VIEW OF STARS

A

Stories of Love

EDITED BY ANITHA DEVI PILLAI & FELIX CHEONG A young Peranakan teacher, a Malayalee bride thousands of miles away from home during WWII and an interracial couple in modern times all face a similar predicament – do they abandon convention and follow their beckoning hearts? What if Cinderella's evil stepmother had loved her? What if events from the 10th century Japanese court took place in Singapore? What if a single decision, one moment or an unspoken wish changed your life forever?

Between these pages, a reader will discover how different we are as people, and how unique as individuals, but also how alike we are in our need to connect, and in our desire to tell our stories. Ranging from re-visions of well-known romantic legends to personal re-imaginings of family stories, this collection is finally an affirmation of the transformative and creative potential of love, and of its power to move us.

– Asst Prof Wernmei Yong Ade, NTU

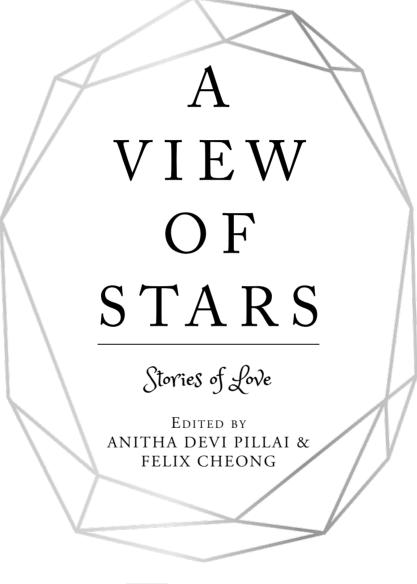
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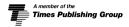






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Poem "I Watch the Stars Go Out" by Felix Cheong from I Watch the Stars Go Out (Ethos Books, 1999).

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For Theijes Therrat Menon, may you find a love that brings you a lifetime of unbridled joy and comfort. – ADP

> For Dad and Mom, in remembrance and love. – FC

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PREFACE

What love is, when love is not. How love is, why love is not.

We can peel its petals many times over but the sunflower that is love remains as bright and unyielding, its face always opening to the light.

It is a thing of splendour and beauty: child-likeness and sometimes, the likeness of a child; aged and at times, damaged; hellbent and oftentimes, a godsend.

We can sing of its mysteries and hurts, its giving and forgiving ways, how it bends and mends.

In praise or lament of love, we have written arias and pop songs, plays and parables, movies and TV shows, books and poems, Facebook posts and blogs. Indeed, generations have generated words that wound around wounds, and band-aid of pages that began in remembrances past and looking to infinity ahead.

Yet, in spite it all – or because of it – love is its own cliché. All we can say about it, hand to heart, a kiss hovering in the air, is it still moves, like God, in mysterious ways. We experience and know

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For Review Only

it, in our time, by our own reckoning. And by its particularity and peculiarity, love is paradoxically universal.

It was the universal traits of love that was the topic of conversation one morning between Anitha Devi Pillai and Anita Teo that planted the seed for this anthology. Both had love stories of their strong-willed grandmothers to share and when Felix Cheong joined the conversation, he too had one about his parents. The conversation continued with other writers and seventeen heartwarming and memorable stories were collected, many of which were inspired by true events or by well-known epic tales. The stories include author commentaries that provide an additional lens to understand the writers' inspiration and creation.

This book would not have been possible without the unwavering faith of managing editor Anita Teo, senior editor Shereen Wong and designer Lynn Chin. We are deeply grateful that they helped to weave their magic in making this book a reality. We are also indebted to Assistant Professor Wernmei Yong Ade for her kind endorsement of this anthology as well as the fifteen authors who have contributed stories to this book.

We hope that *A View of Stars: Stories of Love* will make your heart smile and sigh with us.

Anitha Devi Pillai Felix Cheong

I WATCH THE STARS GO OUT

FELIX CHEONG

Perhaps love is a view of stars through the telescope of years, now aged, no longer uncommitted in chosen places nor fearful of that strident moment when light explodes into a million shards of heart.

BYGONE

YEARS

AN UNUSUAL ARRANGEMENT

Anitha Devi Pillai ★★★

It was a new day in 1924 and a special birthday for Chellamma; for not only had she turned twelve, her wedding too was barely a few hours away.

Her mother had woken her up at dawn to give her an extralong massage that day with homemade oil made from coconut, red hibiscus flowers and almonds from their garden. Each family in the village had their own concoction of oil but theirs was the most coveted one. The villagers believed that Chellamma's family's pitch-black hair and youthful skin were attributed to their weekly oil baths and massages using their family's centuryold secret blend of homemade oil. No one in her family had grey hair nor wrinkled skin – well, at least not until one was in their late seventies.

To her great annoyance, she was not allowed to swim and linger in their family's fresh-water pond with her cousins, despite it being a special day. Instead, all she had for company that morning was her grandmother and aunts.

"Bathe quickly! What will they say about our family if you are not dressed when they arrive? And don't go climbing trees for mangos with Gopalan ... did you hear me?"

Chellamma rolled her eyes in annoyance. She had not even seen Gopalan in the last two days.

Everyone had something to say to her that morning. After more rituals and prayers, she was ushered into a room on the upper floor of their two-storey house. Now that she was to be married in a few hours, she was told that this was her room henceforth. It was her favourite room in the house as it faced their village's only river. The womenfolk had more instructions on her new daily routine from the next day onwards as a married woman. She barely paid attention to what the women were saying.

"I wonder if he is handsome."

She had not meant to speak those words aloud. But the women in the room understood her. None of them had seen the groom either. All they knew was that she was lucky to marry him as he was a man of considerable means and grit. He had, after all, left the comforts of his sprawling home at the age of sixteen in search of a job in Singapore. Rumour had it that he was not on the best of terms with his maternal uncle and was eager to fly the coop as soon as he could. And now having made his own fortune, he had returned, at the age of twenty-one. This time he was ready to 'take a bride' in his hometown.

Soon it was time and her grandmother entered her room with her family jewellery, a stunning two-piece cotton sari with thick gold borders and a blouse that stopped a few inches below her breasts. Chellamma was the first amongst them to don a blouse under the sari wrapped around her chest for her wedding. In keeping with the times, she did not have a hair wound into a round coil on the side of her head. Instead, her mother parted Chellamma's luxurious thick hair in the centre and plaited it loosely. The womenfolk, who were gathered in the hallway, cooed in delight when they saw her for the first time in her wedding attire, remarking how times had changed in their ancestral home.

The day itself was etched in her memory, for that was when she met him – her Krishnan.

She had been impatient to get a glimpse of him without being seen from the western wing of the house where the women stood. She tiptoed and craned her neck over her aunts' shoulders just as he entered her home with an entourage largely made up of barechested men in stark white dhotis and a piece of white cloth over their shoulders.

Krishnan was a tall man with broad shoulders and at least two heads taller than all the men in her family. He certainly looked so out of place in her home in his long-sleeved white cotton shirt that he had rolled up just above his elbows and khaki-coloured pants from Singapore. He was also the first man that she had seen in her community who did not spot a tuft of hair on his head.

But he didn't notice her. Like everyone else in the room, he too was transfixed by the hanging brass oil lamps around the four sides of the courtyard and the sight of the 1,001 lotus flowers her older brother Gopalan had gathered to decorate the courtyard. Delicately strung lotus garlands were woven around the teakwood pillars and brass chains holding up the oil lamps. There were purplish-pink lotus flowers in every nook and cranny. It was unusual to decorate the home so extravagantly for a wedding ceremony. In years to come, the village folk would reminisce about a brother foraging the surrounding villages for his sister's favourite flowers to decorate the palatial house up the hill.

For all the hurry-burry that had consumed their home earlier in the day, the ceremony itself was a simple one. Krishnan was made to sit on a wooden plank next to a brightly lit tall oil lamp in the middle of their courtyard. Chellamma was instructed to kneel on the ground in front of him by her oldest aunt. As custom dictated, she faced east. She faced him.

"She looks tiny!" said someone seated on the left. Relatives were gathered around the four sheltered sides of the open courtyard.

Under the shimmering light from the stars of the midnight blue sky above, Krishnan carefully placed a traditional Kerala sari much like what she was wearing in her hands.

"Hello ... I'm Balakrishnan," he said in English. A few of her relatives sniggered. Someone said something naughty leading to more giggles from her cousins standing on the far left of the courtyard.

He wasn't supposed to speak to her until they were alone. But he was hardly like any of the other men in the room. He was the "foreign-returned groom" and as such, forgiven for his transgressions.

She didn't pay any heed to the whispers around her. Gossip and small talk never bothered her. All she could think of at that moment was that, for a man built like a wrestler, Krishnan had a gentle voice.

She spied bottles of gingelly oil for her hair, foreign-looking perfume bottles, areca nuts and betel leaves on the gift trays that his relatives had brought for her. Her aunt then sprinkled rice over both their heads and shoulders. With that, the wedding ceremony ended. But the fragrance of the lotus flowers lingered in the air for several days, reminding her of new status.

The next few years were blissful and they were blessed with three children. But for a man who had tasted independence at a young age, he was restless and homesick for the sounds and smells of Singapore.

He regaled her with stories of roads so wide and clean you could sleep on them and about the people of different races whom he had worked with. He taught her several Malay words that he had picked up. Everyone in Singapore spoke Malay most of the time and English sometimes, he said. He told her that people were the same underneath and that they had more in common than they knew. That both Chinese and Malayalees believed that the gates of the underworld were thrown open at the same time of the year. While Malayalees celebrated the occasion with a feast and lighting oil lamps to welcome their King Mahabali from the underworld and called it Onam, the Chinese welcomed their ancestors by laying out a feast for them on the streets and burning joss sticks for their blessings. They called it the Hungry Ghost Festival.

"*Aiyee* So, all the underworld subjects take a holiday in Malaya? Even, they take a holiday ... and travel long distance!"

They burst out laughing in the dead of the night, annoying the family dog who started howling. That only made them laugh harder.

"Are there any Malayalee women there? What do the *Singapur* women look like? Who is prettier? I or the women in small frocks in *Singapur*?"

He sidestepped some of her questions. He knew she was just teasing him.

"The women are so beautiful ... you should meet my boss, Devanathan Pillay's wife ... she is ..." "They are Malayalees?"

"Noooo ... my boss is a Chetti Melaka. They are half-Malay and half-Indian ... who knows ... maybe they do have Malayalee roots."

"Ahh ... okay ... Did you have a girlfriend in *Singapur*?" she asked in jest, another day, not really expecting him to answer.

"Well ... for a while, I thought Pillay's wife liked me. She was quite young ... younger than me. One day, when I went to collect Pillay's lunch, she asked me if I could get her a traditional Kerala sari. She spoke for a long time about how good-looking our people were. She touched my arm once or twice. I was only nineteen years old ... I thought ... oh ... you know ... well, you know what giving a woman a sari means in our culture ... I thought that was a hint."

Chellamma attempted to smother the laughter that rose up from her belly in his chest. But her heaving laughter got him laughing too, albeit rather sheepishly. In retrospect, it was funny. He had been heartbroken for a while when he realised that all she wanted was to cut up the sari that he had gifted her to make into a skirt. He had gone to great lengths to procure a new Kerala sari from a friend's family.

"Aiyoh! These foreigners ... you know ... my Malayalam Miss (Malayalam teacher) told my class a story once about a Governor of Madras, a British man, a Sir Mou ... something something Duff, who offered a lady in Travancore ... maybe was it our Travancore Queen ... I don't know ... well apparently he offered her a beautiful fabric from Madras right in front of her family ..."

Neither of them could stop giggling as it was clear where the story was headed.

"She goes ... no ... no ... thank you, sir ... I am quite satisfied

with my present husband ... I can't accept your fabric ..."

They squealed in laughter and almost rolled off their bed.

She had a million other questions for him every night. And he was only too eager to quell her curiosity with tales that often sounded too good to be true of a land far away, filled with strange practices and ways.

"You know, Chellam, they are not like us ... there is a stigma about divorce. Women don't leave their husbands. All of them ... Chinese, Malays and even the British ... their women stay by their men. In fact, there ... the men are the heads of the households, not the women."

His stories and their banter kept them up half the night on most nights.

"Are there any vegetarians like us? What did you eat there?

"Oh, Chellam! The food ... No way, you don't want to be a vegetarian there ... there is so much variety ... there is this Chinese dish – Hokkien mee. It's a noodle dish ... like the string hoppers that you make ... and they add another type of noodle to it ... a thicker one made from rice or wheat flour and egg. The Chinese hawkers fry these noodles with prawns, eggs and pork pieces and wrap it up in a large *opeh* leaf ... do you know what an *opeh* leaf is? It's not really a leaf ... it is actually the bark of a betel nut tree ... and oh, Chellam ... the fragrance that you get when you open the package at home ... ahhh."

He raised his five fingers to his lips and kissed them.

"Nothing in Kerala comes close to it ... why did the Chinese only leave woks and fishing nets in Kerala! They should have left their noodles and recipes here ..."

She was perceptive enough to notice the faraway look in his eyes that kept getting longer and longer. On those nights, she

didn't push him any further for answers. Once a man had tasted adventure, there really was no going back.

So, when he broached the topic of returning to Singapore several years later, she wasn't surprised, nor did she have the heart to stop him. He was getting increasingly nostalgic about Singapore and restless in their village. The straw that broke the camel's back was when his maternal uncle refused to allow him to spend his hard-earned money from Singapore on new clothes for his children on Onam day. Everything Krishnan had earned in Singapore had been added to his family's coffers.

By now, she was a mother of three and her youngest was still a baby. There was no question of her leaving with him. Besides, women from her community generally lived in their maternal ancestral home their entire lives with their children rather than with their husbands in separate homes. Her great-grandmother, the matriarch of their family, had done so. Even her mother had done so. Fathers did not always play a big role in their children's lives. Inheritance and descent were traced through females.

There was really nothing she could do, but let him go and fervently pray that he would return soon.

Barely had a year gone by when her younger brother, Sivashankaran, raced home with a Malayalam newspaper in his hands from the tea shop. Chellamma had just gotten all three children to nap when he burst into the room shrieking.

"Japan is going to attack Singapore. *Aliyan* (brother-in-law) can never come back ... at least not till the war ends. If he is ..."

Their home was mayhem for the next few hours with family and neighbours gathering and contemplating what to do. Some brought news from their relatives in Singapore that they had received in the aerogrammes a few days before. Someone mentioned that the ship leaving Madras at the end of the month for Malaya was the last one for now, as the route was getting too dangerous. No one knew when travel would resume between the two countries.

Others said that the Japanese troops were no match for the British soldiers who were far bigger and stronger.

It was then that she said the words that changed the fates and lives of her descendants forever.

"I have to go to him. Come what may, in good times or bad times, my life is with him!"

It was an unusual stance to take for a young woman in her late twenties from a respectable Nayar family. But they were at the brink of changes that were sweeping across Kerala. Ancestral homes like theirs were beginning to crumble around them in the face of reforms to inheritance and marriage laws sweeping through Kerala.

Maybe her great-grandmother too recognised that things were changing in Kerala. With so many of the men leaving for jobs overseas and rejecting the old ways, there was a concerted push to change their customs. Or maybe, she recognised the look in Chellamma's eyes.

"Let her go! Send Krishnan a telegram. Send the boys with her too ... just in case ... they can look after her and help with the children."

The matriarch of the house had spoken. She ruled the home of fifty-eight extended family with an iron fist. No one disobeyed her – not even her older brother.

She then took her oldest grandson's hand and half-dragged him out to the garden behind their home. It was clear to everyone where she was headed. The matriarch was leading Gopalan to the serpent shrine – the home of the guardian and protector of their

An Unusual Arrangement 23

ancestral home. Several members of the family followed them. It was an important moment. No one from their family had left the country before.

This time – in a much calmer voice – she addressed her oldest grandson. "Gopala, promise me in front of our serpent shrine that you will bring Chellamma back to this land safely after the war. You know that she's the eldest of the cousins ... one day she will run this home. It's her duty. And when she does, she will need you by her side to help her. Promise me that both of you will come back."

One did not renege on a promise made at the serpent shrine. Everyone knew that.

Soon, arrangements were made for them to leave her village and the country for the first time. They booked a second-class cabin on SS *Rajula*. It was comfortable, with four bunk beds, and they could even bring a servant boy along for free if they wished. They passed off their sixteen-year-old brother, Sivashankaran, as one. But the journey itself was debilitating. Chellamma found that she had to care for four seasick "children", including her teenage brother and deal with the impending danger of getting caught in the crossfire of the war.

So, it was a relief when the captain announced that they had reached the shores of Singapore. Her children ran amok on the ship's deck screaming away pointing to the island in the distance, "Amma ... Maama (maternal uncle) ... Amma ... look ... Singapur ... Singapur..."

Frankly, she could not make out the figures on the shores. All she knew was that there was one more hurdle between Krishnan and her. The ship stopped short of docking at the harbour. She watched in horror as the crew threw rope ladders down the sides of the ship and instructed all passengers to disembark quickly into the waiting boats.

No one on board seemed to protest. Everyone was all too eager to escape the ship and get to the safety of the shore.

They say love gives you strength. Love and her Guruvayurappan (her favourite deity) gave her strength that day to climb down the rope in her sari whilst clasping one child in her hand and coaxing the other two to move slowly to the waiting boats, ready to take them to the shore. Her brothers handled their luggage.

Then she saw him. There he was in the sea of men, standing taller than everyone around him, with his signature broad smile and holding a bunch of lotus flowers in his hands.

As soon as they stepped onto the shore, her daughter, Devagi, dashed towards Krishnan's outstretched arms. Chellamma smiled as she watched Krishnan bend over, ready to hug his daughter. But for some reason, both of them fell to the ground. Next to her, Gopalan too tumbled to the ground and as he did, frantically stretched out his hand to her. Chellamma saw Devagi yell out and Krishnan falling on her. But she could not hear the screams. All she could hear was a sharp ringing in her ears that would not stop and that she would never forget in her lifetime.

The Japanese had dropped a bomb on Keppel Harbour – merely a stone's throw away from where her family stood.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In our family, stories about strong-willed women who were a force to reckon with are bountiful.

My favourite is of my paternal grandmother, Chellamma Amma, who had told her family: "Come what may, in good times or bad times, my life is with him." It is said that with those words, she packed her bags and her three young children and travelled by road to Madras (now Chennai) from Kerala and then by ship to Singapore just on the brink of the Japanese invasion of Malaya. We believe she was on the last ship from Madras just before the war started. Unable to stop her from leaving, the family had sent two of her brothers with her to Singapore. That much is true.

The story, "An Unusual Arrangement", itself is fictionalised. I have taken the artistic license to imagine what my grandmother's life would have been like in the 1920s based on what I have heard. My grandmother was a brave soul who defied tradition and customs to remain married to my grandfather, Pozhikkara Vaazhavilla Veedu Balakrishnan Pillai. You see, the Nayar community (amongst others in Kerala) are traditionally matrilineal. They lived in an ancestral home made up of members who descended from a common female ancestress. The system was intended to protect women and provide them with a home as the men in the community were conventionally in the military and as such often absent or dead. The matriarch was the head of these homes and ran it with the help of her brother or the oldest male. The relationship between a brother and sister was perceived to be far more sacrosanct than the one between husband and wife. Maternal uncles were responsible for the upbringing of their sisters' children.

Husbands visited their wives in the evenings and returned home at dawn. Although the relationships could be for life, there was no stigma to changing partners if either party wished to do so. Their marriage (*samanthams* in Malayalam, meaning union) itself was a simple ceremony comprising the husband giving his wife a sari/cloth. Matriliny started fading out around the 1940s in Kerala.

In Singapore, my family lived in Sembawang and my grandparents had four more children, including my father. They finally returned to India in the mid-1970s. But they were not welcome at either of their ancestral homes, as no one was willing to share their portion of the property. Not one to be defeated easily, my grandfather built my grandmother a one-storey home in another town called Paripally and named it 'Happy Villa'. My grandmother outlived her husband by about twenty years and passed away peacefully when she was eighty years old in 1992.

Her younger brother, Sivashankaran, migrated to the UK in the 1970s. Gopalan, who had grown increasingly desolate waiting for his sister to agree to return home with him, finally left Singapore in the 1960s and cut all ties with the family. The last they had heard was that he was working as a mandor at Nam Heng Estate in Johor, Malaysia. But despite their best efforts to contact him, no one heard from him ever again. Gopalan's only wish, to keep his promise to bring his sister, the rightful owner of their ancestral home, back to Kerala, was never fulfilled. Little did he know that Chellamma did return to Kerala several years later – albeit without him.

HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER

Felix Cheong ★★★

Move, damn it.

I was willing the hands of my watch to move faster. It was just about, nearly, almost, close to, borderline-but-never-quite seven o'clock.

Bloody hell. Time sure knew how to take its own sweet time. Peter saw my face, tense like a hawk waiting for its breakfast to weaken and die. He laughed and gave my left shoulder a light slap.

"Relax lah, John," he said, leaning in for a light on his second 555 stick. "The sun's not even fully awake yet."

Peter was one year my junior, probably had more carbon in his lungs than a man twice his age, and was my best friend as far back as our first fight at five or six years old.

Freddy, my brother three years below me in the family tree but behaved like he had already climbed higher, joined in the ribbing. Exhaling so slowly you could practically count each molecule of smoke, he said, "Yah, she's coming lah. No girl would want to miss your ogling."

I winced. How right he was.

To the untrained eye, we were nothing more than three ruffians, in our tight shirts and drainpipe jeans, hanging around outside our kampong off Geylang Lorong 3. Three goons with nothing else better to do than shoot the breeze with cheap jokes and even cheaper cigarettes.

In truth, we were three boys recently released by the starting gun into adulthood: Peter, to a motorcar workshop opposite Gay World as a mechanic; Freddy, to an office in Collyer Quay where he held a job as a clerk or something equally mind-numbing, and me to Times Printers where I had begun my apprenticeship as a printer.

This was our morning ritual set into motion not long after we declared ourselves independent by virtue of our monthly pay cheque. Freddy and I would bounce out of bed at six and down a quickie breakfast of bread and *kaya*. Or sometimes it was just a cup of *kopi* equivalent in acidity to Ma. We would take care to Tancho down our hair in front of the mirror till we looked Elvis-calm and felt Presley-collected. Then we would rendezvous with Peter here for our obligatory puff.

And watch half a dozen kampong girls on their saunter to the seamstress factory down the road.

In that daily parade of skirts, I would pick her out immediately. She wasn't outstanding because of her height – she was at least a head shorter than me – or hair (thank goodness she didn't spot the beehive that was the buzz around town). She wasn't talkative, smiling quietly at the banter between her friends. And most of all, she wasn't flashy; a simple top and matching skirt would do. Whether polka dot or floral, solid colour or striped, it didn't matter, because her taste was just right, and the whole getup would be held together by a black belt hugging her slim waist.

And yet, she was all that my eyes zoomed in on and paid attention to. Maybe it was her high cheekbones or the shape of her lips. Maybe it was the story in her eyes or the gentle slope of her body. Or maybe it was that gait that made no attempt to exaggerate her curves. Whatever it was that didn't call attention to herself, I was besotted.

There was a moment last week when she had turned to me as she walked by, caught my eyes in the fullness of their longing, and blushed – or what I thought was a blush.

It was like a scene from a Patrick Tse movie. You know that awkward moment when the boy first locked eyes with the girl and the music swelled to the beat of their heart? Yes, *that* moment in *that* scene. Except that I never quite followed through on the script.

I couldn't, and I shouldn't.

Who was I anyway? I was just nineteen years old, still rough around the edges. Not much of a looker, not much of an education either. No real prospects, no real future, as Ma would have me know a couple of times a day; just a job that paid \$100 a month to get my hands blackened by day's end, printing newspapers I could barely read from cover to cover.

It was Peter, sensing I had already dipped my toes into that muddy pool called Love, who asked around the kampong for her name. And the grapevine promptly resounded with an answer: Ah Ting.

Ah Ting. What a good old-fashioned Hokkien name, so becoming of a girl so understated. Ah Ting. Ting, ting, like a bell that would wake me from dreams into the sharp light of morning. Or the diffused glow of the future. Even though she and I were practically neighbours – she was living at the furthest end of the kampong – I had never seen her before. It was a small community – thirty to forty households at most – so it still baffled me why I had not met her before.

"Why don't you tackle her?" Peter said, shaking me out of my reverie. I craned my neck, waved at the *makchik* next door who was dragging her two unwilling children to the Geylang Serai market.

Where were the girls? They were usually not this late. I would have to leave soon to catch the bus to Times House. Kim Seng Road was a good forty minutes away.

"I think Ah Ting likes you!" Peter continued. "She's wearing red every day. Now, what does that tell you?"

"Yah," Freddy said. He had the annoying habit of picking up conversational crumbs from Peter. "When girls wear like that in the office, I also want to tackle! Don't give chance!"

I leaned towards him with my good ear. "Give what?"

"Don't give chance!" he repeated. He was used to my condition, the result of Ma slapping me so hard when I was thirteen years old – for steal-eating a leftover slice of fish in the fridge – that it permanently damaged my right eardrum.

I shrugged. They must have left for work much earlier. Damn it. Just as I was to give up hope, Hope came along.

And today, Hope was wearing all red, as she had done the past few days. Maybe Peter was right. Maybe it was a signal. A hint of permission to approach her, a red flag that fluttered in the wind to get me all worked up and going.

She looked at me again. And smiled. A curl of the lips, ever so subtle. But a smile it was.

I was too shocked to return the compliment.

* * *

Move, damn it. Make a move, John.

But I couldn't, for the simple reason I was on the night shift, which began at 8pm and ended after 4am, for the next two weeks.

I had never been on cloud nine before. But throughout that fortnight, there was no other way to describe my light-headedness. Because I got home almost at dawn, I could not hang out with Freddy and Peter for another glimpse of her.

Still, I was feeling heady, fluff following the flow of the wind. And wherever it blew, there I would drift.

It was so distracting I almost lost the tip of my right middle finger because my hand had moved slower than the paper cutter. I just managed to pull it out in time. That was a close call.

Even Ma noticed something was different – or amiss. In the middle of a long-winded nag – it was typically how she unwound after work – she stopped in mid-sentence.

"You been taking ganja or what, smiling like an idiot?"

I pretended not to hear what she said, but still nodded. With Ma, anything other than a "yes" would have been summarily taken as defiance.

"I don't know what kind of people you mix with outside. You and that useless boy Peter will never amount to anything," she said. "Not like Freddy. See, he's so smart he can get an office job in town. What good are you? I should have laid an egg and eaten it with soya sauce instead of giving birth to you."

And so it went, round and around. None of it was new, of course. The family story, told and retold till it was an article of faith, was that a few years after I was born, my father had a stroke and passed away. He had just successfully crossed the threshold of forty. Why Ma hated me and not Freddy, I'd never know. And Ma, widowed at thirty-four, had never forgiven me for what she thought was the bad luck I had brought.

Before her tirade could permit itself another breath, I escaped into my room, sat on my bed, wistful.

Ah Ting, Ah Ting. What was she doing now?

* * *

"We have an idea!" Peter said when we met again two weeks later. We were doing our best to stay cool - no, look cool, which was more difficult, given we had no money – despite the heat. I was back on the day shift, listless and restless. Maybe it was the two cups of *kopi* I had had to tune my body back to daylight hours, aching in areas I didn't know before.

The airy-fairy feeling was still there, like my head was inside a bubble inside another bubble. Even though I knew where Ah Ting lived, I still couldn't work up the courage to walk up to her doorstep and ask her out to a tea dance. Or a movie at Odeon. I wouldn't know what to do with a "no" for an answer.

"We have a plan," Freddy said. "We came up with it yesterday. But first, one cigarette each to thank us."

"This had better be worth it!" I said.

Just as I surrendered my 555 pack, a sudden confluence of events happened.

First, I saw Ah Ting and her friends ambling towards us. My heart leapt. She was all giggles, more chatty than usual and, more importantly, still wearing red. And she waved at me. A slightest flick of her right wrist.

A good sign, definitely.

Just as I was about to wave back, a blue Volkswagen that smelt of old money made its way down the narrow *lorong* and stopped in front of the girls. From where we were perched on the railing, we saw a young fellow, probably a couple of years older than me, chatting with Ah Ting. She laughed, waved goodbye to her friends and got into the car.

Not a good sign, definitely.

Peter and Freddy looked at me with concern. Even their cigarettes stopped exhaling. You could hear the whole universe drop.

Without another word, I stormed off to work. That was that.

* * *

The talk around the kampong the next few weeks was the General Elections, which would eventually propel a certain Lee Kuan Yew to power. I didn't pay it much heed. None of us were old enough to vote anyway, though the possibility of independence was all Peter could talk about as we made our way to the community centre, where we were minutes away from our riskiest adventure yet in our short life – learning Mandarin.

It was all to please Freddy who had recently told us, long and loud – within earshot of the whole kampong, in fact – about a sweet girl in the office he had a crush on. "But she speaks only Chinese," he said, his eyes faraway and dreamy. I recognised that look straightaway.

It was a dangerous situation to be in -I had almost lost my middle finger to a machine because of it. By then, I had already stilled my heart and given up on pursuing Ah Ting. That bubble inside my head had been painfully pricked by a Volkswagen-shape

pin. She was clearly out of reach and out of my league. There was no way in heaven or hell – and the many worlds in-between – I could compete with a rich man's son.

"The three times I tried to make small talk with her," Freddy continued, "it was like a chicken talking to a duck."

We empathised, of course, as smoking buddies were wont to do. So, without giving the matter another thought, Peter and I signed up for the evening class too. After all, to know another language was to avail ourselves another hook to bring the fishes in.

Imagine my surprise when we settled down to our seats at the back of the classroom. Five rows in front of us, in a sleeveless top and a pencil skirt, all elegance and grace, was Ah Ting, with four of her factory friends.

Five of them, pretty in a row.

The snigger from Freddy and Peter, when it was obvious my jaw couldn't drop any further, gave the game up.

"We didn't take your cigarettes for free, you know," Peter said in a hushed voice as the teacher, who looked as formidable as the Great Wall of China, came in. "We told you we had a plan!"

"What?" I said, barely able to pick up his whisper.

Ah Ting must have heard the commotion. She turned and smiled, ever so gently.

And for the first time, I smiled back. In that flash, I was Patrick Tse, as the music inside my head began.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story of how my parents met in their youth was only revealed to me at my Dad's wake. All along, my parents had told me they had grown up in the same kampong in Geylang Lorong 3, but the finer, juicier details of how they had dated were modestly whitewashed as "like that lah".

It looked like a backstory Dad would take to his urn (and Mom too, for she also succumbed to pneumonia three weeks later), until Uncle Peter showed up at the wake. One of Dad's oldest childhood friends, he regaled us that evening with the amusing tale of my parents' courtship. Instantly, I recognised in it the framework of a rom-com:

Boy meets girl. Boy falls in love with girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl.

What I didn't include in the story is that Dad still didn't muster the courage to approach Mom even though they were now attending Chinese classes together. So, Uncle Peter and Uncle Freddy had to go one step further: they asked a mutual friend, who was good in Chinese, to write a letter to Mom, purportedly from Dad (I believe they must have learned a trick or two from Cyrano de Bergerac). This letter was then left on her desk.

Dad was surprised when he received a letter from her a few days later, saying, in no uncertain terms, that yes, she would love to go out with him. The rest, as they say, is my family history.

However, I had cut off this tail-end of the tale because I felt that the character was coming across as too passive, that inertia had gotten the better part of him and if he still needed another push from his friend and brother, then he probably wasn't really interested in her in the first place. Which was far from it.

The young man in the blue Volkswagen is entirely fictional, although Mom did tell me that Grandma (my great-grandmother) had wanted to matchmake her with a rich man's son. But she, like Dad, was rebellious (they were, after all, baby boomers and the flower power of the 1960s was beckoning) and took to each other instead.

In fictionalising my parents' love story, I had retained its essence but, with the creative licence afforded to a son and writer, embellished it with humour which I hope would do their memory justice.

ABOUT THE EDITORS



Anitha Devi Pillai (Ph.D.) is an applied linguist and teacher educator at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She is the recipient of three Teaching Awards and a research award. She

received the *Excellence in Teaching Commendation 2018* from the NIE, NTU (Singapore), and the *SUSS Teaching Merit Award* in 2013 and 2014 from the Singapore University of Social Sciences. In 2017, she received the *Research Excellence Award from Pravasi Express* for her research on the Singapore Malayalee community.

Apart from her academic publications, Anitha has authored six books, including *From Kerala to Singapore: Voices from the Singapore Malayalee Community (2017), From Estate to Embassy: Memories of an Ambassador* (2019) and *The Story of Onam* (2020). She has also recently translated a Tamil novel titled *Sembawang: A Novel* (2020) to English. She is currently writing a collection of short stories about the Malayalee community in Singapore and editing a short story compilation for young adults.



Felix Cheong is the author of eighteen books across different genres, including poetry, short stories, flash fiction and children's picture books. His works have been widely anthologised and nominated for the prestigious Frank O'Connor Award and the

Singapore Literature Prize. More recently, his libretto for opera, *At One Time*, was one of three finalists in the New Opera Singapore Open Call for Composition competition. His latest books of poetry, *Oddballs, Screwballs and Other Eccentrics*, and *In the Year of the Virus*, were published in September.

Conferred the Young Artist Award in 2000 by the National Arts Council, Felix has been invited to writers festivals all over the world, such as Edinburgh, Austin, Sydney, Christchurch and Hong Kong. He holds a Masters in Creative Writing and is an associate lecturer with Murdoch University, University of Newcastle, Curtin University and the National University of Singapore.



ABOUT THE WRITERS

Joyce Teo is currently the Vice Dean (Arts Management) at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. She is also an Ethnomusicologist, specialising in gamelan music and enjoys baking to de-stress.



Yeoh Jo-Ann grew up in Malaysia and lives in Singapore. As a teenager, she dreamt of being a cat or a rock star, but instead spent most of her adult life working in publishing, somehow ending up as features editor of a women's magazine before giving it up for a

career in digital marketing. She drinks far too much coffee, doesn't eat vegetables, and exercises too infrequently. Her first novel, *Impractical Uses of Cake*, won the Epigram Books Fiction Prize 2018, and her short stories have been included in anthologies such as *Best Singaporean Short Stories: Volume Three.* Jo-Ann is currently working on her second novel and looks forward to completing it before she tears all of her hair out.



Meira Chand was born and educated in London, and is of Swiss-Indian parentage. She studied art at St Martin's School of Art & Design and has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Western Australia. She relocated to Singapore in

1997. Her multicultural heritage and the confluence of different

cultures in her life is reflected in her novels, which explore issues of identity, belonging and cultural dislocation. Her novels include *A Far Horizon* (2001) and *A Different Sky* (2010), which follows the lives of three families through the thirty tumultuous years leading up to independence. The novel was on Oprah Winfrey's recommended reading list and "Book of the Month" in Waterstones. It was also longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2012. Her latest novel, *Sacred Waters* (2017), moves between two timelines, and is a compelling exploration of two women's struggle to assert themselves in male-dominated societies.



Robert Yeo is 80 in 2020. He published his first book of poems in 1971. He went on to write other books, stage plays, chair drama committees, edit plays and short stories, write essays on Singaporean theatre and literature and a memoir and librettos

for opera. It is a long writing life which he combined with teaching in institutions like the National Institute of Education and the Singapore Management University. His latest books include his 2012 collected poems, *The Best of Robert Yeo*, and the 2016 play, *The Eye of History*. He won the Southeast Asia Write Award in 2011. Volume 2 of his *Memoirs Routes* is scheduled. Photo credit: Laura Schuster



Linda Collins, a New Zealander based in Singapore, is the author of the memoir *Loss Adjustment* and a forthcoming poetry collection, *Sign Language for the Death of Reason. Loss Adjustment* was a *Straits Times* top 10 book of 2019, and Book of

the Year at New York-based *Singapore Unbound*. Linda has an MA in Creative Writing, and was shortlisted for the Hachette Australia

Trans-Tasman mentorship. Her work has appeared in *QLRS, Cordite, The Oyster Bay Review, Literary Mama, Swamp, Turbine, The Fib Review* and *Flash Frontier,* among others; and she received an Honorable Mention in a *Glimmer Train* Very Short Story Contest. Photo credit: Malcolm McLeod



Nuraliah Norasid is a writer and educator. She graduated with a PhD in English Literature and Creative Writing from Nanyang Technological University. Her writing has been published in a number of journals and anthologies such as *Quarterly*

Literary Review Singapore (QLRS), Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writing, Perempuan: Muslim Women in Singapore Speak Out, and Best New Singaporean Short Stories Volume 1. Her debut novel, The Gatekeeper, won the Epigram Books Fiction Prize in 2016.



Rachel Tey is the author of the middle-grade fantasy adventure series, *Tea in Pajamas* and *Tea in Pajamas: Beyond Belzerac*. Outside her day job as a content and communications specialist at a local university, she enjoys escaping into literature

(reading or writing), playing the piano and losing herself in Pinterest. She lives in Singapore with her husband, who illustrated her books, and two children. www.racheltey.com



Elaine Chiew is a Singapore-based writer and visual arts researcher. She is the author of *The Heartsick Diaspora* (Myriad Editions 2020, PRHSEA 2019), and compiler and editor of *Cooked Up: Food Fiction From Around the World* (New Internationalist,

2015). Twice winner of the Bridport Short Story Competition, she has published numerous stories in anthologies in the UK, US and Singapore. Originally from Malaysia, she graduated from Stanford Law School and worked as a corporate securities lawyer in New York, London and Hong Kong. She also received an MA in Asian Art History from Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2017.



Nicholas Yong is the author of *Land of the Meat Munchers*, a zombie novella set in Singapore, and *Track Faults and Other Glitches*, a collection of speculative fiction short stories. In 2017, *Track Faults* was shortlisted for Best Fiction Title at the Singapore

Book Awards. In his day job, Nicholas covers the general beat as a world-weary journalist at Yahoo News Singapore. In between, he spends far too much time 'nerding' out on books, movies and comics, and preparing for the impending zombie apocalypse. Photo credit: Joseph Nair



Jean Tay holds a double-degree in Creative Writing and Economics from Brown University, USA. She has written over twenty plays and musicals, which have been performed worldwide. She has been nominated four times for Best Original Script for the

Life! Theatre Awards, and won for *Everything but the Brain* in 2006. Jean was attached to Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) as resident playwright from 2006-2009, and helmed SRT's Young Company Writing Programme from 2012-2016. Her plays *Everything but the Brain* and *Boom* have been used as 'O' and 'N' Level literature texts. Jean is the founding Artistic Director of Saga Seed Theatre, a platform to bring Singapore stories to the stage.



Vicky Chong graduated with an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts in 2018. Her works have been published in *Readers' Digest*, *The Graduate, Business Mirror* in the Philippines and *Singapore Marketer*, among others. In 2017, her short

story, "Chun Kia", was one of 10 pieces selected for the 2017 George Town Literary Festival Fringe publication, *The Zine*. Another short story, "The Uber Driver", won third prize in the 2018 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards Asia-Pacific.



Noelle Q. de Jesus is the author of two short story collections, *Cursed and Other Stories* and *Blood Collected Stories*, which has a French translation, *Passeport*. Noelle has an MFA in Fiction from Bowling Green State University in Ohio, and has won recognition

for her short stories. Her work has been anthologised and published in *Puerto del Sol, Mud Season Review, Witness,* and *New Limestone Review,* among others. She wrote the chicklit novel, *Mrs MisMarriage,* under the name Noelle Chua. She lives in Singapore with her husband, with whom she has two adult children, and she is currently trying to finish a novel.



Aysha Baqir grew up in Pakistan. Her time in Mount Holyoke College sparked a passion for economic development. In 1998, she founded a pioneering not-for-profit economic development organisation, Kaarvan Crafts Foundation, with a

mission to alleviate poverty by providing business and marketing training to girls and women in low-income communities. Her novel, *Beyond the Fields*, was launched at the Lahore and Karachi

Literary Festivals and was featured in the 2019 Singapore Writers Festival. Her interviews, book reviews, articles and short stories have appeared in *Ex-pat Living, The Herald, Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly, Kitaab, The Tempest*, and Singapore Writer's Group Forum, Borderless, and Countercurrents. She is an Ashoka Fellow. www.ayshabaqir.com



Dennis Yeo began his career as an author with a composition published in the school magazine when he was in Secondary Two. Today, he unleashes his literary energies by assailing his unsuspecting Facebook friends with a continuous barrage of

pretentious haikus. An educator by trade, he is living proof that appreciating Literature, teaching Literature and producing Literature are mutually exclusive endeavours. His dabbling in creative writing has resulted in the publication of four poems thus far. This is his virgin foray into prose. The world waits with bated breath for his yet unwritten dramatic work.



Inez Tan is the author of *This Is Where I Won't Be Alone: Stories*, which was a national bestseller. A recent Kundiman fellow, she has won the Academy of American Poets Prize, and her writing has been featured in *The Rumpus, Rattle, The Adroit Journal,*

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