

CYRIL
WONG

Winner of the Singapore Literature Prize

TEN THINGS

MY FATHER

NEVER 

TAUGHT ME


AND OTHER STORIES

“An eclectic collection of short stories that is original and often deeply moving.”

—Dave Chua, author of *The Beating and Other Stories*

“Cyril Wong’s largely character-driven stories demonstrate clearly how they are inspired, in each case, when a personality passes through a moment of crisis, as in the tales of R. K. Narayan. Whether his people are young or adult, female or male, gay or straight, there is always a struggle and a revelation. Sometimes there is no resolution. Cyril writes with insight and sympathy about people in a Singapore spectrum that readers can identify with.”

—Robert Yeo, playwright and author of
The Adventures of Holden Heng

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CYRIL WONG



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Applause

A LINE OF raindrops hitting the ground culminates in a concatenation of explosions nobody can hear—except me. They deafen me; they are deathly, every new thought blown to the back of my brain to die and dissolve with each rapid succession. The raindrops are unceasing.

Nobody hears them but me.

Do you think you're ready, Raj? Are you ready to go out to work? Will you come back on time? Will you upset your employers again this time?

I see William, another inmate—wait, the word is “resident”; they say we must say “resident”. We are residents, not prisoners. When we are well enough, they want us to leave, get jobs, and find a place to stay where we will take our medication on our own. All alone.

I observe William, an old Chinese gentleman who has grown *too* old, limping in slow motion while leaning on his walking stick. He will never leave this place. He will die here, alone in his room. A nurse will gently close his rubbery eyes and

cover his body with a piece of cloth.

But William is not dead yet. He is walking, or struggling to walk, down the hallway, towards me. “Hello, Raj,” he says in that eighty-something-year-old voice, full of gravel and heaviness. He is friendly. The other residents are not so friendly. The others are lost in themselves, turning in circles inside themselves, not sure which way is out; not sure where the sound is coming from when someone talks to them, telling them to sit down and keep perfectly still.

“Hello, Mr William,” I reply, still standing and leaning against the window. I turn my face back out to refocus on the rain that meets the ground outside, making sounds no one else can hear.

Are you ready, Raj? Are you ready to go out and work? Are you ready to clean tables, Raj? Raj...

“Raj! I’m talking to you!” It’s Tiffany Chia, the friendly social worker who is always leading residents from one end of the home to the other to attend workshops. I like carpentry classes the best, but I injured my index finger while sawing a piece of wood and my finger swelled to the size of my thumb; Tiffany told me I could no longer continue. Tiffany likes to smile a lot and shows plenty of teeth. Now she is smiling but she is also impatient because I ignored her. I need to pay closer attention.

“Sorry, Ms Tiffany, I didn’t hear you,” I reply. “Really really sorry, Ms Tiffany.”

“It’s okay, Raj,” she says, her tone softening. She is carry-

ing a file in one hand and a plastic bag in another. She always carries snacks in her bag. I wonder if there is some in her bag now, like biscuits or sweets. “Today is your big day, right, Raj? Today you get to go out to work again. Are you happy, Raj? Are you happy?”

I nod. “Yes, Ms Tiffany.”

And I follow her down the corridor. I wonder where William has gone. He must have wandered into the canteen, where he will be fed coffee and biscuits. At least they feed us regularly here. Once I leave, I have to find my own things to eat. I will need to earn money to buy food. But leaving is good for me. I must be independent. I am forty years old. Not a kid. I need to look after myself. My medication is working, everyone says so. I will no longer lose my temper and hit people for no reason.

They found me on a public bench one night, lying there half-naked with just my shorts on. I had no idea how I got there. I still don’t. They told me my mother died in her sleep and I slipped out on my own to sleep outside that same night.

Did my mother actually die?

I never saw my mother again after they found me shivering on the bench. They separated us, taking her body away and putting me here in Pelangi Home. I never even attended her funeral.

Or did I? Didn’t I see them carry her into a van? Why can’t I remember? Wasn’t there a building with an escalator tilting up to the sky... Had it been a dream? Didn’t the escalator take me to a cold, cold room where my mother was kept

inside an open coffin, waiting to be rolled away? Wasn't there a church ceremony? My mother and I are Hindu, not Christian. So why was there a priest in a white robe muttering prayers I didn't recognise—

Maybe the medication is blowing out my memory.

But medication is good. Everyone says so. Meds keep me quiet. And perfectly still.

Will you forget your meds, Raj? Will you end up striking your employer again? Will you behave this time? Can you promise you won't disappoint us again?

I am not stupid. I can think for myself. I see, and hear, things other people cannot see or hear. I know things. I know when people are lying to me, when they are fake, when they really just want me to curl up and die. I know these things. That was why I hit the fat Eurasian man at the factory who talked to me like I was retarded. I am not retarded. I hit him and he fell to the floor with a sound like the earth caving in.

Why is it still raining outside? It is bright morning and the rain is pouring, blasting the roads with that liquid, explosive music. I keep stealing glances out the window as I follow Tiffany to the main office, where everybody will be waiting. For a moment, I look down at myself. I have not forgotten to change; I am no longer wearing the Pelangi Home uniform. Instead I am wearing a grey polo shirt and knee-length shorts. I even have shoes on. This is my public attire. I can dress like this because I can go out today.

Today will be a good day. They found me a new job. Not at a factory this time, but at a nearby coffee shop. Will I get free food and drinks? I hope so. That way, I can save money for other things, like clothes, like rent for a new flat...

When I was a boy, my mother warned, "Don't disappoint people, okay? Or else they won't trust you. Or else they'll make life difficult for you." I recall her droopy, affectionate eyes, her pink sari, the ring she always wore on her finger to remember my father who died from liver failure. Had she been disappointed with me for dropping out of school at an early age, for being a good-for-nothing bum, for having to keep working in order to look after her useless son—

Can you promise you won't disappoint us again?

We arrive at the office. Inside, there is a big table where some people are talking. Tiffany goes in first and chats with her boss, a shorter, older Chinese lady. There is also a middle-aged Malay man inside; I recognise him now as my counsellor. He has been counselling me for the past year. He gives me advice on my life, tells me what my medication will do to me, and dispenses warnings regarding my bad behaviour. I like and despise him at the same time. He is never sincere, even though his actions do help me get better. The medication is working, after all. And he must have recommended me for this new job to Tiffany and her boss. So maybe there is a part of him that is real, that cares for people like me.

Tiffany directs me to sit in a chair at the head of the table.

Now everyone turns to look down at me. Tiffany's boss smiles, but it is a nervous smile.

Suddenly I don't feel comfortable sitting down, looking up at them, at their faces that seem to grow layers the more I stare at them. Their outer layers are hardening into masks; masks with smiles cut into them as if with a blunt knife.

The male counsellor is speaking. "Sorry, Raj, we've decided last minute that we cannot let you go out to work today. You're not ready. Sorry, Raj, to make you come here and for us to tell you like this."

Tiffany speaks too, although she sounds exasperated. She must have only just known about this in the room too. "Sorry, Raj, I...we...decided it might be better if we waited a bit longer for you to get used to the medication, then next time, we find work for you again, okay?"

Why is this happening? Haven't I been quiet and good and still? Haven't I been polite to everyone around me? When will I be ready? Is it because I spoke too loudly to Tiffany or to my counsellor at some point or other? I cannot help how I speak sometimes. I never mean to sound rude or aggressive. Sometimes my voice just rises and people get scared. But it's not my fault. It's not even my problem if *they* get frightened.

Then my mother's voice enters my head. *They don't trust you, Raj. They're making life difficult for you, Raj. They don't like you! And when people don't like you, they do everything they can to make your life difficult.*

I reply with a loud voice. "That's not fair what! I waited six months for this chance. Now you say cannot. It's not *faaaaaaiir!*" I shout and drag my last word, standing up abruptly and pushing the chair to the floor behind me. It lands with a bang like a gun going off in an enclosed space. I cover my ears to block out the sound, but it is deafening. The ringing cuts a straight path right through my brain.

Then my hands take on a life of their own. They clench into fists and bounce off the wooden table with increasing violence. Then the fists fly up to my face and I am beating myself, not that hard, but hard enough for me to shut my eyes in discomfort. I am hitting myself and not anybody else. And I cannot stop. My knuckles continue to land on my face. I can hear the counsellor's voice (*Raj, stop it. Behave yourself now!*) and then Tiffany's higher-pitched pleas (*It's not your fault, Raj. Please stop it! Raj!*)

Soon I find myself squatting on the floor. I am still striking my face; not with my fists this time, but with wide-open hands. I am slapping myself. The sounds I make when my palms meet my cheeks are like an unrelenting round of applause. I am clapping myself. Or clapping for myself. I start to giggle.

All the voices are receding now. I am no longer filled with rage or disappointment. I clap and clap and simply cannot stop.



About the Author

CYRIL WONG is the Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of poetry collections such as *Unmarked Treasure*, *Tilting Our Plates to Catch the Light* and *Satori Blues*, as well as a collection of strange short fables called *Let Me Tell You Something About That Night*. He has served as a mentor under the Creative Arts Programme and the Mentor Access Project, as well as a judge for the Golden Point Awards in Singapore. A past recipient of the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award for Literature, he completed his doctoral degree in English Literature at the National University of Singapore in 2012. His first novel, *The Last Lesson of Mrs de Souza*, was published by Epigram Books in 2013.

“An eclectic collection of short stories that is original and often deeply moving.”

—Dave Chua, author of *The Beating and Other Stories*

A woman learns of a friend's illness and wonders if she ever truly knew him. A boy who sees ghosts heeds the advice of a fortune-teller, with surprising consequences. A girl wakes up and realises everybody in her Bedok neighbourhood has vanished. This collection brings together, for the first time, both new and previously published stories by Cyril Wong, award-winning author of *The Last Lesson of Mrs de Souza*. Ranging from the commonplace to the surreal, these short narratives feature characters in crisis, with two stories crossing intriguingly into creative autobiography.



Cyril Wong is the Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of poetry collections such as *Unmarked Treasure*, *Tilting Our Plates to Catch the Light* and *Satori Blues*, as well as a collection of strange short fables called *Let Me Tell You Something About That Night*.

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