

MY SHORT STORIES Vol 1



C. K. YAP

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The Before Room

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Introduction

THIS is a collection of 3 flash fiction stories I blitz wrote, free to read and redistribute. For much longer, and (I would venture) better stories, check out Vol. 2, \$1.⁹⁹ also on FreeLunch.my.

C. K. Yap
Petaling Jaya
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The Before Room

*“Kiss me, in the echoes of your smiles. In the space
between each breath. In the subtle sense somehow
I’ll be there”*

WHAT I am is the sum of what I was, up till present. But to call any moment “the present” would be wrong. We never actually stand in our present. Rather we exist in the space just before.

The book café was on the ground floor of the youth sports tower. Numa, Janet and I were reading from Wyndham. And Numa asked,

“Do you believe in telepathy?”

“Absolutely. Why?”

“It would be nice to have it, that’s all”

She looked sultrily at me. But Janet made her turn the page on the holo-scan superimposed over the low table with our coffees and sandwiches. And I wondered how the two women could stand sitting cross legged on hemp puffs for so long.

The future, considered objectively is merely the boundary envelope of the past, as we can sense only that which has already occurred.

Just outside the cafe, an expanse of rolling indoor park with a captive grove of tall African angasana trees by the far end of the glass facade. Students lay on the dry grass strewn with their satchels and coursework printouts.

“I hear you dropped out of college”

“Yes, years ago, before I got into community projects
-like this one”

“It’s one of the better things about the city”

The youth sports center was open all night and was meant to be somewhere more wholesome to hang out rather than a mall or coffee joint. It rose 10 stories above the project houses and was wrapped round with a spiraling hiking-biking trail.

“See you both on the roof”

Janet and I looked at one another. Neither of us fancied a 7pm night climb, nor did we want to read more books. I paid with my staff card and we adjourned to the park.

I never considered anything I did newly, a mistake as I do it before knowing what is right. Imparting experience is

someone else's responsibility. Asking for it assumes I am always listening. Listening means I suffer to exist.

“It's strange you dreamed up this -idea”

From where we stood I could see Numa, long legs pumping up the spiral trail. I answered, distracted,

“...Hmm?”

“I mean, you've made it and... do you find me attractive?”

Janet was short and bookish, with a chiseled nose and squarish frame-less glasses. She had big dark eyes and a small mouth that looked very anime. With her delicate fingers, she stroked a Chinese bamboo flute.

“I have something I wrote for you”

Falling in love is like being in a Mexican wave. She sits down, I get up, and through the other side of the stadium, breezes the stirring effect of everybody's participation.

The DiZi melody was light and sprightly with bursts of expression, in oriental style. She finished with a smile, bouncing on her heels.

“Nice. Bravo!”

“Thanks. Is there anywhere we can -you know?”

We looked at one another and I put my hand over my chin.

“There's a room here. No, more like a large closet...”

“Well?”

“It's special. We call it the Before Room”

“Any reason why?”

“It was designed in before any of the other facilities”

“Let’s go see it”

I shrugged okay and we proceeded up to the roof by lift. In the small steel cube, she pressed her hand into my hand. Her small fingers stiffened as they meshed with mine and they felt warm and slightly tacky like her lip gloss.

People touch one another all the time. I’ve always found it strange that eyes do not touch. The parts through which soul meets soul. Nor ears, that hear the promises hearts make to one another.

We found the roof deserted except for pigeons roosting under a concrete ledge. I looked around for Numa but she wasn’t there, -yet. I dragged a chain across the hiking trail access, setting a “cleaning in progress” sign up in front. Then I took out my skeleton key and unlocked the closet.

Inside, a strange draft wafted off the floor. Janet was taken aback. But I reassured her. Flipping a circuit breaker revealed we were standing on a steel grating over a shaft that ran all the way to the basement. Spotlights came on in sequence down to the bottom with echo-y mechanical sounding clicks.

“What is this freaky place?”

“The Before Room -I mentioned it earlier”

“It keeps the structure ventilated. Look up”

Huge fans spun lazily, drizzling coolant water. I folded a lever on a console box and the grating platform began to slowly descend.

“Maintenance mode”

Janet looked puzzled and irritated all at once. Then she noticed,

“Oh, my flute-”

“Must have left it on the roof”

“Never mind”

Forgetting is a crime. It isn't about losing information as information is never lost. Forgetting means neglecting to roll the sum of the past onward. How should anyone forget.

As the platform slowly descended, we expressed our feelings passionately. When we reached the bottom, I said to her,

“I thought you'd enjoy the ride”

Janet blushed. I saw her out of the shaft into the basement car park.

“What about you?”

“I'll go up -for your flute and to tidy up”

But she pressed the shaft door close so I locked it and we left.

Giving up is a blessing. If you can lay the job down early, it must be a success.

Nobody saw Numa till the shaft platform was raised for service the next day.

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Glass Houses of Summer

STEFFI Innapetz sang as she picked the guitar.

*“Do sunny days wait patiently, while people all
grow old and gray?”*

It was a song that Boris Small wrote with her back when they were twenty somethings. When they were hanging out with the Mulders one summer’s day and A’Chuan asked, what would hanging out together be like when they grew old?

“The ravages of time, inspiration for rhyme...”

Outside the Songwriter’s Loft, it was pouring. Steffi tucked her tumbleweed auburn hair, streaked with white

into her hoodie, gig bag at her side under a big black umbrella. Then, a smoothly pleasant tenor voice turned her head.

“Miss Innapetz?”

“Yes”

“My apologies. Mr. Mulder sent me. Your car is waiting”

The gun was handed to him in a paper bag along with a photo montage of Boris Small, 68, host of The Globe Tonight for its last 10 seasons. His pro-Gay Nation interviews with Governor Luke Lovey, and denunciation of Inter Faith commissioner Booker Morman had not gone unnoticed in extremist circles. In this case, the Angels Brigade of al-Lehh.

A'Chuan Mulder sat in the spacious wood paneled studio at the mixing console, his shirt unbuttoned. Steffi Innapetz leaned over him, her arms round his neck. A servant interrupted their togetherness.

“Your Chemical, Miss Innapetz”

Mulder took her hands off his shoulders and passed her the tall frothing drug smoothie. It smelt of honey melon. Her favorite. Steffi raised the glass to her lips as he nodded, staring at her, emotionless. It tasted of sweet roasted nuts with a trace of bitter pistachio. At 70, the woman was still as charming as she was at 22. But A'Chuan and Steffi were just erstwhile lovers on opposite sides of the mental health divide.

Toby was Boris' partner. Their intimate relationship and soon to be announced marriage was hot gossip in Sum-

merland City. It was late morning on Bali beach as the TV star emerged nude from the surf, tufts of wiry hair on his bronzed body, sinews stretching wide over his chest and hips. Their noses sparred over the kutta leaf inhaler they had made together at the potter's. And Toby's right hand trembled ever so slightly as they grappled.

Steffi and A'Chuan loved that night. It was plain to everyone she was insecure, even frail of mind and that he was her guarantor. Because of her old friend, she had a life, a pretty darn good one. She sat up on the spacious oval bed, in an over-sized Venus Revival! mail fabric tee shirt. A'Chuan had given it to her when he bought them each a youth-prolonging pearl. Dipped and swirled for three seconds in spiced brandy, they consumed the elixir together.

“There was a shooting at Boris’ penthouse. I thought you might want to know”

“Is he okay?”

“No, he’s in hospital. His partner killed himself after shooting him twice”

Toby’s body was mutilated with Arabic script. Police forensic androids believed he did it on his own with a razor in front of the bathroom mirror before turning the gun on himself. Boris Small, shot through the lung and stomach, was in critical condition at Summerland Infirmary.

“Do you think he’ll like chrysanthemums-”

“Or daisies?”

“Sunflowers, he’s gay”

The spacious garden center lay across the roofs of the brownstone block. Flexi Glass panels glinting in the pale

winter sunshine. Mulder gave Steffi a rare hibiscus-cross air plant. She put it in her tangled wavy hair where it began to take root as Luke Lovey, head of the Universal Government announced its takeover of the IF terraforming corps on Mars and their lucrative pearl seeding operation on Venus.

They watched the impassioned Governor denounce God on the TV wall. Beside him, his talented half Siamese son and popular Summerland celebrity, Prince whose body was still atrophied from the First Landing campaign which he had commanded.

Prince and Lovey appeared shirtless together on the pink and green hued merchandise banners as ticker tape and gold-silver confetti rained down on the stage.

“Shoot me now!” The Governor dared, to raucous applause.

Steffi and Boris made out behind the tool shed at the Mulders' sprawling glass and steel bungalow. They giggled over ragged breath and trembling legs.

“Don't tell A'Chuan, promise!”

“No, I will”

“No you won't”

But A'Chuan and his father turned on the sprinklers and the three friends squealed, rolling on the freshly cropped grass. The sign on the lawn's edge read, “Mulder Residence. Do not throw stones”

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Straw In The Cold

BEING left behind on launch day was the furthest thing from Albert's mind. The stout, baseball-sized chameleon stretched and yawned. Spindly arms scratching at his barrel-like body. Julie's bed was empty. He climbed up to the window sill. Their car was gone!

Julie worked for SpaceEgg, one of the startups contracted to build the Sling. An elastic hyper graphene arc 80 miles high. And today was its official unveiling. Media from around the world were gathered in operations base, Singapore. She checked her hair, blond and knotted, straightening her ID badge pinned to the slate gray company jumpsuit she wore.

In the hallway beside the press room, dignitaries were talking to a tall transgender man in blue astronaut overalls. A shorter, dusky youth also in blue stood beside him, hands folded behind her back. Just then, a woman with short platinum hair and horn rims tapped Julie's elbow, pointing them out,

“Go over and ask Captain Ross and the Master Sergeant to meet me in the ready room”

“Yes Ms. Percie”

Ross “Rosie” Sheriff, ex Navy fighter ace had decided not to be a man any longer. It was unfortunate that it coincided with his selection to be SpaceEgg's lead test pilot. His co, Marsha Ismel, the first Moslem woman in space and member of the Mensa Club.

“Excuse me, Captain you're needed in the ready”

“And what code?”

“Umm...”

Julie stuck a pencil into her hair twirling it conspicuously.

*** Damn! Where was Albert? ***

“That will do. Come on Marsha”

Percie watched from the doorway, code-yellow fuming. Julie patched Albert with her radio but there was no reply.

Bored and dejected, Albert the chameleon had spent the better part of the morning coloring in Julie’s sketches. He called his best friend, Hanna over from next door. Together they raided his beetle farm to make chocolate bugs.

“Aren’t you supposed to be somewhere important today?”

“Apparently not”

Julie tried to lose herself in the crowd but she was too blond and beautiful to escape notice. She patched for her troll again to no avail. Then a child’s voice interrupted her vacillations.

“Ju-lie : Organizer”

Reading her badge, somewhere between a child and a toddler, he introduced himself,

“Mr. Jones. Pleased to meet you. My young assistant...”

“Amanda. Thank you”

Mr. Jones suffered from a rare disorder that caused his body to develop more slowly than his intellect. Lounging in his motorized pram in a diaper and baby blue top emblazoned with the SpaceEgg logo, he put his crayon to his head

and twisted it. Amanda did likewise. Julie just smiled, nodding. And Amanda ushered the very important tot away.

Nervousness got the better of Julie and she developed a sore throat. Leaning against the water chiller she poured herself a cup of ice flakes. She met all the guests that afternoon, carrying her sick cup and sticking her pencil in her head to dispatch them to their various stations.

Ross, Marsha, Jones, Amanda and Percie gathered around the ready table watching the uncharacteristically dizzy organizer and her unorthodox coping mechanisms.

“Nerves”

“Yes, probably”

Meanwhile, Albert had left their house and was over at Hanna’s where they were building him an exoskeleton from 3D-printed parts and old lithium cells.

“Julie, sorry to be direct but where’s your troll?”

The speaker for the Federation Internationale les Troll cornered the blond woman as best a fist-sized reptile could.

“I...”

She rasped a reply which sounded like “Nowhrmissin-sorr”.

“Never mind, then”

The speaker patted her shoe.

Large floor to ceiling glass windows let reporters in the press room witness the launch. The hyper graphene frond stood out like Jack’s fairytale beanstalk against the tropical sky and its tip, lost in the streaky straits clouds. Powered by tide and wind, the arc of super strong organic carbon began to turn like a whip.

Video on the presentation screen of Ross and Marsha in the Egg at the arc's tip, faces rippling with G-forces. Percie affirmed contact with the crew who gave the now infamous finger to head screw in reply.

Bio-engineered chameleon helpers seen from telephoto lenses clambered around the superstructure, making adjustments as the whipping graphene tip broke the sound barrier with a shockwave that would have killed a human.

Mr Jones and Amanda watched impassively with hands over ear muffs as the tip went hypersonic and the capsule was flung off into space.

It took them just 10 minutes to reach orbit.

“Woo!”

Hand claps and cheers erupted from Mission Control as video of Ross and Marsha floating weightless in the cabin streamed in.

“We have video...we have audio”

Percie folded her arms standing at ease in the doorway. Touching her rainbow stud earrings, she laughed, probably for the first time since she joined the company.

Space can be rather chilly. Ross and Marsha pulled on sweaters emblazoned with the gold-black mission patch as cameras zoomed in. Julie could read the clever play on words motto stitched around it: “Straw in the Cold”. The crew of the Egg smiled warmly.

Julie drilled her flaxen hair with her pencil, thinking to herself: it’s been a long day hasn’t it, Albert?

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About the Author



CHENKUANG YAP was born in Canberra in 1976. He lives with his parents in Peninsular Malaysia, amid the spice isles where he dabbles in short fiction, game design, and song-writing. Follow him on Twitter @Brotheryap