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To my brother

PART ONE

**A HAIRY
SITUATION**

CHAPTER I

Hashwini worried, in retrospect, if she had triggered the Little India riot of 2013. If so, Rodrigo would have to share the blame.

Rodrigo was a sleek and handsome stray cat with a docked tail that roamed the neighbourhood where Hashwini and her grandmother lived. One rainy night several months before, the bengal cat had followed Hashwini home, then lapped up the saucer of kopi susu she had laid out for him and decided to stay. Hashwini's grandmother checked for fleas, did not find any, and so gave her stamp of approval. She was going to call him, simply, Cat. Hashwini vetoed this. It had to be named after her Brazilian idol, Rodrigo Santoro. No other name would do.

Rodrigo's inexplicable urge to topple containers and dinnerware off the edges of counters made itself known quickly. Her grandmother would leave a plate of briyani on the dining table, but as soon as her back was turned, a crash would follow. Hashwini would step into her room and find her bottles of nail polish underneath the dressing table, cracked and leaking. Even a pot of simmering broth left to cool on the stove did not deter him. Rodrigo had a metaphorical itch to scratch, and the exasperated chiding from Hashwini and her grandmother fell on deaf ears. There was no taming the new male in their household.

On that fateful night in December 2013, approximately an hour before the vehicles on the streets nearby were set on fire, Rodrigo apparently felt the itch again. Hashwini had disrobed and stepped into

the shower when Rodrigo sneaked in and hopped onto the ledge above the towel rack. He eyed the line-up of fanciful toiletries thoughtfully; one of the bottles was uncapped and positioned nearer to the edge than the rest. Rodrigo reached out and gave it a little nudge with his paw. The bottle wobbled. Rodrigo glanced downwards. There was a red bucket filled with foamy liquid underneath the ledge.

Hashwini turned just in time to witness her precious bottle of kaffir lime hair conditioner make a dive for the bucket in which she was soaking her bra. Her piercing shriek startled Rodrigo and sent him dashing out of the toilet. She groaned as she scooped the bottle out of the soapy solution; what little detergent that seeped inside had rendered her conditioner unusable.

There was a brief moment when Hashwini contemplated skipping one of the ten steps in her beauty care routine. But she steeled herself against the easy temptation of being sloppy. If she were undisciplined with the necessary routine at the age of 25, she would have no one but herself to blame when crow's feet eventually made their appearance when she reached 45. Hashwini had made it a habit to uncap her range of creams and moisturisers and spread them out on her bed when she reached home. This effectively made it impossible to skip the routine, even on days when she was exhausted from her job as a croupier at the casino and wanted badly to flop onto the bed after brushing her teeth. Similarly, she uncapped her beauty products in the toilet before taking a shower. That was how Rodrigo came to upset her bottle of conditioner.

Hashwini quickly towelled her hair dry and slipped on a simple T-shirt and a skirt. The nearest provision shop that sold this particular brand of kaffir lime hair conditioner was six streets away, at the junction of Serangoon Road and Desker Road. It was not yet 9pm. There was still time to grab a bottle before the shop closed.

Once Hashwini turned onto Desker Road, the crowd thickened. It was a Sunday night. The Little India district was packed with migrant workers of South Asian origin out on their rest day. They had come for the familiar comfort of Indian cuisine, music and groceries. Nowhere else on the island could one walk past a row of shophouses and be dazzled

by the burst of colours from a sari shop, enticed by the aroma from a fish head curry restaurant or bombarded by the blast of filmi music from a CD vendor all at the same time. It was a slice of India right in the middle of Singapore.

Hashwini hated crowds. She was only 1.5 metres tall and disappeared below the line of vision of the taller pedestrians jostling in the congested wave, invariably surprising them at the split second right before they bumped into her. As a pre-emptive measure, she would mutter aloud *'scuse me, 'scuse me* as she pushed through the sea of bodies, like an ambulance with its siren switched on to clear the way. But when she stopped to catch her breath, the nasal assault of trapped heat and body odour would hit her hard and she would feel like retching.

"You're just spoilt," her grandmother would retort whenever Hashwini complained about the migrant worker crowd in Little India on any given weekend. "I go to the market every Sunday and I don't have a problem. In fact, some of them are really sweet. They offer to help me carry my basket all the way home."

"That is because you guilt-trip them."

It was true. Hashwini had long noticed that her grandmother used her frailty and dotage to her advantage, especially when there was a discount to be wrangled or a favour to be solicited.

"And you really shouldn't bring strangers home," Hashwini added. "You don't know them. What if they decide to rob you?"

"No, they won't," her grandmother insisted. "We're all Indians. The same blood flows in our veins. We take care of our own kind."

Hashwini wrinkled her nose; she did not feel any kinship whatsoever with the migrant workers from India. Unlike her grandmother, who hailed from a village in Tamil Nadu, Hashwini had been born and bred in Singapore. As far as she was concerned, the migrant workers who spoke a different shade of Tamil could well belong to a different species. Her kinship lay solely with her fellow Singaporean friends, be they of Indian, Chinese or Malay descent.

By the time she reached Nayagam Ranjan's provision shop, Hashwini was feeling irritable; her T-shirt was clammy with perspiration and clung

to her skin. She noticed that both Mr and Mrs Ranjan were buried at the checkout counter behind a snaking queue that was at least ten men deep. For a moment, she frowned and wondered if it was worth wasting a half-hour queuing to pay for her bottle of hair conditioner. Then, an idea struck her. Mr Ranjan's son, Kaustubh, often helped out on weekends when business spiked along with the influx of the migrant worker crowd. She could locate him and slip him the payment. The fact that she could come up with such a brilliant idea pleased Hashwini tremendously. She always knew she was an exceptionally smart girl.

The hair care products were located in the deepest aisle in the shop, and Hashwini had to squeeze past the throng of shoppers. She spotted Kaustubh at the far corner unloading bottled beers from the crates onto the shelves. When she finally reached the last aisle, she was dismayed to discover that the hair care products had been repositioned, and the kaffir lime hair conditioner had been moved to the top shelf. What she wanted was way out of reach.

Hashwini fought her way to the bottled beer section to grab hold of Kaustubh.

"I need your help. I can't reach the top shelf."

"In case you haven't noticed, I am really, really busy here."

Hashwini felt a wave of resurgent irritability, but reminded herself that losing her temper would not get her what she wanted. Perhaps she should take a leaf out of her grandmother's book and play the card of vulnerability.

"I know you're busy, but what can I do? I wish I were tall enough."

The surly young man pointed at the far end of the aisle and said, "Good thing the ladder's been invented. Help yourself."

Hashwini almost blew her top. She stormed to the far end, grabbed the ladder and started shouting *give way, give way* as she bulldozed her way through. Her ambulance siren transformed into that of a fire truck. When her vehicle scraped an elbow, she bellowed such an aggressive *sorry* that the victim cowered and ducked away.

Hashwini's rage escalated when she discovered that the ladder wobbled horribly against the shelves. She spotted a scrawny man

squatting beside her, examining the range of bar soaps on display on the lowest shelf. The man was unlikely to be tall, but he would have to do. Hashwini reached out to tap on his shoulder and requested as politely as she could manage, in Tamil, "Can you please help me?"

The moment the man stood up, Hashwini realised she had made a terrible choice. Not only was the man barely five centimetres taller than she, his eyes were bleary and his breath reeked; he must have downed several cans of beer earlier in the night. There was no way he could balance himself on the ladder. It would have to be she.

"Can you please help to hold the ladder?"

The man stared at Hashwini for an uncomprehending second, stared at the ladder for another and finally nodded. Hashwini waited for the man to secure the ladder with both hands before she ascended. She had made it up only three rungs when both of them heard a shrill beeping. The ladder started to wobble the moment the man released his left hand to reach for the mobile phone in his trouser pocket. Hashwini gasped as she felt herself gradually leaning towards the hair colouring products on the left, and then pivoting towards the range of shaving creams behind her. She grabbed onto the nearest shelf for dear life.

The man seemed to be oblivious to her predicament. As she maintained a precarious balancing act on the rickety ladder while holding on to a tenuous sheet of alloy metal, he took the incoming call. Hashwini seethed. She could hear an angry voice over the phone shouting at "Sanmugan"; now she knew she was not the only one antagonised by the drunken nincompoop!

The rant on the phone went on for three full minutes. From what Hashwini could hear, it seemed that the voice belonged to Sanmugan's bunkmate, who was reprimanding him for holding up the chartered bus. They had agreed to catch the 9pm transport back to their dormitory so that they could queue for a spot to do their laundry. Missing this bus and catching the next would mean landing themselves at the tail end of the two-hour queue and losing precious sleep that they needed.

Sanmugan murmured a slurred apology and a promise to hurry, then looked up at Hashwini and gesticulated that she should step down.

“This will just take a minute!” Hashwini shouted. She was boiling with murderous rage. “Will you hold the ladder with two hands, *please?*”

Taken aback by the young lady’s outburst, Sanmugan reached for the ladder with his left hand, but discovered that he could not secure a proper grasp, not while still holding the mobile phone. He took a second or two to ponder, and then solved the problem by leaning his whole body against the ladder, his head almost brushing against Hashwini’s thighs.

Hashwini felt like smacking the nincompoop’s head but decided wisely that she should just ascend the ladder, grab her bottle of hair conditioner and get the ordeal over and done with. As she climbed the third-last rung and stretched for the bottle, she thought she heard a click. She glanced downward. The man’s mobile phone was positioned directly below her.

“How dare you!” Hashwini hissed once she had both feet back on firm ground. “How dare you take a photo up my skirt!”

Sanmugan looked at her in bewilderment.

“Show me the photo you took!”

The man continued to stare at her stupidly.

Hashwini lost her patience and made a grab for the mobile phone. She was going to tap her way into the gallery when an incoming call disrupted her mission.

“Shit!” Hashwini cursed. Not knowing what to do, she handed the phone back to Sanmugan. It was the bunkmate, shouting at him again.

Hashwini decided she wasn’t going to suffer fools. Grabbing Sanmugan by his shirtsleeve, she hauled him past the crowded aisles towards the front counter, ignoring the curious stares the other shoppers threw at them. The inebriated man was strangely compliant, enduring both the rant on the phone and the manhandling by the fuming young lady without putting up a fight.

Hashwini found Kaustubh near the shop front carrying yet another crate of bottled beer. She quickly explained the situation.

“What do you want me to do?” Kaustubh shrugged.

Hashwini stared at him in disbelief. “If a female customer gets molested in your shop, what do you think you should do?”

“Molest? I thought you said he took a photo of you?”

“An upskirt photo!” Hashwini almost shouted, exasperated. “Don’t you think you should be calling the police?”

“Why don’t you call them yourself?”

There was again the nonchalant shrug. Hashwini wished she could smack the insolent, lazy young man. And then two concurrent realisations struck her—that she had left her mobile phone at home and that Sanmugan was gone.

“Where did he go?” Hashwini shrieked.

Kaustubh jerked his head in the direction of the entrance.

Hashwini pushed past the few shoppers blocking her way to the door. But the instant she stepped out onto the street, she was cruelly reminded of her height handicap. The pedestrians that streamed past her immediately blocked her view, and the man she was after had already vanished into the crowd.

Hashwini stepped back into the provision shop dejected. But the sight of Kaustubh wearing an unsympathetic smirk on his face infuriated her so much that she was instantly reinvigorated. There was no way she was going to let the pervert get away with this!

Hashwini took two steps towards Kaustubh and extracted the mobile phone she spotted jutting out from his back pocket.

“Hey...” Kaustubh could only utter a feeble protest; both his hands were lugging the crate of bottled beer. He watched with a frown as Hashwini called the police with his phone and reported the incident.

“Where do the workers get picked up from?” Hashwini turned to ask once she got off the phone.

“What?” Kaustubh looked bewildered.

“All those chartered buses that take these foreign workers back to their dormitories. Where do they pick them up from?”

“Just across the road, a little farther up.”

Hashwini sprang off.

The car park was 500 metres away on the other side of Serangoon Road, where more than thirty buses that had been chartered by dormitory operators to ferry the workers back waited with their engines running.

Hashwini arrived just in time to see a convoy of five buses edging towards the exit. The first bus had to stop and wait for a gap to interject itself into the Serangoon Road traffic flow.

Hashwini dashed to the front entrance of that bus and pounded on the glass panel. The driver tilted his head and stared at her with suspicion. He could see her mouth moving but her words were muffled and indecipherable. The dormitory housed only male workers so she was definitely not part of his bus load. She looked deranged. He decided that it would be a bad idea to let her into the bus. So the driver turned his head towards the main road, spotted a gap and jerked his vehicle into the traffic flow, completely ignoring her.

Hashwini was livid now. She felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Kaustubh. “How can you run off with my...”

Hashwini did not let Kaustubh finish his sentence. With all the strength she could muster, she shoved him towards the middle of the exit lane and ordered, “Stop the next bus!”

Kaustubh froze like a petrified deer blinded by the headlights of an oncoming vehicle. But the indignant honking of the bus unfroze him and he quickly skipped off the tarmac onto the grass patch. The driver threw vulgarities at him as the bus swerved into the main road.

Disappointed by this useless specimen of a man, Hashwini decided to take things into her own hands. She scouted the immediate vicinity and quickly spotted what she needed. As the third bus inching towards the exit, she raced to a rubbish bin by the road, toppled it and rolled it towards the middle of the lane, creating an effective blockade. The bus driver stared at her with incredulity and began to honk furiously. Hashwini marched to the side of the bus and ascended the steps once the door was opened.

“Siao ah li?” the bus driver shrieked in Hokkien, which translated into “Are you crazy?”

Hashwini held up Kaustubh’s mobile phone like it was a badge and shouted, “Police!” Almost immediately, the impropriety struck her, so she added, “The police are coming. I am doing a search on this bus. Kill the engine!”

The bus driver was intimidated by Hashwini’s forceful command and took it that she was an undercover police officer. He broke out into a cold sweat when he suddenly remembered he was driving his cousin’s bus and that the latter sometimes conducted clandestine operations smuggling in untaxed cartons of cigarettes from neighbouring Johor state. What if there were still a load of contraband in the secret compartment adjoining the engine? He meekly obeyed the undercover police officer when she ordered him to switch on the overhead lights to facilitate her manhunt.

Hashwini was momentarily stunned when the lights flooded the cabin and forty pairs of eyes stared back at her. But the entire busload of migrant workers had heard her shout “Police!” a moment ago and everyone watched her with unease and trepidation. Hashwini could smell the fear in the air. Emboldened, she marched down the aisle and inspected the faces with unlicensed authority. Every single man looked fearful, if not downright guilty. Hashwini fed on their collective uncertainty and felt like she towered over these men, even with her lack of height. She practically shouted with triumph when she spotted her quarry cowering in the second to last row.

“You! Stay right there!”

The entire busload of migrant workers erupted into hushed discussions as they strained their necks to identify the apprehended felon among their dormitory mates. They watched intently as the policewoman whipped out her mobile phone and called for reinforcements. This was the most exciting thing to happen since they had come to work in Singapore. A handful who owned smartphones switched on the video function to record the scene. They did so stealthily; it would not do for the policewoman to notice them and confiscate their phones.

To their shock and delight, the bus driver suddenly jumped into action. He raced down the aisle shouting with urgency. They could not understand his words, for he was shouting in Hokkien, but they could tell that he wanted the policewoman and the felon off the bus. A heated argument ensued. Those seated near the front could not hear properly for the two buses in the queue behind them had begun to blast their horns impatiently. The smartphone owners now stood up and filmed the

action blatantly. These would be priceless clips they could share with their friends and family back in India and Bangladesh.

At one point, the bus driver grabbed the scrawny felon by his arm and forcefully dragged him towards the front exit. Enraged, the felon's bunkmate in the adjacent seat tried to stop him but the aisle was narrow and the undercover policewoman was in the way. The entire busload scrambled to the left side and watched through the window as the four of them tussled and stumbled out of the bus. It became apparent that the bus driver wanted to leave the felon and his bunkmate behind and drive off. The felon's bunkmate started a heated argument, adamant that the two of them should not be abandoned. The bus driver insisted that he had the right to boot the troublemakers from his bus and turned to board the vehicle himself. When the bunkmate attempted to shove his friend up the steps, the bus driver swivelled around, lifted his leg and aimed a hard kick at the scrawny felon's chest that sent him tottering backwards. The entire bus gasped. A collective rage surged as someone shouted in indignant protest, "This is intolerable!"

The bus driver fired up the engine and locked the front door, unaware that he had incurred the migrant workers' wrath. When he inched his vehicle forward at an angle to circumvent the toppled rubbish bin, he saw the felon's bunkmate spring into his path to block his advance. Cursing, he slammed his palm onto the vehicular horn and held it there, adding another layer of ear-piercing honking to the cacophony from the buses stalled behind. Glaringly illuminated by the headlights, the stubborn troublemaker held his ground and refused to move.

The bus driver was contemplating if he should cut diagonally across the grass patch to get onto the main road when he heard the siren. From the far end of Serangoon Road, the flashing lights of a police patrol car could be seen advancing in their direction. Overcome with panic, the bus driver went into reverse gear and jammed on the accelerator. The bus jerked back abruptly and smashed into the stationary bus behind. The migrant workers seated at the back suddenly began to shriek, some of them banging on the windowpane to get his attention. Through the rear view mirror, the bus driver saw several of them pushing their way

to the front, gesticulating wildly and yelling in indecipherable Tamil. He could not understand them but he could sense their irascibility. He could also tell that things had somehow gotten out of hand.

Hashwini could not hear herself screaming amidst the uproar. The buses were honking, the migrant workers were shouting and the ear-piercing police siren was advancing towards the car park. A moment ago, when the bunkmate hopped in front of the bus to stop it from exiting, she had moved in to grab Sanmugan by his sleeves. Determined to hold on to him till the police arrived, Hashwini found herself in a tug of war as her quarry strained to get away. At one point, he tilted his head and bit into her arm. Hashwini yelped and let go, more out of surprise than actual pain. Sanmugan stumbled away towards the second bus as though he wanted to take the alternative transport. When Hashwini caught up and tried to grab him again, Sanmugan swung his arm at her and sidestepped. And then it happened, right in front of her eyes. The first bus suddenly jerked backwards, ramming into the second bus and pinning Sanmugan in between. That was the moment Hashwini started screaming.

As the second bus reversed out of the way, the flaccid body of her quarry slumped onto the tarmac. The eyes protruded out of their sockets with a wild glint, registering his final moment of pain and shock. Blood streamed out of his nostrils and his gaping mouth. Even as Hashwini continued to scream in horror, she noticed that the fallen body was neither convulsing nor choking for air.

The bedlam unfolded quickly. The migrant workers descending from the bus to investigate stood stunned at the spectacle. The gathering crowd swelled as word spread and the curious came forward to find out more. They identified witnesses from the bus and pried them for details. What actually happened? Several accusatory fingers pointed at the reckless bus driver, who had been dragged down from the bus by a handful of angry migrant workers. He was the one who had literally kicked the victim out of the vehicle and then rammed into him. He was the murderer!

The two police officers emerging from the patrol car were initially confused by the pandemonium. Some of the witnesses were eager to update them but neither of the two understood Tamil. And then they

spotted the mob justice. A Chinese man was being held hostage by a group of irate migrant workers, some of whom were hammering him with their fists. Both the officers froze. Never in their line of duty had they been confronted by such a scenario. It was a group of ten or more enacting violence against the Chinese man, but there must be over a hundred onlookers. The immediate realisation of the two officers was that they were outnumbered, not only as police officers by rowdy migrant workers, but also as Chinese by Indians. As much as they hated to admit it even to themselves, they felt unsafe.

Of the two officers, the corporal was the first to recover from the shock. He announced that he would call for reinforcements, and quickly slipped back into the vehicle to reach for the police radio. The sergeant was left with no choice but to take on the angry mob alone. He drew out his baton and shouted for the group to halt the attack, but nobody heard him. It was all too noisy and confusing. The sergeant pulled out his whistle and blew hard. This time, everyone heard it. Three of the migrant workers rushed towards him with the intention of reporting that there was an injured man who needed an ambulance. But the sergeant thought that the mob was breaking out to attack him and in panicked reflex lashed out with his baton. His first strike caught one of the migrant workers on the left arm, and the poor man shrieked in pain. There was a suspended moment when the crowd stared at the sergeant in bewilderment. The bus driver took the opportunity to struggle free and raced towards the patrol car, shouting for help. As some of the migrant workers approached the sergeant to explain the event, the jittery sergeant again lashed out at them with his baton. That was the moment the crowd began to jeer. The police was here to protect the culprit. They would never be on their side.

Hashwini watched in horror as the bedlam escalated. She saw the sergeant and the bus driver retreat into the patrol car. The corporal tried to back the vehicle onto the main road but the migrant workers encircled the patrol car and blocked its exit. Someone picked up the toppled rubbish bin and hurled it at the windshield. That act of rebellion excited the mob and brought on cheers. The bold among them laid their hands on the patrol car and began to rock it, eliciting more cheers from the

onlookers. For a moment, it looked as though the mob might pry open the doors, drag the hostages out of the car and shred them to pieces. But a shot suddenly rang out and the crowd fell over one another to back away.

It was the sergeant who had fired his pistol out of the window. He got out of the patrol car looking pallid, and motioned to the corporal and the bus driver to follow suit. Holding his pistol above his head, pointing it straight up, he fired another warning shot into the air before signalling his companions to retreat from the mob on foot. The crowd jeered loudly as the three scrambled across the road. Someone shouted a command, upon which the mob reconvened around the patrol car and worked together to upturn it. Once the vehicle flipped over, a celebratory hooting erupted. Within minutes, the vehicle was set on fire. The mob pranced around the burning effigy until someone goaded them to move onto the main road. The celebration ought to be spread and shared.

Although Hashwini felt shaken by the sudden, senseless death she had witnessed a moment ago, she could not deny the buzz of excitement under her skin as she watched the upturned police patrol car burn like a torch less than 30 metres away. This was not something she was watching on television. This was happening, in real time, and she was a part of it. In fact, she was the one who had started this madness, for crying out loud!

Hashwini turned when she felt a tug on her sleeve. It was Kaustubh.
 “Can I have my phone back?”

Hashwini extracted the mobile phone from her pocket and handed it over wordlessly. But a flash of inspiration struck her and she snatched it back.

“Just a minute.”

She held it up high, angled it to capture the flaming police vehicle in the background, and contorted her face to look appropriately alarmed before taking a selfie.

CHAPTER 2

Truth be told, Jessica was of the opinion that honesty was overrated. Were she honest, she would turn to her friend seated next to her on the dragon boat and break the latter's heart with the truth—that the hunky team captain working the drums with majestic fervour up ahead was not in the least bit interested in her.

But why break poor Andreae's heart? The dear girl was plunging her paddles valiantly into the waters, puncturing each exertion with a screeching yelp, no doubt designed to draw the team captain's attention to herself.

"Did you not notice how he always stays back after practice to chat with us?" Andreae had more than once repeated her observation.

"He chats with everyone. It's his role as the team captain to build the team spirit." Jessica felt it her duty to douse the poor girl's misdirected ardency.

"That is so not true. You must be blind not to see that he is interested in us."

That, in a nutshell, was Andreae's problem, Jessica mused.

The two had met in junior college and Andreae had clung onto her like a parasitic clump of mistletoe onto a full-grown, flowering eucalyptus. Over the past four years, Andreae had copied her hairstyle, her make-up and her clothes. It never struck the poor girl that she did not have Jessica's height, skin or contours to carry it off. She always ended up looking like a smudged, off-colour carbon copy of the real deal. Some of

the mean girls on campus called her "Fake Prada", but Andreae either did not know or pretended not to.

Jessica hadn't minded Andreae's clinginess. But it unnerved Jessica whenever Andreae fused their separate identities as a singular "us". It was as though Andreae actually believed that she could feed on Jessica's attributes like a mistletoe would its host eucalyptus.

Both girls were rinsing off after dragon boat practice ended when Andreae suddenly declared, "Maybe he's too shy to ask us out. Maybe we should ask him out instead."

Jessica secretly sighed. She hadn't the heart to tell Andreae that the team captain had in fact asked her out on a date once before and had been somewhat embarrassed when she told him she had a steady boyfriend.

"You can always try." Jessica shrugged.

"Yes, I should." Andreae decided happily, now that her best friend had endorsed the idea. She rinsed off the shampoo suds and raced off without even drying her hair. It took her all of five minutes to return triumphant.

"He said yes."

"He did?" Jessica had to admit that caught her by surprise.

"We are going to the soup kitchen after this."

"Is that some fancy new place I haven't heard about?"

"It's a soup kitchen run by some NGO to feed the migrant workers. He says he will bring us."

"Why are we eating at some soup kitchen that gives free meals to migrant workers?" Jessica asked, mystified.

"Because he has already signed up for volunteer duties, so I told him that we will be happy to help out," Andreae said cheerily.

Jessica rolled her eyes. Of all the relaxing or fun things she could do on a Sunday night, Andreae had to sign her up for soup kitchen duty.

The team captain, Krison, was waiting for them outside the changing room.

"I am so glad you are coming." He looked at Jessica, genuinely pleased.

"We're happy to help," Andreae chirped. "Are we sharing a taxi?"

"I have a motorbike. I'll meet you there," Krison said. "The venue is called Lucky Tongue. You can locate it using Google Maps."

Jessica rolled her eyes again. She was pretty certain he would not be paying their taxi fare.

It turned out that the NGO ran a soup kitchen in a coffeeshop that was not open on Sundays. Krison waved them over as they entered. He was seated at a corner table with a lady who looked to be in her forties. The latter stood and shook their hands warmly. “So nice of you to join us, ladies. We can always do with more volunteers. I’m Omala. I am the director of Migrant Workers Count Too.”

“We are glad to be here,” Andreae said. “Do you need us in the kitchen?”

“We have enough manpower in the kitchen tonight. You can help us serve at the counter when people start coming at six. We are catering for 250 people.”

Jessica was pleased. She was meeting her boyfriend after dinner. They had something exciting planned and she didn’t want to turn up smelling like a simmering pot of mutton curry; she could tell from the distinctive aroma emanating from the kitchen that that was what was for dinner.

Krison slipped into the kitchen and returned with four plates of white rice topped with servings of fish moolie, curry mutton cubes and sayur lodeh. Omala urged them to take their time. The place would not get busy for another half an hour.

“The soup kitchen is a such sweet idea. I am sure the migrant workers are very grateful,” Andreae muttered while she chewed on the mutton cubes, mangling her words and making “sweet” sound like “swee”, which meant “pretty” in Hokkien. She added, looking at Omala, “You are such a sweet lady.”

“I am neither a sweet nor ‘swee’ lady,” Omala said, tickled. “If anything, I am an enraged and indignant woman.”

“Why?” Andreae exclaimed, but she dragged her syllables too long and came across sounding like an enraged and indignant cat screeching.

Omala pointed at a table behind the girls. “You see those two Bangladeshis? Their names are Majumder and Bhimul. I will tell you their stories.”

Jessica and Andreae turned to get a good look. Both men donned striped polo shirts and faded jeans, and looked nondescript. But they shared an

aura of dispiritedness, their eyes downcast and their shoulders slumped.

“Majumder started work for a construction company in May. To date, he has not received a full month’s pay. He has a family of seven back in Bangladesh going hungry, while he is stuck in Singapore jobless and homeless, awaiting a financial settlement between the Ministry of Manpower and his employer.”

“How is that possible?” Jessica hissed in disbelief. “Why would he continue to work for free all these months?”

“Every time he broaches the subject, his boss will hand him \$50 or \$100, and make him sign for those. It’s a rather common deflect-and-defer strategy,” Omala explained. “Majumder had to pay \$5,000 in agent’s fees to fly over. He was already waist-deep in debt before he started work. That was the reason he hesitated for so long before he approached the authorities. He didn’t want to risk antagonising his boss, who can easily cook up an excuse to repatriate him.”

“And guess what happened after he made the report?” Krison interjected. “The boss changed the locks to the dormitory and confiscated his belongings, leaving him instantly homeless and jobless.”

Jessica felt, beyond the shock and horror, a deep sense of betrayal. She had grown up believing she lived in a country that practised justice and equality. Singapore was well known for being corruption-free. It was inconceivable that the system would allow this injustice to go unpunished.

“It’s a matter of time before MOM sets things right. He just has to be patient,” Jessica opined.

Omala and Krison both shook their heads, a pair of identical wry smiles on their lips.

“The arbitration process is mired in red tape and unlikely to get them what they deserve,” Omala said, her tone hardened and resigned. “Many of them run out of money while waiting for a settlement, admit defeat and have to borrow money from fellow migrant workers to fly home. Once they leave the country, the MOM case files are closed. And the same employer continues to hire.”

“This is so sad,” Andreae purred, directing her sorrowful eyes at Krison.

Jessica found her friend's affectation almost as unbearable as the indignation simmering in her. She turned to look at the two migrant workers again and asked, "What's the other guy's story?"

"Bhimul? Before he flew in, he signed an IPA—an In-Principle Approval—that promised a construction job paying \$1,600 per month, which is decent enough," Omala said. "But when he reached Singapore, the company assigned him a job as a gardener with a salary for only \$750 and made him pay for his own meals and transport. It was a total mismatch."

"But the IPA is in black and white," Jessica argued. "The employer can't possibly get away if he fails to deliver."

"Yes he can, unfortunately." Omala sighed. "Whenever MOM arranges for mediation, the employer simply refuses to agree on any sum of compensation for Bhimul. So the authorities have to arrange for yet another mediation session several weeks down the road. The game plan is to wear Bhimul down until he uses up all his savings, gives up and goes home defeated."

Jessica was taciturn for the next hour working at the serving counter. As she scooped from the container of sayur lodeh onto the plates held by the migrant workers, she studied their faces. She had seen them all before, pumping sewage out of clogged drain pipes on the roadside, filthy towels wrapped around their necks to soak up perspiration, or seated on the void decks in groups of three or four, eating out of packets of mixed vegetable rice unfolded on the cement floor. They existed in her peripheral awareness only as aberrations of the neat and orderly city she grew up in. Their alien presence was an inconvenient necessity.

Jessica had never seen them properly until tonight. She now saw them as Majumders and Bhimuls, fearful of asking for their unpaid salaries lest their employers might repatriate them debt-laden, or despondent as they awaited the outcome of interminable bureaucratic processes that wore down their spirits and wiped out their savings. And Jessica felt angry. How could her government, and her people, allow such injustice to perpetuate? How could she herself not have known?

After the soup kitchen had closed, Jessica and Andreae made their way to the nearest underground MRT station on foot. The latter was

babbling about Krison, extolling his saintly qualities and practically offering herself as a sacrificial virgin at his altar. But Jessica was not listening. She was troubled. Now that the indignation had tapered off, she had to ask herself: What was she going to do about it?

In the past, whenever Jessica became impassioned with social injustices and human tragedies, she had always taken action. When she read about the genocides in Somalia and Syria, she signed the online petitions to condemn the perpetrators, and shared them readily on Facebook. When an earthquake of magnitude 8.9 hit Japan two years ago and sent a 10-metre tsunami rolling through large swaths of farmland, she stuffed three huge canvas bags with her old clothes and lugged them to the Mercy Relief collection point. Her actions satisfied her conscience enough such that she did not feel guilty splurging on her next Nike or Speedo purchase. She had done her part and a certain destitute child in a far away corner in Somalia, Syria or Japan was better for it.

What she learnt tonight was different. The system put in place by her government and practised by her people had allowed the despicable to prey on the vulnerable. The injustice occurred in her backyard. She felt culpable, almost as if she were guilty herself. She did not know what she could do—not yet—but she knew she had to act.

Jessica's train of thought was abruptly interrupted when Andreae suddenly grabbed her wrist and hissed, "Don't look. Just keep walking."

"What? Where?"

"The poster. Don't look at the poster on the left."

Jessica defied the instruction and craned her neck to the left to zoom in on a poster adorning the wall in the MRT station. The model in the poster was a familiar face—Adhha bin Jimari.

It had been almost a year since she last saw him.

"I'm so sorry, Jess," Andreae whined in a high, thin pitch that scratched the irascibility in Jessica. "I tried to distract you."

"I'm alright," Jessica replied curtly. She wouldn't have noticed the poster had Andreae not brought her attention to it.

"I know he broke your heart but it was a long time ago," Andreae continued soothingly. "You have to get over it."

“I *am* over it.”

“You don’t have to hide your feelings from me, Jess. I’m your best friend. You can be totally honest with me.”

“Of course,” Jessica replied untruthfully.

She had lied to Andreae about the break-up. The truth was simply too complicated.

The poster was a bold publicity effort designed to counter the public’s disgruntlement over a recent series of massive train breakdowns. In it, Adhha was down on one knee next to a train engine, wearing an oil-stained uniform and holding a spanner in his hand. He looked into the camera with his trusting puppy eyes, lightly touching the hearing aid on his left ear. The caption read, “I don’t hear well, but I hear your feedback. I am doing my best to fix the problem. Give me time.”

Jessica first met him at a fund-raising sports event. Andreae had sprained her ankle and begged Jessica to take over her spot in the relay team. She was to complete six laps in the pool, pass the baton to a hearing-impaired cyclist, Adhha, who would have to cycle eight kilometres before passing the baton to a runner for the last leg of the race. Jessica later told Andreae that she thought Adhha looked dashing in his cycling gear. What she failed to mention was how impressed she was by the sizeable package in his cycling tights.

Jessica initiated a texting-based courtship. By the time they met for their first date, Jessica had learnt quite a bit about Adhha. He worked as a technician with Singapore Mass Rapid Transit, was currently training for the Southeast Asia Sports Meet, and had never had a girlfriend before. Jessica found the last bit of information titillating. She felt like she was given the reins to a promising young stud and the freedom to break it in at the livery arena.

As the weeks passed, the texting progressed from polite and friendly chatter to flirtatious and provocative exchanges. When Adhha revealed that there was an unfrequented storeroom in the underground tunnel next to the train tracks where sometimes he hid out and jerked off, Jessica asked to see it. Aflame with anticipation, Adhha ignored the regulations and smuggled her in. It was in that dusty little room, her back flat on

the sleeping bag that jiggled every time a train roared past, where she gave the cyclist his first wild ride in a new terrain. Despite his clumsiness, Jessica knew she had picked her stud well. Given time, she could train him to go the distance.

Adhha proved to be a diligent student. He accorded Jessica the same respect and obedience as he would his track-and-field coach, and fine-tuned his strength and speed to provide her the utmost pleasure. Jessica was brought to new heights of ecstasy she had never experienced before. In fact, she was so pleased she planned a surprise treat for him; she would offer him the reward of a ride without the rubber suit.

Jessica found out that Adhha was scheduled for the afternoon shift on the day he was meant to receive the treat. After her tutorial ended, she made her way to the train station where he worked and texted him the code “TW”. That was her signal that he should proceed to pick her up at the platform and smuggle her underground for some “tunnel works”.

Adhha was delighted to receive the unscheduled visit. Once they were safely in their dusty little secret room of carnal pleasure, the pair lost no time conjoining lips and removing intervening items of attire. Jessica had packed a tiny pair of scissors in her bag. It was her intention to present the surprise treat with a flourish, snatching the condom pack from his hand and snipping it in half. But the moment did not materialise. Both of them groaned when Adhha’s pager beeped and a text message came that his service was required urgently.

Jessica mentally prepared herself for a long wait. The poor reception underground did not permit web surfing, so Jessica watched an episode of *Game of Thrones* she had downloaded onto her mobile device. When Adhha had not returned after the episode ended, Jessica decided to chat with Andreae over SMS.

Girl, guess where I am. Hint: dark, sweaty and steamy.

Oh no, you’re stuck in the underground train tunnel. You poor thing!

Jessica was stunned. How did you guess???

It’s all over the news, Jess.

What is all over the news??

The worst train disruption in the history of SMRT. Where are you stuck? Hasn't help arrived yet?

I can't get onto the web. Send me some pics.

Jessica quickly browsed through the screen grabs that Andreae text-messaged. The North-South and East-West lines, the two major arteries of the train system, had both broken down an hour ago. Channel NewsAsia estimated that 750,000 commuters were affected. The back-up fleet of buses activated to ferry stranded commuters was unable to handle the volume, and angry commuters were flooding social media with their frustrations. The situation did not look like it would improve anytime soon.

Jessica packed her bag and let herself out of the storeroom. She counted her blessings that the lighting system was in order; she did not fancy having to make her way through a darkened and abandoned tunnel alone. It also struck her that had she not been engrossed watching *Game of Thrones*, she would have noticed the anomaly earlier. The dead silence in the tunnel in the absence of rumbling trains was deafening.

Rounding a bend, Jessica saw that a six-carriage train had been stranded less than 200 metres from the platform. Strangely, the passengers had not yet been evacuated. She could see movement inside the carriages from afar. As she closed the gap, she could also hear angry shouting from within one of the carriages. Someone was pounding on the door panel and hurling scurrilities at a lone figure standing outside the carriage. Although she was staring into the bright lights from the platform, Jessica could tell that the silhouette planted on the train tracks was none other than Adhha.

Jessica raced forward and asked Adhha what was happening. He explained, in a mix of hand signals and slurred muttering, that the electrical circuit had tripped and the train doors remained stubbornly shut. Several of his colleagues were working on the problem in the switchboard room but there was an enraged commuter who simply would not stop abusing him.

The man pounding on the door panel was a Caucasian with a thunderous voice; Jessica could hear his tirade clearly through the glass

pane. She could also tell that the air-conditioning in the carriage must have shut down, for most of the commuters were perspiring profusely. The entire lot looked utterly miserable.

"We are doing our best to fix the problem," Adhha tried again to placate the Caucasian. His slurred enunciation was almost indecipherable, even to Jessica, who was standing next to him.

"Speak up, you moron! I can't understand a word you're saying!"

"He said, there is a team of technicians working on the problem. Just be patient!" Jessica shouted to make herself heard. Then she added, "This man is hearing impaired."

"You think I haven't figured that out? After an hour of hearing this insufferable fool spout nonsense that none of us can understand?" the Caucasian retorted. "And how stupid can you be to send an idiot who can't hear nor speak to manage a crisis situation while the rest of the team has run for cover?"

Jessica suspected just as much; Adhha's colleagues had offered him up as a sacrificial lamb because none of them were willing to face the angry crowd. But the Caucasian's belligerence got on her nerves. "You need to calm down," she said.

"Why should I calm down?" the Caucasian challenged. "Do you know how much of my time you have wasted? If I hadn't sent my car for servicing, I won't even be on this filthy piece of shit you have the gall to call First-World public transport. First World, my arse!"

"Please calm down," a fellow commuter in the carriage urged. "We're all in the same boat. We'll just have to be patient while they fix the problem."

"You know why you are all calm and patient? It's because you're all sheep. This is a nation of sheep! You trust your government to do everything and make every decision. You can't even think for yourself. And you don't know your rights. When you are stuck in a malfunctioning train, you should clamour for action! You don't just sit back and trust that someone, somewhere, will fix the problem. But I am guessing none of you sheep will understand that."

Although he was unable to hear the exchange, Adhha could tell from the looks on the commuters that the tension in the carriage had escalated.

There was nothing he could do except to raise his voice and plead again, “Please, we are sorry. We are doing our best to fix the problem.”

“Oh, shut up, you bloody parrot!” The Caucasian slapped the glass pane separating them.

All of a sudden, the train doors wheezed and slid open. There was a collective cheer as the commuters felt a draft of fresh air enter the carriage. The Caucasian muttered something under his breath as he threw his attaché case down onto the tracks and made ready to jump. Alarmed, Adhha shouted for him to wait. He had yet to set up the emergency detrainment ramp. But the Caucasian ignored him and made a leap, landing heavily onto the tracks and losing his footing.

“Are you alright?” Adhha rushed forward to help the man up.

Once the Caucasian got back onto his feet, he picked up his attaché case and swung it wildly at Adhha. Adhha gasped and lifted his arms to ward off the assault. The crazed Caucasian made two more ineffective swings before aborting his attack and turning to stumble towards the platform. But he didn’t get very far. Jessica dashed past him and blocked his way with her arms outstretched.

“You apologise to him or I will call the police.”

“Get out of my way!” the Caucasian bellowed and charged at her.

Jessica wanted to shove the brute back, but his swinging attaché case smacked into her shoulder, causing her to lose her balance and fall onto her side. There was a sharp pain at her left ankle where she felt a tendon snap. She could only watch with angry tears as the Caucasian clambered up the stairs and disappeared from the platform.

Adhha rushed over to assist her once the retractable ramp had been set up. Some of the commuters who had descended crowded around her too. Everyone was indignant about the actions of the big bully. Jessica let herself be carried by Adhha up the stairs onto the platform in the manner of a new bride by her groom. She thought it was really sweet of Adhha and secretly wished someone was filming the scene.

And of course, someone had.

Over the next two days, the unprecedented SMRT fiasco dominated the print media headlines and online newsfeeds. Keyboard warriors

slipped into full battle gear and waged war against the SMRT CEO. They trained their spotlight onto his million-dollar performance bonus, hinted at his familial connections to the political elite and demanded a public apology. It became an instant circus as netizens herded the CEO into the ring and whipped up a storm demonising him.

In the midst of the brouhaha, a four-minute video clip uploaded by one of the commuters who was trapped in the stalled train was slow to gain traction.

You’re on YouTube! Andreae was the one who sent Jessica a link to the video clip three days after the incident. The first three minutes was shot inside the carriage. The Caucasian was filmed berating Adhha even after it became clear that the latter was a hearing-impaired young man. The tail end of the segment saw the Caucasian hop onto the tracks, assault Adhha, push a young lady onto the ground and make his getaway. The clip ended at the point when Adhha was carrying the injured young lady up the steps onto the platform.

Jessica was devastated. Although the image of her with her arms outstretched blocking the bully’s escape was imposing, she was only captured as a silhouette against the platform lights. Her countenance was barely recognisable.

Don’t worry. They will uncover your identity eventually, Andreae comforted her. *It’s amazing what the online community can do.*

Andreae was almost right. The Internet was amazingly efficient when its users came together to conduct a collective investigation. But the focus of their hunt was the Caucasian and they wanted blood. It was quickly established that the man at the centre of the furore was an expatriate from the United Kingdom. He went by the name of Anton Cassidy and worked for SmartInvest Asia as a Senior Wealth Manager. The irony that emerged was that Mr Cassidy’s LinkedIn profile listed the man, who proved himself so lacking in compassion, as someone who had been working with the charitable organisation Willing Hearts on poverty alleviation over the past decade.

Netizens were further enraged when a screen grab surfaced of Mr Cassidy’s Facebook post immediately following the incident. There

was a picture of his silver Porsche and a caption that read, “Ahhhh... reunited with my baby! Normal service can resume, once I have washed the stench of public transport off me.” There was also an astringent comment by Mr Cassidy in which he claimed he was caught in an awful train meltdown and had to suffer the stupidity of a “retarded” technician who was clueless about his job.

Over the next few days, the online furore gained momentum. The keyboard warriors gathered an army united in an enmeshment of xenophobia and patriotism, and demanded that Anton Cassidy apologise. The expatriate eventually did, but he made the mistake of emphasising that his family suffered extreme distress from the online harassment and thinly veiled death threats. The netizens rejected his apology over its perceived insincerity. SmartInvest Asia bowed to pressure and issued a statement to the effect that it did not condone the Senior Wealth Manager’s behaviour, and that the company and Cassidy had “parted ways with immediate effect”. But the keyboard warriors were not placated. In the end, five weeks into the ruckus, Anton Cassidy fled the country in disgrace.

Jessica was delighted when the army of keyboard warriors dispatched scouts to ferret out the identity of the technician who was verbally abused in the video clip. She figured that once Adhha had been identified, the breadcrumbs would surely lead them to her. But she was mistaken. In the interview, Adhha professed that he did not know the identity of the young lady who had stood up for him and guessed that she might be a commuter from the platform who stayed behind to offer help.

What do you mean by that? You don’t know me?! Jessica screamed over WhatsApp.

I can’t tell them the truth. Adhha pleaded.

Why?!

Because you were not supposed to be there. If my company found out I smuggled you into the restricted area, I will lose my job.

As much as the explanation made sense, Jessica could not bear the burn of Adhha’s betrayal. She broke off her relationship with him and cried her heart out on Andreae’s shoulder.

“But why? Adhha is such a sweet boy. Did he do something wrong?” Andreae wanted to know.

Jessica did not believe Andreae could comprehend the complexity of the situation nor her emotions, so she simply stated, “He wasn’t honest. He betrayed me.”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry, Jess.” Andreae imagined the worst and hugged her broken friend fiercely. “You have to be strong. You’ll survive this. You will.”

Once Andreae started to cry, Jessica’s tears stopped. She was pretty certain Andreae was crying about a totally misconstrued scenario and it would be dishonest to accept her sympathy.

Andreae was a sweet girl and a good friend, but Jessica would have difficulty defending her if anyone were to cast doubt on her intelligence or sensibility. Above all else, the girl was a poor judge of character and tended to accept people at face value.

Take Jessica’s current boyfriend, for instance. Andreae concluded, after several dinner meet-ups, that the man was kind, tender, generous and, of course, exceptionally handsome. On the other hand, she noticed that he always ordered the same food and guessed that he was probably not very exciting.

Andreae was right on one count. The boyfriend was an exceptionally handsome man.

Chong Jin was a member of STAR, the Special Tactics and Rescue team of the Singapore Police Force that was trained to handle hostage situations, riots and terrorist threats. Jessica had met Chong Jin at a career fair organised by the Ministry of Home Affairs three months earlier. Although she felt no calling to join the uniformed services, she was curious to find out more about the man beneath the uniform. Two dates later, the pair became an item.

Unlike Adhha, Chong Jin took charge right from the start. He made it clear that he had very specific preferences in bed, and that Jessica had to enter the relationship with an open mind and an adventurous spirit or it would not work. Jessica was instantly intrigued.

Chong Jin did not rush her. He allowed her several weeks to figure

out the full extent of his fetishes. She came to learn that the man enjoyed sex most when it manifested itself in the form of a power play. He was aroused by the elements of coercion and resistance, and invariably steered the interaction towards dominance and submission. Sex was especially exciting for him whenever he was put on standby duty at home as the second-tier response team. He would have access to his full set of uniform and basic gear, and could engage in extensive role-play.

That was the reason Jessica was excited about the date that night. Chong Jin had sent her a photo of his handcuffs, a hint that she ought to prepare herself for some rough-and-tumble uniform play. As she parted ways with Andreae, the latter had waved and chirped, “You’re meeting Chong Jin, aren’t you? He’s so sweet!”

If only she knew.

There came a moment an hour later, when Jessica suddenly recalled Andreae’s misplaced chirp and wanted to giggle, but gagged instead. Chong Jin reached down with his free hand to lock her head in position. He was moaning with acute pleasure and would not allow her to stop. Although most sessions saw him playing aggressor, Chong Jin occasionally wanted to switch roles. Tonight, he was an unsuspecting police officer outwitted by a crafty siren, handcuffed to the bed and forced to suffer the ignominy of a blowjob.

Jessica reminded herself to relax her throat muscles and breathe through her nose. But when Chong Jin continued to apply excessive force in pressing her head down, Jessica decided she had had enough. She was about to pinch his thigh when his activation pager beeped.

Chong Jin groaned. The pager, together with the key to the handcuff, was out of reach in a key dish on the dresser. He ruffled Jessica’s hair with his free hand and requested that she retrieve the pager. He almost jumped when Jessica suddenly gave a piercing screech.

“What happened?”

“My hair! Ouch!”

Jessica had shoulder-length curls. A tiny tuft near her ear had gotten entangled in the zipper. She was having great difficulty trying to extract herself.

“Just pull off my pants!” Chong Jin snapped. The insistent beeping of the pager was getting on his nerves.

Jessica grabbed hold of his belt loop and pulled hard. This time round, it was Chong Jin who shrieked in pain. The zipper had similarly ensnared his pubic hair.

“Okay, okay, I have an idea.” Chong Jin tried hard to stay calm. “Reach for my sock drawer behind you. There is a Swiss Army knife in there somewhere. You can use it to snip off that bit of your hair that’s stuck.”

“I am not snipping off my hair!” Jessica protested.

“Alright, snip mine then,” Chong Jin conceded.

Although Jessica could not tell whose tuft she was handling when she manoeuvred the tiny pair of scissors above her head, she managed to set herself free. The moment Chong Jin disengaged himself from the handcuff, he slipped into his uniform top and shot out the door.

Jessica trotted into the bathroom to inspect the damage. There was indeed a tuft of hair near her left ear that had been snipped off. She was grousing to her reflection in the mirror when she heard her mobile phone ring. It was Chong Jin.

“Are my handcuffs on the bed?”

They were.

“Shit. You’ve got to bring them to me.”

“Where?”

“There’s a situation at Little India. Text me again when you get here. Keep the handcuffs out of sight. Love you.”

The last two words were terms of endearment Chong Jin used whenever they had a particularly rough session and he was feeling apologetic about the bruises or bite marks. Jessica wondered why he would use the term in the current context but there was no time to ponder. She knew he would be in trouble if his superiors discovered he was sans a piece of equipment.

There was a horrendous bottleneck where Orchard Road swung left into Selegie Road, so the taxi driver chose to execute a flanking via Jalan Besar to drop Jessica off along Desker Road. As she approached Serangoon Road on foot, she could tell something was terribly wrong. The noise coming from afar was not those of merrymaking. It was peppered

with fearful shrieks and barbarous hollers. Jessica found herself jostling against the flow of pedestrians who were desperate to get away from the main road. When she reached the junction, she could hardly believe her eyes. There was an upturned vehicle in the middle of the road and rioters were dancing around it emitting hoots and catcalls. Someone lit a bottle of spirits and threw it in through the open window. Very quickly, the interior caught fire, which sent the rioters into a wild frenzy.

Jessica had seen similar scenes of anarchy on international news footage but never did she imagine she would witness it live in her own country. She stood rooted to the ground and watched stunned as the bedlam unfolded all around her. At one point, the ringing and vibration of her mobile phone broke the spell. It was a text message from Chong Jin.

Where are you?

Jessica looked around to check her bearings.

Nayagam Ranjan's provision shop at the junction of Serangoon and Desker.

All of a sudden, the upturned vehicle emitted a loud explosion, creating a huge ball of fire and sending everyone running for cover. Caught off-guard, Jessica jumped and dropped her mobile phone. She instinctively bent down to retrieve it. Almost immediately, someone collided with her and sent her sprawling. Before she could pick herself up, the horde of terrified pedestrians scrambling away from the explosion trampled over her. Jessica panicked as she felt herself being kicked at and stepped upon repeatedly. She curled up into a ball and prayed that she would survive the ordeal.

The crowd quickly calmed down once they realised it was but a singular explosion. Jessica felt a pair of strong arms pick her up. "Are you alright?" It was English spoken with a heavy Indian accent. Jessica wanted to reply, but a searing pain at her left ear rendered her speechless and whimpering. She feared to think the ear might have been torn off.

"Don't worry. I'll get you to an ambulance."

Jessica had to shut her eyes because the scene on the road was reduced to a jerky visual as her saviour pounded the pavement while carrying her in his arms. At one point, she felt him coming to a halt. "Open the door! We need help!" Opening her eyes, she was relieved to see that he

had managed to locate an ambulance. Strangely enough, the ambulance door remained shut. Eventually, another pedestrian stepped forward to unlatch the door handle. There was no one in the ambulance.

"I think they got scared and ran away," the pedestrian speculated. He held the heavy door open as Jessica's saviour climbed aboard and laid her down flat on the stretcher.

"Don't worry. I will find something to stop the bleeding."

Jessica watched as the man rummaged through the first aid box and extracted some bandages along with a bottle of antiseptic. She guessed, based on his pronounced accent, that he might be a migrant worker. "What is your name?"

"You can call me Haroon," the man said. He dabbed a cotton bud with the antiseptic and cautioned, "This may hurt a bit."

Her mobile phone pinged suddenly and startled both of them. Haroon chuckled as Jessica checked the message from Chong Jin. The latter had panicked when he arrived at Nayagam Ranjan's provision shop to find her missing.

Injured. In an ambulance now. Come find me.

Jessica winced as the antiseptic stung. She was surprised at how assured Haroon was dressing her wound. "You are good at this."

"I ought to be," Haroon laughed. "I was a nursing student back in India."

"Really?" Jessica could not believe her luck.

"Not here, though," Haroon added. "I'm here on an S Pass with a construction company. Hope to earn enough to finish my nursing degree when I go home."

Jessica thanked him profusely after Haroon had finished dressing her wound. She tried sitting up but cried out when a searing pain ripped through her abdomen. Haroon looked worried.

"There might be other injuries. Do you mind removing your attire so that I can do an examination?"

Jessica nodded. She reached down to pull off her trousers and heard a metallic clank as the pair of handcuffs dropped onto the floor. She tilted her body to pick it up but the searing pain at her abdomen sent her collapsing onto her back.

“Why do you have these?” Haroon asked as he picked up the pair of handcuffs. There was a look of alarm on his face.

Jessica was pondering if she could trust Haroon with the truth when all of a sudden, the door to the ambulance burst open and someone jumped in. Jessica tilted her head and saw that it was Chong Jin. Before she could respond, the latter lifted his rifle and aimed a buttstock at Haroon. She heard herself scream hysterically as she watched Haroon drop to the floor like a sack of sand.

And then she saw Chong Jin pick up the handcuffs and clip them onto his belt, an unmistakable look of relief on his face.

CHAPTER 3

Had Sharon known how horrendous the morning was going to turn out, she would have called in sick and cancelled her appearance. Surely they would understand; a bad sneeze loaded with the influenza virus could easily knock out the contingent of septuagenarians and octogenarians at the Sunflower Retirement Home, much like a well-aimed throw would do to pins at a bowling alley.

As an elected parliamentarian, she had certain duties to perform. They included scheduled visits to hospices and retirement homes, as well as appearances at bursary award ceremonies. The media coverage would assure the public that she had not forgotten about the needy residents in her constituency.

The first hint that a nasty surprise might have been in store was the apologetic grin the director wore when he received her at the entrance.

“We have three very enthusiastic residents who are putting up a dance performance this morning and they insist they want you to join in during the final segment. I hope that is alright with you, Miss Sharon?”

“That’s perfectly fine.” Sharon smiled benevolently. She imagined the elderly men and women were performing some line dance routine; nothing she couldn’t handle.

The director heaved an undisguised sigh of relief and led her to the holding room where the three performers were waiting. Sharon caught her breath. She was unprepared for the spectacle of three shrivelled

elderly women in tight, sleeveless cheongsams that clung mercilessly to their shapeless torsos, exposing their sagging arms. The caked foundation on their wrinkled faces was a gaudy sight to behold and the unrestrained application of blush an indefensible overkill. Nevertheless, the three were beaming with overflowing confidence.

“Let me introduce you to our three lovely ladies!” The director enthused. “We have Grandma Lucy, Grandma Mimi and Grandma Beebee. They used to be professional dancers.”

“How lovely!” Sharon tried to match the director’s tone of delight. “Do you perform traditional Chinese folk dance?”

“Oh no, we were professional dancers at the Apollo Night Club. We do sexy numbers.” Grandma Lucy winked.

“Don’t worry, we designed a set of very simple steps for you,” said Grandma Mimi, quick to give assurance when she saw that Sharon had turned a shade paler. “And you only come in for one minute at the very end.”

“Erm... I am just worried that I might spoil it for you,” Sharon began, but Grandma Beebee had already thrust a pair of maracas into her hands and signalled the director to start the music.

The piece that tumbled out of the CD player was an iconic dance number called “Ja Jambo”. Sharon had heard it before; her own mother might have taken to the dance floor back in the 1970s while the band played this very song. To their credit, grandmas Lucy, Mimi and Beebee had choreographed quite a showpiece that matched the quick tempo of the music. Although Sharon cringed when she realised she was expected to perform the same sequence of hip sways, butt thrusts and armpit-exposing arm-over-the-head postures, she reminded herself that it was entertainment meant for the Sunflower residents. She would just have to bear with it.

After ten minutes of practice, the director mowed down the protests of the dancing grandmas and ushered Sharon to the meeting room where the media representatives were waiting. Sharon delivered a short speech about the need for the government to be frugal while rolling out social welfare programmes, and emphasised that the citizens must not

be allowed to develop a crutch mentality. The reporters looked bored. Sharon felt sorry she wasn’t able to reveal some of the exciting initiatives the government had lined up, but the next election was two years down the road and it was not yet time to fire up the voters’ enthusiasm.

The director then led Sharon to the activity room where the Sunflower residents were seated in tidy rows of wheelchairs awaiting her arrival. Sharon took her time to shake their hands one by one, stuffing auspicious red packets, each containing a \$10 bill, into their palms as she did so. One of the elderly, a hulking man sporting multiple faded tattoos on his arms, was apparently having a bad cold. He emitted a thunderous sneeze as she neared, wiped mucous off his nose with his right palm, wiped that palm on his pyjama bottoms and then extended the hand to Sharon when she came to him.

Sharon froze. Every cell in her body was recoiling in disgust. Thinking quickly, she pretended not to see the man’s extended hand and moved to pat him on his shoulder instead. The man gave her a toothless grin. Sharon next pinched the red packet by the edge and gingerly offered it to him. It was at that point that her luck ran out. The grateful recipient grabbed her hand with both palms and shook it warmly, leaving a wet smear behind.

Sharon wanted to scream. But her intuition as a politician told her that even the act of extracting a sheet of tissue paper to wipe away the mucous might be wrongly interpreted by the reporters present. She could come across squeamish or insensitive. Luckily for Sharon, the director saw what had happened and was quick to offer a box of tissues.

The residents had lined up an abbreviated string of musical performances for their esteemed parliamentarian. Two solo singers heartily belted out “The Wandering Songstress” and “Night Jasmine” in croaking voices before the trio of dancing grandmas took over the mike to perform the final number. Grandma Beebee slid over to Sharon, who was seated at the front row, and stealthily handed her the maracas.

“Don’t be nervous. We’ll guide you,” she whispered.

Sharon wasn’t nervous until this moment. It hadn’t crossed her mind earlier that reporters would be among the audience.

“We are the Apollo Sisters!” Grandma Lucy beamed as she introduced their act. “Back in the 1970s, we were professional hostesses at the Apollo Night Club. We were adored by the towkays who tipped us more in one night than they paid their coolies in one month. Those were golden years for the cabaret scene. Today, we would like to present a cabaret number for our special guest Miss Sharon Shi.”

As the director orchestrated a round of applause from the Sunflower residents, Grandma Mimi took over the mike and continued, “We would also like to dedicate this number to an old and dear friend who is celebrating his ninetieth birthday today. He was a strong and handsome club bouncer back in his prime years. Can someone help to wheel Black Cougar to the front, please?”

As it turned out, the birthday boy was none other than the hulking resident with the faded tattoos. Sharon imagined that the ex-bouncer probably had a spread of other tattoos underneath his singlet and pyjama bottoms. But as the nonagenarian sat in his wheelchair sniffing away, it was hard to imagine him as a muscled bouncer back in his heyday.

Once the infectious tempo of “Ja Jambo” kicked in, the audience perked up and began to bob and tap to the beat. Even the reporters standing behind shook themselves out of their lethargy and clapped along cheerily. The spunky trio turned up the heat and elicited catcalls and screeches with their provocative hip sways and butt thrusts. Two of the reporters extracted their mobile phones and began to film the performance gleefully. Everyone was charmed.

Everyone but Sharon.

She had thought it would be harmless fun engaging in a little uncoordinated buffoonery with an elderly trio. What she hadn’t anticipated was how spectacular the dancing grandmas turned out to be. Their routine was show-stopping! She would be the only buffoon on stage.

Sharon’s palms were sweaty and shaking slightly when Grandma Mimi swirled towards the front row to lead her into the dance. There was a collective gasp of surprise and delight among the audience. The clapping intensified once they realised their esteemed guest had humbled herself

and secretly practised just for them. Every single one of the reporters was now recording the performance on their mobiles.

It was the most torturous and interminable sixty seconds Sharon had ever experienced. She was constantly half a beat behind the trio, thrusting her singular butt out when they had retracted theirs and lifting her arm over her head as they were swinging theirs down. Some of the old folks in the audience began to giggle. They were charmed by Sharon’s obviously intentional buffoonery. The reporters knew better and had to bite their lips to stifle their grins at Sharon’s mortification.

As the dance came to an end, the audience rewarded them with enthusiastic applause. Sharon was slinking back to her seat when grandma Lucy grabbed her wrist. “We have to take a picture with the birthday boy.”

Everyone in the room cracked up when Grandma Mimi threw a cushion onto Black Cougar’s lap before planting her butt on it and wrapping her arms around his neck. Grandma Lucy herded Sharon to the left of the wheelchair and goaded her to imitate Grandma Beebee, who was sticking her face near the birthday boy’s and pursing her lips as though she was about to kiss him. Sharon grimaced. But the audience had started to sing the birthday song and she felt pressured. So she pressed her face close but tilted her head so that she was looking at the audience smilingly.

As she beamed at the audience, the birthday boy felt another huge sneeze coming. He decided to spare the lovely Grandma Mimi in his lap and so jerked his head to the left and released the wet sneeze forcefully onto Sharon’s upturned cheek.

After a split second of stunned silence, the audience screamed, some in horror, others in hilarity. The director grabbed a box of tissues and rushed over to her rescue. Sharon took another second or two to recover from her shock. As she smiled weakly and waved off the director’s apologies, she secretly prayed that none of the reporters would upload the clip onto social media.

Later, Sharon hid out in the director’s office toilet and scrubbed her face harshly with a hand towel the director had provided. She shuddered when she imagined the virus-laden spittle landing on her cheek. Although

she wished fervently that she could drive home to scrub herself from head to toe with antibacterial shower gel, her schedule was much too packed. There was the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) executive committee lunch meeting, the fund-raising event at VivoCity, the airport pickup at four in the afternoon and two funeral wakes to attend; she wouldn't get to kick off her sensible heels until after a late dinner.

Christina Overee, who chaired AWARE, had booked a private luncheon room at the Tung Lok Signatures restaurant at VivoCity. They had an hour before the fund-raising event began at the mezzanine. As Sharon sipped her cup of oolong tea and watched the others stream in, she felt once again that she was watching a parade of some of the most powerful women in the country. Among the most prominent were the group CEO of Singtel, who had transformed the Singapore-based telecom firm into a global behemoth; the founder and managing director of Spa Esprit Group, who had built a formidable portfolio of over 18 brands and more than a hundred food, beverage and lifestyle outlets; and a managing partner of GGV Capital, who not only made waves in the China tech scene as an astute investor but was the only one in the room who had made it to the *Forbes* list of 100 Most Powerful Women.

Sharon hated to admit it, but she felt inferior. It was true that the media had trained their spotlight on her four years ago when she joined Temasek Holdings, the colossal sovereign fund with a portfolio estimated at 193 billion Singapore dollars. At the age of 31, she was its youngest ever managing director. Two years later, her star burned even brighter when she ran for election on a joint ticket with Christina Overee's husband and entered parliament riding on the wings of the dominant political party. Temasek Holdings' generous pay package, together with the five-figure parliamentarian remuneration, allowed her to make an instant leap into the top ten per cent of income earners in the country.

By all measures, Sharon ought to have been proud of herself. Yet she couldn't help but feel intimidated by this team of power ladies, most of whom sat snugly in the bandwidth comprising the top one per cent of income earners.

Christina ordered dim sum so that the committee members could munch on the delicacies and discuss business at the same time. In her signature efficient style, she came straight to the point.

"Later this afternoon, we have mobilised thirty-three volunteer nail techs to run the charity manicure booths at the mezzanine. The media reps will arrive at 2.30pm. Sharon will be our spokesperson for this event, as always. She's our best chance to secure a spot on the 9pm news broadcast."

The ladies collectively glanced at Sharon and smiled. It was unspoken but understood that AWARE needed a member from the dominant political party to magnify its publicity efforts and to bypass bureaucratic red tape. Sharon returned the smile. Her anchored role in the committee was a security blanket she embraced like a four-year-old.

"But we all know that charity booth runs like these, though effective for media exposure, are not going to help us reach our fund-raising targets. We have a charity dinner event at the Hilton end of January. Five thousand dollars per table. I expect generous sponsorship from all of you, ladies. Let's go around the tables and make our pledges now."

Sharon prayed that the burn on her cheeks did not manifest itself in colour. She abhorred this humiliating practice of public pledges. As the running tabulation of fives, eights and even tens inched nearer, she took in a deep breath and steadied herself.

"It will be one table for me, please."

Sharon hoped she had delivered her line with enough equanimity and that no one would notice the underlying shame. That all the other ladies took pains not to make eye contact with her made it all the more unbearable. Sharon felt like a four-year-old invited to a posh birthday party wearing a cheap plastic tiara with the \$2 Daiso price tag intact.

After the lunch meeting, the power ladies proceeded down to the mezzanine to meet the press. Christina initiated the official opening of the charity booths and lavished praises on the 33 nail techs who had volunteered their services. All proceeds would go to a fund that supported women and children whose husbands and fathers were incarcerated. Sharon then gave a video media interview expounding on

the good work AWARE was doing to offer support services for survivors of sexual assault and domestic abuse, which was statistically significant among families of prisoners.

“You looked so confident doing a live interview!” one of the power ladies purred at her later. “I could never do that. I would be way too self-conscious.”

Sharon beamed. She knew for a fact that she looked good on camera. Her angular jawline and craggy cheekbones, which she used to detest while growing up, were the very features that lent her an air of aristocracy and refinement on film. Years on the debate team in secondary school and junior college had put on her an armour of confidence. The cumulative accolade came when she became one of only three Asian undergraduates in the history of Yale to win the title of Best Debater at the tournaments. Her debating style had been variously described as masterful, fiery and bloodthirsty.

“And I must say your shoes are exquisite!” the same lady continued. “Are those Manolo Blahnik?”

Sharon bit her lip. She had bought this pair of Manolos after her second AWARE meeting, when she realised that none of the shoes she owned made the cut. She was hoping that no one would comment on them so she could go on pretending they were one of several pairs from her collection. Now she would have to go and splurge on another pair, or more.

The charity run looked to be a success. Christina had planted a team of her own staff to join in the queue whenever it fell below a headcount of ten. It had long been observed that Singaporeans placed their trust in queues according to their lengths. The longer the queue, the more ardent they were to join in and spend. Apparently, the same principle applied to donations and charity.

At three o'clock, Christina collected Sharon as they had earlier arranged and headed for the car park. She passed Sharon a garment bag containing a freshly-pressed set of clothes before heading back to the mezzanine event. Both their husbands were flying in at four and Christina had enlisted Sharon's help to pass her husband a change of

clothes so that Elvis Overee could rush directly to his next meeting. As the incumbent Minister for Foreign Affairs, the man ran an extremely tight schedule. Sharon's husband was on Elvis' payroll as his trusted personal assistant.

On the drive to the airport, Sharon glanced at the garment bag on the passenger seat and chuckled as the thought crossed her mind that she must be the most overpaid errand girl on the island. But she did not mind. She would not be where she was now without the Overees.

Sharon had first met Christina Overee when she returned from Yale to serve her scholarship bond at the Economic Development Board. The latter was prominent in the organisation for being the only woman among the senior directors. Sharon immediately identified Christina as a potential mentor, someone who had miraculously broken through the glass ceiling and could show her the way.

Sharon had been acutely aware of the chasm; Christina was too far up the hierarchy to even take notice of her. So Sharon worked hard to make herself stand out. Over the first few years, she aggressively sought out major assignments that required her to make presentations to the senior directors. If there was a cross-divisional working committee that reported directly to Christina, Sharon elbowed her way in. She did not allow a single month to go by without her name appearing in a report Christina was reading or a meeting where Christina could see her make presentations.

Despite her best efforts, nothing came out of them; Christina Overee did not appear to be fond of her. The two women had very little in common. While Christina was as charming as a Vanda Miss Joaquim, Sharon was as bleak and spiky as a beavertail cactus. Yet Sharon bore no grudges. As an endorser of the power hierarchy, Sharon acknowledged that Christina, being higher up on the ladder of authority, did not need to pay attention to her—it was up to Sharon to win Christina over.

And she eventually did, although it was under entirely fortuitous circumstances.

One Sunday afternoon, Mrs Shi, Sharon's mother, invited her friends from her church over for lunch. Seated at the same table, Sharon did

not pretend to be civil. She ignored the guests and scrolled through the newsfeed on her tablet. But she pricked up her ears when she heard the ladies mention AWARE. Apparently, their church leaders strongly disapproved of the organisation's liberal approach to alternative sexuality, and were of the opinion that its policies and programmes encouraged acceptance of deviant sexual lifestyles among the public. Christina's name was mentioned as a prominent member of the enemy camp.

After the guests left, Sharon pried details from her mother. She was shocked to learn that the church was engineering a stealthy takeover bid. Mrs Shi was among the many church members who had obeyed instructions from the church leaders to sign up for membership with AWARE over the last two months. It was their plan to turn up unannounced at the impending annual general meeting, vote their own church members into the executive committee and wrestle power from the old guard.

Christina was curious when Sharon requested a private lunch with her the next day. She became solemn as Sharon revealed what she learnt. The AGM was in less than a week. She would have to move fast.

Sharon made it clear that Christina had her support. She was, however, stumped when Christina wanted her to contact her circle of friends, urge them to apply for AWARE membership and to turn up for the AGM in support of the old guard. The truth was that Sharon did not have many friends, but she kept that to herself.

Despite the forewarning, Christina and her team were caught off-guard by the robust turnout of the hostile newcomers. The old guard lost six out of the 11 seats in the executive committee. The presidency went to a Josie Thio, an academic who sat on the church executive committee.

Christina was furious. Together with what remained of her team, she set about organising an extraordinary general meeting the following month. The intervening weeks saw aggressive recruitment efforts by both the old guard and the newly-elected executive committee. By the time the EGM swung around, membership in AWARE had ballooned tenfold. Accusations and arguments flew during the six-hour session when Christina and her supporters pushed for a vote of no confidence.

They pointed out the impropriety of asserting conservative Christian values by the new executive committee in a secular organisation such as AWARE and urged supporters to call out Josie Thio's power grab for what it was—a hostile takeover by the church. Eventually, Thio's team admitted defeat and handed the reins back to the old guard.

Once victory had been secured, Christina made strategic moves to consolidate her army. She roped in Sharon to serve as an executive member of AWARE and made it clear at the Economic Development Board that she had taken Sharon under her wing. That was the pass Sharon needed to squeeze through the crack in the glass ceiling.

Sharon was ecstatic. She knew that winning Christina's trust was pivotal in her ambition to cross over to the top echelon in the civil service. What she did not anticipate was the bonus that came attached to it—Christina's husband.

If Christina was a power player in the Economic Development Board, Elvis Overee was a power broker in the national arena. He was, after all, a cabinet minister and held the foreign affairs portfolio. Elvis was in his early fifties and exuded an intelligent and confident charm. He seemed to be genuinely fond of Sharon and treated her like the daughter he never had. Elvis and Christina Overee had no children.

Over the next few months, the Overees included Sharon in their social engagements. The intention was to allow Sharon to tap into their network of friends and contacts in high places. Sharon was thrilled to suddenly be propelled into an elite social circle. She found herself lunching with CEOs of financial and investment institutions who made decisions that moved millions of dollars across accounts. Her ambition was stoked.

When Elvis eventually invited her to join his political party, Sharon was taken aback. He explained that the elections were coming up and the party needed new blood. There was a dire lack of representation of young professional women in the line-up, which made her the perfect candidate. Despite his insistent persuasion, Sharon was hesitant.

“Tell me, what is holding you back?”

Sharon explained that she was not keen to be under the constant scrutiny of the media.

“None of us are, except perhaps a handful of egomaniacs,” conceded Elvis. “That is why we are the luckiest politicians among democracies worldwide. Think about it—who owns the media in our country?”

Sharon could not argue with that. Not only did Elvis’ political party dominate parliament by taking up 84 out of 87 seats, the party had, over the years, held tight control over media regulations. The cosmopolitan city-state of five million was served by a single media conglomerate with strong ties to the dominant political party. Seventy per cent of the population read the same newspaper every day.

“But I have no political background and zero grassroots support. I am a complete stranger to the electorate.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Elvis laughed. “I will guarantee you passage into parliament. You will run for election under my team.”

Sharon could not argue with that either. The country had pioneered an election system that was unique among democracies worldwide. Candidates representing different constituencies could team up and run for election on a collective ticket. An established cabinet minister like Elvis Overee could easily carry two to three new political candidates on his back and ferry them into parliament safely.

When Sharon continued to be hesitant, Elvis made an appeal. “I’ll be honest. I need you on my team. There is politics within politics. Among the cabinet ministers there are factions. During the last election in 2006, my arch nemesis, whom I shall not name, tried to bring in a very strong candidate. But he was overconfident. He placed that candidate to run in a single member constituency, and the poor fellow suffered a humiliating defeat by the opposition. This time round, he will piggyback this candidate in on his team ticket. It’s a guaranteed win. I am sure you know who I am talking about, yes?”

Sharon nodded; she knew whom Elvis was referring to. Dr Gimme Lao had shot to instant fame during the national SARS crisis back in 2003 as both the doctor who identified the first carrier and the task force leader who effectively traced and identified all cases in the country, thereby putting an end to the pandemic that could have annihilated the entire population. He was touted as the star candidate of 2006. So it came

as a shock when he lost the election to an opposition candidate.

“I have been hunting far and wide for strong candidates to join my team and I’m so glad Christina brought you to my attention,” Elvis continued. “You will be the ace in my royal flush.”

As transparent as Elvis’ attempt to stroke her ego was, it worked. Sharon took it as a compliment that Elvis would place her on the same level as Dr Gimme Lao. In her mind, she locked on to the star candidate as the benchmark to beat.

When the election campaign began in 2011, Elvis and Christina Overee went to great lengths to coach her. They did not doubt her capabilities but they knew her appeal to the electorate needed work.

“Always smile. Show your teeth, or you will come across either condescending or insincere.”

“You will be walking the ground and talking to the average Singaporean. Mirror their language. If they don’t speak good English, forget about your perfect grammar and elite school vocabulary. Speak Singlish, and dialects, where possible. Go down to their level.”

Sharon was grateful for the coaching. She came from an affluent background and studied in elite schools. She did not have many friends who lived in public housing. At work, she had to impress her superiors but never had to be circumspect around her subordinates. Left on her own, she would not know how to connect with the blue-collar working population.

Sharon memorised catchphrases that were well-used among the masses and peppered her speeches with them. She taunted her political opponent and claimed that the crafty man employed “pattern more than badminton”. She cringed inwardly when she spouted the asinine phrase but the crowd loved it and cheered. She would have loved to coin the term Machiavellian, but the word would be lost on her audience. The Overees were right. It was a different ballgame soliciting votes from people who formed the bulge in the bell curve of intelligence quotient. To showcase her brilliance would only alienate them.

So Sharon continued to speak the language of the masses. She claimed that she would run the estate maintenance of her constituency efficiently

such that “swee swee bo zhao zui”, which in Hokkien meant that it was “so nice that there is no leakage of water”. By voting her in, they would guarantee themselves a reliable representative who was “woon woon jiak bee hoon”, or “steady like eating vermicelli”. Although she secretly found many of these rhyming phrases moronic, the audience lapped them up. So Sharon continued to show her teeth when she smiled and spoke the language of the populace and for that, the electorate of her constituency voted her into parliament.

As far as Sharon was concerned, the real bonus was her engineered transfer from the Economic Development Board to Temasak Holdings prior to the election; she could not have contested as a civil servant. It was a dream come true working for one of the biggest sovereign funds in the world. She had to believe that the Overeers were her lucky stars!

Sharon reached the airport arrival hall at four o’clock sharp. The two security officers who were there to receive Elvis spotted her coming down the escalator and quickly came forward to take her garment bag. They informed her that the flight from Cebu had touched down and that Elvis should be clearing customs in no time.

Sharon whipped out her mobile phone to check her messages. There was one from Masri bin Khairuman. Masri was a university undergraduate who volunteered his services as a grassroots leader at her constituency. She had tasked him to keep a lookout for any social media postings that concerned her. He had sent a message with a YouTube link and a sad face emoji.

Sharon had an inkling, even before she clicked on the link, that someone would have posted a clip of her awkward “sexy” dance routine at the Sunflower Retirement Home this morning, and she was right. To her dismay, the viewer comments ran the gamut from ridicule to outright malice.

“What a clown! She dances like a retard.”

“Election is long over. Will you stop wasting time kissing babies and dancing with retirees, and go do your job already?”

“Do you guys know how much money she takes home as an MP? Singapore has the best-paid politicians in the world and this is what she

does all day. Easy money. Best job ever!”

“Love that sneeze! Right into that bitch’s face! Give the man a Tiger!”

Sharon was still scrolling through the comments when a sudden peck on her cheek so startled her she yelped and took a step back. She looked up and caught her husband looking equally startled by her abrupt reaction.

“Oh dear, your wife doesn’t look very pleased to see you, Yu Chin,” Elvis teased them. Both men were tanned from their diving trip. Elvis was an avid diver and often dragged her husband along on his bimonthly weekend dives.

“I’m sorry. I was just distracted by this,” Sharon said, showing them the hideous clip. Both men frowned when they browsed through the disparaging comments.

“Did you say one of the reporters might have uploaded this clip? He is stupid if he thinks he can get away unscathed,” Elvis said, clearly displeased. He turned to Yu Chin and instructed, “Get William Fernandez on the line.”

William Fernandez was the editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings. Over the phone, Elvis curtly made it clear that he wanted the culprit sussed out, held accountable, and the YouTube clip removed.

“Thank you, Elvis,” Sharon said gratefully after Elvis ended the call.

“You’re on my team, Sharon. I won’t allow anyone on my team to be bullied.” Elvis winked. “Besides, your husband knows too many of my secrets.”

“That is true,” Yu Chin laughed. “I have so much dirt on him we could retire in the Bahamas if I chose to blackmail him.”

“Hey, you’ve promised to retire together with me and go diving around the world, remember? Don’t go back on your promise!”

Sharon watched as Elvis cuffed her husband good-naturedly on his shoulder. She never ceased to be amazed by the easy camaraderie the pair shared. Elvis thanked her for fetching his clothes and instructed one of the security officers to help carry Yu Chin’s diving gear to Sharon’s vehicle. Yu Chin would have to accompany Elvis to his meeting.

Sharon set off to attend two funeral wakes: one the parent of an influential business community leader, the other the parent of a

prominent grassroots leader. It was dark by the time she reached home. She could feel the soreness in her feet as she kicked off her heels. She needed a bath badly.

As Sharon waited for the bathtub to fill up, she studied her profile in the full-length mirror. In her opinion, her chest was too flat, her shoulders too bony and her kneecaps resembled prunes. These were features that had stung her hard during her teenage years; she imagined that the boys in her class rated all the girls and parked her in the “undesirable” category. In defiance, she was fiercely intelligent and outspoken. She could just as easily return the judgement and condemn these academic weaklings. It did not matter that no boys had ever asked her out on a date while she was in high school and junior college. Winning the President’s Scholarship to Yale and leaving these underachievers in her dust were revenge enough.

Sharon poured a generous dose of bath salts into the tub and immersed herself in the steaming water. It was the one indulgence for which Sharon allowed herself no time limit. All the other items on her daily schedule were strictly timed. But when it came to steaming hot baths, she could soak for an hour or longer, never mind the wrinkled prunes that sprouted on her toes and fingertips. It was calming, rejuvenating and sensual. It was better than sex.

The truth was, Sharon’s sex life with her husband was as stagnant as a tub of still bath water. As gallant and charming as Yu Chin was in social settings, he was rather passive in bed. He would often roll over to her side, wrap his limbs around her body, kiss and cuddle and hold her tight until one of them fell asleep. On the occasions that she indicated she wanted to go the full distance, he was overly gentle and hesitant in his moves, as though she were a porcelain doll that he feared he might shatter into pieces. Their lovemaking was never the roar and thunder of a waterfall, but the sluggish currents beneath a serene pond. Sharon had never experienced an orgasm with him.

Yu Chin was an attractive man. He had sharp features, and his jovial personality added to his charm. Sharon had been rather taken by him from their very first meeting. The Overeers must have sensed her attraction for

they went out of their way to create opportunities for the two to interact. Christina would claim to be too exhausted to attend a charity dinner and so pass the tickets to Sharon and Yu Chin. Or something unexpected would pop up in Elvis’ schedule, and he would ask Sharon to keep Yu Chin company at a game of golf. It wasn’t long before the two began to date exclusively.

Sharon judged Yu Chin to be an excellent candidate for marriage. He hailed from a prominent family—he was third in line to inherit the Gwee Shipping Conglomerate, the second largest firm of its kind in Asia. He had inherited a secluded two-storey bungalow near the end of East Sussex Lane, a prized estate along the swanky Holland belt, where he lived alone. Women would kill to date an eligible bachelor such as him. Which begged the question that haunted Sharon at the back of her mind—why was this man not already married?

She decided to ask Christina about this.

“He was in love, for the longest time, with someone who was not available, someone who was already married,” Christina revealed. “He needs to move on, but he can’t do it by himself. It’s really up to you, Sharon. You can save him.”

And that was exactly what Sharon had decided to do—to propose marriage to this man who needed saving.

The water in the tub was getting chilly. Sharon drained out half of the tub and turned on the hot water faucet to refill it. As she leant back again, she reached for the hairbrush on the ledge. She was about to run it through her hair when she spotted a strand of white dangling from the bristles.

As far as she remembered, neither she nor her husband had white hair.

Despite the steaming water streaming into the tub, Sharon felt a chill in her bones. She had never questioned her husband about his past love but she had always imagined it had been an older woman. Yu Chin was a man who needed mothering.

In her mind, Sharon saw a shadow emerge from the past belonging to a woman she had never met but who she knew had a tight rein on her husband’s heart. Sharon knew the woman had caused her husband unbearable pain but now she wondered if the woman had not also

provided immeasurable pleasure for him. What had lovemaking been like for her husband and that woman? Did she bring roar and thunder to their copulation?

The shadow in her mind began to take on a form—a voluptuous figure wrapped around her husband, clawing his back with its nails, licking his ear lobe with its tongue, grabbing his buttocks and pushing him deep into itself, violently, repeatedly until he came with a roar that was all sharp pain and deep pleasure.

Sharon burst into a wail. Her body shook as she wept inconsolably, upsetting the serenity of the water and sending waves spilling over onto the rug below. She did not hold back her tears. Those were angry tears. Her flat-chested, bony physique was found wanting by her husband. She was not enough for him. He had gone back to the other woman, and she had invaded the sanctity of their marital home.

Sharon did not know how long she wept. But once she was done, a sense of clarity returned to her mind. Now she was ready to deal with the problem.

As she reached for the scrub pad, her mobile phone pinged with a message from Yu Chin.

Drive down to Cantonment Police HQ ASAP. Elvis and I are on our way. The police will brief us.

On what? she texted back.

Riot in Little India. Escalating.

Sharon experienced a momentary confusion. What was Yu Chin talking about? If there was major rioting in India—the country—yes, that would explain Elvis Overee’s alarm. But why would she, or the police for that matter, be involved? But riot in Little India, in her constituency? How could that be possible?

Sharon dismissed her doubt as she speedily dried herself and threw on some clothes. The police briefing would clear the confusion. Little India was part of Jalan Besar constituency, which was under her care. The media would take notice of how she responded to the crisis. She was glad she had had her emotions sorted out in the bathtub earlier. She needed her mind to be sharp and clear.

There was a police sergeant stationed at the car park lobby of the police headquarters to usher her to the Special Operations Command Centre located at basement two. Sharon could immediately sense the tension in the air. Two dozen police officers were hunched over their terminals, their eyes trained on the screens and ears plugged into their headsets, awaiting orders. Yu Chin popped his head out from the control room in the rear and waved her over. Sharon could see through the glass panel that the police commissioner was deep in discussion with Elvis Overee and two other men she did not recognise.

“What is going on?” Sharon asked in a hushed tone. She reminded herself that she had been called to duty as the Jalan Besar constituency parliamentarian. Her matrimonial crisis would have to take a back seat for now.

“The cause is as yet unknown but apparently, the migrant worker crowd at Little India has gone wild. The workers were rioting along Serangoon Road, overturning vehicles and setting them on fire.” Yu Chin drew her into the control room and directed her attention to the large screen hanging overhead. “Look. The police have set up video live-streaming from atop a block of flats facing the main road. Can you believe what is happening?”

Sharon stared at the live-streaming in astonishment. That was unmistakably Little India. But the derangement on screen was an alien spectacle. The people of Singapore were known for their orderly behaviour; they queued for buses and trains, to consult the doctor at the clinic or to pay for their purchases at the supermarket. Her people respected order. Yu Chin was right. These troublemakers were migrant workers.

“What is the police commissioner doing about it?”

“All the Special Tactics and Rescue teams have been dispatched. They are assessing the situation. Once the Minister of Home Affairs arrives, the police commissioner will brief all of us on the response procedures.”

Sharon suddenly clutched Yu Chin on his arm and pointed at the screen. “Do you see that?”

“What?” Yu Chin squinted his eyes and searched, but all he could see was a moving jigsaw of pandemonium. “What are you referring to?”

“There! You see that tall migrant worker carrying the woman and moving in the crowd? She looks unconscious.”

“Where? I don’t see it.”

Sharon tried to point it out but the hanging screen was too high up. She turned and shot out of the control room to the nearest police officer seated in front of a terminal. “Can you log on to the live-stream feed, please?”

Yu Chin caught up with her. “What is it? Should I alert Elvis?”

“There he is!” It took Sharon close to a minute to locate the target she was searching for. “Can you zoom in, please?”

The police officer zoomed in just in time for them to catch sight of a migrant worker carrying a woman into an ambulance through the back door.

“She’s probably injured and he’s seeking medical help,” Yu Chin conjectured.

“Actually, the ambulance is empty,” the police officer said. “The riot situation is out of hand and we cannot guarantee the safety of the medical staff. We gave orders for them to retreat behind the police line thirty minutes ago.”

Sharon and Yu Chin stared at the screen. Once the migrant worker realised the ambulance was empty, he would surely exit and seek help somewhere else. But an entire minute passed and the ambulance door remained shut.

“This is no good.” Sharon shook her head. “Get the police commissioner to send in the STAR team! We cannot afford to make the situation worse by also having a sexual assault victim on our hands.”

The police commissioner reacted with lightning speed once he understood the situation. The STAR team was alerted to locate the deserted ambulance and break in to rescue a possible hostage. As the group crowded around the terminal and watched with bated breath, they saw a lone STAR team member race to the ambulance, pry open the back door and clamber in. Despite the collective tension, everyone was secretly amazed at how fast the team member had responded.

All eyes were fixed on the screen as the STAR team member re-emerged. He was carrying a woman over his shoulder in a fireman lift. The woman appeared to be highly agitated. As the police officer zoomed

in to allow for a closer look, there was a collective gasp of horror. The woman had her jeans pulled midway down her thighs, and her lacy underwear was showing.

Sharon felt her heart sink.

PART TWO

**EAR
MITES**



PHOTO BY ENG CHUN PANG

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

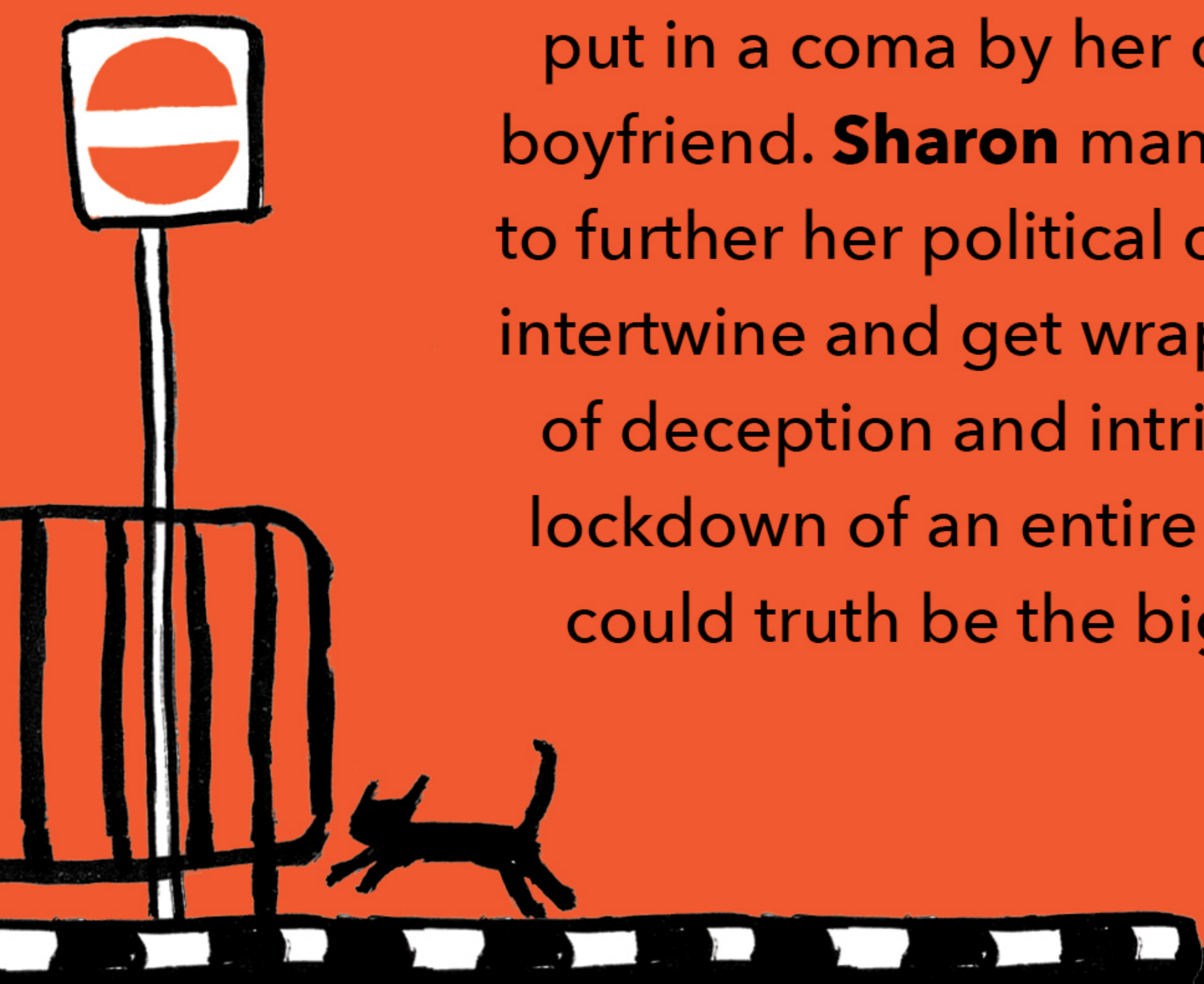
Sebastian Sim grew up in a two-room HDB flat with parents who were part of the pioneer generation of independent Singapore. Not one to shy away from the road less taken, he has travelled around the world to soak up different experiences and cultures, and tried his hand in diverse industries: as a bartender at Boat Quay, an assistant outlet manager at McDonald's, an insurance salesman, a prison officer in a maximum security prison, and a croupier in a casino. He published three Chinese wuxia novels between 2004 and 2012, and his first English-language novel, *Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao!* (2016), was shortlisted for the 2015 Epigram Books Fiction Prize.

“A surrealistic retelling of the Little India riot that strikes at the heart of the cynicism driving Singapore’s culture wars; interwoven stories poke entertainingly at our country’s political shenanigans, but satire becomes brutal realist fiction when we realise the author is merely holding up a tilted mirror to everything that is wrong with our society.”

—Cyril Wong, author of *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me*

A DARK COMEDY BY THE AUTHOR OF *LET’S GIVE IT UP FOR GIMME LAO!*

Hashwini worries that she has accidentally started the 2013 Little India riot. **Jessica** is injured on the night, but her rescuer is put in a coma by her overenthusiastic boyfriend. **Sharon** manipulates the facts to further her political career. Three lives intertwine and get wrapped up in a web of deception and intrigue. During the lockdown of an entire neighbourhood, could truth be the biggest casualty?



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