reasons I could no longer remember clearly. After I saw her at the hospital that day, she suddenly waltzed back into my life, front and centre, as if nothing had changed since we parted.

We had dated for a few months, a haze of days. What had I remembered from that earlier, short-lived relationship? Not much, to be frank, except for the intense petty quarrels and the sex. And also the long pockets of silence we kept up till one of us eventually relented. There was only so much we could bear before something finally went south, turned bitter. But this was my side of the story, and we know there's always another side. Maybe even more than one.

The thing was, I liked Yifan a lot when I first knew her, and the attraction was mutual. But those initial feelings ran a short course and then expired. There wasn't enough in the relationship to sustain it, to keep it afloat, though we kept at it, pushing along dutifully like two shipwrecked survivors in a lifeboat heading nowhere. It was

futile, hopeless even. And so when the right time opened up—was there ever a right or good time for a break-up?—Yifan initiated the end, and I found myself going along with the decision, not really caring one way or another.

But that felt like a long time ago, a story taken from a different life.

Nothing seemed to have changed for Yifan when I bumped into her at the hospital. Small of frame with a round, severe face, she looked a few years younger than she actually was—twenty-four, twenty-five? She had called out to me then—her voice ringing out, pulling me towards her—and later put her hand on mine, smiling, all teeth, inscrutable. We chatted for some time—mostly she talked and I listened—and that afternoon was the start of something new between us.

Yet the past was never far away, sticking to us even when we began anew: a tiny seed falling from an old tree onto the same earth, blooming with new shoots and complicated roots. We brought our past into the present, like long shadows trailing us, and there was no way to escape this. What was Yifan's past? Where had she been in the six months we were apart; what had she been doing? I was curious, naturally, and part of my curiosity was motivated by my own guilt—was she still angry over the last break-up? Did she feel unjustly treated? Nothing in her current actions or behaviours told me otherwise, and yet something continued to eat at me. As if sensing my thoughts, Yifan chose to remain mum on this, as if the past did not matter to her any more, a thing to be discarded and forgotten entirely. Yet the past had its way of eluding us, to throw us off its scent, before it finally caught up.

What I remember most vividly: Yifan's unshakeable presence at the hospital, three months ago. I had just been discharged, a week after being admitted for my suicide attempt, still groggy from the meds and too much sleep, my mind cottony and half-gone; then there she was, a shard of light. Like I said, we chatted. And then, as if it were the most natural of things, the next step in the sequence of events, she came back to my flat and we had sex. I had not felt any sexual desire for some time, but when she led me by hand into my bedroom and onto my bed, I fell right into it unthinkingly. She steered me along, move by move, and it was as if nothing had changed since we last broke up, every act deeply familiar, every touch a memory pulled from our bones.

Nothing had prepared me for the renewed urgency of the desire that sprang out of nowhere from my own broken body after this fateful session. Whenever we made love, it would feel like I'd been given another chance to regain myself, to reach for something that had been lost to me. I leapt at every opportunity, and I was relieved to find Yifan returning my enthusiasm in her own ways. My recovery was slow and long-drawn—the cut was deep—but the sex we had was something I looked forward to, an absolution, a necessary part of my life. Though I never told Yifan of this need, I could sense she was aware of it, and was willing to accommodate it. But there was a catch. Yifan wanted something in return: for me to read her a story after we had sex.

I like stories, she told me. I like to hear them, and you're a writer; you have plenty of stories.

What was there to lose? I'd simply trade one thing for another, no complication, no questions.

She did not mind whether I read an old story or something I was working on at the time, and she wasn't particular about the type of story it was either. She would still give it her full attention. The tilt and angle of her head on my chest as she listened, her even breathing, the stillness of her body—what did she hear? How did my words enter her? As mere vibrations across her skin, perhaps, reaching her inner ear? Fully absorbed, Yifan fell still as an animal in hibernation. Sometimes I'd think she had fallen asleep, but in the next moment she would tilt her head upwards as if she had picked up some disturbance in the air.

Even after weeks of reading to her, I still did not know how she felt about any of my stories. Although she would shake her head, sigh or laugh at certain parts, she never offered a word or comment. Did she even like them? What was she looking for? In her still, quiet presence, I took my time with the stories, pausing to consider every new word or sentence, making minor adjustments as I proceeded. The story changed as I read it, taking a turn here, making a stop there, diverting into unknown paths away from its original design. It was a strange experience to see a story, fixed and autonomous on a page, living a different existence as the words left my tongue and left their mark in the ears of another. How many lives does one story lead—one in many, or perhaps many stories in a single, larger existence? What shapes did the story take in Yifan's mind—and what did she make of it?

Whatever the case, Yifan listened to the stories with her undivided attention, rapt and enthralled, like a child spellbound by a new magic trick. And the spell worked on us both: her with her immersion in the storytelling, and me with my need to keep her beside me. But no story was ever long enough to hold the spell through the night. I might cheat at the ending, prolonging the inevitable or stretching the outcomes, but sooner or later the words would run out. I dreaded this final moment, for it meant that Yifan would stir from her reverie, move away, put on her clothes and prepare to leave. I wouldn't be able to stop her, not even with a desperate offer to tell her another story.

One is enough, she would say, turning a kind gaze at me.

When Yifan first came into my life, I was still trying to sort it out—drinking too much, occasional party drugs, a long sterile period of not writing, and the return of depression. I could not recall much of what she had told me about her life except a few sketchy details: she was from Ipoh (“Some kampung at the outskirts of the state, you won't know where it is even if I tell you”) and had been working as a waitress in a seafood restaurant since she came to Singapore (“You take the orders, pass it along to the kitchen, and serve; it's not that hard, really, so what's not to like about it?”). I vaguely remembered sending her home once or twice—she lived in the same estate as me, somewhere in the eastern side of Ang Mo Kio—though if you were to ask me where exactly, I'd be hard-pressed to give you an answer. Still the mind turned up odd surprises now and then, dredging up old memories when I least expected it; a word

or turn of phrase from Yifan and a new plane of images, full and unbroken, would surface in my head. Yes, I still remembered that and no, it should be as it was.

Memories of her might have stayed hidden but irrevocable within me, but what parts of Yifan remained the same? And what changed all the time? Every time I looked at her, I had a sense of something constantly in flux, changing as the light fell on her at different hours, as if she were trying to work out the shape and intent of who she was. But did I know enough about her to form this impression? I had barely had a grip over my own thoughts.

Still, what little I remembered fed an insatiable need for more. I needed to know everything about her. And so I persisted, masking my compulsion with feigned, innocuous curiosity. Eventually I was able to form a clearer picture of Yifan's family and background. She was the youngest in a family of nine kids: six brothers, two sisters. Her parents had worked on a fruit plantation in Ipoh that grew pomelos and durians for nearly 40 years before retiring. As a child Yifan had helped out in the plantation along with four elder brothers, and whatever she earned went into her parents' pockets. She had come to Singapore to work because she wanted to get away from her family.

I turned these hard little kernels of facts into pieces I could use to put together an image of her in my head. I needed this full, unobscured image of Yifan to hold myself together, to know that I had not conjured her up in the well of my loneliness. Because if she existed, then I too existed. There had been days—lying on the bed

in the hospital, and waking up at the table after a night of writing—that I had felt like nothing more than a wisp of a figure; closer to death than life, the feeling so unbearable that I wished I had cut a bit deeper in my last attempt to erase myself. But I had survived—panicking enough when I saw the blood to make the emergency call—and now what was left was to take it a day at a time, moment by moment. Hardly an existence, but still.

Because we did not have any sort of arrangement, I could never tell when Yifan would appear at my doorstep. She would come over slightly past 11pm, after knocking off from work, and would stay till I finished telling her a story after we had sex. When she left—she had not spent a full night at my place so far—I would lie on the bed, trying to work out my thoughts as I recalled the smell of her body on my fingers. On most nights, she would bring over the leftovers from the restaurant where she worked—fried spring chicken or prawn rolls—and we would eat at the coffee table in the living room. If I wasn't hungry, she would put the food away in the fridge, and I'd microwave it for the next day's meals. She occasionally bought Tiger beer, which we took turns drinking straight from the bottle. I liked how the beer flushed Yifan's cheeks and neck, giving her a sharper, more beguiling allure; when I touched her in bed later, her skin would radiate a smooth, delicate heat. When we were done eating and drinking, Yifan would clear everything away, then take a quick shower. I didn't mind the greasy, smoky smell that clung to her after a day of work, but Yifan was too self-conscious about her personal hygiene to ignore it.

Once a week, she would come over to my flat with a bag filled with fruits, biscuits, canned sardines and luncheon meat, packs of instant ramen and Nescafé coffee, and cook a meal to share. I had taken over the flat after my parents passed away when I was in my late twenties; I was never close to them, unlike my elder brother, who took care of them when they fell to their respective illnesses, lung cancer and heart disease. Sometimes, Yifan would clean up the flat despite my protests. The only things she left untouched while cleaning were my books and papers, which were scattered all over the dining table and coffee table in the living room. She would occasionally pick up a sheaf of paper and give it a quick scan. Yifan had had to drop out of secondary school, though she didn't give any reason, and I'd wonder how much she understood from these cursory glances. In any case, I didn't make any attempt to hide my writings from her.

If I remembered anything about our lovemaking from our earlier relationship, it was all lost in these new sessions which were, by all measures, intense, fervid, consuming. It also didn't help that back then I was having sex with other women, something I took great effort to hide from her. Now that shred of my life seemed a long time ago, lived by someone I barely knew, and I felt very little remorse in discarding it. Yifan never brought up our previous relationship, and I knew enough to do the same. What was past was past, and we were starting anew.

In my idle moments, I imagined the sex we once had and tried to compare it to the present, even though the details were sketchy.

How much did the body remember over time—the odd angle of Yifan's arm, the curve of her back as she took me in? The past colliding with the present, churning the same actions into similar images, bleeding into one another—did she always throw her head back as she came? Had I always taken her nipple into my mouth like this, flicking the hardening tip with my tongue? Did I remember everything correctly?

The first few times we made love after reconnecting, the whole thing had felt procedural, a step-by-step sequence leading to a climax. We were gentle and careful to a fault, as if we were both scared of making the wrong move, of acting out of sync. Yifan led the way mostly, guiding our bodies through the different stages and positions. I felt her eyes on me, watching how I responded to her and making small calculations, minor adjustments. It would have been all too mechanical if not for the fleeting streaks of pleasure I saw sweeping across Yifan's face from time to time, the suppressed groans escaping her wet parted lips. I wanted to feel her intensity, her pleasure in what we were doing, and in some imperceptible ways I did: my skin flipped inside out, no longer a barrier, but a flimsy membrane through which everything seeped to fill me. I felt tethered to Yifan through her skin, by her breath. Somehow, I knew she had needed this too, for reasons of her own.

After we had sex I'd turn to the side table, pick up the story or book and begin to read. Our bodies still damp and musky, slowly losing their tension, Yifan would lean into my chest, breathing lightly on my skin. I had always liked this transition between our

lovemaking and the storytelling for its uncomplicated nature—the unambiguous moment when it crossed from one threshold to another. She needed a story, and I needed a listener. When I was done reading, there would be a skip of time where we would lie very still in bed, our bodies tangled up and our minds in separate spheres of thought, before Yifan got out of bed and put on her clothes, turning her back towards me. Before she left, Yifan would give me a kiss on the cheek and remind me about the leftovers in the fridge.

Once, I stepped outside after she left and leant against the railing along the corridor to have a smoke. I watched as she emerged from the void deck of my block and walked the path that cut across a dark field, dissolving into shadows under the dim yellow light of the streetlamps. She always seemed in a hurry to leave. I finished the cigarette and returned to the flat, killing all the lights save the one in the kitchen. There I made a pot of coffee and lit another Pall Mall, watching the pale fingers of smoke spiral and disappear into the air. After a while, I brought out my laptop from the study room and, while waiting for the kettle to whistle, opened the new story I had just read to Yifan and started revising it. The cup of Nescafé coffee I made later was left almost entirely untouched as I worked on the story, the air in the kitchen growing dense with cigarette smoke. When I was finished, I took a final sip of coffee and poured the rest into the sink.

That night, I was unable to sleep, my mind clogged with a swarm of thoughts. I went back into the kitchen, wet a rag and started

cleaning the stove, the kitchen table, the shelves. Afterwards I sat at the kitchen table and smoked, waiting for my body to signal its fatigue. A reel of images and words pinwheeled through my head, held together by its own logic. With all the windows shut, I listened to the flat's silence. A scene floated into my mind, unprompted: the phone in my bloodied hand, crackling with static, the overhead lights of the kitchen blazing. The sonorous voice of the operator ringing in my ears: *stay calm, is anyone with you now?* The blood that never seemed to stop, pouring from the dark slit in my wrist. The pain was there, momentarily, in the first insertion and the cut—and then it was gone, and all I could hear was a wave of silence: the black dogs had stopped their howling, their hunger appeased. How long they had hounded me—prancing and watching at the borders, waiting for my next move, anticipating my fall.

I closed my eyes and wiped the scene from my mind.

Yet the black dogs were still there; I could feel their presence, their shadows stretching over my life. How long could I hold up before they came for me again? Was madness a slow progression, or a sudden fall?

I had always suffered from these dark spells since I was a child—extended periods when my mind would spiral into free fall, and every thought I had was a thought that reached for some kind of oblivion, for the relief of death. They came to me, quietly and unannounced, and then they stayed. Days that I couldn't get out of bed, let alone eat or sleep, days that felt like the longest days ever, each second beating its own deadly knell. When I was 18, my parents

sent me to a doctor who sent me to a psychiatrist who dispatched me for two months to Woodbridge Hospital. I took all the pills, and I listened to all the advice: *go out, make more friends, get some sunlight, take up a sport, smile more*. I tried, I did everything I was told, and I had good days. My parents were pleased.

And then the dogs would appear again, snapping at my heels.

My father: *Why are you doing this to yourself? Why are you doing this to us?*

My mother: *Can't you try harder? You know you can overcome this if you want to. You only need to want it.*

My brother: *Don't be weak, you're a fucking man. Don't give in just like that.*

And so I tried. I kept the black dogs at bay, I left them cold and starving. I saw another psychiatrist, I took the new drugs. I met new people, new faces. I dated and I had sex and I felt positive. I learnt to write fiction, and the words became a weapon and a shield that I used to defend myself; the stories were maps to plot my escape. I built up an arsenal of words; I wrote story after story. The world grew inside me, now a fortress, now a city: I had my control, my authority, the light pouring in and flooding every corner. I felt good about myself for the first time in my life.

And then my parents died, one six months after the other.

Still I held up for a while, for four, five months. Then, without any warning, the dogs came back. The days stretched bleakly on in a long bated breath, a seam of time without end, unfurling inside me, feathers like razors, cutting.

What if I had died the last time—would it have mattered to anyone? I no longer stayed in touch with my older brother after my parents' deaths; we had our own lives and we lived with the decisions we made. I had enjoyed solitude from a young age and long grew used to being alone. I managed life on my own terms, living with very little, and expecting even less from other people. People are needy and demanding and they will never be able to help themselves, I often reminded myself. I did not feel the need to impose myself on others, and likewise, I refused to be burdened by others. I would die, and there would be no one to mourn for me, and it would not be a terrible thing.

But with Yifan I had doubts. I knew I had leant too heavily on her, and the gaping pit inside me was widening and deepening over time. When I was with her I felt the pangs of my own loneliness more intensely, and I was suddenly afraid of my urgent, desperate need, and where it would lead me eventually.

Yet for the first time in a very long while my days were filled not with fear or encroaching darkness, but with a small sense of wonder, even possibilities.

• • •

“Derrick, I’m not what you think I am,” Yifan said, after we had been seeing each other for four months. “I take different forms, different disguises, and this is just one of them.”

I turned to look at Yifan when she said this. With her head on my chest, and her words flitting across my skin, I thought, for a

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—SINGAPORE POETRY

Derrick can't believe his luck when he rekindles a romance with ex-girlfriend Yifan. But Yifan remains aloof and distant. She confides to Derrick that in her hometown of Ipoh, she discovered that she is actually a fox spirit with mystical powers.

But Derrick isn't the only person who has fallen under Yifan's spell. Unbeknownst to him, Tien Chen, a man with an unhealthy obsession with fire, has also been dating her. When Tien Chen eventually confronts Yifan about her infidelity, she tells him a story about her childhood in Ipoh to explain her actions. But is Yifan really the person she claims to be?

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