

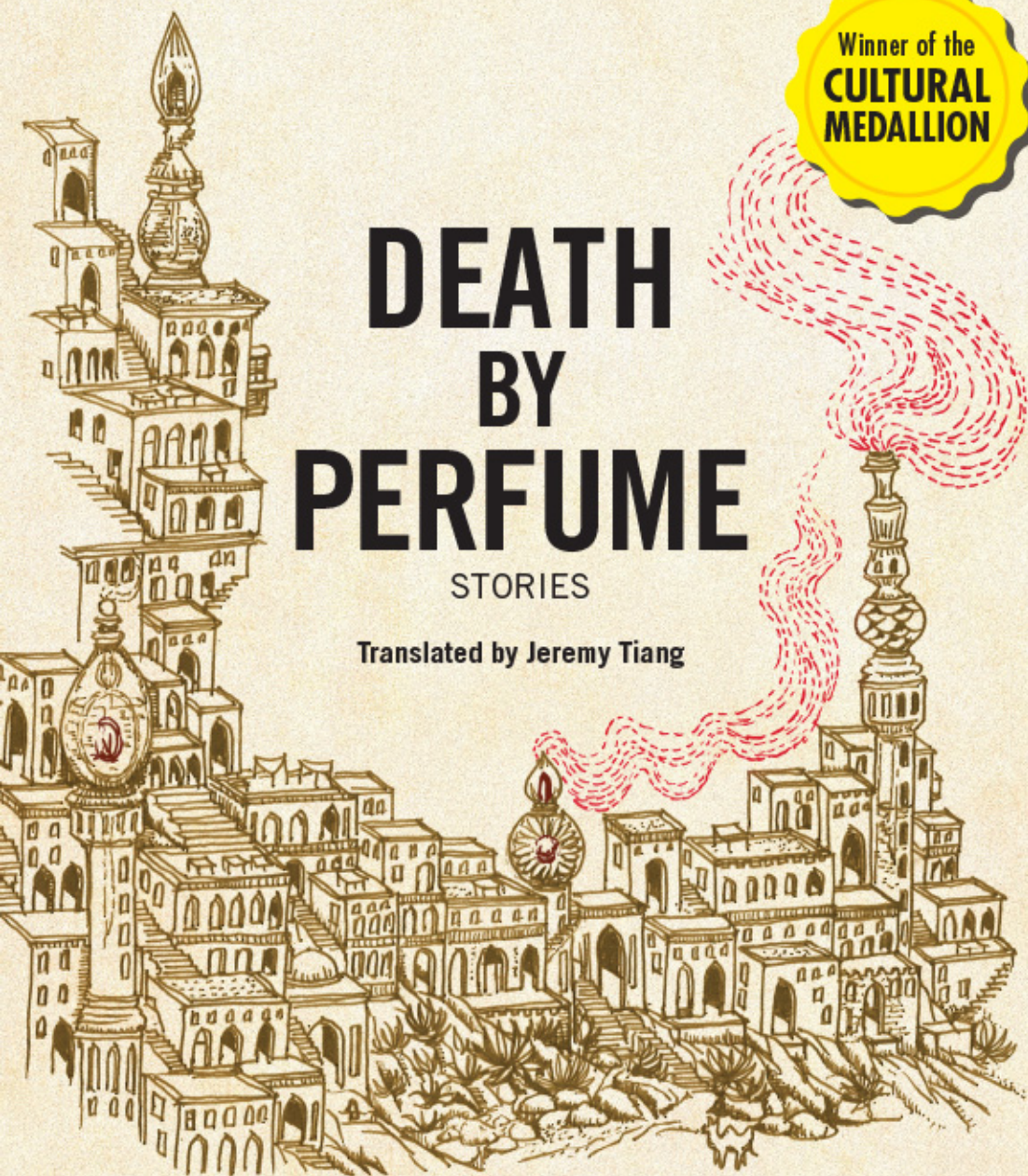
YOU JIN

Winner of the
**CULTURAL
MEDALLION**

DEATH BY PERFUME

STORIES

Translated by Jeremy Tiang



Death by Perfume

YOU JIN

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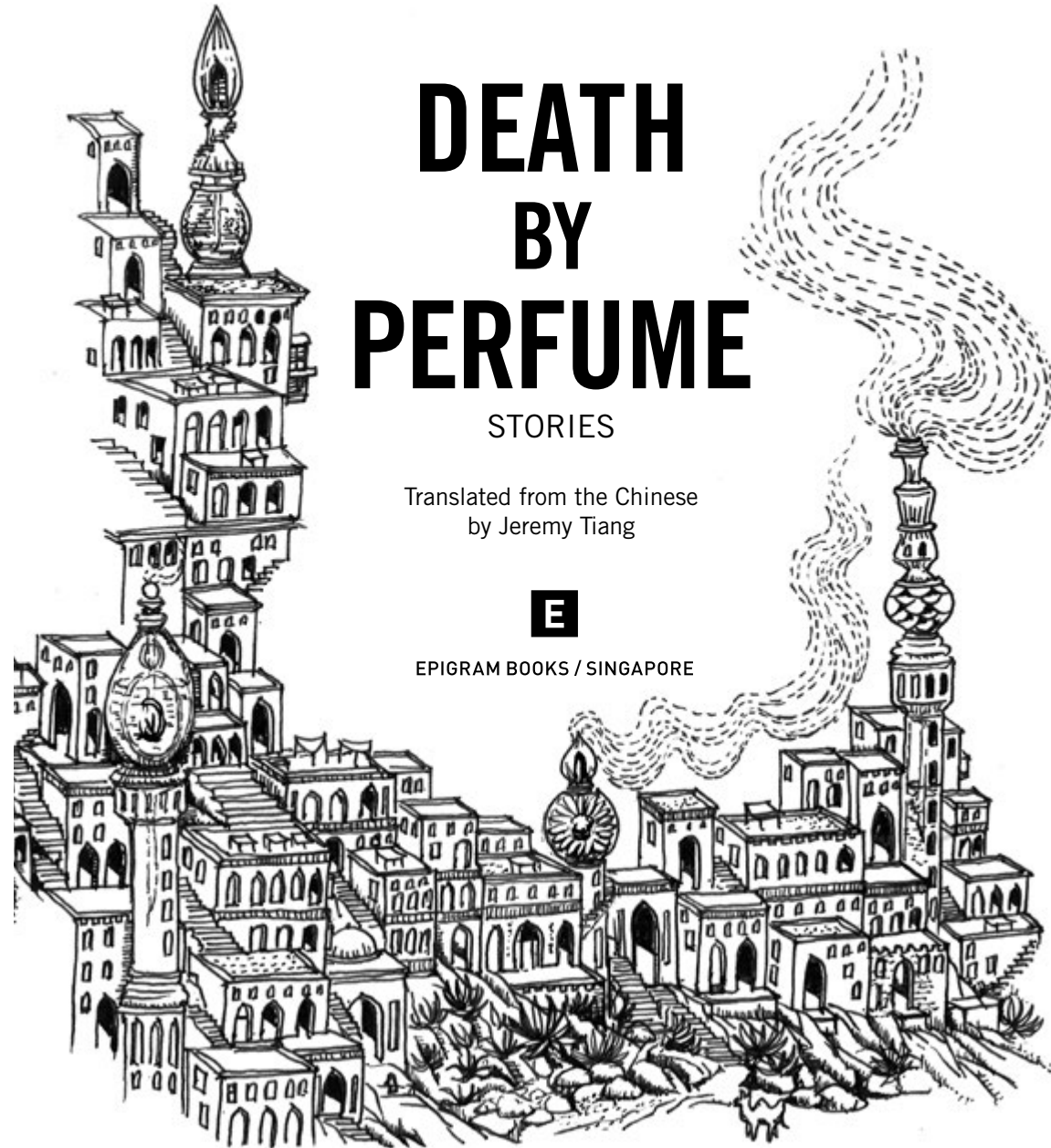
DEATH BY PERFUME

STORIES

Translated from the Chinese
by Jeremy Tiang

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product
of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Translator's Note

YOU JIN NEEDS no introduction to the Singaporean reader of Chinese literature—an amazingly prolific writer, she has published dozens of books and won practically every award on offer in this country. As a schoolboy, I immersed myself in her short stories, a fascinating counterpoint to the viewpoints presented in Singaporean English literature. You Jin has always looked outward, geographically in her many travelogues, but also in a more societal sense, pushing us beyond our comfort zone and making us view familiar landscapes from a fresh perspective.

Death by Perfume is a fictionalised account of You Jin's time in Saudi Arabia when her husband was posted there for work in the late seventies and early eighties. A young mother adrift in a foreign land at a time before the Internet and cheap flights, she was faced with an isolation difficult to imagine today. These stories chart her encounters with other expat wives, exploited labourers, and the strict Islamic laws she had to negotiate. Told in her trademark wry, witty voice, these are tales of dislocation and heartbreak, of clashes and compromise between cultures.

On a personal note: after last year's *Durians Are Not The Only Fruit* by Wong Yoon Wah, it's pleasing to translate another Perak writer. This is a part of Malaysia I feel particularly close to, because

my mother was born there. Like You Jin, she moved to Singapore as a child, and for a time struggled with being a Cantonese speaker in a predominantly Hokkien country. Perhaps this hint of otherness lingers in You Jin's writing still, and accounts for the tantalisingly deadpan quality of her prose, intimate yet detached.

JEREMY TIANG

Death by Perfume

Mongkol Sheds Tears

THE FIRST WEEK after my arrival in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia from Singapore, I was drowsy and lethargic from a combination of the strange surroundings, the cruel heat and jetlag. Lacking the energy to do anything, I allowed the floorboards to grow thick with dust and the laundry basket to overflow with dirty clothes. James said, “Would you like me to find you a helper?”

Always lazy about housework, I nodded eagerly.

At noon the next day, just as I was trying to coax my son Danny to lie down for his nap, someone rapped hard on the front door of our little white house.

Opening the door, I saw a brown-skinned stranger. He held a bucket in one hand and a mop in the other, a cheerful grin on his face.

“What is it?” I looked at him suspiciously.

He bowed a little, and said in fluent English, “Ma’am, I’ve come to help you mop and do laundry.”

“Oh, I see. Please come in.”

As I invited him inside, I grumbled inwardly about James. What was he thinking, sending a great big man like this into our house?

Walking briskly, he headed straight for the bathroom, but passing by Danny’s room—Danny was still awake, sitting up in bed—he stopped and pulled a few faces, provoking the boy into a

fit of childish laughter that echoed through the empty house, driving away some of the loneliness.

Well, he seemed interesting. Following behind him, I asked, “What’s your name?”

“Mongkol,” he answered, sticking the bucket underneath the tap, standing quietly by as it filled.

“Are you Thai?” I asked.

“Correct!” he beamed at me, revealing yellow tobacco-stained teeth.

Seeing his face properly, I realised how unusual his features were—not in the sense of being attractive, but rather comical. He had the sort of appearance that provokes instant laughter, a clown’s face. But Mongkol was not a clown, he just made you want to laugh with joy when you saw him, all thanks to that face with its outlandish proportions and eyes that smiled whether open or shut.

After filling his pail, he carried it to the living room and, clutching his mop, began work with a gait resembling a dance, twisting and turning left and right, clearing the accumulated grime off our floorboards. This was a man who knew how to find happiness in labour. I suppressed the laughter that threatened to burst from me, and went quickly into the kitchen to make coffee.

When the floor was done, Mongkol came into the kitchen with a load of dirty clothes, nimbly tipping them into the washing machine. He swiftly turned on the water, added detergent, and set the timer. Then he stood, waiting.

I poured him a cup of coffee. He received it with a startled expression, thanking me repeatedly.

“Mongkol, how long have you been here?” I asked casually.

“Not long, not long. Just eight months.”

“Are you used to life in this country?”

“More or less!” He shrugged, turning his gaze in the direction of Danny’s room and, with a trace of envy in his voice, continued, “Ma’am, you have your child with you, your days will pass more easily. I’m here all by myself, with my four children still in Bangkok. Sometimes I feel really bored and lonely.”

“You have four children?” I couldn’t help exclaiming, studying his boyish face.

“I do. People in Thailand marry young.”

“So—have you visited them since coming here?”

“No. The company’s rules are strict. Workers can only go home once a year.”

“Only four more months to go then,” I said.

“Living here, a day feels like a year.” His expression suddenly grew blank. Just then, Danny wandered into the kitchen, and Mongkol’s lively eyes grew cheerful again. He wiped his hands on his trousers and scooped up fearless Danny, looking at me pleadingly. “Ma’am, may I bring him outside to play?”

I nodded and he rushed joyously out the door. A moment later, I heard Danny giggling so happily that he seemed to contain all the laughter in the world. After a week in Jeddah, with only the company of his lethargic mother, it seemed he hadn’t laughed with such abandon in a long time. Looking out the window, I saw Mongkol squatting on the ground, he and Danny playing catch with pebbles.

When James came home that evening, I told him all about our day. He said Mongkol used to be a waiter in a Bangkok restaurant, and after interacting with many tourists, spoke better English than the average Thai. He now handled odd jobs in the company’s cafeteria, and as the kitchen didn’t have much for him to do in the afternoons, James had asked him to come over and help with our

housework. Mongkol got on well with everyone, and carried out his tasks without complaint. Everyone in the cafeteria liked him.

I couldn't stop smiling at the thought that Danny would have a playmate from now on.

• • •

Mongkol came to do the housework three times a week, and each time his bag would be filled with all kinds of snacks, the sort little children never grow tired of eating. When his work was done, he'd pull out sweets to share with Danny as they played.

On one occasion, he took Danny to the field behind our house to play on his bicycle. I happened to be in the back room with a book. The weather was hot and humid, and our air-con was broken. Beads of sweat trickled down my forehead. My mood, like the sticky perspiration, was uncomfortable. As I continued my desultory reading, I overheard Mongkol's conversation with Danny through the back window.

"Danny, what do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked in all seriousness.

This is a question all mothers worry about, and even though Danny was just two years old, I couldn't help the sensation, as the proverb has it, of longing for my son to become a dragon. Pricking up my ears, I strained to catch Danny's answer.

He stated clearly, "I want to be a bus driver."

I couldn't help laughing at that. So the little one had no great ambitions! But Mongkol replied, "That's good! One person driving so many people around." Then, as if the words were bursting out of him: "Danny, do you know what my son wants to do?"

Danny made no reply, but that didn't deter Mongkol from

continuing, "He wants to be a doctor! Do you know what a doctor is?"

Danny continued to ignore him. All I heard through the window was the monotonous squeak of the bicycle. I couldn't resist opening the door and abruptly taking up the conversation. "Mongkol, how old is your child?"

His sun-darkened face went suddenly red, and he stammered, "The oldest one, he's in the final year of secondary school."

"It's good that he wants to be a doctor. You should encourage him."

"Yes, you're right," he said awkwardly. The sun really was too fierce for Danny to be out, and I called him back into the house. Mongkol took the opportunity to say goodbye.

• • •

Later on, after a few more conversations with Mongkol, I began to understand him better.

Those who come to Saudi Arabia for work are like books full of fascinating stories—but you have to flip through them with curiosity and patience to learn their contents, which you'd never be able to guess from their covers.

Although comical-looking and always smiling, Mongkol carried a heavy family burden. He had married early, at the age of eighteen, his new wife a year younger than him. Children arrived one after another almost immediately. He only had primary school education, and his wife hadn't stepped through the schoolhouse door even once in her life. Of course, this made it hard for them to find work. He got a job at a restaurant, but the wages were so low his wife had to supplement their income by sewing handicrafts day and night. The family was surviving, but only just keeping their heads

above water. Coming to Saudi Arabia for work, although it meant leaving his wife and children, was at least an escape route, a path full of hope. His present job fetched four or five times the salary he'd earned in Bangkok, not only improving the family's standard of living, but turning his hope of sending his oldest son to university into a possibility, rather than a madman's dream. Each time Mongkol mentioned this child, his voice seemed soaked in honey, full of sweetness: "He loves to study, and dreams day and night of becoming a doctor."

"That's great," I teased him. "Then you'll be able to say you're a doctor's father."

He scratched his head, embarrassed, but still burst into hearty laughter.

The extreme loneliness and isolation I'd felt when I first arrived in Saudi Arabia was slowly replaced with fresh curiosity. As soon as I had the chance and a bit of free time, I grabbed Danny and followed James through the streets, looking around. This filled the time well.

One day, I went along to the fish market with our cook, spending the whole morning jostling through the crowds there. When I got home, Mongkol's lean figure was already standing in our doorway. Danny ran to him excitedly, at which his mouth split open into a grin like sunbeams spreading over his face.

"Mongkol, I'm sorry," I said as I scabbled for the door keys. "I forgot to tell you to come a little later today."

"It doesn't matter," he said, his eyes, mouth and voice full of smiles. "I came to say goodbye—tomorrow I'm heading back to Bangkok, and I won't be back for two weeks."

"Oh? Have you already worked a whole year here?" I got the door open, thinking about him finally seeing the wife and children he'd last set eyes on twelve months ago. It brightened my mood too.

"What do you like to eat? I'll bring some back."

"No need, the thing I like can't be brought onto airplanes," I said, half-jokingly.

"What is it?"

"Durians!"

He scratched his head, as was his habit, and laughed.

After Mongkol left, I finally got a sense of how important he'd become to me. Hanging clothes out to dry in temperatures of more than forty degrees was a particular type of agony, like being burnt alive. And so, after two weeks, when Mongkol's rough knocking sounded on the front door again, my heart felt sheer delight, as if setting down a weighty burden.

As soon as he entered, he handed me a heavy plastic bag. I opened it to see six thick, fragrant brown slabs.

"You can't take durians on the plane, but you can take durian cake," he chuckled. "My wife made this—please try some."

I was moved—not just by the food, but by such good intentions, so rarely encountered.

When I asked how it felt to go home, he was unable to conceal his happiness. After a year, his four children had grown up a lot, and were much more responsible. He only felt guilty about his wife, whom he'd left alone at home, taking care of the children and bearing all the hardship herself. And if she felt aggrieved, all she could do was swallow it.

The hardship would come to an end, I reassured him. When he'd earned enough money, couldn't the two of them be together again?

When he returned a couple of days later, he brought along a family snapshot.

His wife was thin and dried-out, wearing a loose dress, looking

as if a strong wind might blow her away. A slight smile floated atop her sharp features, speaking of contentment and happiness. Her face was exhausted, looking older than her age, but that calm smile made her appear virtuous, tender. Beside her were several children, all lively and innocent, utterly adorable, particularly the oldest son, a clear-featured boy with a noble bearing, completely unlike his comical father and wizened mother. If one could judge a person by his appearance, then this one would be marked out for success.

When I shared this observation with Mongkol, he smiled so broadly he couldn't close his mouth.

• • •

I'd thought there'd be no winter in the desert, but winter arrived anyway—silently, suddenly. Early winter was mild and comfortable, a basin of cool water splashing over us, welcome and refreshing after so many months in what felt like the centre of a fireball. But very soon after this, the harsh weather arrived. There was no frost or snow, but it was as cold as if they were present, so cold our bodies stiffened and our fingers hurt.

Danny and I didn't leave the house all that season. Lonely and missing his playmate, Danny looked forward to each of Mongkol's visits with more eagerness than before.

Mongkol continued to arrive three times a week, but I noticed that for some reason, he'd become dispirited since the beginning of winter. His thin eyes grew droopy, as if he hadn't slept enough. I guessed that those eyebags must be full of melancholy—was he homesick, did he miss his family? I'd been through many such nights myself, staying awake and allowing tears to rub my eyes bloodshot.

With his bad mood, Mongkol couldn't summon the energy to

play with Danny, lacking the heart even to clean the floor properly. Every time he left, I'd find some areas still wet from mopping, while others were untouched and dusty. Reminding myself we were all adrift in a strange country, I initially forgave his sloppiness, but he kept making the same mistakes and I was forced to speak to him. Yet each time I brought up the subject, he apologised repeatedly, with such sincerity and fear it became harder to scold him the next time.

The strangest thing was, even in the midst of his depression, Mongkol had bouts of euphoria he could not contain, humming gentle Thai melodies to himself as he hung out the laundry, thrusting an endless supply of candy and chocolate at Danny.

After dinner one day, chatting with James in the living room, I blurted out my concerns about Mongkol's recent mood swings.

James slowly lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and said expressionlessly, "The workers have been gambling recently. He's probably doing it too."

"Gambling?" I was startled. "Since when have there been casinos in Jeddah?"

Jeddah, a strict theocracy, lacked even cinemas—never mind a casino.

"Since when do you need a casino to gamble?" James flicked his cigarette ash with a tap of his index finger. "The workers' hostel is the perfect gambling den!"

He told me illicit gambling was one of the company's biggest headaches. In summer, the hot weather discouraged the employees from lurking in the hostel; instead, they flocked to the city to look around. But this cruel winter kept them indoors, and crammed in their crowded quarters, they sought an escape from the boredom and misery of confinement by turning their living space into a makeshift casino.

"If they could just treat it as a way to pass the time, it wouldn't

be a problem,” continued James slowly. “But the difficulty is they’ll sometimes bet their entire month’s salary, with up to a thousand dollars riding on the turn of a card. And afterwards, neither party does any work—the winner is too distracted, and the loser too depressed.”

After a pause, he went on, “The worst thing is, the workers who gamble away their entire wages have no money to send home, so they lie to their family that the company is withholding their pay. Recently, we’ve been getting angry letters from relatives about this!”

“Why doesn’t the company try to stop them gambling?”

“We send someone to look around the hostel every night, but that isn’t very effective. As soon as the inspection is over, they just start gambling again.”

The next day, as he cleaned, I ventured to ask, “Mongkol, I’ve heard that gambling is quite popular in the workers’ hostel these days.”

He eyed me warily. “It’s just for fun.”

“Playing cards to pass the time is harmless, but imagine putting an entire month’s hard-earned wages on the table—how foolish that would be!” I kept my eyes on him, refusing to let him off the hook.

He twisted the mop in his hands, his face completely blank. Observing how coldly he’d reacted, I swallowed the next few words I’d intended to say.

Mongkol avoided me over the next few days, probably afraid I’d interrogate him more about gambling. He arrived in a hurry, performed his duties in a slipshod manner, then left as soon as he could. It was only one afternoon, having hit rock bottom, that he finally revealed what was bothering him.

On that day, he came to our little white house as usual, filled a bucket and walked into the living room. Like always, I sat in the kitchen drinking coffee. Normally, just as I was finishing my first

cup, Mongkol would come through with the dirty laundry, having done the floors. But strangely, on this day I got through two cups of coffee without hearing any movement from the other room. I stuck my head in to investigate, and got a fright to see Mongkol squatting in the centre of the living room, his arms hanging loosely, his eyes blank, as if he didn’t know where he was. I walked over and said, “Mongkol, what’s wrong?”

Even my gentle voice caused him to jump violently. He stood up, his entire face flushed red.

“Mongkol, if you’re not feeling well, you can go back and rest, don’t worry about the remaining chores.”

“I—no, it’s nothing.”

“Or come and have a cup of coffee first. Would you like that?”

He hesitated for a long while before nodding slowly.

In the kitchen, he clutched his steaming mug, his listless gaze directed at the floor. Suddenly, without preamble, he uttered, “Ma’am, you were right.”

“Yes?”

“I shouldn’t have gambled away my hard-earned money.”

His face was pinched with tension. I asked clumsily, “Did you—lose a lot?”

“Yes, a lot.” His expression turned bitter. “I haven’t sent any money home for a month now.”

“What!” I shouted, and immediately saw before my eyes his son’s clean-cut face, his dreams of becoming a doctor. “Mongkol—”

“Ma’am,” he waved to interrupt me. “I used to look at other people gambling and think how useless they were, how backward. And now I’ve become the most useless, backward one of all!”

“Don’t say that, Mongkol.” I knew gambling was as addictive

as opium, impossible to quit, but still I said, “If you just stop now, won’t everything be okay again?”

“I still owe my workmates a lot of money. I just need to win enough to clear my debts, and then I’ll stop,” he said heavily.

But gamblers lose nine times out of ten; wagering even more money to clear gambling debts—this was the talk of a madman.

“Mongkol, please don’t gamble anymore,” I urged him. “What if you got an advance on next month’s salary? I’ll ask Mr Lim for you, if you like.”

“No! No!” He shook his head stubbornly. “Don’t trouble yourself. I can sort out my own difficulties.”

That night, I spoke to James about Mongkol again. He said Mongkol’s attitude and commitment were worsening at work, and he was neglecting many of his duties, sometimes even dozing off during office hours.

“The kitchen supervisor has warned him several times. If he doesn’t buck up, the company may cut his wages as punishment.”

That such a lively, hard-working person could be so transformed by gambling—I shook my head and sighed.

• • •

One evening two weeks later, the three of us were crouched on the floor, putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Suddenly, there was an urgent knocking on the door. This sound, echoing through the deep silence of the desert night, sent a shiver through each of us.

Outside the door was a high-ranking official from the company. Still panting, he gasped, “Workers fighting at the hostel. Please come and take a look.”

James swiftly tugged on his jacket and rushed out. I tried to silence

my thumping heart, and sat with Danny beneath the yellow lamp, continuing to fit jagged pieces of jigsaw together. Danny pouted when he noticed how distracted I was, jamming pieces in where they didn’t belong, and yelled, “Mama, you’re doing this all wrong, I don’t want to play with you anymore!”

I took the opportunity to dispatch him quickly to bed.

It was a dark, windless night, but still freezing cold. I sat alone on the stone steps outside the house, looking at the black silhouettes of mountains in the distance, nursing anxiety in my heart.

James finally came back close to midnight, by which time the whole desert was so still you could hear the very sound of loneliness, the kind of solitude that presses on your heart and creates a niggling pain.

“What happened?” I asked urgently.

“It’s fixed.” James, looking utterly exhausted, was stingy with his words.

“Fixed how?” I persisted.

“Fired Mongkol.”

“What!” I clutched at his arm, crying out, “Why? Why fire him?”

“Fighting. He almost gouged out another Thai worker’s eye.” Rage trembled beneath the surface of his voice.

“He—how could he do that?” I said, disbelieving.

“Gambling, of course!” James tumbled onto the sofa and sighed, “He said the other Thai was a cheat, fixing the cards to steal his money.”

You can’t force a cow to drink if it won’t lower his head. Gamblers are like fish willingly impaling themselves on the fisherman’s hook; Mongkol had swallowed the bait, and was now complaining it was poisoned!

“He was like a madman. The other guy was almost beaten to death, poor thing.”

“Didn’t anyone try to stop them?”

“Of course! But he was in such a frenzy, even several big guys couldn’t pull him off.”

“And—what about the injured worker?”

“He’s been sent to hospital. His left eye isn’t looking good. They might not be able to save it.”

“Blinded!” A great sadness rolled over me. “Was he really a cheat?”

“Who knows?” answered James impatiently. “Mongkol said so, but couldn’t prove it. And even if he really was cheating at cards, that wasn’t a reason to attack him so viciously.”

I nodded in agreement. The first person to use violence, however justified he may feel, is still the one at fault.

“I’ve booked his plane ticket. First thing tomorrow morning, he’ll be leaving for Bangkok,” said James, his face rigid. “When I spoke with him alone, he kept saying he was sorry, asking for another chance. He couldn’t stop crying. But there’s no way to cover this up—it’s far too serious. We have to follow the rules.”

Mongkol, poor Mongkol, shedding tears.

Thinking of his smiling, comical face, and his dreams of sending his son to university, I could only lower my head in silence.

And the night continued, cold and dark, the wind frozen beyond the mountains.


The Buffalo and the Peacock

BY THE TIME we arrived at Steven’s place, it was after eight. The wind was high that night, blowing sand all over my face and hair. I panted my way up three flights of stairs, my head grey-white from grit. In truth, around six that evening, I’d looked at the rising sandstorm and wished I could find an excuse not to go—but it would have been terribly rude to break an appointment at the last minute. Steven received guests so seldom, it’d be offensive not to turn up; I had no choice but to suffer through the journey!

The maid opened the door to us, revealing a houseful of people, chatter and perfume all around. As I entered, my eyes immediately landed on Steven’s wife Gloria. She was wearing a black evening gown in velvet, its V-neck showing off her collarbones, silver threads glittering around the neckline and hem—a sexy, eye-catching outfit. Her make-up, like her voice, was overstated: silver eyeshadow, orange-red lipstick, magnificently seductive. She was clutching a glass of wine, chatting merrily with her guests, crystal earrings swaying flirtatiously with each toss of her head.

“Hey, Jimmy!”

It was Steven calling to us. He stood by the table, mixing drinks, his normally dour face now bursting with a broad smile. I felt this grin was pasted on for the benefit of his wife, and normally remained



In the late 1970s, a young Singaporean writer arrives in Jeddah with an infant son. She encounters a strange and often hostile environment with curiosity, empathy and good humour. In this collection of linked stories, the narrator confronts, among others, a bored expat wife with dangerously extravagant tastes, a divorced engineer with the face of a camel, and a desperate security guard who finds solace in downing bottles of perfume. Beguiling, plaintive and profoundly insightful, You Jin's fiction is a vivid evocation of Saudi society.

You Jin has published more than 150 books in Chinese in Singapore, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Malaysia. These include novels, short story collections, travelogues and essays. She is the first recipient of both the Singapore Chinese Literary Award and the Montblanc-NUS Centre for the Arts Literary Award. She received the Zhong Shan Literary Award in 2010 and Singapore's Cultural Medallion in 2009.

Jeremy Tiang won the Golden Point Award in 2009, and was shortlisted for the Bridport and Iowa Review Prizes. In 2011, he represented Singapore at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. He has translated six books from the Chinese, including *Durians Are Not the Only Fruit* by Wong Yoon Wah, and was awarded a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant in 2013.



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