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Joshua Kam

How the  
Man in Green  
Saved Pahang,  
Possibly <sup>and</sup> the World



“A wild ride from start to finish.”

Cyril Wong, author of *This Side of Heaven*

“Borgesian, even Manichean in spirit, with almost reverent borrowings from Nusantara mythologies to Abrahamic religiosity, this novel is a wild ride from start to finish, riffing on Malayan history, politics and folklore in a surprisingly redemptive arc, while remaining deeply interrogative about what it means to keep true to goodness in the ever-changing face of evil.”



CYRIL WONG

Two-time Singapore Literature Prize-winning  
author of *This Side of Heaven*

“What a trip! This 21st century adventure quest with an Islamic saint also brings us on a madcap tour through a multitude of Malaysian mythologies—Malay epics, Taoist pantheons, WWII/Emergency/Merdeka heroics, and more. Even more vitally, it gives us hope amidst the dire news of our era—political corruption, environmental devastation and bigotry—reassuring us that the human/divine spirit still flourishes in the late-capitalist tropics, and is ultimately destined to triumph over evil. An absolute delight, and truly, deliciously Malaysian.”



NG YI-SHENG

Award-winning author of *Lion City*

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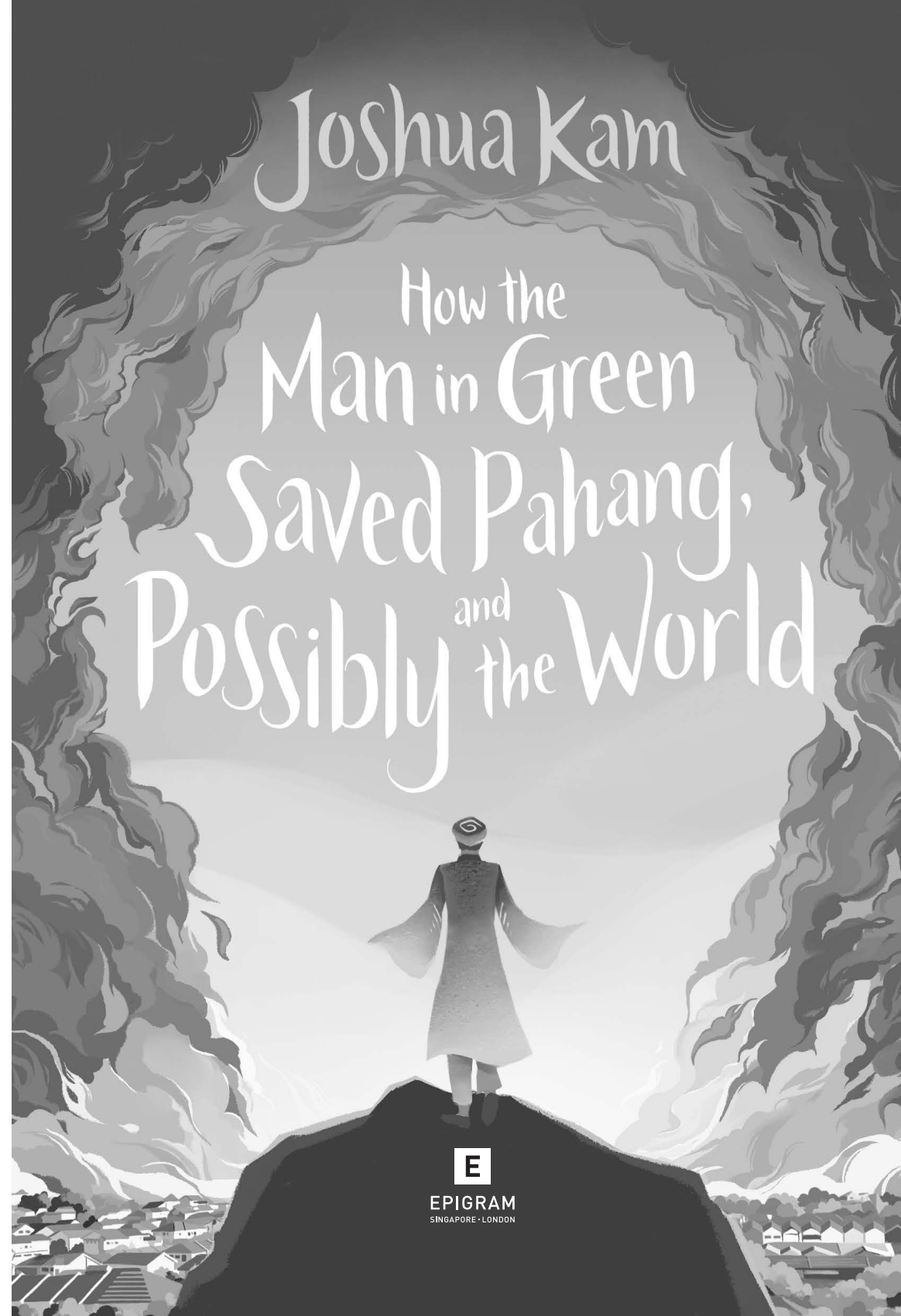
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*For my mother,  
and all my matriarchs*

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# 1

## PIGEONSHIT

HE WAS FIRST spotted outside Masjid Jamek. Before the grille of the mosque, a man draped in green scratched his sweaty face with the perplexity of one locked out of his own house. His forehead shimmered, and the pink mosque shimmered, and the laminate sign on the gate shimmered and simmered in the mid-morning sun.

“Official Business inside. Visitors tomorrow.”

No local was trying to get in. A cluster of Dutch mat *sallehs* sweltered in their elephant pants and not much else, trying to turn shawls into headscarves. Gabriel had been passing through. Frankly, if he hadn't had to get some lotion at the pharmacy, he might not even have left the station, much less noticed the man in green. Gabriel glanced back. The fellow still stood before the gate. And the mosque was still closed on a Thursday.

At last, a security guard came out of the *pondok*, facing the chap in the green turban and green robes who was peering through the grille gate.

“Closed,” he said simply, making doors with his palms, folding one over the other. He repeated it again, in English this time, but still the green man seemed not to understand. Instead, he gesticulated wildly, fluttering his hands past the gate. And this time, he started speaking.

Arabic, thought Gabriel. He hadn’t studied it since uni. Four years ago—had it been that long already?

“I must see him,” the green man was saying, over and over to the dumbfounded guard. “I must see him and treat the patient.”

Gabriel turned back. The pharmacy was so close. Just across the street its green signboard flashed and beckoned. It wasn’t even a cough, so much as some ulcers on his tongue, and all he wanted right now was a cup of ice and some Oral Aid to numb the pain. He bit his lip. The curiosity of it all, though. Without thinking about it, he stepped out from the gathering crowd to touch the guard on the shoulder.

“Bang, I can translate,” he said, his years as an interpreter jump-starting anew. “He wants to go inside and...see him.”

“Inside? Cannot. VIPs only,” the guard explained. “Please lah. We have rules here.”

The green man glanced at Gabriel and their eyes held fast like brambles. He was younger than Gabriel had assumed—about his own age, though the crisp, close-cut beard concealed it somewhat. Gabriel couldn’t tell where he was from; he could have passed himself off as anyone in KL, one of ten thousand visitors from Pakistan or Bangladesh. An Iraqi tourist. Reassuringly Muslim? No, that wasn’t certain. There was something very Levantine about his Arabic, but he spoke it like a second language, and Gabriel found himself trying hard to catch the cadence, to find more clues, to train his ears. The man’s eyes glinted. Gabriel felt dimly that he’d walked into a trap.

Turning from the guard, the stranger addressed Gabriel again in Arabic.

“But I must go in. Yunus has the fish! I must pluck it from his lips. I must go in.”

Gabriel cocked his head. Wasn’t it the other way round in the story? “He wants to go in,” he said in Malay. “Is there a Yunus in there meeting him?”

“He can’t! It’s just closed.” The guard lowered his voice and pointed surreptitiously with his thumb to the cluster of police cars and officers embanked on the alley across. “I don’t know how you know about a Yunus or a body or nothing, but even an imam came this morning and the whole ceremony has been on ice. The minister’s here. No one comes down for deaths like this—not usually. But if anyone else goes in, it’s the end for me.” He clucked his tongue and drew his thumb against his throat.

Gabriel nodded, then shrugged. Was shrugging a universal gesture? Would the man in green understand? Gabriel could see them behind the grille clearly now—a line of navy uniforms on the red-brick pavement with their hands at their waists, shielding the doors of the mosque from view. And behind them were suited figures, hunched in the noonday heat. He turned back and translated all this to the green man.

The green man shook his head. “It won’t do. It won’t do! I must go in—I’m in the wrong time already, the fish has all but swallowed the bait and it’s time to—” His eyes glazed over in their frenzy while he pleaded with the guard. Then he grew very still.

In what Gabriel took for nervousness, the fellow began fidgeting with his hands, rubbing his fingers like rubbing off sand. Now the

guard was asking questions again, wanting to know exactly what the green man wanted, and Gabriel was attempting to speak over both. He was still trying to decide if he wanted to translate this fresh nonsense about fish and time, when a deafening rush of wings *phwooshed* out from past the station and over the Klang River.

Pigeons. A whole cloud of them bore into view, wing to wing, so densely in formation that Gabriel couldn't make out the street behind them. From behind the Robinsons building, some thousands had materialised and swept over the mosque. Women ducked, men scattered, children pointed and squinted. The pigeons flew low, and the sound of flapping filled the gap under the LRT pillars like the sound of a monsoon. The guard looked up. The white people in their mosque-mandated sarongs looked up. The line of officers wobbled as they braced for the typhoon of wings sweeping over station and mosque.

What happened next Gabriel would try very hard to recall in order, but never manage. Everyone looked up—pigeons don't flock in KL. Not in hundreds. Not in tens of thousands. Not in a square kilometre all at once. And not blooming out of nowhere from behind the damn Robinsons building. He glanced back down at those around him. Everyone was looking up except the green man. He just stared at Gabriel and winked. The bloody basket just winked. Now *that* was a universal sign. Gabe could barely fathom what was happening before he found himself gently but firmly pushed aside as the green man turned to the padlocked door. His hands steadied and hovered over the lock. The distracted guard barely heard the click of metal as the bolt sprang from its ward and the lock clattered to the ground. Gabriel had no time to register this as the green man glanced his way one more time, then leaned in to breathe on his ear.

“God's not dead, just wrong, right?” he whispered, in the crispest English, then turned to the mosque again. The gate rolled like a stone and the bastard was through.

The hell had he known to say *that*?

By now, the pigeons had descended almost directly upon the mosque, domes and all. Even the policemen were beginning to panic, and one of them pulled out a pistol and fired into the air. But with their faces all upturned, no one saw the green man glide round the pavement over the grass, and dart into the mosque.

Presently, the guard finally gathered what had happened, and glanced at the cloud of pigeons that were now alighting in the forecourt. And just beyond that, the man's jade-green robes were whirling and whirling. The pursuit began. Before he knew it, Gabriel too found himself running, though exactly whose side he was on, he couldn't tell. Who would say something as specific and absurd as that before using passerine magic in a mosque?

The guard expected the pigeons to scatter as he ran. They did not. Each time he and Gabriel threatened to step on a cluster of feathers and claws, they would ripple away left or right, fluttering in a flurry of blinding wings that blocked all line of sight and foiled all chase. But the green man whirled as in a dance and glided through the gaps among the flapping wings, handily ducking past the policemen's line.

“Hooi!” the guard bellowed, at last, trying to catch their attention, but this too was almost drowned out by the cacophony of cooing pigeons. By the time they found the line of policemen, the horde had just begun to disperse. But every human was doused in feathers. Feathers and the unmistakable waft of pigeonshit. And beyond that, the ministers—Gabriel could pick out their faces from the headlines



of the last five years, even the foreign affairs minister—could at last be seen shielded against the onslaught by their bodyguards' jackets.

But even then, they were all too late. Past the ring of tourists, past the guards and officers, past the ministers splattered with pigeonpiss and pigeonshit, past the perimeter of yellow tape on the garden's edge, past the tessellated tile and the Moorish arches and the Mughal domes designed by some white boy in 1908, the green man stood still. Right at the tip of the grounds, where the tiles and grass gave way to the cement embankments at the river's fork, a body lay at his feet. Soaked to the bone, the corpse's drenched clothes sagged over the bloated belly, the pruned skin, the pallor of a face. A new stench hit Gabriel's nostrils, cutting like a parang through the stink of bird. Death-smell.

Gabriel crossed himself. Everyone had paused to see the green man, kneeling with his hand hovering over the body's heart and lips. He said nothing. Just a tap of his knuckles on the chest, like knocking on a toilet door to find out who was inside. And no one—not even the pursuant police—could mistake the moment when the body's eyes fluttered open.

The body's face began to shrink, the river gunk streaming out of the waterlogged pores until the face looked almost normal, if a bit pale. The eyes, once swollen shut, began blinking. The belly too subsided, as did the bloating in the arms and the feet and the neck. Then suddenly the body belched out an unmistakable living groan.

The birds were alighting, but the people in the mosque grounds, with every eye on the resurrected man, paused as the green man backed away and the corpse struggled to stand up. By now he was quite recognisable—an independent blogger who'd made the news of late. He'd been a surly one, about as quick to smash the government as

the opposition. Recently missing. On the eve of his wedding, missing. A certain Yunus Musa.

Yunus Musa the corpse turned about. He opened his mouth as though he had something to say, recently restored to himself and all. marvelled at each unstiffening limb, and each digit of each finger, with his mouth agape and a ring of pigeons taking flight about him. The showmanship of all this was incontrovertible. But when he looked up, he saw the line of policemen and cabinet members, and blanched, returning to his pallor post rigor mortis from a minute before.

What happened next Gabriel found hardest of all to describe. The flock of pigeons had gathered over their eyes once again, and before anyone knew it, the resurrectee was obscured in the many-eyed cloud of wings. The green man turned to his audience, grinning with a savage sapience. The curtain of birds fell and rose. No photo recorded the moment. Some said Yunus, like his namesake, jumped right back into the water from whence he'd been exhumed. Another witness suggested that a panicked gunshot, muffled by the pigeon's cacophony, caught the green man by the ear. More than a few claimed to see the revived blogger borne aloft like a cherub in the cloud of pigeons, each one lifting him by his drenched clothes up into the air and out of sight.

At any rate, once the birds had fled, the sun was back on people's necks, the forecourt was plastered in shit, and the green man and his patient were gone.



The body had rolled in with the river that morning. On the embankments of cement that suspended the coral domes of Masjid

Jamek over the confluence, it must have floated down the Gombak River and bobbed into view on the Klang River. It surfaced suddenly, like a monitor lizard's head in the morning. Indeed, Mas Wibowo the sweeper had almost mistaken the body's drenched clothes for just that before the corpse flipped over and a human face came into view. He swore in Javanese and ran for the custodians in the mosque.

It took some makeshift rope of yellow raffia and four groundskeepers—himself included—to haul the body to shore. Astaga, this was above everyone's pay grade, heaving a corpse into a mosque. Even to wash it, this was too much. The body had to be washed. Police were called first. The imam was notified, but he had been conscripted for a conference in Kelantan for the weekend; an imam from a neighbouring mosque of approximate stature had to be brought in. By now the police were here. There could be no washing of the body, of course, till they had their way, but the Balai Polis Diraja seemed to be in no hurry at all.

Instead, a squad of riot police had materialised. Within the hour, and in rush-hour traffic. Officers fanned out around the mosque gardens. The chief, stepping out of his van, seemed very certain of the procedure, but not much else. The deceased was to be extracted for an autopsy. Before washing the body, if possible. The sooner they dragged the corpse out of sight and into the hearse, the better. Less publicity is the best publicity, he muttered to someone taking notes.

And then bloody limousines with bloody ministers inside rolled up at the gate. Whoever let pigs into a mosque should be hanged, he muttered.



For a long moment, Gabriel stared at the retreating cloud of solid bird, then back at the mosque, then at the faces that had frozen about him. First the custodian and the security guards, then at each bereted officer in blue. And looking at the centre of the maelstrom, his eyes locked on the minister himself. He wasn't even one of the big ones, the sort who'd say absurdities about Israel or tigers or the price of kangkong. He was one of the quiet frogs who'd jumped into the new party before GE14. He stood sweltering in a cogent blend of shit and sweat that polished his baldness and stained the pits of his blue suit black. Italian bespoke, thought Gabriel—he'd read that in some article. Something too about the crocodile leather shoes the minister wore every day, but by the look of them now, you couldn't be sure. In the chaos, the minister's eyes darted like fish in a bowl, flashing up at the sky, then about him, then at the growing puddle of putrid water where the corpse had lain a minute before. Incontrovertible, all of it. The pigeons had come. The body was gone.

Gabriel breathed, looking back first with unspeakable longing at the LRT station, at the pharmacy, at the commute to the church office he'd so willingly derailed. Then to the sliding gate through which his turbaned acquaintance had eluded a city and kidnapped a reanimated corpse. Was there even a designated crime for that? The journalists would be crawling over here soon. More police. No, dammit, the police were already here.

It was just at that moment that the gathering crowd beyond the gate, stirred to new mania, latched onto the sliding grille, rolled it back, and poured in with their phones and poorly wrapped sarongs.

In retrospect, Gabriel could never fathom afterwards why the police hadn't seized him on the spot, abetting a trespasser and all.

The headline of some front page the next day would have reeked of conspiracy. “Indian Accomplice Distracts Guards as Green Illusionist Escapes, Says Witness with Selfie-stick”. And of all days to wear his foreign-arse black cassock to work. But then, what precisely could they have arrested him for, arcane resurrection? Urban body disposal? Bad interpretership, most likely.

He breathed, flicked his wrist and caught the hands of his watch under the sun’s glare on the glass. Eleven fucking fifty. He’d well missed the committee meeting at church. And he was about to miss lunch.

That did it. With a city poised on the precipice of ten thousand conspiracies, a Parliament turned zoo house and the Moorish floors of Masjid Jamek ankle deep in shit, Gabriel Paul strode out. Jostled by the crowd, but otherwise unimpeded, he hopped on an LRT, and got chicken rice behind Ampang Park.



The Church of the Annunciation, recently refurbished, was a white brick house behind the British High Commission. The Russian Embassy had owned the compound since Soviet times, along with the little international school adjacent to the garden. Sometime in 2006, the Greek Orthodox Church had regrettably failed to replace a standing priest, someone had explained to Gabriel once. Something about a Romanian actress and a regrettable absence of trousers. The next month, an anonymous patron had kindly offered to purchase the house to set up a new, decidedly Russian church, complete with a licenced iconographer from Novosibirsk.

The Greeks lodged a complaint; the Ecumenical Patriarch’s secretaries wrote furiously to Patriarch Kyrill for months. Everyone

else just assumed Putin had relocated his Malaysian spy nest to some discreet penthouses overlooking the Klang River, and was now recouping the costs. It was a strange building, the church. Parishioners had to keep explaining to relatives that they were neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant, and certainly not Mormon. Its white walls brimming with gilded saints and candles and hooded mothers on Sundays, it didn’t so much sit on Malaysian soil as it perched—a golden double-headed eagle no more at home here in Kuala Lumpur than a Union Jack.

Gabriel had rehearsed his apology by the time he walked into church. Crossing himself at the door, then before each icon, he turned to meet the eyes of Father Irenaeus Lau, which were glinting behind rimless specs under the window light. The meeting had been adjourned, Gabriel surmised. The priest watched him, waiting more with curiosity than impatience. Gabriel was still a sight: barely kempt after scraping off what poop he could at the gate, and probably still smelling of bird.

“Sorry ah, Father...I was delayed.”

The priest’s eyes gleamed again. “Abuden?”

Out of the corner of his eye and through the window, Gabriel caught the flicker of a TV screen, switched to the news channel in the church office. Of course he had. He shrugged.

“I was looking for the resurrection of the dead—today it came looking for me.”

The priest laughed. “Pigeons! Pigeons!” he said, raising his palms to the roof. Then he sniffed. “Pigeons. Let’s get you a new cassock. Since Yevgeny moved to Jakarta, I think we still got his oversize one. But should still fit kua...”

Crossing themselves at the small entrance Gabriel found himself slipping back into the motions behind the doors, with the priest humming the Cherubic Hymn under his breath. Droll as hell, Father Irenaeus. A warhound of a man, forged in the air force back in 1965, recently retired. Mistrustful of Russians but so perfect in chanting the Slavonic that the Moscow nuns now clutched their chests when he sang. And here he was, accepting the resuscitation of journalists, magic birds and his cantor's filthy cassock with even and unruffled grace.

"We who mystically represent the Cherubim..." he sang. Gabriel began to laugh. He slipped on the replacement robe. The day was not lost after all.



They'd got to the litanies of the Evening Vespers service when the clouds burst.

Later, it would be called the storm of a decade, a freak monsoon where the Indian Ocean hoisted her jeans, dredged up her buckets and tipped them over KL. It started modestly enough: a drizzle over the centre of the city. Meteorologists would report that it seemed to start right around the Klang-Gombak confluence and spread in concentric circles from there. Hard rain too, cold and clean and mineral: none of that acid rain that ate the limestone façades and marble floors of courtyards. Outward and outward it spread, first over Chinatown, then down the hill and over the greyed tiles of Dataran Merdeka and the great, water-limp flag that hung forlorn in the downpour. Mat rempits and families on motorbikes huddled under highway bridges. Some tourists from Michigan frantically hobbled to the shelter of the covered kaki lima and bought coffee at Yut Kee on Jalan Kamunting

(the new one) just to wait out the siege. Men in slick jeans with white-thread overlays, women in baju kurungs and everyone else found themselves sardine-stuffed under the awnings with the press of cendol makers on their carts and rojak vendors on their bikes.

Then the winds bore down the river and all through the shoplots and shantytowns, blowing skirts up and pants down and umbrellas inside out. The aluminium kongsis of the Bangladeshi builders outside the upcoming Tun Razak Exchange rattled and shook. Unable to work, the builders hunkered down under steel beams to watch the wind bending the trees from storeys above, the corrugated roofs of the houses beneath groaning loud as chainsaws while they texted families back home. By then the rain had started to blow horizontally, so much so that the splendid waterspouts and fountains under the Twin Towers were bent southward by the iron wind. Posters for the last elections were ripped off their posts. Advertisements for loan sharks and urut-urut istimewa cascaded down in torrents off the electric poles and storefronts, months of grime and glue dissolving with them.

And the river, too, unclogged. Above the water all the wretched neon lights and strewn rice lights that were entangled in the rain trees were torn off the branches, leaving only the green limbs behind. Below, swollen by the rains, the Klang and Gombak stampeded to the sea, unlatching every scab of shit and plastic bag hidden in the riverbed's crotch. The Clean Klang Project and all the sanitation efforts had the storm do its hard work for them, as the rubbish washed up in heaps on the banks, which the cleaners would later find immensely easier to dredge away. The rains had come to the city like anyone came here: with the wind on their backs, boasting of conquest, and roaring like all the kings who had or hadn't tried. Babur Khan and the Mughals,

Iskandar Zulkarnain and Laksamana Cheng Ho. Everyone came, everyone fled to this country, but the valley straddling the two waters had clung on like a turd to a cow's tail in the storm.

By now, Gabriel's voice in the candlelit church was almost drowned out in the clamour, his chanting a thin whisper against the rain and the winds. "More honourable than the cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim..."

Only a few faces looked up to meet his gaze from the choir. Lonely music, vespers was. Only a mother or two would normally come with a child. Maybe a visiting monk, and Vlad, the weirdly consistent diplomat who stood on the balls of his feet like he had something to atone for, and always the Quahs, who had been chrismated last year. Much like he had, Gabriel thought, his chanting streaming from his mouth by rote as his mind ran. Church was a strange place. All sorts of imperial and coloniser languages and ugly histories, all hushed by the storm.

The tsunamis of 2004 might've felt a little like this, at least when it began. Gabriel's Anglican mother had told him stories of women having dreams, asking for hotel rooms at higher storeys hours before the waves came in; holiday-goers who felt the impulse to drive inland before the deluge because they saw the patterns of the fleeing birds. And yet, for all the pious few who were saved, there were people swept out to sea, their bodies spit back out bloated on the shore days after the waves had subsided.

Bloated as Yunus Musa, dragged up from the Klang River, recently resurrected. Yes, he had seen that. With his own eyes, he had. How had the news reported his disappearance last week? Some minister had suggested the reporter had gone into hiding from his enemies.

Perhaps a long vacation, some officer surmised. Hearing the news, Gabriel's mother had shaken her head and clucked. "Berani-lah them. And the gahmen some more, so like that. What to do?" It had all been quite abstract until he'd seen the distended body of the chap, limp as a fish carcass on a tiled floor. What a dark way to go, all for reporting a minister's affair and embezzlement.

All these stories had made no sense to Gabriel. He'd thought about the matter almost since he could talk. Not heaven and hell, not evil or good. Just suffering and non-being. Life was full of these unknown sufferings. Tsunamis, typhoons, the sheer malice of people for other people. And not so much tragedy as entropy. Just chaos. All this earth had no order and that—that was the truest horror. Church helped. Church was order. Liturgies, hymns, icons, gildings, curlicues, readings, chapters, verses, vestments, chalices, bread, wine, faces. See, all that was form, a neat fence staked out on a cliff. And beyond the cliff? He couldn't tell.

You learn a lot of things as a church reader, he told himself. Part of your work is just singing the names of the saints in your part of the liturgy. A simple enough job, after your meagre shifts at a second-tier museum. In that job, you're telling people not to touch the mannequins of Melakan prisoners being carted away by moustachioed Portuguese. What an idiot you'd been, doing art history in Seattle, visiting exhibit after exhibit about wars. Americans had so many wars and so all their museums are about war. Agent Orange and all that. Now you're back in Malaysia and you do the same thing. Between dead people and the lives of the saints, you're not an historian. You're just a coat-keeper of the dead. Now *you* haven't suffered, not really. But the groan of history some days in all its weight seizes you, grabs your hand and

rattles you till you'll listen. Saints holding their gouged eyes in icons, or chopped-off heads or chopped-off hands. Sexy saints stuck with arrows. Rebels in Pahang who revolted and died, the bamboo-themed tortures of the Japanese. At some point, you must ask if any one can bear it. History isn't pretty up close. But you, who sing the deaths of saints and who by your day job sanctify the dead—you must carry this. Or at least learn to fence it off before going mad. And then God—well.

*God is not dead, but wrong*, Gabriel had scratched into his journal last year.

How in hell had the bloody basket known that?

But now it was Father Irenaeus' turn to chant. Gabriel snapped back and caught his breath. The verses of petition and the bestiary of beasts that praise God had been read. The evening could begin, he thought with some relief.

Of course, it was then that he saw the gold two-headed eagle balanced on the candle stand turn from metal to feathers and flesh. He blinked. Nothing should surprise him now. This was how insanity started: a willingness to concede whatever's put before you. A complicity in the charade. The freshly incarnated bird—birds—glanced his way, looking much less regal alive than when plastered over in gilding. They stood up, glanced at him askance like a couple of Changkat queens blowing smoke from their lips, and took flight to the east, shattering the closed window.

Gabriel blinked, not sure he'd seen it so much as understood it. The gilded eagles were back to where they'd always been, frozen in gold. The window they'd destroyed just a second before was intact. This was getting too much, he thought. All he wanted was to get the hell home.

At last, the dismissal was read. The priest pronounced his blessings over the level heads of the congregants, and then it was done. Most hurried out to their cars shortly after kissing the little gold cross in his hand; a few lingered. Inside, Gabriel found himself shaken but cornered as Seraphina Quah began narrating the components of a vegan char kway teow for Dormition Fast she'd promised from last week.

"So the secret is the fu-chok. You stir-fry first, instead of the egg. Then take the kway teow and slowly tambah the kicap. Must be careful one—egg noodle whatnot oso cannot; vegan mah. Oso when you find the fresh taueh from the wet market, make sure you get a small tub of chilli from this one aunty...what's her name? Mak Cik Norah..."

Gabriel couldn't tell if he found her ministrations stressful or soothing, so he kept nodding. In the end, he tuned her out and caught his breath for a full four minutes, smiling meekly as she tossed more unseen ingredients into an imaginary wok.

It was Irenaeus who rescued him, clearing his wattle behind them. Seraphina Quah excused herself, made one last metanoia crossing the Holy Road and slipped out of the lacquered doors.

In the quiet, the priest regarded Gabriel. What a little man. And for all the adventure of the day, mostly unshaken. Seized by neither denial nor bewilderment, the credulous Gabriel cut a strange figure among the icons on each tall wall. John of Shanghai, Elizabeth and the Baptist, Vladimir who converted the Slavs, and Photeini at her well. As the priest blew out the candles, their eyes mellowed to a sombre but not unkind gaze. Gabriel's shadow climbed taller, up and up along the wall, until he seemed to have shoulders almost equal to the archangel in the gallery above the windows. The last flames burnished Gabriel's face to a bronze gleam, as of metal put through fire, as he gazed out guilelessly at the priest.

“How you going back ah?” Irenaeus asked.

“Oh, just the LRT,” he began, triangulating the routes in his head. “If you can drop me off—”

Irenaeus shook his head. “I checked ahdy. Everything’s flooded—all trains in the city have been frozen till 9 pm. Semua tutup, brader. Take the parish car.”

“Father?”

“I live here. Take the car.”

“Uncle,” Gabriel said, glancing at the 2001 black-and-yellow Kelisa drowning in the drenched driveway, “if the LRT’s flooded, you sure the car won’t kena?”

“Lu nak jalan, ah?” *You want to walk?* Irenaeus shrugged, gesturing to the umbrella rack. He retrieved the keys from a trouser pocket under his vestments. Gabriel smiled. He took the keys, kissed his priest’s hand and strode out into the driveway.

A minute later, the little car was trundling out the gates of the Orthodox church into the silver curtain of rain.



“Shit,” the good reader of the Church of the Annunciation said, as he turned onto Jalan Binjai. Traffic was downright purgatorial. A sea of cars and vans and beleaguered motorbikes pressed in on his little Kelisa from all sides. Jalan Ampang was no better. Urban driving required him to be a heathen. An hour of this, he hoped, and he might make it home to take stock of himself. Two hours.

At last, through the deluge, he saw the hold-up: a makeshift police booth squatted on the kaki lima as navy-clad officers came out in ponchos, stopping every car rolling down into Tun Razak. He groaned

again, this time at a traffic light, red, now rendered irrelevant by the standstill. It wasn’t even a partial blockage, some nice two-lane affair that spot-checked a few flagged vehicles for inspection. The whole bloody road was occupied by the police search. For what, he could only wonder. Missing martyrs and reconstituted journalists must be on their minds as much as his.

The traffic light had just turned green again—not that he could move a centimetre forward or back. Looking out his window at the city towers over his head, he caught sight of some wild hermit on the kerb. He seemed homeless, laughing as his mostly shaved chin tilted back to catch the rain in his mouth. He wore a green poncho, garish and awful, and in his hand was what looked like a bucket that once contained some nata de coco. He started accosting vehicles for money in the deluge—a prospect as absurd as it was lucrative. A few pitying drivers really did roll down their windows to drop coins into his pail. Others pretended not to hear his slender fingers drumming on their windshields.

The man was now headed his way, Gabriel realised, with the guilty dread he always felt during encounters with the homeless. What was he supposed to do, anyway? At least he never pretended to not see anyone, like everyone else. He tried to look them in the eye when he told them he had nothing to give them. This, surely, was what it meant to see the divine image in every human body, every icon. No matter the dressing or the frame, his mind added primly. He peeked into his wallet, wincing. Two hundred-ringgit bills clung damply to the lining. The relief his thin excuse now harboured for him was audible. He could refuse in good conscience. A homeless man on the street accosting people in the pouring rain. Huh. He had just the gestures in mind when the man approached.

Gabriel had it all rehearsed by the time the man arrived at his car—from the passenger side, what’s more. How odd. He was just about to put his hand up in resignation, and smile a pressed smile of benign uncompassion, when he heard the Kelisa’s doors unlock with a resounding clack. Before he had a moment to react, the man had opened the passenger door and slid inside—poncho, bucket and all. He threw back his hood.

“Don’t try that shit about not having small change,” he said in familiarly accented Arabic, grinning. “I’ve not battled seraphim to have my soaked arse booted from this car seat.”

Of course. Of course the bird prophet had magic powers that unlocked cars and summoned flying vermin. Of course the bird prophet spoke kitchen Arabic and talked about angelic orders. And of course they would meet again here.

To his surprise, Gabriel found it in himself to speak. “And you couldn’t have waited till after the roadblock that is searching for you before deciding to tumpang in my car?”

The man looked queerly at him. He leaned on Gabriel’s shoulder, and took a deep sniff. “That’s not your cologne. And this isn’t your car.”

Gabriel said nothing at first. The traffic light had turned green again and nothing, not the next eight cars ahead of him, was moving. “I’m borrowing it just to get home. I don’t know what the hell you want with me, but I—”

“You know that the notice went out for a man of your description too, no?” he said, switching decidedly now to a light, brocaded English. “I mean, they want you for interrogation.”

Now that *hadn’t* occurred to him. Surely no one had seen him get out of Masjid Jamek in all the havoc? How could they have known?

But by now the mosque security guard, at least, must have reported him as a witness to the affair, if not an outright abetter. CSI shows were the domain of his mother’s Astro subscription, not his. He turned to his new passenger.

“I don’t suppose this is all going to forget itself, yah?”

“Well, we’ve still got this police check and the dozen others that have sprung up in the city to circumvent, if there’s any hope of not getting arrested.”

“About that—arrested for what, exactly?”

The green man shrugged, pulling his poncho off over his shoulders. Apparently he’d changed into some Petaling Street knock-off Levi’s since they’d last met, and a yellow T-shirt. “Hell should I know? Who knew resurrecting someone was *illegal*. They’re your royal policemen. I’m just visiting.”

The line of cars began inching forward again. The police were just metres away now.

“What’s your plan ah?”

Now the green man really did laugh. He shrugged, first one shoulder, then the other. For a minute, the two sat in quiet while the wheels claimed centimetre by centimetre of road. At length, the queue of cars escaping onto Bandar Tun Razak squeezed forward, and now it was their jalopy trundling into the orange cone-demarcated lanes as a policewoman signalled for him to stop and lower his window. Gabriel turned dubiously to the green man, but he was just smiling like he’d swindled Robert Kuok out of a bread factory.

Gabriel should not have been surprised. He was expecting something divine. A bolt of lightning to the tiang to the right. A wave of the green man’s hand and a dumb nod from the police as they motioned them



by like Obi Wan at Mos Eisley. Instead, Gabriel sheepishly rolled the window down.

“Heavy rain, eh?” the green man said, in a burst of rusty but certainly familiar Malay. Gabriel was too tense to say a word. Sometimes the obvious was all you could say.

The policewoman shrugged. Even under her umbrella, her tudung was soaked to the seams, and for a moment he put aside his own terror and felt something like pity for the drenched officer. She looked inside the car, eyeing the now-shaved green man’s face, then at the distressed denims and T-shirt he was wearing. She glanced back at the photos on her bulletin. Her brow twitched. Gabriel was too tense to say a word, but now she was beckoning them to get out.

“Here it is,” the green man said.

A taller policewoman came up, tapping the other on her shoulder. She seemed to be digging something up on her phone, squinting under their umbrellas, before glancing back at the Kelisa. Eyeing Gabriel and the green man one more time, she waved them past the checkpoint and the other one began stacking up the orange cones.

Gabriel needed no spurring. With a deft manoeuvre, he swung the little car onto Bandar Tun Razak.

“Go left,” the green man whispered.

Too flabbergasted to protest, and almost too late, Gabriel obeyed. Slowly, his new companion began tuning the radio:

“...breaking news. Apparently, the hunt is over at last, as a man in green robes and a suspected accomplice wearing black were apprehended in Petaling Street just minutes ago, according to the Chief of Police. He has declined further comment, but exhorts all drivers to stay safe on the roads in the downpour. He has confirmed once again

his commitment to understanding the incident to the fullest extent, and the nation will be updated live. Now, turning to the weather in the Klang Valley..”

“By God,” Gabriel said, “what did you do?”

“Sold the robe to some gullible Italians,” the green man said. “Told them they were...what was it? Oh, traditional kampung garments.”

“And now they’re arrested?”

“Ah, just as long as it takes for the troops to realise they got the wrong droids,” the green man said.

“Somehow I expected more miracle and less guile.”

“Now where’s the fun in that? This isn’t some Borges shit, you know. Sometimes a ram in the bush is just a ram in the bush. A close shave, but it worked. And now I have a car, a one-way trip to Pahang and a willing chauffeur—I mean, accomplice.”

“I beg your pardon? I’m going—”

“Accomplice! You’ll be driving me to Pahang! You’re a real fugitive now. You think they’ll let you just walk away from this? You won’t hear the end of the interrogations for the next five months!”

This was true. But not a good enough reason, Gabriel thought. More abetting wouldn’t help his case when the cops did catch up to the parish car. Father would be frantic when the choir was without a cantor tomorrow. Even if the trip to the Pahang border would probably be slower than U-turning back to his snug apartment of books in Bukit Jalil, they were bad reasons. And such dreadful weather. Still.

The green man seemed to observe these machinations with a divine disinterest. Then, staring at the windshield wipers as if they were the lines of a book, he began to recite in English:

“It’s not God that I do not accept, you understand, it is this world of God’s, created by God, that I do not accept and cannot agree to accept.”

Gabriel jolted upright as though slapped. Somehow the green man had known he’d know that too, quoting Dostoevsky like that. It was part of a long debate between brothers about God and Russians and the sticky yellow leaves—and yes, he recalled—needless human pain.

“What do you know of me?” Gabriel asked at last.

The man in green blinked. “Nothing! Nothing at all. I’m told I have that effect, though.”

“Were you sent to me?”

“My good man, there’s much I don’t know too. It’s been a long retirement and I’m just back for a spell. But see, it was you who were sent to *me*. Everyone agreed.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone! But that’s not what you want to ask. What you want to know is if I know about God being wrong, and how I know if I *do* know. You’re an historian; you carry those who once lived, and their hand is upon you.

“But you’re in luck. The weight of the Once-living has caught you, Mistuh Gay-bri-yel Pauwill. It’s found you, and it wants you, and you might find they’re much more alive than you think. And you haven’t been chosen for your merits or your brains or any of that, you know. We thought you’d be someone who’d *want* to join this venture. And all I want is that you get me out of this city, and maybe stay for the ride after. Then we will eat the Mouth. And then we will weigh God on God’s self. And maybe then you and your cosmic scales might tip even.”

Gabriel regarded his passenger. The idea was absurd. The man was insane. But then the birds, and the storm—who was he that

even the grimmest pigeons would obey him? He couldn’t be seriously entertaining this. And yet—immortals had intruded into the world before, so the hagiographies said. Sometimes life interrupted the living. And a chance to weigh God—whatever it meant. Surely that meant *something*.

“Whaddaya say, Gabe?”

“I’m not sure. ‘Let us go, that we may die with Him?’ St Thomas’ words, I think.”

“And in yours?” The green man prodded his weary accomplice.

“I’ll get you out of KL, dammit. Jom.”

## 2

## KOPI

FOUR DAYS IN, Lydia found her cup. A cheery little thing, all beige, its enamel chipped at the rim. She'd forgotten how much iced coffee she used to drink in this house; they started her young. Every Chinese New Year she'd come; each year she snagged this cup from its place on the tray. Everyone knew.

Today she found it in the shuttered pantry, hidden behind plates, blocks of coffee and a Tupperware of abandoned biscuits. This was an omen: after five unfilial years away, her grandaunt's house was letting her back in, pardoning her absence, ceding her a new place at its table.

Peering inside the green fridge, Lydia could see the cans of 7Up and Jolly Shandy that her Loke Yee Por stockpiled for the clan every New Year, stored away for a reunion now indefinitely postponed. Loke Yee Por, Lydia thought, translating the words. Sixth Grandmother's Sister. Sixth Grandaunt. Beneath the tiled stove, a cracker tin that stored used oil sat on the linoleum. The woks lay untouched. The chicken coops,

devoid of chickens, were bare. And the joss sticks she lit before the long, last drive to the KL hospital lingered on the altar. It was a house preparing for a feast, interrupted, and until today Lydia had been gate-crashing. It had taken four days, but the house had given in.

Right, back to coffee. How had Loke Yee Por made it? Dark and sweet and iced, thick as Kuantan silt. For three mornings her father had risen before her, tiptoed past the other guest room and brewed it the old way. But today she'd found her cup, and decided to press her luck. The house's clemency would hold, surely. First, the grounds; then the enamel pot to steep; then the sifting.

When Grandaunt left them, up in the Mawar Ward hospice, the nurses called Lydia's father first. Lydia herself had only been in the country for a week, returning for the summer from two years at divinity school in Wisconsin. She visited her grandaunt as much as she could, feeding her congee from a tin mug on Thursday, but even that felt like a farce. Five years of exile spent mostly away in the snows of North America had changed her, while her grandaunt had been tended by hands not of her favourite niece's. The nurses were all very polite. A little relieved too, she could tell. In her last weeks, Loke Yee Por couldn't recall anyone's name; she kept mistaking the nurses for Lydia's cousin in Singapore, kept refusing the food they fed her.

Yes, yes, she'd gone peacefully. All her belongings untouched, as she'd asked. They arranged the funeral with Nirvana Funerary Services, with its little disposable water cups and inexplicable baskets of pineapple candy. The undertaker would be at the morgue at any minute. Yes, yes, a simple funeral, like she asked.

It was a quick funeral, up at the Enlightenment Care Centre. Care centre indeed—you'd think it was a bloody kindergarten. Loke Yee

Por's remains were carted in by one of the buzzing hearses scattered round the gate. All Lydia recalled were the Taoist shrouds of yellow over her coffin—the simplest available—then the brief walk around the grounds and then the cremation. Lydia almost understood the relief her relatives felt—a knowledge that the forgetting and the long preserving was done, that Loke Yee Por had passed on to whatever awaited beyond the shuttered fires. The next week Lydia found herself driving her father to Kuantan to pack up the house of the aunt who'd raised him, and then gone on to raise her.



The coffee steeped perfectly. The house had not withdrawn its grace. Her father, now awake, came in from the other room and smiled.

“Not like the thin lattes they make in Wisconsin, hor?”

Lydia laughed. “No, not like their lattes, Pa.”

“We've done a lot ahdy, Ah Girl. The furniture and boxes all packed. Did you put the Singer sewing machine—ah! There it is.”

“Today it's her room, I think.”

Her father munched on his piece of kaya toast. “Her room first. Then the altar.”

She glanced up. “The altar? I thought Ah Boy could take the portraits and incense...he still comes up for Qing Ming and all.”

“I called a local pastor, actually,” he said slowly, “to cleanse the house. He'll find a place behind the house to buang the thing and exorcise the rooms.”

Right. She had forgotten, for a moment, the strange, purgative faith of her father. All trumpets and renewals and leaflets with clip arts of clouds. “The heavens are closing over Malaysia,” a revival pastor would

declare primly during sermons, almost pleased at the prospect. Lydia had shivered then, but the clapping had not ceased.

Loke Yee Por had even come to their church once, in KL. She smiled, prayed at the altar call and went home the next week to light incense for her parents in the other life. “They will be lonely mah,” she said, the moment Lydia's father had driven back to KL. Lydia said nothing as the car trundled away without her. This episode had been subsumed into Lydia's college: “Indigenous Sacrament: Syncretism and Soothsaying among the Malaysian Chinese.” What alliteration.

She came home with a suitcase of books: Octavia Butler and Óscar Romero jostled with Hillsong and Joel Osteen discs her father's church had requested of her in America. She'd laughed while packing, the different Christianities rolled into one bag. She still laughed now.

Her father had regarded her as she stepped off the plane: a frizzy-haired academic in shorts and a free college T-shirt, wearing the same jet-lagged reserve that had weathered the worst years of his divorce without cavil. Alvin Goh had mistaken that reserve for having nothing to say, once, but the books had done their work—she was so Western now. She and that strange Jesus she'd snuck in through customs.

Clearly Jesus had missed a memo; in Malaysia, he was still white. Only in Wisconsin seminaries was it countenanced that he'd been black, Alvin decided. Not a bad thing, but still. Cultural differences.

They hadn't spoken of their Jesuses much, of course. Sometimes, Alvin asked his daughter to translate bits of Greek or Hebrew. But today, when Alvin brought up the exorcism of the house from demons in this Pahang sun, Lydia paused, bit her lips and leaned back in her chair.

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Memory eternal.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JOSHUA KAM CHUN WAH grew up in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, taking frequent trips with his father down the coastal state of Pahang. A history graduate of Hope College, Michigan, he developed a hunger for the mythology of place-names, rebel peasants and sea gods his family inherited from generations by the water. Dividing his time between Malaysia and graduate school in Michigan, he interviews Nusantara mystics for a living, bakes when he can and drinks when he shouldn't. *How the Man in Green Saved Pahang, and Possibly the World* is his first novel.



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the links between her late grandaunt's  
eccentric lover and her involvement in the  
Communist Emergency. As all parties  
converge on Pahang, Lydia and Gabriel  
must grapple with the theologies  
and histories they once trusted, in  
a country more perilously punk  
than they'd ever conceived of.

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