

“A winning, roaring read!”

—Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé, author of *Singular Acts of Endearment*

THE MINORITIES



GHOSTLY
A NOVEL

SUFFIAN HAKIM

Best-selling author of *Harris Bin Potter* and *the Stoned Philosopher*

“Suffian Hakim’s literary prowess is like unsolicited spooning. You never thought you needed it, but it’s there and it feels good. In his sophomore effort, *The Minorities* showcases Suffian’s signature weighted prose and sophisticated humour—a style that elevates the subject matter into an imaginative plain. Irreverent and relevant as the story lives and breathes and spoons.”

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“A generous tale of belonging and connection in spite of diverse backgrounds that oppress us all. Doused in irreverent humour and familiar Singaporean flavour, Suffian’s characters are faithfully human, humane, very much down-to-earth. Let this book into your life. You won’t regret it.”

—Jennifer Anne Champion, author of
A History of Clocks and Caterwaul

“A winning, roaring read! Suffian Hakim writes with such natural talent and pure panache. The language simply leaps off the page, with knee-slapping humour. The hip menagerie of characters—lost souls looking for home—is endearing from the get-go. This is group therapy with catharsis, and no neat closure. Freud would have absolutely adored this speculative and absurdist jaunt.”

—Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé, author of
Singular Acts of Endearment

“Buckle up for a joyful, wild ride in Suffian Hakim’s inimitable terrain of transmigrating pontianaks, telekinetic apparitions and guided group therapy for supernatural beings with issues.”

—Sebastian Sim, author of *Let’s Give it Up for Gimme Lao!*
and *The Riot Act*

“Not only is this an action-packed horror comedy coming-of-age road trip novel—it’s also a story about home. What kind of place do we want Singapore to be? A nation of model citizens? Or maybe something like what Suffian imagines: a found family of classless refugees, banding together, regardless of hygiene and visa status, both supranational and supernatural.”

—Ng Yi-Sheng, Singapore Literature Prize-winning poet
and author of *Lion City*

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THE MINORITIES

GHOSTLY
A NOVEL

SUFFIAN HAKIM



EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

*For Mohamed Aizat Amali,
Mustakjm Van Haasnje,
Muhammad Iskandar,
Mohamed Nazir,
Nasruddin Baharudin
and Syah Fidzuan*

*Six majorly brilliant minorities
who gave me the best memories
of my life,
but ya.*

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*We who are finished—
when did we even start?
They took our souls from our bodies,
And now they expect our hearts.*

STARTERS

PROLOGUE

PRIMORDIAL SOUP

IN THE BEGINNING, there was nothing. Earth did not exist, nor did the moon and the sun. Stars did not exist, nor did galaxies and black holes. The phrase “Do you like what I’ve done with the place?” did not exist.

And then twenty billion years ago, the Universe was created.

Most would argue that it was the act of a singular God, acting alone, out of His, Her or Its own agency. God was a solitary being, existing ex nihilo, with neither twin nor equal.

Some monotheists describe existence as a product of God’s Word, that He, She or It spoke the Universe and its constituents into being.

Those words would probably have been the loneliest ever spoken. “Let there be light,” for example, was uttered by a solitary being, at the cusp of existence, to an audience of nothing.

The concept of the Divine Word is contentious for many reasons. For one, there are disagreements on its content. While some believe that, in the void of nothingness, God first said, “Let there be light”, others argue that God was more likely to have first said, “Fuck, it’s dark in here”, then the more documented and luciferous statement.

Then there's the dialectic which precedes the above debate: what is the nature of God? Where some see God (without actually, you know, seeing God) as a speaker-creator, uttering words of power that bring things into existence, others do not. Some believe God to be a sculptor-creator, moulding existence from primordial material with divine hands or some kind of divine chisel. Some—these tend to be long-dead Egyptians—believe God to be a masturbator-creator, His hot, heavy breaths creating the sky and the winds, and His seminal fluid giving rise to the oceans.

Of course, each Godview has been challenged.

A speaker-creator, silencers say, cheapens the value of words as the alpha and omega of communication. Uttering Words at the brink of creation that no other being can hear or respond to, they point out, is a profanely pointless path for an all-powerful being.

A sculptor-creator, the rigid point out, would have required material that predated God, and begs the question: who brewed the primordial soup?

The detractors of God as a masturbator-creator are mainly unable to fantasise a conjugation of what is carnal with what is dogma (carma?). They need a hand in seeing the profane-cum-sacred.

Maybe the truth is that God is none of the above.

Maybe the truth is that God is all of the above: He, She or It spoke existence into being, and sculpted the primordial material into a magnum opus that, in equal amounts, held both chaos and cosmos. Then, after a hard eon's work, God, shall we say, unleashed the oceans?

And eventually, whether directly or indirectly, whether by the ministrations of evolution or by some form of divine arts and crafts, God created life: entities that consumed, that reproduced, that participated in majestic eco-systems. Life manifests itself in hulking, sky-scraping trees that photosynthesise oxygen from sunlight, carbon dioxide and water. Life is in the very minute tardigrades, visible only through modern microscopes, yet capable of surviving the harshest conditions.

Life is in *homo sapiens*—human beings—of all forms and nuance. It was in cave-dwelling early humans painting the walls of their homes with depictions of animals they hunted and killed. It was in Mesopotamian priests studying the stars to decipher the intentions of Anu and Dagon and Hadad and their fellow gods. It was in Bushido-sworn samurai, performing hara-kiri so that, with death, their names do not become bitter to the tongues of the living. It is in New York penthouse-dwelling millennials concerned about their stagnant

growth in Instagram followers. It is in the post office clerk, the Hollywood child actor, the rubber millionaire, the South Sudanese beggar, the climate change denier. It is in the rabbi and the imam. It is in the gym regular flexing in front of the mirror, and in the teenager wearing a homemade Batman costume at Comic-Con. It is in the porn star, using an enema to prepare herself for an anal scene, and in the nun putting on her habit as she prepares to greet newcomers to the orphanage. Life is equal in all people.

The problem with human beings—perhaps the most unfortunate problem with human beings—is that despite their common humanity, despite being participants in the dance of life for only 130,000 out of the universe's 14 billion years (an insignificant millionth of the cosmic timeline), they have a debilitating ability to set themselves apart from one another.

They could use the most trivial of things—grammar, for example—to see a member of the same species as lesser and Other. They could use the most sacred of things—religion and faith—to become so divisive that they would kill one another in the name of God as they know Him, Her or It.

There are divisions by nation and tribe. There are divisions by wealth and income. There are divisions by ethnicity, marked by trivial factors such as the colour of one's skin, heritage and language, and cultural norms and traditions.

The cost of these divisions of people is exactly that: the division of people.

And when divisions happen, humanity seems to lack the oversight to preserve both equality and diversity between tribes or demographics or nations or communities. As a result, minorities begin to form: groups marginalised, formed of the margins of human division.

The truth is that human progress is a numbers game. Minorities have chips stacked against them since their moment of inception, lacking the resources and manpower larger groups would naturally have.

The minorities are the wretched of the earth and, in divisions of religion, the wretched of the afterlife, too. Their cultures are branded backwards and the antithesis of what the larger groups deem “cultural” and popular.

Then again, consider God. God, a race unto His, Her or Its own. God, whose words we do not quite understand and might misinterpret. God, who some of us believe does not exist. God, whose true nature and motivations we've debated endlessly. God, whom we use to further our own political agendas.

God, the ultimate minority.

CHAPTER ONE

DIET COKE & MENTOS

I WAS NOT the most intelligent person in the world. I was not even the most intelligent person in the room. That distinction belonged to the man lying on the wool carpet, his mouth wide open and filled with cola, trying his best not to gargle. Affixed to his head was a metal bowl-shaped contraption with wires sprouting from it and meandering across the floor, past unused nuts and bolts and a solitary almond, past crumpled sketches, past a dusty first-edition copy of *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan, to the laptop before me.

I was nowhere near as intelligent as the lady wearing a *South Park* T-shirt, braless and free, crouching over said man, holding a singular Mentos over his mouth.

I was occasionally, but most often not as intelligent as the young man holding a camera up to the scene, observing, documenting and saying things like, “We’re not just doing this for the money. We’re doing this for a shitload of money!”

I used to believe I was more intelligent than the previous owner of the four-room Yishun flat we were in, and I was proven very, very wrong. As a matter of fact, his last words to me were, “If you do anything stupid in this

house, like bringing home whores, I swear to Allah that I will haunt you and kill any ghost busters you're gonna call." I was pretty sure what we were about to do fell under "stupid things", despite the apparent lack of whores.

I didn't even say intelligent things. Presently, I said, "Shanti, in the immortal words of Snoop Dogg, drop it like it's hot!", to which the lady armed with the singular Mentos asked, "Have you turned on the BrainScan?"

To which I replied, "Oh, yikes, no, no, no, no, I have not, what is wrong with me, I have sambal for brains I tell you, oh man, how did I forget this", as I quickly double-clicked an icon in the form of an electric-red human brain. A window popped up on the screen, whose edges had several small modules digitising numbers and displaying fluctuating bar graphs, while a main central module, occupying nearly three-quarters of the screen, featured a graphical representation of an adult cerebrum. Orange striations on the digital brain indicated interconnected firing synapses. I labelled this pixelated cerebrum with Cantona's name and age, as well as the words: Subject Zero. "Okay, we're good."

Shanti turned to the man under her. "Cantona, you ready?"

The man with the mouth full of cola raised a thumb up at Shanti.

"Tights?"

"Action!" said Tights from behind the camera.

The Mentos dropped from her hand, into the mouthful of Diet Coke. An instantaneous effusion of foam exploded from Cantona's mouth. It was as majestic as it was alien, a froth geyser that appeared almost plasticine. To his credit, the man lay still, even as foam fell back onto his face.

Shanti called from the floor, "Did the BrainScan work?"

I looked at the BrainScan's interface again. The main module showed the pixelated cerebrum with angry red striations, over and beyond the orange ones. It showed Cantona's brain activity, revealing his apprehension at the influx of carbon dioxide into his throat—harmless at this amount. It highlighted his fear, a feverish flourish in his amygdala. A steady network of lines along the cortex also depicted his determination in remaining still for this experiment to work. I pushed the screen so it faced them, jabbing my finger excitedly at the monitor. I hadn't smiled that widely, or freely, in a very long time. "Yes, it did! Holy hell, it worked!"

Shanti let out a sort of unbridled, joyful whoop, and high-fived an equally jubilant Tights.

Cantona took the cue to begin coughing and sat up. His wet black T-shirt clung to his chest. "Fatafati!" he hacked out in his native Bengali, smiling triumphantly.

Shanti knelt by Cantona and began wiping away cola from his face and neck with a napkin, while Tights recorded them with his camera.

"Thank you for that, Cantona," I said, hand to heart. "It was something to behold."

"No problem," he said, still retching out droplets of cola. "I wish there were a more conventional way I could pay rent, other than whoring myself out."

"But for Science!" Shanti exclaimed.

Whoring himself out.

There was a dull tap-tap-tap. Someone must have patted Cantona on the shoulder for a job well done.

A job well done whoring himself out.

Somewhere near me, or somewhere impossibly far away, Cantona's voice was saying, "I felt fear, but more of cola going up my nostrils than of my own mortality."

"Whoring yourself out?"

Cantona was then next to me, peering at the laptop and saying, "Dude, it works! I thought you'd be more excited than this."

Shanti's voice was saying, "Now that we know it works, we need to move on with phase four." Then she appeared before me, her smiling face near mine, dominating my vision. "We can make the SoundLoft happen!"

Cantona was *whoring* himself out.

"He's distracted," Shanti said with a sigh.

"Look, man," Cantona said, "if you'd rather I pay—"

"No," I quickly said. I took his hand and kissed it. "No, my friend. You're a genius. A brilliant, brilliant genius. People should pay you just to be near your brain." I rested a hand on his shoulder. "You guys make me proud to have you staying here."

I turned to Tights, camera still running, taking it all in as he always does. I pulled him in for a hug. "I cannot ask for rent from any of you. It is my privilege to have each one of you in my house."

I turned to Shanti and cradled her face with my hands. I kissed her forehead.

They were looking at me as if I were insane, but I took it. I did not know how to explain to them the *other* experiment we had inadvertently performed above and beyond, *beyond* the one for the SoundLoft. "We'll continue this tomorrow?"

"*After* Cantona's exhibition?" said Shanti. Cantona made a small, queer, dismissive sound.

"Yes." I saw the look on Shanti's face. "Yes! It's in my planner. I didn't forget."

Cantona asked me, rather worriedly, “Are you okay?”

And again, falsely, I said, “Yes.” They deserved the truth, and I made a silent promise to give it to them when I could, when this was less embarrassing, and not a matter of life and death.

“You know where to find us if you need anything,” Shanti said softly.

They left. Cantona closed the door gently behind him.

I found that I was holding my breath. I waited until every footfall upon the linoleum floor faded into the small stirrings of evening. I waited as the air thickened with silence. And when all that pulsed in my ears was my nervously beating heart, I scanned my room.

“Hello?” I called out, and the empty room brought back to me its harrowing silence. “Father?”

The ghost of my father replied with nothing, because he was not there, unseen, unheard, un-alive—absent. The nothing told me everything: my father was dead, as he had been for months, and as resounding as his final words to me were, he was going to remain that way.

“Father, are you there?”

He was not.

I picked up the copy of *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan. A lifetime ago, my father gave me the yellowed, fraying thing—then it was relatively pristine, of course—on the day I turned eight. He told me that, with the book, he had tasked me to not “be a dumbass like all the other idiot kids your age and their fucking video games, pressing away at the buttons like stupid goddamned zombies”. To say that my father showed me tough love was like saying that God sent Noah on an all-expenses-paid cruise.

I turned to the last dog-eared page, realising as I did so that the book had been there, untouched, for months.

I last held the book when a hospital bed occupied the space next to mine. Every night since the day my father became bedridden from a mild stroke (and I moved him to my room from his), he had asked me to read to him. We began, on that first night we shared a room, with Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (“The gazelle is the hero of the story, not Hayy,” my father had argued irritably through coughing fits. “The story should be called *The Gazelle and The Needy Goddamn Human Boy She Was Forced to Raise*”). In a couple of days, we moved on to Victor Hugo’s unabridged *Les Misérables* (for a good two weeks from start to finish, most of which my father spent snoring). We followed it with Adolfo Bioy Casares’ *The Invention of Morel*, the story of a fugitive who hides on a strange, deserted

Polynesian island—one with two moons and two suns in the sky, where dead carcasses would come back to life in the morning, where people seem to disappear and reappear at random. When a group of tourists arrive on the island, he falls in love with one of them, a beautiful young woman named Faustine. Throwing caution to the listless winds, he tries to speak to Faustine, only to be completely ignored—something that happens when he tries to communicate with the other tourists as well. The fugitive eventually learns that this aberrant phenomenon is a result of a machine created by a man named Morel. The machine can trap souls and recast tangible projections of these souls (their memories and personalities still intact) upon the island in accordance to Morel’s whims, like some bespoke moving photograph tailored to the inventor’s desires.

“I really hope my soul doesn’t carry my memories with it,” said my father as I closed my yellowed copy of *The Invention of Morel*.

“I’m sure there are memories you want to keep,” I said softly, as I always did with my father. “How about when you met—” I trailed off, letting “Ma” fade into the unspoken.

“Who? Your mother?”

I nodded.

His lips curled slightly in a faint smile. He then quickly recomposed his face to its usual stoicism. “Where I’m going, that Jewish woman can’t follow.”

“Father, come on.”

“What memories are there to keep? We were in love, and then we were not. I’ve lived seventeen good years without Shiri by my side.”

“She’s coming over on Saturday to see you.” It was Tuesday.

“Then I hope I die before that.” For the first time in several weeks, my father laughed.

The day after, I asked my father, “What do you want me to read to you next?”

With much difficulty, he sat up. “Do you remember that book I bought for you when you were eight? I wish you still had that.”

“I still do.”

For a while, he said nothing. Then he said, “Good.” He lay down. “Read it to me.”

And so I retrieved *Cosmos* from my bookshelf, and started reading to my father.

By Friday, we had gotten far in the book. “The Sun’s stellar ash can be reused for fuel only up to a point,” I had read that day, the words of the late Mr Sagan escaping my lips. “Eventually the time will come when the solar

interior is all carbon and oxygen, when at the prevailing temperatures and pressures no further nuclear reactions can occur. After the central helium is almost all used up, the interior of the Sun will continue its postponed collapse, the temperatures will rise again, triggering a last round of nuclear reactions and expanding the solar atmosphere a little.”

My father sat up again, with a suddenness that jolted me. “When I’m gone, this house goes to you. If you do anything stupid in here, like bringing home whores, I swear to Allah that I will haunt you and kill any ghost busters you’re gonna call.”

I stared at him wordlessly, shocked by the outburst, and could only tear my eyes away when he slumped back into bed.

“Read on,” said my father weakly.

And because there was nothing to be said, I read on:

“In its death throes, the Sun will slowly pulsate, expanding and contracting once every few millennia, eventually spewing its atmosphere into space in one or more concentric shells of gas. The hot exposed solar interior will flood the shell with ultraviolet light, inducing a lovely red and blue fluorescence extending beyond the orbit of Pluto. Perhaps half the mass of the Sun will be lost in this way. The solar system will then be filled with an eerie radiance, the ghost of the Sun, outward bound.”

That night, my father passed in his sleep.

A sort of faint, electrical hum supernovaed me out of my reverie. Far away in my father’s room next to mine, the television came alive. I smiled, an almost mad smile stretched by relief. That smile died when I remembered that Tights and Cantona shared my father’s room now.

“Father?” I tried again, acutely aware that I must be speaking to the walls. “I brought a whore into the house.” I laughed. “I guess you have to haunt me now.” I laughed again, so hard that tears welled in my eyes.

I did not know how long I stood there, watching, waiting, tears cascading from my eyes, calling for my father. I did not know how I ended up in bed, lying down, staring at the ceiling.

I fell asleep, and I dreamt I woke up in a cold, grey morgue with endless lines of body bags. My heart came alive then, throbbing violently in fear and dread, and it nearly palpitated as the bodies in the bags began to struggle and move. Their zips came undone in unison, and the canvas fell aside to unveil clones of my father, naked, each one bearing autopsy scars. As one, they turned to me and, still sitting in their respective body bags, began berating

me in chorus about the pointlessness of dreaming and demanded that I do something more productive, and I woke, and I hoped to see the translucent, grumpy visage of my father’s ghost hovering above me, but I did not.

I sat up and rubbed the sleep and dried tears from my eyes.

My room was flooded, in majestic beams of morning sunshine, in the aroma of Shanti’s Wednesday waffles, in the clarion of the early-morning news on the television. Puddles of stray laundry were strewn across the floor as if this were a makeshift refugee camp and they were the survivors of my war against carrying-those-damn-things-to-the-washing-machine. I got off my bed and stepped on something wet and fluffy. A mad part of my brain thought I had impressed my foot upon a cat. I quickly looked down. The wool carpet by my bed had major cola stains.

My brain rebooted from the stimulus, and I properly registered the scent of waffles.

Every Wednesday, Shanti made waffles, lightly spiced with cinnamon and saffron and heated to crispy, fragrant perfection. She then made each of us separate batches of toppings, such that Cantona could have his waffles drenched in maple syrup, Tights could have his accompanied by a bowl of honey and a bowl of chocolate rice (he’d dip his waffles in honey before coating them with the rice), and I could have mine with a generous dollop of butterscotch smack in the middle. Shanti always had hers plain.

I showered quicker than I’d care to admit and headed to the kitchen to find my housemates already there. We exchanged hearty good mornings and I took my seat at the head of the small, wooden, rickety breakfast table.

“How are you feeling today?” Shanti asked me cheerfully, decanting a new dollop of batter into the waffle maker.

Here, in the glare of morning, in the order of breakfast, the thought that I could have seen my father again seemed insane and ass-droppingly inane. “Refreshed,” I answered. I looked at Cantona. He gazed back at me, uncertainty flickering in his eyes. “Thank you for your courage yesterday, Cantona. We’ve taken a huge step towards realising the SoundLoft.”

“My pleasure,” he answered. I reached out and gave Cantona a light squeeze on the shoulder. He added brightly, “Maybe after today I can help pay—”

I waved at him dismissively and turned my attention to Tights. “What did you guys watch last night?”

“*Finding Nemo*,” Tights replied. He added with a laugh, “Stupid fishy.”

“I hate that film,” I said.

“I think Marlin should never have lost his son. It’s a show about bad parenting,” Cantona said. He took a sip of iced green tea. “He embarrasses Nemo in school, Nemo feels he needs to prove himself to his father and that kickstarted the events of the movie. By being a bad father, Marlin fathered *Finding Nemo*.”

“You can’t put the blame on the father,” I found myself saying. “I think Nemo was at fault, getting captured by humans like that. He was naïve and impulsive, and that got him into trouble.”

“That movie just makes me crave fish and chips,” Shanti chipped in from the waffle maker.

“You can’t blame Nemo,” Cantona said, after chuckling slightly at Shanti’s statement. “Humans are larger, with powers and machinations beyond a fish’s understanding.”

“People like gods to fish,” Tights pointed out. “More power, more big.”

“But Marlin, with his life experience, should know the threat that humans pose,” continued Cantona, who put down his glass of green tea a bit too loudly on the table. “He should have done more to educate Nemo.”

For a while, we sat in silence, until Tights broke it with a loud fart. “When you have bad inside...” he began, not at all sheepish.

“Let it out straight away,” Cantona and I finished. We laughed. Shanti shook her head, smiling.

She joined us at the table later with a mountain of waffles, which she doled out proportionately onto our plates. “Dig in, boys.”

We thanked her. I also thanked Allah and Yahweh out of habit. Tights had already begun munching loudly. Cantona waited until Shanti was settled in at the table before he began eating.

I cut a roughly two-by-two square of waffle and took a hearty bite. It tasted as incredible as it smelled. My entire being sang for the godsend that was Shanti, but that song of joy ended with an abrupt, jarring record scratch that raked at my heart. I addressed my thoughts to the room, “Hey, was anybody haunted by the ghost of a grumpy old Malay man last night?”

Tights replied instantly with a shake of his head. “No such thing,” he said between bites.

Cantona and Shanti exchanged looks. Cantona said, “No.” Shanti asked, “Why?”

“No reason.”

“Were you?” Shanti asked, the furrows at her brows more pronounced.

“Not at all,” I replied. “That’s the problem.”

CHAPTER TWO

ILISH OUT OF WATER

AT ART VERNISSAGES, it is hard to tell the buyers from the enthusiasts, the enthusiasts from the pretenders—the alphas from the abecedarians—until you speak to them.

“Do not,” Shanti said to us—briefing us, really—before we left the house, “speak to anyone. We need to stick together and we need to be low-key.”

“Avengers bad guy?” asked Tights, almost giddy with excitement.

“No, Tights,” replied Shanti. He was visibly deflated. “Not Loki. Low-key. We need to make sure nobody knows about you and Cantona.” Her gaze moved from the Chinese immigrant to the Bangladeshi immigrant, where it lingered. “If you must speak to someone, keep conversation strictly to art. And I cannot emphasise this enough—stay together.”

The vernissage we were heading to was part of an exhibition called *Toil & Canvas: A Collection of Art by Expatriates and Foreign Workers*, held in the magnificent function hall of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

My father used to tell me that art was “the devil’s ejaculate”. I never agreed with him. Art, to me, was one of the most exciting of human enterprises, when compared to other man-made contrivances such as traffic jams and

bread and butter. We tether ourselves to art as we ascend to higher thought, marvelling brushstrokes of paint with the same joyous intellect we use to marvel strokes of pith and semantics. Or we wrap ourselves in art, to blind ourselves from the world, to grasp opportunistically at its allegorical wings so they can drag us above the dregs of humanity.

Or—if you're like my father—you see the arty-farty as more fart than art.

Hilda the host, large and mighty, greeted the four of us in a voice that carried across the museum, her arms flourished open in a grand gesture of welcome. Behind her stood her choir of assistants completely clad in figure-hugging white polyester that suggested not sensuality but that they were deeply frugal with clothing material. Their hair was flat and slicked and immaculate, each strand in its rightful place. They were a singular unit—cold, efficient, methodical as they worked in tandem, greeting guests with pre-programmed gusto, ticking boxes on their clipboards and darting about with a kind of urgent elegance.

“Welcome, Mr Nocta,” Hilda greeted Cantona, as we tried to hide our collective sniggers. A. N. Nocta was Cantona's “art name”, an anagram to hide his identity. “It is wonderful to see you again, my friend. The work you sent for this exhibition is simply inspirational!”

“Thank you, Hilda, that is very kind of you to say,” Cantona said, more to the floor than to the larger-than-life lady before him, who then grabbed his face and kissed both cheeks. When he regained full ownership of his face, Cantona said, “These are my housemates, Shan—”

“Welcome!” Hilda interjected, loudly and warmly. The woman then raised her left hand and snapped her fingers. A stout male assistant with proud features, looking barely older than twenty, rushed forward. “Gabriel, take them to the VIP bar.”

Gabriel led us into the function hall. The place was vast, with white walls that soared to a lofty ceiling. The entirety of the hall was carpeted with Pakistani kilim, a brightly coloured flat-weave rug (I found myself hoping, for the sake of the janitorial department, that nobody spilled their drinks). A floor-to-ceiling red velvet curtain separated us from the back half of the function room. At one end of the reception area, off to the left from the entrance, was a rectangular, stepped oak dais, a platform about thirty centimetres high. Behind the dais was an extensive brand wall on which the words “Toil & Canvas” were spray-painted in large pink fonts against a grey, industrial-grunge background. Upon the curved side of the dais were intricate Vedic carvings.

Hilda's assistant then led us through an already sizeable crowd, past people carrying cocktail and wine glasses, engaged in conversation—some deep, some shallow, some hollow. The guests were clothed in eveningwear or formalwear or formlesswear or things-they-had-on-from-the-morning-until-the-eveningwear. We fit in in the first two ways—Shanti had ensured it.

We continued past the velvet ropes cordoning off the VIP area, with its magnificent circular marble bar topped by a rich brown, coated oak surface. Here, the human density thinned considerably. Cantona nodded at a couple of other men at the end of the bar, and they nodded back wordlessly. No doubt they were fellow artists, the art that bled from their experiences while displaced from their respective homelands coagulating in this vernissage. I waved to them out of reverence for their work, then remembered that I did not know them—nor did they know me—and immediately fixed my gaze at my shoes.

We took a spot at the bar facing the dais. Gabriel asked us if we needed anything. We told him no and thanked him. He promptly left us. Shanti ordered us three glasses of orange juice and a glass of rum and coke.

“I'm so nervous,” Cantona said, facing the crowd, sipping his drink.

“You'll be fine,” I told him, and I meant it.

Cantona was a self-taught artist, the result of working as a pigment crusher in his youth and of a hand-me-down book on Italian Impressionism given to him by his mother on his tenth birthday.

“I feel naked.”

I adjusted the lapels of his jacket—well, my jacket that I had lent him for this occasion. “Well, you just offended this awesome jacket by pretending it doesn't exist.”

“You know what I mean.”

I understood what was in store for Cantona. He was infinitely more an artist than he was a construction worker, but pragmatism had forced his hand when he decided to leave the dustbowl of Bangladesh for Singapore's ever-evolving concrete jungle. This was his chance to move towards self-fulfilment. Nevertheless, Cantona Fawwaz was also a fugitive on the run (of sorts) and even though this vernissage was invite-only and showcased the works of A. N. Nocta, it was far too public for his liking.

I patted the underside of his glass. “Drink up. It might calm your nerves.”

“This is just orange juice.”

“And that won't calm your nerves?”

Cantona drank. Tights was nervously reciting the entire script of *Forrest*

Gump to himself, his glass untouched next to him. Shanti was holding her glass, as full as it was empty, the dark liquid in it glinting in the fluorescent lights. She stood several arms' lengths from us, scanning the crowd with those keen, intelligent eyes. She was wearing a red dress that accentuated the deep chocolate of her skin, and, if we weren't so nervous about everything, I would have better appreciated how beautiful she looked. She occasionally glanced at Cantona, for barely perceptible lengths of time, before resuming her watch. Sometimes, I felt Shanti worried too much for Tights and Cantona, especially Cantona. I didn't know to what extent I disagreed with her fretting, but I occasionally found myself, perhaps subconsciously, providing the counterpoint to it.

"You've waited your whole life for this," I said to Cantona as he took a gulp.

"If they find out—"

"They're not going to, *Mr Nocta*. Every decision you have made has led to this. If you're not on the run right now, if you had just continued serving—*wasting*—your time at the construction yard, you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be able to bring your art to people. You would have kept your abilities a secret and that, my friend, would be a damned waste of talent. You are here, at the cusp of being recognised for what you were *born* to do." I smiled at my friend. He returned it, the hesitation that pulled at his face gradually dissipating. "Go have some fun," I said to him.

Cantona downed what was left of his orange juice. He then moved further down the bar towards Shanti.

I turned from them. At times, watching the two of them felt voyeuristic, like I was an intruder on a secret that, though open, was so fragile it might crumble under witness. Tights, who was next to Cantona, shuffled over to me, his glass a quarter empty, his manner rigid.

"You good, Tights?"

"No," he replied. "I scared. Many people."

"Don't be," I told him. "Just be yourself, make new friends and have fun."

"But Shanti said—"

"Shanti said watch what you say, that's all." I glanced back towards Shanti, who was deep in conversation with Cantona. "Just talk about your favourite movies and stay within sight."

Tights smiled uneasily and shuffled towards the exit of the VIP area.

I did not see where he went from there, as a voice, magnified by a microphone, rented the air, killing the nebulous buzz of chatter that had

simmered in the hall. "Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for this evening's host and curator, Miss Hilda Auger!"

Hilda ascended to her dais as "Also Sprach Zarathustra" began playing over the speakers. She took her time, walking slowly, her silver dress gliding along with the swells of the music. I could not decide if the overall effect was godly or gaudy. Everybody else seemed to have already decided, as rapturous applause broke out across the hall.

Finally, she reached the middle of the dais, a space she occupied with an almost celestial poise and confidence.

When she spoke, I had the general impression that the microphone was unnecessary. "Friends, colleagues, fellow lovers of art, thank you so much for being here. Welcome to the opening night of *Toil and Canvas!*"

Hilda basked in the subsequent applause—one that I found myself inadvertently contributing to—and spoke only upon its death.

"These works of art by expatriates and foreign workers speak of our common humanity, our struggles to find acceptance and belonging so far away from home. Here, at Our Ziggurat, this symbol of our shared ancestry and heritage—" Hilda swept an arm towards the curtains in the middle of the hall, and they came apart, unveiling a multicoloured stepped pyramid made of hemp fibres and earthy textiles held up by wooden effigies of decreasing height; easels were scattered around Our Ziggurat, bearing the works of art that were in danger of no longer being the exhibition's focal point, "—we have gathered for a homecoming, a return to the soul."

Oohs and *aahs* blossomed and flurried, and amid these erupting invocations, Hilda descended from the dais. She stepped forward and the audience gave her a wide berth—the laity making reverential space for their Divine Being. "You may enter now," she declared to a crowd that was as enraptured as I was on the *qui vive* (for Tights), "and I promise you will leave with more in your hearts and minds than you have now."

Large swaths of people began to approach Our Ziggurat, pointing, commenting, drinking champagne.

There was a practised "ahem" behind us.

Shanti, Cantona and I turned to find one of Hilda's white-clad assistants. She was a tall, fair lady who was so skinny she appeared narrow. Her nametag said Michaela. Her countenance said Cruella de Vil waiting for a delivery of Dalmatians.

"Ms Auger would like to speak to you, Mr Nocta," she said tersely,

addressing Cantona only. “If you would follow me.” She turned, and did not start walking until Cantona was next to her.

I turned to Shanti. “Um, I lost sight of Tights.”

She shook her head. “I’ll look for him.”

“All right then, I’m going to look at some art and try my very best to understand them,” I said to her, a listless chuckle betraying my guilt.

“If you find him, keep him with you,” said Shanti with a heavy voice, before she disappeared into the crowd.

I headed towards Our Ziggurat. The art littered around it spanned styles, genres, subjects and technique. Some of them popped out to me: a still life of a dirty shovel, an abstract self-portrait painted in hummus, a landscape collection of soaring mountains and dark, smoggy cities.

On one side of Our Ziggurat, I found the white sign I was looking for. It read: “A. N. Nocta, Bangladesh” in bold black font.

“The enigmatic Mr A. N. Nocta,” the paragraph under it read, “is a self-taught artist. He started painting at the age of twelve, when he worked as an apprentice at a dye factory in his native Bangladesh. Beyond this, nothing much is known about Mr Nocta, though rumours abound that he is a fifty-year-old recluse who breeds mules. While his style and technique harken to the Renaissance, his subjects are as brutal and raw as they are absurd and surreal.”

Behind the signboard stood a large landscape, about a metre by two. Painted in strong strokes was a dark, solitary hand, palm stretched open, reaching upwards from waters inky blue and surging, rippling. The hand dominated the canvas, such that I could see clearly every wrinkle upon it cresting and meandering. In every concentric ripple of water around its veiny wrist, there were minute, distorted reflections of beatific life and violent death, every scene tinted watery blue. One ripple curved and skewed a destroyed mule caravan, bloodied bodies strewn around, the red bleeding through the blue. Within the ringed theatre of another ripple was a stout man cradling his baby. Another one depicted a boy kicking a football. Smearred across the top of the canvas like misshapen blue-grey clouds were small hands, reaching for their brethren in the water. The oil and canvas oeuvre was titled *Kali Pulls Icarus Out of the Water*.



“It’s not time to make a change. Just relax...” I had been singing along with the radio that dark, breezy night. Reclining on the hood of a rusty old Toyota,

I had marvelled at how brightly the stars shone above, this far from the light pollution of the city. “Take it easy...”

I had parked along an empty stretch of road, far from civilisation. The last car passed me over an hour ago. The last streetlamp blinked impassively at me about a hundred metres back. If it weren’t for my radio renting the silence rhythmically, there would be a harsh hush, a black void of noiselessness. Farther down the road was a Muslim cemetery, the resting place of tombstones etched in Arabic and wretched with dates of birth and death.

I never understood the practice of setting in tombstone a person’s birth and death dates. Did it matter, for example, how old my father was when he passed? Did it matter how long his bones had been in the ground, farther down that road? What difference did it make if they had been there, rotting, for 42 days (as they were then) or 42 years? Dead is dead is dead.

It had been one of very few things I had in common with my father. Two years ago, I had been here with him to attend the funeral of one of his childhood friends, Malik. Then, I had met my father’s former teacher, Pakcik Dollah, a sprightly man of about ninety. He had hugged my father, before saying, “Malik died too young.” Malik was in his seventies. My father, insufferable and emotionless, said, “No such thing. Dead is dead is dead.” Pakcik Dollah’s face was unreadable as he gazed at my father after that comment. He then said simply, “As a practising bomoh, I wholeheartedly disagree.” He then threw me a wink and hopped farther along the graveyard.

Something broke the silence—something outside the car, something not from the radio. Something *organic*.

I heard the rustle but, in the dark, barely saw it.

I sat up.

The rustle grew louder, rankling in the silent night. The bush next to the car began to shake violently. I cast my phone’s built-in flashlight on the movement. “Hello?”

Something large erupted from the bush and jumped into the light. Recoiling, I yelled in fear.

“Wait!” the something large said—well, “panted barely discernible words” was a better way to describe how it spoke. The monster from the chaparral was merely a not-so-monstrous chap.

He was a tall, skinny man, with a shock of facial hair. He wore what was probably once a clean white T-shirt, and work trousers that were tattered and dirt-stained, as though he had been running through the jungle for hours.

“Water?” he gasped, clear and lucid. “Do you have any water?”

“I don’t have any on me. No, wait. Well, it depends on what you mean by ‘water’. Roughly seventy-five per cent of me is made of water—”

The man whimpered through his ragged breaths. “To drink. Please. I have been running for four straight hours.”

I took in his drenched T-shirt, the mottled beads of water on his skin and his wild, unfocussed, deep-set eyes. “Hang on, let me check.” I opened my glove compartment. A flurry of envelopes fell out. I quickly shoved them back in, and slammed the compartment shut. “Sorry, it appears I don’t have any.” I chuckled quickly, nervously. I was hoping that would push him along, but he stayed rooted to the ground.

The way he looked at me, I felt like I had just sentenced him to death. “Please, sir?”

I sighed. “I can get some along the way back. Get in.”

He stumbled into the back seat, and lay prone. I started the engine.

“Thank you, sir, thank you,” he said with pants more ragged than his trousers.

“No problem. Just don’t kill me.”

“I am not a murderer!”

A small part of me, deeply buried within my id—the part that willed me to spend my time near a graveyard listening to songs my father listened to—throbbed in disappointment. I said nothing as his heavy breathing began to subside.

“I like the song you were playing.”

“‘Father and Son’ by Cat Stevens?” I began driving off.

“Yusuf Islam sang it, no?”

“They’re the same person. That’s his name after he converted to Islam.”

He said nothing.

I asked him, “Are you running from the law?”

“No.” He paused. “Not yet.”

“What’s your name?”

“Cantona.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Selena Gomez.”

“Thank you so much for your help, Mr Gomez.”

“Damn it, man. I was being sarcastic.”

“Oh.”

We fell silent again, the sounds of sparse passing traffic filling the night. At regular intervals, we were bathed in the orange LED lights of the streetlamps.

“Why?” he finally asked.

“Why what?”

“Why were you being sarcastic?”

“Your name can’t actually be Cantona.”

“Do you know the footballer, Eric Cantona?”

“Of course, I do. Total legend.”

“My parents named me after him. My full name is Cantona bin Fawwaz.”

“Were your parents Manchester United fans?”

“The biggest in Comilla,” he said with pride, even in his rather dire circumstance, even as he kept his form low in the back seat of the car.

“You don’t speak like most Bangladeshis.”

“That’s a bit racist, sir.”

“Most Bangladeshis I know, at least.”

“Do you personally know many Bangladeshis?”

“Just the one.” I thought of the caretaker who tended the garden next to my block, the one with the rusty shears and the sheer vest and the seer-like wisdom and the gap-toothed smile.

“What’s your name, sir?” he asked again.

I told him my name—my real name.

“What kind of name is that?” he asked.

“The one my parents gave me,” I answered truthfully.

The blue Toyota cruised down the Pan-Island Expressway. I asked the question that was foremost in my mind. “Who or what are you running from?”

“My former employers.”

“Who are they?”

“Chang and Sons.”

I paused. “Is that a gang?”

“No,” he replied from the back seat. “They’re a construction company.”

I tried to imagine any reason why a construction company would chase an employee across the jungles.

“Did you steal cement from them?”

“What would I do with cement?”

“Well, you could cement your reputation as—”

“There is nothing to do with cement,” he interjected in a heartbreaking lament. “It’s just the same dull, grey thing every day. You wouldn’t comprehend.”

“Ah, but I do, my friend. I do understand. Cement—why, it is but a sham. Not as meaningful as, say, green eggs and ham.”

The stranger—Cantona—remained silent. In my rear-view mirror, he

looked perplexed and slightly perturbed.

“Have you never read Dr Seuss?”

“No,” he answered.

“We need to change that,” I told him flatly. As soon as I said that, I regretted it. Why was I making plans for book-sharing with a complete stranger?



This end of the vernissage, I realised, was emptier than the other sides of Our Ziggurat. Most of the crowd was near the entrance, where some expatriate CEO of a successful financial technology start-up was displaying his collection (I believe it was called *Money Talks*—charcoal sketches of anthropomorphised wads of cash, portrayed deep in conversation with seemingly prosaic things such as pillars and sports cars and diamond rings).

I moved towards the painting behind *Kali Pulls Icarus Out of the Water*. The small rectangle of paper pasted to the easel said this one was called *Seventeen Lives*. It depicted an upturned red-and-white striped hat and two cats, a calico on the rim clawing at another cowering fearfully inside. The cat inside the hat had a coat of fur like the night sky—a blue so deep it was almost black, speckled with stellar silver.

I stepped back and studied the rest of the painting. The hat was on a wooden table. Next to the hat, a candle in an ornate pewter candle holder lent light to the scene, casting misshapen shadows upon grey walls. There was something about the shadows...

“Did you find Tights?”

I turned to see Shanti, radiant in her long red dress but her face and voice grim as blood.

“No.”

“I’m worried. This whole thing was a bad idea.” Her eyes darted this way and that.

“We’re doing this for Cantona,” I reminded her gently. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s talking to Hilda at the bar.” She dropped her voice to just an octave above helplessness. “She’s making him drink—alcohol.”

“Well, the man deserves a good drink!”

“He’s not supposed to,” Shanti said flatly and continued scanning the hall. “I’m going to keep looking for Ying Hao.”

“Shanti, wait.”

“What is it?”

“What is wrong with the shadows here?” I asked her, gesturing at *Seventeen Lives*.

She let out an expulsion of impatience. “It looks like four people crawling out of a fire.”



Cantona had said one word, and it had been “pareidolia”. He was lying on his back, having drunk an entire bottle of water and practically inhaling the chocolate bar I had bought for him at a petrol station. He gazed up at the clouds, which remained stationary relative to the world that was zipping past us, as I drove the blue Toyota onto the Bukit Timah Expressway.

“What’s that?” I had asked.

“It’s when you see shapes and meanings that aren’t there. Sometimes you see people in shadows cast by fire. Sometimes you see faces in the clouds. Sometimes you hear messages when you play songs backwards. Sometimes you see animals in the stars.” He repeated, “Pareidolia.”

“Where did you learn about pareidolia?” I asked him. I doubted Chang and Sons had extra-curricular programmes for their workers to study psychological phenomena.

“When I was doing my first doctorate.”

I nearly braked just so I could give this conversation more attention. “Okay, firstly, ‘first’? And secondly, ‘doctorate’? What is someone with more than one doctorate doing as a construction worker?”

“I have three doctorates, but none of them were considered legitimate enough for me to get an academic job.”

“Where did you get them?”

“Easy PhD dot com,” he replied.

I almost laughed, but felt it would come across as condescending. “What were your doctorates in?”

“Art Theory, Philosophy and English.”

“Ah, yes. Well. I see. Interesting. Mm.” I was saying words and making sounds just to not laugh. I would later find out that Cantona learnt a great deal from these Internet doctorates, from simply researching the theses he submitted to get his easy PhDs.

We eventually took the exit to Yishun, and weaved through the streets and

roads—empty, mostly, at this time of the night—towards its still-coruscating heart. About six blocks from that heart, there was the 17-storey, white brick government housing building I called home.

I parked the car and escorted Cantona to the 13th floor and that brown teak collection of planks I called the door to my home. I opened it for him, but he stopped and looked positively sheepish.

“You’re not a vampire, are you?” I asked him.

“No.” Then, “Why?”

“Vampires cannot enter a place unless they’ve been invited in.”

He laughed nervously. “No—no, I am not a vampire.”

“Then, please, come in,” I said to him. “And remind me to pass you Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.”

He took off his shoes. “Thank you so much, sir.”

I smiled at the younger man. “Please don’t call me sir.”

We stepped inside. The house smelled of waffles, so starkly, deliciously crisp in the dead of night. I led Cantona towards the kitchen, where Shanti stood in one of my oversized T-shirts, working her magic on the waffle maker.

Shanti nearly shrieked when she saw us. “You could have told me we were having company!”

“Well, I didn’t expect you to be up at four-thirty in the morning making waffles!”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Ergo...waffles?”

“I thought I’d prepare them now. We can have an early breakfast later.” Her eyes sparkled alive for a moment. “Get a head start on our project.”

My heart warmed. I had done nothing to warrant Shanti’s dedication to our project—let alone her dedication to me, for that matter—but here she was, leading, and feeding, the charge.

I stopped beaming when I realised that introductions were in order. I placed a hand on the newcomer’s shoulder. “Shanti, this is Cantona.”

She smiled uneasily. “Hello, Cantona. Welcome!”

“Hi, Shanti,” he said shyly.

“I’m sorry you caught me at a bad time,” said Shanti, pulling at the hem of her T-shirt.

Cantona mumbled several sentences rapidly that, from the look on her face, neither Shanti nor I caught. I discerned, barely, the muddled phrases, “I’m the one who’s sorry”, “I must smell like a pig covered in a dead pig” and

“I’m usually more presentable than this”.

Into the ensuing silence, I told Shanti, “He will be staying with us for a while. Until he’s ready to get back into the water.”

“No problem at all,” said Shanti. “What do you do, Cantona?”

Cantona began stuttering, so I replied for him, “Cantona here is on the run.” The man shot me a look of complete panic, to which I addressed, “Don’t worry, we can trust Shanti.”

Shanti’s tone, however, had shifted greatly. “Well it depends, what are you on the run from?”

“From my former employers,” said Cantona, whose head seemed to have bowed even more.

“Chang and Sons,” I elaborated, sensing that Shanti was in information-gathering mode. “A local construction company.” I told her about how we met, and the conversation we had en route.

“Why?” Shanti directed the singular word to Cantona, and my sympathies went out to him. She tended to get dogged in the pursuit of truth and facts—it made her a great lab assistant, and a formidable interrogator. “Why are you running away from them?”

“Because I don’t want to be a construction worker anymore,” Cantona said to the floor.

“What do you want to be then?”

“An artist,” replied Cantona, in the same manner one might reveal that one has herpes.

“How do you expect to be an artist, Mr Cantona?”

“Well, I’ve been painting...”

“So has my six-year-old niece, but nobody’s calling her an artist,” Shanti replied sharply.

The poor fool began stammering. “I’ve sent my art to Hilda Auger.”

“And who might that be?” Shanti’s voice was barbs hidden behind silk. She then took out her phone, and began typing away furiously.

Cantona saw this and couldn’t tear his eyes off her fingers jouncing across the surface of her phone as he replied, “He— She’s, well, a famous art corrector, I mean, curator and collector, who’s in Singapore now collecting works by expatriates and foreign workers for...for an exhibition in June.”

“How do you spell Auger?” Shanti asked. Cantona told her. There was a short pause before Shanti turned her head to me and said, “It checks out.”

“That’s settled then,” I said, breaking out of my growing discomfort.

“Cantona, you can stay with us.”

Her eyes never leaving our guest, Shanti crossed her arms, not caring that the oversized T-shirt she wore rode up. “We’ll be accessories to a crime if we let him stay with us.”

“This man has nowhere to go, Shanti.”

“Yes, he does,” Shanti said. “Back to Bangladesh.”

“No, please,” Cantona cried, his desperate eyes turning to me. “Please, I do not want to go back there. There is nothing for me in Bangladesh.”

I knew what I had to say, and I hated the fact that it had come to this. “Shanti, I am letting Cantona stay in *my* house, and that’s that.”

“If they find this *illegal immigrant* here, it won’t be just you who gets into trouble.” Shanti turned to Cantona, and softened her voice, “Look, I have nothing against you, I truly don’t. But for as long as you’re here, we’re breaking the law by harbouring you illegally.”

“Perfect,” I said triumphantly at “breaking the law”. “That decides it, then. Cantona, welcome to your new home.”



I moved past *Seventeen Lives*, still wondering which of the two cats in the painting had eight out of its nine lives remaining. I also wondered if a cat with eight lives lived a partial existence, with one-ninth of its identity lost to that abyss in the red-and-white striped hat of life, or if it had eight full lives left to lose.

I wondered if I should get a pet cat.

The function hall of the Asian Civilisations Museum was abuzz with chatter, and the waves of attendees ebbed and crested around Our Ziggurat, undulating from one cluster of paintings to the next. There was still no sign of Tights.

The third painting by Cantona was of a barren land ending in a canyon so deep it felt like the very boundaries of the world. A line of donkeys walked the land, towards the edge of the canyon. Some of the donkeys were falling off the edge, and the ones that had fallen were morphing—melting—into grotesque grey globs of sullen humanoid faces wearing expressions of despair and sorrow.

I glanced down at its label. *Assess Your Head*.

“What is the worst thing about death?” asked a great feminine voice behind me. “That you are lifeless? Or that you are meaningless?”

I turned to find Hilda Auger, hands clasped behind her. “Hello, Miss

Hilda,” I said, clasping my hands behind my back. “Maybe the worst thing about death is that you never get to see donkeys again.”

“It’s a rather sordid painting, isn’t it?” she said. “Asses ambling to their death, and in those death throes, they transform into some horrible semblance of humanity.” She seemed to be testing me, prodding me with her seemingly disdainful attitude towards Cantona’s art.

“There is a certain dark beauty to it,” I said. “This piece was painted with hope.”

“And hope is signified by this line of donkeys?”

“Have you heard of the Mongolian Pony Express?” I turned away from Hilda, back towards Cantona’s painting.

“Can’t believe I have.”

“When Temujin—”

“Who’s Temujin?”

I pressed on. “When Genghis Khan’s empire began expanding rapidly, he knew that consolidating political power was not as easy as winning wars. So, he created the Pony Express, a network of relay stations to transport supplies and intelligence between encampments and settlements and towns and conquered cities. Ponies and mules were its lifeblood. Mr Nocta saw hope in—”

Hilda interjected, “Who are you to Mr Nocta?” She was wearing a thin-lipped smile.

“I am his friend.”

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Jamal,” I replied, trying to keep my right hand from trembling.

“Does he live with you, Jamal?”

“No,” I said, perhaps too quickly.

Hilda began eyeing me from my hair to my shoes. “You’re local. How did a Singaporean man come to befriend a foreign worker?”

“Why are you suspicious about two human beings becoming friends?”

She answered briskly, “Mr Nocta’s art has attracted the attention of several high-value individuals. Your friend is a brilliant artist, that much is clear.” I wanted to smile. Cantona’s art was good, and Cantona’s art deserved the attention of individuals of values both high and low. But... “For a transaction to occur, I need complete transparency from the artist, or somebody who represents him. Now, I know A. N. Nocta is not his real name but for some reason, when I asked him for it, he told me to come to you. Imagine that.”

I chuckled. "I'm as qualified to represent Mr Nocta as I am qualified to be Scarlett Johansson's body double."

Hilda remained silent. Confusion flashed across her eyes.

"She's an actress—"

"I'm a busy woman, Mr Jamal," she interjected impatiently.

"With a choir of assistants and yet you come to me."

She sighed, and her features softened. "Let me put my cards on the table. I want to help your friend, but for as long as I've known him, he's been very secretive about where he's from, where he lives—even his real name."

"I'm sure he has his reasons."

"Be that as it may, I cannot sell his art in Singapore if I cannot furnish the artist's full details in the bill of sale and the contract for the transfer of ownership."

I attempted a shrug. "Don't sell it in Singapore, then."

"I would very much like to sell it in your country's currency, Mr Jamal." She began pointing her index finger to the floor. "There. One more card on the table."

"Sell it in a country with a stronger currency. The States—"

"—have a President who cut arts patronage and has bred a zeitgeist of suspicion towards foreigners."

"Europe?"

"Jamal, I have buyers *here*. I have people who want to buy Mr Nocta's art in Singaporean dollars. I have an opportunity to establish my name in the art industry *here*." She touched my arm. "*We* have an opportunity to establish Mr Nocta's name in the art industry here. His art recalls the Renaissance—collectors *love* that. We can make him rich."

I glanced around. I couldn't see any of my friends. I tried not to sigh, but she had a point. Cantona could be rich—but it meant he would have to go back to Bangladesh. "Speak to Can—Mr Nocta. Lay your cards out for him. Let him know what's truly at stake. If he agrees to share the information you need, then I'll be his rep."

"Very well." She bestowed upon me a radiant smile, this goddess of *Toil & Canvas*. Then she turned and walked back towards the VIP bar.

My right hand was still quivering, as it always did when I lied. I told two lies to Hilda, and I hoped she didn't spot my tell.

Cantona hates donkeys.



After my father's death, his room was left practically untouched, except by a steadily thickening film of dust. The room was spartan. There was a small metal bed with a thin mattress and pillows that looked like large white bricks, a writing table so tiny it looked like a high stool and a cupboard barely a metre wide.

When Cantona first laid eyes upon the room, he had said, "It's perfect, sir."

"Make yourself at home," I told him, stepping into the room for the first time in weeks. "It's yours for as long as you need."

He stopped by the bed. "I cannot afford to pay you rent."

"I know," I told him. "You don't have to."

"I will never be able to repay you."

"I don't remember asking you to."

He stared at me, studying me, I believed, for signs of sarcasm or sinister intent.

"You can stay as long as you'd like, and you can leave any time you want," I told him. "There's no catch."

A smile danced fleetingly across his face. "Thank you," he said, almost sadly.

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Now, settle in. Let me get you something to eat."

"There's no need—"

"—I insist."

I headed to the kitchen, where Shanti was now preparing a cup of coffee. She avoided my eyes, only a slight tilt of the head betraying her acknowledgement of my presence.

I called out to her from across the kitchen, soft, low, apologetic. She said, "Hey," soft, low and apologetic as well.

Shanti came closer, leaving her cup of dark brown powder balancing precariously on hot water. "I'm sorry about just now. You risked so much taking me in—it's not fair for me to question your decision," she said, so close I could see the creases near her brows that underlined her guilt.

"It's not me you should be apologising to," I said to her, walking over to stir Shanti's cup of coffee-powder-hot-water.

At the old, fraying fridge, I extracted a small can of condensed milk. I poured two teaspoons of the stuff into the cup, and stirred lightly. I then turned back to Shanti, and placed the cup gently in her hands.

"Why did you even bring him here?" she asked, taking a sip of coffee as sweet as night.

"Remember what I said to you on your first night here?"

“I don’t have women’s clothes to lend you?”

“No, not that!”

Shanti laughed, and after she stopped, a look of terrible guilt settled upon her face. “Yeah, I know, I know,” she said. She took another sip of coffee, as dawn’s symphony of cricket songs and fading traffic crept into the kitchen.

“Where are the waffles you made?”

I prepared a tray, a plate and a cup as Shanti retired to her room.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” I said to Cantona several minutes later, setting a tray of waffles, bananas and hot cocoa on my father’s old desk. Something rattled in the tray, and I saw that it was a stray almond.

Cantona was sitting on the bed, fresh from a shower, clad in one of my father’s old T-shirts and linen harem pants. “Ask away, my friend.”

I took the chair by the table. “Why don’t you want to go back to Bangladesh?”

“Let me tell you about life in Bangladesh.”

I leaned forward, always eager to hear stories of exotic locales and colourful cultures. “Tell me.”

“I lived with my uncle in Comilla. He owns a dairy farm. Every night, he makes love to goats.”

“Makes love as in...”

“He—how do you say?—fucks them.”

“Ah.” I sat less upright.

“It was difficult living there with him,” Cantona went on. “Every night, I could hear him sneaking out into the barn and having his way with them. Everyone else in our village knew, and they made jokes behind his back. They called him Jamal the Goat Fucker.”

“Is your uncle’s name Jamal?”

“Yes.”

“Your townspeople are a straightforward folk.”

“They are.”

There was a question weighing heavily on my mind, graver than the grave and more pressing than the press. “Does your uncle only do female goats? Does he do male goats as well?”

“I don’t know! Possibly?”

“Then it’s bigoatry, what he’s doing.”

“Isn’t it pronounced—oh, wait.” And then Cantona laughed and laughed.

I smiled. “You’re the first person I’ve met who personally knows someone who’s actually into bestiality.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Cantona said. “Bangladesh beyond that is beautiful.”

“No doubt,” I replied doubtfully, unable to shake off the image of an older, more wizened version of Cantona caressing a billy goat gruffly as the defining representation of Bangladesh. “Where are your parents in all this?”

His eyes left mine. “They passed some time ago.”

“I’m sorry to bring it up. I didn’t mean to.”

Our eyes met again. “It’s all right,” he said. “It was a long time ago.”

“May I ask how they passed?”

Cantona sighed.

“You don’t have to answer,” I said quickly.

“No, it’s not that,” said Cantona, who suddenly appeared more tired than when I had picked him up after his mad run through the jungle. He took a deep breath, as though steeling himself for a punch. Then he told me, “My father died when I was five. He was on his way to catch the Champions League final between Manchester United and Bayern Munich at Camp Nou.”

“Did he make it to Barcelona?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Did his plane crash?”

“No, he was riding an ass—”

“He was riding an ass?”

“A mule,” clarified Cantona. “He joined a mule caravan that would bring him to Turkey, and from there, he would take a ship across the Mediterranean to Barcelona. He didn’t even make it out of Bangladesh.”

“What happened?”

“The caravan got ambushed by bandits. My father was shot dead in the skirmish.”

“I’m so sorry, Cantona.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago.”

“How did your mother take it?”

“Pretty well. She moved us in with my uncle. For six years, she worked two jobs. She helped at my uncle’s farm and worked at an Internet café in town.”

“What happened after those six years?”

“She died.”

I then hated myself for having begun this conversation.

He was still talking, but now his voice seemed uneven, staggering under the weight of what he was about to tell me. “They were only teenagers—kids from town whose parents we knew. They were bad kids, they’d go to the café

and do terrible things. Eventually, the café owner had enough, and he banned porn sites and deleted all hacking tools, and the kids, they started getting angry. One night, when Mother was working, they came over and they started trashing the place. They had cricket bats and they bashed at computers, at the walls. They broke open the till and stole the cash. Mother tried to call the police, but one of them cut the telephone cables with a knife. He said, ‘You’re Cantona’s mother, aren’t you?’ Mother, she nods proudly but it was a stupid, stupid, stupid thing to do. They laughed and spat at her, called her a disgrace for giving me a foreign name. They then took turns kung-fu-kicking her, like Eric Cantona did to that Crystal Palace fan all those years ago—only they were drunk and worked up, with violence in their souls, thirsting for blood. Mother died on the way to the hospital from head injuries.” Cantona paused. He was not crying. He clenched his jaw. “And where was I? At the dye factory, working overtime so I could buy a fucking paintbrush.”

It was then that it hit me: of course he ran from his employers. Of course he took matters into his own hands. Of course he risked deportation. His life was lacerated with gashes of tragic helplessness. I was glad to give him refuge, but I doubted I could lift the burden upon his soul.

A strangling unease coursed through my body. I was too familiar with this man, whom I had met mere hours ago. I knew too much of his life, too soon. It felt like he had encroached into my personal space, and erected shrines of bleeding effigies upon my being.

I made an excuse to leave. I forgot what the excuse was. I’m pretty sure it was as convincing as it was memorable.

He thanked me for the waffles and wished me good night, a deep sadness in his voice. Those last words slipped into the chilly night, stark against the burning anecdotes of his parents’ deaths. I forgot, as well, how I managed to fall asleep.

I slept for two hours. My bed was at the corner of my room, so there was really only one side of it to wake up on.

The shower was particularly cold that morning, each icy cascade kissing my skin and bones to life.

I headed to the kitchen immediately after my shower, to find Shanti already there, setting three places at the table. Cantona joined us a few minutes later, freshly showered and clean shaven.

He wished us good morning with a rather reserved smile, but it was at that moment that I really registered his visage. His face was gaunt, with sunken cheeks and sallow skin the colour of cold coffee—but it was twisted into life

with large, soulful, intelligent eyes and wide, slightly thick lips. He had the countenance of a curious child stretched into an adult too quickly.

After breakfast, Shanti and I retreated to my room to work on our project. That day, we were meticulously soldering active devices to circuit boards, trying to create a modified portable scanner to read electrical activity within the brain.

Cantona joined us after doing the dishes, and asked, “What is all this?”

“This,” I said to him, patting the bowl-shaped hunk of metal that we were attaching to the circuit boards, “is the wHelm—the ‘w’ stands for wave-receiving. It picks up electrical fluctuations within your neurons.” I paused and sought signs of comprehension in his thin face. He nodded, his eyes not glazed over.

“So, it detects brain waves, reads brain activity?”

I caught Shanti shooting him a quick glance, and I thought I saw the corners of her lips curl slightly. But before I could discern for sure, she had returned to soldering.

I nodded. “The plan is to then correlate specific brain waves to specific musical chords. A brain wave that has a low frequency, for example, will be correlated to a low key.” I added dryly, “Not like the bad guy in *The Avengers*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind,” I said quickly, before continuing, business-like, to hide my embarrassment. “So you wear the scanner, and we’ll attach it to a Pianola—an auto-piano—and, if it works, it will play the music of your mind.”

Cantona appeared impressed. “Does it have a name?”

I nodded and smiled broadly. “This, my friend, is the SoundLoft.”

The day pulsated forth, and by the time the sun began to dip into the horizon, we had crafted most of our home-made brain scanner. At about seven in the evening, Shanti headed into the kitchen to prepare dinner, while Cantona and I cleaned up my room, which now looked like an alien landscape of meandering river-wires and monuments made of motherboard trimmings.

By the time we were done, a fragrant, spicy aroma wafted from the kitchen. Cantona reacted rather peculiarly to it.

“Turmeric and mustard,” he said, sniffing the air. He smiled, and a single tear streaked down his cheek.

In the kitchen, we saw Shanti churning something with a ladle. Inside a wok were tender slices of fish in a brown-yellow gravy.

“What are you cooking?” I asked, watching Cantona wipe away the tear, which, by then, had reached his jaw.

“Sorse ilish,” they replied, not quite in unison.

Shanti did not break her gaze from Cantona. “It’s a Bengali dish,” she said softly. Cantona returned her gaze and smiled broadly, his eyes twinkling with tears. “It reminds me of home.”



I heard Shanti’s voice shout my name, and I spun around.

Shanti was rushing over to me. She grabbed my hand, and pulled, very hard. “We have to go,” she nearly shouted, her eyes wide. “Tights did a *Tights*.”

There was nothing to vociferate other than, “Oh, bloody hell!”

We sprint-weaved our way through the crowd, knocking accidentally into anonymous people who made sounds of shock and annoyance that faded into the meaningless whooshes of the night.

Finally, we reached the other end of the function hall, where a large group had gathered. There, in the middle of it all was Tights, squatting, smiling and waving at the people around him, his pants and briefs around his ankles, a twist of faeces underneath his buttocks.

“Is this performance art?” a blond man in a three-piece suit at the front of the crowd asked. There were murmurs of agreement.

“I believe it is,” replied his equally blonde female companion, herself in a glowing turquoise dress that hugged her svelte figure. “I think the juxtaposition of his clean white shirt and that handsome wool tie against such a profoundly base act perfectly captures the difference between society’s elite and its plebeian manual labourers. It is the difference between foreign talent and expatriates, and foreign workers. It is the upper half of society versus its lower half, the sacred versus the profane, the evolved versus the disinclined, the pursuit of modernity versus the inability to escape our base humanity—all in that one act.”

“Mmm,” replied her companion. “Indeed.”

“Go get Cantona. I’ll handle Tights.” Shanti was frantic, and despite her heels and her figure-hugging dress, she moved unhindered, urgently, resolutely.

I bounded off towards the VIP bar, where Cantona was deep in conversation with Hilda. He was leaning jauntily against the bar, smiling, gesticulating, a well-nursed glass of dark spirit next to him.

Upon seeing me, the big woman said, “Ah, speak of the devil.”

There was no time to respond to her. “Hey!” I said, looking solely at Cantona. “Tights did a *Tights*!”

“Excuse me?” It was Hilda who said it, the indignation percolating from her voice. I did not know if it was because I had ignored her, or because I was interrupting her—or because she wanted to know what “Tights doing a *Tights*” meant.

Cantona said pointedly to me, “I’m in the middle of something important here.”

“Yes, he is,” Hilda said, eyeing me curiously. “And you’re just the person we need to make it happen. Mr Nocta has at least eight interested—”

I cut her off—I had to. “With all due respect, Hilda, this is the wrong time for this conversation.”

“I think this is the perfect time,” she said, her eyes never leaving mine. “You are, after all, at my vernissage. I don’t think Mr Nocta has a better chance than this.”

I looked at Cantona. His eyes were begging me to find another way. In the nanosecond before sympathy overwhelmed me, I grabbed his hand and ran for the entrance. I felt resistance initially, and my grasp broke, but when I turned, Cantona was bounding along behind me. Hilda was growling inchoate words of displeasure.

We saw Shanti and Tights speeding for the entrance as well, the latter’s pants, thankfully, around his waist, his belt dangling limply behind him off a belt loop.

We rushed down the stairs, towards the museum gates, turned right towards the taxi stand, ignored the queue, got into the first taxi and yelled at the cabbie, “Drive, uncle!” The door to the museum swung open, but we didn’t bother to see who it was.

“Drive!”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUFFIAN HAKIM IS a writer of fantastical, whimsical, wacky books. His first was a parody, *Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher*, whose initial chapter was published online in 2013 and became viral. *The Straits Times* called Suffian “undoubtedly one of the most whimsical, creative and unpretentious young voices in Singapore literature”. He was previously a regional content lead at media agency GroupM and had written for television shows such as *Random Island* and *The Noose*, and publications *Esquire* and *August Man*.

Meet Cantona, a promising Bangladeshi artist on the run from a construction company; Tights, an illegal immigrant from China obsessed with *Forrest Gump*; and Shanti, an Indian lab technician hiding from her abusive husband. They all share an HDB flat in Yishun with a Malay-Chinese-Muslim-Jewish Singaporean who is trying his hardest to get his father to return as a ghost—and haunt him.

When a forlorn pontianak begins troubling them instead, the four friends find themselves embroiled in a showdown that may just upend the world, or at least Singapore.



PRAISE FOR SUFFIAN HAKIM

“No one else here is writing quite like this.”

—Ng Yi-Sheng, award-winning poet and author of *Lion City*

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