

PASSAGES

Stories of Unspoken Journeys

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Foreword

Passages is a special project of the Singapore Writers Festival, one close to my heart. Its genesis three years ago was simple enough. We were discussing how to take Singapore writers to the larger community in a meaningful way and, in the process, create a new series of stories about the different people in our community – especially those who had taken different paths in their life journey or were considered less privileged Singaporeans.

We talked – a little grandly perhaps – about enriching the canon of Singaporean literature and, at the same time, showing how some fellow citizens responded to and rose above difficult circumstances. These could be stories of hope and resilience, we thought, a balm to read in stressful times.

We also wanted to support more translation and build more bridges to our creative writings in Chinese, Malay and Tamil languages. How could we say we were multilingual or multicultural when our cross-cultural understanding often seems so impoverished or superficial?

Over the three years, the coordinator of the project, the accomplished poet Yong Shu Hoong, arranged for writers to

meet with residents at an old age home and a hospice, low-income clients of VWOs, and former and current prisoners. His affable and mindful approach helped us maintain the important balance between creative licence, authenticity and the needs of the various partners we were working with.

As the project benefitted from the openness and goodwill of the interviewees, we also hoped they connected to the purpose of the creative project, perhaps even finding some relief in sharing their stories.

This book, *Passages: Stories of Unspoken Journeys*, is dedicated to them.

Our profound gratitude to the interviewees for speaking to our writers, and reminding us that one can remain forward-looking when the chips are down and even at the debilitating end of a life. We hope the short stories here do your life stories justice, even though they are not intended to be biographical.

To our Singapore writers, thank you for creating your stories, some humorous, some poignant, but all equally affecting. I hope you enjoyed the creative process, that you gleaned insights from the different people you interacted with.

More importantly, we need to place on record our gratitude to our partners in this project: HCA Hospice Care, Sunshine Welfare Action Mission (SWAMI) Home, Beyond Social Services, Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres, The Little Arts Academy, Singapore After-Care Association (SACA) and the Singapore Prison Service. All of them gave

our writers a window into the lives of Singaporeans who have trod different paths.

At the end of the day, even for the most conscientious of us, life can deal a bad hand or lob any number of unexpected challenges. What must matter more, as many of the stories in this book illustrate, is the quiet dignity of living worthwhile lives, and that must trump any superficial dichotomies of privileged versus under-privileged, or us versus them.

Paul Tan

Festival Director, Singapore Writers Festival

Seascrapers

By Stephanie Ye

Today

She wakes at dawn and watches his face. She imagines the dreams rippling beneath the calm, stark planes. Dreams are what help perpetuate memory, she remembers, or misremembers, reading once, subsurface currents that weave through and animate the detritus floating in the ocean of the mind.

But what about someone who is losing his memories? What has happened to his dreams? She imagines him swimming in a boundless ocean, but as he raises and lowers his arms she sees that they are made of sand. They unglue and crumble and fall into the silent waters.

Two months ago

It was his girlfriend who told her. She'd already heard he was sick, of course, but she didn't know how badly. They weren't hostile towards each other, but they hadn't seen the point of keeping in touch once the divorce papers had come through.

He had included her in an email he'd sent out to friends a year ago, that he'd been diagnosed with brain cancer, but that he was undergoing treatment and that the prognosis was hopeful. She had written a sympathetic letter back, saying to let her know if she could help in any way, but he hadn't replied. She was shocked and concerned, of course, but she also felt it was no longer her place to pry. She'd heard no more from him, or about him, until his girlfriend emailed her out of the blue and asked if they could meet. It's a little bit urgent, she wrote, and hard to put in writing. It's better if I say it to you in person.

She said it over an hour at a cafe near neither of their workplaces, as they clutched cardboard coffee cups and a quiche cooled to a waxen sheen on its plate. Every day he wakes up having forgotten more of his life, the girlfriend explained. At first, he would ask when they were going to some event or running some errand, when they had already done it yesterday, a few days ago, last week. Then he kept reading the same few chapters of a book; commenting on how the renovation of the house across the road had finished so quickly; asking why the radio was playing Christmas carols in May.

Five months ago, he forgot he had cancer, and had to be told every morning that he didn't have to go to work. Three months ago, he forgot she was his girlfriend, was puzzled why a mere acquaintance was tasked with taking care of him. Two months ago, he forgot her completely.

He started asking for you about a month ago, the girlfriend said. At first, he didn't react much whenever I told him about the divorce, he just seemed to accept it. But lately,

he's started becoming increasingly upset. He even cried, as if I'd told him you'd died. But the last straw was the day I emailed you. He'd flown into an absolute rage, his hands were shaking and he was throwing things about. Now, I just tell him you've had to go out of town for work. That's the one good thing about his condition – if you hurt him, he'll forget it soon enough, you return to a blank slate.

The girlfriend took a deep breath. I think it would be better if he starts staying with you, she said quickly. He's obviously at some point in his memories where you're together, he misses you and it would be better for him if he were with you. If it's convenient, of course.

It's not a matter of convenience, she thought, but of conscience. How much lying would she have to do? Would she have to pretend to this sick man that they were still married, still sharing a commitment, a life?

She didn't say any of this to the girlfriend, only: But how long till he forgets me too?

I don't know. He seems to be forgetting at an exponential rate. But he's also getting physically worse. He'll become more and more uncoordinated and weak and then... the doctors give him only a year or so. For what it's worth.

She wondered what *it*, whose *worth*, the girlfriend was referring to. How do you feel about this, she asked instead. It can't be easy for you.

Yes it's not, the girlfriend said abruptly, harshly, before biting her lip. There were suddenly tears in her eyes. Sorry,

she said. I care about him, a lot. But I really think it would be better at this point if he's with you. She impatiently wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. Frankly, it would be better for me, too. Can you imagine being in love with someone who doesn't remember you and never will?

Today

His eyelids are flickering; he sighs; he turns from the weak light filtering in through the curtains. His fingers brush her stomach. Muscle memory, she thinks. Intellectually, emotionally, she is worlds away from what once was; yet his physical presence next to her, the rhythm of his breathing, the scent of his hair and skin, all these are familiar and comfortable. His clothes hanging next to hers in the wardrobe, his toothbrush in the bathroom. Even the way he always leaves the toilet seat up. What fools humans are, she thinks, to believe that myth of the immutable soul, when so much of one's sense of self is determined by one's corporeal circumstances: gender, skin colour, geographic location. Genetics, beauty. Wealth and health. The proportions of one's face, the sturdiness of one's limbs. When a fiery spirit can be extinguished by the breaking of the body; when identity can be destroyed with the mutation of a few cells in that grey hunk of flesh called the brain.

Yesterday

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. His smile made his cheeks and chin for a moment seem soft and guileless – a strange, almost goofy contrast to his long face and gaunt

features. He stretched, and the stretch became an embrace. She rested her head on his warm chest and listened as his heart skipped a beat.

She left him to wash up and get dressed and went to prepare their breakfast, making his coffee on the machine fetched from his place when he moved in. She doesn't drink the stuff herself. She laid out his pills too – painkillers, not treatments; there was no pretence at this point that he would ever be cured. Through the kitchen doorway she could see the worktable where she had placed all the documents and X-rays from the doctor, the first things he'd see upon exiting the bedroom. She had thought at first that maybe they'd be too much for him to take in every morning, but he's always been comfortable with facts and figures, the raw data.

She could see him now in profile, reading attentively like the good student he always was, one elbow propped on the table, his forehead resting on his palm as he leaned over the papers. She had to remind herself that for him this was always the first time, the discovery. Sometimes, he would scribble things in a spiral journal. She'd once taken a peek inside; it wasn't a personal diary but a collection of notes, summarising the cancer and what it was doing to him. He also had a section where he'd written down his bank PINs, insurance numbers, email passwords. Orderly and precise, planning for the end.

Today

He opens his eyes and looks up at her. His pupils constrict swiftly as he scrambles to sit up – or is it to back away? She hears herself say his name. He stops moving, but every muscle in his face, his arms, is tense. She says, You’ve been sick. You can’t remember. Everything’s all right. She realises she’s babbling, so she tells herself to shut up. His lost expression is child-like in its nakedness, and with an impulse of tenderness she reaches out to brush the hair off his forehead; but he flinches and she puts her hand down without touching him.

Yesterday

Some days were busy with errands: groceries, taking him to the barber’s, the doctor’s. Or, if he felt up to it, they would go out on the town, to a museum or the park or to the shops, even to concerts a few times. She handled the schedules and the bills. They sometimes did the same thing days in a row if she felt like it, since of course he never remembered what they had already done. These days were pleasant: she had forgotten how similar their aesthetic sensibilities were. Once, they attended all three nights of an all-Mozart programme; and every night during the second movement of the clarinet concerto, at the moment when the orchestra first took up the solo clarinet’s theme like the tips of waves catching upon a single sunbeam, he reached over and placed his hand on hers.

Other days they stayed home, drew the curtains, ordered delivery. She had stacked photo albums on the coffee table, old snapshots of themselves that she’d kept out of inertia

rather than sentiment. She was on long leave from work, and without the weekly schedule she felt dislocated in time. His condition didn't help. He was in his early twenties that day, shy and earnest. He kept apologising – rather irritatingly, given the numerous apologies they had tossed at each other towards the end of their marriage, the kind that's easy to make when you've stopped actually caring how the other person feels. That old cliché of how the opposite of love isn't hate but indifference; amicable divorces are papered with such light-hearted professions of regret.

This must be so awful for you, he said now. I wish I could remember our wedding... I hope we've been happy... Looking at the flush in his haggard cheeks, she didn't have the heart to tell him, no, we didn't make it. Our love didn't last. Too bad, this is all a lie! Instead, she let him take her in his arms and she told him again about the night he proposed, on a beach under the stars. It wasn't a nice beach – it was a city beach, smoky from the barbecue pits being manned by pot-bellied middle-aged men, as their wives sipped spiked lemonade and occasionally shouted at the children who wriggled underfoot, engaged in their own complex negotiations. As for the stars, those ancient fires were obscured by cloud cover and the reflection of the city lights. Only the sea looked anywhere near romantic, swollen at high tide, the waves rippling like the scales of an elusive creature. On the horizon was a string of lights, ships lining up to enter the port some ways down. Solid yet shimmering, they looked from this distance like a fantastic city of their own. He called them seascrapers as they sat on a blanket, their shoes slumped on the sand like toppled Easter Island

statues. She sat behind him and rested her cheek on his back. The waters surged upwards, shuddering in their effort to obey the invisible moon; when he turned around and asked her to be his wife, what she felt most of all was a sense of inevitability.

Today

She watches him from the kitchen as he sits at the table studying an X-ray. The tumours aren't round, like how she'd always pictured tumours to be, but tree-shaped: branches creeping into the cracks and crevices of the brain, vines clenching themselves round a ruin. She makes the coffee, prepares the pills, lingering a little longer than she needs to on each step. It's a simple routine but it feels contextless today, like a religious ritual whose origins have been erased by time.

She starts as she hears him call her name in a low voice. He's standing at the kitchen doorway, one thin hand on the doorframe, as if waiting to be invited in. He must have prepared for the eventuality and studiously written her name down in his journal. She wonders if he's going to start apologising again, but instead he says, Can I ask you a question?

When she doesn't say no, he continues, Is today the first day?

First day?

First day that I've... forgotten you.

She nods, suddenly afraid of where this is going. I see, he says. He purses his lips. Thank you. He adds, I'm sorry. She consciously holds her breathing steady as he slowly walks

towards her. She supposes that if she were still in love with him, she would start crying when he draws her into his arms. Instead, she counts to ten, then asks him if he wants his coffee.

Forty-seven days ago

It was on one of their stay-in days that he'd laid out his plan. He was in his mid-thirties that day, sarcastic and a bit brutal. It's for your own good, he said. Do you still want to be taking care of me when I'm drooling on my pillow and pooping in my bed? By that point, I doubt I'll remember your name to thank you.

She answered coolly, trying to match his tone: And how do you propose to do it? Pills? Slitting your wrists? Hanging? Jumping from a window? Driving off a cliff? It would be great if it were a method where I didn't have to clean up afterwards.

Drowning, he said. It's easy to make it look like an accident. And I've heard it's actually very peaceful, and quiet. There's none of that waving your arms and shouting business, because at that point your body's simply incapable of any voluntary action. Water replaces air; one element replaces another.

And when would you like to do this?

Let's go with the day I forget you, he said evenly, and started writing in his journal.

Today

He tells her he wants to go to the beach that evening. She asks, not very hopefully, if he's sure. I'm quite sure, he replies. There's a mulishness in his expression that she hasn't seen for a long time; she recognises it from when he took business calls at home, wearing down the other party until he got what he wanted.

The sky is edged pink and orange over the rooftops as they set off. She drives. She hasn't been to this beach in ages, but she finds she knows the way, doesn't get any of the turn-offs wrong. He sits beside her gazing out the window; the shadows sliding across his wan face from passing headlights look like cracks, ghostly renderings of the growth beneath his skull.

The city beach, as it turns out, has become even tawdrier in the intervening years. A small funfair has sprouted like an alien colony on a nearby field, lights and colours whirling ceaselessly according to some impenetrable purpose. The air smells of meat and melted sugar. Stumbling about are hysterical groups of teenagers and strained families, dazed children and defeated parents.

He says he wants a hamburger from a stand. Do you want one, he asks, and she automatically says no, I'm a vegetarian, before wishing she hadn't. He stands awkwardly with his hands in his pockets as she digs in her bag for her wallet.

I'm sorry, it just smelt really good, he says, cradling the oily packet like it is a wounded bird.

Oh, it really doesn't matter, she snaps. Then she sees his face and unsets her jaw. I'm sorry, she says. God, I'm sorry about everything. She's said that word too many times, yet somehow she now feels she's never said it enough.

They walk in silence down to the water. Oddly, the beach is more generous than she'd remembered; the sounds of the fair eventually fade out and soon they're alone in the dark. The starless sky has the sheen of an aubergine. All they can hear is the splash of the waves and, farther out, the humming of the ships. She spreads out the blanket she's brought, and they sit and look at the beads of light on the horizon. Seascrapers, she says, pointing at them, and he looks searchingly at her, as if sensing the echo.

I'm ready, he says softly. I'm going soon.

I'll go with you. I won't stop you, but I'll be with you. She feels a deep sense of calm settle in her bones. And I'll bring you back.

Thank you, he says. He smiles. She realises that this is the first time he has smiled at her today.

She rests her head on his chest. She can hear his heart, the thrumming of that robust, blithe muscle. It is the beating of a fantastic sea monster ascending from the depths, still innocent of the knowledge that it is the only one of its kind that survives. She thinks of their broken marriage vow, *till death do us part*, and how perversely they were ending up fulfilling it after all.

Is it all right if I kiss you now, he says.

There are myriad kisses in a relationship: desperate ones as involuntary as breathing, stolen ones on crowded trains, ceremonial ones at the front door, routine ones as dispassionate as licking an envelope. It takes two to kiss, but does it take two to hold the memory?

His fingers trace her brow, ears, eyelids, nose, chin, as if he's hoping their topography will map out for him what his extinguished self found dear in this stranger. She puts her hands to his face and draws him close. His mouth tastes of blood, though it could just be the burger. In that moment, she has never loved anyone else. Or maybe it is just muscle memory; after all, the heart is a muscle, too.

They walk into the sea, and when the waves are lapping at their throats, they turn to face each other and he grasps her hands. She inhales, he exhales, and they plunge beneath the surface. The salt stings and the water is black and she can't see anything. She can only feel his hands gripping hers with unexpected strength; but he's right, he doesn't struggle. Afterwards, she holds him, his head to her heart, as they float between the city and the seascrapers.