

My Short Stories Volume 2

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Introduction

Thank you for picking up my small book. In it we meet (morally-) flamboyant players on the darker side of love; hear the breakfast politicking among men of the cloth of future time; and let a cripple with song show us the beauty of the human spirit.

C. K. Yap,
December 2022,
Petaling Jaya.

The Gold Jacket

There was a wedding dinner. A tall man had taken a short wife. She was barely as high as his chest, dressed in a simple black gown. He was dressed in white boat shoes, rolled up white pants and a billowing white shirt with ruffles around the collar and wrists. Over this, he wore a gold jacket stitched with dragons, pearls and curly clouds. It had loops and knots for fastening but it wasn't fastened and his shirt bulged from beneath, stained with drizzles of Champagne.

The boy asked him,

“Are you rich, sir?”

“Not at all”

“You seem prosperous”

The tall man laughed,

“Being a stylish slob doesn't mean I have money to burn”

The boy asked again,

“Why take such a short wife?”

“She’s a friend”

“Won’t you not be satisfied?”

The tall man didn’t reply. He took his curly-haired love by the chin and with his other hand, fed her a chocolate strawberry. She ate it staring straight into his eyes. But before she had finished, he kissed her, making her blush, leaving her out of breath and flustered. He turned to the boy,

“She may not have melons...”

“Yes, I think I know what love means”

The boy had a friend. And as they wandered through the seafood displays and among the freezer chests at the back of the theme restaurant, he proposed to her.

“I’ve seen a kiss”

“And...”

“I want one with you”

“No!”

He held up a chocolate strawberry and looked at her with utter seriousness. With hesitant steps she walked up to him and put out her hand.

“Give it to me”

“No, I’ll put it into your mouth”

“Then do it”

He let her bite the strawberry and waited for her to chew it. Then he pressed against her. Their fingers locked and she blurted out,

“Ohh!”

She pushed him away, still chewing, looking embarrassed but in her eyes, she had grown just a little bit older.

He stumbled backwards as she pushed him against a freezer door. She pressed close to his ear. And whispered,

“I love you”

“Just not right now”

In his heart, he thought, I hope she never grows.

But grow she did. And her melons too.

They were 18 when they met again. It was at the airport fish and chips joint. He had ordered a ham sandwich and a glass of fizzy water when he saw a beautiful young woman with a plate of strawberries and chocolate mousse sitting across. She held up a strawberry and bit into it sultrily, looking right at him. He got up and moved his meal to her table,

“Are you...?”

“Just not right now”

He smiled,

“I’m going abroad tonight”

She looked disappointed,

“Why, for how long?”

“I don’t know. Mom and Dad say we’re moving -to Australia. Probably for good”

He sipped the fizzy water.

“What about you?”

She laughed,

“I don’t think we can afford that”

“Then marry me”

She blushed.

“Or do you have someone else...”

With her fork, she stirred the strawberry mousse.

“A lot has happened since then”

“I suppose so”

The tall man who wore the gold jacket was among the well-wishers. This time, he was dressed in red paisley pants with a silk shirt printed with elaborate purple and maroon abstract motifs. His wife wore a linen slip decorated with sunflowers. They both looked older yet they were still very much in love.

“I reckon there’s no way to persuade you?”

She didn't reply, gazing at the loving couple two different sizes.

“Eat your sandwich”

There was a nook with a sink, mirror and hand dryer. He watched himself watching her bend over to check her eyelashes as he straightened his shirt. The wash area was claustrophobic narrow and as they turned, he brushed against her fullness. She didn't protest as they kissed.

On the plane, he felt something stiff in his pocket and reached into it. He drew out an envelope and in it a letter he unfolded with shaky hands.

“Marry me -when you're ready”

He sank into the seat, eyes closed.

In the summer of 2024, he graduated from Melbourne with a degree in strategic studies. Promptly, he was recruited into the diplomatic service, as an intelligence agent, not to use the word “spy”.

That same year, his love interest married and her invitation letter to him brought tears to his eyes. He had to see her one last time.

The tall man in the white outfit and gold jacket sat at the banquet table beside his short wife, dressed in navy.

“Nice to see you again?”

“Yes, you too”

“Married yet?”

“No”

“Planning to?”

“Maybe -maybe not”

He shrugged. The red diplomatic passport in the inner pocket of his coat.

She waved to him from the front-most table and her husband raised his glass of champagne. He smiled back, also lofting his glass.

“What about your marriage?”

“I have... been too busy”

“Doing what?”

“Confidential things, mostly”

“007”

She laughed. He smiled a strained smile.

“I think I’m ready... now”

He expected her to grimace but instead she enjoined,

“And so am I”

She locked arms with him and they strode out onto the balcony. It was night. Paper lanterns and glow chains dangled from

the trees and off the hotel facade. They made their way down a spiral stairway and into the inner courtyard which was done up Spanish style.

He could hear a sound like bees buzzing amid a dark, dense grove of dwarf orange and lemon trees.

“It’s not as if we were never in love”

“It’s not as if I will always be -with him”

“Give one of your tricks to me -I know you have them”

“No!”

“With your job we could live anywhere, do anything -be free”

She looked sad,

“Do you think I’m stupid or mad?”

“It’s loyalty, integrity, backing up our choices”

“Sometimes people hop, Mr. I always walk straight”

“Sometimes they dance”

She undid his belt

He reported the needle of poison used,

“To kill a dog”

And no further questions were asked.

He thought about what she had said about life and morals and

that made him cutting, daring, ultimately more successful.

He chose a wife eventually, someone arguably better than her. With golden hair and melons too, more like tan-rust snow pears, which matched the rest of her slender freckly sun-kissed body. Her eyes were blue, and streaked with the colors of Sydney bay.

Deep down she knew he had many associates and admirers. It was something they never discussed.

Her husband was a diplomat himself, he soon found out at an embassy meet.

“It’s okay to be attracted to my wife. She’s a woman. We’re men”

So she told, he thought.

“And I’m sure you’d grant the same for me”

The other man smiled. He smiled back.

“How deep is love?”

He drew out a slim cigar case and they lit up together. Of a sudden, he felt more relaxed.

“Brother!”

The other man grabbed his shoulders and ruffled his coat. He was shorter, had a thick Chinese accent and a face like Cary Grant. Beneath his dark striped suit, a nimble body that moved in sudden and graceful strokes.

His Australian wife had on an avocado green gown and her blond hair was stretched back and knotted with a mother of pearl comb. She seemed at ease, talking with the dignitaries. He watched her from the side of the hall, semi-conscious he was holding that smoldering cigar.

“I suppose you had a good time?”

“Yes”

He bent over to nuzzle her ear and it smelt strongly of cigar smoke and cologne.

“What about you?”

“Just fine”

“What do you really think of me?”

“I think I love you, always -you’re beautiful”

She smiled.

“Women do grow old”

“And then what?”

“We understand, that’s all...”

“-and we hope men understand”

It wasn’t as surprising a statement as he expected.

“And I was afraid you’d taken up Tai-Chi”

She giggled, and layers of pretence dropped off their shoulders. They were more natural towards one another over the antipodal summer, and when he had to go home unexpectedly, alone, she didn't ask.

His friend had had a baby. It looked serene, asleep in the pram, bathed in a tinkling lullaby from the toy radio clipped to the frame.

The cigar man smiled ear to ear. My son, he announced proudly. She picked up the sleeping infant who smacked his lips and frowned, and placed him into his arms.

He shivered, feeling suddenly weak but took the baby to his chest and bent his back backwards. She leaned over him and kissed her baby on the forehead. It giggled and spurted, legs wiggling. And she looked into his eyes cautiously.

“Congratulations”

“Thank you. He'll be our only one”

“Enforced?”

She nodded. The one child policy, he presumed.

“I never considered it much, that the continuation of life can be this precarious, so delicate”

She looked disinterested,

“It's only dangerous when you obsess with weeding the garden too much”

“And pull up the tulips and lilies”

“Right”

“What then are chances, big hero?”

He wanted to answer but she took her baby from his arms and began whispering to it.

“Let’s light up, my friend”

“Sure, and I’ll buy the Americano”

Her husband patted him on the back, grinning and he registered that he had found friends among friends.

He hadn’t aged much but his wife had. Her face showing tell-tale cracks under her makeup and her body imperceptibly more strained with all the yoga and aerobics she’d been doing to keep it supple. The gold jacketed man and his diminutive partner waved him over.

“When are you having one?”

“I don’t know”

“No time?”

He wanted to say that he didn’t love his wife enough but he swallowed that thought. Maybe he didn’t love anyone quite that enough.

“You’re an idealist”

“Pardon?”

“This isn’t a world of good friends and good times”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I turned into a bat and bit you”

He chuckled,

“Do what you have to, not what you want to”

He looked across the hall to where she was slow dancing with her child and her lithe, suave husband working the floor animatedly. And something in him snapped.

“I crossed a threshold of sorts when I married your uncle”

The gold jacket man’s petite wife spoke up in a soft tinkling voice.

“Had a deck of cards experience of love all my life”

“What do you mean?”

“He didn’t see me just for the hearts and spades”

Gold jacket reached out and took him by the hands. He had large hands. He pulled him forward and they leaned against each other’s cheeks and he whispered,

“Don’t be the one who lets himself down”

He wanted to say, thank you, and same to you but that would have been insensitive. It was obvious they wed for love so deep the average person couldn’t fathom or believe.

There was a span of several years where in between, he did many important things, made decisions that affected the supply of food to countries struck by famines, aid to war zones, made personal visits to disaster areas.

She came to him on one such occasion, after his pin-point appeal on TV poured donations of bread and soup into her wintry Nepalese town.

She was the most beautiful woman in the country, or so she implied and when they were alone in his tent, she placed over his shoulders a gold jacket, stitched with motifs of peace and love.

“Are you Buddhist?”

“Why?”

“These are the wheels of life”

She traced the embroidery on the jacket with a long pointy painted nail.

“How long have you been without?”

“Too long”

He didn't have the heart to deny her...

“Are you positive you're barren?”

“She nodded”

“I didn't want you to know”

“Would it have mattered?”

She looked away but He caught her arm and stroked it.

“We’ll adopt”

Tears filled her blue eyes as she nodded.

“I don’t love you any less”

“And I can’t love you much more”

They were twins. A boy and girl. The most beautiful woman in Nepal let them go to a better life with the angel who loved her people.

“They have your skin”

She smiled back, happier than she had been in years. And shortly he retired from the service.

They moved back to the Far East, making a life for their motley family amid the Spice Islands. And when gray started creeping into his hair, he received an invitation from his first love, to the wedding of their only son.

He was dressed in rolled up fisherman’s pants and a burlap tunic, feet clad in Indian moccasins. Around his shoulders, a well-worn sun-bleached gold jacket. He had taken it on numerous walks along beaches, on boats across straits, and along jungle paths.

He sat there, a carbon copy of his uncle, though his wife was far taller. She was dressed in a sarong gown, her blond hair whisked into a wreath to hide her age.

The lucky boy, just turned 19, beamed from ear to ear.

“Uncle!”

He called, bowing to clasp his hands. He pointed out his wife, standing several tables away with his mother and father.

“What do you think of her?”

He just smiled. And a calming aura of love surrounded the temporarily manic groom and his nervous entourage.

“You approve?”

He nodded,

“We’re so much in love”

“I can imagine”

“Hey, you’re... not Uncle”

He patted the young man on his shoulder,

“We knew each other -by heart...”

The groom stepped back a little as his mother appeared.

“He had cardiac failure”

“Who?”

“Gold jacket -with the tiny wife”

“And what happened to her?”

She chuckled through tears,

“We didn’t really poison that dog way back”

“He nodded knowingly”

The Chinese Cary Grant came over to be with his better half. He was wearing a rhinestone cowboy vest over a stiff starched tux shirt and bow.

“Where I got this?”

“Texas -oil drilling. Made me a fortune”

Mrs. Rhinestone glowed with admiration. He put a hand behind her waist.

“Wife’s got the melons, eh?”

They all laughed.

When the night was almost through, a staffer passed him a small card which said,

“Meet me in the courtyard”

The orange and lemon trees were laden with fruit but she wasn’t there -yet. He had searched the space with its many private nooks and crannies.

“Australian intelligence?”

“Formerly, retired -with honors”

The muffled woman’s voice came from behind the stand of

lemon trees.

“Who?”

She asked.

“I don’t know you”

“But you came”

Hushed silence.

“I was expecting a friend”

“So was I”

“What happens when you retire from the service?”

“Anything, presumably -even this”

He waited for the punchline. The expose. All his cover-ups and indiscretions.

“What do you think we all get for walking the absolute straight and narrow?”

“What do you think of swimming with sharks?”

“And are you one such?”

“Huh!”

“You’re an idealist”

“Do what you have to do, not what you want to”

Sweat started beading on his neck and forehead. He was well trained in diverting a covert strike from someone -perhaps an insider, with knowledge of his personal history.

But the muffled voice went silent and he could sense the sniffling sounds of her weeping.

“Count to 10 then come to where I am”

He counted out loud and as he reached 10, heard a scooter throttle its engine, speeding off.

He rounded the lemon trees and there it was, hanging on a bough, the unmistakable gold jacket his uncle used to wear. Near the shoulder and down the lining, a spurt of old blood stain. He picked up the garment and scrunched it to his nose, recoiling from the lingering trace of deadly chemical. Leaning shakily against a tree trunk, he exhaled heavily to clear his lungs.

He thought of burning the jacket, or tearing it to bits but instead, with a knife he kept folded in his belt, he cut free a square of the stained fabric and neutralized the poison in his brandy.

He made his way up to the first floor, to a gift shop where they sealed the piece of gilded silk for him, between slabs of clear lead glass. He paid \$2 to have it wrapped and dedicated.

It stood on her mantelpiece a long time.

Toast and Curry

News that our Pastor was to be recalled reverberated through the congregation. A certified IF (International InterFaith) preaching professional, Pastor had the authority of the World Church, Siam-Taiwan Buddhist Society, and Friends of Makkah-Baitulmuqaddis.

The trouble with Pastor was that he rather liked his food.

“We’ll have the toast and chicken curry, please”

“What’s that again, bread and curry?”

“Not just any bread, Pastor -toasted Hainanese bread”

“And this is for breakfast?”

“Yes”

“Hmm...”

The food arrived along with 2 frothing iced tea lattes. Fingers of puffy crisp white bread stacked high on a saucer and an oval bone china boat of fragrant orange-brown curry swimming with chicken pieces and chunks of potato.

I took a piece of the bread and broke it. Pastor gave thanks as I dipped both halves into the spicy sauce and handed one to him.

We ate the curry bread together and I could tell he was in 7th heaven.

I took the opportunity to ask some burning questions.

“So Booker Morman -is he really... you know”

“Gay?”

“Yes”

“No, he was set up”

“But he got down and dirty with the lad, Olsen?”

“In the name of Almighty God, yes!”

“And that’s not wrong?”

Pastor broke another of the bread fingers and dunked it gracefully in the curry.

“It’s wrong if WRONG is wrong, and right if wrong IS wrong”

He peered at me through his holo focals that perched so delicately on the bridge of his nose.

I could see coded text scroll over his left eye. The control version of the InterFaith Bible.

“In other words, he got his toast and curry”

Pastor laughed,

“He has treasure in Heaven, God bless the good commissioner”

“Hard time explaining that to the average Joe”

“Hard indeed”

Pastor speared a chunk of potato, thoughtfully.

“And what’s the latest on FIST?”

“We know they’ve found the Martian codex”

Fides per Technologiae -the puritanical terraforming and exploration arm of the InterFaith, entrusted with proving, through applied Science and Mathematics, the existence of the Supreme Being.

“Bunch of piranhas”

Pastor slurred.

“Don’t trust them”

“Not since the Venus revival”

The last of the crispy toast was eaten and I watched the man of God spoon the remains of the curry behind his beard.

“Next week again?”

“Let’s do”

We shook hands and I footed the modest bill.

For all the criticism FIST gets, they did do some things right. Pastor's IF-issued black and white two-seater electric convertible pulled up in front of us just as we exited the mall, driver-less, its door popping ajar into his outstretched hand.

Pastor waved and I waved back. He made the "call me" sign to his ear and I nodded pertly.

"Luke Lovey is gay -hell and he's World Governor"

"Pardon me?"

"Prince is gay..."

She meant, the governor's son,

"-and he's a Hollywood celeb"

Words kept pouring from her pierced lips. Tattooed arms bound up in black leather loops and straps.

"See that?"

She pointed out the Olympian statue of the governor and his son in tryst, center of the broadwalk.

"Freakin' L-O-V-E, boss"

She bent over, biting her lip, showing me the two fingered salute of the Universal Government.

"What have the IF shites got on that?"

Concerned, I asked,

“Do you have a home?”

“Hell no!”

“Are you hungry?”

“Now we’re talking, boss”

She took my hand. It felt like hugging a porcupine.

There was no way to bring a trash hooker into the Oriental, so I stopped by a convenience store for a loaf of sliced bread and charged 2 and a half credits into a vending machine for a warm bowl of spicy soup.

We set the paper bread bag and cardboard soup packaging on fire in the mesh cage around a busted spotlight and toasted the bread over it.

I gave thanks as the toast browned and broke it, dipping both halves into the spicy broth.

She ate in feral snatches between oozing black tears and saying “Hell”

“This the jackass?”

“Man-of-Oh-So-Mighty Gawd?”

The unmistakable raspy helium voice of a Patriot. Fallout of the Universal Government’s frantic putsch towards Mars. They failed in a protracted military campaign against FIST, suffering permanent muscle atrophy. Gas breathers, kept happy with GMO opioids and legalized prostitution.

“Have some toast, soldiers”

I deflected their frustration.

“Thanks, gov”

“Who’s your friend?”

“The one with the fancy car”

“He’s our Pastor”

“What does he know?”

“Has he been in space, been to Mars?”

“Seen the face of living Satan carved into the million-year-old ice shelf of Olympus Mons?”

“Y’all don’t know half the Lord’s codex”

One of them spat between the hooker’s legs.

“No pay not your day”

“Aw c’mon, baby”

His feeble arms pulled on her thongs. The crippled soldier shrieked silently. It was like watching a noir stage play.

And it was indeed a week till I had the stomach to have toast and curry with Pastor at the Oriental again.

“I hope you don’t mind but I brought some condiments”

I shrugged absentmindedly, thinking of once again being a

one-man soup kitchen to UG trash.

“This ought to go well”

“Coconut cream custard!”

Pastor smeared the screw pine spread over the toast to which he also applied a daub of margarine, and dipped it into the curry.

“Mmm...”

He chewed for a long time, then cleansed his palette with a mouthful of sparkling mineral water. He dabbed his beard against a monogrammed serviette.

“If Booker Morman’s impeached by Lovey, who’ll lead the IF?”

“In the case of a direct attack on the InterFaith, it will be an Ingenieur from FIST”

He scowled as he admitted it, more so than hearing the governor’s name uttered in the same sentence as their commissioner’s.

“Everything gets better”

I ventured.

“Oh, everything? those cold-hearted colonizing beavers”

Pastor seethed under his breath.

“They say FIST has manufactured the pearl -the Pearl of Great Price”

“From instructions in the Martian codex”

“Yes, and no son of Adam should well consume it!”

Pastor wiped his toast with sweet salsa before dunking it as if he were stabbing the curry to death.

“You’re letting me eat alone”

“Think nothing of it. Shall we split a soft-boiled egg?”

“Why not?”

Pastor broke the yolk with the edge of a finger of toast and swirled it in its little egg cup. He coaxed the jellied strands of orange and white onto the bread and swiped it across the surface of the curry.

He stopped short of taking a bite as his eyes turned kindly and blurred with tears.

“Love or good sense -which one leads a man astray?”

I had been staring at our Pastor with elbows on the table and hands over my cheeks.

“Trick question?”

“No. Do you love me?”

“Yes”

“Do either or both of us have good sense?”

“I don’t know”

“Now don’t love me”

“What?”

“NOW, do either or both of us have good sense?”

It began to dawn on me, the wisdom Pastor had.

“I respect you, actually -quite a bit more”

Pastor fed the egg curry toast mix under his beard and chewed noisily, triumphant.

“Love is like your favorite thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle”

“You always figure out how to put it back together no matter how much it’s scrambled. Those with good sense just take less time”

Something in me snapped and I got up, excusing myself to the washroom.

“Too much curry gives you the farts”

“Too many green grapes give you diarrhea”

“Come in here to drown your sorrows with tap water?”

I stared at the matron and she stared back. She looked like she had once been attractive, maybe 20 years ago, but all that was left of it was her perfect poise and sparkling eyes.

“I’m with my Pastor”

“The one with the beard and square glasses?”

“Yes, actually -how...”

“He was once a young man like you, don’t you know, love?”

“Saved me from walking the streets”

Only to clean up other people’s shite, I wanted to say. But I held my tongue.

“Being a hooker is easy, he said”

“Being something more productive is hard”

“So here I am”

She raised her shoulders and smiled weakly,

“20 years...”

“And we loved 15 times not including the kisses”

There was a small spa attached to the washroom which was unisex. In the center of the steaming hot stones, suspended high over the bubbling spring water, a Venusian pearl gyrated in its anti-gravity field.

The matron unlocked the glass door to the spa and we stepped through.

“500 credits to see me young again”

I wired the amount and vents started spewing alcohol-laced steam over the pearl. She, transfigured, was indeed most beautiful.

“How long does the effect last?”

“As long as you love me”

“Then I always will”

“Think of me, remember...”

She called out as I adjusted my clothing so nobody would suspect what we had done.

Pastor was waiting patiently at our table with his eyes down-cast. Hand lazily swizzling his latte.

“Sorry for being so long”

“Doesn’t matter”

“Met someone, have you?”

“Quite”

“None of our business”

“Very well”

It had become rather difficult to finish the toast and curry, being two men lost in thought.

We went our separate ways.

At 8:30 Saturday morning, I prepared to meet Pastor at the Oriental as usual. I jumped the long queue of patrons to sit at the chef’s table.

Pastor wasn’t there. I expected him to arrive flushed and streaming steam from the pearl spa any minute but he never appeared.

Instead, there was a small brown box on the table at his end. I opened it and inside, I could identify some things that belonged to him. There was also a letter in his own hand.

“Been recalled to headquarters, read the message. Selected you to lead the flock in my absence. Here is all you’ll need”

I put on the holo lenses. They tapped into my brain, alerting the congregation to my presence. Thoughts and questions from around and afar coursed through my awareness, manifesting as code on the purple-green hued glass.

Aqua benedicta, the label on the bottle said. Odorless and colorless. I patted a few drops onto my cheeks and chin and new beard started sprouting. I turned to look at my reflection in the eatery window. I was turning into the spitting image of Pastor.

There was an accordion of IF access passes hanging from a lanyard, now bearing my name and holograph, and lastly a palm-sized stamped aluminum tool that could spring off a variety of sharp implements, ninja-like weapons, God only knew what else.

I stuffed these into my vest pockets.

Walking towards the mall exit, I was met by a stylish IF-issued black self-driving. I got in and the car addressed me as “Pastor”.

The powers of a Pastor were wide-ranging. I got Matron, now young and beautiful again, transferred to the ladies’ gym changing room, filling her position in the men’s washroom with Trash Hooker. Hell, it felt good.

I preached to the Patriots, called all the young men either

“Timothy” or “Barnabas” and they just smiled.

“You’re perhaps being a little too visible, Pastor”

Timothy of the moment appeared concerned.

“The UG still needs InterFaith support. The status quo may be tacit. It won’t be changing anytime soon”

“Because of feet on the street whipping up the grassroots - people like us”

“How much do they pay you?”

“Nothing, surprisingly”

“You have a car”

“Issued”

“How do you eat?”

“On your credit”

I smiled under the thickening growth of beard and waited for it.

“Let’s have some curry and chips”

“Say ‘toast’ and you’re on”

“Toast?”

“There’s a little cafe called the Oriental. They serve the most delicate Hainanese bread”

“Okay, but I have to use the men’s room first”

“I’m sure you do”

We took our seats at the chef’s table. Timothy was noticeably flustered. But my kind eyes and smile put him at ease.

“Is it wrong-”

“Hush”

“But I just-”

I waved my hand, banishing his doubt.

“Morality is simply finding the shortest path to love”

“It takes smarts?”

“It takes heart, in other words, PRACTICE”

We looked each other in the eye and chuffed spontaneously.

Then the waiter brought our toast and curry.

“There are potatoes in there somewhere”

“Thanks, Pastor”

“Help yourself, you’re paying”

I broke the bread, gave thanks, and dipped it in the dish. Timothy and I chewed the toast and were edified.

“The Lord is gracious indeed”

“Amen to that”

“You’ve heard the latest on Booker Morman?”

“Yes, they’ve acquitted our commissioner”

“So then Olsen, the Patriot he was helping-”

“Dropped all charges”

“He lied?”

“He had a change of heart”

“That’s what happens when you sway public opinion”

“Which is what you’ve been doing?”

I leaned back in the chair and pushed on the tabletop. Timothy sipped his latte, eyes glowing with admiration.

“They’ve found the Prophet Yipp -or what’s left of him”

“So they think”

“He didn’t make it back from Mars”

“The commander’s bones were discovered wedged in a crevice. He must have crawled in there to push against the pain”

“This was after he wrestled the codex from King Satan?”

“Yes”

“They also found a scaly green dismembered arm nearby, pinned down by a rock. It was still twitching”

“Goes to show”

“Our enemies aren’t the LGBTQ+ community”

“Not governor Lovey’s nepotistic, irreligious family”

“Far less the common sinner”

Timothy nodded, sullen.

I spooned the last of the curry behind my beard.

“The launchpad, Pastor”

The car announced.

“Thank you. Don’t linger”

“Very well, sir”

** Been in space, been to Mars, seen the face of living Satan carved into the million-year-old ice shelf of Olympus Mons? **

“How many will be like the stars?”

“Shining forever and ever?”

The trajectory of each capsule was precise. Fired from the launch tubes of the orca-like planet breacher in bursts of 2 and 3 per minute.

Deep in the belly of the orca, I led the worship chorus. Men and women in navy robes, sailors of the InterFaith, singing in unison, giving praises to the Supreme Being.

Leave the rest to the machine learning arcana of FIST and their spidery combat drones.

During luncheon a young woman asked me,

“Are you a prophet?”

“Because we don’t sail without one”

“Yipp once laid hands on my teacher, as Pastor in turn blessed me. He taught me everything I know.”

“Then that’s okay”

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“He’s made commissioned”

The chorus saluted.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“The control piece. You should have it”

I reached into my vest pocket and drew out the stamped aluminum tool, laying it gently on the mess table.

“It’s doesn’t seem much, I’m afraid”

“Thus does FIST ever hand out anything really important, more so to IF regulars”

“Oh-”

The chorus sailors turned the gizmo over in their hands and declared it part of the ship's toaster oven.

Calculating coldly with their cybernetics, the Ingenieurs approved of my compliance, pinning onto my robes the three silver crooks of a provisional war bishop a.k.a. acting ship's captain.

Timothy waited at our table at the Oriental. He checked his watch several times, swizzling his latte.

I didn't show, of course.

The young man then got up, walked over to my usual seat and drew the chair out. What's it like to be Pastor. But being of a humble and considerate heart, his gaze fell and he noticed the small brown box on the cushion.

He picked it up, set it on the table and sat down in my seat, nodding to the waiter who served the toast and curry.

He ignored the smell of dark spice and coconut cream. Maybe Pastor was right, he thought, Everything gets better.

Ukulele Travels

The little girl asked to see the old man's hand. His strumming, plucking right hand. The one he covered in black Gore-Tex studded with knobs run through with bicycle brake wire.

"I'm still working on it"

He clenched his fist which took about half a second's delay. Each of his fingers curled and straightened with some difficulty but he could still slow pick his pineapple ukulele.

"Take off your glove"

"It's a mess"

"How did it ruin?"

"Too many vacations in Bermuda"

"No, I'm kidding..."

"Don't fool with witches and their Kraft"

He turned away as he said it. As if one had slapped him across the face for talking out of turn. It had become a reflex. Though they had long since gone.

“You’re thinking of visiting Borneo”

Her eyes sparkled with life.

“And Port Moresby”

She sifted through his travel pamphlets.

The old man who played the strings sighed softly. He had been let off the hook just a year ago and gifted a child to bring up as his own. It was their insurance.

“Treat her well”

“Yes, Ma’am -absolutely”

He was 62 when he was freed. Healthy except for his right hand which had atrophied from being stuck in the way of continuous angry attacks. People denouncing America.

“We’re not the Beast”

He was told point blank.

“Yes, Ma’am”

And, sorry... gudasai.

Without his padded glove on, his right hand looked almost skeletal compared to his left. He couldn’t touch his pinky to his thumb, nor cross his fingers like Jesus showed. Although he was never good with chopsticks, they now were beyond his ability to control. Holding a pen to write made his arm quiver.

He did notice, however, that tugging on certain fingers seemed

to control or enable proper movements of his other ones.

Hard as he tried to conceal the knobs and wires that ran criss-cross over the back of his hand, they were too bulky and he ended up looking like a cyborg.

“Why don’t you paint the metal bits black?”

“Because then it’d be harder to check for repairs”

He was known in his lakeside town as old Iron Hand.

It became evident that there were certain things he had better stay clear of.

Such as the time he tried to braid her hair, getting it tangled and caught in his wiring.

The time he tried to play with a shaggy dog.

Or knit his helpful neighbor a Christmas scarf.

Morning runs round the lake made him feel true joy. His legs pumping high, feet gliding over the ground on gel padded soles. The wind in his face. It took his mind off his disability.

One such summer morning, he saw a girl in difficulties off the lake shore. The others were screaming for help. He was a strong swimmer and soon reached her with quick, efficient strokes of the crawl.

He got under her, lifting her neck clear of the water so she could breathe.

“Can you hear me?”

Struggling but no reply.

She was in shock, probably took water into her lungs.

With strong pushes of his legs, they made the shallows and everyone helped lift her onto dry ground.

That’s when they noticed his hand and the detached locks of gold caught in its wiring. She had put up quite a struggle.

“Who are you?”

“Just a resident”

“What’s with the hand?”

“Made it myself. Needed to”

The young man walked up to him and patted him on his shoulder.

“You did a good job”

“See we’re giving her CPR, she’ll be okay”

The girl was coughing up water and her eyes had opened.

“Take care of that hand”

As the group hobbled back into their minivan, he sat himself down with a thump. He picked at the bunches of hair stuck in his wires but they were caught dead.

He pulled off the mechanical glove, and all the bystanders saw his disfigurement. There were hushed whispers as he strode through the crowd with the atrocity dangling from his withered fingers. Strands of gold billowing off.

She came from a poor family, his little girl, and they were glad to let her go play with the smart man. The retired engineer.

“He’s sweet but he’s too old for you”

“I know, Mommy. I still love him”

“I want to go to Borneo”

“I want to see inside a cave”

“That’s nice, Honey”

“They’re the longest, deepest caves in the world”

She ran off to find her friend but he wasn’t at home. There was faint strumming coming from the woods by the lake. And there she found him sitting on a fallen log he had scooped saddles out of. Holding his ukulele.

She crept up to him Indian style.

But he heard her and pulled his cuff down over his hand.

“Where’s your glove?”

“Got wet”

“Caught with hair -again”

She laughed.

He smiled back.

“Been writing a song”

“Want to hear it?”

She nodded so he sang,

*Got to know you,
Down by the fireside.
Now we're two,
Down by the fireside.*

*That fireside,
Down by the lake.
That burnt so bright,
For lovers' sake.*

“I like it”

“See the sun is setting”

With a knife and some flint he lit some dry pine needles. Then as the flame grew, fed it twigs then small branches, finally a chunk of log.

He had a bag of marshmallows which they toasted as the shadows grew long. She sipped cocoa from his thermos and put her arm under his arm, against his checkered flannel shirt.

He wrapped himself around her as she was cold. Her name was Sandy and she was now 18.

“I’m -I don’t know how to say this”

“-Leaving town”

“Where to?”

“College”

“In New York”

“We never got to do Borneo”

He chuckled softly.

“Yeah...”

“Well have fun -and take care”

“It’s a wild town”

Tears filled her eyes.

She threw her arms around him.

“Thanks for everything”

As she got into the used car he gave her, she could hear faint strumming and a shaky voice humming softly. She could see ripples on the lake, looking like a piece of fallen sky. The pine cones were cracking. She wiped her eyes dry and gunned the motor.

“You can come round our place for dinner”

Sandy’s mother called him.

“Whenever you’re lonely”

He seemed never to age. Forever 38.

And it was no secret the older ladies admired him.

Every time he came over, he brought the fish, the ribs, the burgers and the wursts.

And they ate well.

“It’s not good you’re alone”

Said Sandy’s mother.

“Marry. The witches, aren’t they gone?”

“Did they take your... uhum?”

He gazed into his lap with an eyebrow raised.

“Can’t be that bad...”

The men all patted him on the back.

“C’mon”

He looked up, smiling.

“I guess so”

She was an Air Force sergeant, 31. They matched him with her through Sandy’s dad who knew her uncle. On her second tour of the Middle East, her chopper was shot down and she lost both legs at the knee.

“She’s good looking, isn’t she?”

“Yes”

“Brother, look -she’s got no legs”

“Look at her, do you want her?”

“I’m... not sure”

“C’mon!”

The men walked him to the doors of the bar and grill. They whistled at her and she turned, reflexes like a hawk, spotting Iron Hand looking right at her. He smiled shyly and raised his gloved hand. She smiled back.

“So are you on crutches or wheelchair?”

“I’m asking so I can arrange things”

“Wheelchair, my stumps hurt”

“Your hand -you too?”

“Long story. Don’t let me do your hair”

She tossed her locks confidently, playing with his clever network of wires.

“You’re no slouch”

“You’re special. I like you”

She brought out a small box and opened it.

“My Medal of Honor”

“I could have got free of the wreck but I didn’t run. I came back for the others, again and again until it blew up”

“If you don’t want to talk about yours...”

“I’ll understand. It’s a guy thing, yeah?”

“Yeah”

“It still hurts”

After their dinner, he wheeled the soldier to his truck, folded her wheelchair into the back, and asked,

“Where to?”

“Somewhere quiet, peaceful”

He wheeled her to the log by the lake. Put his hoodie on her and a blanket over her lap. Over the crackling of the campfire, he said,

“I started writing this song -way back. Now I know how it’s supposed to end”

*She picked the pebble,
So he skipped the lake.
Now, they didn’t know where the Fireside chat’d take.
The fireside, the fireside, the fire... side.*

He strummed his ukulele.

“I don’t suppose you’re up to swimming in Bali or spelunking

the Mulu caves?”

“I can’t walk”

She laughed cloyingly.

Like she had practiced it many times.

She woke in the morning still wearing his hoodie over her underwear. And he wasn’t in bed.

“Hey...”

She called.

“Hello?”

He stumbled up the stairs, eyes bleary.

“Sorry, I was doing some thinking and got carried away”

She sulked.

“What are you making?”

He had appeared clutching a bunch of graph paper, some Popsicle sticks and bike brake wire

“Nothing yet...”

“-But see, the way women walk, with their hips, side to side?”

“If we got you some legs and split them down the middle, then wired them up...”

“When you sway, the knees will lift”

“1-2-3 and you’re walking, even running”

He leaned on the doorway, breathing heavily. It was an invention to say the least. One that could make them big bucks.

That evening, he wrote a haunting melody not knowing how true it would turn out to be.

*Oo-oo-OOH,
Something’s got to give, And the walls are closing in on you.*

*Oo-oo-OOH,
She’s too scared to live, And the consequence of being untrue...
UNTRUE*

Sandy pulled up early spring while he was replacing the wiring over the sergeant’s legs. They needed stronger cables. She got out of the car driven by a balding man in dark glasses.

“I -need money”

“How much?”

“Ten grand at least -for now”

Her left arm seemed to be dangling limp. He knew muscle damage when he saw it.

He felt it through her jacket.

“Does it still work?”

She turned away, tears streaming down her face.

“I thought I’d join the Army...”

He hugged her.

“It’s okay, I’m here for you”

He made out a check for twenty thousand dollars and handed it to the driver.

The balding man took off his shades. And his eyes were sincere though they only saw green.

“Sir, thank you”

He slipped the credit note into his pocket.

“Now you better cough up the rest”

He squeezed her wasted arm.

Iron Hand broke down,

“I’ll pay”

“Please let her go”

In the commotion, his wiring scratched the loan shark’s face. Sharky drew out a handkerchief and wiped his cheek slowly. A streak of crimson on white linen. He crumpled and flung it away in distaste, drawing out a gun.

“Please...”

Iron Hand fell to his knees. The shark ripped off his glove and ground it under his heel.

But the sergeant yelled that she had called the cops.

“You’re all trash”

“Trash, damn you”

He touched the gash on his face, sneering.

Sharky stowed his gun like he was pocketing loose change. He got into the car cool as ice. And the brown sedan disappeared behind the trees.

“I really screwed up”

“Thought I was so brave”

A true fighter owes no one anything.

She picked up his ruined glove and pressed it to her heart.

Then she touched his beautiful hand to her cheek.

A light rain started falling, making ripples on the lake -like a piece of fallen sky.

“Let’s go inside”

Autumn came and so too did long evening walks by the water. The two women became firm friends. He was blessed with a child by each of them.

One night, as he was drifting off by the log in front of the sputtering campfire, he heard the voices again.

“So how you been?”

“Okay, I guess, Ma’am”

“Took care of the little girl?”

“Yes, Ma’am”

“Not too poor or poorly?”

“No”

“Then we’ll put you right back”

“Live as long as you want -friend”

He was 75 but looked 45.

That year, Advanced Ergonomics went public.

Company engineers made him a skin colored padded glove. It was a bit thicker at the top where carbon strips and memory metal were embedded, powered by a series of lithium coin cells. Palm-side was fashioned from thin, strong webbing, allowing him to feel more of what he was touching.

Sandy’s arm was wired up so she could control it from magnetic transducer rings that slipped around her fingers. They used strands of memory metal bound together to replace her torn muscle. She slipped her cybernetics under a thick, ribbed sports arm sleeve.

The sergeant similarly got new legs. They were able to pivot and bend with ease. To celebrate, they danced together in front of the jukebox at the bar and grill.

“Maybe we can explore those caves now?”

“Maybe”

“How about shopping in Jakarta?”

She nodded, nuzzling his shoulder.

“Samosir island...”

“Imagine landing on Lake Toba in a boat plane”

Life is one thing never worth giving up on.

He switched partners and everyone applauded.

“So you have two mommies”

“How’s that?”

The class giggled.

The young boy shrugged.

“Witches make things happen”

“Witches?”

“They come through the air”

“Take what they need. They always give back”

“It just takes time”

“How very interesting, let’s all give Jeremy a big hand”

Sporadic clapping.

“And what have you brought to show the class?”

“Mom got wounded in Afghanistan -from shrapnel”

“It was so bad she couldn’t move her arm”

“She still drove the men all the way home to base”

“This is her Purple Heart”

The boy held it up high so everyone could see the medal.

“Does anyone have any questions for Jeremy?”

Hands shot up instantly.

He became the most popular kid in school.

His sister, Misha was a year younger. Cat-like, quick-witted and brave as her mother. She didn’t go to class but spent her days running naked through the woods with paint on her body.

She was respected by snakes and raccoons, and was a friend of the wild deer.

One day, she found her father’s pineapple ukulele leaning against a redwood. She picked it up and put it to her nose. It was Dad’s uke.

She listened for his wavering humming voice but the forest was quiet. She waited for the smell of sweat or urine but it didn’t come.

Then rustles of someone wading carelessly through the underbrush.

In a flash she was up the tree quick as a squirrel, peering from behind its girthy trunk.

“I know you’re hiding, little girl”

It was an older woman with red curly hair, dressed in dull ragged greens. She relaxed a little.

“We’re afraid, hmm? Not any more?”

Curious, she descended the trunk.

Though the woman was old, she looked much younger as her body moved. Misha knew this was charm. Animals had it.

“Give it to us, come on”

“Yes, the ukulele -it belongs”

She handed over the uke.

“Where are you taking it?”

But there was only echoey strumming in the distance and a wavering voice that sang,

*There's a lake in the mountains,
There's an isle on the lake.
What's a life made no difference,
Where's the ice on your cake?
O-o-oh-Lake in the mountains... [together]*

About the Author

ChenKuang Yap lives in tropical Malaysia amid the Spice Isles. He was born in Canberra in 1976 and is an avid fan of short speculative fiction, being himself an exponent of the form.

Background to the Stories

The Gold Jacket

It seems to be centered around clothing and married life. Also infidelity and star-crossed love. Indeed these things were on my mind as I penned the tale. I hoped that the reader would guess the motive that drove me to write it, which was living a life wasted waiting on other people's decisions and desires. Having no occasion to wear my fine clothing to, not to mention, no love of my life, or children. Much like Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*.

Toast and Curry

While many would dismiss it as an 'oatmeal' story focused on food and conversation, I did this because I needed to nail down a lot of disparate information, like the *Pickwick Papers* (which I have not fully read). The jumble of morally-contradicting spiritual advice I accumulated was one, as was my fascination with the Jesuit Order's relationship to the Papacy, and with Sitchin's Nibiru / Planet X. There is a thread running through the story, of redemption and my calling to work for God which I had been involved in for some time. Most of all, I had hoped to tint this

sometimes 'Big Fish' surreal tale with hope and light-heartedness, otherwise it would be a heavy read.

Ukulele Travels

Besides writing, my other hobby is music. I own an ukulele which I played while in rehab. I also have a mild palsy of my right hand. So this story is quite a bit biographical. It is also **the** only one to have characters with mentioned names in that it is at times more intimate and emotional than the others. The reader might draw comparisons with Silas Marner and 'Edward Scissorhands', both of which are often on my mind as my life is often introverted if not lonely.