

## ***Anak Sastra*, Issue 9**

### **Table of Contents**

"Courts of Hell" by Daniel Emlyn-Jones

"Buko" by Amanda Andrei

"Yellow Dress" by Peauladd Huy

"Redemption by Jews" by David Scott

"Irresistible" by Julie Anne

**Daniel Emlyn-Jones** has a special affinity with Singapore and has published several short stories with a Singapore connection, a few in *Anak Sastra*, and a few in other places. Nudging forty, Daniel has recently been reflecting on what is important in life. Love and creativity, and writing for its own sake come at the top of the list!

[Amanda Andrei](#) is a Mestiza writer based in the Washington, D.C. area. In addition to journalism, she also writes plays, poetry, and short stories. Her plays have been produced and read in Virginia, Maryland, and DC. Her short story "Buko" is being adapted as a song by the Dutch indie band [All Shall Be Well](#).

**Peauladd Huy** was born in Phnom Penh. She was eight when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia in 1975. Her latest work, published by Connotationpress, was nominated for the Sundress "Best of the Net," the Dzanc "Best of the Net," and the Pushcart Prize. Peauladd lives on the eastern coast of the U.S. with her family and three children.

**David Scott** lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. He writes short stories, poetry, and also paints. David also maintains a [blog](#).

**Julie Anne** was born and still resides in Kuching in Malaysian Borneo. Her first published novel, [Licik](#), was coauthored with Sham Hashim and published by Fixi in 2012. She is currently working on two more writing projects, including an English novel.

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## **October 2012 featured author interview with Daniel Emlyn-Jones**

### **Q. What is it that you enjoy about writing? What are some of your motivations?**

For me, part of the allure and fun of writing is being able to play God, creating characters and worlds, and having absolute power over them. I also find the expressing of ideas and opinions through writing very empowering. When you speak, people can ignore you or tell you to shut up. It's more difficult to ignore or tell a writer to shut up, because the written word by its very nature has more scope and permanence.

### **Q. Describe your writing process. Do you have any writing habits that could be considered unique or even odd?**

I must ask a parous woman writer about this one day, but I always imagine that the writing process must be something like childbirth; difficult and painful, but ultimately rewarding. Because my days are busy, I tend to write at night in bed. Sometimes I spend an hour or two writing one paragraph, decide its rubbish and delete the whole thing before falling asleep. Sometimes I'll write a whole page and be reasonably happy with it before falling asleep, only to re-read it the next day and decide it's rubbish and delete it anyway! I am self-critical, but as long as it doesn't completely dominate, I think this is a useful thing to be. I have at least three friends who read my work and provide feedback. They all have some kind of professional writing background, and I know I can trust them to be honest without upsetting me too much!

### **Q. Each of your three short stories published in Anak Sastra take place in Singapore. What is it about Singapore that interests you so much?**

My friend Dr. Jock Wong (to whom my short story "Courts of Hell" is dedicated in this edition) is a Chinese Singaporean linguist who I met while working in Canberra in 2002. Through him I was introduced to Singapore, and particularly to Singaporean Chinese culture. There can't be anywhere else on Earth where all the cultures of Asia are crammed into 700 square kilometers of space. I've only really scratched the surface, but I find this intimate multicultural milieu with its kaleidoscope of religions and languages (not to mention glorious food!) quite captivating. I also have enormous respect for Singapore and for Singaporeans. To survive the horrors of WWII and emerge as a glittering first world nation takes some doing.

**Q. You work in the healthcare industry. Are there times where your creative writing interests cross paths with your professional work? Or is it a completely separate aspect of your life?**

At the moment my creative fiction writing is completely separate from my professional work, which is how I like it. However, I have published non-fiction opinion pieces and letters on many different subjects. For me creative writing works very well as a hobby alongside a day job. I can't imagine what full time creative writing must be like. Very grueling I should think.

**Q. What is your most memorable experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?**

Visiting the many war museums in Singapore, and learning about the courage and sacrifice of so many men and women during the dark years of the Japanese occupation.

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## "Courts of Hell"

For Dr. Jock Wong

King Yama glared from the dark recesses of the temple shrine through a fog of rising incense, and an old woman knelt at his feet, a bundle of smoking joss sticks trembling in her hands. The god held a large black fan in his right hand; the left was flexed like a talon, inch-long finger-nails gleaming in the darkness. Though the old woman bowed repeatedly, her forehead brushing the cold stone floor, she knew in her heart that no amount of supplication could appease the chief official of the courts of hell. Her sins had been written in the book of life, and the price had to be paid.

She struggled to her feet, bowed once more to the statue--not daring to meet the eyes--and then hobbled slowly back through the temple complex, barely flinching at a caged temple dog whose growl erupted into ferocious barking as she passed. It was usually the job of the family's Indonesian maid, Rose, to accompany Grandma Tan to the temple, but she had come down with a heavy cold. The job had therefore been delegated to her granddaughter, Angela, who waited for her grandmother at the temple entrance, propped somewhat unceremoniously against a pillar and thumbing her mobile phone.

Darkness had fallen, and the bustling pavement glowed in the pus-yellow of street lamps as they slowly made their way to the nearby bus stop. An unseasonal drought had reduced the grass verge on the roadside to a patchy carpet of trampled straw, and the hot motionless air was heavy as treacle. With one arm Angela supported her grandmother as they walked, with the other she chatted to a friend on her mobile.

The conversation was about the best place to get Prada shoes in Singapore and was as incomprehensible to the old woman as the vast skyscrapers which towered interminably above them. Out of habit Grandma Tan searched the faces of all the middle-aged women they passed by. She couldn't forsake the hope that one day the heavenly gods would take pity on her and let her see her daughter Ah Huay, her little flower, once more. The last time she'd looked into her daughter's eyes, over half a century before and thousands of miles away across the sea in Fujian province of China, they were full of fear as she was dragged away. Grandma Tan hadn't trusted the middleman who'd arranged the sale. There was something artificial about his smile; something hidden behind the cold glint of his eye; something contrived about his assurances. But her husband had decided, and she was in no position to oppose him. She knew, of course, the real reason he wanted to sell her. It wasn't for the money. They weren't rich, but they were by no means starving as some people were. The real reason was that Ah Huay bore his shame. He had ruined her little flower, and he wanted the broken petals out of his sight. A week after Ah Huay had been taken, Grandma

Tan grated aconite root into his rice, bolted the doors of the house, and hid. It didn't take long for the clattering of furniture--and the bellows of rage and pain--to fall into silence.

She was never suspected of murder. To those around her in the village, she had been a good and dutiful wife. The death instead was put down to divine retribution on the family, as her husband's father had been infamous in the neighborhood for cheating his tenants. After the funeral, she had tried to trace Ah Huay, but her trail disappeared into the giant metropolis of Chiang Chew, and she despaired.

Eventually she managed to gain passage to Singapore with her infant son Ah Beng, looking for a better life, or maybe trying to forget the last one. Ah Beng had done well there, excelling in school, landing a good white-collar job, and eventually marrying a good and loving woman. In time they had healthy and happy children, and Grandma Tan thanked the gods for their prosperity. But she could never share their joy. While they looked forward to the future, she could only look back to the cold smile of the man who had taken her daughter. She created a litany of all the possible fates Ah Huay could have met with, a list which over the years grew as long and as varied as her imagination. To this litany was added another list of all the things she could have done to prevent it from happening. Then she would remember her husband's dead body, the eyes still wide in fury, froth still bubbling from the still white lips. Rather than dull with time, these memories seemed to grow more intense as the years passed, as if the gods didn't want her to forget the crimes she would shortly be paying for in full. She longed to tell someone, but how could she confess to her friends and family that the sweet old woman they knew and loved was a murderess? How could she tell her son that he had a sister he was too young to remember, a sister his mother had abandoned to who knows what fate?

They reached the bus stop and Grandma Tan lowered herself carefully onto a seat. Angela, still arguing about Prada shoes with her friend on the phone, leant on the bus shelter next to her. Some distance from the stop, an incinerator burned with offerings to spirits of the dead, the bloating billows of smoke filling the still and sultry air of the roadside with an acrid suffocating stench. Sitting next to Grandma Tan, a mother was trying to coax her child into eating a piece of fruit. The little girl shook her head petulantly, and then started to cry. At that moment Grandma Tan felt a sensation growing in the pit of her stomach. She had felt it before, but in the past had always managed to suppress it. On this occasion, though she struggled to, she couldn't, and involuntarily she began to wail. She lurched forward in her seat, and Angela dropped her mobile and embraced her grandmother just fast enough to prevent her from falling to the ground. In Angela's arms the wail turned into sobs.

"Ah mah!? Ah mah!? What's the matter Ah mah?" Angela had never seen her grandmother in such a state.

"Ah Huay! Ah Huay!" she sobbed "I'm sorry!"

"It's OK Ah Mah. It's OK." Angela embraced her grandmother more tightly. She didn't know who Ah Huay was, and at that moment she didn't care.

Grandma Tan eventually regained control over herself, and with her granddaughter's help, sat back on the bench. A small group of people had gathered around to see what the commotion was about. Their expressions ranged from shock, to curiosity, to amusement. In some there was pity.

As soon as Grandma Tan had started weeping, the little girl sitting next to her had stopped, and instead watched the old woman's sobs in fascination. She now smiled up at Grandma Tan and offered her a piece of the durian her mother had been trying to coax her into eating. Without thinking, Grandma Tan took the piece of fruit and popped it into her mouth. The spiky fruits used to fall on her father's farm when she was a child growing up in rural Fujian. Her father would collect them, machete them open, and the whole family would sit in a circle and devour the rich flesh together. She closed her eyes and was there, crouching next to her brothers and sisters, the sounds of chewing interspersed with chatter about little everyday things. Her love of feeding the farm animals often made her late for school, and she remembered running across the fields to class, the breeze light and cool on her face, the morning sun still tinted with the light of dawn. Then she remembered her only daughter when she was a baby and opened her eyes. She looked down through tears at the little girl next to her.

A gentle rumble sounded overhead. Grandma Tan looked up from the glare of the cityscape to a dark mantle of clouds above. Black spots began to appear on the dry dust of the curb. In a matter of seconds the spots multiplied until the pavement was awash with water, the soft patter of raindrops turning into a deafening roar as torrents of rain pounded on the roof of the bus shelter. The nearby votive fire was extinguished in a few seconds, the stench replaced by an earthy breeze.

Their bus coasted into the stop in front of them. Angela, like almost everyone else waiting, had no umbrella, so she and Grandma Tan had no choice but to leave the bus shelter unprotected. As they joined the triangle of humanity pushing its way to the bus entrance, people hunching under everything from newspapers to plastic bags, Grandma Tan raised her face to the downpour, letting the warm cascades of water wash over her. Then, slowly, she smiled.

The bus passed the temple on their journey home. Grandma Tan peered at the golden roof through the streams of rippling water that gushed down the window; the ornate structure warping and flickering in this changing lens like an old film. At the temple entrance, she could just make out the small matchstick figure of Mr. Lim, the old temple keeper, slowly heaving the heavy wrought iron gates shut for the night.

In reflex, Grandma Tan's mind travelled down the dark musty corridors to the shrine of King Yama. She pictured the eyes, for decades present in every dream. Now, somehow, it seemed to her that his expression was changed. There was an edge of pity in the dark countenance, and the claw-like hand poised ready to condemn, was lowered.

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## "Buko"

Buko was almost like all the other children in his village. He had ten fingers, ten toes, a mother, a father, and lived with them in a *nipa* hut. The only difference, really, was that his head was a coconut.

Not that anyone knew what a coconut was at the time; they did not exist yet. But it was very peculiar that he had such a round, round head. Not to mention a nose, a mouth, and one eye.

One day when Buko was playing with the neighborhood children, he accidentally pushed another little boy into the stream. The little boy was very angry because he lost the toy top that his mother had given him that morning. He yelled at Buko something he had only heard his parents whisper when they thought they were alone at the dinner table:

"You're an orphan, Buko! Your parents went to Obando to pray for a baby, and they found you on the side of the road!"

None of the children knew what orphans were, or what Obando was exactly; they just knew it must have been very serious, if your parents had to pray for a baby *and* leave the house.

Buko's single eye began to tear up. By then, another child had found the toy top and handed it back to the little boy--who instantly felt sorry--but it was too late. Everyone thought that an orphan was a little boy with a round, round head, not to mention a nose, a mouth, and one eye.

When Buko went home, he felt very sad. His mother gave him a cup of goat's milk, but he refused, which was strange, because that was all he would ever eat. Buko sat in the windowsill and watched the orange sun float past the trees.

Buko's mother did not mind her son's strange little habits, which was fortunate for us. After all, she and her husband *had* gone to Obando to pray for a baby. They did not find him on the side of the road, but in time had him the same way all babies are born. They loved him--round, round head and all.

At the very moment that his mother went to put back the goat's milk, a mosquito buzzed by Buko's single eye. The little boy swatted at it--and accidentally fell out the window!

Buko's mother heard his cry and rushed to the window--but there was no trace of her son, only a soft patch of brown earth. She and her husband searched under the house, in the garden, and near the stream, but it was fruitless. Suddenly, Buko's mother had an idea: sprinkle goat's milk on the ground.

"That way, he'll come back when he's hungry," she declared. "Little boys are always hungry."

Day after day, the parents dutifully sprinkled milk on the ground. In time, a tall, slender tree with pointed leaves grew from the soft brown earth. After seven years, the tree produced fruit. When you removed the husk, you saw a round, round fruit, with three holes that looked like a nose, a mouth, and one eye.

The mother was so happy to have so many children, that she named them all: Niyog, Lubi, Bagol, Silot, Ungut, and of course, Buko. And that is why Filipinos have so many names for the coconut today.



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## "Yellow Dress"

Construction began in early summer and was estimated to be completed in a year. By spring they were putting up new rooms in the new addition, adjacent to the sunroom, where all the house plants were kept. It was hard waking up to this looming project and even more excruciating waiting for them to finish it. Like typical construction projects, they started by over-promising, and ended up under-delivering.

Then, a year had passed.

"Aren't they done yet with the dry walls?" I asked Jack, my husband, for no reason other than to let him know that I was fed up with all of the renovation projects on our old home. I was fed up living among strewn tools, 2x4s, and sheet after sheet of dry wall leaning up against--and eating up--the walkways and blocking things I needed. I was tired of the constant flow of activity, the ins and outs of the various work crews. I was tired of owning an historical home--tired of preservation, of historical society's rules and regulations.

"That summer, the nails being driven in were like semiautomatics." Suddenly, you began the story as if triggered by something. And I, perking up, was hungry for more details, as usual. "So many soldiers. I was hiding behind a line of trees." And just as quickly as your started, you stopped. Bleary-eyed, spacey, you stared through the window into the day's overcast sky, into the cold dreary drizzle of another late autumn day, backing up a step, and then another--as if shrinking to miss something coming towards you. Your eyes shuttered, clenched your fist tightly, as if to shut yourself off from seeing any more of whatever it was you are seeing.

"My yellow dress ..." you muttered urgently, almost in a panic, as if it were too late to save it from being ruined. As if the world has suddenly collapsed after its last breath. Again, I was more than certain nothing would come up after the yellow dress. Nothing but silence loomed with its white noise in the room once again. Just like the other occasions before this, after you pulled the yellow dress into the conversation, you would grow eerily calm. And we were never able to usher out a single word more from you. You would withdraw from us and rub your eyes as if to smear the very image into oblivion.

But I reached in. Pried your hands away and gave my best attempt to steady those palpitating hands in my own; soon enough it became indistinguishable as to who was steadying who, because we were both rattling so violently. Securing and squeezing as though to solidify those forever-moving hands in mine, I manage, "I love you, Mom." I gave her trembling hands a gentle squeeze and then another, signaling that I was there for her. I wanted so badly to squeeze every drop of that haunting story out of her. Just like the other

times before this, I desperately wanted her to unburden herself of the past. She used to tell Dad about it but nobody else.

That yellow dress always found a way into the memories of what happened in your home village years ago. Just like many times prior to this, I was still uncertain as to what actually had triggered the story to come out and halt so abruptly. After setting down my bags and peeling off my outer coat, I had mentioned that yesterday was a sunny and breezy-cool day while we took Charlie out for a picnic and then to the playground. I guess that it must have been either the word "picnic" or "sunny" that had triggered your memory this time around. Or was it the gloomy gray weather visible outside the window? This was nothing more than speculation on my part since you will never let me know--certainly not after bringing up that yellow dress.

I remembered that summer. The construction was well underway towards the latter part of the summer because the young owners had wanted their home to be ready for their first baby, which was due to arrive sometime around mid-autumn. When we caught one another at the mailboxes, or at the pool, or while on our way in or out, they had expressed a handful of times how much they wanted their child to be born at home in warm bath water. The whole neighborhood practically knew about this. So the whole world, it seemed, was busy throughout the summer preparing for this important child's arrival. At times, it seemed as if every piece of wood could use an extra nail or two to keep it in place. While everything was underway, it was hard to hear ourselves talking, especially Susie and me. Then again, we were the only two trying to talk over the all noise, over Mother's blaring classical music, and over the hammering, driving, and recoiling of nail guns. Nothing seemed capable of dampening the percussion of construction tools--nothing other than leaving the residence altogether. We were chased away by our neighbor's construction noises day after day for most of that summer.

That summer, we had so many picnics together--just the three of us. I was just five then. My younger sister, Susan, who was three years old, would burst out into hissy fits the first few times. In our hurry to get out of the house, we usually neglected to grab her travelling doll and bring it along. Poor Susie spent those first few car rides between sulking and worrying about her doll being left behind. Susie's crying seemed to be even more dreadful than the construction noise for my mother. She later eased her young daughter's sadness by ordering an exact replica of the doll and placing it in the car just so that we would not need to worry about forgetting the doll on any outings again.

Even at five, I was curious about the reasons for leaving the home so quickly. I wasn't sure why, but I knew that loud noises meant we would take some sort of outing that day. But outings always included a range of ways to have fun--usually involving a picnic of some sort. I was always happy to oblige because I loved picnics; everything about them excited me. I even had my very own picnic set ready to go anywhere at a moment's notice. My trusted imaginary picnic set: wicker basket, table set, and flowery chinaware with tiny little blue birds on it.

You flinched so frequently, recoiling like a frightened creature, throwing us into our shoes if you were not in too much of a hurry. And when you were, you would clasp Susie tightly on your hip, would grab her shoes, and utter: "Out-Out." Those two "outs" were so embedded in me that sometimes now, when I rush down a flight of stairs, I can still hear those two words, "out-out," as clearly as you said them on those summer days. One "out" is piggybacking the other "out." No pause. Both connected almost as sure as your hand, warm on my small back. Rushing while trying to hold on to everything so as not to trip, it seemed as if we would slide down those ten concrete steps rather than taking them one step at a time. We slid into the car all hyped up, holding onto everything until the last door closed, sealing all three of us inside. The first few outings were trips to the zoo, while subsequent trips were geared more towards the playground, because by late summer, the zoo smelled too much like stinky animals. We would always stay out too late to have dinner at home--or until the worksite was safely emptied of its work crews. We ate out a lot that year with many picnics away from home, frequently meeting up with Dad later for dinner after he had finished work.

You could never remember when it started to rain--even after all these years--but you were more than certain that it would rain sometime because "the ground was poked with work shoes trampling up and down." It was how you would have imagined it to be at the end of a busy day between the stable and the slaughter house. You had never said so, but I would imagine it when I was a bit older, when you said blood was "in" the ground--Not "on" it. In my mind, it was what any flesh would automatically do after being compromised with such physical abuse. After the cut, it bled and soaked up the ground beneath it.

One day she disclosed calmly: "The ground was muddled up because a lot had been killed. The ground was sloshy, puddled up where fluids were pooling." She paused. "At the time, the rain must have been heavy. Did it rain almost every day then?," I asked. But she stared through me as if that rain had suddenly breached some dam and the water was hurtling towards us.

I could still see it in her eyes; this paralyzing fear is collecting and carrying her off again. Like people in a deadly mudslide, you can do nothing to help. You do not want to push in further because you know if you did, everything would get swept off, more than anybody could handle, especially her. And where it was going could only be disastrous for any person, especially for someone in her condition.

Other times, she remembered just in time not to go there; so she began again the time prior to this time by saying that "young leaves on lower branches were wearing what's on the ground. Dirtied up and drippy." Leaves, branches, and trunks dripping with moisture was the image I read into her use of the word "drippy." Then, everything is in a brown skirt like after the pond had receded after many days of heavy rains. Believe me, it is what to expect for April and May here in the South--rain, rain, and rain, followed by the flowering trees dancing with colors again. The first would be the Japanese dogwoods with their slender purple buds, rushing out like heads coming out from under gusted-up cherry blooms. This is what I still remembered the most--the image I had kept imagining all of those years, long after she excused herself to make phone calls or to go to the bathroom. As we got older, we

realized that it was because she could not continue with the different stories. Once she came back and said that "April is the driest and the hottest month there. But that day for some reason, it rained." She said nothing else. Turned back around and fled.

You can imagine what it was like, listening to parts of the story always taking place in April and May, and then, imagining them in the spring, bursting with the whole spectrum of colors--as it usually was with spring in the South. We had four very distinct seasons and everything fell into its familiar place in our world and safe upbringing: an historic neighborhood, a prominent college and its vast acreages of reserved lands with professors leisurely roaming the complex. Imagine that. Both parents living through the horror of genocide; just listening to the tales made anything else deemed horrific seem tame. Car accidents and local murders and any violent robberies advertized on the news station--we were too young for any of that. Too traumatic. Too bloody. Too cruel. So we grew up not seeing much violence. Because my parents did not talk about it much, we knew next to nothing about what had happened to our mother for those four years she had lived under the Khmer Rouge regime. No, we weren't oblivious; we knew that sometimes something was not right with her. Sometimes, she was unable to see all of the sudden. "Random stress-induced blackouts, random terror-induced blackouts," I had overheard Dr. Martin say to my father on more than one occasion during his dozen or so house-calls to help my mother. She was seeing so much that everything else had blacked out. And other times, saw so much that she would not speak at all--calmly quiet, as though being casted under the shadow of defeat. The shadow of dead silence. The dead shadow of that yellow dress. The yellow dress her sister wore that fateful day, which was promised to my mother five years from the very day her sister had put it on her fourteen-year-old body. "The body that promised to grow fully into that still roomy dress," as Gram had told us whenever we stayed overnight with her.

"What happened to the yellow dress, Gram?," we queried her on more than one occasion. But Gram would always reply: "What happened to your aunt's yellow dress can't be saved," and would leave it at that. No more explanation. No more comment.

"Did it get too soiled, Gram?" we would ask when we were still too innocent to know. The story of what happened to Mother's promised yellow dress and our aunt did not survive the tragedy of that day, when their village was captured by the Khmer Rouge. It was not until years later that my sister and I learned the full story on our own. And we thanked them for sparing us the many details while growing up.

That world is still too cruel to grasp even as an adult. Nobody can be overly prepared, though at the time, I thought I was. But I was wrong in so many ways: I found that the mass graves at Cheung Ek were way beyond any comprehension of the words "slaughter" or "genocide," when we popped in for a weeklong visit to Cambodia while on our way to Australia. In taking this planned stopover, I was not sneaking behind their backs. My father knew about it but had refused, out of loyalty to Mother, to accompany me and my husband. I did not blame him. It was too much for anyone who had been there to bear. "It just too much," like Mother often said.

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## "Redemption by Jews"

Jacob was sixty-one when he came to the Philippines. He had already been divorced for two years and had just wrapped up the sale of his carpentry company to a young man who had worked for him as an assistant for ten years. He decided to try the hot countries where he had never been to see if he might like to retire there.

The divorce was Jacob's third. His wives accused him of insensitivity, irritability, and ill temper, all of which were true. He had violent temper tantrums in which he smashed crockery, broke windows, and hurled things at his terrified wives, fortunately without hitting them. They said he was insanely jealous and controlling, which was also true. All of these accusations were on the record as each of his divorces went to court. What his wives did not say--out of delicacy, or on the advice of their lawyers, or both--was that even in his fifties he was oversexed, demanding sex two or three times a day at the very least. His wives found this at first flattering but later tiring. They also did not put on the record that he was a raging anti-Semite, a significant portion of whose conversation was composed of rants against the Jews. He babbled the usual ragbag of inane *shibboleths* from the tradition of that particular obsession at them until they were driven almost mad. Perhaps the lawyers advised them not to mention this for Jacob himself was a Jew, on both his mother and father's side, and it might introduce an element of confusion into the court proceedings. It should also be mentioned that Jacob was an exceedingly handsome man, highly intelligent, capable in business, and very charming. Not in court, for obvious reasons, but privately to their lawyers (women, all), they mentioned that for some time after their marriage to Jacob they were very much in love and were convinced they had made a wonderful match.

When Jacob landed in Manila, he stayed over only one night. For the past five years, he had lived on a farm outside the medium-sized city where he ran his business, commuting every day. Over this time he had come to see cities as the old prophets saw Sodom and Gomorrah, as cesspools of moral slackness and depravity. After his night surrounded by such dangers on every side, he took a bus on a day's journey to a small provincial town he had once read about in a magazine. Here he stayed in a small hotel, not a tourist hotel for the town was far off the beaten track and had no tourist trade to speak of. The other guests were mostly business travelers, salesmen, and small contractors. The management gave him a very reasonable monthly rate, including meals in the restaurant, and he decided to stay for at least a few months.

The town was on the sea as just about all towns there are, for the Philippines is a country of islands. It was hot, in the high thirties centigrade, with brilliant sunshine. Every day he walked to the beach a kilometer away from the hotel and swam in the sea. In the afternoons he bicycled on the gravel roads leading out of town through little villages with

houses built on stilts and thatched with straw, past groups of people working in the fields. He brought a sandwich and a bottle of juice with him and had a mid-afternoon snack usually on a hill where he could look off into the distance while he ate. He was back at the hotel for supper at six. Afterwards he climbed the stairs to his room on the third floor and took a nap.

Every evening at nine o'clock on the dot, for Jacob was man of clocklike routine, he left his room with its tiny balcony overlooking the town and descended the stairs to the lobby. At the foot of the stair he turned right, and, crossing in front of the main desk, passed through a set of double mahogany doors leading to the bar. The bar was much larger than needed for the guests because it served not only the hotel but also the surrounding community. Jacob sat at a table in the corner frequented by a small group of European and North American expatriates. There were about twelve regulars, most of whom were retired and a little older than Jacob. Since it was Wednesday night and the full complement appeared only on Friday and Saturday evenings, there were only five present. As Jacob approached the table it struck him for the twentieth time how brightly their pale skins shone pink and strange in that sea of brown Filipinos made even browner by so much time outside under the hot season sun. This was accentuated for three of the men who had taken to combating baldness by shaving their heads. Jacob gave a general wave and, when the very attentive waiter appeared almost immediately, ordered a beer.

"Over there, Jacob," said the man on his left, one of the billiard balls whose jet black eyebrows appeared as finger clouds crossing the face of a pale full moon. This was Carson, a retired pharmacist from the American Midwest who lived in the hotel eight months a year and dabbled in local real estate. Jacob didn't remember his first name or even if he had ever heard it. Everyone called him Carson. Even Carson referred to himself as Carson. Jacob turned his head to follow the pointing finger until his eyes came to a stop at a table where four young women were drinking beer.

"The closest one on the left," said Carson.

The closest one on the left was wearing a bright yellow dress printed with figures of elegant blue and white flowers. She was beautiful with the particular kind of beauty that only a mixture of Melanesian, Spanish, and American blood could bring. Even, perfectly-formed features, high cheek bones, flawless skin, a lovely rich brown, jet black hair done up in a bun secured by a comb at the back of her head, and almond eyes which were perhaps Formosan, perhaps American Eurasian, or perhaps even the eyes of a Castilian Duchess come to rest after many years of restless wandering here in this little provincial town. She was talking animatedly to her friends who were also speaking animatedly so that one wondered if they had some magical ability to speak and listen at the same time. There were no men at their table. While he was watching, a young man approached the women, but after a brief, polite exchange, he went on his way.

"And what about her?" Jacob asked.

"A widow looking for a husband. Preferably a rich one."

"How do you know?"

"I bribe waiters. I have intimate conversations with my barber."

"How did she get to be a widow? Arsenic?"

"Ha ha, very funny. And with some of these women not far from the truth. In her case, however, it was perfectly above board. He was a fisherman and died in a storm at sea. That would be difficult for even the most malicious wife to manage."

"What about age?"

"My informants tell me she is amenable with a top range of late sixties. That is, of course, if there is enough money involved so there is no need for her to be embarrassed by lack of a dowry. Her husband took the boat which her dowry helped to buy to the bottom of the sea with him."

"She's very beautiful, Carson. Perhaps a little rich for my blood."

"Oh, I don't know. This is a poor place and a Westerner of even modest savings is quite a catch, the equivalent of a multi-millionaire back home."

Jacob and his friends went on to talk of other things, and he forgot about the young woman. But an hour later when the band got up to play, he walked across the floor and asked her to dance. She rose, took his hand, and followed him onto the floor. A waltz. She held herself at arm's length of course, for it was unseemly for strangers to dance close like lovers or a married couple. When the dance was over, she invited him to sit at her table and was introduced to her friends. Jacob bought a round of beer--a European beer, which they claimed, after a few sips, to be inferior to their local beer with the added penalty of being twice as expensive. Jacob stayed at the table for the rest of the evening, dancing with Julia, the young woman, six or seven times and even once with each of her girlfriends. When he was crossing the lobby to ascend the stairs to his room, Carson, who was leaning on the front desk chatting to the clerk, said to him, "well, I guess we won't be seeing you for a while."

Jacob chuckled politely but kept on his way.

Julia came to the bar on Wednesday and Saturday nights. Jacob spent these evenings at her table, but they were seldom alone. There was at least one girlfriend, sometimes up to three or four. Julia worked in the laundry at the local hospital and the girlfriends were all coworkers. After two months of this, one evening, Jacob was sitting alone with one of the girlfriends, a plump, affable young woman named Rose. Julia was late coming for some family reason and the other two girlfriends at the table were up dancing. After she had scrutinized him for some moments with her dark eyes, Rosa asked, "are you married?"

"Divorced," replied Jacob, not insulted at all by the question. He was delighted that someone was finally coming to the point.

"Retired?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to live here full time now?"

"Probably."

"Julia doesn't want to leave. She's a home girl."

Jacob said nothing to this and a few moments passed by until Rose brought her eyes back from the dance floor where they had wandered and asked, "if you married would you be bringing your property here?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

Rather blunt but how else could you ask such a question? Jacob mentioned a figure.

"American?"

"American."

"You will invest here?"

"Yes."

"Julia has connections through which mortgages could be let out."

"And how much would such mortgages amount to?"

"Two hundred thousand American."

"A lot."

"Yes. Such beauty has a high premium."

"The mortgages are to be let out to family?"

"Some, but not all. Will you buy a house?"

"I suppose, yes."



"Julia has three children, a mother and an older sister who live with her."

"I see."

"They come with her is what I mean to say."

"Fine."

"And am I correct in assuming that it is marriage you have in mind?"

"Of course."

"Julia trusts me. I will make the arrangements."

Two days later Jacob and Rose met in the hotel restaurant and made the arrangements. He gave her a sum in cash to cover the costs and six weeks later Julia and he were married in the Catholic Church, for she and all of her family were devout Catholics (or at least, Catholics). There were four bridesmaids, three flower girls, and three hundred and fifty guests who did not have to jam themselves into the small parish hall for it was a warm night. After loading their plates with food and clutching bottles of beer in the crooks of their arms, the guests went out under the stars and ate sitting on the ground. Jacob, at Julia's insistence, wore a rented tuxedo for the ceremony but changed into shorts and T shirt for the reception. Julia wore her bridal dress all evening until they left to catch the late night bus taking them to the other side of the island for their honeymoon.

The honeymoon was not a great success but not an unmitigated disaster either. They had sex but Julia's participation was tepid and Jacobs's rife with performance anxiety. They stayed in a rented cabin by the sea and went swimming every day. Afternoons, Julia went off by herself to visit relatives in the area. They had supper at the local restaurant and danced afterward when the band came on later in the evening. After two weeks Jacob was quite smitten with his new wife, but Julia was bored to tears with her new husband. He spoke of little besides house construction, brick-laying, and Jews. He had a great passion of hatred for the Jews and accused them of terrible deeds in high places. He was an atheist. He hated the Christian God as much as he hated the Jews. He made loud, peasant-like sounds slurping his soup at the restaurant. He complained when she bought trinkets at the local market to take home to her relatives. His love making was almost unbearable. He aroused no desire in her so she had to pretend like a woman in a bordello. He didn't seem to notice. When he slept he snored all night, tremendous pig-like snorting from deep caverns beneath his long, fleshy, North American nose.

Jacob bought a modest but roomy house not far from the hotel. He did not consult his wife for it was his opinion that such matters should be decided by the male. Fortunately, by blind luck, he had bought just the house which Julia and her mother looked at and fell in love with some weeks earlier. This had something to do with the fact that the real estate

agent recommended by Rosa was Julia's cousin. The house was single story, spreading itself out over most of a large lot. It had a central courtyard opening onto a back lot overlooking the sea. There were fifteen rooms, one of them a long, wide living room/dining room, with a lean to kitchen at the back. Julia's three children, mother, older sister and two elderly women cousins moved in with them. In the mornings, after seeing the children off to school, the women set up their work stations in the living room. One of the cousins worked a loom upon which she wove rugs and wall hangings. Julia, her mother and sister wove straw baskets. The other cousin made ornaments people buy to decorate children's birthday parties. They worked from nine in the morning till supper time. At noon Julia and her mother walked to the market to buy food. Usually Mama, as Julia called her, cooked supper.

Julia insisted that Jacob replace the old stove in the kitchen. They went out together and she picked out a gas stove with a large oven. As soon as it was installed, two of Julia's younger sisters came every night except Saturday and worked from midnight until seven in the morning baking bread, muffins, and cookies. After breakfast they loaded their baked goods onto a handcart and pushed it off to the local market. Jacob complained. "Somebody is running a bakery out of my kitchen."

"Our kitchen," Julia replied.

"OK. Somebody is running a bakery out of our kitchen."

"They are my sisters."

"And what does that have to do with it?"

"My sisters are welcome in my house."

"All night, every night, running a bakery?"

"The oven is just perfect they say."

"I'm sure they do. And I'm sure they find the free gas is also perfect."

Jacob did not know that he was also buying the flour, yeast, raisins, baking powder, etc. which went into the baked goods. Julia was an expert at jiggling household accounts so that turning a repair bill into bags of flour was no problem for her. But Jacob decided not to press his complaint. There were women everywhere, baking, weaving, painting walls, cooking, cleaning, talking, arguing, and he felt a little intimidated. When the day ended the house filled up with cousins, nieces, nephews, uncles, aunts--a seemingly endless parade of Julia's family. Some came and went. Others stayed for a month--others for longer--and still others never left. It seemed to Jacob that there were at least five children, besides Julia's, who lived with them full time. When he brought this up to Julia, she was vague. When he spoke to Mama, she told him that yes, 'some' children were with them for a bit because their parents were off working in Manila. She was vague about exactly how many. They

were good children who ate very little and only required a tiny space to sleep in (actually they slept in hammocks hung in a room which thus resembled the *focsle* in an old-time sailing ship). The parents would be back any day now she assured him. But months went by, and they still had not come. Jacob learned their names. In the evenings he sometimes took them for a walk on the beach along with Julia's children and bought them ice cream from the little stand a few hundred yards down from the house. Eventually, he ceased to ask when the parents would arrive.

At the far west corner of the house was a two-room suite, the rooms separated by a short hallway in turn closed off from the rest of the house by a rough plank door. Here, where it was quiet no matter what was going on in the rest of the house, Jacob had his bedroom. The second room served as his study. Julia slept with him here once or twice a week. The rest of the week she slept in some other room. Where exactly, he was unsure. At first Jacob complained but eventually he gave it up. He was of an age when often his number one priority was a night of undisturbed sleep. Julia was restless in bed. She often got up in the middle of the night and helped her sisters baking bread. Mama was especially solicitous of Jacob's sleep. After he said goodnight and went through the door to his suite, she had one of the older children help her cover the door with two heavy rugs to muffle the sound from the main part of the house. Jacob slept well in his bedroom and when the noise and bustle in the house became intolerable to him he had a quite place to retreat away from it all.

Four months after the wedding, on a rainy day when the whole world seemed composed of rain beating on the steel roof and water rushing from the gutters, Rose came through the kitchen and onto the patio where Jacob was having his coffee watching the torrents of rain fall into the sea. He was happy to see her for he considered Rose an affable, business-like person with whom one could deal in a direct manner and get some results. This was very different from the women in his house who were slippery as eels, elusive as weasels. Rose carried a cup of Mama's coffee with her and sat down opposite him at the ornate wrought iron table. After the usual formalities and a pause, Rose, as was her way, got to the point.

"The mortgages," she said.

"Oh yes," said Jacob.

"Julia has a cousin lawyer who can draw up the agreements. He has already done the preliminary work."

"Fine," said Jacob.

"He can come tomorrow afternoon for the signing of the papers and the transfer of the money. You can go to the bank in the morning."

In the morning Jacob went to the bank and made the arrangements. The lawyer came after lunch, an enormously fat man who sat at the long kitchen table and unburdened an immense briefcase of a tall pile of documents. Jacob signed them. Julia signed as well. The lawyer also signed them. Mama and the older sister signed as witnesses. They were small-

amount mortgage agreements, a thousand here, two there, the largest being ten thousand. Some were on agricultural land, some on houses and small businesses in town. When this was completed Jacob made out and signed a series of checks certified on the spot by a clerk sent over by the bank. The documents and checks then went into the lawyer's case and Mama and the older sister brought out several plates piled high with the younger sisters' baking and a tray of gleaming bottles of beer wet from the ice bucket. The lawyer proposed an elaborate and comical toast and everyone laughed heartily. When the plates and tray were empty, the lawyer rose and, accompanied by Julia in her best dress with her hair drawn up in a bun with a comb as it was the first time Jacob saw her, left through the front door to climb into his late model Japanese car to drive the documents and checks around to the owners of the properties. Jacob walked them to the door and then went to his suite for his afternoon nap.

Julia did not come back until after dark. Jacob was having his beer on the patio, and she came out to join him. She talked excitedly about where she had gone and the people she had seen, for driving in the car and meeting with so many people happy to conclude a hopeful business arrangement, stimulated her. Jacob listened impatiently. When she wound down he asked her once again about the baking sisters.

"I suppose you want their children to go hungry," Julia said.

"What does that have to do with a bakery being operated in my house?"

"That's how they feed their children."

"Don't they have husbands?"

"The husbands are fishermen. How can a fisherman feed all those children?"

Jacob had no answer for this. Julia took the opportunity to rise in triumphant and stately dignity and go back into the house. When he came through the kitchen Mama stared at him censoriously. The elderly cousins sitting at the table turned their eyes away. He continued down the hallway to his study where he sat in his armchair and brooded.

One morning, some months later, Jacob cornered Julia alone in the kitchen. All of the other women had stayed up all night baking for a festival and were now off selling their wares at the market. He sat down at the long table opposite her and said, "mortgages have income."

"Of course mortgages have income," replied Julia.

"Then where is it?"

"The lawyer says some payments are late and others have been deferred for unavoidable reasons. The income from the others is just fine."

"Just fine?"

"Yes. Just fine."

"What does that mean, 'just fine'?"

"It means it went to places it was needed."

"Such as?"

"The Fuentes cousin needed dental work."

"I see."

"School just started and the children needed clothing and supplies."

"I see."

"Consuela's husband had his tools stolen and they had to be replaced. Carpentry tools are expensive as you should know."

"But Julia, don't you see that mortgage money is capital money? If the income is spent on expenses then the money is frittered away and the capital disappears."

"Of course."

"Of course what?"

"Necessary things must be dealt with whatever you call the money. After all you can call it various names but in the long run it is just money."

"Just money?"

"Yes."

"Well, I would like you to give me an accounting of the mortgages, income, expenses, and so on."

"No problem. The lawyer is good at giving accountings and making lists. I will speak to him."

Whether Julia spoke to the lawyer or not Jacob did not know but some time passed by and he was still without an accounting. Six times he spoke to Julia who each time claimed the lawyer was about to appear any day, but he never did. The last time she gave him this answer Jacob became enraged. He shouted at her in the kitchen. He chased her around the long table, but she was much too lithe and quick for the likes of an aging, arthritic

carpenter. He grabbed a cup from the table and was about to throw it at her when Mama and the two baking sisters appeared in the doorway. They stared at him with terrible neutral looks on their faces. He placed the cup back on the table and went out through the patio door. He could hear the kitchen filling up with the other women, talking in excited voices. No doubt they had ways to rid themselves of unreasonable foreigners. Perhaps they threw them down a well then buried them alive with a rain of useless mortgage agreements, piano lessons, gas ovens, dental bills, and the mouths of hungry fishermen's children.

Julia refused to speak to him for a month after this event. She did not come to sleep in his room. The other women spoke to him but distantly. It was a week before the little children came to sit on his lap as they had before. But after another month it blew over. Julia came back to sleep with him but now only once a week. The children once again ragged him after supper until he took them down the beach for ice cream. Mama began once again to tease him occasionally about the fact that he was ten years older than her, and the baking sisters began to leave a few delicacies out to have with his morning coffee. He had to admit to himself that these women had generous hearts. They did not carry grudges, and they wanted very much that their house not become a place of war and division.

Mama and her daughters were possessed of an age old tradition of household gender relations. The man was officially recognized as the head of the house, the titular power. Jacob was seated at the head of the table and fed the choice cuts of meat. His coffee cup was filled before he mustered a desire that it be so. On all official occasions, family gatherings, he was treated like a grandee. His clothes were cleaned, pressed, adjusted, and fussed over as if he were the King of France or the Emperor of Russia. On very special occasions, one of the older sisters even shaved him, for they claimed that he did not pay close enough attention to the corners. He sat in the big chair in the living room while all the guests came to greet him, shaking his hand and kissing him on his cheek. Adorable children were plunked into his lap and he obediently fed them with the chocolate candies the woman had stuffed into his pocket. Even though he was not a Christian, he was called upon to say the grace before meals, taught to him by Julia. His suite at the back of the house was sacrosanct. When he was sleeping the children were kept away from it with a stern discipline. In matters of household renovations he was deferred to. Was the patio to be retiled? Julia brought it up with him. Should the screened porch on the front be enlarged? Mama discussed it with Jacob over coffee. They allowed themselves to be guided by his wishes.

In the matter of children's expenses, however, it was another matter. After all men are lazy creatures of pleasure and did not bear children. In such matters their wishes, instructions, were to be interpreted in a broad fashion and not taken literally. Jacob did not want to pay for art lessons for Julio, Julia's eldest? Fine. Then the grocery money could be squeezed, extra loaves of bread baked. The contractor cousin who did the patio could be asked to give a finder's fee. That dense man should have offered it himself before he was asked. As a last resort there was the mortgage income, managed by Julia out of an ancient iron safe, a relic from the days of the Spanish and left in the house by its former inhabitants who perhaps did not have the energy to carry its many hundreds of pounds out the door. But only as a last resort, for Julia was a careful manager. Not long after the letting out of the

mortgages, she was a part owner of several hectares of crop land and had a controlling share in a fabric shop.

All of this went along reasonably well, but it was obvious that something was building up in Jacob. He began to feel he was living at the edge of a terrible tyranny of women. To be fair to the poor man, he did his best to find some way to release the pressure and stop paranoia blossoming in his mind as a single, overwhelming obsession. But he failed. He became moody. He spent long hours alone in his room. Then one day he got up from a night of broken sleep and changed his mind about everything. He dressed in his old carpentry overalls, stormed into the main part of the house and began shouting at the women. Even Julio, who was often able to calm him, was brushed off to the side. The women scattered like chickens before a diving hawk. Lifting up young children into their arms they rushed out the kitchen door onto the patio.

Jacob stood in the doorway and hurled insults at them. They were deceivers, witches, devils from the nether regions of hell, thieves, manipulators, foul fornicators, workers of dark arts, destroyers of the minds of men, evil, devouring vulvas, depraved monsters. He would have no more to do with them. He would have no more to do with their money-sucking brats, their one long endless meal, their decorations and renovations, their whining and wheedling, their cajoling, their cunning, their steady, inexorable chiseling. All this he was leaving behind him. All this he was now, at this very moment and forever, banishing from his mind. "No more!" he screeched at them in a spray of spittle. "No more you evil, torturing, squeezing bitches. No more!" And with that he collapsed in a heap in the doorway.

The women had watched this performance quite dispassionately as if they were watching a speech given by a politician from Manila. But when he collapsed they rushed to the body to see if he was dead. He wasn't. He was breathing regularly and his pulse was strong. Mama sent one of the daughters for the doctor. The older sister brought a blanket and spread it out on the floor beside him. They tugged and rolled him until he was lying face up on the blanket and lifted him up with many hands and carried him into the bedroom. They laid him on his bed, positioning his hands on his stomach as if he were laid out in his coffin.

When the doctor came out of the bedroom into the kitchen, he said that Jacob was perfectly healthy. "The man is as sound as a two year old donkey."

"And of much the same nature," Julia replied.

The doctor laughed. After pocketing his fee, delicately folded into a linen envelope, he wrote a prescription for a sedative. "Three days in bed," he said. "All of that shouting and foaming at the mouth is hard on the system."

Jacob was enervated by his bout of rage. He lay quietly in his bed studying the ceiling while the pills the doctor gave him loosened his muscles and set his mind pleasantly drifting. Julio sat by his bedside reading one of his textbooks. His concentration was intense. He turned the pages with a deft movement of his right hand. After watching him for a while, Jacob reached over, covered the text with his hand, and looked into Julio's face, a pleasant, evenly featured face every bit as beautiful as Julia's. "I am afraid, my dear Julio, that for many years I have been wrongly maligning the Jews. What are they, after all, but poor fellow wanderers seeking to place their feet firmly on the ground wherever their ill-stared fate has led them? For this they should be hated? I don't think so. Hereafter my policy will be not to love them, for that would be condescending, but to create for them in my mind a warm limbo of non-judgment where they can be free to be whatever they are going to be. As there is, apart from myself, not a single Jew in this town or even on this island, they will not notice my change of heart, but I will and that is what counts." Then he smiled and Julio smiled back. He removed his hand from the book, replaced it with the other on his stomach, and went to sleep.

He did not rise from his bed for three days. Julia looked after him. She was careful not to say anything which might upset him, and he himself avoided all contentious subjects. He asked her about the children. He talked about the weather, wondering why it was that the people here on the island dreaded the rainy season while he, a foreigner, loved it dearly. He told her of his childhood when he and his brothers slid down snow-covered hills on a wooden toboggan and made snowballs with their mittened hands to hurl at one another. He spoke of his mother, a large, warm hearted woman whose sons teased her mercilessly. He asked her to bring him an umbrella from the market and gave her two one-hundred dollar bills from the drawer beside the bed. He told her to spend what was left over on clothing for the children.

When he rose on the fourth morning, before breakfast and his morning coffee--for a great necessity lay upon him--Jacob removed all the furniture from the study excepting the roll top desk holding his personal papers. Julia, Mama, and a stay-over cousin helped him carry it out the back door and put it in the storage shed. The women wanted to clean the resulting dusty corners but he would not allow them. He took broom, dustpan, mop, and pail from the closet off the kitchen and cleaned the room himself. When he was done, he had breakfast on the patio and then walked to the lumber store pulling one of the toddlers along behind him in a bright blue wagon.

That afternoon a truck delivered a pile of lumber and plastic bags filled with nails and hardware. Jacob had the men carry the lumber through the house and lay it on the floor of the study. When they were gone, after mama had fed them cinnamon buns and coffee at the kitchen table and Jacob tucked tips into their pockets at the door, he began constructing a workbench along one wall of the room. It took him three days to finish and then he put a series of shelves and pegboards above it on the wall. The women kept peeking in to see what he was doing, but they did not ask any questions, fearing it might set him off. They watched him silently for a few moments and then left. When the toddlers came he did not chase them away. He sat them in the corner and gave them blocks and wood shavings to play with.



When everything was finished he closed the door and would not let any adults see inside for two months. He spent ten hours a day inside the room he now referred to as the shop. When the toddlers knocked on the door and called his name, he let them in and reclosed the door. When they were tired of playing with the blocks he gave them, he let them out again. Sometimes he went to the lumber store and brought back chunky blocks of wood. In the evening he strolled along the beach stopping to look at the fishing boats pulled up on the sandy beach.

When the two months were up, he opened the door and thereafter seldom closed it. Everyone came to look. The toddlers squeezed through the legs of the women and headed for the corner where Jacob had left a pile of ends and shavings. Along the workbench was a line of fishing boats carved from softwood and painted the same bright colors the fishermen painted their own boats. There were masts, tiny sails, oars, and figures of fishermen, some looking off over the sea, others leaning over the gunwales pulling up their nets. There were twenty or so, all of slightly different sizes and designs. They were propped up with small chocks. They were awash in the soft light of the day-glow lamps Jacob hung from the ceiling, and, as he had painted the top of the bench blue, it was as if they were floating upon a magically created, strangely calm, indoor sea. The women's eyes grew as round as saucers. They entered the room and spread themselves out along the bench peering closely, sucking in their breath in silent admiration.

The next day while Jacob was drinking his morning coffee with Julia on the patio, he handed her a letter. The letter gave her sole rights to the mortgages he had signed a few years before. It listed them--the lawyer cousin had done this for him--in a long column extending to a second page. It was notarized by the lawyer, signed by Jacob, and witnessed by two clerks in the lawyer's office. Julia read the letter, thanked him very solemnly, and kissed him on the cheek. What was hers practically was now hers in the eyes of the law. She showed the letter to her mother and put it away in the safe.

In his sixty-fifth year Jacob took a piece of white wood and etched upon its surface "Forgive me dear Jews", first in English and then, below in letters the same size, in Latin. The translation was supplied by the lawyer who spent his Saturday afternoons reading the original versions of Tacitus and Ovid. Lettering complete, he framed it with a thin border of mahogany and hung it on the wall above his workbench.

When Julia saw the plaque, she asked him what it meant. "The Jews, whom I hated for so many years, have redeemed me," he said. It was obvious from Julia's expression that she did not understand, but he gave no further explanations.

When Julia came into the kitchen, her mother asked, "What did he say?"

"Something about Jews and redeeming, but I really don't understand it."

"Seems a strange thing to put up on the wall when there is not a Jew within a hundred miles. Did he do bad things to them when he was young?"

"No. He just hated them. He feels bad because he hated them. I suppose the plaque is propitiation, a kind of blood payment. Maybe they do that where he comes from."

Mama said nothing, but she was worried that Jacob might be going crazy again. Perhaps all the carving was only a temporary abatement of his madness. For her the Jews were people she heard about in school who had a tiny country half way around the world. To make plaques asking them for forgiveness as if they were spirits floating around in the air seemed to her not quite sane.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Irresistible"

He poured himself another glass of champagne as he listened to the soft music playing in the background. It was Chopin's *Raindrop Prelude*. The lilting melodies somehow dulled the headache that had been throbbing in the back of his head since he woke up that morning. He took a sip before placing the glass on the table, unbuttoning the two top buttons of his shirt with his other hand. His coat and hat lay discarded on the wing chair across from the semicircular couch he sat on.

Ben had nearly dozed off when he heard a soft knock. A waiter opened the door and announced that Miss Isabella Hakeem had arrived. Ben hurriedly straightened himself up before opening the door to meet Miss Isabella Hakeem, a true sight-to-be-seen in a red dress.

Her hair was jet black; it looked like fine raven silk, thick and spilling off over one of her shoulders. The red dress looked as if it was a part of her skin, tight yet fluid across her curvaceous body. Her hips swayed as she walked, looking seductive and classy at the same time. She wore a mysterious smile on her lips, while her eyes were large yet innocent. Ben immediately felt something stir deep inside of him.

Bella saw the appreciative look in Ben's eyes and widened her smile. "Mr. Benjamin, private detective?"

Ben nodded. His gaze was still fixed on her face. He imagined that she would be beautiful but not this beautiful.

"Thanks for coming Miss Isabella." That sounded a little off, even to his own ears.

"Please, just call me Bella."

She slid onto the couch just three feet away from him. Ben held his breath as he watched the hem of her already short skirt slide up her leg another inch, revealing the creamy, white skin underneath. She smiled as she observed him watching her and made no effort to tug her skirt back down.

"Can I get you anything? Juice? Champagne?"

"Champagne would be wonderful, thank you."

Even with the air conditioner on, Ben felt a little warm. He unbuttoned his shirt sleeves and started to neatly fold them up. Ben opened a fresh bottle of champagne and poured it into a glass for her. She took it from him, intentionally letting her fingers brush over his

hand. The electricity jolted throughout his body momentarily, like touching an exposed live wire.

Ben waited until she had taken a few sips before he began. "Miss Bella, I'm sure you know the reason I requested this meeting."

She responded with her trademark crooked smile that made his heart pound harder. "No Mr. Benjamin. I'm afraid I don't know."

Ben inhaled deeply before he spoke. "I believe you are well acquainted with Tan Sri Jess Haron. Am I right?"

"Depends on how you define 'well acquainted'."

"Where were you on the night of his murder?" he asked rather pointedly.

Bella rolled her eyes. "I've been through all of this with the police. Why am I doing this again with you?"

"Well, according to my source, you told them that you were at home taking care of your sick son," he said as he looked straight into her hazel eyes.

She stared back as she answered firmly. "Exactly."

Ben took something out of a butter-colored paper file and slid it across the table towards her. "Then, do you have an explanation for this?"

He showed some enlarged photographs of her, a little hazy but clear enough to identify those in the pictures. The first photograph portrayed her wrapped around Tan Sri Jess in a secluded corner of a ballroom. Another photo showed them kissing passionately, while the third one showed her leading him towards a side door. The time stamp on the photos was dated February 7th, 2012--the day of the murder.

She glanced at them and laughed. Bella stood up and moved over, sitting back down on the couch intimately close to him. She leaned in and whispered, "He's not the first person to find me irresistible."

Ben quickly stood up and walked towards the large mahogany table at the west corner of the room. He used a bottle of whiskey on the table as a distraction for himself, to help from thinking dirty thoughts about the girl in front of him. He poured the whiskey into a small glass and downed it in one breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had all started two months earlier, when Tan Sri Jess, a prominent Malaysian politician and businessman, was found dead in a local hotel room. He was shot in the head on the

right side of his temple. The police found no evidence of anyone else in the room with him that night.

The police, after failing to find any leads in the case, had ruled out foul play, classifying it instead as a suicide. The case caused quite an uproar in the country, appearing in countless headlines for weeks. He was the topic of many water-cooler conversations. He was a wonderful person, a great politician, a brilliant businessman, a family man, and a humble philanthropist. At least, that was what was said about him.

Two weeks after his death, his wife, Puan Sri Maya, showed up at Ben's office requesting his services. Convinced that it was no suicide, she wanted to find out who had murdered her husband.

"What do you mean by 'murdered'? I read that it was a suicide?" Ben asked her casually as they discussed the matter in his dingy room.

"He was not the type of person who would commit suicide. The thing is, he just wouldn't give up so easily, no matter what difficulty he faced."

"Well, how would you describe your relationship with your husband?" Ben questioned her as he watched her fiddle with her handbag strap. At 49, Puan Sri Maya still looked very beautiful and elegant. Her black hair was cut into a bob; there were hardly any lines on her face; and her figure was still amazing.

"We were good. Well...we had our ups and downs too, but...we were good together." Her eyes watered as she spoke of the husband that she had only recently lost.

"What else makes you believe that it wasn't a suicide?"

"Three days before his death, one of his investments flourished. He earned almost 100 million ringgit from it. Why would a man who just had a windfall of money kill himself?"

"It might not be about money. It might be about something else. Something you don't know about."

"You don't know Jess. He lived, worked, and breathed money. Money was his favorite source of happiness. He grew up poor. And money was all he ever wanted. He paid for a European holiday excursion for us a week before he died. He also bought a new car, a Porsche. He even bought himself a new Patek Philippe wristwatch. Wouldn't you agree that those are not normal characteristics of a suicidal person?"

Both fell silent. Ben reached out for the paper envelope that Puan Sri Maya handed him earlier. A few purple notes slid out.

"I believe you will find the fee agreeable."

Ben admitted that one of the reasons he was taking this case was because of the large sum he was offered. Another reason, though, was because he missed the act of investigating. He missed the thrill that came from solving cases. This was before, though, when he was still a police officer.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mr. Ben?"

Ben turned around, snapping back to reality. Bella stood near him, holding out her now empty champagne glasses. "Can I have some as well?"

Ben poured the whiskey into her glass and refilled his own. He brought the bottle back to the semi-circular couch and sat it down on the table. Bella followed suit.

"Why don't you tell me what happened that night."

She laughed again. "And after that, what?"

"I don't know," he admitted honestly.

She inched closer to him, letting her arm brush up against his. Ben's skin tingled where she made contact. "You've been paid already. That means you have to produce some results, right?"

"I guess, yes."

Bella ran a finger down his arm with a playful grin on her face. "Then I'm going to stick to my story. I was home, taking care of my sick son."

She walked towards the window, parting the curtains. The glittering skyline of KL came into view. From level 11 where the club is located, she could see the thousands of headlights on the road below. Ben watched her from behind--the beautiful figure in that red dress.

He approached her slowly, touching her shoulders lightly. The smell of her perfume wafted up, which he recognized as Chanel No. 5.

"What if you tell me the real story, and I'll figure out the rest later?"

She turned to face him, now only inches apart. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know if it's true--whether or not you were the last person to see Tan Sri Jess alive?"

She moved even closer. "Yes, I was."

He leaned in, aching to kiss her. She brushed her lips to his, so briefly that it felt like butterfly wings fluttering over the surface. She then moved away from him, returning to the couch.

"For how long have you known him?"

She opened her small handbag and fished out a pack of cigarettes. She lit one and took in a deep breath of smoke. Her beautiful mouth formed a small rounded shape as she exhaled the smoke slowly. "Four or five years maybe."

"And for how long have you been sleeping with him?"

Her eyes lit up in amusement as she took another breath. "We slept together fourteen times in the last six months. Quickies not included. I hope that's enough information to you."

Ben smiled. He poured another glass of whiskey, already feeling a little tipsy. As he raised his glass, he continued his questioning. "So that night ... was that a planned encounter or just a quickie?"

"Definitely a quickie."

Ben sat down on the couch again. She stubbed out her cigarette and leaned towards him. Half her body was pressed up against his thigh as she reached over him for his glass, taking a swig from it.

The sensation was intoxicating. He reached out to touch her chin and kissed her. She felt so soft, so warm in his arms. It seemed like ages before she finally pulled away.

"Why him?"

Bella chuckled softly. "You're not the only one who has ever found me to be irresistible."

"Tell me the whole story from the beginning."

She pressed closer, sending shivers throughout his body. "I knew him long before I ever slept with him, if that's what you are asking."

"And how would you describe your relationship with him. Close? Was it just an affair?"

She toyed with the buttons on his shirt. "It was an affair. He never told me that he loved me. But he didn't exactly pay for the favors I provided him either."

Ben wrapped his arms around her. "So it wasn't for the money, then?"

Bella shrugged. "I guess it was just sex."

They kissed again, with more passion than before.

"Now my turn," she said.

Bella moved over to straddle him, unbuttoning the rest of his shirt and pushing the shirttails aside, revealing his taut stomach, softly quivering from desire. She kissed down his jaw line slowly.

"How did you get those pictures, anyway?" she asked him as she pulled away, her expression curious.

"I had to go through thousands of pictures to get those shots. You sure are very elusive," he said meekly.

She grinned profusely as she stroked the side of his face. "I wasn't an invited guest. I had to sneak in to get him to leave with me. He called me from home, asking to see me...saying that we needed to talk."

"About what?"

She leaned in and kissed him again. At that point Ben was almost blind with desire. He ran his hand along her body, devouring her with his lips and hands. She gave as much back, pleasuring him in ways that he had never experienced before. The attraction had been nearly irresistible from the moment she stepped into the room.

He pulled away from her kisses, feeling the alcohol really set in. *It must be the whiskey*, he decided.

"Why aren't you a police officer anymore, Mr. Ben?"

"I got tired, and after my partner got shot, I decided it was no longer worth it."

"Are you married?" she enquired.

"Not anymore," he said meekly.

"So no wife, no family. All you have now is your career?"

He nodded gloomily, as if reminiscing about the events that led him down the solitary path in life he was now on. Bella sighed and snuggled up against him. With expert hands, he pulled off her beautiful red dress. She sat there on his lap, looking timid as he feasted on her beauty. Ben had plenty of experience with women over the past few years and expertly handled Bella as she let him have his way with her.



"So what happened after you sneaked him out of the ballroom?" he said almost breathlessly as they came to the end of their lovemaking.

"We went to the hotel room, and I fucked his brains out."

"But according to the police, there were no signs of anybody even on the bed?"

She rolled off him and collapsed on the couch--her chest heaving with her labored breathing. "Who said anything about having sex on the bed?"

He lit a cigarette and took a few hits before offering it to her. She accepted it gracefully as she shook her dark hair out of her face.

"What was it that you were discussing?"

She paused before answering. "He started telling me about his political career, about his family, his life, and his ambitions. About how happy and successful he has been up to that point."

She passed the cigarette back to him. Ben took another few drags on it before stubbing it in the glass ashtray. He washed the aftertaste down with a few gulps of whiskey.

"And the next thing I knew, he started babbling. About how he no longer had a sex life with his wife, about how he feared that he might not be selected to contest in the upcoming election. About how some people were trying to kill his political career."

"And?"

"Well, he told me that he had just come back from seeing his doctor."

"And?"

"Well, it wasn't good news," she answered casually as she slipped back into her red dress. She then grabbed the whiskey and took a swig straight from the bottle.

"Which is why he committed suicide?" Ben was slowly getting confused from fatigue and the alcohol.

"Well, at first he was in denial. He told me his doctor must've made a mistake." She took another swig and passed the bottle to him.

"Then suddenly he started crying and apologized to me. He told me that I should go and get tested."

Ben finished buttoning up his shirt, took out his handkerchief, and mopped up the sweat on his brow. "It must be something serious. STIs?"

She stood up and reached for her small handbag that lay discarded on the floor near her feet. "No. He said that he had contracted HIV."

"HIV?"

She nodded, applying lipstick to her full lips as she did so. "And the straw that broke the camel's back was when I told him that he probably got it from me."

Ben's head reeled as he listened to her story. The goddess that he had just had sex with was coolly informing him that she had given her lover HIV. He stared at her in uncomprehending horror, trying to digest what she had just told him.

"And then he started screaming hysterically at me, asking me why I would do this to him. I simply told him that he had been the victim of a political game. I confirmed that someone was indeed trying to kill his career."

She laughed as she looked at Ben's horror-stricken face. "I was paid handsomely to get him out of the picture. By somebody who wanted what he had. You can understand that, can't you?"

"And then you shot him?" his voice came out a little more than a whisper.

She turned away, pulled on a lace glove, and reached into her handbag to produce a gun, a Glock 17. "No honey, I didn't," she said as she placed the gun in his hand. "I just egged him on. I gave him the gun and reminded him that his life was as good as over already."

"You wicked woman!" Ben exclaimed, still struggling to believe what he had just heard. "You tricked me!"

"You weren't the first one to find me irresistible, honey." She laughed melodically. "I've got nothing to lose. I'm dying anyway, and so will you. Soon."

Ben's life flashed before his eyes as Bella bent down and kissed him deeply. "Congratulations, you've hit the jackpot," she whispered softly. Then with a sharp turn, she left the room. Ben stared at the door while his eyes glazed over.