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# Lovelier, Lonelier

DARYL QILIN YAM

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DARYL QILIN YAM



EPIGRAM

**Also by Daryl Qilin Yam**

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*Kappa Quartet* (2016)

*To Pigar!*

PART I

# RANDEN

Kyoto, 1996

Happiness lies beyond the clouds;

Happiness lies above the sky.

—Kyu Sakamoto, “Sukiyaki”

## 1

It wasn't love, really. They were just trying to make something out of their lives.

When Jing met Isaac, in 1996, she was in the midst of losing her mother, a loss that, looking back now, she might have supplanted with a man she'd come to love, or what she had assumed was love. She would find herself thinking about this years later, at one of Isaac's work parties, one of the few she had attended out of an unspoken solidarity. They were at the clubhouse of a condominium, located at one of the offshoots of Orchard Road; the host was a theatre-maker who wanted Isaac to star in one of her plays, regardless of whether his renewed contract with Mediacorp would allow it. Jing remembered the look on Isaac's face then, a very well-known face at that point in time, but a face she liked to think she knew most intimately as he stared out of a window: she saw the way he gazed past the treetops, and the way his features were lit, dappled even, by the shimmering surface of the pool several metres below. She saw the way his eyes were trained towards the hazy skyline of the boulevard's glittering buildings, not so much with yearning or despair, but with some other emotion she had yet to pin down, even after all the time they'd spent together.

The year was 1999; the new century would be upon them in a few minutes' time. Standing in a corner of the room, watching various couples find one another, reach for one another, all of it in an atmosphere of palpable anticipation, Jing was struck by the idea that there were perhaps some things she would never know about him, had never known about him, probably since the day they'd first met. With this came the conclusion that it wasn't solidarity that Isaac needed from Jing that night: it was solitude. He wanted to be alone, or perhaps, he needed to be alone; it might even be a fundamental part of his nature, this loneliness. She became increasingly convinced of this, even as a countdown eventually began, causing her husband to finally tear his gaze away from the window.

She'd seen that same look before as well: on Mateo, her best friend, in that restaurant in Shinmachi-dori.

It was the night of the 22nd of March, 1996. They showed up to the restaurant at 7pm sharp, standing underneath an umbrella large enough to accommodate them all: her, Mateo and their other friend, Tori, who worked and lived at the ryokan they were staying at just two streets away. Jing and Mateo had met Tori in their final year in London, in the spring term of 1994, at a house party in Stoke Newington: even though Jing had exchanged a few kisses with Tori that night, it was never serious, because the real intimacy, Jing knew, lay strictly between Tori and Mateo instead. To her they shared an innate connection, an understanding that bordered on the telepathic, resulting in an intense, triangular friendship over the remainder of that term, one that undoubtedly made Jing jealous of the other two at times. Jing watched Tori then, in that restaurant in Shinmachi-dori, wondering if she could see what must have been plain to her too: that Mateo was in trouble, had been in trouble over the past

few days in Kyoto, and that he might possibly be at the breaking point that evening. He had already taken to staring out the window just minutes after the three of them had been seated, in a place that should have appealed to all of Mateo's sensibilities: the dining area replete with hinoki floorboards and furnishings, with servers dressed in linen from head to toe, and that overly large juniper bonsai standing in the middle of the dining area, casting grotesque shadows on the ceiling. Instead Mateo partook in the drizzly weather outside, the droplets still clinging to the wires between the telephone poles, the only landmark of note in an otherwise featureless part of town. Jing wondered if Tori knew what was going on with their friend, as she caught her giving Mateo a quick glance. She wondered if any of them knew what was really going on with each other's lives.

Tori began to scan the menu. Jing made the effort to do so too, even though everything was in Japanese. Tori then told her it was okay, that she would do the ordering, although her finger did hover over the few options they had, the cheapest one priced at 3,500 yen.

Jing made a face. Ugh, she said. That's going to hurt.

I agree, said Tori. She flipped the menu, trying to see if there was another page—there wasn't. Oh no, said Tori, smiling at Jing, and Jing couldn't help it: she smiled back at her too. Tori asked if Jing was still returning to Singapore on Sunday, the twenty-fourth, and Jing said yes, I suppose so, though with a little hesitancy. Tori asked her what the matter was, and Jing didn't reply immediately: instead she quickly shot Mateo another look, before saying that there were still things she needed to settle. Things she needed to do.

In Kyoto? said Tori. Kyoto, specifically?

Jing nodded. She allowed herself to look at Mateo more firmly then, just as Tori stared at her with her question. But Mateo's gaze was still fixed towards the window: it made him appear more impenetrable than ever, what with the watery light from the streetlamp shining

into the restaurant, casting a grey, nearly opaque finish over his face, his glasses, the collar of his shirt. Tori then asked them both, her and Mateo, what it was that Jing needed to do in the city, and Jing felt like she had no choice but to say that she was sorry, and that now was not the right time.

To what? asked Tori.

To tell you, said Jing.

Jing and Tori kept quiet then, for a few seconds. I see, said Tori. I understand. She smiled again. We have not spoken in the past two years, so I should not...I should not pry, she said, causing Jing to feel an onset of shame.

Don't misunderstand; it's got nothing to do with that, said Jing. It's just—there's a story I can't tell, not now. I'm still in the middle of it. You get that, don't you? she asked, and at this Tori nodded, saying yes, I do. I do, actually. Do not worry. Tori then turned to Mateo, and asked if he knew what was going on with Jing.

I've been helping her, actually.

Oh. Over the past three days?

He nodded.

And are you also leaving on Sunday?

Mateo looked down at the table, and shrugged. I don't know, he said, making a pointless flip of the menu before him. He still hadn't made a decision on his open return; he didn't know when he would be flying back to Spain. To Madrid? asked Tori, and Mateo shrugged again. Maybe, he said, most likely Madrid, after which hung a long pause, a pause that Jing used to watch him again, her friend from long ago, wondering why there was so much the three of them had chosen to hide from one another. She wondered how they had got so comfortable with this, this arrangement of not knowing. But in her mind she knew that different friends had different agreements with one another.

Hey Mateo, said Tori.

Hmm?

Is it sad?

Mateo cocked his head to the side, with a half-grin on his face: for just a few seconds, Jing thought, he looked like his usual self again, like she'd always remembered him. What is? he asked, to which Tori said, Jing's story, causing Jing to laugh, mortified at what they were saying. So is it not? asked Tori, smiling once again, and Jing shook her head, saying no, no, I don't know. Forget it. She laughed a little more before she took a sip of water. It's fine, she said. I'll tell you one day, Tori, the whole thing. The whole story.

Mateo's face lit up just then. He reached a hand out, tenderly, to touch the window.

Oh, he said: Fireworks.

Jing remembered turning, almost immediately, with the eagerness of a child—but there was nothing, nothing, even though that was the moment when everything had begun to change. Where? she asked Mateo, and he quickly tapped his fingers on the windowpane, before the light could fade away.

Right there, he said—there, look. You see it, no?

Tori stood up behind Jing, and took a step towards the window. Jing remembered feeling Tori's hand on her shoulder, a light grip that left her tense.

I don't see anything, she said.

What?

Tori appeared to remain unconvinced. I don't see anything, Mateo, she said again. Some might—some might say it is too early.

He didn't understand. Too early?

For fireworks, she said. Tori then explained it to him, to the two

of them: how hanabi, as they were known here, typically take place during the summertime. It is the custom, she insisted. Tori then asked if he was sure about what he'd just seen, and he said that he was, he was certain about it. And that was when Mateo revealed that he had been seeing fireworks every night, actually: grand ones, large ones, fired over the city. Over the main river, in fact, the Kamo River, that threaded through the city centre. He would hear the fireworks first before he'd see them, many of them, burst all over the sky above.

Every night? asked Tori.

Mateo nodded. Every night, he said. And that was when Jing finally made eye contact with Mateo that evening, as he added: I can show you.

The friends didn't stay long at the restaurant after that. They settled the bill, and proceeded to walk back to the ryokan, under a much lighter rain this time. There is a bar, said Mateo, a bar that he could take the girls to, to show them that what he'd seen was real. Jing remembered failing to understand why the fireworks had mattered to him so much, but she also remembered the way that Tori looked at Mateo too, with a sudden seriousness that surprised her. This is important to you? said Tori, and Mateo said yes, it was important, very much so. Then okay, said Tori, I will go with you. And when she turned to Jing to ask if she would join them too, Jing found Tori holding her hand, with the same firmness she'd felt on her shoulder just moments ago. Come on, said Mateo, join us. Just like old times. Jing then looked at him, and then at Tori, with the distinct feeling that they were caught in an undertow, somehow, the three of them too weak to resist it. Sure, she said to Mateo. Let's go out.

The three entered the ryokan and took their shoes off; they were about to settle on a time to regroup when Tori appeared distracted by



a pair of trainers, shelved away in a corner of the genkan. She began to head down the corridor of the first floor, towards the common kitchen, in a manner that compelled Jing and Mateo to follow.

There was a guy inside, a tall one, with hair that'd grown past his eyes. He turned out to be a recent friend of Tori's, a guest at the ryokan a few weeks ago, before he went travelling around the region. He called her every other day, from whichever payphone he could find, just to tell her where he was; Tori hadn't known, however, that he would be coming back to Kyoto that evening. I also didn't know, the guy said, smiling. Tori asked if that was why he called her a second time today, and he said yeah, I guess. In fact, he just got to the ryokan half an hour ago, just in time before the front desk closed for the night.

Tori glanced at the tinfoil packet, heating up inside a pot of boiling water. Instant curry? she asked.

To go with rice, he said. Plus a banana, the guy added, pointing at the plastic bag beside the rice cooker.

He then finally turned to her, to Jing and Mateo, asking if they'd eaten already. Jing remembered being struck by Isaac's handsomeness then, an almost unfair attractiveness that pushed past the unkempt hair, the uneven shave, the hollowness in his cheeks. It was also hard to tell if he was older or younger than she was: he had a natural complexion that betrayed his youth, but also a demeanour, an air about him, that told her he'd been through something difficult, profound—something only he could understand. In years to come, this aura of his would compel strangers to be kind to him, unfailingly so, and even propel him to stardom; that same aura would protect him too, from the lingering presence of most people, as though afraid of overstaying their welcome. It left only a rare few in his innermost circle, a circle Jing couldn't even be sure she was a part of at times. But she wouldn't have an inkling of this, wouldn't have the ability to

foresee such a thing in the ryokan that evening, not on that Friday night in March, 1996; as they shared their names with one another, she wouldn't be able to tell if her attraction to him was due to some gravitational effect that he had, or because she wanted to be pulled towards him instead, to be close to someone, to have the presence of something decent in her life. When Isaac revealed that he was from Singapore, Jing remembered feeling heartened by the coincidence. It felt uncanny to her. Oh, she said, me too, which left an awkward, almost embarrassing silence in its wake.

Mateo spoke up. He asked Isaac if he would like to join them later, to a bar he knew in the city. Isaac said it was okay: he wanted to rest tonight, take his time at the bathhouse after his dinner. He felt like he had come a long way, even though the journey hadn't actually been that far.

Where were you? asked Mateo. Jing then watched Isaac turn back to Tori, tentatively, just as he gave his reply: Nishinomiya.

A frown and a smile both quivered over Mateo's face. Isn't— isn't that where—?

Tori nodded. Yes, she said. Where I grew up. And for a moment the four of them fell quiet once again, filled with questions they didn't know how to ask one another. They were all so young.

## 2

On the day he left home, Isaac made sure to take a couple of things with him, on top of the other items Sherry had written down on a list. First, he took a lighter and a pack of candles from his field pack, as well as his tin can, for eating on the go. He then went into his parents' bedroom and pocketed his father's Oakley sunglasses, hanging from a hook behind the door, and took the Walkman too, standing by his father's side of the bed, which also doubled as a radio.

He popped out the cassette tape. It was an old favourite of his father's, *Bad Girl*, the 1985 album by Anita Mui. As Isaac put the tape down, wound halfway along its A-side, he recalled not the music, but the cover art, the singer in bright jewels and a purple dress, staring through the hollow of a man's fading silhouette.

Isaac went over to the other side of the room. He swiped a half-empty jar of sour plum candy from the top of his mother's bedside cabinet, a leftover treat from Chinese New Year. He then found more sweets, which he took as well, as he worked his way down the cabinet's drawers. From the fourth and final drawer, Isaac managed to find a disposable camera, with eleven shots left in the roll, as well as his birth certificate, laminated and slotted into a fraying, A4-sized manila

envelope. ISAAC XAVIER NEO JIALIANG, it said. 01/03/1973. Isaac placed the certificate back into its envelope and filched that too.

He returned to his bedroom, his and his sister's. The only thing that Isaac took from her was a photograph, stuck on the wall above her mattress. As he peeled it away from the Blu-Tack, he could sense his sister stirring, looking up at him, drool already pooling over the side of her mouth.

Isaac knelt beside her. He used her bib to wipe her saliva. He then got her to look at the photograph, for what would be the last time between the two of them.

The year in the corner said 1982: Isaac was nine, his sister seven, his parents still in their early thirties. They were at the zoo, all four members of the family, seated on a giant, artificial log. There was a monkey too, squatting in the middle—golden-haired and red-faced, unbothered by the way his sister had wrapped her arms around its body. As Isaac held the photo closer to their faces, Isaac could see the monkey's trainer standing by the side, smiling proudly, it seemed, at both the way the primate was behaving, and at the unbridled enthusiasm his sister had for the creature.

Isaac considered the other faces too. It was easy for him now, to see how they might have borne traces of a future they would each come to inhabit. His father looked content for one, but wary, clearly anxious about the animal; you could see the sweat coming down his sideburns, dripping down the length of his forearms. His mother, eyes half-open, sported a lazy smirk as she placed her hands around her daughter's shoulder, oblivious to her husband's worries. And there was him, of course, his mouth wide open in a perfect smile, holding up a peace sign next to his face: the only one ready for his shot.

\*

Isaac and Sherry got the idea to run away on the 17th of January, 1995, about a year before they managed to carry out their plan. It was a day off in National Service for Isaac, a Tuesday: Sherry met him at Khatib Camp, first thing in the morning, and followed him back to Chinatown, to his flat in Jalan Minyak, where his family lived on the twelfth floor. They had arrived with food, a steaming packet of chwee kueh and two cans of F&N Grape, and heard a thump, from his and his sister's bedroom; when they opened the door they were immediately assaulted by a horrible stench, followed by the sight of Isaac's sister on the floor, squirming and struggling towards him like a worm. Just beside the mattress was his mother, who kept on sleeping, snoring like a cow, even with the smell of her daughter's shit wafting from a day-old diaper.

Zach, said Sherry, you wanna wake your mother first? Isaac quickly spotted the bottle of zolpidem pills in a corner, and shook his head.

Help me carry my sister, he said instead.

They hoisted her to the back of the flat, their feet nimble enough to avoid the flecks of waste that dripped onto the floor. Sherry then brought the radio from the living room, her father's Walkman, with a Faye Wong cassette tape inside it this time, and placed it next to the door of the toilet.

Isaac laid out a few sheets of newspaper on the floor before he undid his sister's diapers. He and Sherry grimaced, and held their breath, as he skipped over to the rubbish chute and tossed it out of sight. Sherry waited till Isaac had settled back down and started the water before she extended the Walkman's antenna, adjusted the dial for the radio, and turned up the volume.

93.3FM was Sherry's favourite station. Isaac had always known, ever since the two had started dating in their second year of poly, that it had been her dream to go into radio one day, even though he had also seen how that dream would shrink, or take a different shape from

time to time, to accommodate other roles in the media that she could do. Now her aspirations went largely unspoken, a year after they had graduated; Sherry still worked at her mother's printing shop, failing to put anything they had learnt in their media and communications course to use. Whenever Sherry played the radio next to him, Isaac could only think of the way their lives were already adjusting even further, and hardening, some might say, within the fast-shrinking confines of a foreclosed reality.

There was a news segment then, on the radio: the first item was about a major earthquake that had struck Japan several hours ago, at 5.46 in the morning. The tremors had lasted for twenty seconds, and measured at a magnitude of 7.2 on the Richter scale. Isaac and Sherry exchanged a quick look, certain that the same question had arisen in both their minds: what in the world did a 7.2 entail? What was a 7.2 relative to a 5.2, a 6.2, an 8.2? The answer soon came: an estimated 3,000 lives lost in the city of Kobe alone, a number the newscaster said was sure to rise over the rest of the day. And as the news segment concluded, the two looked at one another, dazed as though in an aftershock of their own, broken then by the most horrific sound, a sound Isaac found hard to believe he was hearing: it was laughter. The radio deejays of the morning show were laughing, over a joke one of the co-hosts just made. It didn't matter what the joke was even about.

That's horrible, said Isaac.

Yah, said Sherry.

He found it hard to speak. I can't believe—

Believe what?

Isaac shook his head, to stop himself from commenting further. And yet he felt surprised when he heard Sherry's voice, as though she were completing his sentence: We are so lucky to be here. Right?

His first instinct, believe it or not, was to laugh in response. Right, he thought. They were so very lucky to be where they were.

And while the two of them smiled at one another, Isaac knew that Sherry was imagining the same thing he was: of Singapore shaking, uncontrollably, 7.2 on the Richter scale, just to see what it felt like, for once—just to see what it meant to crumble, for once. It was not a frightening thought for him to entertain. And even though Isaac was playing with the bidet now, causing his sister to clap and snigger under the fresh spurts of water, he could still feel Sherry's gaze upon him, along with all of the anger and shame and self-loathing that they shouldered between them. Remnants of his sister's shit floated towards the drain of the toilet as he said:

Do you want to leave?

The dazed look came back into Sherry's eyes. Oh yah?

Yah, said Isaac. Let's leave.

They saved money over the following year. The weekend before his National Service ended, Isaac and Sherry got together and counted everything they had in the bank. They counted and then recounted, and then counted again. At the end of it all they asked one another, did they really know how much it would cost to take a bus, a train, a ferry, a flight? What about hostels, other places to stay? What about food? Isaac and Sherry frowned, unsure of what to say.

Isaac still remembered that day, spent at the void deck, tallying up coins and bank notes, and sums on their passbooks over a mosaic-tiled chess table. The void deck was in one of the estates in Bishan, where Sherry and her mother lived in her maternal uncle's flat; she had just come back from the hospice, where her father was warded, paralysed after an accident in the army. Isaac saw that Sherry had worn lipstick that day, and a bit of blush. She had eyeliner on too, and her eyebrows were plucked into thinner lines.

Make-up, he said to her.

Yah, she said, keeping her eyes down on her passbook. Nice, right?

He nodded. It's new, he said. It's nice.

She smiled.

Thanks, Zach, said Sherry.

That was a thing Isaac never figured out: how she had arrived at this nickname of his, the shortening of his name to Zach. It was what she called him ever since they became a couple. To her, he would always be Zach, while to him, Sherry would always be Sherry.

The following Saturday, Sherry asked Isaac if he wanted to try something new. It was a small request from a friend, with some money tied to the end of it. It's nothing complicated, she said, and it could be done in one morning. Nice, said Isaac, that's super cool, even though he had no idea, really, what it was she was getting him to do. Isaac then asked if he knew this friend of hers, and Sherry said no, don't think so. He's someone new, she added. Sherry then told Isaac to meet her at her mother's printing shop at 10am on Monday, and he told her he'd see her then.

Isaac liked going to the printing shop. Sherry's mother was a tall woman with even taller hair, and she had a great, great laugh. She was the kind of woman who'd get invited to host auctions or sing karaoke on stage every time getai season rolled by. He'd see Sherry's eyes, her nose and her teeth every time he looked at the woman, and it amazed him, the resemblance. And whenever he visited he'd bring food from the kopitiam next door, and Mrs Wong would laugh and say aiyoh, leng zai, so sweet. She'd take the food with her glove-covered hands and pass it around the shop, causing the heavy musk of hot paper and fresh ink to be imbued with the scent of whatever food he got them that day. But as he stood outside the printing shop on Monday morning, he found himself horrified by the realisation that he would not miss this. He would not miss these smells, these recollections. It shocked him to think that he would not even miss the sounds of Sherry's mother

greeting him, laughing at him, calling him handsome. What was the point? he thought. It made him wonder what he was truly capable of achieving; it made him wonder how far he'd go to excavate himself, if it meant that he could run away. He would miss nothing, he thought, as Sherry opened the door.

Hey Zach, she said.

He stepped inside. The shop was closed on Mondays, so there was no one in besides the two of them. Sherry locked the entrance and led him to a photocopier, the one standing at the rightmost corner of the place. Isaac pointed at the tall stack of A5 paper beside it.

Flyers?

Dui, said Sherry, nodding. She must have already started before he showed up, thought Isaac. Sherry picked up a separate stack of A4s and passed it to him.

Cut them in half, she said. Can?

He nodded. He then looked at the A4s and the A5s—at the same face that was smiling on all of them.

Is this Zoe Tay?

Sherry cast him a quick glance. Dui, she said again.

He peered closer. There was text in English and in Chinese, printed at the bottom of the flyer: *ZOE TAY. MOST POPULAR FEMALE ARTISTE. STAR AWARDS 1996*. He must have looked rather puzzled, for when he raised his head again he saw Sherry staring at him.

You dunno, right, she said.

Yah, he said. No clue.

Sherry handed him one of the flyers. She told him that the Star Awards was a TCS awards ceremony that started two years ago. It rewarded the best in Chinese Singaporean television, super glam and everything. So you dunno about *The Golden Pillow*? Sherry asked, and Isaac said in response: What pillow? It was a drama starring Zoe Tay, and it had just ended the previous month, said Sherry. In the first

episode, set in Thailand, Zoe Tay's character, Xiao Dan, gets caught in a love triangle between two men: there's the one who wants to marry her, a you qian got money kind of guy, and there's the one she wants to marry, her childhood friend, who she'd been in love with for the longest time. But the you qian ren then gave 1,500 baht to Xiao Dan, signalling his intent to marry her, while Xiao Dan moves along with her life, carrying around the 1,500 baht, with no idea that the money could mean this kind of nonsense thing. Only at the end of the episode does her childhood friend finally tell her: Someone wants to marry you. You sure you dunno, Xiao Dan?

Wait, wait, said Isaac. But she wants to marry her childhood friend, right?

That's right, said Sherry. Ren Niang.

And is Ren Niang also a you qian ren?

She shook her head. Xiao Dan's life would be simpler, said Sherry, if she could just forget about Ren Niang. Just marry the you qian ren. But what to do?

Isaac looked at her then, unable to tell what was going through her mind. Yah, he said. What to do.

Sherry didn't respond. Instead she turned back to the flyers, to all of Zoe Tay's photocopied faces.

That's how I know.

Know what?

That I really love Xiao Dan, said Sherry. That I was going to love the show. Xiao Dan is so strong, so brave, all because she's in love with Ren Niang, who's also strong and brave as well, said Sherry. No matter where he goes, there she will be, because she loves him no matter what.

Isaac looked at the flyers again. It was the first time he ever heard Sherry say she loved anything in her life; it was also the first time he felt like he was learning something new about Sherry again, even though it made sense, of course, that she would fall into this kind

of thing. Okay, he said. I get it.

At 12.45pm they were done cutting all the flyers. Isaac went out and bought them both lunch, fishball noodles from the kopitiam. At 1.30pm a man came by the shop, a skinny dude with running visors; Sherry handed him the entire stack of flyers, all 1,500 pieces of Zoe Tay. The man opened his backpack and handed Sherry an envelope filled with \$2, \$5 and \$10 notes.

Sherry returned to Isaac's side. Together they counted the money, both of them performing mental sums under their breaths. When Sherry was done counting she said: Okay. Take it.

He felt like he had to ask. Everything?

She nodded. Yah, she said. You keep.

And then the day to leave came, on the final week of February. Isaac placed the lighter, the candles and the Oakley sunglasses into the tin can, before putting it at the bottom of his backpack. He then gathered all his mother's sweets into a ziplock bag and placed it inside as well, followed by the camera and his father's Walkman. In also went the manila envelope, containing both his birth certificate and the photograph of his family at the zoo. All of it sat alongside his essentials, the things that Sherry had listed for him, which included an extra set of clothes, some toiletries and stationery for making notes with. His passport, his way out of town, was kept in a separate ziplock bag, while his wallet was fastened to the waist of his jeans with a metal chain. He was good to go.

He heard a moan, then, from the corner of the room. He wondered if it was cruel of him, packing his bag in front of his sister. Isaac looked at her one last time, and found her staring back at him, her hand opening and closing, as though grasping at some invisible thing.

I'll always remember you, was all he managed to say, before he left for good.

\*

The sun was quickly setting. Isaac made his way down the hill, towards Chin Swee Road, before cutting across the park at Pearl's Hill towards Chinatown. Even then he thought that he might have lost all memory of his neighbourhood already, overcome by the realisation that all roads had a way of looking the same, all paths too, all under the common denominator that was the night. When he got on the bus that would take him directly to Golden Mile, Isaac placed himself on one of the seats beside the windows. As soon as the bus reached its next stop, he thought he was on the verge of retching, of heaving, only to realise that he was crying, sobbing, so painfully that he had to bite into his fist to muffle the anguish. When he could finally reopen his eyes, he found that the seats closest to him were clear of people; only the few who had remained along the perimeter managed a glance at him, before fearfully looking away.

Sherry was already at Golden Mile, waiting for him on the steps of the main driveway. She had a fanny pack around her waist, while her backpack, a bright purple Eastpak, sat beside her feet.

Hey, Sherry, he said.

She must have noticed how puffy his face was. Hey, Zach, she said anyway.

Isaac rubbed his nose, and looked around. There were other people too, people with suitcases and rucksacks, staring at the road. You ready? he said.

Sherry nodded. You leh?

He nodded back. I think so, he said to her. He then felt another sharp pain, squarely in the middle of his ribs this time. And then he had to bend over, his chest tightening.

Zach. Zach.

Yah?

You can do this, Zach.

Okay.

You are going to take this bus and leave everything behind, Zach.

Okay.

It will take you to a new life, Zach.

I know.

Do you?

Yah.

You sure?

Hmm.

Okay, good.

Their bus came at the appointed time, at 7.50pm. Sherry reached into her fanny pack and took out their tickets. Isaac trailed behind her as they queued for their seats. It took everything in him to be grateful that here, even now, he still had Sherry Wong, the one who understood him the most. The one who knew what it meant to have this rage of his, an incandescent rage, one that would clear a path forward for his and Sherry's new lives. The driver asked if they had any luggage, and it was clear to Isaac, so clear: these bags on their backs, it was all that they had with them. These bags were the sum total of their new lives, with spaces they may or may not fill. He would do anything in his power to protect what he had left with him.

Sherry chose a pair of seats in the midsection of the bus. As Isaac settled in beside her, she held tightly onto his hand, placing it firmly on her knee.

Hey, Zach?

Hmm?

Say it to me.

Say what? he said. And then he stopped himself, shook his head; he knew what she was talking about.

You can do this, Sherry.

Hmm.

You are going to take this bus and leave everything behind, Sherry.

Hmm.

This bus is going to take you to a new life, Sherry.

And Sherry looked at Isaac, her eyes boring into his. What could Isaac say about this moment, seated in this bus to Malaysia? That her eyes were hardening and then softening, and then hardening again; that they wouldn't loosen their grip on the other's hand; that he wouldn't know how long they would stay that way in the bus, after the doors closed and led them north, out of Singapore and over the Causeway, away from everything he had known before. They went into the strange and the wondrous, towards the only things he knew for sure now, which so happened to encompass the passing view, the blurring signs—the too-wide and half-dreaded unknown.

## 3

Fear, Mateo thought. Love is everywhere.

He thought Daniel had called, on his fourth night in Tokyo. It was a leap day, the 29th of February, 1996: Mateo stood by the sink of his toilet, in the serviced apartment that the gallery had rented for him, smoking a cigarette whose taste he was beginning to enjoy. He turned to the box, flipped it on the counter, reread the label on the front: Golden Bat Cigarettes. Sweet & Mild.

He left the door to the toilet ajar, by just a sliver. It was enough for him to watch his companion for the evening, a man whose name he had long forgotten or probably misheard. They had met in Ni-chome, at one of those hole-in-the-walls that were friendly, welcoming even, to the patronage of foreigners: a guapo approached him and danced with him, the Cher song they were shimmying to nearly over at that point. Mateo could still recall the sensation of the guapo's mouth at his ear, asking if they ought to sleep with one another, and Mateo had said yes, yes. Let's leave, right away.

Mateo tapped his ashes into the sink. Here, in the ambient lighting of his room on the eighth floor, he inhaled the last of his cigarette and exhaled over the scene, over the sight of his companion, compressed

within the gap between the door and its frame.

Anyone could look like anybody, given enough smoke.

He stubbed out his Golden Bat, flicked it into the toilet bowl. He then reached for a second, a third, a fourth; he knew that life would continue to be like this, this endless reaching for things, so why should he stop now? It also explained why, at 1.15 in the morning, he found himself dashing out of the toilet in his bathrobe, towards the phone that just began to ring. He picked it up and went, Hola—Daniel? only to cringe, and swear under his breath, when he heard a woman's voice instead. It was Jing, a former roommate from his time in London, asking who this Daniel was.

Ha ha, he said. My bad. Hey, Miss Singapore.

Hey, your foot. Come on, Jing said to him. Who's Daniel?

Mateo eyed the man on his bed, deep into REM. The corner of his mouth twitched, as well as his brows, before he turned his body to the side. An ex, said Mateo, his heart palpitating. Huh, said Jing. You never told me. Do you want to talk about it? she asked, and he had to lick his lips.

He had a vision, then: he saw Daniel in the toilet, through the gap in the door, standing by the sink. Standing where he used to be. Not really, said Mateo, sorry. He changed the topic, even though what he really wanted was to hang up right now, smoke another cigarette. So you got my postcard? he said, and Jing said yes, she did. She asked how long he was going to be in Tokyo, and what kind of work he was going to be doing there. Three-week secondment, baby, Mateo replied: admin, logistics, sales, networking. Everything, basically. Jing then asked if he was planning to return to Madrid, and he found himself locking eyes with Daniel again, the vision of Daniel, watching him chat on the phone. He told Jing about his plans to travel around Japan instead, to at least see their old friend Tori, now that he had finally got a hold of where she was based. She works at an inn now,



like, at a guesthouse in Kyoto, he said. I even have the address.

Mateo then heard a sigh over the phone, a rush of static over the speaker. Jing asked if he ever felt that life had a way of working out sometimes, to which his answer was a prompt no. Miss Singapore, he said. Not at all, love. But he got her to explain while he watched, and waited, for the vision of his former lover to pass. He couldn't keep his eyes away.



They decided to walk to the bar, now that the rain had stopped. Mateo didn't have the exact address of the place, but he knew it was near the west end of the bridge that overlooked a delta in the Kamo River. Tori then told them about a route, a shortcut across the city—one that involved walking through the Kyoto Gyoen, the national park that surrounded the Imperial Palace.

There was a moment, just before they left, when Jing caught Isaac leaving the kitchen, making his way down the corridor towards them. Jing quickly returned to tying her shoelaces, pretending she hadn't noticed. Eventually she felt his presence, or more accurately his long shadow, cast over them all in the genkan. Take care, you guys, he said.

You sure you don't wanna join us? asked Mateo. Isaac said it was okay; Tori wished him a good rest.

I will see you tomorrow? she asked.

Can, he replied. I'm not going anywhere.

He didn't move then; he seemed intent on watching them go, before returning to his dinner. It gave Jing the courage to crane her head up towards him, to ask if he knew when he was going back. Back where? said Isaac, a response that left her dumbfounded, surprised. I meant Singapore, she said.

Oh, said Isaac. She found it hard to read his face, a face half-

shrouded in shadow. I'll let you know, he said to her, tomorrow.

The three then walked northwards, for about a kilometre or so, towards Marutamachi Station. It marked the southern corner of the Kyoto Gyoen, according to Tori. While they walked, Jing observed how the rain seemed to stop, after several days of intermittent downpour, dwindling at last into something like a fine mist, unfolding over them and the city: she heard nothing but the sound of their briskly moving feet, and their steady breaths; she could hear the rainwater too, falling from the eaves of nearby rooftops, as cars and motorcycles dashed over puddles on the road.

At some point, Tori finally asked Mateo if he could tell her more about the fireworks, and he asked if she was sure. Yes, said Tori, I want to know. Jing then caught Mateo looking at her too, and she nodded, even though she was mostly following Tori's lead. Just tell us, she said.

He told them that he'd seen his first firework on the 19th of March, his first night in Kyoto. He said he wasn't altogether sure of where he was, though it was midnight, last he'd checked. He had lain on top of his futon with his eyes open, unable to sleep, unable to reconcile his back with the tatami floor. He remembered looking at Jing, lightly snoring on the other side of the room, soft but operatic. He heard his G-shock beep the time, 2400 hours, which was when he had got up, changed and grabbed his wallet. Mateo stepped out of the room and went downstairs, where he found Tori, in the kitchen, with her colleagues round a large table. He saw the drink in her hand, and the way everyone was still laughing, still eating. He crept into the vestibule and slipped on his shoes, sliding through the main entrance, confident he hadn't been seen. Had you though? asked Mateo then. Had you seen me leaving? And Tori smiled, and said she hadn't, though she later noticed, while retreating back to her quarters on the second floor, that his shoes were missing from the genkan.

It was his favourite season, spring. April was his favourite month

in Madrid, what with all the frequent showers: rain was the gayest weather, said Mateo, it had nothing but style, nothing but drama. Here, in Kyoto, it was as though the rain were speaking to him with hushed whispers, gracing him with little touches like a familiar friend in another city. When Mateo had slipped out that night, he only knew of the bathhouse, round the corner of the ryokan; he then walked down another road, aimless and happy to wander, until he eventually came across a Lawson. He bought a box of Golden Bats there, as well as a six-pack of Asahi. Everything else after that was a good blur, he said, the kind that he welcomed, he wanted. He savoured it, the cool moisture on his skin and in his hair; he could imagine the rain hissing against the burnt cinders that he nursed in his lungs.

At one point he didn't know where he was any longer; it didn't matter to him, really. He said this just as the three friends stopped at the crossing of Nishiyoko-cho, waiting for the light to change. At some point he had caught his first firework, watched it flash over the street, he said: it prompted him to turn, to look over his shoulder, just in time to catch it flare into brightness, into fast-fading gold—and while it did so the whole city seemed to shine. And while it shone he found himself bursting into a smile too—he was drunk, yes, but he was alone, more importantly, and the quiet horror of knowing this had filled him with a pleasure he couldn't quite explain. Mateo smiled for the length of time the light had stayed with him in the air.

They walked past Marutamachi Station, towards a FamilyMart, where Tori used the toilet while Mateo bought himself a new lighter. When Tori rejoined the group, Mateo was already smoking, while Jing stood closer to the bicycles parked outside the store, staring at the large intersection just ahead. She was looking at the large compound across the road, walled by stone and a perimeter of trees. The Gyoen.

Jing watched Mateo stub out his cigarette. He began to tell them about his second night, about how he had waited for Jing to fall asleep again, before slipping out of their room. While making his way down, he got caught by Tori this time, seated in the lounge beside the main staircase. He'd seen the variety of small dishes that Tori had set in front of her, as well as the magazine laid open to the side. He asked if her shift had just ended, and in turn Tori asked if he was heading somewhere. Mateo grinned, bit his lower lip. He was going to get a drink, he said, causing Tori to remark, Without Jing? Sí, said Mateo. Is that naughty of me? And Tori had wiggled her nose, asking if she could join; Mateo clapped his hands together and told her yes, Miss Japan, of course. Not sure where, though, he admitted. Tori then quickly heaped her remaining food onto a single plate.

Let me take you somewhere, she said.

They had walked as well, that night, to the izakaya that Tori frequented in Pontocho, an alleyway of teahouses and restaurants situated next to the Kamo River. But first they had to wade through Shijo-dori, inundated with people; Tori said that she went to the izakaya whenever she wanted to be alone but not alone, if he knew what she meant by that. Mateo asked if that happened to her often, the need to be alone, and Tori said matter-of-factly: Loneliness is normal for me. It is a completely normal part of my life. And you? she asked. Mateo remembered fixing his gaze on his friend, who was still waiting for him to reply; as they wove their way through the night-time crowd, he wondered if something had necessitated this level of frankness between them, caused by all that time they hadn't spoken to one another, or if she had always had this ability, to see him for who he really was. You are still the same, said Tori to him, as they neared the alley of Pontocho. You only feel valued when you are desired. I understand that very much.

The alleyway had been just as crowded that evening, swarmed

with tourists. Mateo and Tori each ordered a highball the moment they were seated at the counter of the izakaya, wedged into a narrow gap between two teahouses. Sābisu, said the bartender, placing a small plate of fried tofu in front of them. Tori asked if Mateo needed anything else to eat, and he shook his head. The food was more than enough, he said.

The izakaya got talking, at some point. It began when one of the German diners asked about the gramophone crackling in a corner. What's that song? he said. From *Porgy and Bess*? The woman seated beside him spoke up next: Traurig, she said, that sounds depressing, for the bartender had pulled out the sleeve of the vinyl and pointed at the title of the current track. Act 1, Scene 2, recited another person: "My Man's Gone Now".

There were about a dozen of them in the conversation, all from different parts of the world: there was the pair from Munich, executives of an automobile company; there was another pair too, from São Paulo, in Kyoto for their twentieth wedding anniversary. One man who came alone was a musician from Iceland, a double bassist close to retirement, if there was ever such a thing. The topic so happened to be about everyone's first loves, and they did so by going down the counter, taking turns to tell their stories, and it had pained him, Mateo, to realise that his turn was only a matter of time. At one point the izakaya burst into protest, over something that the double bassist from Iceland just said: he declared that he had never been in love before, which caused the bartender, a long-time friend of his apparently, to wag his finger at him, saying no, no. Muri. You are lying, he insisted. But the German woman leapt to the musician's defence, saying no, I believe him, I do. I know people, perfectly content people, who have never experienced the feeling in their lives before. But then it was the Brazilian couple's turn to speak, and they told their story, a heart-warming one, which lightened the atmosphere

once again; once they were done, the couple looked at Mateo, who was next. Mateo found himself smiling at everyone, Bartender-san included, not knowing what to say. When he turned to Tori, he found her smiling back at him too, saying: Go on.

Mateo looked down at his drink; he watched an ice cube break into two, bobbing on the surface of his whisky. He took a swig, then cast his eyes down again as he said: I fell in love many times. When I was young, especially. But I was only ever loved back once.

He looked up. Everyone at the izakaya was silent, waiting for him to continue. Even the opera playing had seemed to soften.

I met him last summer. In New York City, said Mateo. One of the Japanese diners asked where, where exactly in the city, and Mateo said: At the Museum of Modern Art.

And then he didn't speak anymore. He kept quiet, and the izakaya stared at him, realising that that was all he was going to share that evening. He felt Tori tap him on the shoulder, asking if he was okay. He turned to her.

I'm going to head out, he said. A quick smoke.

Are you sure? she had said. You can smoke in here.

Jing finally looked at Mateo, at this point in the story. The three of them were in the middle of the Gyoen now, where it was dark and bright at the same time. Everything about the park felt extremely vast, with gravel paths that must have been twenty metres wide, making it hard to even see the trees that stood by the side; it had the effect of making everyone inside it feel awfully small.

I'll see you in a bit, Mateo had said to Tori in the izakaya, and he stepped outside, where he could take a deep breath, even though every intake of air felt shallow. Nothing felt enough. He made his way out, back onto the main alley: there were still so many people, so many passers-by in Pontocho that he had to find his way out of that too, and he finally stumbled upon a small park, one that overlooked

a section of the Kamo River. It was here where the feeling finally relinquished its hold over him, loosening its grip over his chest, dissipating into something lighter, freer.

There were people about, down at the riverbank. (Jing looked about her: it was almost bleak, really, to feel like they were the only ones in the park.) Lovers, loners: everything amber-lit, on either side of the stream. Even in the dark he had known he could fall in love with this place, this river, so adept at catching the many lights of the city, and so adept, too, in making them dance in its grasp. (A wind picked up then: nothing stirred, not even the trees to the side, bearing their leaves in the dark.)

Mateo had heard it then: heard it whistle, and pop. He remembered looking upwards, northwards—upriver. And then more fireworks, again and again, lighting the water and its many patrons, the river alive, as though aflame. Every time another went off, he imagined a pair of hands striking a piano, a chord in minor key: he imagined Daniel beside him, witnessing the spectacle with him, until he was really there, loving him back, both of them happy and content to remain in the shadows of this soft-lit city. That night he thought back to that summer day, in New York, in search of West 53rd Street like all the other fucking tourists, trying to intuit which way was uptown and which way was down. He was short-sighted, it turned out, he needed glasses; he couldn't read any of the road signs, right on the verge of realising that what he had was a problem, that this was not how other people perceived the world, in a blur. Watching the fireworks, he remembered why he was there in the first place, why he had thought of heading to MoMA that day. It was *RANDEN*, he recalled; it was on display. It was one of the nine installations at the Barbara London show, *Video Spaces*, in the René d'Harnoncourt Galleries. In the brochure was a picture of the artist, Han Aw, heavily pregnant, standing amidst a clearing within a bamboo grove.

Jing's mother.

More claps resounded across the sky. (A wind continued to blow through the park; Jing had to pull her jacket tighter around her, while her friends had to stop, close their eyes, hold their hair back.) Mateo had watched each firework go up in a soar, not just golden ones this time, but silver ones too, even a few in emerald green. Each one appeared to dissipate in a sigh, each one reminding him of what he really had: the grandeur, the uncanniness. The illusion.

It ruined him.

They sat by a road. They were in the middle of a small neighbourhood, at the northwestern exit of the Gyoen: nothing but low-lying buildings, packed tightly together into a grid. The three decided to rest outside a minimart, one with an impossibly bright sign in white and lime green. Tori went inside and quickly came back out, handing the two of them a bottle of beer each.

I didn't know, said Jing, the first time she'd spoken all evening. She knew that Mateo had taken a look at *Video Spaces* that summer, had even managed to catch her mother's artist talk. He had written to her, telling her how cool it was to see *RANDEN* in a space like that, the only pre-1990 work in the show, placed between the Stan Douglas and Chris Marker installations. But Jing didn't know that that was how Mateo had met Daniel; she hadn't even heard of his name till a few weeks ago, over the phone, when the relationship had already run its course. In that moment, Jing could have asked for any number of details, like what was Daniel's surname, for instance, or what the guy did for a living. She knew nothing about this man. Instead Jing asked Mateo if he had hated it, being with her, when she had asked for his help in Kyoto. No, said Mateo, he didn't hate it. It just reminded him of things, is all.

Tori was glancing at the two of them. What is going on? she asked. You have to tell me, she said, looking pointedly at Jing, and although Jing bristled at her friend's insistence, she knew that there was no avoiding it now, the story. She asked if Tori still remembered who Jing's mother was, and she said that she did, of course. Mateo had just mentioned it earlier, the performance artist. Tori asked what the matter was with her mother, and Jing said that she was dying. From throat cancer, she said: Stage 4. She had a laryngectomy last month, though I don't think it bought her that much time.

Tori was aghast; she looked pale in the illumination of the minimart's sign. I have to ask, she said, but what is a, a—a laryngectomy? Jing demonstrated by placing a hand over her neck. They take out your entire larynx, she said, and create a hole on your neck, to help you breathe.

Tori blinked. A hole? she said. An actual—

Yes, said Jing. The hole. The doctors put a plastic case over it too, to protect it.

Tori nodded, before looking down at her feet, at her own bottle of beer, held in both hands. Jing knew that she was trying to imagine it, having a hole in her own neck. But how to tell her that nothing could compare to the sight of the actual thing? How to tell her friend the sheer number of steps involved, just to take care of it at home, on a twice-daily basis? How to tell her about the way her hands had shook, as she swabbed the skin around the opening, the stoma—or the way she had winced, and shuddered, as she watched her grandmother remove and reinsert the inner cannula, that plastic tube, through her mother's neck? Some stories were truly impossible to tell, thought Jing—especially the one about her relief, really, to be here in Kyoto. She felt relieved, grateful even, to be sent here instead of being stuck at home in Singapore, with her mother dying in her makeshift bed on the living room couch.

Tori took a drink from her bottle. So what is the connection? she asked again. Between Han Aw and Kyoto?

Mateo cleared his throat. He readjusted his glasses. Jing's mother wants her to recreate an artwork, he said.

Jing sighed. Yes.

What artwork? Tori asked, and Mateo explained: in 1970, Han Aw travelled around Malaysia and Indonesia, conducting research on an ethnomusicology project. She discovered she was pregnant with Jing, on the same day that Paul McCartney announced he was leaving the Beatles. It prompted the artist to make a series of works that would define the rest of her career: she gave lectures and stage performances about the nature of having a child, about the responsibility of bringing a child into the world, the politics of being pregnant, giving birth, making life. That same year she performed at the first Pride parade in New York, said Mateo. Han Aw made a bunch of friends there, gathered a small crew of cameramen, and flew all of them here, to this city, where she would film a work known as *RANDEN*. Have you seen it?

Tori shook her head.

It's a great film, said Mateo. You need to imagine, Tori, this woman with very long hair, wearing a white dress, facing away from the camera. She's in the middle of Kyoto, standing completely still for like, what, forty seconds? And then she *screams*.

Tori gasps. She what?

Sí, said Mateo. The bitch screams, for fifteen seconds. And then she goes quiet for five seconds, before the scene changes, and it's her again, except she's standing somewhere else, another place in the same city. And again, forty seconds of silence, until—

She screams?

Uhuh, said Mateo, for another fifteen seconds. The scene then changes again, and the artist screams again, and then it's another

scene, another place—

How many times?

Jing held up the number with her fingers. Seven, she said. I even have the places memorised: the rock garden at Ryoan-ji; the Sanmon Gate at Nanzen-ji; the landscape garden at Taizo-in Temple; the Shariden Garden at Rokuo-in Temple; the dry waterfall, Ryumonbaku, at Tenryu-ji Temple; the Shishi Rock, in the grounds of the Hogon-in Temple. The seventh one is tricky, but—

It's Arashiyama, said Mateo, the bamboo grove. It's the one place we haven't filmed yet.

Yet? said Tori. So the two of you have been—

Filming, yes. I am the cameraman, said Mateo.

Tori looked at Jing, a look that now held wonder alongside the fear. So you've been—

Screaming my head off? Yah, said Jing, I have. And before they knew it she and Tori were laughing, clutching one another's hands, leaning against the other by the roadside. Mateo watched the girls with a smirk on his face, and took another swig from his bottle. Jing and Tori soon righted themselves, finishing the rest of their beers.

Do you remember where we started filming? said Mateo.

Yah, said Jing. At Rokuo-in.

Mateo nodded. You had the stills from *RANDEN* printed out, just to check we were at the exact same spot.

That's right, said Jing. I also passed you my mother's Handycam.

Mateo nodded again. You did, he said. And I did my best, you know, to make sure I captured the same spot at the same angle, the same stone-paved path that extended from the main gate. You stood a few metres ahead, asking how was your position, and I gave you a thumbs up, telling you to stay where you are, surrounded by maple trees. And then you took off your jacket, and pulled out this white blouse from your bag. Mateo smiled. It was a reference, right, to your

mother's original white dress? he said. And you know, Jing, I found it really funny, the concept, funny to the point of absurd: continuity, it's not just a thing of films, I realised, but of memory too, of the images we hold onto. He paused. I didn't know, for instance, how long the image of Daniel was standing next to me, there at the Shariden Garden, he said. But there he was anyway, fully formed, like the real thing, dressed in cargo pants that nearly touched the ground. And he had his, his prescription sunglasses too, with that *horrible* leather cord slung around his neck. And there was a way I *swear* that Daniel was gazing at you, Jing, standing right beside me: the same gaze on his face the first time we met last summer, fixed instead on your mother's back that time.

And I don't know, said Mateo. I don't know if you noticed this moment, Jing, but I—I put the camcorder down. I had to. I had to look at this Daniel, here with me in Kyoto, staring straight ahead, paying me no mind. Like *I* was the one who wasn't there. Like *I* wasn't the one staring at *him*, at this, this man, this man with the cargo pants. But he knew, didn't he? He knew I didn't care about art anymore; all I cared about was this guy I found at the museum. I wanted to ask if he knew that I was already memorising every part of him, every ridiculous detail.

Did he know how easy it was? said Mateo that night. To, to bring him back, to bring him—bring him here? How the real difficulty lay elsewhere, within myself? I wanted to show him, you know, the, the dark corner where I put all kinds of stuff, a whole assortment of things, where they would suffer from more than the usual neglect. I wanted him to see it, said Mateo, show that place to him. I wanted him to know that I still love him, I do. Needless to say.

## 4

Lately Tori had allowed herself to feel comfortable again, at ease. On the 1st of March, 1996, she began her shift as usual, by taking a spray to the front desk and wiping the counter down with a cloth. She then flipped open the room register and checked the day's log, to see which guests were checking in and which ones were leaving. She brewed a pot of tea for herself too, to last her throughout the day. She then reached behind the counter and switched the heater off, for what might have been the first time that year.

The telephone rang. She picked it up and sent her first morning greetings over the phone, to the concierge of a serviced apartment in Tokyo. He would like to book a room for two, on behalf of a guest, he said: six nights in total, from the nineteenth to the twenty-fourth. The dates were still two weeks shy from the cherry blossom forecast, which should mean good news for the concierge. Tori checked the register, and said they had a few private rooms on the fourth floor available.

Excellent, said the concierge, I'll have one of those rooms. He then asked if he could confirm one other thing, and Tori told him to go ahead, as she marked the dates out with a pencil. The concierge cleared

his throat, and asked if there was a person named Tori Yamamoto working at the ryokan.

Tori paused: her hand froze, the tip of the pencil hovering just above the page. Why do you ask?

The concierge seemed to have picked up on Tori's trepidation. He replied, rather apprehensively: My guest says that he is a friend of hers.

Tori told herself to take a breath. She asked if she could have his guest's name. The concierge told her that he had the names of both guests actually: Mateo Calvo Morales and Jing Aw. He asked if he needed to spell their names out for her, he could go letter by letter if necessary, and she said no, that was not needed. I'm Tori Yamamoto, by the way, she said to the concierge. I'm the one they're looking for.

The phone rang again, twenty minutes later: it was Mateo, naturally, calling her from Tokyo. He asked if she remembered him, and she told him that she did, of course. She kept her voice as level as possible, and asked Mateo how he had found her. He said: I sent a postcard to you, to the mailing address you left me and Jing. And guess who left a message for me at my apartment?

Tori didn't have to work hard to remember: there could only be one address she'd given him. Regardless, she asked: Who?

Ay dios padraastro, said Mateo. Your stepfather, Tori.

Both hands tightened around the handset. It was harder to keep her voice level now, as she asked Mateo what the message was, and he had to pause, just like the concierge, sensing that something was not quite right with the conversation. He gave me the number to your workplace, said Mateo. Told me to check on you, see if you're well. Standard daddy things, you know?

Tori closed her eyes. So they know, she thought. They must have tracked her down, somehow, before deciding to let her be. Right, she said in reply. Standard daddy things.

There was another pause over the line. In any case, said Mateo

finally: I can't wait to see you. There's no one quite like you, Miss Japan.

Tori smiled. He did say that a lot, Miss Japan, Miss Singapore; Mateo was Miss Universe, of course, Miss Universe 1994. She was relieved to find that the nostalgia she was filled with was a simple one, uncomplicated; it was something she might be able to live with, even enjoy. It has been a while, said Tori. I hope you're well. She told him that she couldn't wait to see Jing too, before putting the phone down on its cradle.

The rest of her shift proceeded relatively normally that day. In the evening she walked to the nearby sento and put her clothes away. She then made sure to take a long shower, letting the hot water run over her body. There was a mother on the other side, shampooing her two young daughters. Tori turned her tap off and walked over to the mosaic-tiled tub, where she found herself not just sitting, but reclining, letting the water lap over her shoulders, her neck, and then up to her ears, so that the only thing she could hear was the muffled churning of the water in the bath, the sounds of other people reduced to mere murmurings, while her voice continued to repeat itself in her mind, saying: They know, they know. They've always known. They've known, all this while.

Hello? someone said, as though from above. You okay?

Tori blinked: she had no idea where she was. She tried to breathe, but she couldn't—she then winced, and found her hands and knees bruised, from being on all fours on the pavement. She tried to breathe again, and coughed; she blinked once more, only to shed tears this time, plenty of them, dripping over the concrete like rain.

Hey, said the voice again. You know English?

The voice belonged to the pair of trainers, standing right in front of her. She nodded.

Oh, said the voice, oh good. Are you okay?

Tori nodded again. The stranger was kneeling in front of her now, sliding a packet of tissues towards her on the ground.

You want?

Her hands and knees continued to hurt. Tori took a tissue from the packet and quickly wiped her face.

We don't need to talk, he said. But let me take you home, okay?

All right, said Tori. Thank you. He looked kind, she told herself—she figured him to be a backpacker, someone who must have just arrived in the city. He never touched her, only hovered about her, protectively, when she rose to her feet. He asked her what happened, and she shuddered, looked around.

Bad dream, was all she said, though it was the truth. It was. She was still in her nightclothes, barefooted and without any trousers on. She allowed herself one hard look at Kyoto Station before turning her back on the place; there was no screaming, no ruin, no pain. It had been more than a year, she reminded herself.

Tori asked for the time. The stranger checked his watch: 5:51am.

She nodded; she'd only been like this for a few minutes, then. And do you—do you have a spare pair of jeans? she asked.

The backpacker put a hand to his head, thinking quickly. Um, uh—I got shorts, he said. Can?

Tori nodded another time. He quickly opened his backpack and managed to dig them out, a pair of denim shorts. She put them on.

You need slippers also?

Tori could have cried again, at the kindness this stranger was showing her. She kept her voice steady as she said yes, yes please.

She slid her feet into flip-flops two sizes too big. But they felt spongy, well worn. You sure nothing happened to you? asked the stranger, and Tori shook her head.

No, she said. Lucky me.



She knew the way back was just straight ahead, northwards, with a quick left at Takoyakushi-dori. She asked the stranger if he was looking for a place to stay that day, and he said that he was, but only somewhere cheap, like at a hostel or something. Tori understood, and nodded at him, telling him to follow her, to Shinmachi, where the ryokan was located. She switched the light on over the front desk and flipped through the register, noting the spare bed she still had in the men's communal room on the third floor. Only then did Tori finally think to ask him for his name, and instead of telling her he reached into his backpack and handed her his passport, kept safe in a wrinkled ziplock bag. Singapore, said the front cover; that's how she recognised his accent, she thought.

Tori took his details down. As she did, it surprised her to see that today, technically, would be the man's twenty-third birthday. Tori handed his passport back to him, wincing, still, from the slight bruise she had on her palms.

Thank you, Isaac. Welcome to Kyoto.



The first thing Isaac and Sherry did at the hotel was fuck, which was to say that they did so urgently, clumsily, desperately. Sherry hooked her arms around Isaac's neck and remained silent, hoisting his sex into hers, her body this nimble, frightening, but also wondrous thing to him. Every time she came she threw her head back and let out this low, guttural sound and grit her teeth together, not in a way that suggested restraint, but the need to compress it, contain it, the violence and the pleasure and the feeling. After they were done, Isaac lay on their bed, tired and utterly spent. Sherry hopped off his body, tossed his condom into the trash and cleaned herself in the shower. When she came back out she picked up the phone and

ordered room service.

What's the cheapest thing you have? she said into the phone. Okay. Yah. Terima kasih.

Sherry hung up, then turned to Isaac and patted his arm.

Hope you're okay with instant noodles, she said. After that we have to go out and buy stuff.

Isaac was still sweaty, panting. Can, he said.

Sherry rolled her eyes, and looked through her Eastpak for her spare bra. You got see a supermarket around here? Anything nearby?

He shook his head.

Right, she said. Tonight.

That evening Isaac and Sherry found themselves before a Giant outlet a few blocks away, with more aisles of produce either of them had ever seen in their lives. Sherry took Isaac to the bread section and chose a loaf with nuts and raisins; at the fruit section she picked out bananas, apples and pears. She would say things like: This is good, this won't need to be in a refrigerator, you can just eat it whenever you feel it's time. That or: This is healthy, Zach, it will make you full, you don't need to eat anything else. She would then ask Isaac if he understood, and he would nod and say yah, he did. Sometimes she would ask him a second time, and he'd have to go yah, yah, he got it.

Try to drink only bottled water if you can.

Okay.

Sometimes tap water might be okay, but most of the time it's not.

Okay.

Also always keep your plastic bags, you don't know when you might need them.

Okay.

Do you know how to fold? Into small tight squares?

I think so.

Sherry narrowed her eyes at him, even as she gave him a smile. I show you later, she said.

Isaac would later count the things that Sherry made him get: ponchos, insecticide, bandages, powder, packets of sweetener, a comb. After they paid for everything Sherry handed them all to him, just for him, to keep. This is how it starts, he thought at the time; this is how their lives would begin to fill, starting with these little things. He only hoped that his backpack would be big enough.

Back at the hotel they entertained themselves by taking pictures, with the disposable camera Isaac had taken from his mother. They took pictures of the bed, the toilet, the view out the window. They took pictures of one another, alone and together, striking various poses before they decided to fuck another time. It started when Sherry placed one hand on Isaac's arm and placed the other on his pants; he looked at her, saw the intent in her eyes once again, and got instantly aroused. It was then he thought: it doesn't take much to love someone like Sherry. Sherry was beautiful, and available, and strong. Sherry was a leader, a guide. Sherry knew what to do and knew what she wanted. And now she wanted him, and she was wanting him all the time, it seemed. But Isaac made sure he was in charge this time. He held her wrists down as he pumped into her, again and again and again, asking her if she liked it, if she liked how it felt, was she sure that she did? Did she want him to come, and was she close to coming? Did any of it feel good? he asked, as Sherry's lips curled into a smile. After they were done they cleaned up and settled back into bed, unclear if it was still day or night. Who knew where the sun was any longer? And then another thought occurred to Isaac as he lay on the bed.

Can I ask you something? he said. Can I ask you about that show?

What show? said Sherry, looking at him. *The Golden Pillow*?

Isaac nodded. He asked about the show's name: Is there, like, an actual golden pillow? Sherry nodded back and said yah, there is. It's a gold-coloured stone that Ren Niang's father gave his mother a long time ago. Ren Niang? asked Isaac—Xiao Dan's childhood friend? He then asked what was so important about this stone, and Sherry said: Love lor. It's love, Zach. When Ren Niang's father left for Singapore, he gave his mother this stone to remember him by, and she held on to it, slept with it, used it as pillow. She did this for more than twenty years, loving Ren Niang's father but hating him also, counting every day he doesn't come back for them. But does he? asked Isaac, and Sherry said yah, he does. Ren Niang's father is still in love with his mother, even though he has this whole other family in Singapore, all in this crazy big house. So he runs to Thailand? said Isaac, and Sherry said no, more like the other way round. He gets them to come to Singapore.

There was a siren, then, wailing past the hotel. Isaac stared at the ceiling of their room, waiting for the sound to fade away before he asked: Is he a good guy?

Who? Ren Niang's father?

Sure.

Yah, said Sherry. He's a good guy.

And Ren Niang? asked Isaac. Is he a good guy?

Yah, said Sherry again. He's a good guy also, Zach.

Isaac turned his head, to smile at Sherry. He found that she'd been staring at the ceiling too. Do they get together? he asked. Xiao Dan and Ren Niang? And Sherry looked at him again, shaking her head. I dunno actually, she said, with tired eyes. Isaac told her he didn't understand. I also dunno, she said. No one knows who is with who by the end of the final episode. It's too heartbreaking for anyone to decide.

Isaac turned away—he felt a sudden pain in his head. Okay, he said, I get it, even though he wasn't actually sure if he did. He closed his eyes, and Sherry switched on the television, flicking past the Malaysian channels until she finally hit Channel 8, at the tail end of the day's *Singapore Today*, broadcast through a haze of static. *People around the world can expect brilliant views in the night sky from the 1st to the 3rd of March*, the newscaster said, *as Comet Hyakutake, also known as the Great Comet of 1996, becomes the closest-flying comet to Earth in more than two hundred years*. While Sherry strained to listen to the newscaster's voice, steadily increasing the volume on the TV, all he could hear was the static, the haze, the noise. Isaac reached for a pillow and placed it over his head.

A while passed; he didn't know how long. Isaac was hoping he could touch her, at least, perhaps feel her lying next to him, though it was clear that she was no longer on the bed. But Isaac could still hear the TV, hear people speaking to one another, not with words but with interference, electrical interference, which caused his head to buzz with the noise too. He figured that Sherry was still in the room, just seated somewhere else, like perhaps the window, the toilet, or even the floor, until he finally heard that other noise, of the door opening and closing, and then not opening again, no matter how long and how much he willed it to.

She'll be back, he thought. She will be. He balled his hand into a fist and put it in his mouth, until the TV began to clear up again, with *News 8 at 10*.

He would never forget her either.

Sherry took care to leave a few items behind: a set of timetables from the railway station; a pocket atlas, containing maps of every country in the Asian continent; a folder of cash in several currencies, like rupiah, pesos, yuan and yen. No baht, he noted ruefully, the number 1,500 coming to mind.

He found the flyer a few hours later, for the talent show *Star Search*, inviting interested applicants to register and audition. He discovered it as he was flipping through the pages of the pocket atlas, absentminded and then suddenly alert: it'd been wedged in the final pages of the small book, the ink on the paper long worn out along its edges.

She had told him about the show before, the difference between *Star Search* and the Star Awards. *Star Search* is an acting competition, which Zoe Tay had won, of course. She was the show's first ever champion in 1988. The competition has since taken place once every two years, he remembered, which led Isaac to look at the flyer once again, at the year that was printed beneath the title.

1996.

Isaac checked out of the hotel on Friday morning. He asked the receptionist for directions to the rail station, where he bought a one-way ticket to the airport in Selangor. He studied the large dashboard in Terminal One, confused but not daunted by the constantly changing information, at the numbers and letters rattling and turning, always turning. The time was half past nine, and he walked over to the customer service counter, where a lady gave him a smile.

How can I help you?

Hi, said Isaac. What's your name?

I'm Huda, sir.

Hi, Huda, I'm Isaac.

Isaac reached over the counter to shake her hand. Huda took his hand and smiled at him, with a slight hint of irritation crossing her eyes as Isaac placed his backpack on the counter. I'm sure you got see guys like me all the time, he said to her.

Huda didn't nod, though she did continue to smile. You want to know what is the first flight out of here?

## About the Author



Daryl Qilin Yam is the author of *Kappa Quartet* (2016), a novel longlisted for the inaugural Epigram Books Fiction Prize, and *Shantih Shantih Shantih* (2021), a novella. He is also an arts organiser, and co-founded the literary non-profit Sing Lit Station. He holds a BA (Hons) in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Warwick; he won the Second Year Prize from the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, and spent an intercalated year studying under the AIKOM programme at the University of Tokyo. His prose and poetry have been published in a number of anthologies and literary journals, including *Berlin Quarterly*, *Queer Southeast Asia*, *Transnational Literature* and the *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series.



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

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love and the elusive nature of reality.”**

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*It wasn't love, really.  
They were just trying to make  
something out of their lives.*

And so begins this tale of four friends—Isaac, Tori,  
Jing and Mateo—whose lives become entangled  
after a madcap weekend in Kyoto in 1996,  
during the passing of Comet Hyakutake.

Daryl Qilin Yam's genre-defying second novel ranges  
across countries and decades, charting the tributaries  
of pain we thread with our friends and the arcs of  
the many stories we tell in order to live.

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