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If It Were Up to Mrs Dada

A NOVEL

“Intensely
moving
and deeply
perceptive.”

—Cheryl Julia Lee,
author of *We Were Always
Eating Expired Things*

CARISSA FOO



“A startling new take on a classic—
Carissa’s modern retelling of *Mrs Dalloway* is
both intensely moving and deeply perceptive.”
—Cheryl Julia Lee, author of
We Were Always Eating Expired Things

“This novel is a generous homage to place as
well as a tribute to the art of attention which
is capable of revealing a whole life in a single
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If It Were Up to
Mrs Dada

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For Sarah

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How happy I was if I could forget
To remember how sad I am
Would be an easy adversity
But the recollecting of Bloom

Keeps making November difficult
Till I who was almost bold
Lose my way like a little Child
And perish of the cold.

—Emily Dickinson

I

Mrs Dada said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lulu had her work cut out for her. The tables had to be set; the men from Neo Garden were coming. And then, thought Cheryl Dada, what a morning—

What a fucking hot morning. For so it had always seemed to her that clouds would gather when it was the hottest, that some draught would hover over the home, that the heavens would open. But now, sniffing the warm, sultry surroundings, she was sure there was no cool air to plunge into. “Doesn’t smell of rain,” Cheryl Dada said to herself, staring up at the sky. “No chance of rain today,” she said again. Sweat was dripping down her back. Cotton—or not? Cheryl Dada thought, rubbing her right palm against the baby blue pants that were sticking to her thighs. Probably not, though it certainly wasn’t chiffon either. Chiffon was the cream panel top she put on for today. Sleeveless and light, it was supposed to keep her cool. But it was not airy as advertised. “Fuck *AIRYSTOCRACY!*” Mrs Dada said, biting the words, as she remembered the slogan plastered on the window display—*FEEL HIGH AND LIGHT!* She should have guessed as much that airy meant nothing in this equatorial climate. With crossed arms and a strong neck, she stood on the porch, waiting for a breeze.

Mrs Dada did not see this coming: the heat; the cloudless sky; the air that was thick with haze. Her plan was to go to Ang Mo Kio Hub to buy an assortment of flowers but that would be too arduous now, especially in this heat, alone, without Lulu, who was busy laying the tablecloths. No, Mrs Dada had decided, she would not leave the sheltered porch—not under this searing sun, not over her dead body.

The weather forecast had said it would be cool. Cool, she thought, meant a walkable weather. But where was the breeze? Where was the cool? Today was anything but cool.

The weather report could have been “Thunderstorms expected tomorrow” or “Heavy showers in the morning”. The man on the television could have said it would snow; he could have said hail or typhoon or cyclone. He could have thrown out some weather jargon that nobody would understand. He could have said something curious, something extraordinary. But to say cool temperatures tomorrow... Cool temperatures! What the hell was that—in Singapore anyway? That was a weak lie, utterly thoughtless. It was the kind of lie not worth telling, not even worth exposing. If it were big enough, Cheryl Dada thought, if it were far-fetched enough, it would cease to be mere lie and become a front page story: *Thunder Strikes Boy Swimming in Bedok Reservoir. Snowfall in Singapore for the First Time. Avalanche on Bukit Timah Hill*. But no—Cheryl Dada was certain of this—no story was ever spun from cool temperatures. Well, not in Singapore.

Come to think of it, most stories begin with lies. Most lives could be lies, Mrs Dada thought, looking into the distant blue. Lies with truths far away, far far away, then one day they become the real thing. A lie told long enough has its own life. Kudos to those who buy the truth; but she would rather a big fat lie. A good lie, she meant to add. A big, fat and good lie (note: not the same as a white lie) is a story of its own—original and unfettered by moral rectitude, relieved of the obligation to truth.

The weatherman’s greatest fault was telling a half-hearted lie that bored its way to nowhere. That’s the worst kind of lie, Cheryl Dada thought. No wonder he’s reporting the weather.

Anything would have been better than this underwhelming fib about today being cool when they had announced during morning assembly that it was 34 degrees. “Damn it!” Cheryl Dada let out as she wiped the sweat off her forehead. She should have known better than to trust a man in spectacles and a suit. That’s the typical

conman’s dress code, she thought to herself. Remember when that curly-haired man locked her in the guest room? He was in a handsome checked shirt too, looking decent until he held her wrists and insisted she and he were lovers!

Mrs Dada had trusted the weatherman and she was feeling the effects of the blunder; her skin was reddened by indignation and injustice. The rising anger was saved by a split second of confusion: was she mad at him? Or at herself for believing—again? Why was she so gullible? History is wont to repeat itself, though never in exactly the same way. If all heroes must have a tragic flaw, Mrs Dada’s was that she was too trusting.

While people are generally suspicious about strangers, particularly the ones lurking gingerly outside the MRT stations with red files tucked under their arms, Mrs Dada would entertain the unfamiliar men who came up to her, young punks in suits with stiff, glossy hair who eventually left her as eager as they found her; the woman was insufferable, they thought, asking too many questions and wanting elaborate answers to every one of her questions: “What’s the difference between accident and hospitalisation plans?” “What’s the global fund all about?” “Why do insurance companies like the colour red?” Each answer, which they thought was enough to satiate the auntie, was merely an appetiser; it was a prelude to desultory conversations of corporate conspiracies, government policies—and if they were lucky, she’d digress to more conversational topics like the CPF Act and the Retirement Sum Scheme.

Mrs Dada had a listening ear that was enthusiastic even when nothing substantial was being said. Too often she devoured facts—be they half-facts, hearsay, headlines—and spun them into solid stories, carrying all of them in her heart as though they were her own. And once she was persuaded into one belief, she bit hard and found it impossible to let go. To this day she still could not believe that Lee Kuan Yew had died. The man was immortal to her—that was the first truth and nothing else could supersede it.

It was a dark, extremely dark day when the news broke. Cheryl

Dada was mostly kept in the isolation room that evening. She was so lost and listless that she picked up the paper that John Pitts had slipped under the door and wrote just below the words “Automatic Thought”: *Death*. “Alterative Thought”: *The dark age is here. Nobody is coming to save. Not the British or Japanese. Not the Singaporean*. In the column titled “Emotion or Feeling”, she scribbled offhandedly: *DÉJÀ VU*. She remembered struggling to write properly because her wrist was sore and there was no light.

Thinking back, the events of the day still seemed surreal to her. It was a lie—April Fool’s had come early. She was certain that whatever coffin they had prepared, the cavalcade of black cars, the lachrymose crowd on the TV were part of an elaborate hoax; the body lying in the Istana was not his. “NO!” Cheryl Dada screamed in the TV room, hurling curses at the CNA news reporter. “NO, IT CANNOT BE!” she exclaimed, and flung the remote control across the room when he first announced LKY’s death on primetime morning. She broke into a fit, her body shaking, madly convulsing as Daniel and the nurses rushed into the room and tried to hold her down. (Lulu still had the scars from the tears in her skin. Three curved marks on her left arm.) Cornered and pinned to the floor, she thought she was losing it; but anger turned her into a deaf beast, and since she could not hear them, she saw only the fluttering hands and mouths opening and closing as if they were fish gulping for air. All this pushed her over the edge. Cheryl laughed and laughed at them. She could not stop until she had been brought to the room and there was nothing to see and laugh at because the room was dark.

It was a traumatic day for Cheryl Dada and those who were around her. She who first believed that Harry—yes she called him Harry—was like Dracula and those pearly-skinned vampires who fed on blood for immortality could not believe otherwise. Harry had been there from Day One—what was the nation going to do without him?

The death of the Senior Minister, who had also been the first Prime Minister, the only Minister Mentor and once the Secretary-General

of the PAP, haunted Cheryl Dada. The following nights she started to have nightmares about exoduses and invasions. She dreamt that a tsunami hit Marine Parade and swallowed all of their reclaimed land; that Malaysia had cut their water supply and they had to collect rain water with jerrycans and drink water that was yellow like urine; that the angry swordfish were back with a vengeance and had mutated into a bionic species whose laser bills could destroy guns and rifles, much less tree trunks. For weeks she worried over the nation’s predicament and her own future, about what would happen to them. For without Harry, Singapore was a nation of lost sheep, bleating for this and that, horrified and hungry. The only leader they knew, he was and still is the father of the nation; the godhead.

They were a young nation—half a century old! Just children! Then again, her father had passed away when she was barely two and she survived. So it’ll be okay, Cheryl consoled herself, people will get over it; people always do. Forgetfulness is resilience in some sense. We will survive, and we have survived. Still, taking the first step into the second half of the century without Harry felt wrong to her. It was unthinkable, almost sacrilegious.

Poor Cheryl Dada was hounded by the guilt of the living. PM Lee II had declared a seven-day period of mourning for the nation to remember their founding father; Cheryl tried her best to not forget too. Every day she stared at the pictures in the newspapers, detailing his heavy eye bags, the slight creases of his forehead, the waxen skin, the tuft of hair—wispy and white like the feathers in her pillow—as if that would bring him back. Yet the more she stared, the more she cauterised his face from her memory. For a long time after, try as she might, she could only conjure the face of Bela Lugosi.

Cheryl Dada’s version of the nation continued to crumble in the aftermath of his death. So great was her horror, when she found out that lions were not native to Singapore, that she did not bawl but sat unnervingly quiet at the corner of the dinner table. “Maybe elephants,” someone yelled out; “Definitely not lions,” said another. But wasn’t the Merlion a caricature of the first lions that

had roamed the land? More important, if there were no lions, then what was the Merlion? What was that thing spitting water into the Singapore River?

The talk about lions transpired over dinner some weeks after LKY's passing when Ling Na distributed a tin of Merlion cookies for dessert. It looked funny: the shape was rectangular and it was a frontal view of the Merlion's head. Strange to not see the Merlion from its side. Strange to see only its feline head. Cheryl complained that it did not look like the Merlion; the others insisted that the Merlion could be that—it could look like anything.

The chattering went on; each woman fighting to have her voice heard. "The real Merlion nobody see before, okay—" began Loudspeaker Leow, but could not finish; her mouth was full of cookies. Felicia Phua, the youngest at the table, pasty-faced, murmured something about Asian lions. Someone—her face was blocked by Mrs Rohan—was throwing out questions: "How you know?" "Who say?" "You see before meh?" But it was Siew Eng who was winning because she had a geographical mind: "Singapore is an island surrounded by water leh, a fishing village; we are super coastal. How did the lions come here—swim ah?" Cheryl Dada would have gladly conceded to that point, but Judy Chua had to add, "Wah lau mai siao lah. Merlion where got real? Yeong tao nao sio lah. Don't be stupid, can?"; a fucking mean thing to say. Facts were facts, and Cheryl Dada accepted that. But calling her stupid was a personal attack. God, she hated that woman; she hated her whooping voice.

Finally, Ling Na had to intervene. It was her fault, no doubt; she was the one who had brought the Merlion cookies. Like a judge with her gavel, she banged the tin on the table and there was order. "The Merlion is a story," she began. "Singapore, like many other countries, whether big or small, needs a story," she continued, blabbering on about Qin Shi Huang and the terracotta army, Hou Yi and Chang Er, Yue Lao and his red strings and how Sun Wu Kong conquered the West. Some of the stories were mythologies, some about the art of war, others were romances. The story was whatever the people needed.

The faces at the table brightened up, as if they had been enlightened. "Yah hor! No wonder!" The voices started again and boomed through the dining hall.

The women chomped on the sugar-free cookies. Cheryl Dada sat silent at the end of the table, her mind still ruminating on the point of stories. She sort of understood: the Merlion was like China's Green Dragon. It was also the Centaur, the Minotaur, Medusa.

Still, the truth about the Merlion did not sit well with her. She could not be persuaded by Ling Na's Chinese references. In her heart she fought the explanations. For Cheryl Dada, trusting as she was, had long chosen the first tale. For although she believed easily, she only believed once. History could not be wrong; the origin of the nation was irrefutable. Sang Nila Utama beheld the chimera; Singapura was a Malay fishing village. It was Malaya, not Malaysia.

The Merlion must have been a species of its own, she concluded. It had to exist, if not what was Singapore? If there were no Singapore, was she still Cheryl? The Merlion had to exist; it had to be real. And Cheryl Dada believed it was real. The certainty of her thought pleased her; but the smile departed as soon as she remembered that she was supposed to get the flowers.

There was no breeze; no cool temperature.

"Not a cloud in the sky got the fucking sun in my eye," Cheryl Dada hummed to herself, squinting against the light that filled the creases on her face. "Argh! This fucking sun! Why is it so fucking hot?" she groaned, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the cruel glare of the sun.

The hard consonant struck her ear. So what? Mrs Dada reflected silently, tugging at her chiffon top, fanning herself. So what if she used a couple of bad words here and there? As if people in the neighbourhood were saints. No one was squeaky clean here—for example, Siew Eng on the third floor of block A threw her cigarette butts, sometimes still lighted, out of the window. Evidence of her misdemeanour was found in the flowerbeds, the lettuce patch, the herb garden, everywhere except the bin.

Like in most homes, there were a lot of pent-up frustrations and wandering emotions that surfaced every now and then. They found their way into an elbow shove, a sudden push, an uncaused fight, a false accusation, a fire alarm going off. (That did actually happen when one resident attempted to suffocate herself to death by locking herself in a room while burning a basket of letters.) It was one reason why the doctors and social workers insisted on incorporating art therapy into the residents' schedules, citing to Management studies that showed it would help to channel negativity into canvases and slow down the onset of mental diseases. Their selling point was that the big private homes like St Luke's and Red River Valley used such therapy and therefore they should too; Management agreed. The residents were mostly happy about having an extra option of activity to choose from. However, Cheryl was sceptical about art classes, unconvinced that emotional expression could be taught and curated into square blocks of scribblings and ugly splashes of colours. For a moment or two she thought about Choon Eng's purple sea that was hanging, on a nail, on the main wall of the lobby.

What was Choon Eng thinking about when she painted that? Cheryl wondered meditatively, remembering the droopy eyelids that veiled the woman's pretty black eyes. They were eyes that reflected the weariness of one whose brightness had been robbed by youthful afflictions, eyes that saw the world as regal and peace-loving despite what they've had to see.

Choon Eng's sea was iridescent purple. Perhaps it was the cataracts that had turned the reds muddy. Perhaps she had imagined a version of the red sea—she used to be religious and wore an ostentatious gold crucifix around her neck. Or perhaps it was the sea that had asked to be painted. The waves were accentuated with spikes to show that the waters were ever moving; the outline was made bold in a red shade of purple, almost maroon, as if the sea were impenetrable. Over and over the paintbrush swept across the surface of the canvas producing a thick and uneven patch of sky with melding hues of purple and pink. Because Cheryl had inspected the painting countless times,

she could roughly separate the purple sky from the purple sea. But it seemed to her that ambivalence was good and the division was unnecessary. Purple is as red as pink to the dead anyway.

Whether art therapy was advantageous to the old folks was disputable. What was supposedly really helpful were the geropsychologists: John Pitts and Barbara Smart. They were the expats with professional expertise hired to increase the quality of residential life. But they only came in thrice a week and knocked off exactly at five when they did. They were not available in the middle of the night, when help was most needed. Sometimes there would be wails in the wee hours of the night and then they would stop before one could identify the source; sometimes the sound of glass shattering woke the home and then it would cease as abruptly as it began. Those who were nosy and agile would hurry out of their rooms and find no commotion. The whole place was suddenly and serenely empty of noise. Not even the sound of people snoring. Rage was real but hushed. The home was hushed.

For better or worse, it was Judy Chua who would break the eerie silence of the night and the peace of the day. Hers was a high-pitched and grating voice that could cut through the wooden doors and pierce you in the temples, causing many to roll their eyes when she spoke. Judy Chua—they called her Chor Lor—lived on the ground floor of block A. It's A for Apricot, though some say it's A for Atas; yet Judy Chua was neither sweet nor uptown. She was, however, powerful—powerful enough to secure a prime room with a small private garden in the most expensive block. At 81 she had rank and years on her side. She could do no wrong, and she did no right. Her mouth was a terror—and it was not just the blatant spitting of phlegm on other people's shoes. Cursing was her way of talking: her punctuations, accents, exclamations. What angered Judy Chua the most was if someone looked her way and the eyes lingered. Even to a look of adoration, she would throw back a death stare and start cursing. “Kan ni na kua si mi?” Her mouth would widen as she spat the words: “Kua si mi lan chiao?” as if to devour completely the transgressor.

“That woman swears like a trooper,” said Cheryl Dada to herself, shaking her head at the thought that they lived in the same block. Even Judy Chua’s gestures were vulgar. Once she had grabbed a broom to hit at Jewel, who was trimming the grass patch outside her door, and did not stop until the nurses strapped her down. Chor Lor... Was that Teochew? Boy, did she earn her name.

The spiralling thoughts brought Cheryl Dada to the firm conclusion that she was not the worst of the lot. She might not be a saint but she was nowhere as uncouth and disrespectful as Judy Chua, and not nearly as inconsiderate as Chin Siew Eng. And even if she were as bad as people thought, at least she wasn’t the only one. People ought to remember that. Not all old people are the same, Cheryl thought to herself. The word left a nauseating residue in her mouth.

“Ou...ouh...” she shaped her lips as if to whistle a tune. Although the topic of age was not taboo in the home, it was seldom discussed because it was dull. Age, to many adult women, after all, is a relative and pointless calculation.

In the home, there were women in their fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, a handful in their nineties, and three centenarians. Quite unlike in the garden-variety old folks’ homes, there were a good number of residents in their forties, a couple in their late thirties even. Felicia Phua, for instance, was 40 and Siew Eng had turned 43 last week. They weren’t *old* old, certainly not as old as Auntie Ah Luan or Mrs Rohan; they were just damned enough to be here.

Felicia, plagued with severe kyphosis, who had been in a wheelchair since she was 33, was known around the neighbourhood as the Hunchback of Ang Mo Kio. As for Siew Eng, the woman was a one-legger: her right leg had been amputated after a freak car accident on the winding slope of the Cameron Highlands. Still more damned: Felicia used to be a competitive runner in school and Siew Eng, a tour guide. Both had relied a great deal on their legs. Thank God, they had met in the home and bonded through prayers to Saint Servatius—the patron for those with foot troubles.

Much like Cheryl Dada, they were women whose lives became associated with those of the invalid, damned, handicapped, infirm and spouseless. Regardless of age, they all gathered in the home. The three of them were part of the small minority, barring the Malay and Indian ladies. They were the English type who preferred to say “fuck” and “shit” and “damn it”, and watched *Wheel of Fortune* instead of Channel 8 soaps. Nothing like the other Chinese women who spoke Hokkien and Cantonese, and who swore just as much, if not more.

Cheryl stood by the conclusion that she was not the most vulgar one in the home. Besides, English could never sound as crass as Hokkien. But her face grew solemn as she contemplated this more: for how could someone be vulgar when she mostly spoke Hokkien? To say she was vulgar would be racist—or “dialectist”. If so, was it right of them to call Judy Chua Chor Lor? Was it right of them to call her *geh ang moh*? Why did they assume she spoke Mandarin and Malay? Some even thought that she knew Indian—she had to correct them: “Indian is the ethnicity. Tamil is the language,” and then clarify that she did not speak Tamil. But their faces remained bewildered, others suspicious.

Unlike those who spoke dialects—and there were many in her generation—Cheryl Dada only knew English. She could manage a bit of Teochew, as much as her grandmother had taught her, a few words in Mandarin and Malay; but Hokkien she could not speak. Her grandmother told her it was unladylike. “Ah Le, you don’t be chor lor like them ah,” she warned. “Better don’t be like them.” Cheryl never knew exactly who “they” whom her grandmother spoke against were. Sometimes they were the rowdy neighbour boys, sometimes they were the hawker uncles.

Anyhow, she promised her grandmother that she would not be like them. She had never sworn while the old lady was alive. It was only after her arrival at the home that Cheryl began to pick up the curses. For one abides in the colonial language, not swear in it. Unless it was “bakero”, which was the exception, because her mother had used it all the time. She said the Japanese were always shouting

“bakero”; they came knocking at her door and spat “bakero” at her mother when she let them in. That they shouted “bakero” when they left her crying. Cheryl had always thought her mother was quoting the soldiers verbatim. It was only when she was older, after taking a survey course in Asian History, that she realised what her mother had been trying to tell her. She understood then the grit in her mother’s voice when she told her those bedtime stories, the swift hand that switched off the radio whenever “Sukiyaki” came on.

“Damn this sun!” said Mrs Dada, feeling the heat wrapping around her. Her fringe was falling onto her forehead; half a can of hairspray was not enough to hold her hair on this muggy day.

Also, the haze was back. The news said the PSI reading was 70. That was a lie, for Cheryl Dada smelled the char in the air. Looking up at the vacuous sky, she felt an impulse to pray. The old habit returned carelessly to her. She found herself searching the sky for signs of a divine being, someone who would make it rain, provide shelter and refuge from the tireless sun; but the firmament hung detachedly above her, mostly clear and blue. No sign. No God; nothing came, as usual.

Cheryl Dada wanted many things in her life. But recently she had been latching on to the littlest things—as though she could be easily pleased. For instance, she had been all excited about learning French earlier this year. Daniel had told her that everyone was given a \$500 credit to pick up a new skill (“It’s a government initiative to help develop the best in us,” he said), and she immediately decided that it would be a language. But not Korean—which was what most of the women in the home wanted to learn. Cheryl never got into those cheesy Korean soaps like the rest of them. She would rather spend the afternoon walking aimlessly than sit through one episode of people crying and falling ill and dying in car crashes. Wasn’t the world dead enough, the home depressing enough? She could not understand why so many people would crowd in the TV room for romance. Neither could she understand why Clare was into Korean dramas when the fair-skinned, chiselled men did not interest her.

If Cheryl Dada were to learn a language, it would most certainly be French. Much to everybody’s surprise, two other women were also interested. Lulu was too, but she did not count because she was neither a resident nor Singaporean. Cheryl Dada was suspicious of Felicia and Siew Eng; she thought that they only wanted to get out of the neighbourhood. The younger ones often had the most mischief up their sleeves. Some aunties called the pair Che Lun Jie Mei: Felicia was always itching to relive the thrill of speed, while Siew Eng would sit herself in any vehicle just to get a lift out to buy cigarettes.

Even though three names were put down, Daniel warned her that it was going to be difficult to get people to sign up for something as exotic as French; in fewer words, she should not get her hopes up. He explained to her that Management would not want to arrange transport for only three people and they did not have the funds to bring in instructors to conduct the classes. He was right: plans for the French class fell through. It was about practicality; nothing personal. He was right again: nothing’s personal here.

If Management really wanted to talk about practicality, then what was practical about giving a woman like herself \$500 in credit? She’d much rather have the cash. Exactly how practical was it for her to learn something? Daniel suggested dance: “It’s trendy and fun. Be an active ager!” He gave her a list of courses including hand jive, Chinese fan dance and ballroom dancing, but it was clear he included those only because they were convenient. The Chinese dance group met every Tuesday in the multi-purpose hall and the hand jive class rehearsed in the common room of block B on Wednesday mornings. There was less paperwork, fewer arrangements to be made if she took up dance. Daniel’s optimism must not be confused with genuine concern, although Cheryl could not deny that he was one of the feeling ones. She was thinking about how he had kept yawning and scratching his eyes so that no one would notice that he was tearing up at Choon Eng’s service.

“The little things...” she mumbled, putting her hands together. “God, I would like some clouds,” she said. It seemed the most practical

thing to ask for; and if practical enough, it might be granted to her. All Cheryl Dada wanted this very moment as she stood on the porch was some relief. She wished the sun would go away. Clouds would be very nice; a drizzle would be nice too—anything to freshen up the lazy afternoon. It should rain soon; there's no such thing as drought in this country. Was that why the old specky said cool temperatures expected? Was he calling it into existence? Perhaps they were going to make it rain with those calcium salt things.

Argh, this fucking heat, Cheryl Dada let out in her mind. No way she was going to walk to the garden today. No way she was going to pass by potty-mouthed Judy Chua to get to the other side. No way she was going to get into a fight today.

"No, I'm not getting the flowers," Mrs Dada said, looking over to Lulu, who was busy setting up the tables in the parking lot. Her feet were starting to sweat.

At this moment a couple of passing clouds smudged the blue sky. Funny how they had sneaked in and filled up the sky, and the air was suddenly cooling down. Even so, the sun seemed to be chasing her with a dogged pertinacity. It made her peachy skin flare up and her lips dry. On days like today, Mrs Dada thought resignedly, even the clouds don't help.

And, she thought with conviction, she could not brave the heat for the flowers, for she would not be able to stand it. Anyway, the Hub was too far and her only escort was ignoring her. The other option was the garden. It was reasonably near and she did not need permission to go on her own. Also—and this was probably the best part about today—she had the freedom to roam around and could spend more time in the garden or her room because the hourly care plan was not enforced on public holidays and special occasions.

Still, Cheryl thought, if she were to make her way to the garden, near as it was, she might develop a rash from walking under this sun. Her skin was easily irritated lately and she had had enough of those antihistamines—they made her sleepy all day.

Examining the pink patch near her right elbow, Mrs Dada thought

about eczema and melanoma, but decided the rash was too mild to be an augury of cancer. There was neither blood nor suspicious moles. It could not have been acne, she persuaded herself. Surely she was past the age for that. Must remember to ask for QV, she noted silently. And prickly heat powder too.

Looking to the parking space tucked away in the corner of the driveway, it occurred to her that transport might also be an issue. Her ride was giving way—well, it was technically her mother's; Cheryl Dada had inherited it when her mother acquired one of those motorised wheelchairs. The wheels were wonky; the seat cushion was wearing thin. She must remember to get Lulu to see to it. This time she would ask for a brand-new one, preferably American. No more second-hand stuff, she promised herself. Definitely no more bakero Japanese brands.

But it was not up to her. The actual purchase was subject to Management's approval and its preposterously long red tape. They took weeks to go over simple forms and urgent requests, forgetting that time was not a luxury in the home. Many of the residents still remembered Auntie Ah Luan. She had been the first of them, in the home for 29 years, respected for her seniority and life experiences, loved for her unflagging warmth and generosity—especially for her never-ending supply of Khong Guan biscuits that she always gave away freely. Auntie Ah Luan was a typical genial granny: small, slightly hunched, had white hair tied up in a bun and wore a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. Though she carried a hypertensive heart and the cartilages in her joints were wearing away, she never had the slightest hint of fatigue or bitterness.

An image of Auntie Ah Luan staggering along the garden path slowly came to Cheryl Dada, vivid as if it had happened yesterday. She was one of the first people whom Cheryl befriended; Ah Luan was a dear auntie and confidante to her. The 93-year-old lady loved nature and the sun; weeding was her favourite thing to do in the afternoon. The joy of working in the garden was what propelled her to put in the request for mobility aid in the first place, even though

she was shy to use a wheelchair. “Jin pai seh, jin siu li,” were her exact words. The garden, all for the garden.

Management took so long to process the purchase. They claimed that they needed to send for a qualified assessor to evaluate her condition before approving the request for an assistive device. Couldn't they see that ageing was not a social problem but a sentimental one? For God's sake, the old lady was confined to her bed! She could not move her legs—what more proof did they need?

Auntie Ah Luan spent her last days in bed. She did not get to smell the pandan she planted or feel the warmth of the sun. She died in her sleep, in a room without a view. The wheelchair arrived two days later and was allocated to Mrs Rohan.

The lesson was loud and clear. Auntie Ah Luan's death reminded the rest of the residents that time was not on their side. Their Casio watches synchronised to a common time beeped on, with or without their owners. The hours of decay pursued them to the fatal climax, the clock soldiered on after each denouement.

Even though Mrs Dada did not really need the wheelchair, she wanted to have it changed. It was hitting the 10-year mark anyway. Wasn't 10 years the standard usage period for vehicles? She wondered why people made such a big deal out of it. Daniel was miffed about the predicament of his car too. He'd been trying to sell his beat-up Mazda for some time now, but there were no takers. Even Keng Boon, the old clerk who was usually contented and placid, had been so worried about his ageing car that he had to take a leave of absence. He reappeared a week later with a fresh haircut and brown-dyed hair as though his recently-bought Picanto had given him a new lease of life.

The expiring COE was haunting the men who shuddered to think about their cars becoming valueless when they hit the 10-year mark. It seemed to Cheryl Dada that a pandemic called Time (whose catchline went something like, “No time already lah!” or “Still got time meh?”) had spread throughout the nation, and the men were wearing mechanical watches in their minds while the women had

biological clocks sewn onto their wombs to avert the First World phenomenon known as depopulation or, to use the term Clare had taught her, voluntary childlessness.

Mrs Dada stared at the watch on her wrist. It looked like it belonged to a man. She did not understand cars and the other things that made men happy, but she assumed that an opportunity to buy a new car would be welcomed by most people. A decade seemed like a reasonably long time, long enough to collect substantial dents and dirt, so why did people not jump at the opportunity to change their cars? How long were they intending to keep their rides for—until the bumpers fell off? Anyway, when things get old they ought to be scrapped, she thought, running her eyes over the rusty silver on the rims of her wheelchair. And after all, 10 was the number of perfection, of an entire cycle, of... Of what? Mrs Dada could not remember.

Then the words sounded like thunder in her mind: “Ten is order.” But who said that? “Ten is the number of the law.” Was it Moses or Elijah? Cheryl Dada could see the rows of pews: 10 on each side of the room. They drew her eyes to the rugged cross that was nailed to the front wall.

There behind the pulpit she saw him. “Ten is order,” he bellowed; the floor was vibrating. “Keep all ten, fail not one, my child,” he bellowed again, his hazel eyes stared into hers. The man must be Jesus. Except he was Chinese. His yellow arms were outstretched: one hand clutching the Bible and the other held cartoon tracts. No obvious scars, Cheryl noted, squinting to see his palms. As for the wound on his side, her natural eyes could not see through his polo shirt.

Cheryl Dada stared hard into the vista, trying to summon the memory of the Chinese Jew. All this time she was sweating profusely, her clammy hands fiddling with the ends of her shirt. The little of the man she could remember melded with the face that emerged from the driveway.

“Good morning, Madam!” said Jewel high-spiritedly. He was walking briskly towards the bougainvillea that were potted by the

porch and stopped in his tracks with his hands full of weeds when he saw her.

“Hello, Jewel,” said Cheryl Dada, relieved to be interrupted.

“Madam eat already?” he asked politely.

“Not yet. Have you?” she said.

He nodded. “Yes, Madam. Today is rice and chicken curry.”

Cheryl Dada gave a weak smile. For his sake, she hoped the curry wasn’t sour.

“Wait ah, Madam,” said Jewel. He went to the rubbish bin to throw the weeds in his hands and came back to her smiling sheepishly, as though her standing alone on the porch was his fault.

“Madam?” His voice quavered for a moment.

Sensing his apprehension, Cheryl Dada let her eyes wander behind him.

“I want to tell you something,” he said.

What is it? she thought, glancing down at her watch.

“Madam, it is tonight. I cannot go to your party tonight,” said Jewel, nodding apologetically, fingering the rusty trowel in his tool belt.

Her lips puckered, forming the silent surprise.

“I’m very sorry, Madam. Sorry.”

Why? She almost asked.

I really want to, thought Jewel. The food is good and MC members will give out ang pows. And also Madam and Mr Dada are good people. Madam always gives him Brand’s essence of chicken and Mr Dada would occasionally give him his old checked shirts. Jewel did not want to disappoint them. But it was his turn to wash the cars tonight. He had already asked Rajet to cover two nights for him last month. Rajet had his own commitments: two multi-storey car parks on Avenue 6 and a full-time job at the pest control company; and Jewel could not afford to skip nights this month. No work meant no money. He could not just work 44 hours a week in the nursing home; \$560 was not enough. Back in Chittagong he could work forever, however long he wanted; there were no regulated

labour hours. But here work stopped at six. All those extra hours spent in his dorm—how much did that cost him? He tried to work out the sum in his head: if he washed eight cars in four hours and each wash was five-dollars, he would earn about \$40 a night, minus water money and soap money. But it was difficult to keep track of the money that was coming in because some nights he washed six cars and some nights there were no cars to wash.

Jewel was certain of one thing: the more hours he worked, the more money he made. Man-hours meant more men, more work, more money. July was a good month because he was washing almost every day. June, however, was not so good because many people went on holiday. Also, early in the month he had lost one packet of soap and had to ration the remaining bars by chopping them into tiny bits.

He wanted to tell somebody about the unease he felt for reusing the soap water and how his heart beat so quickly every time a police car drove by. But Mrs Dada would not understand. Why would Madam care? What seemed right to him was illegal to her. She was from a different world and he did not belong to her party.

“Very sorry, Madam, sorry I cannot go.”

“It’s all right,” Cheryl Dada said after consideration. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, Madam,” Jewel rushed on. “Sorry, Madam.”

Watching Jewel turn away, Cheryl Dada found herself unwilling to let him go. She was sorry that he could not be there. He works too hard, she thought. He also seemed to be getting thinner—or was the green and red checked shirt too big for him? With an impulse to hold him, a maternal compassion welling up, she called out, “I’ll ask them to keep some food for you!”

What a boy. With that sweet disposition and politeness, he can’t be older than 25, she thought. Where had he learned all that gardening skills? From his father? Grandfather? Great-grandfather? (She heard that they married young—women as young as 12.) It always puzzled her how migrant workers like Jewel arrived here and seemed to know how to do the things they did. Like where did they

learn to build something like Marina Bay Sands or the Star Vista? And the Esplanade? They must have had some training before they got here. Surely, not everyone could do it. Surely it wasn't as simple as following a building plan. There was nothing simple about filling up a rooftop infinity pool. The foreign workers did a good job—they were Chinese, right? Cheryl Dada recalled some dispute over wages on the news. Only the Chinese would dare to complain about unpaid wages and illegal deductions, only they would rally outside MOM and demand to be heard because they knew their rights.

Cheryl wondered if Jewel could build a pool too, and her eyes glittered at the thought of having a jacuzzi in the home. She was very pleased with the gardener, so much so that she might even miss him when it was his turn to receive the five-year long service award, which was a round-trip ticket to his home country. The blossoming pink bougainvillea that brightened the courtyard testified to his capabilities.

With his tool belt and gardening apron, Jewel certainly looked the part. His boots were caked in mud from grubbing about in the soil for diseased roots. The dark-skinned, lanky boy carried with him the smell of dampened earth. Cheryl Dada took long and deep breaths, relishing the telluric scent that was still wafting in the air.

Only for a brief moment she thought of St Joan's. She closed her eyes and traced the uneven canopy of rain trees and the square field that took refuge under the viridescent dome.

(Jewel turned back to look at her. Something in Madam's tense face relaxed and softened, and she looked happier. Her face was very peaceful; it had a clarity that would make a good identity card photo. Jewel remembered how he had to use up half a bottle of gel to tame his curls so they would not fall to the front and cover his eyes. The immigration officer behind the camera was not nice at all—talking to him in a snarky tone. He was also thinking of how Madam's calm expression would befit an obituary picture; the kind that made the deceased look so at peace with death that living was passé and heaven was a real thing. The kind that turned mourning into jealousy.

Looking at her, affected by the feminine grace, Jewel forgot she was Madam from block A. In that moment, as his watch beeped twice, he saw his Ma again. The countenance roiled feelings of grief and shame. He began to tear up. It brought him back to that September, that weekend before he had left Chittagong. It all happened so fast: the application; the contract; the recruitment fees; the IPA and work permit processing; the visa and passport checks; Ma's death; the funeral; his departure.

Jewel was with his agent in Dhaka when he received the news. He flew back immediately on his agent's tab, just in time to see Ma before she was wrapped in the kafan. He did not recognise the pale-faced woman in a white dress; she looked like a teenager. Nani's hands were bright red from all the washing and cleaning. The same hands pulled the linen over the body and tied the sheets with ropes.

Outside the mosque, it was quiet. Nobody spoke a word, as though they did not know each other. Hands were raised and folded; the women behind were sniffing like they had colds. Once or twice there would be a roar: "Allahu Akbar"; then it was silent again. Then the truck started; its engine throbbed. Inside, where the body was loaded, it was quiet. The road was empty for a Friday afternoon. There was no sign of the usual stray dogs that scavenged for food by the wayside.

The cemetery was peaceful as expected. There were no birds chirping or frogs croaking. Only the sound of feet dragging across the grass. As shovels of soil heaped over the body, Jewel recited a prayer and said salam in his heart. He hoped that Ma's faith would take her to Paradise, someplace prettier than the overgrown burial site; he hoped there would be lilies and roses, birds and small animals, laughter.

Nani was waiting by the gate when it was over. Her arms reached out to Jewel and pulled him close; her face on his chest. He was afraid that Nani would hear his heart moaning when he was not supposed to cry. But she let him go without saying anything.

The crowd left as they had come, wordless and without tears. It

was the quietest day of his life. Juwel left the next day for Dhaka. He flew to Singapore on Sunday and started work on Monday.)

Mrs Dada was thinking of St Joan's. The white and blue building was most pretty in the rain. Amidst the sound of pattering rain, she could hear the recess bell chiming; her watch beeping—and it was noon. She would go out to where the field met the trees and sweep her feet through the mounds of leaves and long black pods. The sounds of crisp leaves shuffling and twigs snapping, joined by the chatters of mynahs and crows—occasionally interrupted by the boys screaming in the neighbouring football field—woke the sleeping giant from its reverie. In moments like this saturated with the smell of soil and dried leaves, St Joan's slipped into Cheryl Dada's thoughts.

(Her eyes were resolutely shut, as though determined to block out the light. Madam must hate the sun, Juwel supposed, tracing the arches of her eyebrows. What was she thinking? The party tonight? He took a few steps closer, heedful not to alarm the woman, and allowed his eyes to rest longer on her fine face. The lines near her eyes were most distinct; they relaxed her worried face. Madam is pretty but she's getting old, he thought. Definitely older than Ma was. Juwel did not know if it was the stale curry or the thought of his mother's mummified body that roused in him an urge to puke. He dropped his tool belt and ran to the toilet.)

Cheryl Dada had forgotten most of St Joan's. She could not recall what the school building looked like, for it had been closed and torn down many years ago. The motto—*Steadfast in Duty*—was embossed on the school badge that was mostly white and blue with small flowers. She could piece together bits and bobs: the drink stall sold Sinalco and ice cream soda; a bowl of yellow noodles was 30 cents; the building did not have lifts; on the ground floor was a makeshift dental clinic operated by a masked couple. With the demolition it was as if St Joan's and its people had never existed. As if she were never there, as if nothing had happened.

A few years ago a co-ed school was built on the same plot of land. The paint was brighter, the building taller, the field trimmed. The

canteen remained where it was; near the back gate. Cheryl passed by once when she was on home leave. There were boys and girls in green and yellow uniforms carrying their oversized bags, some holding hands, some buying ice cream from the Wall's cart by the traffic light. The older kids were hanging around the bus stop, waiting for the feeder bus; the younger ones stood by the side gate and looked out for their maids. Cheryl was standing there by the green fence where she had stood decades ago, looking into the football field; but everything was unfamiliar. She could no longer put the place to her memory. St Joan's was a disembodied fragment of the past. Cheryl wondered if she had imagined that year in school.

The one thing that assured her—what she remembered most vividly of St Joan's—was the perfume of the good damp earth with a hint of citrus. It flushed her with the hope of youth and brought her to the top of the world and to the end of herself. When the soil was roiled and the grass freshly cut, and her body suffused with warmth and midday languor, Cheryl Dada was reminded that the world was larger than the home.

But why was she thinking of St Joan's now? Where did the thoughts about it come from, all of a sudden? Her mind had no room for St Joan's, for the party was her priority. Today, the party was her world.



PHOTO BY CHONG YEW

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

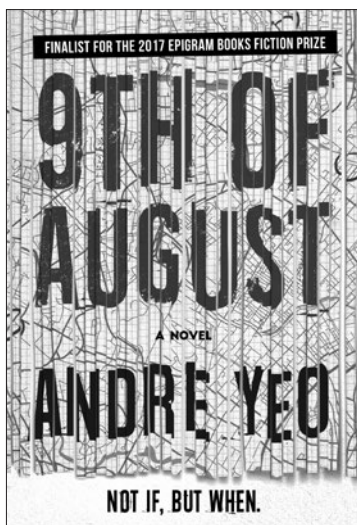
Carissa Foo received her Ph.D. in English Studies from Durham University and is currently teaching at Yale–NUS College. Apart from her research interest in modernist women’s writing, she also teaches conversational English to migrant workers. *If It Were Up To Mrs Dada* is her first novel.



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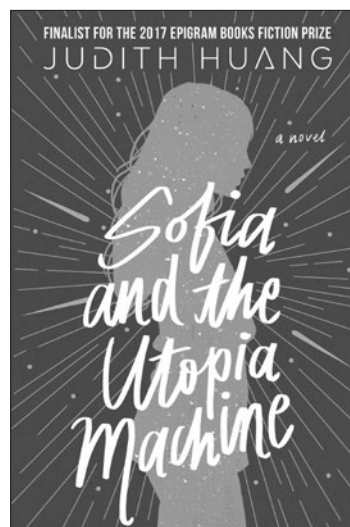
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Today is National Day. It is also Cheryl Dada’s birthday. She pokes her nose into everybody’s business as they prepare for the celebration. She is vaguely aware of a strange man who keeps talking to her, the migrant workers who hang around the home and her fellow residents, who seem less enthusiastic about the big day. Slowly, she discovers how her life converges with theirs, even as she begins to learn who she is.

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