You Are Not Alone

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Abstract

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The stories collected in *You Are Not Alone* are each intimately concerned with the jouissance referred to in Lacanian psychoanalysis: the thrill or excitation that lies constantly out of reach of both language and law, such that its pursuit frequently requires that the subject transgress from pleasure and enjoyment (where the jouissance is carefully regulated) to pain and dread (where the jouissance is beyond anyone's control). As the title of the collection suggests, each story revolves around characters grappling with their own isolation and coming to terms with the presence of the Other – the effects of which range from the cathartic to the terrifying.

From a trio of fetishists in "Philia," to a monstrous encounter in a rural Malaysian village in "Pontianak," to a political rally on the streets of inner-city Kuala Lumpur in "Bersih," I explore how jouissance can be, paradoxically, both the great unifier and divider of subjects. We find characters whose personal jouissance, be it in the form of enjoyment or suffering, seems to alienate them from the rest of the world. Only by apprehending the jouissance felt by the Other—a friend, a stranger, or a monster—and by feeling the Other's pain and pleasure as acutely as one's own, can the subject reach beyond the lonely confines of private turmoil towards a point of solidarity and kinship: a jouissance of the Other.

For Calvin, who got me started; and for Kat, who keeps me going.

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Philia

"So what are you saying?" asks Lester, gripping his unopened Yuengling Light like he's trying to get it to pop. "I can't come over anymore?"

"No, you can come over."

"But I can't do my thing anymore," he says.

"That's right."

"Because of the new girlfriend."

"Because of the new girlfriend. Listen. You can come over any time you want. You want to come over and shoot the shit, that's what I'm here for. You want to watch a movie at three in the morning, hey, knock on my door."

Lester's hands tighten around his can of beer. He crumples the lower end so that the top bulges with the pressure. There's no way, Lester darling, you can't possibly pop that can. But oh how his grip gets tighter and tighter!

He says, "I don't fucking come here to shoot the shit or watch movies. You know why I come here. We had an arrangement."

"I know we had an arrangement."

He says, "You don't understand. I *need* this."

"I know, Lester, I know."

He says, "You don't know what it's *like* at my house. You've never seen it." And he's right. I've never seen it. Two years he's been coming over to my place, and never the

other way round.

He says, “You don’t know my wife. You don’t know how *clean* she keeps the place. It’s a sickness with her, man. Marble floors polished three times a day. No scuff marks, no smudges, nothing. Everywhere you go you see your goddamn reflection under you. Like you’re some kinda Jesus walking on water, man. It’s enough to make a guy nervous.”

He grips the swollen can with both hands and grunts. He aims it over the balcony, at the Marriot across the street. The way he’s squeezing that beer, you’d think he was wringing someone’s neck.

“My wife,” he says. “She keeps the goddamn *ceilings* polished. You ever been in a house with shiny goddamn ceilings?”

“No, Lester.”

“The ceilings are so goddamn shiny you can see your bald spot in your reflection in the *floor*.” He looks over at me. “I been living in that house ten years, and I never seen so much as a cobweb. A guy can’t get what he *needs* at a place like... a place like...” He trails off. His mouth hangs open. He stares at a point just over my left shoulder and lets out a faint “Ohhh....”

He drops the beer. I watch that swollen red can hit the concrete. It doesn’t burst. I realise I’ve been holding my breath.

“Fuck me sideways,” whispers Lester. “Look at that beauty.”

I look. Eight hairy legs wriggle around on an immense web that stretches from one end of the balcony to the other.

“Herpyllus ecclesiasticus,” he says. “Eastern Parson spider. You can tell by the mark on its abdomen. Looks like a parson’s collar. Christ, would you look at the *size* of it. You can see the *hair*.”

“That thing poisonous?”

“No, no,” says Lester. “Not to us at least. Totally harmless. Big lovely wriggler though. Look at it. Like a little hand.” He licks his lips. “I’m gonna need this one, man. This... this is gonna be a good one, I can feel it.”

He looks at me. It’s that look he gives me when he’s asking for permission. Eyes creased, lips pressed together, legs shaking.

“Please,” he says. “If you’re gonna put an end to it, at least give me this last one.”

“Alright, Lester,” I say, because I can’t say no. Because a friend in need is a friend indeed. “But this is the last time.”

His hand is already in his trousers, working with lusty abandon. He breathes hard, in, out, in, out. “Like a little hand,” he says. “Little hand.” He gasps like a swimmer after a long dive. “Little... fucking... gaaahhh... little... *beauty*!” His whole body goes rigid and curls in on itself like a millipede getting poked, and his face swells and goes red and his lips pucker up to suck at an invisible teat. He rocks back in his chair and his head smacks against the window, but he doesn’t notice. He’s off, he’s away. He’s in spider-land, tears streaming down his face. He’s got the look of the blissfully reverent. He looks the way my grandmother used to look in church. Utter ecstasy. Rapture city. God yes. I did that. I helped him get there. I gave him something he needed.

I go inside to catch my breath and get another beer and a box of tissues.

There's a blanket of flying ants on the ceiling tonight. It's swarming season, when all the males flitter out from the colonies that line the walls of the building to go on the prowl for a good fuck. Most of them end up at my place. Hundreds of these slender brown things buzzing out of the holes in the wall, covering up the ceiling, dipping in and out of my toaster, drowning in my dishwater, and clustering like pilgrims around the big bright LED lamps in my living room.

The spiders love them. They spin webs all over the apartment, which pick up dust bunnies, grease, and little panicked ants. Like this guy. I watch him spin around, a wriggly little ballet twirl. Very likely he's only just now waking up to the horrible position he's in. Wretched little creature. All that struggling is just going to alert the spider. As if he wants to be eaten. At this point I lean in close. I try to see what Lester sees.

The spider is a little black wisp of a thing. She plucks her way across the web on eight delicate legs. She lowers her face over the struggling ant and bites it, just once, to paralyze it. The ant goes still. The spider wraps the ant up into a little gift. A present to herself. Then I get too close, and the spider dances away into a dusty corner.

Lester takes a tissue and wipes his hand. "So this is it, huh?"

When I don't respond, a look comes over his face that I've never seen before: embarrassment. He says, "Alright, alright, look, just say it. I know you're thinking it."

"What am I thinking?"

"You think... you think it's dirty, don't you."

"Of course not."

"You think it's dirty," he says. "It's okay. You can say it. You can tell me."

"I don't think it's dirty."

"But the new girlfriend does," he says.

"The new girlfriend does."

He gets to his feet. He reaches out to Herpyllus ecclesiasticus, but doesn't quite let himself touch those eight hairy legs. He says, "Common house spider. I don't know why but it's always been my favourite. But oh mercy, it is a beauty. It's enormous. Look at that parson's collar. It looks like a vicar. It looks like a big fat vicar." He fishes out a little Ziploc bag from his jacket pocket. "You mind if I...?"

"Not at all."

Lester lifts it out of its web and traps it between his fingers. He holds it up to his ear. He closes his eyes and listens for a moment, nodding, as if to some silent instruction. Then he puts it into the Ziploc bag. "I'm gonna miss this place," he says. "Do you know how hard it was to find a place like this? My wife would have a heart-attack in a place like this."

"You ever think about leaving her?"

"Hell no," he says. "I love my wife. You know how hard it is to find someone you love?"

He leaves. And a couple hours later, Jackie comes over.

"Oh man," she says, when she sees the ants on the ceiling. "Oh man. What a turn-out. You weren't kidding about your living room."

She catches one of the flying ants between her thumb and index finger. I never see

her hand move. She pulls its wings off, and then its legs. She puts the ant on the windowsill: just a head, a thorax and an abdomen, still alive and now completely at her mercy. “Nice,” she says. “Oh, I’m gonna enjoy this.”

Then she prowls around the room, looking for spiders. She snatches them up with those lightning-quick fingers. She grips them firmly enough to keep them in place but not enough to crush them. She tells me she doesn’t want to get goo on her fingers. She takes their legs off one by one. Lester would never understand. Lester can’t see that Jackie is a friend in need.

“I can’t get enough of this place,” she says. “I hope you don’t think I’m a weirdo.”

“I don’t think you’re a weirdo.”

“I just need this,” she says. “You know what that’s like?”

“Yeah,” I say, because I need this too. I watch her take apart every ant and spider she can get her hands on. I watch her roll all the collected legs between her fingers. They look like a clump of eyelashes.

She’s breathing hard. Her face is flushed, god yes, and I’m flushed too. I did that. I helped her get there. I gave her something she needed.

Pontianak

It's your first night back in the kampung, and something out there is scratching on the wall. Scratch scraaatch scratch, hard drag of claws on wood. Probably an animal, like a cat or a civet or a monkey, or god knows what else, using your cousin's shack as a scratching post.

Are you going to have to listen to this all night? You're having enough trouble sleeping as it is.

Don't look at your watch. If you look at your watch, you'll want to look at it again.

Roll over on your side and count backwards from one hundred, close your eyes, try to imagine you're sinking into a warm and welcoming abyss.

That's it. Let go of all the air in your lungs. Breathe out the tension, relax down into the mattress.

But your hip is sinking through the old sponge, digging into the floorboards. Pain blossoms down there in red lines, radiating out from the tip of the bone.

So you roll onto your back again. Now that you're thinking about it, how long *has* it been, really, since you and your cousin went to bed? Maybe just one look at the time. Just one little look, so you can have a rough idea of how late it is, and then you won't look again.

Press the glow button on your watch, try to make out the numbers in the glaring green light: 12:44 AM. You have been lying here in the heat and the stillness for a little

over two hours.

And scratch scraaatch scratch, the claws make another pass on the wall. Maybe it's a tiger. Wouldn't that be something? A tiger picking tonight of all nights, your first night back in the old kampung, to wander over to your cousin's shack and scratch a few territorial lines along the wall. You consider getting up and having a peek out the window, see if you can catch a glimpse of the creature before it stalks off.

But... no, you don't want to get up just yet. If you get up, you'll wake yourself up more, and then you'll never get to sleep.

From somewhere on the other side of the room a wad of mucus gets caught in your cousin's throat, so you hear it bubbling there in his oesophagus every time he inhales. Fast asleep. How does he do it? How can he bear the hot weight of the air out here? The way it hangs thick and heavy like a blanket! And the noise outside, a melange of mating calls and territorial warnings – frogs croaking wetly from the underbrush, night-birds making their plaintive reports, cicadas droning out their insect lust – a constant stuttering shriek in the dark.

Isn't this what you came out here for? Apart from the obligatory visit to your cousin, of course, the two of you being the only family either of you have left. Didn't you yearn for some fresh air? A little break from the sound of cars honking at each other in the blocked arteries of the big city, a quiet place away from the smog and the rubbish and the pervasive suspicion that you just aren't working hard enough. Back to nature, back to the simplicity of sleeping in the wilderness, back to the easy life of the kampung.

Well, you're here now, and you wish you weren't. Nothing to do at this juncture

but pretend that the noise outside is just music, the radio station of the jungle. Nocturnal Cacophony FM. And the phlegmy rumble of your cousin's snoring is really the low soothing purr of the air-con in your bedroom back home. And the cool sweat on your forehead is actually the chill from air-conditioned air. And the old flat slab of a mattress is really your queen-sized bed, perfect and feathery and soft.

This works for a while... long enough that you feel yourself start to drift, like a boat down a lazy stream. Feel sleep tug at the edges of your head, pulling you down, whispering the cryptic nonsense of a dream. Someone is there in the room with you, running a fingernail down your cheek – no, not your cheek, the wall, there's someone outside scratching on the wall....

A point on your neck starts to itch, a white flare on your skin. Mosquito bite. You scratch it out of reflexive rage.

From outside you hear: scratch scraaatch scratch. That thing is still out there, and you're awake again, back in your cousin's shack, suffocating under the jungle heat.

The sheet is soaking up your sweat, clinging to your skin like a sticky membrane. You ache to just throw the sheet off and sleep with your skin bared to the night-time air, but that would be an open invitation to the mosquitoes.

They blow in through the holes in your cousin's mosquito net and dart a jagged periphery around the room. Go ahead and try to follow those wispy silver-black shapes flitting around up there – you can't do it. Your eyes can't keep up. So you listen instead. You can just about hear it over the noise: the tinny E-flat of a mosquito's wings, growing louder until it's a shrill blast and it dives straight down into your ear, and you feel the

brush of insect legs against the tender skin of your ear canal, and you shiver away, rub your ear, try to trap the little beast.

You hear it take another dive and there's a needle jab on your left temple, sharp pinprick of a proboscis poking through your skin's taut surface.

You take a swipe at it, miss, slap yourself on the chin. It's too quick for you! It buzzes angry circles around your head, like it's outraged that you'd interrupt its meal.

It makes another dive, and your hands come together, CLAP.

From the other side of the room your cousin murmurs, half asleep: “Shut up.”

Did you get it? It's too dark to check your palm for a black smear. Rub your hands together over the side of the mattress anyway, just in case.

That's when you feel another needle jab, right on your neck. And this time you're a little faster, a little more awake, and the mosquito is tired and drunk on your blood. You catch it with the heel of your palm. Its abdomen pops and suddenly the air smells like copper, and you feel a tiny splatter on your neck and hands. As if you weren't sticky enough already.

Scratch scraaatch scratch, slow rake of nails on the other side of the wall.

Isn't that tiger—or whatever it is—satisfied yet? How much scratch could a set of claws need? You whisper to your cousin: “Shafiq! Do you hear that?”

No response, but you notice he has long ago stopped snoring. Perhaps he's wide awake too, listening for the noise. If so, why doesn't he say anything?

Scratch scraaatch scratch.

Check your watch: 1:38 AM. This has been going on for nearly an hour. Is it still

the same animal? You have a hard time imagining a series of animals congregating at the same spot, taking turns to scratch out three lines at regular intervals, each time lingering a moment longer on the second line. In fact you have a hard time imagining any animal staying in the same spot for so long, clawing out the same litany over and over.

Scratch scraaatch scratch.

Is it playing with you? The longer you listen to it, the more deliberate it sounds, like a message being scribbled on the wall: I'm out here. I'm out here. I'm out here.

Alright, so if it's not an animal, what is it? This is the real world, and very likely there is a nice safe reasonable explanation. It's the wind. It's a branch blowing against the wall. There's no pattern, no intention behind that scratching, it's the most harmless and natural thing, just bark and leaves blowing in the wind.

So why can't you hear leaves rustling? Why is the air so still?

Scratch scraaatch scratch.

The window isn't very far away from your spot on the floor. If you crane your head up just a bit, you might be able to see the leaves. If the leaves are moving, then there is a wind blowing tonight, which means nothing is out there, which means you can go to sleep.

Lift up just a bit. A little more. Catch a glimpse of black leaves – dead still.

No wind tonight.

Well, now that you're up, maybe you could just have a look out the window. Then you'll know once and for all. Just one little look, and you can put the matter to rest.

Sit up and start to push yourself off the floor – the floorboards give off a nasty

squeak.

“What are you doing?” whispers Shafiq, from his corner of the room.

Whisper back: “I want to see.”

“Don't,” he says. “Don't get up. Don't... don't look outside. Don't let it see you.”

It isn't Shafiq's choice of words that keeps you from getting up – it's the dreadful tremour in his voice. Fear. He's afraid of what's out there, and you should be too.

So you ask: “What is it?”

“Stop talking! Go to sleep.”

From outside, you hear the hiss of wet grass. Something is moving out there, just beneath the window.

Scratch scraaaaaaatch scratch.

Shut your eyes, clamp your bloody palms over your ears. Allahu akbar, make it go away.

Eventually your arms get tired and loosen up, and you can still hear it: scratch scraaatch scratch.

Shafiq whispers, “Just don't get up. And don't look out the window. If you do you'll be letting it in.”

“Letting what in?”

“Shhh! Don't make a sound. Just lie still and close your eyes and sleep.”

The two of you listen as the claws make another pass, three thin lines on the wood.

He adds, “We'll talk about it in the morning.”

*

At some point—you don't know when exactly—the scratching stops, and a rooster screams about the approaching dawn. You close your eyes for what feels like the space of a heartbeat or two. When you open them again the sky has gone from ink-black to morning indigo, and you can hear the call to prayer, long ululating notes resounding across the kampung, echoing off corrugated metal roofs, amplified by the tinny funnel of a megaphone: Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar, la-ilaha-illallah.

Cling to the pillow, shut your eyes again. Just a little longer. You can't have slept for very long, your body aches at the thought of getting up.

Shafiq is shaking your shoulder.

“Come,” he says.

You can barely lift your head, barely lift your eyes. You've finally come to appreciate the mattress, flat and awkward as it is, and you don't want to be dragged away from it just yet.

But Shafiq shakes your shoulder again. When this doesn't rouse you he jabs at your side, stabbing your ribs with his index finger.

A hot flash of rage jolts you awake. “Shafiq, please!” you cry, but now your heart is beating fast, and you're sitting up, and you won't be able to go back to sleep now.

“Come,” he says again. “Time for prayer.”

He helps you stand up and leads you to the door. He opens it, and in the pre-dawn gloom the jungle outside is solid black, formless, lacking any definition save for the jagged outline of leaves against the bruised sky.

The terror you felt last night comes back to you, enough to make you pause at the door. Last night your cousin's shack had become a sanctuary – these walls and this door were your only protection against the thing outside. What if it's still out there, waiting for you to come out?

"Shafiq…" you say, unable to say the words. You stare at your cousin from the doorframe, needing him to see your fear, needing him to give you a sign that it's safe now.

"Come, lah," he says. "We have to wash."

So you follow him out to an old iron faucet jutting out of the grass, and you splash water onto your hands, mouth, nostrils, face, arms, hair, ears, and feet – three times each. The water is icy, and when it hits your skin it sends waves of numbness rippling through you, a shock of cold that goes straight to your head. You recall the words of your old ustaz when he taught you the five prayers: "You may look like you are washing your body, but you are really washing your mind, purging all unclean thoughts."

When this is done you go back inside, where Shafiq unrolls two dusty prayer mats. You join him in the dawn prayer, a little embarrassed to realise that you don't remember all the words. It's been a while.

Later, as the two of you sit cross-legged on the patio and eat chicken rice under the shade of the overhanging roof, you decide it's the right time to ask about last night's noise.

Except Shafiq speaks first: "Cousin, I'm so happy you're here."

This takes you a bit off-guard. You don't usually hear much affection from Shafiq.

You feel a dose of tenderness for him, Shafiq, this character in your life whom you see at three-year intervals with every visit back to the kampung. In fact when you look back on all the years you've known him, you think that he has always been, in his own way, something of a brother to you.

"I... I'm very glad to visit," you say.

"Yes, it's good that you've come. There's something wrong with my car, and I need someone to drive it into town to have it fixed."

"Oh," you say. "You want me to do that."

"Cousin, you're so kind to offer!" he says. "Yes, it would be a great help."

"Why can't you do it?"

Shafiq gestures to the banana trees growing around his shack. "I have all this work to do. If you want to eat tomorrow, I need to sell some of this fruit." He claps you on the back. "Don't worry! It won't take long. Two hours at most, just a quick trip into town and back. The car just needs a small fix, not much. It's a very old car, very well made. Also ask them to change the oil and fix the headlights."

"The headlights are broken?"

"No, they just go out sometimes. I don't know. Usually I just have to switch the engine off and on again, and they come back on. Never mind lah, you won't even need them. You will be back before the sun goes down."

You sigh. This sounds like it will take more than just two hours. You can see how the day will proceed: you driving a broken-down old heap and sweating in a mechanic's shop; Shafiq picking bananas under the shade of the trees and stretching out on his patio

for an afternoon nap.

You feel your eyelids grow heavy at the thought. How much sleep did you get last night? One hour, maybe two? Not nearly enough.

“Do you always get up so early?” you ask. “For the morning prayer, I mean.”

“Of course!” he says, between mouthfuls. “Always!” He sounds defensive; you get the impression he is saying this more to the world at large than to you. Then he says, “Well, not always, but... we should always try. God was good to us last night, and we should praise Him.”

“Good to us...?”

“Last night,” he says. “God was good to us last night. You are alive, I am alive. God was good to us. Insha'Allah, God will be good to us again.”

The subject of last night lingers now in the silence that falls between you. He doesn't look you in the eye. His fingers idly stir the rice on his plate. You can feel him daring you to ask.

“You said we could talk about it in the morning,” you say, carefully. “Can we talk about it now?”

“Ah? Talk about what.” Shafiq looks down at his breakfast.

“You know what. The noise last night, we both heard it. There was something outside. I think you know what it was.”

“Yes, but... I shouldn't say. You don't want to know.”

Now you're annoyed. “Of course I do. I'm asking because I want to know.”

“Ah, but it might scare you, dear cousin,” he says, shaking a rice-flecked finger.

“The big city is a safe place where you've grown soft and happy. I don't think you're ready.”

How dare he! The nerve of him, bringing up your city life like it’s a mark of ignorance. Here you are, making an effort to visit him all the way out here, and this is how he treats you?

“Shafiq!” It comes out so loud and abruptly that you surprise yourself. He looks at you in alarm. You say, a little quieter: “Please, stop playing with me.”

“Alright, alright,” he says. “If you really want to know... alright. I tried to protect you, but I can see there's no stopping you. Well... have you heard of the pontianak?”

Of course you have. It's hard to grow up anywhere in Malaysia, whether in Kuala Lumpur or out here in the kampung, without hearing the name at one point or another. An image comes to mind of a young woman, stark white against the black silhouette of trees. You see her all the time, on books with titles like *True Malay Ghost Stories*, or on posters for cheap locally-made horror movies.

The woman is corpse-pale and is wearing a tattered white dress. Her head is bent forward just enough for her wild black hair to hang over her face. Her fingernails are overgrown and black and curve at the ends, like claws.

“You think it was a pontianak?” you ask.

“I know it was a pontianak.” He picks off the last few bits of rice still sticking to his plate.

You feel your temper rising again. “Shafiq, I asked you not to play with me.”

“I'm not playing, lah! Don't call me a liar!” He gets to his feet. “I'm telling the

truth. What? You want proof?”

You nod. Of course you want proof.

“Fine,” he says, putting down his plate. “We'll look for proof.”

He leads you around to the side of the shack and points to a space in the wall just below the window. “This is where it was scratching last night. Do you see?”

You don't see. He points again, runs his finger along three lines etched into the wood. “Claw marks, here.”

They do look like claw marks now that he mentions it, but they could just as easily be deep grooves in the woodgrain. Or if they are claw marks, who could say what left them behind? “An animal could have made those.”

“How long were you listening to the scratching last night? Animals don't have that kind of patience. Besides, look how high up these marks are.” He lifts his hand, palm flat like a cap on an invisible head, five feet off the ground. “It must be this tall.”

“Are you sure those marks are new? They could have been there before.”

“Actually they're not new,” he says. “I've heard her scratch there before. She always comes back to the same spot.”

“Shafiq,” you say, gently, “I have trouble believing any of this. What are you saying? That a real actual pontianak has been coming to your house every night, and you have decided to tell me only now?”

“Not every night,” he says. “Just some nights. Usually when I'm alone. I didn't think it would come back last night, with you visiting. I thought it would want to stay away.” He looks at you significantly. “I suppose it doesn't think you are much of a

threat.”

Could he really believe all this superstitious drivel? Because that's what all this is: rural superstition. Spooky explanations for every bump in the night.

Now, perhaps something else is going on here: perhaps Shafiq is playing you for a fool. You search his face for the telltale signs: a nervous smile, pursing lips, rapid eye movement. Is it a sign that he's lying if he doesn't make eye contact, or if he doesn't break eye contact?

Shafiq does both, looking first at you and then up at the trees. “I think it lives up there. A pontianak lives in banana trees during the day.”

“How do you know that?” you ask.

“Because I saw it in there once.” He points at the tallest tree in the grove, easily the tallest banana tree you've ever seen, at least twice the size of the others. “Last year, during the harvest, I thought I would get up early, before the sun comes up, so that I could work while the day was still cool. And I skipped the dawn prayer. I think that's why I saw it. I was climbing up that tree with my parang ready to cut down a big bunch of bananas when I saw it hanging there upside-down like a bat.

“That's what I thought it was at first! A giant bat, the size of a person, completely wrapped up in wings the colour of old bone, somewhere between white and yellow. It was so still I actually thought it was dead, but then I must have made a noise because the wings parted and I saw, between the folds, two red eyes stare back at me.

“And I screamed. I will admit it! I was scared. And I lost my grip on my parang, and then I lost my grip on the tree, and I fell to the ground, there.” He points at the long

grass growing all around the trees. “The grass broke my fall, but my breath…” He thumps his chest. “My breath was gone. I couldn't move! The most I could do was lift up my hands, and I saw that I'd scratched them very badly, because there were fresh cuts on my palms, dripping blood.

“And I heard a sound. Here is something you should know about the pontianak: when it is far away, it makes a sound that seems to come from inside your own head, it sounds so close. And when the pontianak is nearby, it makes a sound that comes as though from a great distance away.

“The sound I heard was like a baby crying. But crying is the wrong word... it was screaming, the way a baby will scream when it is angry. And it seemed to come from miles away, barely louder than a whisper, barely a sound at all. And then... something... flew down on white wings and landed there,” he points, “at that spot in the shadow of the tree.

“From far away it might have looked like a normal girl, beautiful even, with pale white skin. In fact that is how a pontianak will trick you: it will make herself look like a beautiful girl lost in the jungle, in order to lure you into letting your guard down. But up close it will reveal its true self, as this pontianak revealed itself to me. It looked like it had been dead for a few days: its skin was grey and dirty, and its dress was brown at the edges, stained with mud. Its mouth hung open like a corpse's mouth, and its teeth were long and pointed at the end, sharp like needles, and its tongue was out and twisting around like a red leech. The tongue and the eyes, a dreadful red – they seemed to be the only parts that were still alive.

“And it was coming for me. I had disturbed its home, you understand. Never mind that the tree belonged to me! Meanwhile there I was, on the ground, bleeding. The smell of my blood was in the air, enough to make the pontianak hungry. Do you know how a pontianak looks when it is hungry?”

You shake your head.

“When a pontianak is hungry, it shows you that hunger. It shows it to you by lowering its entrails, inch by inch, in long tendrils that dangle between its legs beneath the hem of its skirt, like red snakes. It happened so slowly, it almost looked like a natural thing... here was a monster coming to suck out my blood, drain me as dry as an old moth husk, and in my final minutes alive it was slowly turning itself inside out, revealing to me the hideousness within.

“And because I was thinking about how I would die soon, I remembered to praise God for giving me life. My mouth made the words, 'Allahu akbar!'

“Aha! This was enough to startle the pontianak. The name of God is terrifying to a monster, and with good reason – God has a special hatred for killers and monsters alike. It froze for a moment, only a small moment, and suddenly I could move again, roll over on my side and reach out for something, anything, a weapon to use against it. Where was my parang? One slash and I could have cut its head off, I know it! But my parang was lost somewhere in the long grass. I groped about in the dirt anyway, praying for God to have mercy on me, to show me a miracle. And do you know what happened?”

“A miracle?”

“Yes, cousin, a miracle! God answered my prayer. My hands found something

hard and sharp in the dirt – a little iron nail! As good a weapon as any. A pontianak hates anything sharp and piercing, like a pointed stick or the blade of a knife, but it hates nails most of all. I held it between my thumb and forefinger, and as it advanced on me I raised the nail up so the pontianak could see it, and I shouted once more, 'Allahu akbar!'"

"But it was just a little nail!" you say. "How could that work against a pontianak?"

"Just a little nail! For you, yes. But for the pontianak? If you ever take a pontianak by surprise and you manage to push a nail through its neck, it will turn back into a beautiful girl, and you can marry her, and she will be an obedient wife for as long as the nail stays there. And the pontianak knows this! The sight of me waving my little nail here and there, shouting God's name, was enough to make it back away. I saw its entrails slither back beneath its skirt. Now it was scared of *me*! So I ran at the pontianak with my nail held high, shouting, 'La-ilaha-illallah!' And it stepped back into the shadows, and spread the folds of its dress wide, like wings, and it leaped straight back up into the tree, burrowing beneath the bananas."

Shafiq takes out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shakes one out and puts it in his mouth. "That is why," he says, cupping one hand over the cigarette to protect it from the breeze, "you should always try do the dawn prayer."

You accept a cigarette from him and put it to your lips. You breathe smoke, feel that familiar burn hit the edges of your lungs, and think about how this is the real world, and nothing Shafiq has told you can be true.

You look up at the trees waving their flat green fronds in the breeze. You can see great big bananas dangling there between the leaves, long and lusty and green. Yes, you

admit, a pontianak could probably hide up there somewhere.

"But this is just a story," you say. "There is no pontianak."

Shafiq purses his lips and blows out a tight funnel of smoke. "Just a story! You think you know what's out there in the jungle? You, who lives in the big city? Everyone who lives out here has seen something, and they all have their own stories. Just a story, you say... cousin, think! Where did the story come from?"

*

Shafiq's car is an old Proton Saga, boxy and unremarkable, the sort of blocky car-shape you might see in a child's drawing. You speculate that at some point it had been painted red, but time and weather have worn its outer coat down to a scabby pink.

"Solid and dependable," he says, as you climb in. "It might stall on you at some point but don't worry, it always starts up again."

There's a dry scraping noise coming from somewhere under the hood, and you think you can hear rattling, as though something were loose in the engine. Try to put it out of your mind. Listen instead to the branches flicking the windows and the pebbles rattling against the undercarriage. Look at the ornate wooden houses perched on stilts, peeking out from between the trees. Look out at the flooded padi fields arranged in steppes that run up and down the valley, each field offering up a shimmering white mirror to the overcast sky. It seems to you that the colour of the grass is so much richer out here, drawing from a deeper well of green than the tough old stuff sprouting from cracks in the concrete in the big city. There is a calm out here, an ease of mind that you didn't know you were missing until just now.

And just as your eyes begin to feel heavy in your head, and the road and the steering wheel seem to drift away, the car gives a jolt and you're lifted fully off the seat for a split second before the seat belt snaps you back into place. The engine has fallen silent.

You can chalk that up to carelessness on your part. You shouldn't fall asleep at the wheel.

You're wide awake the next time it happens, just as the dirt road curves away from the valley and plunges into a thick corridor of jungle foliage. Your stomach lurches ahead of your body, carried along by the excess momentum, and the seat belt cuts a raw line across your chest as the car comes once again to a sudden stop.

Ten minutes later, it happens again.

In fact the car stalls no less than thirteen times, turning what should be an hour-long drive into something obscene and interminable. Meanwhile the sun turns the interior of the car into an oven, and the air-con makes a sputtering hot noise at you and dies within moments of switching it on.

Eventually you hit the highway, and the dirt road becomes dusty grey tarmac, and the trees give way to long stretches of dry sun-bleached grass. You pass rows of shop-houses, their white stucco facades peeling off to reveal a mottled jaundice.

By the time you get to the repair shop it is late afternoon, and the sun is starting to approach the horizon. So much for Shafiq's promise of a quick trip into town.

The mechanic is tall and wiry. His skin is dark and creased like old leather, probably from working long hours in the heat of the day. When he gets close you can

smell the oil on him, a black smell, sharp and heavy in your nose. You hand him the keys and, without so much as asking you for details, he goes over to the car and lifts the hood, making contemplative sucking noises with his tongue. Then he turns to you and looks you up and down, lingering for a while on your leather shoes.

He says something that you don't quite hear, because you are staring at his mole. It's enormous, like a giant black nipple. The areola covers most of his chin. Long white strands of hair sprout from the tip – they seem to wave at you with every movement of his jaw.

“What was that?” you ask.

He tilts his head and scowls as though you've just affirmed his worst suspicion about you. “One hundred fifty ringgit,” he says.

Working on instinct, you pat your pockets to find your wallet. Then it dawns on you that Shafiq never gave you any money for the repairs. In fact, now that you think about it, you can see how your present predicament works out exactly in Shafiq's favour: you are hot, exhausted, and marooned out here in a strange town with a broken car, and if you want any hope of escape you will have to pay this awful man out of your own pocket.

“After,” you say, feeling the need to take control. “I pay after.” Jut your chin out at the mechanic to give off what you hope is an air of dignified impertinence. Have to stand up to people out here, otherwise they won't respect you.

He purses his lips in annoyance and turns back to the car, drawing out those sucking noises in long luxuriant squeaks.

You're really feeling the lack of sleep now. Spots blip in and out of the scene like black fireflies, and a dark fog is creeping around the edges of your vision. Your head feels light, and cold, and for a moment the road and the shop-houses and the cars lose all depth, merge together into a flat photograph. You are falling, falling, teetering over towards the ground until panic jolts you awake again.

You need to get out of this heat. You ask the mechanic if you can have a seat somewhere. He doesn't look up from his inspection of the engine, just waves in the direction of the shop with an over-the-shoulder swing of his hand. You aren't sure if he heard you correctly—was he really gesturing to his shop or shooing you away?—but you're not going to ask again. The hell with him if he won't allow you, a paying customer, the use of his patch of shade.

The air in the shop is thick with incense oozing out in long curling plumes of smoke from an altar in the back of the shop, where a little fat Buddha is laughing at you. The incense can’t hide the stink of motor oil, which burns your nostrils and makes the sides of your head ache. You're tempted to go outside again, but your knees buckle at the thought of spending another minute under the sun.

There, in the far corner: a plastic stool and a little electric fan. As good a refuge as any, a veritable oasis. You plant yourself on the stool and rest your back against the wall, let the fan's breeze wash over your face and cool the sweat on your skin. Bliss.

Shafiq will pay you back the one hundred fifty. You will make sure of it. In fact it occurs to you that you could lie about the cost of the repairs, make up some higher number. Why not? Shafiq has told you a stream of lies all day, from the condition of his

wretched car, to the length of time it would take to get to the shop, to his ridiculous, yes, ridiculous story about meeting a pontianak.

That last lie you take as the greatest offence thus far. Lying about the car and the journey, you can understand – it was the only way he could get you to agree to the task. But to make up some macabre story to exploit the lingering fear you were feeling from the night before... well, clearly you are not much more than a joke to him.

Yes, Shafiq will pay. And so too will the mechanic, if he attempts to cheat you.

Time skips by in jolts. You nod off over and over, and every time you do your head slumps forward and almost tips you off balance, so you wake up in alarm before you slip inexorably back into a doze.

And between these irruptions into the waking world, you dream about a woman in white. Close your eyes, and she is there beneath a dangling mass of bananas, she is there making the long grass hiss with her approach, she is here in the stinking shop running a clawed finger along your cheek, she is behind the wall tracing a line over and over, scratching a message to you: I'm out here, I'm waiting, I'm out here.

Then you feel calloused hands thumping you on the shoulder. The mechanic looms overhead. Behind him you can see the evening sky darkening from plum to pitch, and the first gleaming of the nighttime stars.

The white hairs of the mechanic's mole flap at you as he spits out a tirade in Hokkien, not a word of which you understand. You can't tell if he's angry at you for falling asleep in his shop, or if he's giving you a report on the work he's done on the car. Finally he punches three numbers into an old calculator and holds it up to you: 250.

“You pay now,” he says.

“But earlier you said one hundred fifty.”

He rolls his eyes and taps the screen of the calculator again. He repeats: “You pay now!”

“But one hundred fifty!” you splutter.

He reels back in disbelief and hocks a bubbling wad of phlegm at the floor. He stabs a finger at the calculator and then at you. “Brat!” he shouts. “I work, you pay!”

Is he threatening you? Suddenly you no longer feel like arguing. You fish out your wallet and give him five fifty-ringgit notes, which is all the money you brought with you from the big city. You remember the exact moment you withdrew those notes from the ATM, crisp and fresh and virginal. Now you watch his fingers, grubby from working on Shafiq's old car, leave black smudges across their shiny embossed surface.

“Can I get a receipt?” you ask, but he is walking away from you, not listening.

Somewhere inside you a membrane snaps under the weight of every little indignity you've suffered over the last twenty-four hours. Rage bubbles up from the murky pit of your stomach and detonates in red fireworks behind your eyes. It's too much, all of it, far too much, and if you don't do something soon it's all going to come out in a scream.

But what can you do? Picture yourself banging the roof of Shafiq's car on your return journey, shrieking obscenities out the window at the passing trees. No, that won't help. What will the trees care about all your howling? You need to do something right now, in this shop.

He has his back to you – now's your chance. But what? How? Look around. There, a hammer, lying on the workbench. Go on, allow yourself a little fantasy: picture yourself taking a swing at him while he's not looking. Slam the hammer into the back of his head, whack, knock him off his feet. That'll show him.

But... no, you can't do that. You'll get blood everywhere. The law will find you. What are you thinking, letting him get to you like this? You can't hit him. The last thing you need is to deal with the police on a day like today.

What then? Any second now he's going to turn around. Steal something, maybe. There's a box of nails nearby, perched on the seat of an old moped. He's not looking. Grab a nail. Do it. Now. Slip your fingers into the box, pull out a good six-incher, long and thick and silver. Unsullied, like the money you gave away. Not much of a theft when you think about it, but oh, the solidity of the nail, the way it resists the pressure of your thumb and forefinger. And let's face it, let's say Shafiq wasn't lying to you about the pontianak. This nail could save your life.

The mechanic is looking at you. Did he see you? No, he'd be shouting at you if he did. All the same you hurry out of the shop, tucking the nail into your pocket. There's a delicious prickle running up and down the back of your neck as you make for the car – this must be what they call the thrill of the crime.

Then you hear him shout, "Hey!" and you freeze. It occurs to you that what you did was very stupid, and petulant, and childish, and you wish you hadn't done it, and maybe you should turn around and apologise.

But then a nasty grin settles over your face. Why should you apologise? It's just a

nail. What's one nail compared with two hundred fifty ringgit? You get in the car.

The mechanic taps on the window. Don't look at him. You're not going to wind it down. You're going to drive away, maybe rev the engine a little bit on your way out, just to let him know how angry you are.

You reach for the key, ready yourself to make a sharp twist to make the engine roar to life. Except there's no key in the ignition.

There's another tap on the window. The key is dangling between the mechanic's fingers.

Slowly you wind down the window, the heat of shame crawling up your face. The mechanic tosses the key into your lap, spits another frothing wad on the ground, and walks off.

*

As you guide the car back onto the road, you take a look at the last red gleamings of sunset and remember Shafiq's warning about the headlights. You never mentioned them to the mechanic and he never said anything to you about fixing them. For all you know, they're completely dead. How are you going to find your way in the dark without them? Picture yourself trying to navigate the winding jungle road in total darkness, scraping the sides of the car against the trees.

Oh, to hell with the car. It's you you're worried about at the moment. You could crash into something, or go into a ditch, or take a wrong turn somewhere and get lost in the wilderness. What if you can't make it back? What if you have to spend the night in the car, alone, in the dark?

No, no, don't lose hope just yet. Shafiq didn't say the headlights were broken, he just said – what? That they “go out sometimes.”

Better check them just in case. Switch them on now, see if they're working. You think you see twin circles of dim light on the road ahead of you, but you can't be sure. Maybe switch them off and on again, see if anything changes. No? Try it again, off and on. Off and on. Off and on.

What are you doing? You'll drain the battery. Stop playing with them, you fool. Switch them on and leave them alone. Now breathe. Think. Don't be so pessimistic. The car isn't stalling anymore. That awful scraping noise is gone – the mechanic fixed it. You'll probably get back in half the time it took to come out here. Sandwich the accelerator pedal between your foot and the floor. Enjoy this open road while it lasts.

You can use this time to think about what you're going to say to Shafiq when you see him. It would be oh-so-tempting to just shout and curse and rage until he feels guilty for putting you into this position, but Shafiq could very likely laugh it off, and you would run the risk of looking like a whining child.

This thought makes your stomach twist into a hard knot. The last thing you want is to be laughed at, especially after a day like today. Forget about trying to make him feel guilty, you could take your revenge on his money instead. The mechanic never gave you a receipt, so you can use that truth in your favour.

Tell Shafiq the cost of the repairs was three hundred ringgit, and politely but firmly insist that he pay you back. No, make that four hundred ringgit – not so low that Shafiq can casually wave it away and claim that you did him a favour, but not so high

that he won't believe it either.

And you can explain to him how much work the mechanic put into the car – tell him how you stood by, awe-struck, as the mechanic found problem after problem: a broken transmission, a leaking fuel line, a bad fuse. Why, if you had never paid for the work to be done, then the fuel would have ignited the next time Shafiq took it for a drive! Your cousin could have gone up in a ball of flame. You saved his life today, at the risk of losing your own, and the very least he could do is reimburse you.

Yes, this will work. Just be sure to keep your anger in check. That shouldn't be a problem – you're feeling better already. By the end of this little visit, you will be at least one hundred and fifty ringgit richer. And when you think about it, there's something rather exciting about what you're doing right now, driving into the jungle in the crimson twilight.

Then you turn off the highway and onto the dirt road that will take you to the kampung, and the trees close in on either side and swallow you whole, car and all. The branches converge overhead, thin and gnarled, curling inwards like fingers beckoning you closer, closer, closer. The leaves clump together and form a dark ceiling. The dirt road goes from deep brown to black, seems to widen out and merge with the surrounding trees, seems to disappear altogether save for what little you can see by the dim lights of the car and the *spack-spack-spack* of pebbles striking the undercarriage.

The headlights give everything a shifting black outline. They throw the shadows of the trees into stark relief, and if you look at the trees on a night like this they look a little bit like worms, enormous pale worms, frozen in place halfway up from the ground.

The headlights wash over a pair of eyes in the branches, two shining opals flaring in the dark. You have an audience tonight. Well, of course you do. It's the jungle, something's always watching you here. Monkey, lizard, bird, frog, cat... the list goes on. It's nothing to worry about. Calm down.

You make the mistake of looking into the rear-view mirror, wondering if maybe you'd see the eyes glittering back at you, but there is nothing back there, nothing but black, nothing but a hungry void chasing you down.

“Allahu akbar,” you whisper, to the encroaching darkness. “Let this be over soon.”

Just over your shoulder you hear a familiar sound, a tinny E-flat: the shrill whine of a mosquito's wings. The mosquito must be buzzing nearby for you to be able to hear it over the engine. It's the last thing you want to hear right now, as unwelcome as a drill through the back of the head. Don't bother looking over your shoulder to try to find it – you won't see it in the dark, and you need to keep your eyes on the road.

Keep thinking about Shafiq and the sorry look on his face when you lean on him for the money. Think about the branches leaving gashes in the car's scabby paint job, delight in every rock bouncing across the frame. Music to your ears. A fitting bit of justice for everything you've gone through on this awful hot waste of a day.

There's that mosquito again, zipping by your left ear. You glance over to the passenger seat to see a little black dot flitting around the window, bumping stupidly against the glass. Trapped in here, like you – you are two captives locked in the same metal box, and it is only a matter of time before you turn on one another.

But you are going to get it first. You've given enough blood to these monsters, and you'll be damned before you let this one sink its straw into you. With one hand keeping the wheel steady you lean over to the passenger side and thump your palm over the mosquito.

At that moment the car thuds over a hole in the earth and the wheel twists out of your grasp, and your feet lift off the pedals, toes curling upward in frozen tableau of panic. The car stalls and the tires lock into place, growling into the dirt. You are pitched forward, bashing your ribs against the steering wheel.

The engine dies, and the lights go out. The darkness closes over you, fills the car up with an impenetrable black.

Breathe. Don't lose your head. It's just the dark. Nothing can reach you in here. You are safe inside the car. Just give the ignition a little twist and the engine will start again, and the lights will come back, and you can be on your way.

You know where the ignition is, even if you can't see it. Just feel around behind the steering wheel. That's it. Now turn the key.

The engine shudders. The scraping sound is back, as though someone were under the hood dragging a bit of metal across the car's inner works.

Now, don't panic just yet. You're still fine. You just had a little bump on the road, hardly something that could break a car. And anyway, the car stalled thirteen times today, and each time it did you brought it back to life again. And that was before the mechanic had a look at the engine. You paid a lot of money to have this car fixed. It will work.

Give it another try.

The engine gives a plaintive cough, and falls silent.

It's fine. It's fine. It just needs a minute. You can wait for a minute. In the dark. You can wait in the dark. Just give the engine a little chance to rest, and then you'll try again.

The mosquito chooses this moment to fly up close and jab you in the temple. You smack the side of your head, feel something squish against your skin. You killed it. Good. It's the mosquito's fault you're in this mess.

A shriek comes from somewhere up above, just a faint cry in the distance, echoing over the valley, and you think it must be an owl or some other night-bird, it must be, except you could swear that it sounded more than a little like the scream of a baby.

Breathe.

It didn't sound like a baby. Don't think that. It was a bird. Just a harmless bird.

Stop shaking.

It's been about a minute, hasn't it? Try the ignition.

The engine coughs again, and something catches in there with a gritty crunch, and the lights spring back to life.

And there she is standing in front of the car in a tattered white dress, wild black hair hanging over her face. And her skin is white, and her feet are filthy, and a red mass dangles down from beneath her skirt. And she is reaching out to you, pointing at you, and her fingernails are overgrown and curve at the ends, like claws.

Then the engine dies again, and the lights sputter out.

You saw her. There's no denying it. You saw her. She's real.

You need to go. You need to drive. Try the engine again. Try turning the lights off and on again. Try them both together.

You can just about make out the rough outline of her hair, long and ragged, blowing in the night-time breeze. She is coming closer.

Lock the doors.

You need something, a weapon. But oh, don't you have just the thing? In your pocket. Reach in there and pull it out: the six-inch nail. This ought to do the job, shouldn't it? Shafiq said as much.

Hold on to it tightly. No, not that tightly!

The nail slips out of your sweaty fingers, clatters somewhere down there in the abyss at your feet.

You don't want to take your eyes off the approaching silhouette, but without that nail how are you going to defend yourself? Ease down the seat, see if you can reach it without having to duck your head down. A little further. Feel around down there. The nail can't have gotten far.

Your fingers touch metal. “Alhamdulillah!” you whisper. Sit back up again to see that black outline peering through the window at you.

You let out a scream that reverberates off the car's interior and lingers in your ears, a shrill echo. “Stay back!” Hold the nail up to the window, show her that you are armed.

She taps on the window and says, softly, “Assalamu alaikum.”

What's this? She speaks? She's trying to trick you into opening the window, so she

can reach in and pull you out and feed on you. Don't fall for it.

She taps again. This time she sounds more frantic: “Assalamu alaikum?” Turning the salutation into a question, probing for a response.

Think back to everything you've ever read and heard about the pontianak. Can it say God's name? Can it use a Muslim greeting? Can it talk at all?

Maybe she's not a pontianak. Except you have that image of her burned into your brain, ghastly and pale, as clear in your mind's eye as it was only a moment ago when she was lit up by the headlights.

Roll down the window just a crack. Just a sliver. Don't give her enough room to reach in and grab you.

Immediately she leans forward, pressing her hands up against the glass. Her fingers feel around the edges of the window.

“Wa....” Your tongue is stiff with panic. “Wa alaikum assalam.”

“Help me!” she says. “Brother, can you let me inside?”

More trickery, perhaps? Don't you dare open the door until you know what she is.

“Wait,” you say. You need time to think. Why won't she give you time to think? “Tell me first... who are you and what are you doing out here?”

“I'm lost! Please, I was walking in the jungle just before sunset, and I thought I was on the path that would lead me home but I was wrong, it led me somewhere else, and now it's dark and I can't see and there are terrible things out here, and I'm frightened, brother, so very frightened! Open the door, brother, please, let me in!”

Again you say, “Wait.”

“Wait? How can you tell me to wait? Brother, if you don't let me in now, something might get me, and there will be no one but you to blame!”

She's right, of course. If she were not a pontianak but a normal human woman, then leaving her out here to fend for herself would be as good as killing her. What if she were to encounter a real pontianak? Or else a tiger, or a wild boar, or a poisonous snake.

Listen to yourself, already thinking about her as though she were no danger at all. That's been your problem all along: you are so quick to trust. You trusted Shafiq that the journey would be quick and painless. You trusted the mechanic to fix the car. And now you think you can trust her?

What shall it be, then? Leave her, or let her in? The point is moot if you can't get the car to start. Give the ignition another try.

The headlights flicker back on, twin beams bathing the road ahead with soft grey radiance, as welcome as the light of Paradise. Something clicks in the engine and it rumbles back to life. Salvation at last. There is hope for you yet.

“What are you doing?” She dashes in front of the car, waving her hands. “Stop! Don't leave me here!”

You can see her clearly now. What you'd taken for a dangling mass of intestines is, in fact, a red scarf tied around the waist of her dress. Her skin is pale, but only made to seem ghostly by the pale light of the car. Her nails are long but they don't end in points – they don't look even remotely claw-like. And with her black hair falling back from her face you can see that she is beautiful, with cat's eyes and a little mushroom nose and a slender jawline. Hardly the monster you thought you saw only moments ago.

But Shafiq did say this is how a pontianak will trick you: by appearing as a beautiful girl lost in the jungle, luring you close, getting you to lower your guard.

She puts her hands over the hood of the car. “Please, I beg you! God is watching, brother. Let me in!”

You don't know what to do. You watch her come around to the passenger-side window.

Then you see that the door on that side is not locked. When you locked the door on the driver's side you assumed it would lock every door in the car, but not so – and you shouldn't be surprised, really, that this particular car has let you down once again.

“I'm going to open the door now,” she says. “Is that alright?”

You don't say anything. If she lunges at you, attacks you, if she tries anything at all, at the very least you have the nail. Your grip tightens around it, keeping it locked between your thumb and index finger.

The door clicks open, swings back to reveal her hesitating at the threshold. “Will you let me in, brother?” She has the door open, you haven't made a move to drive away yet, and still she is looking for an invitation.

You hear yourself say, “Come in,” and every nerve in your body screams at you to take it back, rescind the invitation, stamp down on the pedals and drive.

“Alhamdulillah,” she says, climbing into the passenger seat. “Thank you, thank you! You've saved me, brother!” She closes the door behind her. “You're so kind, brother, to let me in, to help me.” She leans towards you. “You're the only person I saw tonight. I was so worried. I thought no one would come. I thought I would starve to death. I was so

frightened, brother! And so hungry. I missed dinner, you see." She leans closer, puts a hand on your leg. The other hand goes to your cheek, traces a gentle line with her fingernail. "I can't tell you how hungry I am, brother. I haven't eaten in so long..."

Get her get her now get her while you have the chance this could be your one chance your only chance get her NOW—

The nail goes through her neck just under the jawline, crunches through sinew and cartilage, sinks all the way up through soft tissue, buries itself to the hilt. Something warm and black gushes over your fingers, splatters all over the seat. For a moment you are holding her in place, feeling the weight of her head trembling up from the nail to your fingers and all along your arm.

"Ulp," she says. "Hhhaaa..."

She flails at the handle of the door.

"Hhhaaa..."

The door swings open and you feel her head slipping free of the nail, and she spills out into the dirt road, and then she is up and making a kind of gurgling sound and you watch her disappear into the trees.

You hear the hiss of footsteps moving through the grass.

You hear a soft thump, sound of a body falling onto the earth.

And then you hear nothing at all over the ringing in your ears. Silence. Like she was never here.

But she *was* here, wasn't she? Your fingers are soaked, sticky. The car is ripe with a metallic, salty smell. The smell of copper coins, of a rusty iron gate, of blood. You must

have hit a major artery.

What have you done?

The passenger-side door is hanging open. She could come back at any moment.

But she's not coming back, is she?

Stare out the passenger-side door. Nobody, nothing looks back.

Maybe you should go and check on her.

But... go out there? In the dark? You don't even know what you'd find.

Yes you do. You know exactly what you'd find. A dead body. You killed her. You're a killer.

The door is still hanging open.

Reach out and pull it shut.

Just drive away. There's nothing you can do for her now. You've done enough.

You shift into gear, put your foot down on the accelerator. That's it. Just drive away. Like it never happened. It didn't happen. It's all just a bad dream, a story you're telling yourself.

Clutch the nail to your chest, feel the tip poke into your palm. Sticky and warm. Get rid of it. When they come for you, they'll be looking for the weapon.

Hurl it out of the crack in the passenger-side window, imagine it sailing away into the long grass. Imagine some animal licking it clean, licking away the evidence.

“God is watching, brother,” she said. Could that be true? But God will never tell anyone, will He? And God rewards the slaying of monsters. Isn't that right?

But she wasn't really a monster, was she.

Just focus on the drive. Try not to see her face in the trees. Put it behind you, banish it all to the hungry night.

You're a killer, a killer, a killer.

Stop it. Focus on the drive.

The trees fall away. You pass the wooden houses on stilts, the padi fields, the little shacks bordering the kampung's rubber estates. Normal things. Safe things. You can stop shaking. You're coming back to the real world now. There's the turn-off to get to your cousin's shack.

Park the car in its accustomed spot under the overhanging roof.

Breathe.

There’s a bad smell in here, sour, like rotten meat. The blood must be drying.

You could tell Shafiq you hurt yourself. The blood is yours. But... no, he won't believe that. The only wounds on your body are mosquito bites.

Maybe if you scratch yourself before going in? He might believe that you had an accident, which isn't so far from the truth.

What are you thinking? You can't lie about something like this. It happened. You killed her. You're a killer. The only thing you can do is confess. Tell Shafiq what happened. He'll understand. And anyway, it's his fault for filling your head with horror stories. He's just as guilty as you – more so, in fact! He might as well have killed her himself!

You can't think with that stench seeping into your brain. Climb out of the car, get a lungful of air.

“Cousin!” Shafiq is outside, bent over the old faucet, poised to wash his feet. “There you are! I was worried for you. But you came home safely. Good.”

He beckons you closer.

“Come, wash with me. It's time to pray.”

The night-time prayer: brilliant idea. Nothing could be more normal. You join him at the faucet, let the cold water run over your sticky fingers. “Washing your mind,” said your old ustaz. “Purging all unclean thoughts.” What could be more unclean than guilt? Let the water wash it away, let it bring you back to your senses, let it carry you back to the real world where none of this madness ever happened and you can go back to your life like someone waking up from a bad dream.

“Come,” says Shafiq, leading you inside. The lights are on, bright enough to make your eyes ache. Blink, and dark fireworks explode behind your eyelids.

“Are you alright?” asks Shafiq. “You look terrible.”

“I am terrible,” you say.

“What?”

“I mean, I feel terrible.” You sway, left and right.

“Did something happen out there?” asks Shafiq. You're starting to scare him.

“I met a pontianak.” You're surprised at how easy it is to say. Saying it makes you feel lighter, like you could be carried away by the breeze at any moment.

Shafiq smiles. “Haha! Nice try, cousin. But there's no such thing.”

This is not what you want him to say. You want fear, confusion, concern. Not this.

“But you said... you said there was a pontianak visiting you at night. You told me

you saw one!”

“It was just a harmless story.” Shafiq goes over to the cupboard and comes back with both prayer mats tucked under his arm. “I tell it to city people all the time. I thought you would like it.”

“Just a harmless story,” you say.

“Yes! Just a bit of fun. You're having a bit of fun with me now, yes? Met a pontianak. Hah! You'll have to try harder than that, cousin.”

“But... what about the scratching last night? You were so scared, you told me not to make a sound... you told me if we looked out the window we would be letting it in. Letting what in, Shafiq? What would we be letting in?”

“Nothing!” he unrolls the prayer mats, placing them side by side. “Cousin, it was probably just a jungle cat or a bird, it happens all the time! I was just trying to scare you! You were making so much noise, I wanted to shut you up and make you go to sleep. And it worked!”

“Then there is no pontianak.”

“That's what I'm trying to tell you, cousin. There is no pontianak.”

“But that's worse.”

“What's worse? Cousin, what happened tonight?”

Where do you begin? What do you say to him? Suddenly you don't want to say anything at all. You want to go home. You want to go to sleep. You want to wake up in your bed, and never think about this again.

But close your eyes, and there she is, cat's eyes glinting at you in the headlights.

Asking you to help. Asking you to let her in.

"What happened out there?" asks Shafiq.

You're a killer, a killer, a killer.

Shafiq looks round, as though he heard the words in your head. But no, he's not staring at you. He's staring at the wall.

"Did you hear that?" he asks.

"Stop. Stop it."

"I'm serious," he says. "Listen."

You listen. And when it comes, it's so soft, it's barely a sound at all: scratch scraaatch scratch.

You start to laugh.

"What's so funny?" asks Shafiq.

"Nothing. I'm sorry. I can't help it."

Scratch scraaatch scratch.

"Tell me again, Shafiq."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me again how it's all just a story."

Scratch scraaatch scratch.

"It *was* just a story," he says, and you can't tell if he's just trying to make you feel better.

"Then I should look outside right now," you say.

"Don't." Panic in his voice.

“Why not?” You're already making for the window.

“You can't,” he says. “You don't know what's out there.”

In the glare of the lights, the window is a solid black. You reach for the light switch.

“Don't,” says Shafiq.

You flick the switch.

There she is, just behind the window, reaching out a clawed finger, dragging that overgrown fingernail across the glass. You think you see her smile at you.

She drags her fingernail along the wall, tracing a line from the window to the front door, which blows open hard enough to crash against the wall with a bang. Shafiq lets out a moan.

She is silhouetted there at the threshold, poised to enter, and even now she hesitates, waiting for one final invitation.

“Please,” you say. “Come in.”

Bersih

“I think that's everything,” I say, when I finish going through my stuff. “Cane, water bottle, camera, computer, pain pills. Wait. Goggles. I'm supposed to bring goggles.”

“Let me check.” Mum disappears into the house and returns with a little silver bag. “These are the only ones I could find. I think they're your sister's.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

She hovers by the front door as I bend down to do up my laces. These sneakers are going to see a lot of wear over the next twenty-four hours.

“You'll take care of yourself, won't you, son?”

“I will.”

“Don't get into any fights.”

“I won't.” I look up at her. “Thanks for not trying to talk me out of this, Mum.”

“Well, I know you have your reasons. Just try to come home in one piece, okay? You're still in recovery.”

In the driveway, Dad is stitching together his latest pair of boots. He looks up from the pile of leather on the worktable. “Be careful out there. I hear they've been shipping police in from Sabah and Sarawak, so you're probably in for a tough time.”

“Uh, good to know.”

He looks down at his stitching, severe black eyebrows crowding together over his glasses. He pushes the needle into the leather, and I feel a prickle run up my arms, as

though it were my own skin.

He says, “One assumes you have a good idea about why you’re doing this.”

“Yes. I mean, I think so. And I mean if I don’t know yet I assume I’ll get a better sense of why I’m doing this later on, in the thick of it, as it were. I mean, it needs to happen, doesn’t it? And I need to be there. And I hope… I just hope it’ll be okay.”

“One hopes so.” The needle punctures through the leather, trailing a thin line of thread.

He nods, a formal dismissal. “Good luck,” I hear him say, as I walk down the driveway.

“Thanks.”

I take a taxi to Wangsa Maju. The driver whistles through his teeth when he sees the traffic jam in the opposite lane. There's a police roadblock at every major intersection.

I've read about these roadblocks: they're looking for foreign agents, communist insurgents, terrorists, and anyone wearing a yellow t-shirt.

Yellow means Bersih. Yellow means you're going to take part in the rally. I don't own anything yellow, nor would I wear any if I did – I don't want to stick out more than I already do. If something awful happens tomorrow, I really want to make sure I look like a harmless tourist: possibly mat salleh, white; or else orang campur, mixed. I figure a tourist is less likely to get beaten up and arrested.

The roadblocks are slowing the traffic down to a crawl – and on a street as busy as Ulu Kelang, that means no one in that lane is going anywhere for at least a couple hours.

The driver sighs. “Long drive back. All because of Bersih.”

I keep silent, recalling Prime Minister Najib's promise that the taxi drivers will be up in arms against the rally because of the business they stand to lose when the people are all over the streets.

At Wangsa Maju I take the LRT into the heart of the city, watching through the front window as the automated train follows its narrow concrete track over Kuala Lumpur.

The LRT's walls have that almost-but-not-quite-futuristic look from the 1990s: rounded edges, shiny metal poles, blocky compartments sticking out of the corners. Tonight the walls are covered in stylised yellow circles. Enormous cartoon egg yolks yawn over the seats and the floor: some ad sticker for a greasy KFC breakfast.

I get superstitious and decide it's some kind of omen. I mean, it's yellow, like the Bersih logo, like the t-shirts the police are arresting people for wearing. A slogan reads, “So good to start your day.”

Above the sliding doors, Prime Minister Najib's chinless face leers down at me from a 1Malaysia banner, looking pleased with himself. Since it's a 1Malaysia banner, it depicts all three “main” races: a picture each of a Chinese boy and an Indian girl on either side, and a bigger picture of a Malay boy in the centre. The text reads: “Working together for racial harmony.”

I realise I never checked the camera to see how much battery is left. It's nearly empty. Damn it, and here’s me thinking I was prepared. I could swear I charged this thing a few days ago. Looks like I won't be taking any pictures tomorrow.

Oh well. At least it can be a prop. If I keep it slung around my neck, maybe the

cops will think I'm with the media.

I'm late. We were supposed to meet ten minutes ago, but time got away from me. I've been practically immobilised for the last several days, in a dreadful funk thanks to the painkiller the doctors put me on: Arcoxia, side effects of which are depression, nausea, heartburn, and hallucinations. The things I do to escape the screaming of my ruined sciatic nerve.

The plan had been: meet Ash and her mum at KL Sentral and take the Monorail over to Maharajalela station before the police close it down. Then proceed to a hotel that we booked near Stadium Merdeka, where we wait for my friends Kaz and Shobee to arrive.

The hotel was Ash's idea. Tomorrow the police will have the whole city locked down, so if we want to get anywhere near the stadium, we're going to have to start tonight. And really, the less police contact we have before we join the big crowd, the better.

My stomach does this: clench shudder clench.

I don't think it's fear. It feels a little more like the exquisite tightness you feel just before you go on stage. Not quite a panic attack. Your heart beats with a little bit more urgency, thrum-thrum-thrum. Feels the way skipping class used to feel, back in high school. The heady rush of doing something I'm not supposed to.

And maybe it's the lingering bitter tug of Arcoxia, but there's a nasty little voice in my head asking me what the hell I think I'm doing, heading out there into a pretty much guaranteed standoff with the riot police.

After all, I could get punched in the gut.

Or I could get a baton in my lower back, where they fixed me a little over a month ago. I could be crippled again, this time for good.

I could get arrested.

I could get shot.

I think about the news articles I've read, big photos of the Federal Reserve Unit's latest training exercises: riot police shouting, “Disperse! Disperse!” and firing their rifles at mannequins wearing yellow t-shirts.

Well, that would be against the law, wouldn't it? They wouldn't fire on the crowd. That would be going a bit far.

But who's to say some nervous riot cop doesn't panic and start shooting? Who's to say the prime minister won't go to any lengths to prevent an Arab Spring from happening on his watch?

Prime Minister Najib, on the subject of Bersih: “Bersih is an illegal gathering. Anyone who gathers for Bersih hates Malaysia, hates the Malay race, and hates Islam. They want to disrupt the racial harmony of our country. I promise you there will be violence and looting. They will try to burn all the shophouses down and interrupt the business of citizens all over the city. Stay indoors and wait for the Federal Reserve to clear the streets. You can rest assured that we will not tolerate violence in our city, and we will meet force with force. We will hold the rally organisers and the opposition entirely responsible for any chaos that happens in our country.”

I think what gets to me the most is this rabid conviction that Bersih is committed

to nothing short of the complete dismantlement of Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition – but that isn't the point of Bersih at all.

Bersih started as an attempt to call attention to problems in the electoral system. A group of lawyers from the Malaysian Bar Council got together and drafted a set of demands: clean up the electoral roll, which means addressing irregularities like phantom voters and multiple copies of the same voter registered at non-existent addresses; reform the postal ballot to let Malaysians overseas exercise their right to vote; use indelible ink to prevent anyone from tampering with the ballots; address all allegations of corruption, including vote buying... the list goes on.

It's a dirty system that needs cleaning, hence the name: bersih, clean. If Najib thinks that calling for a working democracy is tantamount to a call for an end to his party, it speaks a hell of a lot about how badly he needs the system to stay as dirty as it is.

So maybe they will fire at us tomorrow. They could very well be that desperate.

Clench shudder clench.

So what the hell *am* I doing this for? A thrill? A little excitement? A slice of history in the making? And my god, what makes me think the rally would even have me? I'll stick out, the way I've always stuck out. I'll be a mat salleh to them, just another white guy, totally out of place. Never mind my Malay heritage, my Malay name, my local schooling, or the warm crush of familiarity in my chest when I breathe in the thick tropical air. They'll take one look at my freckles and my light skin and they'll know I don't belong. I won't belong at all.

I could go home right now. I don't have to do this. It's not too late. I can text my

friends and tell them I'm sorry, I can't take the risk, it's too soon after my surgery. They'd understand. They've already told me as much. No one would think less of me.

The LRT's doors open at Ampang Park. I could get out right now and take the train back in the opposite direction.

And I would go home, and explain to my parents that I lost my nerve, and I'd stay up in my room, and a mat salleh is all I'll ever be.

No, I can't go home.

I have no idea what will happen tomorrow. I know that it will be big, and I know that my friends will be there, and I know that in all likelihood I will be in pain.

And more than anything I want to be a part of it. I wouldn't miss it for the world.

*

By the time I get to Sentral I'm too late to meet Ash and her mum. Ash texts me to say they're heading for the hotel to make sure we don't lose our booking. Not a problem. GoogleMaps has given me a pretty good idea about where the hotel is.

I walk from Sentral to the Monorail station, keeping an eye out for yellow t-shirts. My eyes gravitate to beige blouses and yellow umbrellas, but I see no obvious fellow walkers. Makes me wonder how many there will be tomorrow. What if the propaganda worked? What if no one turns up? What if it's only a smattering of us rambling around Bukit Jalil? Easy pickings for the riot cops.

I'm walking with my cane for the first time in over a month. It feels strange, like going back to an old friend too soon after you've made your dramatic goodbyes. Hello, hello, how awkward to see you again. Now I've got it in my hand I keep expecting that

sharp bite of pain whenever I put pressure on my left leg, but so far I'm getting no complaints from the sciatic nerve. Not tonight, at least. Tomorrow during the long march, things will be different.

The cane is like the camera: a prop, existing slightly beyond its practical utility. Maybe the cops will think twice before beating on a cripple. And besides, this cane could probably do a lot of damage if things get ugly.

I practice a few swings as I climb the steps to the monorail, imagine swiping someone off their feet. *Swish*. Swing that walking stick the way I used to, when the pain was at its worst and I needed to lash out at something, anything, even the empty air. Listen to the way the black aluminium sings as it cuts a mean arc through the air. A little bit of the rage stored up inside me for over a year flows out along my arm and out through the cane.

People are looking at me. I let my arm drop, lean against my old friend, and breathe.

Traffic in inner-city KL is a nightmare on most days, and today it's made worse by the roadblocks. Which means the Monorail is crammed with people, as if it wasn't tight enough in here.

And I am feeling armed and nervous and excited, with my fists clenched and my stomach tight and my teeth set to a frantic grind.

A couple of tourists sit next to me and murmur to each other in voices hushed enough to obscure what they're saying, but not enough to mask their accent: Australians. Cameras, freckles, loose linen trousers, water bottles. They are the gorgeous and sun-

soaked backbone of a tourism economy. I have to wonder what they'll be doing when the show starts tomorrow.

As we approach the station I gather my things and stand by the door. One of the Aussies—a slender man in a tight black t-shirt—holds up my train pass. It must have slipped out of my pocket.

"Can't leave without that!" I say, which is true – without my pass the guards will think I hopped the turnstile, and I won't be allowed out of the station.

The Aussie smiles at me.

I smile back.

We have established a dialogue, and I now feel the need to talk to them. "Big day tomorrow."

"Is it?" he says.

"Well, yeah. The Bersih rally. Didn't you hear about that?"

"Oh, that. I heard it was called off."

I'm starting to make his companion uncomfortable. She's blonde and pretty and I can tell by her silence and the way she avoids eye contact that she wants me to go away.

"Ah, that's what they want you to think," I say, because once you start to make someone uncomfortable you may as well finish the job. "That's what the bullshit press is reporting, but don't you believe it. It's definitely happening. Trust me, man. Tomorrow's going to be big."

He laughs without any humour at all, a polite titter, quick and nervous. What must they think of me, with my Asian eyes and freckles and not-quite-white skin and walking

stick and dangerous political agenda?

“So where will you guys be tomorrow?” I ask. “Are you going out or staying in?”

“Uh,” he says. “Reckon we'll be staying in.”

“Sensible. Don't blame you.” I want to say something clever, but nothing comes to mind. The doors open, so I give them another smile and wish them a good night. They don't smile back.

*

I come out of the Maharajalela monorail station to find that, like so many cheap hotels in downtown KL, Mandarin Court looks like a total dive on the outside. It's the first thing you see as you turn left, a black tower with a red neon sign at the top: Hotel MANDARIN COURT. The U in COURT flickers irritably as I approach.

But it's nice inside. The floors are white marble, polished to a mirror sheen. The tapestries on the walls are simple, tasteful, culturally ambiguous: could be Chinese, Malay, Indian or none of the above. The lobby is lit by soft incandescent bulbs mounted into a row of glass chandeliers.

A guy in uniform is leaning against the wall as I make for the elevators. We glance at each other: he looks like a cop in his blue shirt, black trousers, black tie and policeman’s hat. Why's he looking at me like that? Is he going to stop me? I'm not doing anything wrong.

He doesn't move. Then I see his name tag and the badge pinned to his shirt: he's just hotel security, and I'm being paranoid.

Ash greets me at the door with a hug. Her hair is a storm of black frizz. Her mum

is lying on the bed, watching the news. She gets up and gives me a hug too. Suddenly all the tightness inside me lets go for a moment and I take a nice big gulp of air. Next thing you know we're falling into giddy hysterics. It takes a few minutes for us to stop laughing. We're here. We made it. Before this I was just a guy in a series of trains and they were a mother/daughter pair in a hotel room. Now, we're a team.

I tell Ash's mum I'm happy to see her here, taking part.

“Oh, I wouldn't miss it! And I'm so proud of you and Ash for coming.” She and Ash were at the first Bersih rally back in November of 2007, which eventually dispersed when the police rolled in with tear gas and water cannons.

I tell them I didn't bring anything to cover my face, and they show me what they brought: bottles of water, sodium bicarbonate, and some surgical masks. “We'll be glad for these tomorrow,” says Ash.

“Um, how likely is it that something awful will happen?”

Ash and her mum look at each other. “Pretty likely,” says Ash.

“Almost guaranteed,” says her mum.

“It just seems so bizarre,” I say. “You grow up here thinking Malaysia's a safe place to live, you know? You get used to a certain way of living. I just don't know what to expect. I've never been in a rally before.”

Ash's mum presses her lips together. I've triggered a bad memory.

“It's not always a safe place to live,” she says.

Turns out Ash's mum is old enough to remember the race riots of 1969, the infamous “Incident” which very few Malaysian history books will ever mention. The

Malays didn't just come for the Chinese in those bloody weeks – they came for the Indians too. Ash's mum remembers being a little girl running with her family through her neighbourhood, screaming as all the cars catch fire. She remembers being unable to keep from looking at the hacked-up bodies in the storm drain. Some of those arms and legs belonged to kids she used to know.

We take a walk outside in search of a midnight meal. Above us, the big U has completely fizzled out.

“There is no U in Court,” I say.

“Must be a good omen,” says Ash.

My friend Kaz texts me to say he and Shobee will be here soon.

We find a little neighbourhood mamak stall on a narrow sidestreet behind a row of towering concrete tenements. The stall is not much more than a few plastic tables and a little stove, run by a Tamil husband-and-wife duo. The only people eating here are a couple of elderly Malay guys in the corner, picking at their rice with gravy-stained fingers.

“I don't know,” says Ash.

I ask her what's not to like.

“In KL you always try to go for the most crowded restaurant,” she says. “More people means better food.”

I know this already, and the way she points it out to me, like it's some new concept, gives me the impression she thinks of me as a foreigner.

But I don't say anything, because there are more pressing matters at hand: we're

all hungry, it's late, and something smells amazing. Sweet fire in the air. Chillies and onions and garlic. Makes my nostrils tingle. God, there's a bouquet I'll gladly smell to the end of time.

The mamak man peeks out at us from behind a stack of tinned condensed milk. He's tall and gangly and dark-skinned. He asks for our order.

“Maggi goreng,” I say. Every mamak seems to have their own take on it, and I want to know what theirs is.

It starts out with the familiar packet of dried noodles and the customary spice mix, just add water. After that, things get crazy: sauces, spices, herbs, meat, all fried up with eggs and vegetables and served with a slice of lime on a plastic plate.

Greasy and delicious. Hot damn. I like this place already.

Later we go up to see Stadium Merdeka by night. We want to see what it looks like before the crowd gathers there tomorrow. We have to walk across a pedestrian overpass to get there.

“Typical bad Malaysian design,” says Ash.

“What is?”

“This whole stupid overpass. Look.” She points at the monorail station. “They had to build the structure of a bridge to make that station, right? You'd think you'd be able to use it to cross from one side of the causeway to the other, right?”

“Right.”

“Wrong. There's a locked door in the way. You actually have to go down the road and use this walkway, because we're addicted to building redundant crap.”

The overpass is filthy. Dry leaves mingle with empty cups and scrunched-up tissues and cigarette butts along the sides of the walkway. But wait, what's that in the corner? A mysterious blackened spot. It’s too contained to be accidental, so it couldn't have come from a careless cigarette. The black leaves have been carefully arranged in a pile: someone lit a small fire here, above the Maharajalela causeway. Maybe they were cooking up heroin, or making an effort to keep warm on a rainy day, or burning an effigy. The overpass takes on a kind of quiet solemnity, like the whole structure is somehow anchored around the solitary black spot.

We climb the sheltered steps up to the Stadium Merdeka parking lot. It's surprisingly easy. There are no guards posted here, no police barriers, no yellow tape. Just a big black parking lot, speckled with rubbish gleaming white by the lights of the stadium.

The moon is half an orange disc: fifty-fifty chance that tomorrow will go well.

The parking lot is dead still. Hard to imagine what it will look like tomorrow, when thousands of people try to fill it. There's a weight to this place, a heaviness, like the whole black stretch is holding its breath.

A single helicopter prowls the sky above us. It directs a fuzzy circle of white light over the ground. Must be looking for people doing exactly what we're doing. We wait under the shelter, out of sight, until we hear the rotorblades thrum off into the distance.

“It's leaving,” says Ash. “It’s gone.”

“Let's go back,” says her mum. “I don't like this.”

But Ash is already walking across the black gravel, and her mum and I quickly

fall in line. I stare at the dark outline of trees dotting the edge of the lot, looking for an ambush. Through a window in the stadium we can see a solitary shirtless man yawn and stretch inside a tiny lit office. We walk from one end of the parking lot to the other, trying to imagine the day to come. No one stops us.

Kaz texts me to say they've been held up, and they'll be another few hours. I stare at my phone. Held up? By what? What's happened? I text him back for details but he doesn't respond.

When we get back to the hotel we see a couple of cop cars parked outside, like no police cruisers I've ever seen. They're all curves, smooth and white, with “Special Investigating Officer” printed on the side.

In the lobby a couple of serious-looking men in suits turn to watch us as we come through the sliding glass doors. They look us up and down, probably trying to work out what a mat salleh like me is doing checking into a hotel with two Indian women.

One of them looks like he's about to say something.

We don't look at them. We don't look at each other.

We walk to the elevators as casually as we can.

Nothing to see here, boys, just three tourists who picked a bad time to sight-see.

We breathe easier when we get back to the room, but it's short-lived. The news sites are buzzing about police raiding hotels all over the city, looking for rally-walkers, charging people with sedition and taking them away. And they're paying particular attention to hotels near Stadium Merdeka. They just hit Swiss Gardens, which is around the corner from here. Shit, we almost booked a room there. If we had, we'd be in a cell by

now. And here we thought the show would start tomorrow. Now we realise the game has changed: we have to make it through the night first.

Every time the elevator dings I ready myself for heavy footfalls on the hallway carpet and shadows under the door followed by a *knock knock knock*.

Suddenly we can't take it anymore. Ash rounds up the most incriminating stuff in the room—the sodium bicarbonate and the surgical masks—and puts it all into a plastic bag. I lift up the ventilation grill in the ceiling and stuff the bag into a corner, thinking about every movie where I've seen this trick work.

There follows a period of tense denial about how scared we are, after which the elevator dings once more and we hurriedly take the bag down again. What if the ceiling vent is the first place they check? They'll know we were trying to hide this stuff, which will make us look even worse. Better to get rid of it altogether or else hide it in plain sight. Maybe just out in the open, on the table? No, that’s just courting disaster.

Finally Ash's mum takes the bag out into the hallway and stashes it behind a potted plant.

The rattling of the aircon becomes unbearable. I keep thinking it's a helicopter thrumming around just outside our window. It's that fucking helicopter from before, and they've found us, and I feel like I'm going to throw up, and I'm shaking, and I've never been this scared before, never in my whole life.

For hours, we listen. The only noise in the room: our breathing, the occasional sniff, the dry skin-scrape of toes rubbing together, and whatever sounds filter in from outside. I hear tires peeling and the angry hum of engines as cars trickle one-by-one

through the police checkpoints. I hear a dog barking, or maybe it's a man shouting, or maybe it's distant music warped out of all recognition after its acoustic bounce through KL's back alleys. There's a deep bass throbbing in the air, like a growl or a heartbeat. It's every noise outside flowing together into something awake and alive.

The hours pass. The fear fades. The wifi signal comes and goes. We keep checking Twitter for news updates, read article after article speculating on the day to come. When two o'clock rolls around we figure the cops aren't coming after all. Ash gives me the key to the adjoining room and falls asleep next to her mum. I text Kaz every hour.

I'm just about to nod off when I get a text from him saying they're downstairs. I find them in the lobby, lurking by the receptionist's desk.

Kaz is wearing a lurid yellow-and-brown striped t-shirt. “It's the only yellow shirt I own.”

“It's hideous.”

“Yeah, fuck you, I like this shirt. C'mere.” He gives me a hug. “I'm so glad you're here, man.”

Shobee likes the look of the hotel. “I can't believe you got a room so close to the stadium,” she says. “This is perfect.”

She's just come in from out of town. She works as a teacher in Johor, about four hours' drive south of here. On the elevator ride up she tells me about the hell they went through getting here.

“Roadblocks everywhere, like you wouldn't believe. It's mad. They've shut down the city, there's zero traffic flow out there. Imagine being in a bus in the middle of that.

And that was just to get into the city. Getting *here* was something else. Kaz's poor friend had to drive us."

They tell me they were up against the road block for a little while. The cops pulled them over and asked where they were going. Kaz made up a fast story about being tourists looking for some hot chow mein.

"Some what?" said the cops.

"Some hot hot chow mein!" said Kaz. "I gotta get at that *good stuff!* You know where I can get me some of that *good stuff?*"

The cops didn't know what to make of him, so they waved him away. A few meters down the road Kaz and Shobee spotted a gap in the blockade where the cops weren't watching. They drove by it and did a slow circle around the block to make sure it wasn't a trap.

Sure enough it was clear on their second pass. They yelled, "Now, damn it, now!" and slipped through, easy as that.

"I think they're shutting down the trains tomorrow," says Kaz.

"They don't want anyone getting *near* the stadium right now," says Shobee.

"I was just there, actually."

They look at me in surprise. Kaz asks, "Did they try to stop you?"

"Nope. I just walked around the parking lot with Ash and her mum. There was a helicopter, but that was it."

"We should do that," says Shobee. "We should do that right now."

"We should see if this hotel has a ballroom," says Kaz.

“We should ride up and down the elevators,” says Shobee.

I point at my watch. “It's nearly five o'clock in the morning, guys. We've gotta be awake in four hours.”

“He's got a point,” says Kaz. “Let's do shadow puppets instead.”

We settle into the adjoining room. Kaz puts his hands over the lamp on the bedside table and does an impromptu puppet show: a grumpy old policeman tells off a sleazy politician for being a reprobate. The two very quickly start sucking each other off. We laugh for a long time. Then it dies down, and we turn off the lights, and I realise I can't stop thinking about Ash's mum as a child running through the race riots of 1969. I picture hacked-up bodies in a storm drain, and a little girl running for her life through smoke and carnage.

“It’s not always safe,” she said.

I wonder if I will ever get to sleep. I wonder if I will toss and turn like the night before I have to give a seminar or write an exam or put on a show.

. Then I close my eyes, feel gravity pull me down through the mattress into a sweet black void, and the screaming fades away, and I dream about nothing at all.

*

It feels like it's only been a minute since I dozed off, but when I open my eyes the sun is glaring hot and golden through the shutters. And there's whispering in the far corner of the room: Kaz and Shobee are at the window, wide awake.

I hear the distant beat of drums and tambourines, and the unmistakable chatter of a crowd. Something's going on outside.

“Hey, you're up,” says Kaz. “Come see.”

I join them at the window. A Hindu wedding procession is passing beneath us. I see white and yellow silk shirts, bright yellow umbrellas, marigolds, smiling faces, and sticks of incense trailing thin lines of smoke.

“Picked a hell of a time to wear yellow in KL,” I say.

This has occurred to Kaz and Shobee too: what if they run into a police line? We picture all those beatific smiles, the incense, the marigolds, the crystalline joy of being part of a parade, running up against a line of nervous cops who, mistaking them for a Bersih march, will charge them all with sedition and inciting racial disharmony, and cart them all off to prison.

We meet the others for breakfast at the same stall we ate at last night. The same Tamil couple are working the stove and taking orders, heavy bags under their eyes. I wonder if they ever sleep, or if their shifts will end only when some young resident of the nearby tenement decides to come work for them.

We eat roti canai, hot and fresh and doughy, dipping strips of it into plates of fish curry.

Shobee gets the news on her phone: “Twitter says there are crowds moving at Masjid Jamek, Pudu Plaza and Dataran Merdeka. Police used tear gas and water cannons on all of them.”

“How many?” asks Ash.

“They're saying something like three thousand people at Pudu Plaza.”

I can't believe what I'm hearing. “Three thousand people! What does that even

look like?"

Shobee smiles. "There will be more."

Ash and her mum go up to the room to get their things ready. Kaz and Shobee and I walk up to the Maharajalela causeway, where bright orange dividers have been laid out from one side of the road to the other, blocking off any traffic hoping to get up to the stadium.

We rip the rings off the tops of two-litre water bottles and dip them into homemade bubble solution made of dishwashing detergent, water and Jell-O mix. I can't believe how well it works. We blow big juicy bubbles at the barricade.

A flock of dark red scooters speed past, driven by men in bright orange camo gear. Police or army, it's hard to tell.

The sky is a heavy, impenetrable grey. Looks like a tropical storm just waiting to unload. All the shops on this row are closed, even the 7-11. None of us have ever seen a closed 7-11 before.

Shobee asks about my cane.

I tell her that I fell down one night a year and a half ago, right on my ass on an icy slope in Prince Edward Island. The impact dislodged one of the discs in the lower lumbar area of my spine, just above the tailbone. The disc slid partway out to grind against my sciatic nerve – "It runs from here," indicating my hip, "to here," indicating my left leg.

"That must have hurt."

"Yeah. It did." I shake my head, resist the pull of bad memories. "But they fixed me, about a month ago. They cut out the disc. Gave it back to me in a little jar."

“Did you keep the jar?” asks Kaz.

“Yep. By my bedside. Looks like a bit of gristle floating in a pink fluid.”

“Eugh. Awesome.”

“So you're in recovery,” says Shobee. “Hence the cane.”

“That's right. And also I figure it could come in handy, you know.”

“How so?”

“Well, in case we run into trouble. I could use this for self-defence. Like, as a weapon.” I take a swing at empty air. *Swish*.

“Okay, this is really important,” says Shobee. “It's really important that you forget about this weapon stuff. If things get violent today, *do not get involved*. That's not why we're here. That's not what the Bersih rally is about.”

“Right,” I say. “We're a peaceful march.”

“That's exactly what we are. The only thing on our agenda today is to exercise our constitutional right to assemble peacefully. Peacefully. What happens if the media gets a shot of us waving weapons in the air and starting fights? And you know they'll be on the lookout for that, so they can use it against us. It's how they operate.”

Shobee's done this before. Like Ash, she was at the first Bersih rally back in 2007. She knows what to expect. I know she's right, but I'm not letting go of the cane any time soon. It's my security blanket. It's a close friend. I leaned on it for over a year of shrieking agony. I feel safer with it than without it.

When we return to the hotel we find more Special Investigating Officer cars parked outside. The lobby is crowded with cops and reporters, standing around, sizing

each other up.

Ash's room is crowded – our numbers have grown since breakfast. Most of them are Ash's friends. I recognise Nitia, a young NGO worker and aspiring writer who approached me a few months ago for feedback on his play. It's good to see him here.

“Good to see you too,” he says.

I ask him how he's doing.

“Nervous, man. I got the chills, right here.” He indicates his stomach.

Another face I recognise, bald and bearded: Morten, a Danish expat I keep running into at the KL Performing Arts Centre. He's the only one in the room who wasn't born here.

“I mean, okay, I'm not a citizen,” he says, “but so what? I've only been here a couple months but I love it, I love every inch of it. I care about what happens to it, I care about whether or not it has a working democracy. And besides... how often in your life do you get to do something like this? I mean, you're an expat too, right? You know what I mean.”

“I'm mixed, actually,” I say. “I'm only half expat.”

“Still,” he says.

Inevitably “What the hell am I getting into?” starts to set in. Everyone's anxious, and we can see it in each other's eyes, which makes us even more anxious, until at various points it's a little more than we can bear and we break out into giddy laughter: “Ha ha ha! Oh my god, oh my god.”

Shobee tries to cut the tension: “Well, okay, look, something bad might happen.

But nothing bad *needs* to happen. That's why we're a peaceful march, remember? Don't give them a reason."

"But what if they attack us anyway?" asks Nitia.

"Okay, people, listen, if they use tear gas or water cannons on us, the same principle applies: cover up your mouth, nose and eyes. It will probably burn quite a lot and you might even feel like you need to throw up. Try not to breathe in too much gas. If we get separated, don't panic, just try to move to a safe place and keep your phones on you at all times.

The room goes quiet.

Then Nitia says, "What happens if we get arrested?"

Ash: "They can't arrest you, dear, you won't be doing anything wrong."

Me: "Yeah, but they're going to try anyway, right?"

Shobee: "They'll try. It's true. If they do get you, just remember that they're not allowed to search you unless they specifically tell you that you are under arrest. The only things you are required by law to tell them are your name and IC number. That's it. They have to tell you very clearly that you are being arrested, they have to tell you why, and they have to tell you where you are being taken."

She holds up her phone.

"I'm going to give you some phone numbers. Take these down." She reads out three numbers, which I scribble down in my notebook. "If they take you, just call one of those numbers and you should be able to speak to a lawyer right away."

"I can't afford a lawyer," says Nitia. "My mum doesn't even know I'm doing this."

Shobee smiles. “Don't worry, they'll work for free.”

“Almost ready,” says Ash, decanting more sodium bicarbonate solution into separate bottles.

“Did you hear they're having solidarity rallies in other cities?” says Shobee. “They're gathering outside the Malaysian embassies. I hear they're doing it in Melbourne, London, New York... lots of places.”

“I heard the cops at every one of those cities have been totally fine with it.”

“We should be so lucky,” says Morten.

Shobee asks, “So is everyone clear about what we're doing this for?”

Nitia: “I think so.”

Ash: “We're marching for electoral reform.”

“That's right,” says Shobee. “But do you know what the actual plan is?”

We look at each other, a little uneasy.

Morten puts in: “All I know is we're meeting near the stadium.”

“Right,” says Shobee. “That's where the rally is supposed to officially meet. After that we're going to march to the palace and deliver a memorandum to the king – the eight demands about electoral reform.”

“That's all the way across town,” says Nitia.

“Gonna be a nice walk,” says Kaz.

“You know the foreign press is already talking about us?” says Shobee. “They're calling us an opposition protest. Can you believe that?”

“What's wrong with that?” I ask.

“Well, think about what that kind of labelling implies.”

“That's right,” says Kaz. “Calling us an opposition protest implies we're with the opposition parties, like we've taken a side in their partisan politics.”

“Exactly,” says Shobee. “But this isn't a Pakatan Rakyat rally, it's not some big conspiracy masterminded by the opposition to overthrow the government or whatever, no matter what the press says. I'm pretty sure nobody in this room is a party member. We're just citizens who care about democracy and want to see some electoral reform.”

Nitia pipes up: “Hey, let's not diss on the foreign press, though. Don't we want the world to see us? I don't believe Barack Obama will let Najib get away with more voting fraud.”

“Uh,” says Kaz. “I think Obama has plenty to worry about on his own turf.”

“Okay, so the United Nations then. If the rest of the world is watching, if there's international pressure on the government, then things have to get better, right?”

Kaz looks like he's about to say something, but instead he gives a shrug and retreats to the far corner of the room, where he sits cross-legged, eyes closed, a wrinkle of concentration gathering between his eyebrows. He meditates for a while, taking deep breaths and letting it out in long, slow exhales.

I've known him long enough to recognise when he's trying to deal with fear. I'm feeling it too: pressure in my chest and stomach, like I'm about to go on stage. I'm way too jittery to sit and meditate, I need to work some of this tension out.

So I lie flat on my stomach on the floor and push up with my knuckles. Ten push-ups. My body knows what to do, relaxes into the exercise. The doctor said I shouldn't do

this so soon after the surgery, but it feels right: I breathe in as I lower myself down to the floor, and breathe out again as I push up. I imagine all my panic flowing out of my arms and dispersing into the floor.

"We're ready," says Ash. "Let's go."

We don't go down en masse – bad idea with all the investigating officers downstairs. So we go down in pockets of twos and threes.

"Keep walking," says Ash. "Don't gather, don't make it look like we're a big group."

Kaz, Shobee and I go down together. The lobby is packed: a couple dozen pairs of eyes turn to appraise us as we leave the elevator. No one stops us.

Heavy grey clouds are gathering overhead. We follow the barricade across the Maharajalela causeway, and then climb the winding slope that will lead up to the stadium.

I take stock of the other pedestrians: most of them are Malay girls in white headscarves, staring at us, keeping their distance. I can't tell if they're going to be in the rally, or if they're just pedestrians. Would pedestrians even be walking around this area today? Then I notice their clothes: short sleeves, light cotton slacks, sneakers – they're dressed for a long walk in the sun.

Then we round the corner, and I see the cluster of police officers waiting for us.

At least a dozen of them are standing around on the pavement, looking straight at us. I take in their dark blue uniforms, the shiny silver studs, the black pistols in their black holsters.

Too late to turn around. We'll look like we're trying to avoid them. We have to go

straight through if we want to make it up the hill.

I watch the girls in headscarves pass through the throng and out the other side. Maybe there's hope.

Don't look suspicious. Don't look out of the ordinary – just act like tourists, out for a stroll, taking in the air. No matter what, don't make eye contact.

I feel a dozen pairs of eyes on me as I make my way through the press of uniforms.

This isn't so bad. This is fine.

Just step around them, they haven't stopped you yet.

Then I get too deep, the police close in, and one of them—a policewoman in a dark blue headscarf—is blocking the way.

I do the first thing that pops into my head: raise my eyebrows in polite indignation, as if to say, “Excuse me, I'm trying to walk here.”

She steps out of the way.

We make it through, and we keep walking, not quite daring to believe it until we've rounded the corner and are safely out of sight.

We hold up and wait for the others to join us. We wait for a long time.

Eventually Morten comes around the corner, followed by Ash and her mum.

Nitia comes last. “Did they stop you guys?”

Shobee: “No, they let us through.”

“Oh,” he says. “Just me, then.”

“*What?*” Ash puts her arm around him. “What happened?”

“They asked me where I was going. I told them I was just out walking.”

Ash: “And they let you go?”

“They took my IC number and told me that the rally was illegal. They told me if I walk today, I'm going to get into trouble. Then they let me go.” He looks around at us. “Am I really the only one they stopped?”

“Because you're Indian,” says Ash. “Ohh, those racist bastards.”

Nitia grins. “The hell with them. Now I *really* want to do this.”

Further up the slope we meet a Malay man with an easy smile and streaks of silver in his black hair. It's difficult to figure out which side he's on: fellow rally-walker, or plainclothes police? But then I see a yellow polo shirt peeking out from under his tan jacket, and decide he's probably one of us.

All the same, something about the chummy way he’s walking alongside us makes us a little suspicious. We've read about how the G20 protest in Toronto went down, when undercover police in black masks tried to instigate some violence from within the crowd. What if they try to do the same thing here?

We walk past one of the side entrances to the stadium, sitting atop a grassy hill. I'm painfully aware of the people in fluorescent green vests watching us from under the shade of the trees.

The man in the tan jacket looks up at the side entrance and then back at us. “Come on,” he says, looking a little like an action hero in an epic battle, about to lead the charge.

He scrambles up the hill, grabbing at clumps of grass to maintain his balance, not looking over his shoulder to see if we're following.

We can't help but take a step forward onto the grass, and immediately something feels very wrong.

Police appear from everywhere, coming out from behind the trees, materialising out of the shadows. And they're behind us too, closing in, forming a circle around us.

It's over.

“What the fuck is this?” says Kaz.

“It's a fucking trap,” I say, already resigned, feeling the fight go out of me, thinking maybe it's better this way. Should I be afraid? The man in the tan jacket was an undercover plant, obviously, and we fell for it, and now it's over, they're going to arrest us all. And we'll spend the rest of the day being shuttled around the prison system, waiting for the lawyers to get us out.

Except they're not coming for us: they're cornering the man in the tan jacket, waving him away, shouting him down from the hill.

We back away. They aren't looking at us. They just want to keep him out.

When it comes to swearing, Malaysians get right to the point: “Fucking asshole shit,” he says, catching up to us. “I just walking also!” He makes a dismissive wave of the hand. “Aiyuh, what lah.” Grinning at us. We grin back – he's one of us now, no doubt about it. He wasn't a plant at all – just over-eager.

His indignation is infectious: “How dare they!” we say. “Wait till we have numbers, then we'll show them.”

We get to a crossroads. More people are gathered here, at the foot of the hill. The road ahead will take us to the Stadium's main entrance. The march is heading this way.

I can smell the approaching rain, which always puts me in mind of the smell of cooking rice.

We get out our bubble blowing apparatus. There's plenty to go around. We offer a bottle of solution and some plastic rings to a group of Chinese students standing nearby.

"No thank you," they say.

"That's fine," we say, turning to others in the group. "How about you?"

"No," says one student, a pencil-thin boy wearing a pair of thick black glasses. Then: "Well... actually, okay, why not."

His friends gather around, interested. Our new friend blows a few juicy bubbles into the air.

"Not bad for homemade, eh?" I say.

"This is homemade?"

"Yeah," says Shobee. "Just dish detergent and Jell-O mix and water. Easiest thing in the world."

"Huh," he says. "I should try that."

We blow bubbles up at the gathering clouds, at the stadium sitting there at the top of the hill, and at the police watching us from the entrance.

I do a head count: about a hundred or so people, some in yellow t-shirts. There's a large group standing around in clusters on the other end of the road, by the wall, all in work clothes: shirts, ties, blazers. They're dressed like lawyers, or however I imagine lawyers to dress.

Stray coils of barbed wire are scattered all over the hill, like it spilled off the truck

and no one bothered to pick it up again.

The first fat drops of rain splatter over our shoulders. Some people put up umbrellas, some duck under the trees for some cover. Most of us stand around and let the water soak into our shirts – this is nothing. The first drizzlings of a tropical shower.

“We should sing something,” says Ash's mum. “Something nice, so no one mistakes our intentions. Any ideas?”

I volunteer: “How about Rasa Sayang? It's about, you know, rasa sayang. The feeling of love.”

“I was just thinking that!” says Ash's mum. “Great idea. Okay, everyone, a-one and a-two and...”

We start singing: “Rasa saaaaayang, hey rasa sayang, sayang hey!”

Everyone within earshot breaks into a smile and joins in. Anyone who grew up in a Malaysian school has at some point sung along to this song – it's a classroom staple.

“Heeeey lihat nona jauh rasa sayang sayang hey!”

More people gather around. The first glimmerings of delight break out over their faces as they add their voices to the chorus.

Eventually we get to the end of the refrain and people start to stumble over the words. I realise I don't remember most of the lyrics, so I hum along instead.

I'm starting to wonder where everyone is. Is it just going to be us on this hill? Where are the three thousand from Pudu? Where's the public horde everyone's so fussed about?

The rain keeps up, soaking into my white silk shirt, soaking into my trousers,

making my sneakers squelch in the accumulating puddles.

At around two in the afternoon, Shobee looks down at her phone. “Twitter says there's a march passing through Petaling Street.”

“How many?” asks Kaz.

“Not sure. A lot.”

“Hell, that's just around the corner from here. You guys wanna run down and meet them?”

People perk up and start moving. Other people see the motion and join in. We walk down the slope, about a hundred of us, scattered along the road.

We start to hear something – a buzz, a murmur. And a heavy beat I can feel through the soles of my soggy black sneakers.

The road ahead slopes down several hundred meters before it snakes off into China Town. And way down there from around the corner emerge a scattering of people, waving yellow kerchiefs. Easily twice our number, a couple hundred at least.

Then more appear from around that corner, and more – a monster, a human tidal wave, an enormous centipede of people, hundreds, thousands of them, spreading out over the four-lane road, filling it end to end. And they are surging up towards us, and we are making our way down, laughing, side by side. And we sing “Rasa Sayang” again, louder now, raising our voices so they can hear.

Three hundred meters and closing. The people at the head of the horde see us and break out into a cheer that everyone else picks up, a roar of delight at the sight of us. Across the ever-shortening divide I hear the sound of applause, and the chorus of “Rasa

Sayang" is shouted back, multiplied many times over.

And we are running now, and I'm clutching my cane under my arm and thinking my god how good it is to run again, how good to be right here, on this road, running down to meet our march.

One hundred meters away, some guy at the front of the great horde raises a shout: "Hidup hidup!" Live, live.

And the crowd answers in a voice that spans the spectrum of vocal range, voice of a swarm speaking as one: HIDUP HIDUP!

"Hidup rakyat!" Long live the people.

HIDUP RAKYAT!

Thirty meters away, we do an about-face, point ourselves uphill. We link arms and let the crowd take us.

The crowd's momentum reaches out, envelopes us, gets us walking to the beat of that thunder of footsteps reverberating through the tarmac. No pushing, no shoving. Seems impossible that we were ever outside of this group, that we were ever moving separately from them.

And a voice at the front calls out, "Hidup hidup!"

The crowd responds, tens of thousands shouting in tandem: HIDUP HIDUP!

"Demokrasi!"

DEMOKRASI!

I look behind: there are still more appearing from around that corner, still more pouring out from Petaling Street to join the march up the hill. How many could there

possibly be? The number in my head keeps growing. Two thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand, fifty thousand.

The crowd has swallowed us; we are in its throat now, adding our voices to its bellow.

“Hidup hidup!”

HIDUP HIDUP!

“Hidup Bersih!”

HIDUP BERSIH!

At the crossroads the police are standing in a line. They back away at the sight of us, watch us from the shade of the trees. We march up the hill, through the big gates and up along the main road leading towards the stadium.

Another cry goes out: “Hancur hancur!” Destroy, destroy.

HANCUR HANCUR!

“Hancur BN!”

They say HANCUR BN! but Kaz and I exchange a worried look. Destroy the ruling coalition? Well, we're not opposed to change, but we thought we were clear. This is not an opposition protest. We are not violent people. This is a rally for a fair democracy, a call for a cleaner electoral system. Right? No ties to partisan politics. Doesn't “Hancur BN” necessarily align ourselves with the opposition?

I find myself saying the words anyway, “Hancur BN!” and they feel good in my mouth. An exciting buzz of vitriol stirs up inside me. Why not? We do want change, and BN are nothing if not hostile to our calls for change. They lock people up for sedition.

They rig elections to stay in office. They channel public funds into private offshore bank accounts.

We fill the street, packing tight. Walls of sheet metal line the road on either side.

I breathe in the sweet, oily smell of thousands of rain-soaked bodies.

“It's beautiful,” says Nitia. “I can't believe it.”

On all the faces: smiles, amazement. No one can believe it. And it is beautiful.

Ahead the people are stopping up short. Through the shifting tide I can see barbed wire stretched across the road, blocking off the way ahead.

The folks up front call for a stop. The call ripples out across the multitude. I tense up, brace for hands on my back forcing me forward into the rapidly diminishing space ahead. Wait for the cries of urgency and panic as people mash into one another.

Instead the stop is easy, gentle. The people in front stop, the people behind close the gap, and the crowd packs tight together. There is no desperation, no rush to get there, to get anywhere – we are already where we want to be: right here, with everyone else.

Over the tops of heads I see those big maroon trucks, water cannons mounted on top. The cops are on the other side of the barricade, standing idly, waiting for orders from on high. Are they going to use those cannons on us? Is this where it'll happen? Look at the walls of sheet metal on either side of the road: where could we go if all hell breaks loose? Where could we run? Nowhere to run but back where we came from – which means the crowd has nowhere to go but back in on itself.

Why haven't they attacked us yet? What are they waiting for? Are they looking for provocation?

The water cannons swivel round and point at us.

Didn't Shobee say something about toxic chemicals in the water, so it burns the skin? I try to imagine what that might feel like. Is it hot? Could it poison me? Is it something that can wash off with plain water?

I should get ready. Cover my mouth and nose, like Shobee said.

I dig around in my pocket for the surgical mask. It attaches to the ears via little elastic bands on the edges. I loop the elastic bands around my ears and let the mask dangle over my neck.

Kaz: “Looks like you've got a bandage on your neck, dude.”

“Shh, it's my mask. You should put yours on, too.”

Now, what else? Ah yes, my eyes. I open up the bag, remember Mum saying, “I think they're your sister's.” The goggles are bright pink, and cut a tight line around my head when I strap them on.

I'm glad for the watertight seal around my eyes. They're perfect. I feel safer already.

Another ripple through the crowd. A name is in the air: Ambiga. “Ambiga's here!”

A middle-aged Indian lady climbs onto a makeshift stage. I recognise her face from the newspaper: Ambiga Sreenevasan, former president of the Bar Council and chairwoman of Bersih.

The crowd erupts into a frenzy of applause.

Ambiga speaks through a megaphone that muffles most of what she says. I hear “Bersih,” “together” and “talk with the police” – I gather that she and the other de facto

leaders of the march are about to negotiate our entry with the police barricade.

She calls for us to sit. The crowd stirs, everyone edges backwards to make room for the people in front of them to sit down on the wet tarmac. Everyone sits, wet knees rubbing against one another. I lay my cane over my lap. The handle is resting on someone else's legs – he doesn't seem to mind.

“You think they're getting anywhere?” I ask.

“I doubt it,” says Kaz.

Sitting cross-legged like this starts to hurt after a while. Tough it out.

A chant starts to grow in the back: “Ambiga! Ambiga!” They want to show their support. It picks up: AMBIGA! AMBIGA!

But folks in the front don't like that. “Shh! Diam! Ambiga tengah cakap! Ambiga is talking!”

A shush spreads out over the crowd like a ripple across a pond.

Ahead, people are standing up again, which makes us want to stand as well, and suddenly everyone is getting to their feet.

There's a commotion behind us: people are moving out of the way. Like a spear, a shape made of bodies is moving through the crowd, cutting straight through, carving out a path through the centre. Big bodyguard-looking guys lead the way. One of them sports a bright yellow bandanna tied around his forehead. Someone smaller is in the centre of the human spear – the man the bodyguards are protecting.

When they get to the front the bodyguards fan out in a defensive line, and the smaller man climbs up onto the makeshift stage and turns to address the crowd. He's

wearing a bright yellow t-shirt and holding a megaphone. I recognise his face from the news: Hatta Ramli, one of the senior politicians in the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat.

Over the megaphone he asks how we're doing. I can't make out the rest. Eventually he raises a hand and shouts, “Hidup rakyat!” and the crowd is so happy to hear it again that they shout back, HIDUP RAKYAT!

He shouts, “Hidup Bersih!”

HIDUP BERSIH!

“Hidup... Pakatan Rakyat!”

This time less people respond. Kaz and I exchange uneasy looks.

He shouts, “Reformasi!” his coalition's campaign slogan.

And the crowd roars, REFORMASI!

“Reformasi!”

REFORMASI!

“He's hijacking it,” I say.

Kaz shrugs. “It's his rally too.”

Hatta Ramli exits the stage.

The rain splatters over us all, dripping off our faces, pooling in the bottoms of our shoes.

Someone starts to sing the Negaraku, the national anthem. Everyone within earshot joins in, you can hear it echoing from the thousands behind us. We stand to attention, just like we're in school again, singing the old song.

Negaraku, tanah tumpahnya darahku.

My country, the land where my blood has spilt.

And I think: well, let's hope it doesn't come to that.

An old man with a long wispy white beard comes onto the megaphone – Shobee whispers that he's the poet laureate, Pak Samad. His voice is scratchy on the megaphone – I can't make it out. I turn to Ash. “What did he say?”

“He said we did what we came here to do.”

“We did?”

There's movement behind the barricade. I see riot police in black armour and red helmets gathering ahead – they must be the Federal Reserve Unit. FRU. Riot police.

Oh. This could be it. This could be the attack.

We watch the water trucks, waiting for signs of movement. Waiting for the water cannon to spray us all down.

Ambiga comes back to say that they aren't letting us through, but that the day has only just begun.

By now everyone is on their feet, and the crowd turns in on itself, so where once we were at the head of the march, we are now at its tail.

I ask where we're going.

“No idea,” says Kaz.

“She said we're heading to Central Market,” says Ash.

We link arms again and move, back down the stadium road, down again to the crossroads, snaking left to head down the hill.

“Hidup rakyat!”

HIDUP RAKYAT!

Another cry: “La ilaha ilallah!”

LA ILAHA ILALLAH! comes the response, noticeably quieter, because it's coming only from the Malays. Everyone else—the Indians, the Chinese and all the others—is silent, nodding along to the rhythm of the words but not joining in.

Kaz gives a deprecating little smile and says, “...I abstain.”

“Allahu akbar!”

ALLAHU AKBAR!

Kaz: “...I abstain.”

Walking down the hill, I feel the familiar bite of sciatic pain. The nerve running down my left leg is a frayed rope. A cord of pain pulses through my leg. Tough it out. You've been living with this for over a year, you can live with it now. This is what you brought the cane for, exactly this very thing.

The media are lined up on either side of the road. Video cameras watch us from above. Someone nearby throws a plastic bottle up at one of the camera crews.

Kaz shouts in the direction the bottle came from: “HEY! Jangan buang! Don't throw!”

“What's that about?” I ask.

“Some dickheads throwing garbage at the media. Just what we need.”

“I'm pretty sure that was an Utusan crew,” says Ash.

The name sounds familiar. “Aren't they the newspaper who've been trying to make

us all out to be terrorists?"

"Yeah," says Kaz, "and the last thing we need is to give them footage of people throwing bottles at them. That's what they want! So they can put up a big fucking photo of an angry mob, and tell the whole world that we're violent protesters who need to be put down."

I hear more choruses of "Don't throw!" behind us – more people thinking the same thing.

Electric spasm running up and down the nerve. This shouldn't be happening. They fixed me, didn't they? But I've been doing a lot of walking in the last several hours, so it's hardly surprising. Get used to it. There's a lot more walking ahead.

To take my mind off it I ask Kaz, "What do you think the end goal is here?"

"Deliver the memorandum to the king, I guess," he says. "If we even reach the palace. Beyond that, I think we've pretty much achieved what we came out here to do. We're all together, right? Making this big symbolic gesture."

"Right," I say. "But do you think there's anything to what Nitia was saying earlier, about getting the rest of the world to call for change? I mean surely there's something to be said for putting international pressure on the government to, you know, pass some reform bills."

"Honestly," says Kaz, "I think we as a culture really need to get away from the fantasy that some other country like the US is going to come along and fix our problems for us. They don't care. They're not interested. They have their own problems. And really, that's how it ought to be. If change doesn't come from us, the rakyat, then what the hell

good will it do? There are no easy fixes." He looks at me. "Hey, are you feeling alright? You're wincing."

"I'm fine," I say, and then I take another step, and the impact of my left foot on the ground sends a red flare vibrating up my leg, drilling deep into the place just above my tailbone where they cut the disc out of me. The nerve is on fire, screaming. I have to stop and take a breath. "Okay, I'm not fine."

"Pain?"

"Yeah," I say. "Damn it, who am I kidding?" I fish around in my pocket for the sheet of pain pills, *1-2 when needed* written in doctor's scrawl on the label.

Kaz looks at the pills. "You taking Tram?"

"Think so. I don't think I can do this otherwise. Feel like my leg's going to fall off."

He nods. His eyes linger over the sheet of pills.

"Hey, fuck it," I say, popping out two pills: one for me, one for him. "If I'm going to be tripping through this, I'm going to want some company."

Tramadol is an opioid, like morphine or codeine. In most western countries it's a prescription-only drug, but over here in Malaysia you can buy it over a pharmacy counter for ten ringgit a sheet, packaged as "Ultracet" – tramadol mixed with acetaminophen.

I think about the time we took Tram together a couple weeks back, hanging out at a cafe in red leather armchairs, having our heart-to-heart. I'd had a bad stab of pain, bad enough to keep me from finishing a thought, let alone a sentence.

"It's dangerous stuff," Kaz said that night in the cafe, as we washed down a pill

each and I felt the pain dissolve into a bad memory. “Addictive, if you take it regularly, so try not to take it more than once every couple days. And it's subtle, verrrry subtle, you don't notice it when you're on it. But you get real sociable. If you ever find you're taking it just to be sociable, that's when you've got a problem. Don't let it get to that point.”

He's right, you don't notice it at all until well after the fact. You just slip into an easy, painless place. The back of your head feels light, you can feel your pulse beating in there, like an extra heart tucked away in your skull. Inhibitions don't quite melt away, just sag a little at the corners, enough to let your shoulders hang loose over your aching frame. The fire in my nerve dwindles down to a few meagre sparks, something I can put out of my mind.

Breathe out the ache, the sting, the tight cord of agony, the hitch in my step. Put one foot in front of the other and marvel at how easy it is. Simple glorious motion.

I grew up in this city. I thought I knew what a crowd was: chaos of solitary agents, milling around, stepping on each other's toes, irrupting into each other's space. But look around – no one is solitary here. No one is alone. I keep locking eyes with other people nearby, and there is no shame, no looking away. We're all here for the same reasons: we love the country, and we want a better democracy. If we didn't love the country, we wouldn't care enough to come out.

And here I thought it was mostly the urban Malaysian youth who cared about electoral reform and social justice. But this isn't just some “generational thing”, this isn't just a petty gathering of the young and entitled. I see plenty of people well into their sixties, and older: wispy white beards and wrinkled faces, smiling in the rain.

An amputee in a yellow polo shirt is walking alongside us on a pair of silver crutches. One of his trouser legs ends in a bunched-up knot.

Behind him a group of hajis let the rain soak into their hats, the white skullcaps of those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

A pencil-thin boy in glasses has linked arms with a girl in a white headscarf.

A bearded expat with a camera around his neck is waving a little Malaysian national flag, laughing.

All around me, on all the faces: the joy of solidarity, amplified every time we lock eyes on one another and smile across the span of bodies.

The rain slows to a few fat drops. The sky has brightened from dismal grey to milky white. We follow Jalan Hang Jebat under walkways packed with people waving down at us, cheering. People line the sides of the street, taking photos, joining the chants, laughing along with us. They love us. They really love us.

Some enterprising vendors have set up stalls along the street. Makes sense, I think. With a crowd this big, they'll make a killing.

But then we get within earshot of one of the ice-cream stalls, where a young Indian man is calling out: “Ais krim percuma! Free ice cream!” And the people, steamed up and sweating after spending so much time in the throng of bodies under the midday heat, slow down around his stall to see if he's serious. He hands out ice cream to everyone who comes near.

A helicopter thrums overhead, buzzing low enough to sweep dirt into everyone's eyes. News or police, we can't tell – we can only see its white underside. An angry metal

voice shrieks down at us from megaphones mounted onto the sides of the cockpit. I can't make out the words.

Someone throws a water bottle up at the helicopter – it misses. The helicopter rises up and disappears behind the Maybank Tower.

We walk until we're in sight of the Pasar Seni LRT station. Barbed wire and concrete separates us from the easiest route into Central Market. A battalion of cops watch us from behind the barricade. Some of them smile at us. We smile back. We aren't doing anything wrong.

We hit Petaling Street, where our chants of REFORMASI! and HIDUP RAKYAT! echo off the grey walls of the old colonial shophouses. The people inside fling open their windows and peer down at the human river flooding their street. Some of them wave.

We're passing in front of a little roadside bar, where bewildered white tourists stare out at us with beers in their hands frozen midway up to their lips. They're missing out, poor things. Don't they know what's happening? Don't they know how beautiful it is out here? I want to go in and take them by the hand and bring them out, one by one.

I hear shouts. Something's happening up ahead. Fear whips me out of the easy place the Tram put me in.

I catch a glimpse of FRU troopers in black armour and bright red helmets. Nitia and Morten are looking back at us, yelling something.

Just above the roar of the crowd I can hear, off in the distance, a set of explosions, like the sound of gunfire. Are they shooting at us? I think they're shooting at us. But we weren't doing anything wrong. People in front are doubling back, screaming.

You'd think after so many disaster movies the sound of thousands of people screaming in terror would be something familiar, something you can process when it's happening in front of you. But I am paralysed where I stand, along with everyone else around me, not knowing what's happening or where we're supposed to go.

White fog is creeping along the road towards us.

Ash: “Is that...?”

A grenade rockets into the air trailing a plume of white smoke. It reaches the top point of its arc and curves down to clatter onto the tarmac only a few meters away. And people are shouting, “Gas! Gas!”

I turn around and look at the thousands behind us, and scream as loud as I can: “MASKS ON!”

There's a flurry of movement as everyone rummages through their satchels, pockets, purses and rucksacks. I turn back in time to see the white fog swallow up the crowd ahead. I pull my pink goggles down, make sure the suction cups make a tight seal over my eyes, and pull the surgical mask over my nose and mouth.

I'm safe now. We prepared for this. Isn't this what I was waiting for? A special thrill, something to remember.

There's a smell in the air that hits you right in the back of the nose, a little bit like gasoline. It's a peppery smell, spicy. Tastes a bit like cinnamon, but it also has the sour bite of industrial chemicals. It's not so bad. I can get used to this. It's just a smell, that's all. I can handle spice, and I can handle this. Just treat it like a bad smell. Don't breathe.

More smoke canisters bounce off the walls. One of them flies straight into a food

stall and blasts a jet of white straight into the little roadside bar, blowing over the tourists – all of whom are screaming, scrambling out of their seats. Hell of a way to ruin an afternoon beer, I think, and then I am coughing, because the smell is eating its way up my nose and down my throat.

Don't breathe.

I can feel it soaking through my mask, like sandpaper rubbing raw the skin between my nose and upper lip. Sour chemical taste on the sides of my tongue. I should have expected this. My god, what the hell am I doing here? Is this what I was looking for? My throat is burning the way it burns during a bad case of the flu. I cough out all the air left in my lungs, copper aftertaste of blood lingering at the back of my mouth.

But don't breathe.

My nose is running. I feel snot pooling inside my useless mask, and maybe the excess moisture will be enough to ease away the burn of the gas, but no, it isn't, the burning is getting worse, and now the white fog has swallowed me up, I've lost Kaz and I've lost Ash and I'm all alone now, no one in sight but a few black shapes in the mist.

Don't breathe.

I need to go, get away, get free of the fog. My eyes are streaming, even behind the goggles. Can't see. I'm staggering now and there's a dead weight attached to my right wrist – my cane. My old friend. My weapon. I raise it up, wave it around in the solid white, shake it at the distant shapes.

My skin is itching, burning. It's all over my clothes, seeping through the rain-soaked fabric. My lungs are a pair of empty bags, trembling, begging for air. Black dots

everywhere, blipping in and out of sight. If I don't get some oxygen soon, I'm going to pass out.

Can't take it anymore. Give in, take a gulp of air.

Crackle of pain in my lungs. The air is full of hot little needles.

I scream it out, scream until my throat feels like it's going to rip apart.

And now I've wasted all my oxygen and I need to breathe in again.

Do it slowly this time. Draw it in gently, so it isn't so much of a shock to the system. Imagine your nose is filtering out all the little needles in the air. Imagine you're breathing in only pure, sweet oxygen.

It doesn't work. It's getting worse. I can feel it in my bones, a steady pulsing ache.

I need to get out of here.

Can't think.

Slap myself in the face, try to clear my head. My palm leaves a burning patch on my skin.

Through the fog I can see a lurid yellow-and-brown striped t-shirt: Kaz. He didn't bring goggles; his glasses are completely misted over.

“Agh,” he says, coughing through his surgical mask. “Fuck!”

Grab him by the hand. “Come on!” I say, which is a mistake, because now I have to take another breath.

Take in half a gulp of hot splintered glass, feel my guts grind together, feel nausea pulling me down.

We find Ash standing alone on a little concrete island in the middle of the street.

Kaz puts his arm around her. She's saying something over and over. I lean in to hear: “This isn't right.”

No sign of her mum, or Shobee, or Nitia or Morten or anyone else.

No time to look. Just pick a direction and go.

We head down the alley behind the bar. I can still hear screaming behind us. I pull my mask and goggles off. My skin is on fire.

Ash is wheezing. I recall her saying at some point that she used to be asthmatic. Is she having an attack? Did she bring an inhaler?

We're all taking sharp breaths of air, now that we're clear of the fog. We stand still for a moment, shaking, sweating, tears streaming out of our bloodshot eyes.

“Where's your mum?” asks Kaz.

“Left her,” says Ash, “at the bar.”

“Shit,” he says. “Do you think she's okay?”

“I don't know. I think so. She's tough.” She takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. “We should keep moving.”

On the way out of the alley we pass an old Chinese aunty sitting by the side of the road in a soggy yellow t-shirt. We can tell from her red eyes and the sweat on her face that she's just come out of a tear gas attack – either the one we were just in, or another one nearby. We ask if she's alright. She nods, sadly. We ask her if she has any news. She says she heard Ambiga and all the other leaders of the rally have been arrested. She says they were trapped in an underground tunnel with tear gas rushing at them from both ends, with no chance of escape.

She stops speaking, and we let her be.

The alley leads out into a plaza, where more sweating refugees from the gas are passing around water bottles, rock salt, and wet wipes. A group of concerned-looking Chinese kids are gathering around an elderly Malay woman, who seems to be having trouble breathing. Everywhere I look I see familiar symptoms: red eyes, sweating faces, heaving chests.

We find Ash's mum handing out bottles of sodium bicarbonate.

“Mum!”

She looks up. “Oh, thank God.”

Ash runs to her, pulls her close for a hug.

Shobee's here too, and Nitia, and Morten. Seemed like everyone had drifted off in different directions, but somehow we all wound up in the same place.

Morten's face is bright red. “I can't believe they did that. We weren't doing anything. They attacked us, completely unprovoked. I mean, I didn't see any provocation. Did you see any provocation?”

“None,” says Nitia. “I've never seen anything like that.”

“It was a bloody human rights violation,” says Morten. He touches his upper lip and recoils, wincing. “It's all over my hands. Fuck, that hurts!”

No kidding. I can still feel burning on my lips and around my nostrils. The skin under my shirt is tingling, pinpricks of pain sparking all over my chest, my shoulders and all down my arms. The sour chemical taste of tear gas is still there, tingling on my tongue.

A Malay man comes over to me and offers his packet of wet wipes. “For your face, brother,” he says.

“Thanks, man.” I take a wet wipe and dab it over my lips – the soft chill is bliss against my burning skin. “Oh, that's better.” I look back at him, recognise the tan jacket and the dusting of silver in his hair. “Hey, I know you.”

He recognises me too. He gestures at my pink goggles and lets out a short laugh. “From the stadium!”

He tells me he just came from Puduraya, where FRU troopers came down hard on them. When some people tried to take shelter in the nearby Tung Shin Hospital, the FRU started lobbing gas canisters into the hospital compound and spraying the building with chemical-laced water.

I press my burning lips together. Tung Shin is a maternity hospital. I was born there. I picture that dreadful white fog seeping through the windows and blowing over rows of newborn babies – their first taste of police brutality.

I hear distant rolling thunder, breathe in the rice-smell of rain, look up in time to see fat drops hurtling down from the heavy grey clouds. In an instant the downpour is upon us, white sheets of water sweeping over the city, soaking us all to the bone. Some people take shelter under the archways and overhanging roofs around the plaza – most of us just stand out in the open, let it wash over our clothes and skin. The burning sensation eases off. The rain is washing away the residue.

The man in the tan jacket raises his arms to the sky. He says, “This is hujan makbul, the good rain. In the first Bersih rally when they used the gas, we prayed for

rain, and it came. Now it is the same." He grins. "God is with us, brother."

People are starting to move. I rejoin the group. I yell, "What now?" over the downpour.

"Someone told me we're to gather at KLCC," says Ash.

"Who's we?" I ask. "We don't have numbers anymore. We have no leadership."

"Oh, we have numbers," says Shobee, keeping a hand over her phone to shield it from the rain. "Twitter says there's several thousand walking towards Jalan Ampang. As for leadership..." She shrugs. "We're still here. I was never under any orders, and neither were you. We're free to do what we like."

"Then what are we waiting for?" says Nitia, getting to his feet.

We follow the gathering flock through a network of narrow alleys until we reach Jalan Ampang, where the crowd stretches on for at least two kilometres.

And I hear, once again, someone call out, "Hidup, hidup!"

HIDUP! HIDUP!

"Hidup Bersih!"

HIDUP BERSIH!

The rain peters out to a light drizzle, and for what seems like the first time all day the clouds part to reveal a pure blue sky.

A band of people come up behind us led by a Malay guy strumming on a guitar, long black dreadlocks trailing down to his waist. And maybe he recognises us from before, or maybe he just has the song on his mind, but at the sight of us the man with the guitar breaks into song:

“Rasa saaaayang...”

We join in: “Hey, rasa sayang, sayang hey!”

And hundreds within earshot join in too.

We walk for a long time under the sun, singing, waving at all the people on the sides of the road who've come to watch.

We pass under walkways packed with people chanting “Reformasi!” and “Hidup rakyat!” much to our delight. Taxis are parked along the sides of the road, a long line of red-and-white Proton Sagas. The drivers are reaching out to us through the windows, shaking hands and slapping high-fives with everyone who walks by them. So much for Najib’s promise that they’d all be against us.

There's a hitch in my step now, stinging bite of pain at the place where my leg meets my hip. The pill is wearing off. I lean on my cane a little more to take the pressure off the leg.

We cross the intersection near the Concorde Hotel, where cars are trying to drive around us. A man in a black t-shirt and a red armband waves us across the street. Motorcycles trundle alongside us, weaving between the bodies.

We pass rows of 1Malaysia banners, each one bearing the prime minister's chinless face, leering over a trio of children: Malay, Chinese, and Indian.

The Petronas towers are in sight, colossal steel-and-glass twins glittering in the sunlight. Any time I get lost in this city I just need to look for the towers to regain my sense of direction.

The pain is really starting to slow me down: the nerve is spasming again. I

imagine a giant taking hold of my leg and slowly pulling it out of the socket, the way you might pull the legs off a mosquito.

I'm not the only one showing signs of exhaustion. On the side of the road an old woman has collapsed – a group of strangers have stopped to help her. Ash goes over to offer her some water.

Ahead, Nitia is holding hands with a girl in her early twenties. He looks back at me and smiles. “This is Catherine! She says she was just at Puduraya.”

Nitia is walking alongside the man in the tan jacket, who looks over at the two young people and lets out a delighted “Oh!” and taps Nitia on the shoulder. “Saya orang Melayu,” he says.

“Yes,” says Nitia. “You are Malay.”

“You are orang India,” says the man in the tan jacket. He indicates Catherine. “She is orang Cina. Yes? Malay, Indian, Chinese. This is the harmony. No need for Najib or his 1Malaysia.” He looks back at me. “And we have a mat salleh also!”

“I'm mixed, actually,” I say. “I'm only half mat salleh.”

“Still,” he says.

A line of police officers on bicycles watch us from behind the barricades. Some of them are playing with the little plastic ties they use to handcuff people, waving them around like floppy swords. They don't look at us with rage or hate or anything other than mild interest. A man in a red button-up shirt goes up to them to say hello. The officers break into smiles.

The street is speckled with yellow banners bearing the Bersih logo in blue text. I

watch Nitia stoop to pick one of them up. “A souvenir,” he says, stuffing the banner into the pocket of his shorts. “I want to remember this day.”

We're approaching the Petronas Twin Towers now. KLCC sits between them, an enormous shopping centre and transportation hub in the exact geographic centre of the city.

I need to stop soon, but not yet. I've just caught sight of the one-legged man with the silver crutches, still powering on. How is he still going?

Birds are circling overhead, gliding lazily on the warm breeze. The trees wave at us from the sidelines. The sky is well and truly cloudless, squeezed of every drop of rain. Our clothes are slowly drying in the sun.

The helicopter is back, buzzing low, screeching at us with its tinny little megaphones. Hundreds of us lift our middle fingers to the sky and tell it to fuck off, which it does, flying off in the direction of Jalan Tun Razak.

I've driven up and down this road so many times, seen it at every hour of the day, with every level of traffic from the solid six o'clock jams to the eerie empty lanes at three in the morning, but I've never seen Jalan Ampang like this. People cover every inch of the square, thousands of them, a sea of bodies, sitting cross-legged on the street at the foot of the twin towers, passing around food and drink.

We sit and join them, sharing what little we have left. My stomach gives a plaintive gurgle and I realise I have been starving for hours. Someone offers me a banana, which I eat, glorying in the sweet soft give of its flesh.

Shoppers are gathering at the enormous windows that line the walls of KLCC,

crowding the entrance ways, watching us through the glass.

A man in a yellow t-shirt is standing on the roof of a car, making a speech to the surrounding masses. We're too far away to hear what he's saying.

Ash leans over to me: “I'm worried about my mum.”

“She okay?”

“I'm worried about her blood sugar.” She looks round at the man on the car. “Did you hear that? He shouted something.”

I listen.

“Effaryou,” the man says.

Kaz: “What did he say?”

Ash: “I think we need to start moving.”

I look down Jalan P. Ramlee, where a line of maroon trucks are rolling towards us. Between the trucks I can see troopers in black armour and red helmets, bashing their batons against their shields.

“Guys,” I say. “Everybody, we need to get out of here, toute fucking suite.”

Someone screams, “FRU! FRU!”

All around us, people are scrambling to their feet. Parents grab their children by the wrists and pull them to the sidewalk. We make our way towards KLCC as quickly as we can.

By now I'm hobbling, leaning heavily against my cane for support. I feel like something is tearing down there at the joint where my leg meets the hip.

They're everywhere: reporters in dress shirts and media tags slung around their

necks; police in dark blue, hands hovering over their black holsters.

Don't make eye contact. Don't look suspicious.

Don't let them get me.

Just look like a pedestrian, minding your own business, just on your own, not part of any big crowd. Just a harmless white tourist. Just a mat salleh out for a walk.

I hear screams behind me, turn around just in time to see thousands of people running – men, women, children, young and old, screaming in sheer terror as the FRU troopers run them down, waving their sticks in the air, spraying the crowd with jets of chemical-laced water, firing canisters at them that ooze out a dreadful white fog.

No.

I won't breathe it again.

I need to get inside.

The last I see of the rally, they're running for their lives down Jalan Ampang, curving around the bend of the road and out of sight.

And nearby I see a policeman point his finger in our direction and shout, “Tu dia!”

I freeze, wonder if this is it, the moment where they beat me up and take me away. I wonder if I will go quietly, or if I should put up some sort of fight. Probably the former – it'll look better on paper. But I don't want it to end this way. I'm tired. I can barely stand. I just want to go home, have a shower, and go to bed.

Then I see that they're not coming for me.

They're coming for Nitia.

We don't know what to do. Not a single one of us has time to react. The police are on him in a flash, trailing a team of photographers. One of the cops puts Nitia in a headlock while another reaches into his pocket, pulling out the yellow Bersih banner. They force his arms behind his back, slap on a plastic wrist tie and haul him up for a quick photo-op.

Click, goes the camera.

And now they're dragging him off, away, out of reach. And I'm calling his name, limping towards them, but they're moving faster than me, and the nerve in my leg is screaming.

I see the man in the tan jacket, terror in his eyes. “Don't try it,” he says, as I hobble past him. “They'll get you, brother.”

Kaz overtakes me, dashing full-tilt towards the police. I see his lips move, he's saying something to them. I can't see their faces, can't see if they're responding to him. They don't slow down. They look like they're trying to brush him off.

Kaz is pointing a finger at them, wide-eyed.

One of the cops turns and puts a hand out, pushing Kaz away.

They load Nitia into the back of a big black lorry.

I go through the entrance to KLCC, push through the gathering onlookers, feel the chill of aircon through my damp clothes.

Morten, Shobee and Catherine are waiting by the escalators.

“What happened out there?” asks Morten. “Where's Nitia?”

“Took him,” I say. “They just grabbed him.”

“Oh my god.” Morten's face goes red for the second time today. “Oh my god, I left him out there. It's my fault.”

“It's not your fault,” says Ash, behind me.

“I shouldn't have left him out there!”

“Stop it,” says Ash. “This won't help.”

He turns to me: “What did they tell you? Did you ask what the charges are? Did they say where they took him?”

“I didn't, I...” I look down at my leg. “I couldn't get to him in time.”

Kaz comes through the doors behind us. “They said they're taking him to Jinjang. I think that's on the other side of town. I asked for the arresting officer's name and badge number, but they wouldn't give it to me.”

“Thank you, Kaz,” says Ash, quietly. “We can't help him like this, and I need to make sure my mum eats something.”

We ride the escalators up to the food court, where we sit around a tray of McDonald's fries, not talking. Ash's mum looks like she's about to faint. She smiles weakly when Ash offers her a fry.

“I think it was the tear gas that did it,” says Ash's mum. “I'm sorry to make you bail out like that.”

Kaz says, “If we hadn't bailed out when we did, we'd have a hell of a lot more to worry about. Did you see the way they went after the crowd at the end there? Like a pack of god damn wolves.”

Morten is shaking, looking down at his clenched fists. “But why did they have to

take *him*? What did he do? He was just walking, like the rest of us!"

"You know why they took him," says Ash. "He was the only Indian male in the group. The darkest one of the lot." She pinches her own skin, only a few shades lighter than Nitia's. "They took him because he was the least likely out of all of us to have powerful friends. So they can hold him up in front of the camera and call this a race riot." She looks down at her food. "I'm sick of this place."

"So this is it?" I ask. "This is how it ends?"

"This is how it ends," says Ash. "Thanks for playing."

*

That night, as we're going over the news coverage of the day, we find out that a man died during the final assault outside KLCC. His name was Baharuddin Ahmad, a fifty-six year-old taxi driver and husband of one of Pakatan Rakyat's senior political leaders. Eyewitnesses say he choked on a cloud of tear gas and fell to the ground, suffocating, and died three hours later of a heart attack on the floor of a police truck. Not a single police officer tried to help him – he'd been dead for hours by the time they got him to a hospital.

The final arrest tally by the end of the day was 1,667 people, including 16 children, all detained for sedition, disturbing the peace and inciting racial disharmony.

And true to their word, the lawyers worked pro bono to get each and every one of them released before midnight. People all over the city donated thousands of ringgit in bail money. Nitia came out at 11:20 pm, among the very last to be released that day. Morten and Catherine were waiting for him by the gates.

*

A year later I climb into a taxi and ask the driver to take me to KLCC.

“Where you come from?” he asks, which is what they always ask.

And I answer: “Saya orang Malaysia.”

He's surprised to hear me speak Bahasa. “I thought you were a mat salleh,” he says.

“Only half.” I tell him I haven't been back in KL in a while. I ask him how he thinks the city's been doing since the Bersih rally.

“Oh, you know, lah,” says the driver. “Those fellows, the Bersih people, forever want to complain.”

“Complain?” I'm not sure how to frame my response. If there's one thing I don't want to do, it's upset him in his own car. Finally I settle on a simple, “What do you mean?”

He says, “Come on lah, this is KL. You can get food twenty-four hours a day. You can have two cars, one for you, one for the wife. The streets are safe. In United States, lah, they shoot you, pow, just for walking outside also. Same thing also in Pakistan and Indonesia. But here? Here is safe.”

“Always safe?”

“For sure, always safe.” He pauses. “Well, okay, not always safe, lah, but you know what they say over here. Don't make trouble. Why these Bersih people want to cause trouble, for no reason?”

“But don't you want a choice?” I splutter. “Don't you want your vote to matter?”

“The BN knows what they are doing. So what if some politician here, some politician there, maybe a little bit corrupt? Don't make trouble, lah. That's life, brother! All we can do...” He smiles at me through the rear-view mirror. “All we can do is get used to it.”

“Sure,” I say, sitting back, feeling the fight drain out of me. “I guess you can get used to almost anything.”

End.