

My Short Stories Volume 4

C. K. Yap , FreeLunch.my , July 2024



3 Tales of Temptation

I wrote these 3 stories as part of a collection of 10 but was unable to continue due to pressing concerns. These were all I had, initially, before I wrote / compiled more into this small book.

Rose

Rose among thorns. The bundle of bones I had become, wrapped in a tight, padded tracksuit in midnight blue, looked on through a frayed balaclava at the tattoo forming on her sleek upper arm.

It wasn't that beauty had died, nor that it had been perfected, but that it was being celebrated in ways purer than it had ever been, even in the time of Esther.

The cyborg artist leaned back in his mesh swivel chair, his thick, veined fingers withdrawing from the needle gauntlets. Unusually, small prune shaped head with granny glasses turned to me and inquired in Cantonese: will that be all?

I looked at “Rose”, spread naked upon the Tyvek lined couch, her lashes caressing her pierced, inked skin. 200 credits passed wireless through a fist to fist punch, like an eye-wipe at an auction. Money these days lingered nowhere.

She got into her sleeveless catsuit of silky chiffon and we made our way out of the box and container city, to the squat of low plastic tables where fake meat noodles were hawked by the corridor exit. The gritty broth wet the corners of my balaclava as I slurped from the cracked China bowl.

You're beautiful, she said -like she always did whenever I took my vegan meal. Then an apologetic girl with acne served hers: a slice of orca flesh, skin, fat and all. It was just an inch or so square, propped up on a bed of GMO alfalfa -at last, healthiness that tasted as good as it was beneficial. The meat was free range, as the food chain had been restored from over fishing and intensive farming. Barring cannibalism, always feed, harvest, and eat the highest, most prolific of God's creations. As such, a square of orca flesh was all the meat she needed for a day.

I never want to see your body again -actually a compliment. The tracksuit I wore kept me from losing water, thus nutrients, kept me at a constant metabolic rate. They had discovered that a form of inner body

stasis dramatically lowered a person's nutrient requirements, provided they were ethnic Chinese. A soft pack of Yuri-nade recycled sunflower wine was in my pocket. We tore two holes in the foil sandwiching an intestinal tubing that coaxed out our salve and mingled it with the nutrients within. I drank greedily of the mixture, of the sweat of her mouth.

What passes for art in a beautiful world, but the capture of pure pleasure? We wandered through the exhibition piazza of mindless clones created for and driven by the fixation on sex, perfect men and women who only lived for a single orgasm, entombed in synthetic nano crystal. She stopped to run her fingers over a slab pocked with their ejaculates, looking into my eyes, gray and weary for sleep, behind the ribbed balaclava.

And the symbiotes we had become, never more apparent.

“Why do eyes never touch -those windows of the soul that share so much, but ears brush against one another in search of neck, and mouths press together in search of permission, fingers locked not from doing harm in pursuit of such, but to milk every last drop of it, selfishly, in forced reciprocation.”

Across the reservoir hung a long thin bridge, made firm by the gravity of the moon. There was a sign at the crossing points of times it was open for each lunar passing.

She stared into my eyes, gray and weary for sleep. And above, the Sea of Tranquility reflected in the midnight blue waters of the dam. The moonlight glinted

in her eye, dancing with the wavelets below and I touched it to mine, not directly but through a single tear released psychosomatically. And the bridge, perfectly motionless for the Moon's gentle glide. Across the sky, stars shone that knew our names. And the waters of the reservoir middled between their banks, as sight met sight in perfect tangent to the gentle curve of walkway. This was beauty -this was art.

Salon

Somehow I had always to wait my turn whenever I went for a haircut. I once had thick locks of burnished copper, streaked underneath with oyster shell highlights. The ladies loved it when I angstily raked my hair through my fingers, head bowed over the lecture

theater folding table. Large glasses slipping down my nose, hunched over in a dark knit cardigan.

Thing was, I never liked scissors snipping away around my face.

The hairdresser may have been pretty. She had a peach shaped head topped with a peroxide French bob that obscured her lashes. And as I was waiting, a buck toothed kid with cross eyes took his seat, helped in by his expectant mother. They spoke in dialect. Swiveling in the padded armchair, his eyes searched for her in the mirror just as mine did from behind my magazine -was she pretty, our hairdresser?

She looked at me, painted eyebrows and mascara glimpsed through her straw colored fringe, and pulled the boy close to her chest. She smiled down on him, his

head nestled between her breasts, slipping freely beneath the salon-issue black tee she wore. And the kid, he must have been 14, heaving as he stiffened uncomfortably in his too-small downtown Parkson-bought shorts, his restrictive white cotton full briefs. It could have been me. I crossed my legs and waited patiently.

Years passed. Then decades, and the unisex salon at New Town, an upstairs shop house which smelt of keratin and ammonia was still there. Advertised by a black sign with a swoosh of hair and shoulder, stood by the stairway. I crept up slowly as my knees ached. Something to do with my mother more than the rheumatic monsoon weather.

Do I have to wait? I asked like pouring sugar into a coffee, hand reaching for a magazine. The hairdresser

was younger than me, and eager to please the day's first batch of customers. A teenage girl with a gummy grin and wide almond eyes was seated in the high-backed leather chair. I want to look like Dua Lipa, she effused, drooling slightly. But the hairdresser motioned her to another seat where a young man with a sharp nose and bicycle helmet blow-dry took care of her.

You can give me whatever you like, I said, trying to lean back into her bosoms but the mechanism of such somehow eluded me. The hairdresser caressed my sparse locks. You're thinning on the left side, she said. You have a lot of new growth that is slow -that's why you lack confidence. You can if you really try.

Apparently my head was her crystal ball. But would she show me some love?

I'm a writer, I told her. Novels. I described my series of books set in the universe of the InterFaith.

And you're unmarried? Her breasts pressed nearer.

Had a girlfriend -once.

She puffed, which smelled of bubble gum and mint thins. I looked at the girl in the other chair being transformed into a singing stage siren. Her tongue in one cheek, barely concealing her smirk. Hands gestured about her head, instructing how she wanted her hair to clump in long waves -really long ones.

And how about you? She sized up my skull shape with long painted fingers, comb over? I told her I knew my head was a good shape. Yes, it's pretty much standard. Maybe take it all off? No, leave a little as streaks, I

suggested. But you're too old. Don't attract unwanted attention. She'd apparently been around the block more than I suspected.

All you need is a trim and a wash.

Look my age, sure.

I thought I saw the buck-toothed kid slip in. He never fixed his teeth but had grown well into his slim merino suit and shiny Doc Marts. He made it and his wire brush hair had suffered none for that.

Here to pick up your daughter?

Ha-ha, yes.

The hairdresser smiled (at the sweet smell of success?). That will be just \$30.

Tears are one thing that shows up clearest in a mirror, especially one so large and close. But then she tipped the chair around-back and my lank locks fell into the small sink basin where a shower drizzled water over my forehead.

You should tell the truth more, she advised, instead of sugar-coating other people's medicine. So she knew -everyone did, maybe.

This is an iron, okay? This, a blow-dryer. Don't be nervous... and this man is my younger brother. Oh! Good, I slipped semi-Freudian. I wouldn't need to tell him to leave us alone.

There was a woman here, I began, with the same hairdo and I... I hesitated to say what I really wanted.

She had a way with younger boys who needed IT. Yours doesn't, even if I were topless.

And as she ironed and blew my hair into ribbon wafts that fell naturally about my "very standard" skull, I began to grow in confidence. I didn't need bosoms to lay in. I didn't need ONE ex-girlfriend. Maybe the poetry I sent her that lost me my side coverage was unwarranted and the meds I took for the sake of Mother, that stopped me rising up the pecking order were a ball and chain of my imagination.

Then the hairdresser began scrunching at my hair energetically, giving it volume. You look better now -almost what I'd call good. I smiled. But that doesn't

mean you get a night job here or my “younger sister” for a snack. Do you pay or play?

Tennis -yes...

Then I have a backhand I need to improve, and you'll buy me a short Lacoste dress which shows everything. We kissed professionally, at least our mouths seemed to connect in the mirror, quite convincingly. She carried on tidying up my ends.

Friends

Saguhathi Chandramatha and I. Best mates. Co-workers down at the docks. He was Sinhalese and I was Sino-Tamil. Strange he never asked for my name, and I never offered it, being to everyone's sensibilities, more appropriate for our relationship.

Transport! Came a shout. My friend looked up from his meal of rice and creamed bitter gourd, fingers dangling over the sulfur paper, moist with gravy and saliva. From our shady perch under the overhang, the sun, glinting off shiny, glossed concrete, off the sides of the docking towers. Come on! He unfolded his legs, touching me on my shoulder.

Dozens of Pondicherri, oiled with NeemKool, heads covered down to their chins in fraying straw dipped in the salt water, loincloths about their hips, rushed towards the descending airship, floating on Bayer Glo Gas. Organic radioactive particles that puffed its lifting bladder four times as effectively as hydrogen, confined in pure electrosynthesized gold-plated graphene.

Saguhathi looked at me. We all appeared the same: strawheads with blown out eye and mouth holes, shadowed dark as a coal pit. But I knew it was him. I was an empath. I silently giggled. I was anonymous, invisible to their hearts, their searching eyes recessed into the damp straw. We lashed down the transport. Monkey-types, A for advanced, and B for leaders, drones came swinging up the lashings, scampering over the taut micro-toughened fabric with Geiger counters in their snout mounts.

Buzz-O. He was called that, Saguhathi pointed him out -a drone bully. He wore the chip-embedded armband around his left bicep. I hadn't much of a clue why AI needed the stick while work itself was supposed to be their carrot. Maybe a scientist could explain. Buzz-O was the Monkey types' pronunciation of "Boss". They gathered round him to receive praise or punishment.

Life was the job, slacking was the rod. Buzz-O laughed from behind the straw that hid his identity as he dislocated a drone's arm limb, its mouth flashing static.

One day, Buzz handed me his armband while he took a dump. Don't put it on, he said as if to say: now fukk off, small fry. I looked at the control strip, then at the scars, new welds on the monkeys. Our hearts mingled as one troop. The drones bludgeoned Buzz to death in the latrine as I looked on, anonymous. 3 soulless holes in a helmet of dry yellow grass. The control band on my bicep.

Now it soon happened that a most precious cargo was to dock. We were notified by the Whiteskins not to fail. It was the arrival of Lois, their fallen princess. She was going into exile in the subcontinent. To one of the summer palaces of the former Raj to birth her

illegitimate male child. Or so Saguhathi told me. He patted me on the shoulder, touched my armband. You're the bully now, he said -go command the reception.

Princess Lois was as beautiful as a camel in a burkha. Dressed in white linen, layers of it hid her bulging womb and her cheek, a sliver of silver that glinted like the crescent moon after Muharram, her quizzical eye like a pearl nested in an oyster. I took off my hat. I knew she was smiling behind the thick sun-reflecting concealer and her hands had gone down below her bulging belly, beneath the gossamer fabric. I let fall my loincloth as she fingered my ripped muscles.

Being an empath, I was easily able to hide and haze over the drone Monkey AI sensors that reported to the colonial masters. Lois touched my tender parts, my seed laden figs on their branch. And we made love in

her stateroom as everyone waited in the afternoon sun. Later, another Pondicherry was savagely whipped for it. Someone I had randomly triggered through the troop's circuitry.

Some weeks passed, and Saguhathi fell very ill. He wouldn't take off his straw, just lying below the overhang, unfinished food by his side, swarming with bottle flies.

Has anyone any drugs? I asked. Shakes of straw-covered heads. Several transports apart, there were usually secret consignments of contraband. I knew. I poked into the cargo hold, in between the crates, commanding 2 monkeys -an A and B-type. We found the hashish through machine-learning and as I handled the vacuum shrink-wrapped fermented snuff, I knew I would be found out at the loading bay.

So I started a commotion on the docks by yelling "Radiation!". Everyone struggled to get the cargo off the compromised transport and I made sure everyone's nails caught some of the marijuana. There was no charge.

Saguhathi sucked on my fingers like a newborn on its mother's first-milks. They were sore for days from his desperate, careless teeth.

My friend, he steadied on my shoulder as we walked slowly along the dock during the evening cool of downtime, how can I repay you? He peeled off his straw, and there were three lashes across his face, now healed from the God-sent hashish.

He didn't have to say anything. I wept inwardly over my earlier indiscretion. You're the bully he said, tapping my chest as he dropped off the pier side to dip in the ocean. I heard a whisper, maybe it was just a thought:

Someday you'll do the same for me, Friend.

Indeed it was the same month that the Whiteskins returned with the Princess and her premature newborn. Point out the one who did it, Boss, said the Lord. But I wouldn't. You'll be severely lashed then, and I was bound up, my arm band stripped off my bicep. Replay the spool, Lead B, commanded the technician in chief.

The records were incriminating. I was to be flogged and burnt with acid all over my body, my soft parts. Lois looked on impassive, through her silver make-up. The pearl missing from her eye. Later, I was informed

that it had been gouged out during days of torture after which she gave me up. I had not banked on that.

I was scourged, bound and thrown into a pit dug in the red clay, filled with flesh-burning acidic loam. The rest of the Pondicherry started shoveling the slow-dissolving peat mix over my body and when I was buried to the neck, the Lords and their entourage turned sharply, departing in their mechanized convoy.

Saguhathi knelt by the side of the pit, weeping. The control band on his bicep. He began to dig with his hands, even as they wore ever more sore, wrestling away the B-types with their tasing bites. He dug for half an hour to free his friend.

3 Tales of Mind Games

These 3 stories came to me one night, as I considered our special relationship with animals and the Biblical warnings not to destroy the balance of nature, down the generations, the small evolutionary steps a species may take alongside another. Sometimes man is the hunter, sometimes the hunted, whether the creature be very big or very small.

Hunter

What is righteousness but the way one's desire fits into the context of fairness. It was something the master told her as he presented the 3 fighters with their weapons.

What is imagination but the product of fair desires? And it is imagination that makes a champion, a true hunter.

It was safe on the floating city in the clouds. On the world below, insects had taken over, quickly evolving into ever more successful and ingenious forms under the reigning King Centipede.

Their reactions were quicker than a man's and their minds, more righteous. As simplicity of their distributed brains and their primal, purely predatory builds dictated.

Shifu meditated kneeling in the glass enclosed prayer hall. His eyes closed and face looking clear ahead through them. Hands on his knees. His head devoid of a single hair.

Master, who is the "Son of Beast"?

He is your enemy, the champion of the insects.

But you trained him, gave him a weapon...

Then what would you have done, Stacy?

She turned, and it was Park and the Beast spawn looking down on shifu. I know what all of you are waiting for, he said.

The Son of Beast flicked open his curved spinning blades. Their titanium alloy mechanical parts, glinting gold in the light from the setting sun. Park and Stacy stepped away as the high insect hybrid circumvented their master.

Jonathan, it's not time, said Park from the far wall. His chain-winding nunchucks rattled, coiling-uncoiling by his thigh. It was a formidable weapon, one that could trap and wrench off an insect limb from safe

distance. The Beast champion folded his blades. He only had 2 arms.

Fair, he said, through mandible-like lips. He bowed, looking long at Stacy.

If you kill our King, I get vengeance on Shifu, he told her in the privacy of the changing room. And you for my mate. The coarse bristles on his red chitinous skin which contained his DNA prickling her back.

The drop lander detached from the city bottom, spinning like a winged seed off a Samara tree. Park and Stacy were unaware that this was to be a one way trip. Except to be told that their weapons must not fall into the hands of the insect engineers. Technology that was sensitive would be rigged to nano dissolve and / or explode.

I suppose you're ready, said Park.

As ever, Stacy replied.

We never got to see your weapon.

She turned to look at him and their padded chitin armor clacked together. It's nothing you expect.

Or are you in love with Jonathan already?

She didn't reply.

Clicking of his chain nunchucks.

The centipede temple was deep within a network of caves which opened to a clearing in the forest where

the insect monarchy foraged, where the champions would supposedly be airlifted. It was a lie that anything under the Beast system would be fetched up to the human realms above.

Inside or outside? The call to duel resonated through Park's brain like a pop from a record.

The insect parts engineered from Beast Son gave him preternatural vision in the labyrinth's gloom. Beast had possibly not suspected that sending the humans a son did nothing for their technology while the insect horde had everything to gain.

He could hear a rushing, like paper being flicked through. Park stretched out his weapon, spiral chains flailing about his body. He could hear and feel chicken-bone snaps from around him but the monster had a

hundred arms -regrow-able arms. Weary and spattered with bug juice, he collapsed back against the cave wall. It was the Centipede King's turn. What weapons had the insects possessed that were fair fighting?

You're weak, human champion -it seemed to come from many directions. Then a slithering and whimpering sound. The king was wounded, perhaps mortally. Park gathered the last ounces of his strength and charged. Instantly, Stacy lit up the cave with a strobe of glow worm light. Her palms pulsing.

He shuddered and went weak, the human champion, beholding the repulsive form of the King. Thanks, Stacy were his last words.

Fairness means you get to choose if you want the darkness. The King approached Stacy. Her palms glowed soft and steady as she spread for him.

Do you know your mother?

No, master.

She was the insect, Shifu hissed.

I thought...

Yes, she invaded us and we -I killed her.

Son of Beast whimpered.

Your mate, Stacy was given them in return.

So let out your blades.

Shifu sat meditating in knelt form as the hybrid's juices began to coagulate in his half-human veins.

I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do...

Though his reflexes had slowed, his blades made up for it, pushing Shifu up against the wall who fought only with his hands.

Then the master drew a stubby wand from his robe. He pointed it at Beast Son who flinched. The glass wall they leaned on opened like a camera shutter and they fell into the sky.

Stacy bred with the Centipede King. His spiny body perforating her delicate human skin, infusing it with his

DNA. He took the egg she coaxed out, from her delicate parts and placed it into his own. Soon they would invade -this time, perhaps more successfully.

Then “boom” an explosion ripped through the King’s bowels. Pieces of Park’s chain weapon clattered against the cave wall where she was lying. Then the head of her team mate, rolling disembodied towards her feet. She tucked it between her arms and rushed out into the clearing, towards the seed copter. The perpetual motion coiled chain driving the wings and lower weight (minus Park’s body and their armor) enabled them to lift off. She placed a clamp on his main artery and smeared bio-gel onto his neck. He smiled back, **** I always knew ****

What happened to you?

Nothing, she said, wary of telling his head of the DNA merge, nothing you worry about. Just recover soon. She planted a kiss on his forehead.

It was some time before they convened in the prayer hall only to find Shifu missing. Park climbed out of the open window. Down to a drop platform, semi-shielded from the high altitude winds. There was Shifu, unharmed if a little bit weak from his imposed fast of 4 days. He didn't tell master that he had made Stacy pregnant. His regrowth present.

Stacy looked out over the vast expanse of cloud which rapidly rushed apart, and the mountains came at her, their snowy peaks glinting in the sun. She heaved a breath as the forested foothills gave way to cave, darkness, her vision tunneling through the labyrinth, to where the insects bred. To where a line of Kings and

their DNA had ended. But they had not banked on the body of the Son of Beast. Somewhere in the woods, it lay, twitching to the dung beetles, the maggots, its human-mixed DNA flooding their insect senses with promise.

Wolf

And the lion stood up -on its hind legs, and its wings fell off. It was given the heart of a man -a MAN!
Pastor Omer searched the small Bible study group.

What does this mean? He asked the gathering.

Outside, there were wolf howls as it was night lit by a moon waxing full. Omer put on his anorak and fetched his cane left by the door. The hand that held it open for him belonged to Jimmy O'Donal. I know what it means,

Pastor, he spoke in a soft voice. There are some here who do NOT.

And you're suggesting...?

Jimmy's face turned stony and stiff so Omer looked away. Fine, he whispered to himself. And the door closed behind him.

The November winter night air prickled his nose, cheeks and ears. He fumbled for the keys to the SUV when he heard a cry from far away. The keys dropped and were scrunched into the snow by his shaking feet.

Who are you? Are you okay? The Pastor yelled. The moonlight casting the landscape in a dim silver light. Deep in the shadows, the voice cried again and grunts could be heard. Omer advanced with his cane held out.

The pastor never found out.

Omer woke up in a hospital emergency hallway. You have a concussion, said a nurse. Your dog helped bring you in.

I don't own a dog...

Well, she's waiting outside in the cold. We've been feeding her.

Chills ran down Omer's spine.

****** I know what it means, Pastor. Help... **HELP** ******

How did I get here, he asked, forcing his brain sober, exactly, I mean?

We think she dragged you, by your cuff. He looked at his anorak bunched up at the foot of the bed and it was ragged on one sleeve. I can get up, I can walk. I have to see this 'dog'.

But the nurse held him down. Sir, you have a concussion.

Jimmy O'Donal paced nervously by the bay windows. If he doesn't show I'm notifying the police.

Maybe you should, said little Claire, a grandmother with bifocals and a Bible open in her lap.

There were wolves that night, said Aboo., we all heard them. But as usual he wasn't taken seriously, being a visiting apologetic Moslem.

Wolves got him, OMG. Jeffy held his cheeks in genuine terror.

*** Shaddap, you gay shite ***

I say we begin with Daniel 7 again, offered Alexa, listening from Amazon HQ. Or does anyone care to read a whodunnit?

Jimmy stared at the Echo Dot, its LEDs rippling along to the comforting female AI's voice. He wanted to ask it some questions, but somebody might be a wolf, -in sheep's clothing.

I'm clean, he said, am I?

Yes, so far, said Alexa, YOU are.

The wolf indeed looked like a large dog breed. In fact they asked him what she was, but he couldn't say. Isn't this a wolf? He thought, reaching out to pet the canine's head. It licked his palm and he couldn't help but smile.

A detective in plain clothes approached Omer. It was snowing and he had just come in out of the cold. Sir, you're under suspicion for rape and murder. Do not leave this hospital room.

What -you say I'M a criminal?

No, you're our number one suspect. Fill him in but don't tell him. He passed the buck to his rookie. She was kind, with an English accent.

Whatever you say can be used against you. But your hit head doesn't probably know it. What you might have done, earlier in the night. Where were you between 8pm to 10pm?

I... I'm a pastor, for Heaven's sake. I was at my regular Bible study.

Did anyone go out into the woods? Anyone you know?

I did.

Sir, I'm going to have to put you under house arrest. Do not give him his mobile or computer equipment that can reach out.

Omer sat at the emergency entrance with his dog / wolf -whatever it was. He was handed warm tomato soup which he sipped. It tasted creamy. We'll get to the bottom of this heinous crime if it takes all night, he overheard the detectives talking somewhere inside.

Wolf howls could be heard from afar. Omer's dog, lying in the warmth of the hospital however, apparently did not care.

Jimmy drove the Jeep while Alexa controlled the swiveling halogen lights on the kangaroo bar. Claire, Aboo and Jeffy stared out the windows into the moonlit night. It looked like soot rubbed onto silver.

We're nearing a police line, said Alexa suddenly. Do not cross, do not cross, do not...

Fukk, the Jeep's been deactivated.

What, Jimmy, whadda you mean?

Alexa, restart the Jeep.

There was no reply but static and some Morse-like blips.

Jeffy grabbed a crowbar while Jimmy held the Dolphin flashlight. Aboo followed behind, hand on his back while Claire stayed in contact with her friends who knew the local law enforcement through her WhatsApp.

They stopped at a clearing in the woods. Yellow tape wrapped around tree trunks. Jimmy directed the Dolphin's strong LED beam across the area.

There was blood on the snow, lots of it, and glints like cat's eyes all around them. He stumbled back. Alexa, activate the Jeep, he screamed into his smart watch. Do it now!

Omer sat at the entrance to the hospital emergency, feeling dejected. He looked at the dog and it looked back at him.

Katherine sat down beside the old man. I'm visiting from the UK that's probably why you think I sound different. In the UK we don't carry a gun. She hoped to console him. Pastor Omer, the house address you gave us is empty.

They must have gone looking for me -in the woods. Jimmy -he's a strong leader. He'd go looking. Katherine took notes.

Jeffy lashed out with the crowbar as Alexa turned on the halogens on his command. Dozens of wolves attacked and were beaten off.

**** Not bad, Jeffy -you shite ****

In Aboo's hand, a bloody dagger. Jimmy lay prone on the snow, his face buried in it. I hope you have a plan, brother. Go kill Claire before she WhatsApps it. Fukk, Alexa, turn off the WhatsApp inside!

Omer and the detectives showed up at the fracas. Sirens and lights blaring.

We masturbated in the woods, that's all, said Aboo, me and Jeffy.

The kid who saw you, then. You did her in?

Jeffy took her back home...

I don't think so.

Sir, I'm placing both of you under arrest.

Pastor did you know this?

Tears filled Omer's eyes.

The bodies of Jimmy, Claire, and the little girl (earlier) were taken to the morgue. The detectives left. And Omer was alone with his dog / wolf. He was aware of the others -her pack, looking on. They had suffered casualties.

He asked, sniggering, do you all want Burger King? 112 whopper meals coming right up, Alexa sounded a little more cheerful, can I take your card?

Lizards

Giovanni, the man in the dark silk shirt and python skin vest who vaped weed-tinted Flowers & Tea™, said, SANTA MARIA. Another one!

Sonno'ma Beech, Johnny. Put the laser down and come to bed.

He dropped the 'zappo, stripped and climbed in with his girlfriend. Now, don't you be going trans on me, Baby. She was considering ending their relationship over its unfulfilling love-making but needed an excuse.

They say the best excuses are seen and not heard.

Hey, Dolly -I should write that down? ** laughter **, they rolled apart. Johnny was short and balding but with a build like an ape. His girlfriend leaned somewhat petite and supermodel thin. She had long curly hair and puffy lips always matte pink.

But before we go any further. Dolly did turn trans eventually and “he” thoroughly enjoyed it. They all came to Johnny’s funeral but nobody cried. Jesus reached down, gravitationally raising his soul against the magnetic pull of the Earth’s core on its sarcophagus (being the astral form).

Johnny watched the satellite with Dolly in his arms. News of the Presidential candidate shot through his ear. They snuggled more into one another as forensic

Al replayed bullet trajectories, showing how close they'd come to losing the prominent businessman cum patriot-crusader.

Tsk... tsk-tsk-tsk...

It echoed from the bathroom. Another DAMN gecko. Dolly checked in at the transformation clinic. There was a pamphlet that detailed the science of gender changing. It went like this:

DNA is a fatty acid chain. Just like the brim of a hat is wavy, the binding base-pairs of DNA cause it to roll up on its own and form a chain. The chain strains against itself, binding itself into a squiggle we call a chromosome.

Humans have a fused chromosome (no. 2). This happened as 2 ape chromosomes were mutated to the extent they were able to coil into one as they had no base-pair conflicts.

Not only did mutated DNA recombine perfectly to become a single large chromosome, it needed to -as the mutation had to be transmittable by sex.

Adam's XY and Eve's XX sex chromosomes contain the zipped up instructions to make all 23 chromosome pairs in our cells. But the X is much larger than the Y. And further, there are no YY human beings.

Eve, having XX, could not therefore have pre-existed Adam, just as YY did not. Therefore her X chromosome had to be augmented with additional DNA of origins unknown.

Today, at Exo Transforms, we have reverse engineered those augmentations from profiling of the fused chromosome no. 2 and we are pleased to offer you the choice of becoming male or female no matter what your birth sex!

Johnny and Dolly read the pamphlet in bed together. They would share love one last time. They were rocking the bed, that's when the 'zappo left carelessly on the sheets shot Johnny through the eye. He screamed, as Dolly orgasmed, then collapsed from what was later diagnosed a heart attack.

The funeral was solemn. Dolly, now called Dale, looked down on her former partner, lying serene beneath the glass top. He had his favorite silk shirt on, with his

python skin vest. Clasped in his hands, an icon of the blessed Virgin.

**** SANTA MARIA, Gianni! ****

The laser had stabbed deep into his brain. He never stood a chance. Even the geckos were more low-key that day, looking on, clucking faintly, from behind the chandelier. Why? Maybe that was all their simple minds felt. And as the service drew to a close, and the people shuffled out, Johnny was lowered his full 6-feet under.

Dale went on to become the one-eared President's running mate. You're full trans aren't you?

Yes sir, said Dale.

The President smiled. Exo are the best. Just had myself cloned by their lab. Aren't you gonna ask me?

What, sir?

How I'll make the jump. The jump, Dale is like flushing the loo on your brain. Know what happens? All the shit we accumulated gets washed into the new brain. And what's in the new brain to begin with? Tsk... tsk-tsk-tsk...

Maybe God was against clones and transforms. In any case Johnny had hated the sound. But it was the same sound he/she had heard during the gene supplanting sleep.

Now that we've shared, Dale, confided the President, tugging on his torn earlobe. I'm gonna have to come outta the closet myself to ball you...

They leaned back in their chairs, laughing.

4 Weddings in 3 Acts

4 couples, very different, are gathered to marry -or will they, as a sinister force picks away at their sanity? I chanced upon this tale while considering an older, over-ambitious (poetic) attempt at a similar topic.

Mirror

The night before the wedding, she had a vision of glass. A mirror crashing to the floor, splintering around her bare feet. By the far wall, an old woman crouched,

gasping as she brought forth child, her gaping vulva slick with wet that smelt like rust and raw, peeled potatoes.

**** Jessica... Jessica l'Serre... ****

Jessica! He shook her aware as she was turning white and cold.

No reason to withhold the obvious. she was guilty. Formerly in adult entertainment, viciously tortured by a jealous fan, leaving her with dozens of knife and burn scars all over her face and body, she had had every type of man between her legs. Now, after the untimely death of her protesting mother in law, nobody let on she was complicit in, could it mean payback?

MunFatt, held his foreign wife-to-be tight, massaging color back into her scourged skin. Why he loved his “Pretty Woman”? She had proven smart, decisive, and would bring fortune to his legitimate Mainland operation. Adopt the ugly mutt, never mind it were desperate and snapped at you.

My mother was OLD, Jessica, he left her on the sheets to gaze out the window of the seaside mansion the four couples had rented for a night and a day.

She knew he understood.

They were not the only ones getting married that day nor without problems of their own.

In just hours she would be Maimunah Sabahar (Munah Sabhar for short). Her husband, a wealthy Arab spice

and fragrance exporter from Morocco. Although both were Moslems, Munah was deeply into the study of Islam while he was a liberal. He had to be, to trade in the West.

Earlier they had fought over his making her wear a tennis dress down at the courts. He held it out now in front of her. Just slip into this, he said. Sparkling grape juice sat on a linen napkin over a silver tray. We can have some sex before the others!

But she pulled her hijab lower, over her begging breasts and pouted at him.

You know how to turn an Arab man on! He declared.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was security.

Boss, Ma'am, did you spot a suited man running through the corridor earlier? Or outside by the pool just now?

Not at all, very sorry. Me and the wife were getting into the mood.

Then we'll leave you to it.

Dotted through the past 6 hours there had been talk of a stranger with an almost featureless face, in a tuxedo, wandering the house and grounds. He wasn't a monster, just someone wearing diffusing webbing to avoid recognition. Was he from one of the couples? Apparently he had been saying upsetting things to a number of people.

Luis and Paloma were already ahead of the rest. He moved over her as she widened compliantly, but otherwise they felt dead to one another. Two more tanned and gym-fit machines on the baby-making assembly line.

Luis, tell me the truth.

No. I will tell you what IS the truth. It is not believing in fantasy made up by others. None of us have reason to be the faceless, gossiping phantom, Paloma -for the very last time.

You were there, upsetting Mizzy and Sheldon. They heard your Latin accent.

No, I was not. Can't any reasonably intelligent person pull off such a stereotypical accent?

Relenting, she untensed, her fingers kneaded his taut perineum, between his anus and his testicles, setting it pulsing. She dilated her cervix to swallow the now irrevocable surge and spew from his erection.

Mizzy and Sheldon were from two different worlds. She was half Black Jamaican, half White Jamaican, while he was a select shade of Straits-Settlement Chinese ochre.

What did this phantom tell you about me? He asked, frowning good naturedly.

She turned away from his logician, face-reading eyes.

Because, he told me something upsetting as well. I trust you, I just want to find out why.

Someone here is not who she seems and her husband knows it. That's all I'll say.

Why?

Why not?

Is it you, then?

If it were, then what have YOU done wrong?

Oh so YOU'VE done wrong and I've done the same?

Hallelujah! Sheldon threw his hands up in the air. So much for being a genius. You get screwed by your own logic, apparently.

I'm calling Luis and Paloma's suite. We'll get to the bottom of this mystery nuisance.

They gathered in the great hall, adjunct which centered around a fireplace and a huge portrait of Saint John of Malaya, builder of the Mansion, beatified by Pope Francis. Around the painting were ornate glass mirrors, all of them cracked in the turbulent months of the Great Apostasy.

12 large nails were embedded in the hard floor right under the gaze of St. John, one for each witch who slayed herself before the image of the prophet rather than serve the Beast.

"Just as in the days of Noah, so it shall be at the coming of the Son of Man. Eating, drinking, marrying -even unto the very end..."

I feel cold, said Jessica.

Jessica l'Serre -you're French... is your name a play on what your parents did or forgot to do, if I may ask?

Mizzy squealed a little. Her husband spotted it first.

MunFatt interceded, she was named for her grandmother on her mother's side, Jessica. Nobody made "just a careless error".

MunFatt, said Luis, I put it to you you've been making the rounds?

If you're referring to the man in the face diffusing webbing, no -I am not him.

Has he been talking to you?

Beads of sweat formed on MunFatt's brow as Jessica looked away.

Paloma made a point she would face him down in private.

Meanwhile the Moslem couple, Maimunah and Sabahar looked on silently. Munah's right fist was clenched hard but nobody noticed.

They decided to spend the day in the adjunct, all of them, while security hunted the elusive chain blackmailer. They looked at MunFatt -their prime suspect. Sheldon asked his surname.

Boone, came the reply, MunFatt Boone. The Straits Chinese did not flinch. What does it mean -that you're to be beneficial to East-West relations? Manfa'at / Boon...

Sheldon, be quiet.

Sorry everyone, the logician apologized, averting his eyes, but you both have pun names. Say, you hired the faceless man...!

For fukk's sake, he hired himself.

So you knew...

There's nothing I can do about him whoever he might be, whether I know him or not.

Mizzy finally broke her silence. Jessica and you are in trouble.

No we're not, replied Jessica.

But the scars on your body, the burns, you were a porn star, Munah spoke up.

Who told you that? Said Sabahar.

Whoever he is, Sabhar, he's very clever at prospecting but he's not found the key to turn on us yet, whatever his motive. It may even be for good. Jessica, tell us what happened to you.

Over a lunch of champagne (non-alcoholic) and freshly-harvested local clams on pasta, flambe, Jessica told her story.

She treated me like a dog and tried to push me off MunFatt. We were in love but she couldn't accept it. She would have rather shamed me to suicide. I sensed it though I gave her my best.

Who?

MunFatt's mother, Q'an.

Madam Q'an. Didn't she fall in a public loo and die of shock?

I was in the loo as well, and I confronted her over her discriminating, loveless heart. We wrestled for my wedding gift: the family's brocade satchel. One thing led to another. She fell and didn't get up. MunFatt doesn't blame me -she was old.

Is that all that's been going round?

Mizzy was all smiles. He was using your secret to open all of us up, get under our skin. A form of voodoo. He made me doubt Sheldon's judgment, who is usually correct.

He's a retard vigilante attached to MunFatt's family probably. We're not safe yet, said Sheldon, profiling the masked man.

Sabahar pulled Munah closer. You see, something like this might not end prettily. There was hushed silence.

From now on, we go about together, all of us, said Paloma.

The best laid schemes of mice and men, goes the saying. For a storm started brewing up the coast, driving gale force winds at the mansion. Groundsmen boarded up windows. Then the power went out just as they had finished dinner, and so were left in the dark.

Paloma and Jessica had pocket torches. The rest used their mobiles for light. It was very dark as the windows were all sealed.

Luis tried the door to the hall which opened as it should. Paloma shone her torch. We need to get some candles and our laptops, she said. The rest of you stay in the Saint's Room and put a chair up under the door handles. We'll knock 3 times, then 4 when we return, she whispered.

Then she, Luis and Jessica found their way upstairs.

Even as the storm howled and rattled, they were not completely alone. The security team of 4 had holed in the kitchen with the kitchen crew numbering 5, believing the mansion secured. Upstairs, in the housekeeping pantry, there were 3 cleaners.

Securing a box of emergency candles and matches, Paloma led them to her suite where they fetched Luis' laptop. Then they went to Jessica and MunFatt's to get her diary. She had hand-written entries every day since she and MunFatt met.

But a haze seemed over their thoughts as the 3 friends navigated the eccentrically linked corridors of St. John's mansion and soon, by candle light, they were disoriented, not to say lost.

Something brushed Paloma's bare shoulder and she gasped. Luis turned, raising his candle only to find himself alone. Jessica! Paloma! He called out, but there were no replies. Where am I?

Down in the adjunct, the 5 left had started up the fireplace. It was some comfort to be around a fire. Maybe a primal instinct -that it would ward off wild animals.

MunFatt and Sheldon said they would pop across the hall to the kitchen to get some hot chocolate and marshmallows to toast while they waited. Mizzy checked her mobile. They had been gone 12 minutes. Then 24.

Shivering, Munah and Sabahar jammed a chair against the door handles. They WhatsApped the missing 5 but

got no replies. Mizzy broke down with a fever. Who is this phantom? What was the source of his power? Was he acting alone?

By some chance, Jessica and Paloma found one another. And Luis found MunFatt and Sheldon. In the Prophet's Room, Munah, Sabahar, and Mizzy huddled on the couch for comfort.

And they began to confide in one another.

Are you a Moslem? Asked Munah.

My father is.

And your mother?

She's Christian.

So what do you believe in?

Sheldon's religion -we're Episcopalian. We believe God accepts all who love Him.

See, Munah? Said Sabahar.

She clasped her husband's hands and kissed them. He laid them on her head and kissed her hair.

Mizzy looked on, a little envious. She and Sheldon had no such customs. She checked her mobile and found a message from her husband. He was safe, talking with MunFatt and Luis, in the kitchen.

So you're a logician -how much does that make? I mean, we're all wealthy enough to afford this wedding package.

Ha-ha, Sheldon laughed, I make nothing but chicken feed. I work for the government Straits Authority. Involves a lot of traveling and consulting, meeting world leaders. I get paid for that only, not for affording luxuries like Mizzy can. It's all for transparency and the so-called belief in the correlation between purity and intelligence.

MunFatt looked at the Patek minute repeater on his wrist, sucking his teeth.

Cost a bomb, said Luis. What do you do?

Loading-unloading. Cargo loading. He didn't want to elaborate, which was as usual for him, suspicious. Long pause.

Ever needed drugs? He retorted suddenly. Opioids, weed, nicotine patches, premium COVID antibiotics, anti-osteoporosis jabs, cocaine inhalers... MunFatt thumped his chest, I got you covered. Don't tell the world.

That leaves me, said Luis. I'm an artist, same as Paloma. She does the design and I color in between her lines. ** Laughter **. The 3 men patted one another on their backs forgetting the chocolate and marshmallows.

Upstairs, Paloma and Jessica had found something -a secret chamber behind a wall panel in Jess's walk-in

closet. It contained spy equipment and tuxedos. Also mannequin heads covered in the gauzy diffusing web that looked like a second skin. The phantom! She drew a breath. There was a button under a shelf ledge and she pressed it. The closet closed and descended slowly.

What are you doing?

We've found the phantom's lair, she whispered.

And I suppose you intend to give me up? Knowing what I've done?

Of course not!

Paloma, for God's sake, have you NO fear?

Gowns

It was 3am in the morning on their wedding day. The 4 couples reunited safe and sound. Even the storm stopped. The mansion staff began taking down the boards over the windows and clearing the grounds of wind-borne litter. But the lovers would have scant few hours of sleep before the ceremony began.

Breakfast was hurried, not to say manic, but that it went at a crisp clip. And of talk of such trivial matters, why not reveal instead what Paloma and Jessica found the previous night -The secret they kept from the others?

The phantom was the St. John of Malaya -yes, the architect of Common Money which supplanted the Beast Mark. The founder of the Overcome Movement

responsible for turning back the sympathetic sorcery that had mired much of the Christian world. But Saint John -hadn't he lost his right hand to rot -a curse of witches that progressively consumed him? What might he look like behind the webbing? And most importantly, what did he want with the to-be-weds?

He's St. John -the phantom, I mean.

How do you know, Paloma?

Jessica's closet -there was a secret compartment left unlocked. He must have been careless due to the storm last night. We got into his lair through an elevator.

What did you see?

Nothing much -it was pitch dark. But there was a lot of flickering electronics wired up to maybe surveillance equipment, God only knows...

Was he there?

The phantom?

Yes, St. John -without the mask.

Of course not, Jessica interjected. We had a quick look around and left as soon as we could. MunFatt, we've been spied on. We need to go back, get the "evidence" erased after we tie up the mad saint and...

Jessica, what have you got to hide? Does MunFatt love you like a cactus?

Sheldon! Admonished Mizzy.

Hush, dear. Jessica, you and MunFatt had better keep your noses clean as there will be an investigation.

Munah broke free of Sabahar and closed the argument: MunFatt, look at your wife, soon there will be 13 nails before the fireplace!

But there was no time to smooth down ruffled feathers. The men and ladies separated to opposite ends of the mansion to dress for the wedding as the guests began to arrive.

The ladies stripped in their green room. All eyes were on Jessica. The criss-cross scars on her skin and welts where she had been singed.

You could fit a comic Luis and I draw -a hero.

You are already one, said Munah.

Mizzy looked on, unsure of what to make of it. Paloma, you seem to have a scar yourself.

She lifted her left breast. It's where they inserted my artificial heart.

OH, I'm so sorry.

Don't be. And don't tell Luis. To him it's just "cosmetic reconstruction surgery". There are many things I don't feel naturally about anymore.

Tears wet her cheeks and Jessica hugged her. Everyone knows what I can't say I feel and nobody

knows what you're dying to tell but don't have anymore.

When they finished making up, they noticed Munah and Mizzy were gone.

Munah, stop.

No, Mizzy, this has to end here. St. John Phantom or not. Sabhar is a good man. We have a lot of friends, money -we can...

We can what?

Munah's shoulders slumped. She didn't turn around. I've had a man before. I thought Jessica would be the foil, then Paloma and Luis's incessant trysts but now I

have to tell my husband -I'm not a virgin. He's a kind man but will he understand?

Mizzy put her hand on her shoulder and turned her around. Munah, she said, Sheldon and I have AIDS. It came from me. But expensive drugs keep everything under control. We can even have children.

Suffice to say, the banquet of Saint John of Malaya had served its first course. And indeed the guests were partaking of his hors d'œuvres and fancy mocktails. There was a string quartet playing Vivaldi in the hall and now it was time for the men to dress up.

Luis tugged on his striking blue bow. He had insisted on wearing one while the others had on silk ties in Tiffany and silver stripes. There was fine sweat on MunFatt's brow.

Nerves? Asked Sheldon.

Not everyday everyone sees your wife looking like a circus act gone wrong.

I'm sure she'll put on concealer.

Luis, most of those scars are literally Halloween quality. But don't apologize. I've heard the makeup argument too many times.

Luis disappeared behind the washroom curtain.

He reappeared with his blue bow undone which raised Sheldon's eyebrow. But the government genius said nothing. It was a hot muggy tropical day, after all, and an AIDS carrier should rather keep a low profile before

all the scrutiny. Maybe he was selfish -he corrected himself if only mentally.

But it was Sabhar who spoke up. Luis, you ready, my man?

Sure, came the familiar thick Latin accent.

He fingered the Arab jambiya dagger slotted in his waistband. Luis if you're not feeling okay, let us know. He nodded.

Of course, the real Luis was a hostage in the phantom's lair. Help me -help! His voice drowned by the noise-canceling plexiglass cube under the Mansion.

The couples mingled with their guests in the hours before the exchange of vows. It was an informal wedding. Even the priest had some wine.

Munah, Sabhar pulled his wife near, Sheldon is not his usual ebullient self. MunFatt sweated again, and Luis -he's already been taken over! By a jampi, he whispered, hand on his dagger.

Sabhar, whatever you do, dear, don't kill anyone. Her eyes were bleeding on the inside. What did they all know -the men, -by now.

Old St. John's plan was simple and was going well. He had the women where he wanted them, and now had infiltrated the men. Soon, the storm, bringing the witches, would return to destroy him. But if all went right, he would have a new heart, break the curse which

had left him trapped in his own mansion, an outcast the past 33 years.

The hors d'œuvre he sampled tasted like cigarette ash to his tongue but his lips creased a smile behind the convincingly sculpted web cast off Luis' face. He kept his right white glove on as he shook hands woodenly. Luis! Came a cry of joy, over here!

Papa, Mamma, said Luis / phantom, hugging them both.

Bouquet

Luis, LUIS. ** fingers snapping **

What...?

Luis, said his doppelgänger staring at him through the plexiglass. I trust you've rested well. Earlier today, I was YOU. ** Thick Latin accent ** Luis, Jessica is pregnant. She confided in me.

Shivers went up Luis spine. I suppose you've told Paloma? Does MunFatt know?

The phantom turned away. There are those who would milk people like the lot of you -for your money. But I'm beyond petty blackmail. Nor am I a self-styled avenger of justice.

Then what ARE you?

Luis felt himself being dragged. A webbing put over his face. He was unsure where he was except that he was

beside Jessica. Her scarred body, plump and fizzing with passion.

Phantom! She exclaimed, half sedated. St. John, -save me! Her gown was ripped down the front and her thighs slick with wet that smelt like raw potatoes and rust.

St. John had had his way with her. But her calloused heart remained secluded from him.

Luis was aware that the others had burst in, standing around the adjunct door behind him, blocking the way out. He felt for his hands -and realized he was gripping an old revolver beneath the throw cushions.

Sabhar drew his jambiya.

Secretly, Munah hoped her man would be hurt, guilty, even as she was ashamed of herself for his sake. Be brave, Sabhar, she prayed for, as well as against him.

A smirk came over Sheldon's face.

Unmask the phantom! He commanded.

Paloma stepped up and gripped the webbing off Luis' head with both hands. A shot rang out (spontaneously?). MunFatt slumped hard against the wall, a rose of red blooming through his whites, through the hole above his suit pocket.

Luis! Paloma exclaimed. I thought so. Jessica rushed to MunFatt who was breathing heavily. He groaned, the bullet had went clean out his back. I should have known, he gibbered weakly.

Then, Sabhar's dagger flashed. It was enough madness to warrant this fatwah.

But Paloma threw herself across her husband-to-be and the jambiya pierced HER heart. Rubbery self-healing elastomer closed around the blade sticking high from her chest. She pulled it out with a grunt, clean of blood.

Sabhar recoiled in horror as Munah rushed to hold him. She would tell him her secret, of her youthful indiscretion, once all this was over.

But first they would have to brave the hurricane. For a saint, John of Malaya was somewhat questionable a character. The apostate revolutionaries who invaded his mansion, smashed his face roundabout against the

ornate mirrors and raped him, crushing the revolver out of his right hand. He had glimpsed a light in the distance. He waded imperviously into the surf as the storm held his assailants back in the mansion, He swam to the lighthouse where he healed, ministered to by angels. But his heart, it was nailed down by 12 witches sworn to repentance -except that they eventually failed. One of them who raped him, birthed his child, and prophesied her name would be "just a careless error". So old St. John knew and disguised as the phantom, told Sheldon the whole truth. He wanted Jessica's heart, porn queen or not.

Come on, Mizzy, he said. It's just 5 minutes to Cape Citadel.

Cape Citadel was a tall lighthouse cased in 3 layers of reinforced concrete and surrounded by steep buttresses -there they would both be safe.

Sheldon led her into a hooded rubber dinghy equipped with a motor. Already the sea was churning with meter high waves.

Sheldon?

What, dear?

There's someone else in this dinghy...

Relax, said her husband, you've always secretly wanted a threesome with a genius and a man of God.

But Sheldon, we both have A...

Faith! He exhorted, now hush, dear.

Epilogue

St. John never met Jessica l'Serre ever again. Trusting in Sheldon, the Saint took Mizzy and the virus she carried soon overcame him though his heart was soothed by the genius couple.

Jessica, raped by St. John, birthed a child who eventually inherited MunFatt's cargo shipments empire. Old MunFatt was grateful to the Lord for legitimizing his business.

Luis and Paloma married in jail where he served a 6 year sentence for abusing a firearm while under the

influence. He came to know his wife and they also had a child -with a similarly weak heart.

Munah told Sabhar about her teenage tryst and he forgave her. She often wondered about the mansion of St. John Malaya and in dreams, she saw the witch birth her child amid the shards of glass around her bare feet. In a slim box held down by her Koran, she kept the smallest nail from before the fireplace where it had popped free.

About the Author



ChenKuang YAP was born in Canberra, South Australia, in 1976. He is an avid fan of short speculative fiction of which he is an exponent of the form. Currently, he lives with his folks in Petaling Jaya, amidst the Spice Isles.

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