

For Review Only

THE
COMMUTING
READER

EDITED BY
YONG SHU HOONG

HERE
NOW
THERE
AFTER

Marshall Cavendish Editions

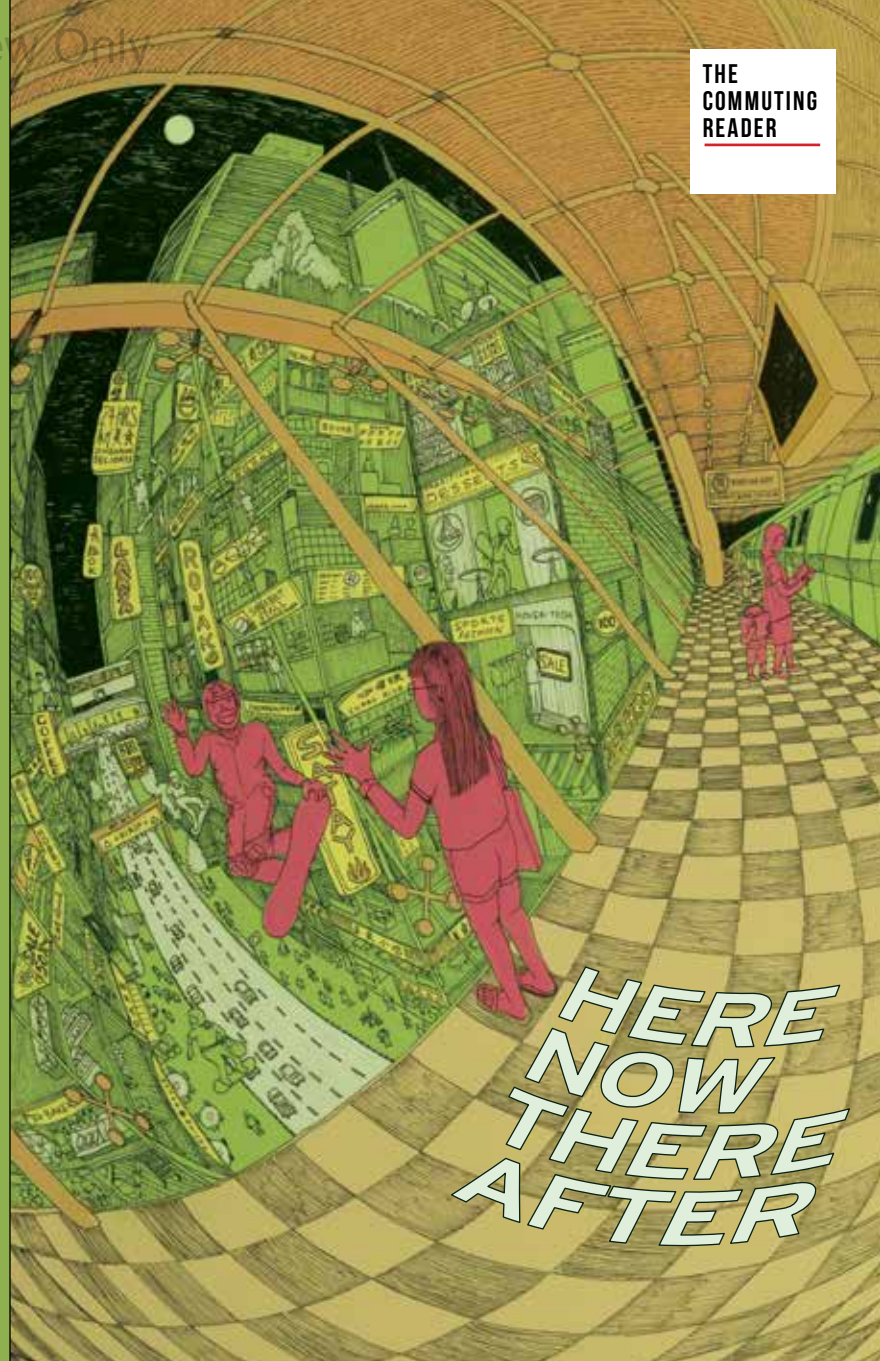
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Featuring: Balli Kaur Jaswal, Cheryl Julia Lee, Dave Chua, Gwee Li Sui, Joshua Ip, Koh Hong Teng, Marc Nair, Neil Humphreys, O Thiam Chin, Stephanie Ye, Troy Chin, Xiao Yan and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow.



HERE
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FICTION

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NEIL HUMPHREYS' works on Singapore – from *Notes from an Even Smaller Island* (2001) to *Saving a Sexier Island: Notes from an Old Singapore* (2015) – have put him among the nation's bestselling authors. He is also the mischief-maker behind the Inspector Low series of crime thrillers, which includes *Marina Bay Sins* (2015) and *Rich Kill Poor Kill* (2016).



DRUNK AND ORDERLY ON THE MRT

THE GUY ON the train was drunk. He had to be. No one behaved in such a belligerent fashion, scratching away at the skin and just about tearing off his face, on a crowded MRT train. Not in Singapore.

Train journeys are silent, sterile and occasionally awkward affairs, much like the rest of the public transport system. Society tolerates its people's odd breakdowns in public, the occasional embarrassments, but no more than that.

On the train, as in life, calm exteriors prevail. A Little Red Dot built on an unnatural island and propped up by a delicate facade couldn't afford too many wobbles. They fray the edges of the multicultural fabric. They pull at its seams, putting the security blanket at risk.

And everyone loves a security blanket.

In Singapore, it is the phone. The ubiquitous, cowardly phone. The phone is a pathway to seclusion, an escape: an excuse to opt out. The phone allows users to record society's every waking moment without ever really participating. The phone champions and isolates the individual, putting the self into selfie.

But the Drunk was messing up the system.

He was getting into the headspace of others. On a train carriage filled with sweaty people sharing stale oxygen and body odours, he was breaking the pact. He was tampering with the public transport code of conduct.

Commuters are expected to mingle. Hips bump. Shoulders barge in a rugby scrum of white collars, but the fragile peace endures. Physical contact is considered a necessary evil. Verbal contact is not. Raging rants against the trundling machines are consistent, persistent and eternally apoplectic, but they are confined to whirring thumbs. Social media takes the abuse so social decorum remains on the trains.

Seething silence is also golden.

But the Drunk had lost his face and replaced it with a red one, full of streaky blood vessels but free of inhibitions. The smile had morphed into a grotesque sneer. His tattoos snaked through his veiny arms and glistened with perspiration. His grubby vest accentuated the tattoos and the tattoos accentuated the uncertainty, the rising fear in the carriage. Tattoos were frowned upon in Singapore. This Chinese guy had gone under the needle to be frowned upon by his fellow Singaporeans. The art encouraged antagonism. Swigging from a vodka bottle did the rest.

“Eh, sorry, ah,” the Drunk shouted, after bumping into a thirty-something executive. She did the Singaporean thing – she ignored him.

The Drunk squeezed the handle above his head and swayed towards the woman.

“Eh, I said sorry ah. Don’t be so rude lah.”

The executive turned her back on him. The Drunk giggled.

“Wah lau, you don’t like me ah. Not your type ah? My English not *atas* or *powerful* enough for Raffles Place, is it?”

“Leave her alone.”

The voice had clarity but no identity. It was buried in a sardine tin of turned heads and awkward shoegazing. Everyone’s eyes were open, but no one chose to see.

The Drunk surveyed his fellow commuters, each one greeting his cold stare with a colder shoulder. He started to make his way along the

aisle, the crowd parting willingly and sheepishly.

He glanced from side to side, playing head tennis with the seated travellers, the chosen few with their feet up: the instinctively guilty. They sat beneath rows of exhausted faces. They peered down at their rested feet, hoping to be ignored, desperate to remain invisible.

The Drunk stopped before a teenage boy sitting in the last seat, the reserved seat, the seat of terror in a society of face-savers, the seat that cannot be taken.

The Drunk lurched towards the teenager.

“Was it you ah?”

“Eh? What?”

“Was it you who shouted leave her alone?”

“No, no.”

“No, cannot be right. Definitely cannot be you. You want to hide in one corner, hope the aunties cannot see you, the pregnant women, the small children. You sit in the selfish corner, hiding. So you cannot shout at me, right? Because you are sitting in the selfish seat. You’re not too old, not too young. Are you pregnant?”

“What?”

“You’re sitting in the selfish seat. That make you feel good ah?”

The Drunk pointed towards an elderly woman standing near the door.

“You see. She stands for you. She is a Singapore pioneer. She made this country. And you are a teenager. What do you make?”

The Drunk tapped the teenager’s phone.

“You live in there, right? Don’t see outside. Don’t see auntie standing with shopping bags over there. You see what? Pokemon?”

“Just get off the train, asshole.”

The Drunk spun around. His eyes narrowed as he searched for the elusive voice. He grinned, the crow’s feet dashing towards the greying hair above his temples.

“Wah you brave ah?” he shouted down the carriage. “So brave cannot show me your face ah. Show me your face, bastard.”

The Drunk swigged from the vodka bottle, melodramatically wiping his forearm across his face. He staggered towards the middle of the

carriage as the other commuters discreetly retreated. A domestic helper pulled her employer's children close to her chest. Students stepped aside as the skinny Chinese guy leered at them. The auntie with the shopping bags shook her head with an admirable mix of indifference and contempt.

Everyone else decided it was time to perform a civic duty. They slyly reached for their phone cameras.

"Come on ah, hero," the Drunk shouted. "Which one are you?"

He scanned the crowd and quickly divided the carriage into two groups. There were those at the far end of the carriage that filmed his antics openly. And there were those at his end of the carriage that filmed his antics discreetly.

"I know you are here, asshole. And I know you cannot be Singaporean like me, definitely cannot. You know why or not? Local heroes do not shout at me on the MRT. Local heroes make videos on the MRT about me. They make videos and they put them up on Facebook. Or maybe got brave tourist here who think you can have a fight in Singapore and then later go for makan, right?"

The Drunk was already on Facebook Live. Updates were being posted on Twitter. Instagram snaps were spreading across the country. By the time the Drunk reached the other end of the carriage, his volatile behaviour was being dissected and demonised everywhere, except on the carriage itself.

"Just get off the train while you still can."

The voice was firm, flat, but unmistakably resolute.

The Drunk flashed his yellowing teeth at his horrified audience. He moved quickly now, crouching low, glaring, intimidating, leering, terrifying, his bloodshot eyes boring holes through those foolish enough to look up from their phones.

"While I still can, what?" he asked, breathing heavily and smelling of a life lived between hangovers. "Or else what? What are you gonna do? What are you all gonna do? Gonna stop playing Farm Heroes? Gonna tweet about me? Gonna send a video to Stomp? Gonna tekan the Gahmen about me? Gonna whack the maid for not wiping your arse? Gonna do what? You gonna blame me for dragging you out of

your virtual fucking reality for five minutes? Blame me? You should be thanking me.”

“I’ll thank you.”

The Drunk thought he heard his own jaw crack. The fluorescent lights along the carriage’s ceiling danced as he fell backwards. A fist, the same fist, arched through the air again, blocking out those faint, blurry lights. The punch found the Drunk’s stomach. He crumpled like a wheezing accordion as blood tickled the back of his throat. His swelling jaw and cheek threatened to steal his voice, but he had to satisfy his curiosity.

“So... you’re the hero,” he mumbled.

The younger Chinese guy spun the Drunk around, grabbing his right arm at the wrist and yanking it hard across his spine.

“Yes, it was me, couldn’t take your bullshit anymore,” replied the Samaritan.

His hair was smartly parted and his white shirt surprisingly crisp for the stuffy carriage.

“Wah, not bad ah, finally a Singaporean with some balls,” the Drunk said. “Who are you, man?”

“I’m the guy who’s gonna throw you off the train.”

“Eh, nice line, *brudder*, and look, you’re gonna be famous now.”

Wincing in pain, the Drunk raised his left arm towards the carriage. His audience was captivated, dutifully complying with societal norms. They had filmed the whole thing. Like at a rock gig, flashing lights were held aloft and waved in the air, recording the images of today’s celebrity gods: everyday people, real people. Reality TV had already paved the way to the White House so a drunken fight between a tattooed thug and an anonymous Samaritan would surely lead to a few more likes on Facebook. And those likes offered validation, proof of an actual life beyond the artificial.

“Looks good ah, all your cameras. Come. I clap for you. Oh wait. I’ve only got one hand,” the Drunk said to a hundred different phone screens. “Wah, look at you all. It’s not fight or flight in Singapore. It’s fight or film, right? But never mind, at least this train got one Singaporean hero. Eh, you are Singaporean, right? Don’t wanna be caught by a foreign talent?”

The stranger twisted the Drunk's arm. The Drunk yelped in anguish. He rolled his tongue around his reddening teeth and spat blood onto the carriage floor.

"Eh, you think I'll kena fine for that?"

"Shut up."

The recorded message announced the train's impending arrival at the next station.

"Eh, hurry up ah, make sure you all get nice photos for Instagram," the Drunk said. "Keep on clicking. Last chance. Station coming. Click, click, click."

The departing commuters did as they were told. They saved their videos and hurried off the carriage. New arrivals took their seats, accepting the baton and continuing the social media relay. They hit 'record' but didn't intervene or offer to help. Like many aspects of their existence, the violent sideshow didn't exist in reality, only in their phones.

As the train doors closed, the Drunk noticed one guy who had been sitting all this time in the middle of a row of seats, his head bowed. He was the only commuter not acknowledging the Drunk's existence. The guy's indifference bothered the Drunk.

He pulled the Samaritan towards the man not filming their fracas.

"Eh, why you never film me ah?"

The plump Chinese guy refused to look up. Instead he fidgeted with his phone, his fingers rubbing against the sides of the device.

"Eh, I'm talking to you, bastard. Everyone else on the train is filming me except you. Why, ah? Your phone not working is it?"

The guy tried to slip his phone into his pocket.

"Ah, now you gonna hide your phone, is it... It's him. It must be him."

Suddenly, the Drunk was moving, his arm released. The Drunk and the Samaritan were reaching for the stranger's phone, working together in unison, rehearsed, experienced, their synergy as obvious as it was seamless. Confused commuters struggled to comprehend the images on their tiny screens, but continued to film nonetheless, hoping to make sense of the absurdity later.

The two men, prisoner and guard just moments ago, were now

pinning the confused guy to his seat. The Drunk tore his pocket away from his shorts and grabbed the phone.

The Drunk scanned the photos quickly. He nodded his head.

“Yep, this is the one,” he muttered, smiling at his former captor. He turned to the restrained stranger. “Who’s been a naughty ah pek then, eh?”

The startled man rose to his feet abruptly, but the Drunk’s fist opened his nose. A woman in the next seat screamed as the blood splattered against her face. She wiped the blood off her cheek and continued filming.

Massaging his broken nose, the stranger flopped into his seat.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

The Drunk grinned.

“I am Detective Inspector Stanley Low. This is Detective Inspector Charles Chan and you, my dirty little pervert, are under arrest.”

The two undercover officers yanked their suspect from his seat and hauled him off the carriage. As the train waited at the platform, the remaining passengers used the free Wi-Fi at the station to upload their videos.

* * *

As they headed towards the escalator, Low caught his old friend smiling at him.

“You wanna know, right? Why the drunk routine?” he asked.

“I know the routine,” Chan replied. “How many times have we done good cop-insane cop already? That’s just you being an asshole, another detour on your journey to self-destruction. I’m just trying to work out your logic with this asshole here, how you spotted him so fast.”

Low shoved the suspect. “You hear that, pervert? He wants to know how I found our infamous upskirt photographer. It’s simple, Charlie. When you see a house on fire, you stop and look. You take photos. Who’s the only one who doesn’t stop? The arsonist.”

“Wah lau, even by your standards, that’s lame,” laughed Chan. “This idiot didn’t start the fight. You did.”

“What? Eyewitnesses said he’d run onto the train, right? We’ve been chasing this bastard all day, from train to train, without a clear description and then finally, we get a live victim’s call. We get told that it’s probably the carriage at the end of the train. So I set the carriage on fire and wait for the arsonist to hide out in the open. I gave this clown prime-time reality TV and his first instinct was to hide his phone.”

“Wah, so *cheem* ah.”

“Think about it. What is social media? It’s millions of shitty lives all trying to prove that they don’t have shitty lives by constantly posting shitty stuff to try and wash away the shitty.”

Chan pushed the suspect onto the escalator. “How shitty is that?”

“Never enough. So I take it away. I remove the mundane and give them an incident, a talking point, something to show their colleagues in the office while they wait for the lift. And they all jumped at the chance to prove that today’s journey actually meant something. But he didn’t. He didn’t film. He didn’t participate. And if you don’t participate, you don’t go online. If you don’t go online, you don’t exist. And we all need to exist.”

“Are you finished?”

“Yeah.”

As the detectives prodded their suspect towards the ticket barriers, Low rubbed his swollen jaw.

“Did you have to hit me so hard?”

Chan smiled at his friend. “You wanted reality TV, right?”

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