

Ombak Volume Two

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Ikoy

By Sigrid Marianne Gayangos

I remember very well the day I first met Ikoy. The rest of my family went fishing. And I, being too young and too sickly, was left alone at home. It was a day of ominous clouds, different from the gray ones that were a friendly reminder of an impending monsoon, and the ocean roared and spewed things that made its stomach sick. Bloated

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fishes that smelled of death were washed ashore, some even caught in frayed strips of plastic and dirt. All up and down the entire stretch of sand were styrofoam chunks that had broken down into smaller pieces, some stuck in dead corals. Old and forgotten things were there, too, ones that were perhaps dear to someone that the ocean took away and no longer wanted now. One of those things, it turned out, was a child so grotesque, I wasn't even sure that it was indeed a child in the first place.

The first thing I noticed about Ikoy was his scent. He smelled of rotten fish, salt, and pus mixed together. His nose always ran and he had to wipe it every time, spreading more gray-green goo on his already slimy face. It was rare when he blinked—his eyes seemingly in an eternal blank stare with the pink flesh just beneath the eyeball waiting to tear up. He appeared at our doorstep with several fishes gathered in a basket made of dried strips of seaweed. I tried asking him who he was, if he was lost, or if there was anything I could do to help him, but Ikoy only mumbled an unintelligible reply.

Still, I let him in. I didn't know what to do about Ikoy. He didn't talk much and his stink made it impossible to stay near him for long. It was, however, immediately settled that he was to stay with us when my family returned home and found me and Ikoy grilling rare fish enough for eight hungry mouths. Normally, we sold fish like that at the flea market. Our Ilonggo suki called them *isda sa bato* and said that the Chinese especially liked

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them. But after several days of having almost zero catches, we didn't mind a bit of luxury for ourselves.

It was not uncommon for folks who ventured out into the open seas to stray into our village. At times, we even had lost and weary fishermen from Sabah, drifting ashore when the waves were particularly testy. After sharing a hot meal with us and having a good rest, they soon left and sailed back to their proper courses. I think the sea had this way of sending them to us, our home in particular. These lost folks never stayed for more than a night though. But Ikoy did for almost a year, and his presence changed our lives forever.

We took Ikoy in, shared meals with him, and my mother did the best she could to rid him of that stench. Once, mother even scooped a handful of sand, spread it over Ikoy's grimy back, and gave him a good scrubbing. But no matter what we did--even after finishing an entire bar of soap--Ikoy still retained that smell. His skin looked bright, though there was flaking in some parts, and I noticed that there were long gashes of scars running from almost every angle down his back.

I wondered how long it would take for Ikoy to return to his grubby self.

Not so long it turned out. Each morning when we all broke fast, Ikoy would appear worn out and tired, like he had just traveled a great distance the night before. Each day there would be new scratches oozing of pus to tend to, and his limbs

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would be slimy from heaven knows what. While we welcomed Ikoy to sleep in our shared bedroom, even putting out an extra mat for him, he never did so. He insisted on sleeping outside, spending the night in my father's fishing boat tied to our house's post, the waves rocking him gently to sleep. Despite this strange arrangement, we never really protested, as it was a fairly safe thing to do on our side of the village.

There were plenty of afternoons when Ikoy and I did nothing but carve shapes from the driftwood that we had found down the shore. He was a natural at carving, and soon, we had a menagerie of wooden animals between the two of us. By that time, all of our neighbors knew about Ikoy and treated him as though he had always been a part of our community. This wasn't always a good thing as children were already wont to make fun of his appearance and smell. Sometimes, while we gathered dark masses of weed that had been washed up by the sea, a girl would run to him and gingerly touch Ikoy's skin. The child would then run back as fast as she could to her eagerly awaiting friends--her tiny fingers wiggling as if in victory--and an endless chasing and tagging one another as 'Ikoy' would begin.

If Ikoy understood any of these, he did not seem to care. In fact, it was those moments when he actually enjoyed being away from our house. Our neighbors debated on whether Ikoy was a *sama-sellang* or a *siyokoy*. He was too small to be a sama-

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sellang for those grew up to ten feet long and were mightily strong, and surely he was no siyokoy because Ikoy had a pair of legs and feet instead of a tail. *But he obviously looks like one*, shouted a little boy before anyone else could refute his statement. He went on screaming *Ikoy! Ikoy! Ikoy!* Until Ikoy was finally stuck with that name.

It was all in good humor and everything was fine, until one morning, Ikoy showed up badly bruised and beaten. The whole length of his arm was covered in deep wounds and he stank wickedly. There was no way to gain information from Ikoy, and whatever ruckus it was that had caused him this, it was a pretty quiet one since we all slept through the night peacefully, even as light sleepers! I wondered what or who could've done this to Ikoy, a mere boy (though, at times, he did resemble a strange creature from the deep, what with his webbed fingers and strange skin). Surely, it wasn't our neighbors. Was it a vicious turtle then? A huge, thick-lipped fish with razor-sharp teeth like those they had warned us kids about?

At that point, mother ignored Ikoy's protestations when night came and he was about to go out and sleep in father's boat again. Mother held him down and gave him that unyielding glare of hers. Ikoy was too weak to disagree. So he slept inside for three nights, and we took turns washing him with a clean cloth and feeding him soft food.

Those three days and three nights when Ikoy stayed in was a difficult time for us: father returned

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home with empty nets, mother got a really bad burn from cooking cassava, my two brothers dropped their handy AM/FM radio while out at sea, and my eldest sister, who was downtown studying in college, called home to tell us that she might lose her scholarship due to an Economics professor who seemed to have taken their heated debate in class personally. On top of that, the *barangay kagawad*, one of our elected councilors, paid our community a visit and had started offering monetary rewards for families who volunteered to leave the area. It wasn't the happiest of times, made all the more depressing due to the dreadful weather that left us cold and gray even late into the morning.

After three days of lying feverish, Ikoy finally sat up and seemed more like his usual self. He paced around our tiny house until mother had enough of it and allowed him to go out. That night, father and three of my brothers set out to try their luck at late night fishing using a chum rig. It was a tricky maneuver which required getting the bait at a definite depth. But after days without catches, the clock was ticking for us. Without our little boat that served as his bed at night, Ikoy took to the wooden planks by the front door. He lay on his back as he watched the moon, and pretty soon fell into a deep slumber. My mother sighed, knowing there was no way she could make Ikoy come inside. She slid closed our makeshift door, but left a tiny crack opened in case Ikoy changed his mind.

We woke up to the sound of our boat motor's

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roar followed immediately by my father's excited shouting. He appeared with my brothers bearing the most generous catch I had ever seen. Their baited rigs caught an assortment of colorful fishes that dwelled in shallow reefs, entire schools of huge rabbit-fish that spanned the length of my father's arm, and even the prized pelagic tuna that had to be carried by two of my brothers. Mother broke down into tears at the sight of them and hugged my father tightly. I'd never seen her as joyful as that moment.

Later that day, my mother managed to sell two baskets of cassava cakes, so she surprised my brothers with a new portable radio. My sister in college called home and merrily told us that her disagreement with her professor was all but a misunderstanding. It turned out the professor was so impressed with her analysis that he recommended my sister to attend a peace conference normally reserved only for graduates.

Amidst the jubilation, we had almost forgotten about Ikoy, who just stood there by the entrance smiling weakly. I turned to him and noticed the new gash that ran across his left cheek, bright crimson fluid dripping down his face. His limbs were wet and slimy as before. Mother rushed to him and fussed over his fresh cut, coaxing Ikoy to tell us what happened the previous night, but all to no avail. He just stood there with that glossy look in his eyes.

Despite his shabby and feeble appearance, there was something about Ikoy that made you feel

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like you were protected. The first time he appeared at our doorstep, I was at least a head taller than him, but I felt that our home was a lot safer with him just being there. He was our guardian, our family. And because he was family, we took it upon ourselves to find out what really was happening to Ikoy when he spent the nights out in father's boat.

We wanted to make Ikoy stay inside that night, but figured that if we really wanted to get to the bottom of this, we had to find out who was hurting him. We resolved to discover what creature came to our house each night, and perhaps trap it, then surrender it to the community leader. Father put out his spear gun and sharpened his single-edged cutting knife just in case it might prove to be useful.

Night came. Ikoy was heading out as usual. But before he did so, I went ahead and hugged him--stink and slime and all--and everyone else followed suit. There he stood in the middle of a tight group hug, confused, as his family wished him goodnight. We slid our door shut but kept our window slightly opened, crouching under the frame and waiting in the darkness.

Time passed painfully slow, and the lulling waves did not help in my battle against sleep. My youngest sister and younger brother were already deep in slumberland, while my parents talked in hushed tones across me and my two older brothers. We kept ourselves occupied by listening to the steady flow of love and heartbreaking stories read

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by the late-night DJ. I stretched and leaned against the wall, feeling the onset of sleep already heavy on my lids. But just when I was about to tumble deep into the world of dreams, my father tapped our floor and signalled for us to look out.

A huge swell in the sea rapidly approached our village, yet despite its size, it remained suspiciously without sound. Just when it threatened to hammer our village down--a flimsy set of houses on stilts connected by mere wooden planks--Ikoy appeared before it, lifted by a whirlpool emerging from his feet. The swell changed in form: one moment a fish-tailed beast with forked tongue, then a mass of tangled seaweed and kelp, then a human-animal hybrid that looked eerily like Ikoy but bigger, so much bigger, until it was nothing but a creature of shadows that loomed above Ikoy.

We were all stunned in our hiding places, motionless and powerless. The shadow creature circled around Ikoy and they appeared to be exchanging words though not a single sound could be heard from them. They lashed out at each other, and in a matter of seconds, became one mighty, stumbling, writhing, rocking thing, darker than anything I had ever seen and faster than my eyes could ever follow. All this was happening in an absolute silence that muffled the waves and other creatures of the night, the kind of stillness that would drive anyone mad in a matter of minutes.

I couldn't stand another second of that eerie quiet, and without realizing it, I let out a tiny yelp.

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The dark moving mass stopped midair, then the distinct shapes of Ikoy and the creature became visible once more. And then it saw me, saw us. It saw through the tiny crack of our window, our cowering bodies squatting there to witness what no humans should. It broke away from Ikoy, and what appeared to be eels and slimy grotesque fishes swimming in and out of its body turned and began to head to our house.

Our parents rushed to our corner, the speargun in Papa's shaking hand. But before he could put it to use, there was a loud thundering voice in a language we could not comprehend. My brothers and I risked another look, and in the distance, we saw a dark swell of water rushing away from the shore. When I looked back up again, there was only the graying sky at the verge of the calm, undisturbed ocean and the dawn. We went outside. On the wooden plank right beside the stilt where father tied his boat was the battered and wounded body of Ikoy. Mother picked him up and carried him inside, whispering soothing words to the broken little boy who was grumbling miserably.

This happened almost a decade ago now. I never knew what my mother told Ikoy when she nursed him back to good health. But not long after that, we woke up one day and found Ikoy gone. In his wake, we also found, on top of my brother's AM/FM radio, three almost heart-shaped black pearls sitting in the flesh of an opened giant oyster. We knew what this meant: that it was to help

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venture away from this seaside village. Beside my pillow, Ikoy left two wooden figures of little boys that he had carved. It was with unfounded but absolute certainty that we would never see Ikoy again.

My eldest sister helped my parents in selling two of the precious pearls to a jeweler in downtown Pueblo, getting a good sum for them. My parents decided to keep the last one and it remained hidden in my mother's dresser to this day. And so it was, that we left our house on bamboo stilts by the sea and braved life in the bustling city. But with Ikoy's gift to us, we were perhaps the only ones who had a comfortable start. Mother opened her own shop where she sold cassava cakes and other goods; and father, who loved the sea so much, found a job as a tour guide for those who ventured out into the mangrove forest on the nearby island. At eight, I entered first grade in school and was the only one in the family who did not have to skip a year due to lack of money.

We never saw Ikoy again. But every year, especially during the times when the ocean's roar muted the cries of the seabirds, I made it a point to visit our old home. Gone were the bamboo stilts and wooden planks; the whole stretch of our former community now a series of food stalls that boasted signs like 'best *curacha* in town'. Yet far behind, you could see waves soaring, blue, white, and green on the crest, tumbling and crashing on the cemented stilts in syncopated rhythm. And always, always, a

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hand-carved wooden figure would wash ashore by
my feet, as if by mere chance.

Everyone Knows

By Anya Ow

Everyone knew that the squash court toilets were haunted. It was a fact that seeped into the masses on their first week of school through an infection of rumours transmitted by the older kids: one of many. The third noodle stall was the best in the canteen. The school cat was called Kiki. The squash court toilets had a ghost.

Kylie's palms grew clammy as she pushed the

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door open. The next closest toilet was ten minutes away in the main building of the school. She'd been staying late at squash practice to make up for being down with the flu for a whole week, and there was no one left there but her. Running to the main block and back originally felt like a waste of time and effort.

"Just stories," Kylie muttered. A fresh sheen of sweat prickled through her back. The squash court toilet had white plaster walls and a grey bench of sinks. It was smaller than the others and much cleaner. Three open cubicles, three sinks. No mirrors – the only bathroom with no mirrors.

Kylie forced herself to breathe evenly. Sunlight drew five horizontal bars across the wall beside her from the shutter window, tickling through with twisting motes of dust. The bathroom was humid with heat. She edged into the first cubicle. She had never tried to pee so quickly in her life, but it still felt like forever and she was exhausted by the time she was soaping and washing her hands.

As Kylie swiped her hands under the hand dryer, one of the toilets flushed behind her. She spun around.

Still alone.

She flung herself out of the bathroom, skidding into the opposite wall. Pushing away from it with a whimper, she sprinted for the squash courts.

The courts were just as she had left it. Her

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racquet and bag on the bench, the air doughy with humidity and the lingering smell of her sweat. Kylie packed up and shouldered her bag. She rescued her phone from her pockets and unlocked it.

Something stung the tip of Kylie's finger, sharp as an ant bite. She flinched as the phone's lock screen cleared into the front camera.

The beige walls with the red stripe and the bland light of the squash courts looked oversaturated as usual on the screen.

The girl who stared back at Kylie wasn't her.

A shaky whimper squeezed out of Kylie. Her phone clattered on the floor behind her as she fled, sprinting wildly away from the courts. Only once past the field did she slow to a jog, lungs burning, hair plastered to her cheeks with sweat. Yueling. She had to find Yueling. Yueling would know what to do.

"Wait, wait," Yueling said when Kylie found her in the library. "You want us to take your phone to the closest temple because it's haunted?"

"I used the squash court toilets and something happened," Kylie confessed.

Yueling threw up her hands. "*Kylie.*"

"I know, I know. Come on. I don't want to switch it back on, and I need GPS."

"Okay. Fine. You'd better not be shitting me."

Google Maps indicated that the closest temple was a bus and a short train ride away. "What did you see?" Yueling asked as they walked back to

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the courts together.

"A face... it wasn't me. It was a girl in uniform. Very pale. Wide, big eyes." Kylie wiped her hands down on her flanks. "Maybe we should just leave it."

"Your parents would scold you if you just throw your phone away like that. Besides. Maybe you didn't see anything. Maybe it was just a glitch in the front camera." Yueling warmed up to her topic. "Maybe you just thought you saw something."

"Maybe," Kylie said. She was glad for the sticky warmth of late afternoon now. It grounded her as they cut across the basketball courts and into the shade of the squash court building. As they got close, Kylie clenched her hands.

"Huh," Yueling said, looking around. "Didn't you say you left your phone on the floor?"

"I did!" Momentarily forgetting her fears, Kylie darted into the court. The phone was gone.

"I'll call it." Yueling whipped out her phone.

Kylie yelped as her ringtone rang out from within her backpack. Yueling then cancelled her call, surprised--then exasperated. "Seriously?"

"I swear I left it here. On the floor." Kylie shrugged off her bag and dug through it. The phone was at the bottom instead of being in the phone pocket built against the laptop holder.

"Front camera, right?" Yueling aimed her phone at it.

"What are you doing?"

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"Recording the evidence. Unlock your phone." Yueling took a couple of steps back.

Kylie braced herself as she unlocked her phone. It didn't open to the front camera but to the main menu. Accessing the camera brought up a dark rectangle--the front camera wasn't on. Kylie pressed the icon and the phone flicked to a grainy view of the ceiling.

"No ghost," Yueling said, as she and Kylie peered into the front camera and it showed only their faces.

"Yueling, I swear, I wasn't shitting you."

"I'm... going to believe you," Yueling said slowly, "because we've been friends since primary school and you've never pulled pranks on anyone before."

"Okay. Good." Kylie sat down on the floor, breathing hard.

"I don't know if bringing it to a temple is even going to help. What are you even going to say to the monks? 'Hello, I think my phone is haunted?' Have you been to a temple before? Are you even Buddhist?"

"Non-practicing. My grandma took me to the temple to pray before the finals last year," Kylie said. She'd been bored and impatient to leave.

"Besides, the last time I saw something on YouTube about exorcists, the guy was in Malaysia and he was Taoist." Yueling squatted down, slinging her arms over her knees. "Maybe we can deal with this without trying to involve people who won't

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believe us."

"How?"

"Maybe we could figure out why she's still here. Don't you think it's sad? Haunting a toilet forever?" Yueling gestured in the direction of the bathroom with a hand. "I've always thought that ghost stories were tragedies."

The phone stayed in Kylie's school locker for two days. She charged it with a power bank and checked it during the lunch break and after school, always around other people. The phone functioned perfectly, as intended.

Maybe Kylie had imagined things. She'd been staying late. Being on the school team meant keeping up with practice on top of keeping up with her homework--it meant early mornings, late nights, weekends spent training. Ever since Kylie had made it into the school team, she'd had less time to spend with her friends, including Yueling. She regretted that, she told Yueling as they were walking from math class to geography.

Yueling wrinkled her nose. "Being on the school team means extra extracurricular points when you're applying to junior college. I get it. I'm on the library *and* gardening committee boards. Do you think I'd do that if I didn't need the points?"

"We can rest when we're in uni," Kylie said. It was a common joke in school. A high-performance secondary school like theirs crunched its students through thirty-six hour weeks, part of it

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extracurricular. There was also homework on top of that. The pressure to perform constricted around every occupant of the white-walled school. Students, teachers, even parents.

"Uni's going to be the same. We can rest when we're dead."

"Do you think that's what happened? To Her."

Yueling looked around. Their class had walked on ahead, chattering about tomorrow's tests. "I Googled deaths at the school from the last few years. Nothing."

"Everyone knows the ghost from the squash court is there because of a suicide," Kylie said. The phone sat heavily in the pocket of her uniform. "Maybe that's why you couldn't find anything. Suicides don't make the news for a reason. They're afraid of copycats. If there was a murder, there would've been something."

"You should ask Her," Yueling said.

"She hasn't reappeared yet." Kylie palmed her phone from her pocket and checked the camera function. Nothing. She showed it to Yueling.

"Done it alone yet?"

"No. Maybe you were right. It was stress. I was already freaked out when I went into the squash court toilets and--" Kylie shrieked as a hand landed on her shoulder. As she jerked away, the knot of girls behind her burst into hyena laughter.

Yueling spun on them, flushed with anger.

"Lily!"

"Relax lah. It's just a joke. Kylie, why so

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stressed?" Lily smiled with the unthinking malice of the young. "What's this I hear about the squash court toilets? You saw a ghost? Ooo-oo-oo!"

"Oo-oo!" the pack of girls beside her echoed.

"You think it's not scary? Go and see for yourself," Yueling said challengingly.

"What for? It's so far away. The ghost thing is only a story. If there was really a ghost the school cleaners would've complained." Lily leaned in, her smile widening, then made a show of twisting back and pinching her nose. "Eww, what's that smell? So smelly! Maybe that's why the ghost came out?" Her clique laughed.

"Lily," Yueling warned.

"Forget it. It isn't worth it," Kylie said. She tried to turn away to keep walking but Lily grabbed her by the arm, hauling her around. The phone slipped from Kylie's hand and clattered loudly on the floor, face-down. Kylie gasped.

"Oops. Clumsy Kylie," Lily said, smirking. The clique sauntered away as Kylie stooped to pick up her phone. It was cracked down the centre.

"Shit," Yueling said, staring at the damage.

"Could've been worse." Tears stung the edges of Kylie's eyes. She forced a smile. "What a bitch."

"We could talk to a teacher."

"What for? All her friends will just say I dropped it. Let's go. We'll be late," Kylie said.

Yueling nodded slowly and started to walk down the corridor. The moment her back was turned, the ghost girl reappeared on the front

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camera. She angled her head to look down the corridor, her mouth pressed into a flat line. Her hair was brown now, like Kylie's, and there was a warmer tint to her skin.

"Yueling!" Kylie yelled.

"What?" Yueling looked over. The phone shut itself down. Kylie tried to turn it back on, but the screen stayed stubbornly dark.

"Nothing," Kylie said, disappointed. She put the phone away.

Kylie's parents both worked long hours, and she was often asleep before they got back. Alone in the house, she made her own dinner out of what she could find in the fridge and did homework into the night. As Kylie stretched and closed her textbook, her phone switched itself back on. The ghost girl looked out.

After a moment to compose herself, Kylie said, "You're not actually that scary." Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. "I find a lot of things scarier than a ghost. Lily and the others. Whether I can get good grades so I can get into a good uni. Whether I can get a job. Global warming."

The girl said nothing. Her gaze was solemn, unblinking. "This isn't too bad," Kylie said. She dug her fingertips into her arms, each of them icy.

"You're the first person I've talked to who hasn't judged me in some way. What happened to you?"

A pale finger pointed in the direction of the

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schoolbooks. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly. "Grades?" Kylie guessed. The girl nodded. "It's hard. You're not the only one that this pressure-cooker system got the better of. And in this country, getting a therapist for something like school stress? Forget it. Even our parents wouldn't understand."

The girl nodded again. "What's your name?" Kylie asked. No response--the girl didn't look like she had heard. "So uh. My friend Yueling, she said maybe we could help you move on. You're still one of us, our senior." The girl shook her head. "I'm pretty sure you'd get to heaven? Or somewhere better?"

The girl held up a pale palm. She pressed her finger to the screen. Where her skin touched the screen, the smudge she left lit up in pale light. *There is nowhere*, she wrote.

"Do you know that for sure?" Kylie flushed once the question came out of her mouth. A ghost would know the answer to that better than she would. "I'm sorry. That was rude."

The text winked out and the girl wrote: *This isn't bad*.

"Really? But you're stuck here. Doesn't that mean you have unfinished business?" Kylie asked. The world would be crowded with ghosts if there was nowhere else after death.

The girl reached forward. *You are the ghost*, she wrote in spiky letters. *I am free*.

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"I know that school's been very stressful for you lately," said Mrs Lim as Kylie sat before her desk. The teachers' office was a morass of cubicles papered over with books and documents.

"No more than for everyone," Kylie said. She'd washed her hands three times after having to clean the muck out of her locker and her nails still felt dirty.

Mrs Lim looked tired. She wasn't just the form teacher for Kylie's class of forty--she also taught chemistry for most of the Sec 3 classes. "I've spoken to Lily and the others. They deny being the ones who vandalised your locker. That being said, I've heard complaints about Lily before."

Kylie nodded. She wasn't Lily's only target, or even Lily's favourite target. Being in a school team helped. "I wasn't going to say anything." It'd been Yueling and the school janitor who had made the report.

"Why not?"

Kylie stared at Mrs Lim. "What can you even do?"

Mrs Lim winced. "I'll speak to Lily's parents."

"Again? Sure." Kylie had seen Lily's parents come to school before, bristling with aggression as they argued with one teacher after another over whether their precious child had gotten the right grades for a subject. Kylie's own parents didn't have the time--they worked multiple jobs. They didn't even have the money for tuition.

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"I could call the police," Mrs Lim said, "but I feel that's an overreaction. Lily didn't hurt you, right? And you should think about how that would look. For you, the school, and for Lily's future prospects."

Lily's prospects? *What about mine?* Kylie swallowed the words, forced them into sour seeds, and pushed them back down her throat. She wasn't a star student like Lily. Nor was her mother an alumnus.

"Can I go?"

At Mrs Lim's nod, Kylie slipped off the chair and walked out. The burr of background noise in the staff room compressed away behind her, leaving a ringing void in her ears. Once outside, Kylie checked her phone.

"You were right," Kylie told the ghost girl.

The ghost girl said nothing. She had shorn her shoulder-length hair, trimming it into the short bob that Kylie wore. As Kylie waited, the ghost girl's uniform started to warp. The rounded collar from her version of the school uniform straightened to Kylie's sharp edges.

"I don't think I'm hallucinating. I think everyone else is," Kylie said when they were home. They had been trying to read *Jane Eyre* together, but Kylie wasn't in much of a mood to read. The ghost girl traced a question mark onto the screen. Kylie gestured at the ghost's updated uniform. "I don't know if it was the same for you, but

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nowadays the secondary school you go to really matters. Matters just as much as uni. My cousin's been a lawyer for two years, and clients still relax when they realize she's from our school."

Same, the ghost girl wrote.

"Everyone treats school like the most important thing I'd ever do. It's just four years out of my life."

Can be forever, wrote the ghost. *It is for me.*

Kylie grimaced. "I'm sorry. I should have thought."

It's ok, the ghost girl wrote.

"Do you even like this book? I should have asked when I picked."

There was another unblinking pause, just like when Kylie had asked the ghost girl for her name. Kylie was about to turn a page and continue reading when the ghost girl pressed a finger to the screen. *Lao Fu Zi?* she wrote.

Lao Fu Zi? That's so old, Kylie nearly said. She swallowed the words. "Dad probably still has one of the books. I'll check."

"You don't even want to hang out after school anymore," Yueling said as she stood next to Kylie at the bus stop. "Is the Lily thing really getting to you?"

"No. I don't even think about her much," Kylie replied.

Yueling stared at her unhappily. "Look, all the stuff they said about you online and all that, it's

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mean and horrible--"

"I didn't read it." Kylie hadn't been on social media much ever since the ghost girl had occupied her phone.

"Then why are you just going straight home every day? By yourself?"

"I'm not by myself," Kylie said. She pointed at her phone. "I've been talking to the ghost."

Yueling shuddered. "Right. The ghost that I still haven't seen and that you can't do a screen recording of."

"Yup."

"You guys sure are friendly now."

"She's alone and so am I," Kylie snapped. She glared down the road, trying to will the bus to appear. Yueling tried to touch her shoulder and Kylie flinched back.

"You're not alone, Kylie. You're not." Yueling looked sad as she said it.

"You talked to Mrs Lim!"

"So did the janitor!"

"You should've known it wouldn't help. It just made things worse," Kylie said.

Yueling wrung her hands, upset. "I had to do something. I'm worried about you."

Kylie didn't deign to answer. They boarded the bus in silence.

"I think we're really similar," Kylie told the ghost girl after her solitary dinner of fried vegetables and rice. The ghost nodded. Her eyes

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were no longer black, but a warm brown of coconut husk, like Kylie's. "Why can't you tell me your name?"

dun nd 1, the ghost girl wrote.

Kylie laughed. "You're my age. Or you were, before. How could you have gotten to my age without a name?"

The ghost girl frowned. Maybe she'd forgotten, in the not-there world. "Sorry," Kylie said. She made a show of clasping her hands before her and bowing before the phone propped on the table. "Me and my big mouth. It's ok."

thank u <3, the girl wrote, after a pause.

"Why? I still haven't found a way to help you. I can't even help myself. They're thinking of kicking me out of the squash team because I missed two practices. I don't care. I'd rather stay here at home and talk to you."

The ghost girl started to write a response. She frowned and rubbed it out with the side of her palm, smearing a bright plane of light on the screen that took a while to fade. When Kylie could see the ghost girl again, her cheeks were wet.

Mrs Lim told Kylie's parents about the squash team situation. "It's not fair," Kylie told the ghost girl after practice. It was late and they were alone. "The team doesn't like me anyway." That hadn't been true before, but it was now. The team had ignored her when she had walked in to practice. Even the coach had been chilly.

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The ghost girl said nothing. She'd been growing withdrawn. "What?" Kylie demanded.

"What?" Lily mimicked from the door. Kylie spun around.

"Lily? What are you doing here?" Kylie asked, wary. Lily was with her usual pack, all of them grinning.

"You didn't think I'd have forgotten about what you said to Mrs Lim, did you?" Lily sauntered in. "Wow, what's this?" She scooped up Kylie's phone from the bench. The phone looked locked. "Your phone is cracked. So sad. You should take better care of your things."

"Lily," Kylie growled.

"Wouldn't want me to drop this again, would you? Or step on it?" Lily dangled it in the air.

What would happen to the ghost girl if the phone broke? "Lily, c'mon. Please give it back."

"You want it back? Here." Lily skipped outside, giggling.

Kylie charged out of the courts, trying to grab the phone from Lily. Hands caught hold of Kylie's shirt and shoulders instead, dragging her over the concrete as she screamed and struggled from being pulled by Lily's gang. She was thrown forward, landing hard against the toilet's tiled floor. The door to the squash court toilets slammed shut behind her. There was a scraping sound and a metallic noise. Something had been jammed under the door handle.

"Lily!" Kylie yelled as she tried the door anyway. It wouldn't budge. "This isn't funny!"

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The giggling from behind the door grew louder, then faded away as Lily and the others ran off. Kylie bit out a sob. She rubbed the heels of her hands angrily against her eyes and turned around. There were tiny ventilation windows. Maybe she could climb through one of them.

As Kylie pulled herself up onto the sinks, the lights went out. Kylie screamed, flailing. She fell against the wall instead of overbalancing onto the floor. Groping against the wall to support herself, Kylie froze as she felt glass against her fingers instead of tiles. She was pressed against a mirror, a big one. There was still enough light from the small windows and the late afternoon to see. Kylie slid back off the sink, scrambling back.

The ghost girl watched her from the new mirror. Her bob of hair cuts away between slow-moving frames. It was now long, brushing her waist. It was pulled into pigtails, trailing down her shoulders. It was short, cut like a boy's. Her face fractured along fault lines, an overlay of multiple children, a rough-angled compositions of cruelty and failure's aftermath. The failings of schools, of parents, of other children. The child smiled with the uneven toothy smile of a cornered animal. She reached toward the glass with curling fingers that grew longer and longer, until their sharpened tips began to distend the glass.

Kylie should have been more afraid. Her skin was crawling, her back soaked in cold sweat as she let out a shaky laugh as the fear left her. What did

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she have to be afraid about? This was the ghost girl, Kylie's closest friend, and ghost stories like hers were nothing to be afraid of. "Jesus. Are you OK? I thought Lily was going to break my phone and hurt you somehow. If you're OK, that's good."

The ghost girl froze. Her form compressed downward. She was a solemn child again with long hair, wearing a uniform that was decades out of date. The ghost girl put her hand through the mirror and carefully dropped Kylie's phone beside the sink.

"Wow, thanks!" Kylie made a move for the phone and went still as the girl took a step back. "Wait," Kylie said, reaching for the mirror.

The ghost girl drew away and made a show of bowing and clasping her hands together. The lights came back on. The mirror and its ghost were gone.

"You're not going to tell me what happened?" Yueling asked as they walked to the bus stop. She looked determined.

"What?"

"Lily and her clique all dropped out of school. Everyone knows something happened," Yueling said.

Kylie glanced to the side where the squash courts sat dark. The tournament season was over. "Maybe," Kylie said.

"Did it have to do with the ghost?" Yueling lowered her voice.

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"Maybe." As Yueling made a face, Kylie pushed her hand into her pocket and traced the crack on the screen of her phone. It'd been quiet since that afternoon. The ghost girl's work was done. "I'll tell you on the way home."

Brush Strokes in Heaven

By Ted Mahsun

Translated by Zedeck Siew

Firas is soaking when he wakes up – and not because he has been sleepwalking, though that *has* been happening.

He is surprised to wake up in the same spot he went to bed. Not something that usually happens anymore. Because of his sleepwalking, he is used to finding himself in the strangest of places every time

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the dawn ambients comes on - such as the foggy moisture-laden chamber of water processing.

Between Io and Europa, the Jovian Mining Company station charts an ellipsis around Jupiter.

When Firas wakes up he is soaking. There is an easy explanation. He'd been dreaming. His dream was so gripping, so engrossing: it tweaked his intellect; tugged his spirit; touched his physical body, and more – his body relieved itself. He is soaking now; sopping from sweat and urine.

Even stewed in his own waste-fluids, Firas feels renewed. For the first time in his life – his sad, pathetic life – he feels like he has been handed a fresh start. A signal or direction, somewhere to go.

"Is this the sign I've been praying for all this while?" Firas asks, a whisper. The facing wall is lit with ambient light.

"Detecting language," the wall replies.

"Would you like to switch language to... Mandarin?"

"Oh be quiet you clunker," Firas says. He drags himself from the cesspool of his bunk.

"Xie xie," says the wall.

Cleaning himself up, tidying his room (mining-station staff are never issued personal andromaid; chalk that up to middle-management cost-cutting), Firas heads to work as his daily schedule demands. But the dream that came to him the night before comes to him again. Putting on his pilot's exosuit, he cannot stop asking himself: how can he make his dream come true?

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In his dream, he is an artist. A renowned, celebrated artist. He is a painter. His paintings are works of awe. The foremost museums – the Caelius De Bont Post-post-post-postmodern Museum of Art on Mars; Charon's Abdolaye Jimade Endless Heritage Centre – they all court him, hoping to secure first rights; whichever one he chooses will be feted.

But that is all in his dream. All just a fantasy. How can he make this fantasy a reality? It would change everything. Give his life meaning.

Firas is a pilot. He flies a mining ketch – one of those little ships that mine exotic gases from Jupiter's upper atmosphere. One pilot among many dozens, all working for the Jovian Mining Company. But Firas is special and the ketch assigned to him is a single-person vessel.

Most mining ketches require multiple hands: at least two; maybe three. One pilot, one navigator, a third person to operate the scoops harvesting gases from the planet's banded surface. That last role is the most dangerous.

More sophisticated ketches combine these roles with the help of artificial intelligence and multi-core computers. Such ships run with fewer human elements. A pilot doubles as navigator. A navigator might also work the scoops. Models exist for every possible combination; which is used depending on what an individual crew finds most efficient. But even those still require at least two on board.

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The ketch Firas uses is better.

It is a privilege, actually. A directive came all the way down from the Board of Directors: they have selected Firas to pilot the new Heitzmann-Adler AG model, the HA-1204-81 – full of features and high-tech functions, allowing a single pilot to conduct full-spectrum gas-mining operations.

He was embarrassed at first. When it was announced, his colleagues threw him sharp glances, edged with jealousy. Gradually they stopped hanging out with him. Stopped saying hello, even in the station corridors. It got worse when the rumours started about his sleepwalking. Slowly they started to see him as this strange guy, this weirdo, probably kind of insane. Yet somehow the Board of Directors was giving him preferential treatment? What? Why?

Firas himself wondered. He asked Tan Siew Lin, his supervisor, why he was issued the most advanced mining ketch in the fleet. The answer he got was no help at all.

"I pay you to mine, not to ask questions!" Tan Siew Lin said, thumping both palms on the table. Her cup of americano jumped and the coffee went everywhere. "Time is money! If you aren't using that time to mine, what use are you? I might as well toss you into the gravity well, then at least you'll get crushed into gas and the Company can mine that gas and recoup the money it's wasted on you!"

And Firas felt the urge to correct his boss, because that was not how the gases they mined

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were formed – but his inner censor told him talking back during one of Tan Siew Lin's rages was not a good idea.

Leave your supervisor alone and just go, his censor told him. Do your job, meet your daily quota. No need for chatter.

So that was why Firas never found out why he was the only one assigned to the HA-1204-81, and why he no longer cares to.

The ketch is smooth and spry. A flip of the throttle and its engine roars. The tiniest nudge of its joystick, left or right, and the HA-1204-81 responds, a swift dancing on a draft. Its multi-core computer lets one pilot do everything – chart a heading and operate the gas scoop, at the same time. It makes Firas one of the fleet's most efficient workers. And if he says he doesn't have fun in his ketch, he'd be lying. Every time he takes it out he feels a swell of exhilaration. He takes it through Jupiter's gaseous membrane, a bird through heaven.

The Board of Directors ignores his eccentricities – the sleepwalking, the waking up in odd places every morning. His colleagues on the station no longer wants to hang out with him. They don't want him around.

No matter. This is just Firas's reality, day-to-day. It depresses him a bit – but he tries to deal with it by not dealing with it. By suppressing his feelings and getting on with the job. The job his contract with the Jovian Mining Company requires of him.

He steps up into the helm of the ketch and

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keys his exosuit to the console. He plucks at the switches in front of him, the controls, and the ship's systems come alive.

He flips another switch, opening a channel to Station Command.

"Command, this is Pilot Firas reporting," he tells the little microphone embedded in his exosuit. "Ready for launch."

"Received, Pilot Firas," an officer responds, monotone. "Standby. Refer to the screens and follow the guide-lights to Airlock Nine."

"Thanks, Command," Firas says. He pushes the throttle with his left hand, slowly, slowly, so he can feel the ketch purr with the thrum of the engine. Then he lifts the brakes. The ketch drifts out of dock towards the exit gates.

"Have a productive day, Pilot Firas," says the officer in Station Command before cutting the channel.

The ketch tumbles out of the station slowly. The glare of artificial lights gives in to the pitch of space. Firas lets his eyes adjust. He turns on his navigator array. It finds Io, then Europa, then triangulates to find his own position. He tugs the joystick. His ketch speeds towards Jupiter.

Still thousands of kilometres away, the planet fills his entire field of view. There is nothing else in creation but bands of orange and red and rust and grey, whisked together, at random, a celestial cup of cappuccino stirred by the Creator. It is there in those Jovian tides that Firas will mine his gases.

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Before launch he had loaded the computer with coordinates given to him by the Board of Directors. His heads-up display is etched into the plexi canopy: thin lines of light guides him towards his destination. Firas pushes the throttle to maximum. The ketch quakes. Momentum presses his body into his exosuit.

Like a bullet from a pistol, the tiny ketch splashes into Jupiter's godlike coffee roil.

As soon as the ketch punches through the surface, Firas opens all its ventral scoops. He tweaks the filters so the scoops will siphon the right gases. He turns the sensors on to find out where the right gases are.

Clouds of russet and umber rages all around him. Here there are furious winds of speeds up to 360 kilometres per hour. A pilot has to be alert, one hand always on the throttle, modulating the ketch's speed and make second-to-second decisions whether it fights the storm or rides it.

The ketch's sensors beep. It has found some gas pockets and throws their location up onto the canopy display. As usual, they are all over the place: some in this strata, others below – stuck in a different band of cloud altogether.

The HA-1204-81's advantage here is obvious. It is agile, and its engine is powerful enough to fight Jupiter's hurricane winds. Meaning it is a steady gas miner even in the most dangerous conditions.

Firas is meticulous. He makes sure the right

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gases are siphoned with the proper procedures. He makes sure the filters are functioning properly. He checks that none of the storage tanks have sprung leaks and are filled to full capacity. He darts about, making loops between rust-and-orange clouds, chasing the gases the Board of Directors need. They will sell these gases at a tidy profit on Earth or on Mars - places thirsty for Jovian things.

Firas does not care about any of this.

All he wants is to do his duty here so he can return to the Jovian Mining Company station and figure out how to make his dream – of being a celebrated artist – come true.

With his ketch filled to full capacity, Firas shuts the ventral scoops and begins his ascent home. When the ketch leaves Jupiter's atmosphere for the vacuum of space, Firas detects a vessel in the distance – almost as distant as Io. It is clearly no mining ketch. Too big to be a ketch. Big enough to be some kind of barge - the kind used for long-distance stellar travel - for hopping from planet to planet. Firas himself arrived on a barge like that.

But not a barge *like* that. That one is no ordinary vessel. It is a pleasure barge, as shiny as a castle in the sky, a luxury cruiser anchored off some paradise shore.

Why is it hanging there? Jupiter is no tourist destination – not like Saturn, with its awesome rings. This is an industrial zone. A mining pit. Nothing romantic about this shred of space, at all!

No matter. Maybe it is a Board of Directors

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ship, come to inspect their precious operations, Firas tells himself. Why should I care? If I ask my supervisor, she will just shout at me. Better I just concentrate on making art!

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the work! Look at it! Its grace, its energy, the way its lines are both gentle and forcefully drawn. In my opinion, this is his best work, yet."

The Viewing Hall erupts in applause. The dignitaries in their formal-wear and finery watch the wide glass window, filled with Jupiter's colour and majesty.

The window is zoomed into a sector of the planet, where the bands of its cloudy atmosphere have been stirred, manipulated into a kind of painting. A work in the Post-Impressionist vein, like a Cezanne, a Gauguin, a Seurat – a van Gogh. But much more than those simple oil-paint-on-canvas things. This is alive – truly alive, made in and of a living world. Moving as if a living animal. Any soul looking at it with their own eyes will be touched in their heart. It is heartbreaking in its beauty, in the way it has stirred the giant's rust and umber.

Somebody in the audience raises a hand. A representative of New York's Museum of Modern Art. "Forgive me, Madame Tan Siew Lin, but I am curious as to the quality of the recording of the work we just witnessed."

"Oh, do not worry," Tan Siew Lin replies. "We have taken all steps to ensure that we have a

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complete recording. In fact, this will be the best recording yet. This is the first time we have staged a viewing of Firas's work at such close range. Ladies and gentlemen, at this range, and with the barge's high-resolution trid-cameras, what you have just witnessed is the absolute best possible view. Do not worry. Any more questions before I begin the auction?"

Another hand. "I've got one. Where exactly did this Firas come from, and why has he chosen Jupiter's atmosphere as his canvas?"

The Viewing Hall starts to mutter.

"Oh, you must be new, here," Tan Siew Lin replies, smirking. "I'd assumed that everybody invited here today would know who Firas is. No matter. I can speak a little about his background. Firas is essentially the unexpected result of a scientific experiment. He was a mining pilot involved in a ketch accident some years ago. He suffered complete memory loss. Our researchers tried to recover his memory to no avail. We did find that his skills as a pilot were still intact, however – so we gave him a new identity and sent him back here, to our Jupiter station. After several weeks without incident, Firas began presenting unusual symptoms, such as sleepwalking. We also discovered his tendency – his talent – for flying his ketch like a paintbrush; "like a brush sketching Jupiter's heavens," as Professor Afdzal of the University of Luna so wonderfully puts it. So we took pains to provide him with a HA-1204-81

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vessel, Heitzmann-Adler AG's most advanced model. And now we record and sell his work. This is how he has become a renowned, celebrated artist!"

The man who'd asked the question seems dissatisfied. "Is Firas aware that his work is being recorded and sold by his employers? Is he being paid a royalty? Does he know he is a slave of the Company?"

At this, the Viewing Hall is suddenly awash with voices. "I see. You are here to register some sort of objection?" Tan Siew Lin says, a little loudly. She looks to her guards near the doors. She nods. The guards approach the man, take him by both arms, and march him out.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Tan Siew Lin says, holding her palms up, trying to smooth the tension. "Do not worry. The contract that Firas signed with us stipulates that any and all labour he performs while employed by the Jovian Mining Company belongs to the Jovian Mining Company. Firas and his work is legally Company property, in perpetuity. And so, if there are no further objections, I shall open the bid at seven billion neo-ringgit. Do I hear seven billion?"

A man in a songkok, high collar, and traditional Malay dress raises his hand.

"Yes, seven billion from the Abdolaye Jimade Endless Heritage Centre. Do I hear eight – yes, I see the representative from Caelius De Bont Post-post-post-postmodern Museum of Art is quick to

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answer. Eight billion."

The auction for Firas's career masterpiece continues through the night, into the next morning.

Hope

By Christina Yin

She opened the door with hope. It had been a long time since she had stepped into the Outdoors. Life Indoors was safe and calm. No one jostled her or pushed her into the Stream. She had been happy there. But Father told her it was time to try something new. When they had spoken that morning through the space-video chat, he had encouraged her to take a short walk in the

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Outdoors. It would be easier than walking on Planet B, he had told her, with a wink and his familiar loving smile. That morning, the connection was so good that it seemed as if Father were just in front of her instead of being a space-shuttle away.

Today, most people in Sektor 13 were at the Malaysia Day celebrations, so Father said it was a good day to brave the Outdoors. Taking a tentative step into the Stream, Jia-Ning saw the tall buildings up close and felt the tropical breeze blowing through her hair. It was such a change from the static air of Indoors! She recognised the Petronas Twin Towers with delight. They were even more majestic in person. Jia-Ning realised that the television images just didn't do the Twin Towers any justice. Perhaps she would recognise more sights if she kept walking on. Why hadn't she braved the Outdoors earlier?

Jia-Ning shoved away the memory of Mother jostling in the crowd in the Outdoors and losing grip of her hand; Father grabbing her and putting her up on his shoulders to keep her from getting separated. Father hadn't seen what she had seen from her height on his shoulders. Uniformed Patrolmen whisked Mother away along with other young mothers in the crowd. They had never seen her again. But soon after, there had been news of the successful landing of the first brave human colonists on humankind's inaugural artificial planet, nicknamed Planet B. These courageous souls had followed the footsteps of other primates that had

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survived the initial phase of populating the planet. The orang-utans and chimpanzees - with DNA most similar to that of *homo sapiens* - had apparently succeeded in breeding in the dipterocarp forests grown from the genetically modified fast-growth Bornean seedlings. It was quite a feat, as orang-utans were notoriously known as the slowest breeding primates on Planet Earth.

Now, as she turned the corner, Jia-Ning saw arrows pointing to Zoo Negara, the Forest, and the Ocean. Which should she choose?

The Forest beckoned.

Father had told her of the trees and flowers that she could see in person; maybe even real-live animals – not the holographic versions at Zoo Negara. She would walk to the Forest today. And if all went well tomorrow, she would try to reach the Ocean.

Jia-Ning looked back just once. The door of the Cell she had stepped out from was now tiny in the distance, but Jia-Ning knew that if she stayed focused, she would be able to make it to the Forest. She felt happier than she had for a long time. It was knowing that the warmth of the sunlight and the tropical breeze that blew her hair were real. Just as real as the Petronas Twin Towers, the KL Tower, and the cheers from the Malaysia Day celebrations. She kept walking towards the Forest.

Around two more corners and there it was! She saw majestic mixed dipterocarp trees reaching upwards towards the blue sky, their leaves rustling

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in the breeze. Were those pig-tailed macaques leaping from branch to branch, making the trees dip and sway with their antics? Jia-Ning swore she could smell the moist earth and fresh growth. As she stepped closer, she started running. It was just too exciting, beautiful, real!

With a crash, Jia-Ning fell, nose bleeding, wrist and knee twisted. She lay crumpled on the hard surface of the Stream. Just beyond, on the screen, the Forest wavered and dimpled. She remembered now why she had stayed so long in the Indoors, where it was always safe and calm. Why she preferred to be there, away from the confusion of mirages and what was called real life. She remembered Mother and the television images of the first colonists landing on Planet B. The newscaster had quoted their leader: One giant leap for *homo sapiens*.... Yet even as she lay on the unbending solid Stream, hurting and crying, she saw the sun peeking through the clouds. She told herself that the morning dewdrops sparkling in the sun's rays on the trees in the Forest were real. They had to be.

Fish Tank

By Sobia Ali

Before I got betrothed to the big trout in the tank, I used to bring people of my own species home. I am not sure, though, which kind of them I fell for. My brothers never let me discover that, though I know well my brothers' preferences. Being their only sister, they depended on me to bring them their likes. The big one who owned the fish tank snatched all my girlfriends and the small one who

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owned nothing except two rows of beautiful teeth stole all the boys I had ever gone out with.

The big one would sit looking through the window pane to the driveway when I returned from school. If it were boys I came with, he would huff and puff and shut himself up in his room. And if it were girls escorting me, he would smack his lips and go upstairs to his room to groom himself up.

The small one would be lurking in the bushes somewhere and peep out through them as I arrived. If it was a girl with me, he would slink off to some corner and weep. And if it was a boy, his eyes would light up the bushes so that smoke came out of them. Then he would go upstairs to brush his teeth, while I fetched water to extinguish the fire. But I did not mind, as I knew the smoke was caused by love, and not by hate.

The big one asked them if they would like to see his fishes and they said yes, we would absolutely love to. Then they would go out in the garden to the fish tank, and I out to the market to get the fish food. You would never have known girls to go for aquatics and those kind of things. You would have thought dogs and cats were more up their lane.

The small one would just stand there grinning at the newcomers, until they asked him which toothpaste brand he used. His eyes would start blazing and I - fearing a second breakout of fire - would bundle them towards his room where he kept all the dental stuff he used to get such

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shining bright teeth. It was really funny the way those boys got taken with teeth, and were entrapped like flies in a spider's web.

When my brothers were engaged with the people I had brought into their lives, I had to look after the house and the fish. You would never guess how much hard work there is to be done in maintaining a fish tank. There is cleaning of the tank, draining water, filling the tank with freshwater, balancing bio load and rate of nutrients, and reducing nitrate and phosphate. What with using the algae scraper, sponge, and vacuum in my debilitated physical condition.

Besides, now that my brothers were happily unavailable, I had to pay the bills, arrange for meals, and do the laundry. I had to take care of the garden where weeds came above our knees and plants were dying of suffocation. Termites had taken over the work of hollowing out all the furniture in the house, and wasps had their nests on the window sills.

Sometime in my runs around the house, I'd stumble on my brothers snuggling with my exes. I hardly recognised *their kind* now, and then only by the fact that they were with which one of my brothers. They always called *hello how do you do* and waved at me. I would wave back at them and hurry to buy flakes, pellets, and flies and worms. Sometimes I did try to remember how it had felt like to sit and talk with them. But it was all before the trout proposed to me.

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Of course, I had been approached by a few others too, and it was a really hard choice to choose one from amongst them, they all being so beautiful and clever. Naturally there had been much speculation going in the tank before I said yes to the big trout. There was one with blue stripes and an egg white underside who was much besotted with me, and was quite heart-broken when I rejected him for the big trout.

There was one goldfish that stared at me all the time. I think it was a she, the same sex thing, you know. It could never confess her feelings to me, the miserable creature. Once I laughed at it, one of those demonic impulses to hurt others that sometimes comes over us. It drank a lot of water and sank low in the tank. I was very sorry it had choked itself to death.

When I said yes to the big trout much sadness did spread throughout the whole tank. There was sulking and moping, and no one would eat - except the trout. It wolfed down all the food in the sheer happiness of winning me over. Then they all got jealous of it and chased it to the remotest corner, where it sat trembling with fear. My poor darling trout. I could not hold back my tears and bit my lip in anger so hard I drew blood.

I picked up the rod we kept nearby to stop fishes from fighting, and struck all the fishes clamouring for the big trout's blood on their heads. They all started bleeding and tearing at each other. The smell of blood and the flurry of ongoing orgy

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attracted my darling trout and it came out on the surface. It blinked its big eyes and beckoned me over. Then gently and lovingly, it sucked the blood on my lips.

<Fin>