

# IT NEVER RAINS ON NATIONAL DAY

STORIES



Jeremy Tiang

“In graceful, measured prose whose stillness masks a swirl of emotions, Jeremy Tiang probes the complexities of Singapore’s identity. Home and abroad, in groups or (usually) alone, his characters’ search for their place in this changing world feels both universal and thoroughly Singaporean. These stories signal the arrival of an important writer.”

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“Jeremy’s writing is lyrical and soulful, drawing us effortlessly into the worlds of his many different characters. Grounded in Singapore but not limited to it, his stories reflect a deeper yearning for belonging and human connection.”

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co-author of *Singapore: A Biography*

“Jeremy Tiang’s prose is measured, elegant and beautifully constructed, but beneath that polished surface, these stories are a fierce, unsparing interrogation of privilege and disenfranchisement, alienation and belonging. He gets to the core of how place and displacement shape the human spirit. Tiang has created a profound, moving, even troubling portrait of the Global Singaporean.”

—Huzir Sulaiman,  
playwright and Joint Artistic Director, Checkpoint Theatre

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for DAH, because because because because

“Thresholds are safe, but unfortunately  
you can’t stay on them for ever.”

—Kate Atkinson,  
*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*

# Contents

Sophia's Honeymoon 1

Trondheim 12

Tick 32

Schwellenangst 51

Sophia's Aunt 67

Toronto 93

Harmonious Residences 105

Stray 124

Meatpacking 136

National Day 151

Sophia's Party 167

# Sophia's Honeymoon

NICHOLAS AND SOPHIA plan their honeymoon by a process of elimination. Not America—Sophia went to college there. They covered most of Asia during their brief courtship. Africa and South America will be perused later, at leisure. Australia is, of course, not even in the running. This leaves Europe, which to Sophia means expensive chocolates and the novels of Thomas Mann.

Thanks to an adolescence of ski trips and inter-railing, Nicholas is already au fait with Europe—not, like many of his fellow Englishmen, cut off from the continent. He speaks French, he likes to boast, with a Parisian accent. Gallant, though, he proclaims that having his young wife with him will make each place brand new.

And so Sophia finds herself in Zurich, a town on a lake. She is astonished to discover such power and influence reposing in a place smaller by a factor of ten than Singapore! There is nothing to match the tall buildings of her own country—everything is faded, wanly charming, like old Christmas

cards. She stops taking photographs after realising she is unable to distinguish one picturesque street from another.

This is the first chance she has had to breathe in quite a while. She thought too far ahead, saying yes to the proposal—to the babies, the commitment, the mortgage. The immediate consequence was, in fact, months of flurry as the wedding coalesced around her. Her mother swung into action, not once mentioning her annoyance at her daughter marrying outside their race. In gratitude, Sophia submitted to the cake-tastings and gown-fittings, starting a machine that would not turn off until it had deposited her, winded and flushed, at the altar—where Nicholas awaited her, startlingly attractive in his new Hugo Boss suit.

Nicholas is at home in Zurich, a city of bankers. Although he promised this trip would be business-free, people react subtly when he mentions where he works. They pass him cards. They invite him to country clubs or the ballet. Nicholas declines most of them—*Honeymoon*, he whispers, and the men nod conspiratorially—but a handful he has accepted, rolling his eyes apologetically at her.

She should not complain, she knows. This is the world she has married into, and part of her looks at the box seats and casually expensive lunches, and feels that Europe has spread itself before her feet as if she were a Henry James heroine. And of course it is important that Nicholas make contacts—though he himself would prefer these acquaintanceships to

be seamless, to happen without obvious exertion on his part.

She knows they make a handsome couple, and this is part of what draws people to them. They radiate success (or he does, and she is part of this success). Nicholas is tall for an Englishman, just under six foot, and blond without being effete. Sophia does forty-five minutes of Pilates every morning, and never eats carbs after six. She knows what shades to wear to set off her honey-coloured skin and straight black hair. They are the sort of couple one looks at and automatically begins imagining their beautiful children.

Sophia has tried asking Nicholas if they could have more of a normal holiday—infusing her voice with warmth and flirtation, luring him into complicity. *Lazy mornings*, she urges. *Shopping*. He merely raises an eyebrow at her, as if to indicate he will not understand. It is borne home that he is no longer wooing her, and her function has accordingly changed.

On their last day in Zurich, Sophia finds herself resenting their quaint hotel room, its carpeting the colour of mould. She chews grimly on a Sprüngli macaron, aware she is being petulant. Ignoring her, Nicholas is getting ready to go out. In a minute, he will snap at her to get dressed, but now he is moving efficiently about the limited space, enacting a ritual. Now, cufflinks. Now, the tie.

They are going to the opera this evening, the guests of Hanspeter—an acquaintance of Nicholas' from business



school. He swooped on them and announced that of course they must not miss the event of the season. Everyone has seen it, this opera, that is what one does in the summer in Zurich. He will arrange tickets, his bank always holds a few for every performance.

Nicholas insists on walking to the restaurant. Sophia does not mind, the cobblestone streets and occasional fountains match her idea of Europe so exactly it gives her pleasure just to be amongst them. An elderly lady drops her scarf without noticing. Not running, merely lengthening his stride, Nicholas restores it to her. The woman exclaims theatrically as her husband nods thanks. They look like a tableau from a play.

At the restaurant, Hanspeter orders everyone Zürcher Geschnetzeltes, which turns out to be a thick stew made of veal. It would be a sin to leave Zurich without having tasted this. Hanspeter keeps slipping into his native tongue. Even without understanding what is said, Sophia knows that Nicholas's precise schoolboy Hochdeutsch is more pleasing to the ear than Hanspeter's guttural Swiss German.

Hanspeter's thin wife Mitzi kindly asks Sophia questions about herself. *What do you do? Are you in banking also?* She dabs her exquisite mouth with a napkin after speaking, and leans forward, all polite attention. Sophia has practised her answer: *I used to be at Deloitte, and now I'm a consultant.* She has to stop herself saying "just"—"just a consultant."

*Sophia*—this is Hanspeter, trying to make the conversation general once more—*Why do you not tell us about your Singapore?* Again, Sophia has rehearsed the answer to this, and is able to speak glibly about the heat, the shopping centres, their adorable new flat in Tanjong Pagar with teak furniture imported from Myanmar. She is careful to emphasise how much of a financial hub it is, mindful that Nicholas suspects people of thinking he has relegated himself to a backwater.

Hanspeter glances at his watch, which seems to be the cue for Mitzi to shepherd Sophia to the powder room. They fix their make-up together, and she is obliged to admire Mitzi's handbag snapshots of their seven-month-old. *It is practically my first night out since he has arrived,* giggles Mitzi. *I have been forgetting what this feels like.* When they return to the table, the men are ready to leave. It is part of Sophia's new life that for her, restaurant bills no longer exist.

Hanspeter drives them out to the opera, which is taking place on the lake. They must look gilded, the four of them strolling by the lakeshore in evening dress, but Sophia is primarily worried about whether her heels will slip on the rough flagstone path. Listening to Mitzi chat skilfully about this and that, she is able to relax and talk about their visit to the Gestalt Museum that afternoon.

They are ten rows back from the front, in a little enclosure reserved for corporate guests. Blank-faced attendants in black bring them glasses of champagne. For a while they sit

in silence, sipping and taking in the set, which is constructed on a platform arcing out over the lake, gigantic, with just a hint of sunset around the edges causing the water to glimmer.

Sophia belatedly realises she has no idea what the opera is about. She scans her programme—entirely in German. She should have looked up the plot on the Internet. Nicholas would be mortified if she said anything now. The point is the music, not the story, she tells herself.

The first scene is set in a castle, its towers swooping up unnaturally high. There is some kind of party going on, and Sophia allows herself to be diverted by the sheer spectacle of so many people moving in unison, singing over and under each other to make a wall of sound. It is a carnival, a riot—they hoot and lean flirtatiously into one another, hats and masks colliding.

Next to her, Nicholas seems rapt, unmoving. Mitzi is only half-listening (earlier, she confessed to Sophia, with the air of someone unburdening herself, that she does not really care for Verdi). Hanspeter nods his head almost in time with the music. Sophia only vaguely envies Nicholas his childhood of Covent Garden operas and visits to European capitals, but there are times like this when she feels it as an acute lack in her own life.

On stage, a hunchback is capering grotesquely, his ill-fitting clothes at odds with the sleek elegance of court. He is one of those men who would look out of place in any

setting. The other characters mock him uneasily, as if they are secretly afraid. Now they cluster about him, now they wheel away and dance a figure. They exchange words in little bursts of notes, and now and then the audience will laugh to show they got a joke. Nicholas nods appreciatively, as he does at a good volley at Wimbledon.

By the first interval, the lake can barely be seen. The stage now feels sinister, crevices appearing that did not seem to be there before. Sophia is profoundly disturbed by the final scene, in which a woman is abducted by a group of masked men. For some reason the hunchback is also present, but with a scarlet cloth bound round his eyes. The coloratura screams of the kidnapped girl slash through the music, beautiful yet horrible at the same time. The hunchback rips off his blindfold and howls.

Then they are on their feet, applauding, and the stage dims as the singers drift away. Someone brings them erdbeerbowle, a concoction of red wine and berries. They half-eat, half-drink it, and soon their lips are tinged with red.

Mitzi flips through her programme, far too well-bred to initiate another conversation with Sophia—it would seem too much like forcing herself upon her. Sophia can feel her strength ebbing, the sullenness return. Glancing at Nicholas' watch, she sees they have only been there an hour.

The seating stands ramp up behind them; there must be close to a thousand people here. They are tall, most of them,

and gleam with good health. By her side Mitzi is now, for some reason, singing snatches from the score. She has a light, pleasant voice, and mimics the gestures of the heroine well enough. The men are laughing and applauding her, as if this is a normal thing to do.

It occurs to Sophia that she can simply leave. The singers are filing back onto the stage. She moves against the tide of people returning to their seats. Nicholas mutters something about her foolishness, waiting till the end of the interval to go to the toilet. She decides to be asleep by the time he gets back to the hotel room, and claim the next day to have developed a headache.

It is further back to the city than she remembers, but she knows she will not get lost if she follows the shore of the lake. Zurich feels more alive at night. People meander with the glassy cheer of those on their way from one drinking place to another, and she smiles at strangers in a way that is not possible by day. Men loosen their ties. The city feels slack around the edges. It must be close to Walpurgisnacht, and Sophia would not be surprised to see dancing in the streets.

She contemplates going into a bar, but the thought of standing in the gloom, nursing a solitary drink, is as bleak as heading back to the hotel now. She feels like she did in her first month of college, before she learnt how to make friends, hiding in her dorm pretending to study. Now, she is confident enough of her looks to know she needn't do

anything, someone will eventually offer to buy her a drink. She has also learnt that such men are not the ones she wants to feel obligated to.

There is a McDonald's on the next corner. She is quite hungry all of a sudden, and does not have much money—the smallest meal here will set her back ten dollars, almost all she has on her. Amusingly, there is a burger designed specifically for Switzerland—the McEmmenthaler. She orders it and tells the boy, carefully, *Vielen Dank*, relieved when he nods and thanks her in return.

The taste of French fries, she notes, is universal, as are the teenagers lounging on the plastic seats upstairs. She must look ridiculous in her satiny evening dress and elaborate hairdo. Despite the advertising leaning heavily on the use of authentic Swiss cheese, Sophia's meal does not taste significantly different from a regular cheeseburger. She eats a third of her fries before stopping herself.

Back outside, the air has turned crisply cold; Sophia's pashmina is still hanging off the back of her seat at the opera. She turns a corner expecting a fountain that is not there, and realises she is lost. She tries to retrace her steps to the McDonald's but the sloping, angular streets defeat her.

Now the crowds are thicker, louder than before. The bars must be closing. She worries that it is getting too late, and for the first time that evening begins to feel the cold prickling that accompanies a sense of wrongdoing. These days, the tone

of admonishment in her head comes directly from Nicholas. She begins to walk faster.

Everyone in Zurich speaks English, of course, but no one appears to have heard of their hotel. She might not be pronouncing the name correctly. *It's on a street near Starbucks*, she cries, resisting the urge to physically grab someone. People shrug and smile apologetically, then move on before they get lumbered with a lost tourist. She cannot help noticing that Swiss men carry themselves as if perfectly proportioned, but are generally on the large side and would be considered fat in her own country.

It begins to feel as if she will never get back to the hotel, or Singapore, or anywhere that could be considered a place of safety. The laughter of strangers now sounds sinister, and she stumbles more than once on the picturesque cobblestones. At some level, she knows that girls like her are always rescued eventually, but there is no immediate way out of her situation. She walks past dark shop windows and unfriendly houses. There are no signs, nothing telling her where to go.

Many years later, Sophia will think of this night, and how close she was to tears. She will wonder how she could have allowed herself to arrive there, but also feel a twinge of loss for the girl still capable of losing control. Her feet sore and her chignon unravelling, Sophia cannot be expected to take a broader view; she is too busy fighting the rising panic to see that this might be the last moment she is fully herself.

She feels a sudden touch on her elbow, and looks up to see Nicholas. His suit is immaculate, his face well-bred, impassive. *He isn't angry*, she thinks, *I'd know if he were angry*. She can find nothing to say to him. Her wrinkled dress smells of fried food. There is a ketchup stain down her front. Nicholas wraps an arm around her waist and leads her away. He mutters something about *nostalgie de la boue*, but without any particular emotion behind it. She leans into him as they walk down the narrow street. Everything will be all right, now that Nicholas has found her. This time tomorrow they will be in Vienna.

# Trondheim

I WAS ON the overnight train from Oslo to Trondheim when I heard another Singaporean voice, which took me by surprise. I had already spent a week in Scandinavia without encountering any of my countrymen. It might have been too early in the year for the inhabitants of a tropical island to venture this far north—it was barely spring, and there was still snow on the ground.

The voice belonged to a young woman of about my age, twenty-seven, who was trying to persuade the conductor that her ticket was temporarily missing. She had a great deal of charm, but was obviously lying. Realising he was unlikely to let her off, she switched to explaining with great fluency that her credit card had been stolen the day before, so there was no use asking her for money.

I hesitated—it was very inconvenient, I enjoyed my solitude and besides, had just come to an exciting point in my book—but finally decided I would have to help, and called to the conductor. I knew very little Norwegian, and his English was far from perfect, but we understood each other well enough for me to indicate that I wanted to pay for

her ticket—billett—and hand over a large amount of kroner. Train tickets always cost so much more when you haven't been organised enough to book them in advance.

After that, she felt she had to come and sit with me, even though there were a great many empty seats in the carriage, and I couldn't think of a polite way of asking her not to. She had very little luggage, just a small bag that she swung gracefully into the overhead rack before slouching next to me. She had long hair that stopped me from seeing her face properly.

There was a pause, longer than I would consider polite—so long, in fact, that I had almost gone back to my book—before she said, “Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” I could feel my voice was a little stiff, and tried to sound friendlier. After all, she was a pretty girl. “Where did you lose your ticket?”

“I never had one.” I had suspected this, but felt a little angry that she wasn't even bothering to pretend.

“You didn't have to do that,” she continued. “I know you're being a gentleman, but I thought, what could they do? They surely wouldn't stop the train just to make me get off.”

“It's not a non-stop train. Didn't you look at the timetable? There's a stop at Lillehammer, at 3.07am.”

“Lillehammer!” she laughed. “Why not? I've never been to Lillehammer.”

I decided she was a bit crazy, and turned to look out of the

window at the snow, which was falling again, in heavy drifts. I knew we must be passing beside a fjord, but it was too dark to see anything except the clumps of falling white, skewed by the wind. We were only just outside Oslo, yet it felt like the end of the world.

Maybe she felt some of the dull loneliness that Norway seemed to be swathed in, or maybe she thought I was angry to have bought a ticket for someone who didn't care where she went, but she started to explain that she'd lost her Rough Guide, and was happy to cross the country by boat and train, looking at pine forests. "Why Trondheim?" she suddenly asked.

"I'm just staying there for a day," I replied. "A chalet in the mountains outside the city. I want to do some skiing, and then another train further north."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "Reindeer. The Northern Lights."

"Why?"

I didn't know what to say to that. Surely no one has ever needed a reason to see the Northern Lights.

"So which are you?" She looked at me appraisingly, her eyes narrowed. "Singaporean or Malaysian?"

"Singaporean."

"I thought so. Civil service?"

I nodded. "Engineer."

"You don't have to tell me. Glasses and checked shirt.

Plus you have two ballpoint pens in your shirt pocket."

I laughed, trying not to sound uneasy.

"You've studied here?" she said, making me feel uncomfortable with the way she was looking at me, as if I were a specimen. I felt like I was once again in the army, and everything important about me could be deciphered from the little tags sewn onto my uniform.

"You've studied here," she repeated, as a statement this time.

"In Norway?"

"In Europe." She gestured impatiently, taking in the whole continent. "Let me guess. London, Imperial College?"

"Wrong," I said, childishly pleased that she was capable of making a mistake. "Munich."

"Government scholar?"

I nodded.

"Your German must be very good."

"It's all right," I said, trying to be modest. "I lived there for four years. That's why I can speak a bit of Norwegian, they're quite similar languages. And you?"

"The same." She smiled, a sad smile that made her look older. "Singaporean, government scholar. Leeds, English."

This didn't surprise me; she had the look of someone who read a lot of storybooks. "So you're not an engineer."

She laughed as if the idea was ridiculous. "No, I'm a teacher. They make all the English grads become teachers."

This was probably true, but then I couldn't imagine what else you would do with an English degree. She didn't look like a teacher, or rather she looked like the teacher who was different from all the others, the one who wore fashionable clothes to school and once a year went bowling with her form class. I decided that all the boys in her class had a small crush on her, and all the girls went to her for boyfriend advice.

Singaporean etiquette suggested that I should ask her which junior college she had gone to, especially as we were about the same age and probably had friends in common, but that conversational route seemed unspeakably boring just then, so instead I asked her how long she had been travelling.

"About ten days, I think." Her brow wrinkled, as if she was searching her memory. "I wanted to go somewhere cold. I found some cheap fares to Germany on the Internet, and I kept heading north. I didn't realise that everything here would be so expensive."

I nodded with feeling, having just paid the equivalent of fourteen Singapore dollars for a sandwich at the train station.

"And I wanted to see a fjord," she said. "I thought it would be like an Ibsen play. Pine forests, despair, cold water. Trolls in the mind."

"I know Ibsen," I volunteered. "*The Doll's House*. About women's rights?"

She looked at me like I was stupid, the same look the girls in JC used to give me when I hadn't heard of the latest boy

band, or turned up at Zouk wearing unfashionable clothes. Trying to reach safer ground, I asked, "Which of his plays do you like best?"

She paused before replying. A teacher's pause, designed to make sure the class was quiet and paying attention. "When I was in Oslo, I went to see a play at the National Theatre. It was by Ibsen, *Little Eyolf*."

"In Norwegian?"

"Yes. It doesn't matter, I know the text well enough to follow it. It's about a young couple who have a crippled child, and they blame each other for the accident that caused his injury. They still love each other, but she's from a rich family, and he's obsessed with his work, so they're beginning to drift apart. Then a strange woman comes to visit them. She lures their son into a fjord and he drowns."

"What happens to the parents in the end?"

"They get on with their lives, somehow."

"That sounds a bit tragic."

"He didn't write cheerful plays. Life isn't like that."

"That's why I seldom go to the theatre. So depressing. Why not cheer up a bit? I prefer comedies."

Again, she looked at me like I was an idiot, as if she was tired of explaining things to me. I suddenly felt very angry. Of course she knew more about plays than I did; she was a girl, and a literature teacher. If we were talking about torques and pressure gradients then she would be the one to look stupid.

"I feel like Little Eyolf sometimes. That's why it's my favourite play; I feel like I'm crippled, and nobody understands what I really need. Sometimes I think I should drown myself."

I was starting to realise what kind of girl she was. "You come from a wealthy family, right?"

"We're okay." She looked a bit startled. Maybe I had changed the subject too abruptly.

"And you live in a big house. Sixth Avenue?"

"Toh Tuck. How did you know?"

I nodded, and didn't bother to reply. I had met a lot of girls like her. The pretty ones in the arts stream who giggled and whispered to each other during their Maths lectures, if they went to Maths lectures. In their spare time, they read a lot of Sylvia Plath and wrote indifferent poetry for the school magazine. Knowing where to pigeonhole her comforted but also puzzled me; girls like that don't end up in faraway countries, scamming train fare off strange men.

She looked annoyed that I wasn't answering her question, then threw her hair back and pouted in a way someone must once have told her was quirky. "Do you travel a lot?" was her next line of attack. I felt like I must be gaining status in her eyes; she sounded like she was really interested in me.

"Whenever I can," I replied. "I have a lot of annual leave, and I'll lose it if I don't take it."

"Most people don't go so far away. Everyone I know just goes to Langkawi."

"I want to see every country in the world before I die. I have a big map on my wall at home, and whenever I go to a country I colour it green with highlighter pen. Anyway, aren't you quite far from home yourself?"

"It's different for me." I thought this was patronising of her, but she didn't seem to notice. "I don't really think of Singapore as home anymore. I don't really know where I belong, but I like to be far away."

I could tell that she thought she was being controversial, but I've met a lot of people like her, especially amongst overseas scholars. Some people spend a few years living outside Singapore and then think that gives them the right to criticise everything. I've seen them talking and laughing during the national anthem, making fun of the National Day Parade. Normally I try to avoid these people, but something made me snap at her, more fiercely than I had intended, "Why do you bother living there if it's not your home?"

"I'm bonded," she said. "You must be too. I'll have to keep working for them for a few more years. I don't have a choice."

That was true, of course. I had forgotten that she had said she was a scholar.

"It's a prison," she went on. "I can apply for a transfer to a different school, but I can't get away. I've asked my parents to buy me out, but they need to pay for my brother's studies. He's doing Medicine in Australia."



“It’s not so bad being bonded. I quite enjoy it. It’s a nice job, the salary’s quite okay, and it means I don’t have to think. Why spend time worrying what to do? Jobs are all the same anyway. Just work hard and you’ll have time to enjoy life afterwards.”

She sighed. “I don’t mind teaching. In fact, I really like the kids, some of them are my friends on Facebook. But I don’t like not having a choice about what I do.”

“You knew the conditions when you signed that bond. Didn’t you read the deed? Why would you expect them to pay for your studies and then not get anything in return?”

“I was eighteen. Who on earth can think long-term at that age? I just wanted to get out.” This must have been an argument she had used effectively before, because she was looking at me as if expecting me to nod and agree. “Do you think little girls dream about becoming teachers when they grow up?”

Something had been bothering me for a while—a vague sense that her story did not quite fit—and now I realised what it was. “You’re a teacher.”

She nodded. “GP and English Lit. And I’m in charge of the cross-country team.” I looked at her dubiously, and she blushed. “I used to like running. Anyway the new teachers always get the unpopular CCAs.”

“If you’re a teacher, what are you doing here?”

She tried to laugh, but I think she knew I’d worked it out.

“What, who says teachers cannot go to Norway?”

“You said you’ve been travelling for ten days now, but the March holidays are only one week long. How come you’re still here? Don’t you have to go back and teach?” I realised I was pointing my finger at her and quickly lowered it, in case it looked like I was accusing her of something.

“I’m not supposed to be here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was supposed to go back four days ago. Nobody knows where I am now; I haven’t turned on my hand phone or checked my e-mail. They probably think I’m dead.” She laughed her crazy laugh again, and I wondered if she had actual mental problems. “No, they probably think I’ve run away. Everyone in the school knows how much I hate it there. I’m always complaining in staff meetings. I don’t mean to make a fuss, but they provoke me.”

“You’ve run away?”

“AWOL teacher!” She was still making funny noises that could have been laughter, or small cries of pain.

“Are you in trouble?” I found myself saying, aware that I was talking like a character from a film. She didn’t seem to hear me.

“I was in Germany first of all. I did A-Level German, so I thought it would be a good place to start. I took the train from one town to another, without any plan, just drifting. When I started to run out of money I knew I should go back,

and my week was up anyway. I was in Hamburg, standing by the harbour, looking out towards the Baltic Sea. The sky there seems too big, all sunset, it made me feel like I was lost, like I was nothing. So instead of going home, I bought a ticket on the ferry to Oslo, and then I couldn't afford a hotel so I thought I'd try my luck with this train."

"Are you going to go back?"

"I don't know." She looked impatiently at me. "Don't worry. I'm not going to sit under a bridge and kill myself."

"It's not that," I protested, annoyed that she found me so easy to read. "Your parents must be worried."

She frowned, but was saved from having to reply by all the lights going out just then. The conductor must have finished checking tickets for the whole train, and now we were settling down for the night. Around us the other passengers were yawning, putting their books away, finishing conversations.

We reclined our seats, and opened the hospitality packs we'd been given. These contained a blanket, ear plugs, eye mask and inflatable pillow. I tucked myself in, but didn't use the earplugs or mask—I had the feeling she still had more of her story to tell. My glasses were tucked into my shirt pocket, so she was now just a blurred silhouette against the greater blur of forests rushing past the train windows.

For a while we stayed like this, silent, just the thrum of wheels and sharp splatters as bursts of snow landed against the windows. The carriage seemed to become a single,

warm, breathing mass as we sliced through the night, the only human beings for a hundred miles. I felt myself sinking through layers of something dark and thick as people pulled down their window shades and even the moonlight waned.

When she spoke again, her voice seemed deeper, as if she was pulling at something within herself that didn't want to come loose. "I've travelled to so many countries. My family likes taking holidays; ever since I was a small girl, we would go somewhere different every year. Australia or Canada or Korea. One year we went all over Africa. Then when I was a student, I spent all my money inter-railing, all over Europe. I always feel like I need to escape."

I was now starting to feel sorry for her. "You shouldn't run away." I tried to make my voice gentle, so it wouldn't sound like I was scolding her. "Why don't you tell your parents how you feel? If you're really so unhappy, I'm sure they'll help you."

"I talked to them. They told me not to be silly; nowadays you should be grateful that you have a job. Teaching is an iron rice-bowl."

"Maybe you can ask MOE to transfer you to a different school, sometimes a change of environment can make you feel better."

"Can you find a school where I don't have to go for three-hour staff meetings, or spend all my time filling up forms, and all the other teachers don't tell me how I should behave?"

"I'm sure it's not that bad. Maybe you just need to change your thinking?"

She turned away from me a little. "Why do men always think they need to have an answer? It's okay. I don't expect you to solve my problems for me."

We fell into silence again. I had never met a girl like this before; she seemed contained in herself, but behind the stillness she was an open wound. I didn't know what to say to her. Normally when I go out with girls, we talk about movies or food, but I didn't think she would be interested in these things.

Then her voice came again. "You must think I'm very selfish, only talking about myself. Tell me your problems, Calvin Tham."

I wondered how she knew my name—for a moment it seemed like she could really read my mind—then remembered that it was written on the side of my book. I hate people stealing my books; if you write your name down the side, then it's on every page. She must have taken note of it earlier on.

"What kind of engineer are you?"

"I trained as an electrical engineer, but to be honest, I haven't used a lot of that. I seem to be doing mostly admin work."

"Where are you?"

"Ministry of Manpower."

"You tell people what to do."

"In a way, but it's not that simple." I started to explain to her exactly what my job entailed, but the air between us seemed to solidify, and I realised I wasn't sure myself what I did. I tried to remember my working day, but Singapore seemed unaccountably foreign, like a previous life. I had only been sitting at my desk ten days ago, but it was a blur—I didn't know where the last few years had gone. What did I do when I got into work every day? I turned on my computer, checked my messages, then—what? For the next few hours, what? Day after day clicked by in activities I could no longer list. Perhaps I had always been on this gently creaking train in the dark, all my life, and Singapore had only been a dream. At this moment, anything seemed possible.

We stopped at Lillehammer. The conductor passed through, like an angry ghost, roughly shaking awake passengers whose tickets only brought them this far. The lights came on, very dimly, so they had to grope for their luggage as the remaining sleepers stirred and murmured. On the platform, two or three bleak individuals took final drags on their cigarettes before letting them drop, and stumbled on board. I wondered how deranged your life would need to become before you found yourself waiting for a train at three in the morning.

The train started moving again, very gently, gliding at first and then picking up speed. It was not a new train;

the upholstery, like so much of Norway, appeared to have been preserved intact from the late eighties. Unlike our sleek MRT, busily covering short distances with the screech of metal wheels, Norwegian Rail was stolid and dignified, pistons churning, wheels turning steadily and cleanly along fixed tracks.

I readjusted my inflatable pillow and wondered if sleep would take me. Looking across at my companion, I could see from the reflected gleam of her open eyes that she too was wide awake. Out of impulse I whispered, "You should come home."

"Turn myself in, you mean?"

"I'm flying back in three days' time. Why don't you come back with me? We can make up a story for your school, I'll say you were sick, too sick to get in touch with them, and I had to take you to hospital. I'm sure they'll understand."

"You want to lie for me?"

"You can't keep running forever. What are you going to do? You don't have any money."

"You sound like my mum."

"At least call your mum, so she knows you're alive. You don't have to tell her where you are. Do you promise to call her?"

"All right."

"Why won't you come with me?"

"And do what? Go look at fjords, and then head back

to Singapore like a good girl? Tell my students I was sick, check their holiday homework, and then stand behind them at assembly making sure they don't talk or fidget during the principal's speech? I can't, it's like being buried alive."

"Then what will you do?"

"I don't know."

"You're just being spoilt. No one likes their job; why do you have to be so special? You think anyone really enjoys what they do all day? Just try to do your best; if you don't think about it, then time will pass very quickly."

"I don't need you to be angry with me."

"I'm not angry. I'm just trying to help you. You say you feel trapped, but where do you want to be? Life isn't so bad, after all you have a good salary and Singapore is so easy to live in, low taxes and low crime and nice food. Isn't that enough? Where else do you want to be?"

"Anywhere. Anywhere except where I am."

We were in the far north now, dark and cold for half the year. I was prepared for the roads, which would be treacherous, with spiked shoes and a foldable walking cane. I didn't know what she would do when we got to Trondheim. She seemed so utterly unprepared for anything. Even her clothes didn't look warm enough. I hoped she would be able to steal the blanket from the train and use that until she managed to get hold of a waterproof jacket.

I'm not usually the sort of person who talks to strangers

on the train. I've seen people who do it, just sit next to people and ask them where they're going, leading into hour-long conversations. I don't do it, and I had no idea what to say next. Nothing seemed suitable. I shut my eyes and tried to rest. It was almost four in the morning, and we only had three hours before reaching our destination. I didn't think I would feel human the next day if I didn't sleep at least a little bit. I had planned a full day of sightseeing—the cathedral in Trondheim is the largest medieval building in Scandinavia—and I wasn't sure if I would be up to it.

I had almost drifted off when I heard her voice, low and clear. At first I thought I was dreaming it. She was telling a story, maybe to herself, maybe to me. I listened with my eyes shut. She wouldn't be able to see my face in this light anyway.

"I met him in Hamelin, in the town square. I was only supposed to be there for half a day. There isn't very much to see there, pretty houses and a million tourist trap things about the ratcatcher. But it happened that day—"

"The ratcatcher?"

"You know the story? The pied piper of Hamelin."

"Of course. He got rid of all their rats, but they didn't give him the money they'd promised him. So he came back."

"And took away their children."

"Serves them right. They should have paid him."

"So, that day there was a parade in the town, a pageant telling the story, and I stayed to see it. I don't normally like

fairy tales, but the costumes were so pretty. Little children dressed as rats, and other children being stolen, then the ratcatcher himself, tall and blond, all dressed in strange clothes. I started watching and couldn't stop. I followed them, and by the time it had finished I'd missed my train."

"Was there another one?"

"Not until the next day. And the hotels were all full because of the parade. I hadn't realised, so many tourists come especially to see it. I walked around for a while wondering what to do next, it was too cold to sleep outdoors, and then I met him in the town square. The ratcatcher. Without the costume he was just an ordinary man, a bit thin, but I didn't know anyone else so I went to talk to him. I told him I enjoyed his performance. He's not really an actor, he just does this, normally he works in the town hall. He had small grey eyes, like a rat's. When I told him I had nowhere to stay, he told me I could come home with him."

She was very soft now, barely audible. "It wasn't even that I found him attractive, but somehow I followed him. When he touched me I didn't ask him to stop, it's been so long since someone touched me. It got dark very early and we stayed in bed for hours. We didn't use anything. I think I might be pregnant."

The train was completely silent now, moving deeper into nothing, into the dark, no sounds at all except the wisps of her voice.

“When I saw him the next day he was older than I thought, the start of a pot belly, his hair falling out. Blond hair thins so fast. He bought me some food and put me on the train. I didn’t care where I went. I asked him to buy me a ticket for any city, any city far away from Hamelin. He stood on the platform for a while, with his hands in his pockets, but then he became impatient when the train didn’t leave, he just waved and walked away. It’s too early to use a pregnancy test, so I’m just waiting. I can’t stay still while I wait.”

She seemed to expect me to say something, but I had nothing, no words would come into my head.

“I would do it again,” she went on softly, almost in my ear. “Even if I had a second chance. I wanted to hurt myself, but instead I made myself feel alive. I can’t go back now.”

She spoke a little more, about how there’s always a price to be paid, and if you try to escape it will be gouged out of you somehow. I stayed still, hoping she would think I was asleep. After a while, I did drift off, though it was an uneven sleep. I thought I heard her weeping during the night, but it may have been some other sound.

When I woke up, the conductor was shaking me and she was gone. We were in Trondheim, a watery sun coming in and lighting her empty seat, abandoned blanket and a few of her long hairs. She had taken some kroner from my jacket; I had expected her to, and had left the money in an open pocket as you would put out food for a stray kitten.

The rest of my holiday was uneventful. I took pictures for my Facebook page, and then came back to work. From time to time I wonder what happened to her, and if she ever made it back. Whenever I’m in my younger cousins’ house, I flip through their school magazines, wondering if I’ll see her face. So many different English departments. Once, I don’t know why, I hacked into the MOE server to see if I could locate her, but this proved impossible because I had forgotten to ask for her name.

# About the Author



Jeremy Tiang's writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Esquire* (Singapore), *Asia Literary Review*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Drunken Boat*, *Meanjin*, *Ambit*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* and the first two volumes of *The Epigram Book of Best New Singaporean Short Stories*. He won the Golden Point Award in 2009 and has been shortlisted for the *Iowa Review* Award and *American Short Fiction* Prize. He has also translated more than ten books from the Chinese, including work by You Jin, Wong Yoon Wah, Yeng Pway Ngon, Yan Geling and Zhang Yueran, and has been awarded translation grants from PEN American Center, the National Endowment for the Arts (USA) and the National Museum of Taiwanese Literature. Jeremy's plays include *The Last Days of Limehouse* (Yellow Earth, London), *Floating Bones* (The Arts House; translations of Han Lao Da and Quah Sy Ren one-acts) and *A Dream of Red Pavilions* (Pan Asian Rep, NYC; adapted from the novel by Cao Xueqin). He lives in New York City.

"These stories signal the arrival  
of an important writer."

—Tash Aw

...

A woman fleeing her previous existence meets a fellow Singaporean on an overnight train in Norway. A foreign worker is decapitated in an HDB building site accident. A Singaporean wife must negotiate Beijing as her British husband awaits a heart transplant. And in different corners of the world, Singaporeans and exiles mark National Day in their own ways.

Jeremy Tiang's debut collection weaves together the lives of its characters across the world—from Switzerland, Norway, Germany, China, Canada, Thailand, New York City and back to Singapore. These unsettling stories ask how we decide where we belong, and what happens to those who don't.



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