

FINALIST



EPIGRAM  
BOOKS  
FICTION  
PRIZE  
2016

# SURROGATE PROTOCOL

HIDDEN  
AMONG US  
ARE SOME  
WHO WILL NOT DIE

THAM CHENG-E

— PRAISE FOR SURROGATE PROTOCOL —

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# SURROGATE PROTOCOL



# ***SURROGATE PROTOCOL***

***THAM CHENG-E***



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For Sandra, who has always been there

Life can only be understood backwards;  
but it must be lived forwards.

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD, JOURNALEN JJ:167 (1843)

# 1

## KILLING LANDON

---

SINGAPORE ISN'T STERILE *like everyone says. It's full of secrets. Take me, for instance. I'm an anomaly and I think the world ought to know this. But I don't know if it's a good thing because if the world found out, I'd probably be cut open.*

*Maybe being cut open is better than hiding in the shadows.*

*Did you know that déjà vu is prophetic?*

*I do. I've lived long enough to know that déjà vu is a glimpse of an unchanging future, however you live your present. So do yourself a favour and live it well. That's something I'd offer.*

So says Landon Lock.

The old house sits like a crypt; the light from streetlamps filters through the murky panes and floods its interior with a sepulchral glow. Every night he comes home alone and confides to an imaginary interviewer in an imaginary interview he'd want to give if only the world accepted who he is.

Life has been bland but not necessarily bad. He isn't given to making friends because friends often do more harm than good to his kind. Some old gaffer would stop him on the street insisting they had been acquainted fifty years ago and that it was impossible he should look so young. A hunch would tell him the person was probably right. Still, he would have to walk away.

Truth is, Landon Lock doesn't die and doesn't really live either.  
He just sort of...exists.

Longevity is a bizarre affair because it makes you crave death at one point and be inordinately terrified of it at another. The notion of death is at once edifying and fearful. So he observes it from afar, like a child watching a cavorting clown.

Presently, he leans against the peeling door frame of the lavatory and watches a dying gecko twist its way up the wall tiles. The lavatory is set inside the kitchen—a shabby little appendix behind the old house. Its nooks and crannies carry a depressing degree of gloom, from a shelf made out of bricks and rotting planks to the row of archaic stone stoves.

Guilt steals into him. That gecko had emerged from behind an earthenware vat and given him a nasty scare. But that wasn't just cause for death. It would've been better if it had put up a fight instead of running. Landon sprays more insecticide into the creature's face—a lingering, gentle mist—and prays for a swift death. But the poison delivers only a slow, agonising torment. The toxins are corroding its flesh and dissolving its consciousness, and the little greying creature thrashes wildly.

Someone once told him the closest you can get to observing Death is to poison a common house gecko with insecticide and watch it die. It was a long time ago when the world first saw DDTs in FLIT spray pumps.

Now he believes every word of it.

When he can take no more of Death, he leaves the kitchen and abandons himself to a couch. The living room, cavernous and mouldering, is immured in century-old wallpaper that flakes like plaster. He reaches over and turns a lamp on.

A dusty fan hangs from a mould-mottled ceiling, spinning and

creaking on a long wobbly stem. A wire leads from it, down a wall and into an old timber-backed breaker panel with rows of black Bakelite switches.

Landon stretches his legs, and the cold surface of the green terrazzo feels good against his bare heels. He unbuttons his uniform—a black collared tee with a yellow brocaded emblem bearing the name of a café: FourBees—and drops his head over the edge of the backrest, pretending to be a corpse, as if someone might enter a week later and find him putrefying in this posture.

*Perhaps I've forgotten my kind.*

*You see, my memory works like an old bulging scrapbook. It is one thing to be assured of the fact that it holds everything, and it's another to be able to find in it what you're looking for. Memories of my recent past span days, sometimes a week. They never used to be like that. I'm finding it progressively harder to retain them. They leave me easily—like sand from an eroding shoal. Memories of a distant past I retain better. But only in fragments that hold little meaning. I don't remember people very well. That's a problem.*

*I remember coffee better than people.*

*My doctor said a point in the past might have caused it—maybe something that gave me head trauma or the like. And events that occur after that point work like quick-fading polaroids in my head.*

*No, I don't recall this point in my life. Unfortunately.*

*You know how it's like, don't you? Sometimes my existence feels ethereal, disembodied. A good half of my life had been excised, perhaps more.*

*I've never felt complete.*

*I remember, though, the day mother died. There was no pain. She just slipped away and went cold hours after we spoke for the last time. But I've lost her face. I remember only the sallow, waxen skin and sunken cheeks. I don't recall a heartbeat monitor or an oxygen tube. They didn't*



*have such things then. Most of my recollection comes in bursts; a red and white metal bedpan, a sooty kerosene lamp, valance skirting the bedposts quivering in a breeze, the gentle sway of a gauzy mosquito net in the hot, dusty air of the late afternoon.*

*Late afternoon is a terrible time to die, when the world is winding up for the day. I was sorry that I had to leave her in her bedroom. Memories work better with senses. I remember little else but the subtle stench of decay. Though nascent, it already felt like an intrusion of something foreign and malevolent that was beginning to overpower the familiar scents of balms and ointments of her bedroom.*

*When did the ageing stop? When I was thirty, thereabouts. Maybe younger. How young do you think I look?*

*Like I said, I don't recall that point in my life, so I can never tell.*

*When it comes to looking my age it's really hard to find the sweet spot. It isn't a good thing to be looking too young or too old. Every fifteen years I start a new life as a new person. Passing off for a young man is easy with the way I look and the job I do. People hardly ask your age when it comes to making coffee. But I'll be in trouble if I'm overdue. It's more difficult explaining how I'm looking thirty when my registered age is sixty.*

*My real age? I think I've lived decades.*

*Or has it been centuries? I don't know. My journals will tell.*

*Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not a vampire.*

*Vampires are crappy creatures once you strip them of their pearly skin and sex appeal. They're rabid in a way, much like wild dogs and zombies. I find zombies more appealing because they waste less: they gobble up everything, blood, bones and all. And if they don't eat you up good enough you turn into one of them.*

*Sickness? I don't remember the sensation of being ill. I wake up every day with this blandness that tells me nothing changes and*

*nothing ever will. My breaths are clear and deep. There is the same strength and liveness in my limbs.*

*No, I'm not complaining. It would be an unpardonable sin to complain. But you have no idea how lonely it gets.*

*I often wonder: if Death doesn't come knocking, should I go to it?*

*Throwing myself off the roof might do. Perhaps walking into an oncoming truck; lying across a train track, or maybe lots of poison...*

Landon stops. When it comes to this point, the soliloquy feels juvenile and stupid. If he had the courage, he would've done it already. Death is easy and tempting. But it worries him because there is something intrinsically inane about wanting to die. It feels like there is a consequence to it—one more terrifying than Death itself.

He returns to the lavatory and rushes through his shower because the dead gecko is staring at him from the rusted grating. Then he climbs an old squeaking staircase that winds up to a hallway on the second floor.

In one of the four rooms, the wan light of a naked bulb reveals an antiquated bed of carved teak bedposts and brass hooks from which a mosquito net used to drape. The windows are shuttered and have crusty latches of oxidised bronze. There is a wardrobe with an elaborate architrave and misaligned doors; a profusely-decorated dresser with its mirror missing; an old bronze lampstand, its wires fuzzy with dust; a damaged phonograph; a flatscreen TV perching precariously on top of a rusting treadle sewing machine; a low cabinet, its glass doors misty with age, containing a tired-looking collection of old ointment bottles and snuff cases; disused pipes; little rusting tin boxes; a pocket-watch; and a monocle with its chain still attached.

A chalkboard reads: "Dinner with Cheok on Monday, 2100." By a window there is a jelutong writing table flecked with scratches. It

has a top that can be opened and four drawers fitted with elaborate ring handles of brass. Nearby, a headless tailoring mannequin stands erect, dressed in a high-collared cheongsam of red silk.

Landon produces a thick roll of cash from his bag and stores it in a biscuit tin he keeps in one of the drawers because he holds no bank account. Having a bank account is suicidal if you are already having trouble keeping up a legitimate identity.

Then, on a fresh page of his journal, he pens the usual opening line.

*My name is Landon...*

He finishes the entry and lights a kerosene lamp by a nightstand. The flame produces an orb of warm light and dances with curves like a woman's body. For a long time he lies on his bed watching it.

Tomorrow he will begin the process of killing Landon.

Slowly, he lowers the flame and snuffs it.

/ / /

In the waiting lounge of an expensive hospital, visitors drowse on leather couches, their limbs drawn against the pre-dawn chill. The large glass panes out in front are frosted over with condensation, and beyond them one sees nothing but one's reflection against the darkness outside. Behind the counters, arriving receptionists shiver and pull in their jackets.

Landon is kept awake by the prospect of committing a crime. The carbon paper of the Notice of Live Birth crinkles pleasantly in his hand. He commends himself for having been astute enough to pilfer a piece of it from the pad just a week earlier, when a flustered nurse left it at the counter in one of the delivery suites. He even snatched an Identity Card belonging to a lady who had used it to reserve a table at a food court while she tittered her way to the stalls. It was clipped to a lanyard, along with her office pass.

Thievery is low business. But no one ever told him that procuring an identity would be this hard. If he botches this attempt, he exposes himself, and if he doesn't, the loneliness might kill him anyway. Either way, the future isn't going to be rosy.

The number ticker buzzes. He checks his electronic queue slip and bolts forward, clumsily clutching the documents to his chest.

"Birth cert, sir?" a petite Malay lady behind the counter requests in a sprightly voice.

He hands her the Notice of Live Birth. She takes it with both hands and scans it. "A son? Congratulations."

"Thank you. A daughter would be just as nice."

"I need the ICs of you and your wife."

He slides them over the counter. His countenance is still, but his heart is racing.

"How's mummy?"

"She's doing well. I highly recommend the epidural; it lets you enjoy the birth."

"Thanks for the tip." She hands the ICs back to him. "I'm only just engaged."

"Your turn will come."

The lady hands him the certificate. "Check the particulars, sir."

"Everything's perfect."

"Adam is a nice name."

"Thank you," says Landon, the knot in his guts unravelling slowly. "I like names beginning with 'A'."

The lady points to another spot. "There's the birth certificate number. Remember, it's going to be different from the passport number, so take note when you make one for him."

Landon manages a laugh. "That'll be a long way off."

"I have three nephews. Children grow up in the blink of an eye."

She laminates the certificate and presents it to him with both hands.  
“Check it again, just in case.”

“Flawless.”

In fifteen years Landon will be dead, and Adam shall walk the Earth.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

Landon slips the certificate into his folder and zips it up. “Can’t think of anything.”

/ / /

It is only 8.15 and Landon feels so light and sprightly he could sing to the soft warmth of the early sun. There’s the day to spare, and the freshness of morning washes away whatever traces of melancholia that remain in him. He is early, and he can read for an hour at the civic plaza before heading up to the bookstore. A nice slow breakfast at Café Kinosh will be a good start, then he’ll browse the morning away before catching a film at Shaw. Afterwards, he’ll have tea and cake and read through the afternoon. Then it’ll be dinner—a light one. He’s thinking Italian, one with an antipasti bar. Or tapas maybe.

And then his day will end. And another will begin.

He has all the time in the world and little to live for. And he can never decide if it’s a good or a bad thing. But for now it is good. He is happy.

At the centre of the plaza he finds a black marquee. Air-blown streamers flutter beside giant speakers wrapped in black polypropylene. He squints at the event boards. Something about fashion, football and fund-raising. Throngs of teenagers gather. The speakers blare and a clichéd medley of party music thumps away like there’s no tomorrow, drawing in the exuberance of youth that passes him.

An hour later, Landon finds solace in an air-conditioned interior and its scent of fresh books. He goes to the café and picks a window

seat that overlooks the mall and plaza, where the event host delivers a muffled, incomprehensible speech in an insufferable attempt to sound eloquent. Music pounds on dully behind the thick glass panes.

He orders a frittata with grilled tomatoes, slow-poached eggs and a side of spinach dressed in oil. He flips the menu page and adds a couple of blueberry waffles with crème and syrup.

“Send them after the frittata, please,” he tells the waitress.

“Any drinks, sir?”

He scans an insert and settles for a pot of Hawai‘ian Kona. “It’s going to be a quick brew so grind the beans fine. Don’t burn the grinds, and let the coffee steep three minutes before plunging. You use the French press?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, use that, not the drip. Better still, just pour in the water and bring me the press. I’m very particular about my coffee.”

The waitress flashes an obligatory smile and departs. Landon detects displeasure in it and justifies to himself his fastidiousness over coffee. It takes only a hair’s breadth of inattention to foul up a good pot of Kona.

He sips his iced water and waits. It pleases him to see the store filling up. At the religion section, a scholarly old man reads with his glasses propped over his brows. Nearby, an elderly couple, probably Australian judging by their accent, discusses a title. A woman, Senegalese from her gaudy, tie-dyed, starchy *boubou* and headdress, haunts the politics section.

Tourists, they’re usually the early ones.

Outside, the flow of shoppers along the mall swells. In the copious shade of angsa trees, a gangly man in suit and tie stands beside a trash bin and lights a cigarette. Someone passes him and drops a Big Gulp into the bin; an emaciated golem of a young girl so thin that

the soda was probably all she'd had that morning. The man stubs out on the bin and pops another cigarette between his lips.

The waitress returns with the brew. Landon takes the French press from her. She remembered his request; the plunger is up and the water is steaming. He feels the glass. *A little hot, but with the air-conditioning it should stabilize. Coffee's foaming—a good sign.* He places his palm on the knob and lets the weight of his hand do the plunging—*smooth and slow it goes.* The plunger reaches the bottom and a tangy aroma rises.

He looks out of the window and watches another girl dump a Big Gulp in the same bin. Someone must be giving away this stuff. The gangly man draws heavily on his cigarette and turns away from the sun. At the plaza the event now pulsates with the roar of cheering and clapping. The host's speech, urgent and unintelligible, drowns in the feedback from his microphone.

A third girl approaches the bin, and just like the ones before her, tosses a Big Gulp into the bin. She wears an expression that might have been hewn from stone—one that is cold, stoic; allusive of something dreadful, something unstoppable.

A look of conviction.

And Landon realises with a start that all three girls had that same look.

Reflex drives him under the table, as the window panels implode in a shower of pulverised glass.

/ / /

*The burrs of something broken ground against his back. His wounded sight drew slowly into focus. A man writhed on the ground near him, his face studded with crystalline shards. Blood dripped from the lacerations in slick, dark strands. Amid a host of muffled noises came the screech of tyres, and then he saw a face.*

/ / /

All is dark; grey smoke rises thickly and masks the daylight. A sharp sulphurous stench pervades the air. Waves of muffled cries lap over the ringing in his ears. He is lying on his side, his back arched. He feels his stomach rising to his chest and constricting his airway. His vision goes white, his head throbs in recurring surges of pain. One leg goes on kicking involuntarily as if unmoored. And this time he is acutely aware of it all.

*It'll pass...it always does.*

He opens his eyes to a face.

"There, there," says the bleary face. "Easy on the gritting."

Landon blinks hard to clear his sight. There is spittle around his mouth and a dull, sour ache radiates through his set jaws. A pair of hands is squeezing him all over: his arms, torso, neck; fingers probing over his collarbone, shoulder, and forearm, where a trail of pink blister scars run like ridges across the skin.

"Nasty scars you have." The stranger puts his fingers to Landon's neck and catches a pulse. "How'd you get them?"

Landon stares into a spacious face with squinty, sad-looking eyes and craggy cheekbones. Its sun-scorched skin furrows in deep gulches above the brows. He can't decide if the stranger looks like a lion or a mastiff.

A prick on the finger jolts him. "You a doctor?" he says in a drawl.

"Me? No." The stranger removes a chromium egg-shaped device from Landon's forefinger. "But I know enough to save lives."

They hear muffled whimpering nearby. From elsewhere, a child's cry.

Shards of glass litter the floor like diamonds. Landon sits up, flummoxed, dazed. He surveys the damage and sees the waitress leaning against the base of the counter, cradling her arm and elbow. There is some blood across the side of her neck. The manager is



crouching beside her and trying to get a bandage over her arm. Otherwise she appears well.

“She was just beside the window,” says the stranger. “Lucky girl.”

Landon surveys his precious pool of Hawai‘ian Kona across the floor and fights off a bout of nausea from inhaling a cocktail of gunpowder-stench and the aroma of spilled good coffee. His vision spins. “Who are you?”

The stranger offers his hand and a dour smile. “John.”

Landon takes his hand. It is large and abrasive. “Why’d you—”

“I’m here to help.” John rises to his feet and reveals the full measure of his towering physique. “There might be danger. Wait six hours before heading home, and stay in crowded places for as long as you can.”

Landon holds his head. “I don’t understand anything.”

“In time you will,” says the stranger. “You did good taking cover.” The stranger’s face wrinkles sourly into a smile. “Six hours, no less. Stay in crowded places and *don’t* talk to anyone. Destabilisation has begun.”

*Destabilisation?* Landon loses him to the crowds before he can wring an explanation out of him. He inches forward and peers over the shattered windows where drafts of warm air and smoke mingle with the air-conditioning. A starburst blotch of soot now occupies the spot where the marquee used to be. The air-blown streamers, the speakers and the gangly man in suit and tie have disappeared. Survivors hobble amid twisted steel and body parts. Parts of the plaza are burning. A woman is crying somewhere.

As Landon ponders the impossibility of his reflexes, a fragment of a memory surfaces and sinks quickly into the depths of his mind before he can seize it. He drops away from the window, shaking, and catches the distant wail of an ambulance.

/ / /

The press arrives and Landon flees the scene, racked with spasms of fear that numb even his fingertips. He speaks to no one and leaves by another route that takes him behind the plaza. He holds on to his elbows, shouldering through squads of arriving paramedics and rescue personnel. He realises he is shaking all over—tiny little quivers that seem impossible to repress. When he tries to run, the ground feels marshy and soft. He slows to a walk. It’s less conspicuous this way. But he will need a lot of walking to lose the tremors inside him. He wanders the streets and ends up spending the next eight hours burrowing into the most crowded restaurants and cafés he can find.

At nightfall he finds himself sipping his eighth cup of coffee and trying to watch passing shoppers along Victoria Street. But it has turned so dark that from his seat he sees only the stray reflections of the bistro’s interior and its drop-lights against the glass storefront. People outside, however, can see him.

He takes his mug and napkin and relocates to another seat behind a red cushioned partition. The soft clink of cutlery surrounds him. It is in such settings that a hitman usually appears and shoots someone in the head, he thinks, like they do in movies. But an hour passes, and all is well.

At 9.30, the waitress calls for last orders. Landon steps reluctantly into a warm, dank night that smells of exhaust and stale pastries. Faces come at him in waves. He sees their eyes looking back at him. He glances over and across his shoulders; he searches the crowds hoping to find someone who might help him...anyone.

But the city does not recognise him. People he once knew are either dead or dying. And those who find a familiarity in him tend to convince themselves that faces end up looking alike when you’ve seen enough of them.

Landon isn't special. He is just a very old man running for his life.

For once, he takes comfort in being caught in a taxi queue at the rear of a shopping mall. At least if things happen, someone will be there to see it. It would be worse to return to an empty house alone and get knifed in the bath, or smothered in bed. He gets to a cab after a 30-minute wait and looks around before entering it. Once inside, he looks around some more to make sure no one is following. He watches the driver like a hawk the whole way and stiffens when a dark van or a leather-clad rider stops beside his window at traffic junctions.

When the cab drops him off in front of the old bungalow along Clacton Road, the street appears unusually still. There is no movement, not even a breeze to nudge the leaves. The house looms, drab and forbidding, its windows abyssal eyes. It appears to be crouching in darkness and waiting to swallow anyone who ventures near.

A chill prickles at him. Has it been six hours? He has forgotten to check the time. He unlatches the gate and cringes at the din it makes. Then, gritty footfalls approach and his back tingles. He whips around, and finds only a passing neighbour who keeps his head lowered and dispenses no greeting.

From the other end of the street, an old man conveys a heap of scraps on a bicycle. With every inch of his body poised to spring, Landon watches the man until he passes, and then bolts through the gate and slams it hard behind him. He races across the driveway, through the house, and locks it up tight as a fortress, latching all openings and windows, even the ones in the attic. He decides against showering for fear that someone might slip in through the back, slit his throat and bleed his life away under a running faucet.

A cursory inspection of his possessions reveals nothing missing. He hauls a rusty dumbbell rod up to his bedroom. Then, compelled

by a sliver of recollection, he pores through volumes of old journals and finds an entry inked on yellowed paper.

*March 10th, 1965, Wednesday*

*My name is Arthur. I awoke in a hotel room darker than most I've seen. Tinted windows and dull green walls, beige-coloured drapes, a green telephone, a floral carpet, a card that reads Cathay Hotel. I remember passing a large Tiger Beer mural at the gable wall of a shophouse. Can't see it from my window.*

*I got cuts all over the left side of my body; arms, legs, neck, some on my face. My head throbs. Can't remember where I got them. The guy who brought me here said I was lucky to have survived a blast this afternoon. It had to be the concussion because I remember nothing beyond the moment they brought me out of the car and I woke up in a room I didn't recognise. The guy said he's going to bring me to England. I keep getting the feeling that I'm leaving something behind.*

He reaches the end of the journal and takes up another. *England?* He flips a page and scans it from top to bottom.

*...the feeling lingers. Maybe it's nothing. I've left too many people behind. They all become one in my broken memory.*

*Faces I see on the streets represent them all.*

Unnerved by the day's encounter, he tosses the volumes back into the old trunk, lumbers over to the desk and begins to write in a state of haste and compulsion: *My name is Landon...*

The street lamps reveal two glinting spots in the crown of a frangipani tree behind the old house. The spots hold still for a moment, then streak soundlessly into the night.

# 2

## CONTACT

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LANDON WAKES FROM a dreamless sleep to red digital numerals reading twelve minutes past ten. He sits up and drops his legs to the floor, the hair at the back of his head tousled and standing. His shift schedule at the FourBees café, pinned to a small corkboard on a wall beside the writing desk, says he's not due in until one.

He snatches his journal from the nightstand and opens to yesterday's entry:

*Adam was born today. Count to Adam: 1 of 5,475. In another fifteen years Landon will be dead. Met someone who calls himself John. He said to stay in crowded places for as long as I could. He mentioned something else I cannot remember.*

*Who the hell is John?* His face appears in Landon's head all fuzzed-up like an old Polaroid. *Polaroids and facsimiles—perfect epitomes of my busted memory.* It's frustrating to be forgetting something all the time but the irony is that you would forget the frustration before you could remember what caused it. You find pieces of your day missing, and before the day ends you won't even remember what's missing from it.

And that's only a part of what amnesia is about.

He unlatches the window and pushes the panes open. The sound of sweeping—*swish, swish, swish*. And with the same regularity

comes the call of cicadas. A row of azaleas line the front of the patio. He looks down and sees Cheok at the driveway with the old besom.

He calls from his window, relieved. Cheok looks up at him and lifts a thick arm in greeting, his face shadowed under a straw hat. He is shaped like an urn, with a sturdy build and brown leathery skin, and chooses to wear only weathered denim shirts and khaki cargoes. Contracted to work the lawn once a week over a four-hour session, Cheok visits more frequently than he has to. Supposedly, his wife can't stand his bonsai obsession. The truth is, he can't stand her badgering over everything domestic.

Landon comes through the front door with coffee. "Unusual of you to start so late. Weather's getting hot."

"Got trouble with the truck." Cheok finishes shearing the ixora hedges and shoves the trimmings into a garbage bag. "I brought the fertiliser for the hibiscus."

"I never asked for them." Landon sips out of his own mug.

"They're good quality." Cheok points to a canvas sack nearby. "Organic vegetable waste, very good for the plants."

"I meant the hibiscus."

"You need the hibiscus lah, give your garden some red."

"It's turning into *your* garden, Cheok."

Cheok pushes the straw hat behind his head, wipes his hands on his trousers and takes the mug from Landon. "Anyone who see your house will think you own a café instead of working for one."

Landon thumbs at his door. "They should look inside."

"Your shift what time?"

"One. Got to leave by twelve."

Cheok drinks his coffee and looks admiringly over the garden.

"You got any jobs after this?" says Landon.

"Only yours loh. I'll work till three then go cook for missus."

"Stay as long as you want. I'll leave the keys with you."

"No need. I'll latch the gate when I leave. I hope you haven't forgot?"

Landon stares vacantly at him.

"Dinner tonight—" Cheok prompts, lifting a pudgy finger.

"Nine at my place." Landon blurts in a hurry. "I had it written down."

"Good. Don't forget the match tonight. You can forget anything but football."

Cheok drains his mug in a single swig and Landon throws him a disapproving look because good coffee is never meant to be abused that way. They part and he goes back into the house and skims through the news on his tablet.

An article about the explosion at Orchard Road; 26 dead, over 50 wounded. Eight bodies only partially recovered, needing DNA identification. Glass facades of two nearby shopping malls shattered. Over 30 million dollars in property damage. Estimated 23 kilos of plastique explosives with thumbtacks for fragmentation. No one has claimed responsibility for the act but the police suspect domestic extremists vying for anarchism against organised religion and meritocratic policies.

*Thumbtacks? What were they thinking?*

From the window of his living room, Landon catches sight of a young man rubbernecking at his property from the gate. He is dressed in a business shirt, fair of skin and rather lanky and fragile of build. His hair is waxed and parted in an outmoded manner. Cheok walks over to him and initiates an inaudible conversation.

Landon emerges from the house and the young man pricks up, looking past Cheok to get a better view of him.

"Morning," he greets with a nod.

Landon finds in him a likeness to a dark-haired Tin-Tin. "Can I help?"

The young man flashes his ID and offers a hand through the gate. "I'm Julian, Police Intelligence Department."

Landon holds his breath. It has got to be about the bombing and the stranger named John must have had something to do with it. This fellow might be a colleague, perhaps assigned the task of gathering eyewitnesses, testimonies, those sort of things.

The officer named Julian articulates a name in a Mandarin dialect followed by an IC number, which Landon affirms as his own. "Says here you're Chinese." Julian consults a document. "You don't look Chinese."

Landon feigns a laugh. "I get that a lot. I think I'm part Malay, part Chinese and a dash of Dutch. The ancestor-thing, you know," he lies. "Never could tell when everything's blended so well."

Julian isn't amused. His eyes flit over to the pink, blistery bulges on Landon's forearm. "Looks like trauma," he points to them with his pen. "An accident?"

"I'm sorry, I don't remember. What's this about?"

"We think you might be implicated in a recent incident, and we're hoping you could help us with the investigation."

"I'd be glad to."

"Good." Julian's unflinching gaze unsettles Landon. "Where were you yesterday morning between seven and nine?"

"Home." Landon keeps a straight face. "I went to Café Kinosh at about ten."

"Got an alibi?"

"I've been living alone since my mother's passing years ago." Here Landon frowns a little. "Am I suspected of something?"

"My apologies." Julian appears all but apologetic. "Just the usual background checks. You got ID?"

"It's inside. I'll go get it."

Landon returns to the house. Cheok, besom in hand and looking



rather awkward in their presence, grins at Julian and gets a twitch of the lips in return. Julian resumes his inspection of the grand old house, observing its grey stucco walls blackened with fungi at its base, its shuttered windows painted many times over and the untrimmed bougainvillea creeping all over its chicken-wire fence. He scribbles something in his notepad. The patches of perspiration on his thin chest and underarms expand in the blustering morning heat.

Five minutes later Landon jogs down the driveway and reveals the fluster in his face. “Couldn’t find it...” he pants. “Must’ve misplaced it. You have my IC number, I’m sure you’ll know if it checks out.”

Julian doesn’t blink. “Unfortunate. You said you live alone?”

“Yes.”

“No extended family?”

“I have a very small family. I’m afraid they’ve passed on.” Landon creases the corners of his lips in an attempt to smile. “Would you mind telling me if there’s something wrong? I was at the café when the bomb went off,” he blurts a little too hastily.

Julian looks puzzled. “A live birth was registered in your name.”

The response almost jolts Landon out of his skin. He locks his jaw and with difficulty, works his expression into one of incredulity. “Live birth? When?”

“The hospital found out yesterday evening, when the serial number on the live birth notification failed to match up against the hospital’s birth register. Besides, the *“mother”* turned out to be someone who had reported a stolen IC a week ago.”

Landon’s heart rises in joy. He can fit something in. “I remember now.” A smile breaks genuinely across his face. “I also lost my IC about two days back.”

Julian folds his arms. “So you have.”

“I’m sorry. My memory—it’s medical.” Landon scratches his

temple. “I’ve got therapy sessions with my doctor twice a week and I’ve been taking medication. It’s the kind that makes you forget the recent stuff. But there’s a bit of both... It’s really bad, you see, even the memories of my past are hazy. My doctor could tell you more.”

“Unfortunate.” Julian makes a note of it on his book. “You should’ve lodged a police report the minute it happened.”

Landon hunches fawningly. “Sincere apologies, sir. I’ll report it immediately.”

“At the nearest police post please, if you don’t already know.”

“I’m so sorry. It’s my first time.”

Julian shuts his notebook and slips his pen in the breast pocket of his damp shirt. “That will be all for now, Mr Lock. Thank you for your time.”

“Not at all. I’m sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“Have a good day.” Julian lifts a hand and walks away.

Landon watches him drive off in a maroon sedan and suddenly remembers that his damn IC is in the folder with the birth certificate, which by now would’ve been annulled.

Cheek comes up to him. “Something wrong?”

Landon doesn’t answer. His amnesia has got him temporarily off the hook, and only by the skin of his teeth has he managed to evade arrest. He has messed up, no doubt, and the dread of it pervades his heart like a drop of black ink. He tells himself it doesn’t matter because at worse they’d cut him open.

And the thought terrifies him.

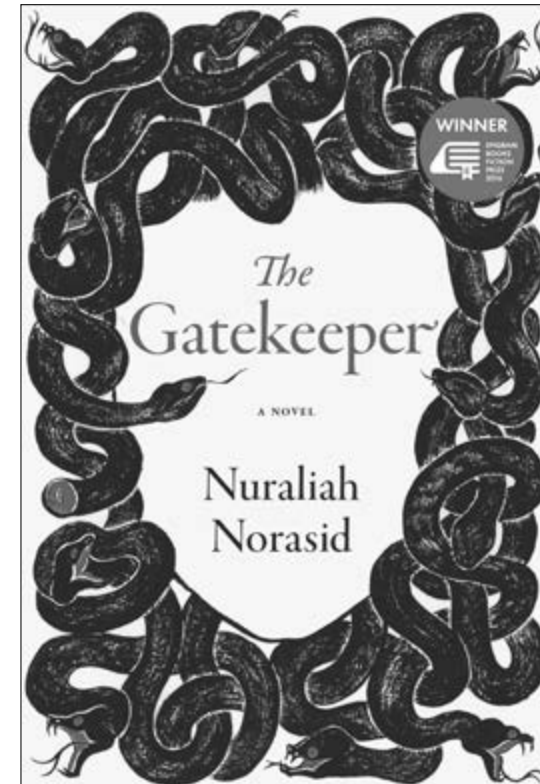


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Tham Cheng-E is an architect who also writes about the special needs community for the online magazine *Special Seeds*, and maintains a family blog on parenting and Down syndrome. *Surrogate Protocol* is his first novel.

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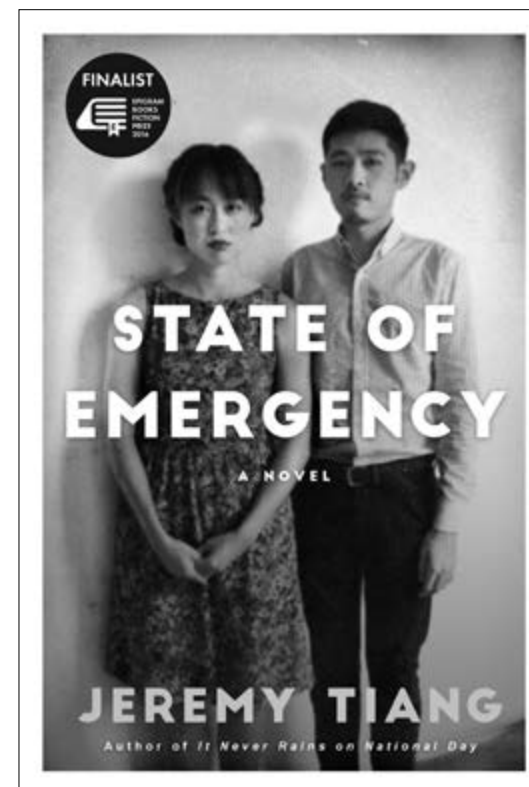
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## 2015 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

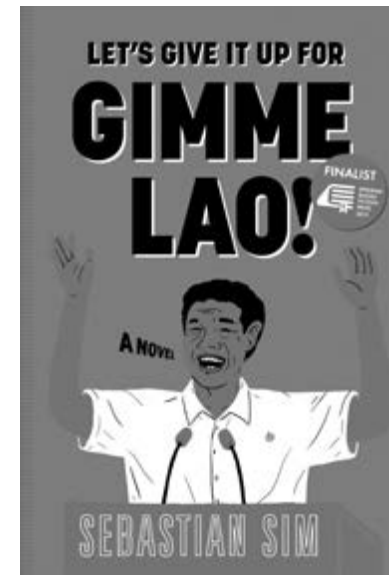


### *Death of a Perm Sec*

WONG SOUK YEE

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SEBASTIAN SIM

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Born on the night of the nation's independence, Gimme Lao is cheated of the honour of being Singapore's firstborn son by a vindictive nurse. This forms the first of three things Gimme never knows about himself, the second being the circumstances surrounding his parents' marriage, and the third being the profound (but often unintentional) impact he has on other people's lives.

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