

AN ASIAN STRIPED  
MAMMAL  
AND  
OTHER SHORT STORIES



FAIRUZ  
JAAFAR



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STORIES

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ABOUT

THE

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This is his first collection of short fiction.

THE  
S O F T  
E D I T I O N

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Dedicated to all the cats I have met and will meet.

## *An Asian Striped Mammal*

He had squandered his last fifty bucks mostly on booze and an assortment of exotic snacks. He needed to get out of his head for a moment so he invited a couple of his friends over on the pretense of catching up on old times.

Strangely enough he loathed every single one of them with a passion but tonight, they were merely invited to supplement him with stories of old glories to get him on an ego trip; from a squalid flat in Yishun to the moon.

The night was strangely cold for May. Only cat shrieks and a heated argument about nothing could pierce the silence of the neighbourhood. His illicitly obtained pack of Marlboro Lights had run out so to keep warm, he gathered Dutch courage through an Asian striped mammal. Well, four cans to be exact. By the time his friends had arrived, he was laughing at a rerun of the eight o'clock news at eleven thirty. It was not long until they were laughing with him.

"You used to be some kind of stud *sia*. Like every time I see you, always got different girl one."

"Back in school, you always seem to know what to say to win a girl's hearts one. No wonder we call you Professor *Cinta*."

"Professor *Cinta*, *rokok kretek* in one hand and a girl in another. You so-called racial harmony one lah. Chinese, Malay, Indian; everyone you can"

He loved hearing stories about what a swinger he was back then.

"Remember how you used to date this girl, what's her name again, that girl with the super fancy name one, damn *atas* one..."

"Like the Oppo like that..o-something one *lah*"

"Ophelia. It's Ophelia. What about her?", he asked.

"Ah ya that one. I just remembered *la*. You two were a hot item *mah*. Always *pangseh* us, go *pak tor* with her."

"Always think of chicks, forget brother."

"*Diam lah* Mat. What about her, Chong?"

"I remembered you used to say that she was like super different one; that this girl was someone you weren't going to let go cos she was special, that she was the one."

"She Premier League, you just S-League shit man. What an achievement *la*, getting her to go out with you."

"Aiya all that fuss for nothing only. Professor *Cinta* with one girl only, like real. Haha end up *kena* caught going out with someone else then go all-"

"Eh you better shut up *ah* Mat."

"But it's true what. *Aiya* old story also still angry meh?"

"Eh Mat, chill *ah*. He don't like means he don't like *la*"

"Aiyah Chong, you always *angkat* his balls one. Relax *ah* bro, this one *cerita basi* already what. Right?"

Glasses flew at this point and all hints of merriment that ensued earlier had ceased. He grabbed Rahmat and walloped him with a twelve inch record he had earlier used as a tray. Chong pushed him and got a hold of Rahmat, who by now had sported a nasty cut on his forehead and bolted out.

"*Puki punya kawan. Gi mampos sama lu!*", he uttered to the departing duo.

His house was in disarray. The record he had hit Rahmat with was his prized possession; an early pressing of Black Sabbath's Paranoid. How fitting perhaps; in his mind, Ophelia was the one who had done him wrong, the one who had ruined a perfectly good relationship with her nosiness, the one Professor *Cinta* could not twist around his little finger.

Ophelia. Ophelia. Ophelia.

He had only recently re-encountered her about a week ago at a food court, the one they used to frequent when they were together. She was resplendent as ever, even if it was eighteen years ago that he last saw her. Sure, age had caught up with her but he had put her up on a pedestal so high, he could not see her as anything else but an angel.

They both talked and reminisced about the old days like the time he had spilled his *mee rebus* on her purse and attempted to eat off of it and the time they went to their first ever poetry slam together (his very first one).

He snored so loudly at that event that it insulted the poet and started a fistfight between them. She recalled how ludicrous she found the whole affair to be due to the fact that the piece the poet was presenting was "I'm A Lover, Not A Fighter".

He found it fascinating how she was able to talk as if nothing ever happened, as if his bout of infidelity had not occurred. Maybe she had chosen to let bygones be bygones. Maybe she was past that. Maybe she wants me back, he thought at the time. At the end of the conversation, he had asked for her number on the pretense of getting reacquainted with old friends back in their university days and she was only too gracious to give it to him.

No one knew for sure at which point did it occur to him that calling Ophelia at this unearthly hour was a "splendid" thing to do but one would assume that common sense had practically left him to fend for himself tonight.

Ophelia was awoken by the shrill noise of her ringtone. She glanced at her screen to see an unfamiliar number; she had not asked for his number in exchange for giving hers and he had not called her at all during the course of the week. Uncharacteristically, she picked up her phone.

He was slurring his lines, not unlike the strange rambling uncles you'd see go viral every now and then.

"Ophelia, Opheliaaaa *suhhyunngggg*, it'ssss meeeee..."

"Who the hell is this?"

"It is meee *suhhyunngggg*, you don't rememburr? Professor *Cinta* *suhhyunngggg*, Professor *Cinta*. You said can call anytimeee so now laaa I call..."

"It's two thirty-nine in the morning, you drunk. Call me when you're sober, please."



"You said we'd chase rabbits forever, Ophelia. You said it yourself, you did, you did, you did, you did, please, Ophelia baby, please, please, what better time than-"

"Eat shit and die, *jantan sundal*."

She put down the phone and started to tear. It felt like nineteen-ninety four again. Lord knows how much her heart had hurt when she found out him cozying up to her friend. The fight that ensued afterwards rivalled any of the Ali v Frazier bouts. His attempts at apology were drenched in alcohol and cigarette smoke and there and then it was over. So many years she had spent wading in needle stacks, so many Yishun Dams she had busted in the process.

She was only trying to be civil when he spotted her. She did well to contain her rancour as she recounted the tales of yesteryear and when he remarked how "great they were together", she was on hand to stress the word "were".

She had given him the benefit of a doubt when she passed on her number but at the back of the head, she had sensed an ulterior motive. Self-vindication is saccharine, especially over someone like Professor *Cinta*.

Later that morning, she will discard her prepaid SIM card and Professor *Cinta* will be booked for assault, told on by a vengeful Rahmat despite Chong's protests.

"His name... what was his name?", Ophelia remarked as she sipped her tea.

"Oh heavens, hahaha, what was his god-damned name?"

## *Heirloom*

6 p.m. in a cramped three room flat, Salmah cooed excitedly upon hearing her granddaughter's laughter fill her living room. Her son Masnor stood in front of the gate, baby Marissa in between his arms.

"Isn't it your ex-wife's turn to take care of her?", Salmah asked derisively while picking up the bundle of joy from her son.

"Last minute work, according to her", Masnor answered ruefully.

After exchanging the customary handshake with her, Masnor made his way home to catch a few winks before starting his night shift as a security guard at a condominium.

No sooner had Salmah set Marissa on the bed than the little one started crying. So *manja*, Salmah thought to herself. Picking Marissa up, she shook her gently as she uttered childish nonsense to her. Through pinches of shredded banana fritters, grandmother fed granddaughter with stories of her coloured past.

"Do you know your *nenek* used to trek through cemeteries just to get to her school?"

"The other girls in the village were jealous that I was the one your *atuk* chose; he was the most handsome guy in the village after all."

"I remember when your father was your age; so chubby and noisy, just like you!"

Salmah caught a glimpse of herself from the microwave oven. Her reflection's eyes wistfully stared back at her. Her heart ached over how wrinkles took the place of smooth skin and how grey streaks made up most of her luscious locks.

Her husband, once a bastion of traditional romance, now treated their home as a hotel to which he checked into irregularly. He would reek of whatever saccharine scent the holder of his heart the previous night was using, every single time.

Taking great care to unlock and lock the gate whilst not awaking the now-sleeping Marissa in her arms, Salmah made her way to the void deck. It was happenstance, that sunset was about to begin its show. Indigo, reds and oranges slowly devoured the blue sky. Salmah took a seat on a stool and admired the lavish display.

Salmah hummed a soft hymn to keep little Marissa at ease. Marissa looked upon her briefly with a gaze that suggested bemusement and tranquillity, and promptly closed her eyes again.

In that fleeting moment, Salmah saw herself in Marissa; she saw herself in this child's father. She silently lamented this tragic quality in relationships involving her bloodline as an heirloom; a curse upon which her kin will be afflicted with.

*"Ku tak rela, ku tak rela lagi"*, she uttered.

I can't bear this, I can't bear this anymore.

## *Anak Kau*

"What else are you waiting for?! Don't waste *ayah's* time!"

Patience was not a virtue Sham was known to extoll. He then shoved young Azfar against the wall and in turn started rifling through his backpack for his report book. Azfar was a primary five student with a precocious talent for art. As fastidious as he was to his drawings however, he could not replicate that for his other subjects, often achieving borderline passes. With the PSLE approaching, naturally any parent would be concerned with their child's performance.

Sham, however, was not one of those parents. As far as he was concerned, every single member of his family was a burden on his bony shoulders. Work at the shipyard was anything but a steady job and he was only paid when the crew called him down, which was occasionally. Sham spent most of his days

at the coffee shop with his ragtag bunch of friends, puffing away whilst discussing current affairs or their next trip to Batam.

"Fail Maths again?! Mother Tongue also barely pass?! Then you call yourself Malay *ah*? So stupid."

Azfar felt that his father's words carried more menace this time around. He was never questioned about his identity, much less understand the concept of what it meant to be Malay and here he was being told that he was not fit enough to call himself Malay. All he was concerned about at that point was his family, his friends and the PSLE. Seeing his father take his belt out the loops, Azfar braced himself for the inevitable.

"Peace be upon you" his mother Khairina proclaimed as she approached the front gate.



What ensued afterwards was anything but peaceful. Sham went to town on a crouching Azfar, a sickening thud accompanied his every blow. Khairina screamed and swung her handbag towards Sham, momentarily stopping him. Sham looked upon her with eyes full of hatred and shoved her onto the sofa.

"This is all your fault! You and your stupid son, like mother like son! All you know is to spend my money like nobody's business!"

"Eh, you useless good-for-nothing husband; what money are you talking about? When was the last time you ever gave me money?! I want to buy new bras and panties also I have to think twice you know, for our own sake!!"

Khairina recalled having to swallow her pride at family gatherings to ask her siblings and relatives for money just to get groceries that would get her family by for a week. The absent bastard, as she eloquently put it, was never present at those affairs; preferring the company of the television in the living room paid for by her own brother, his brother-in-law.

Sham then directed his anger towards her, each blow met with an unearthly shriek. Tender brown skin turned red in the house of pain. This went on for several minutes, disrupted at times by Azfar pulling his father away or him shielding his mother.

Throughout this time, the television continued providing the background score. On it, a rather plump character was listening in on his children whining about their daily problems. The father then interjected, claiming that their problems reminded him of a story; and spun a fantastic tale only a father could dream up of.

## *Pak Ustaz*

Rezal lit up under the shelter, taking extra care to scan around for any plainclothes officer every now and then. The rain provided the ambience to what was a relatively average day for the third-year polytechnic student.

Normally, he would take one of his well-renowned power naps during the fifteen minute breaks his lecturer would put in between 3 hour lectures (or brain-cell fryers as Rezal would call it) but the room was uncharacteristically colder that day.

"Have you ever seen a man living out his last moments?" a voice spoke calmly behind him.

"Nizam, my God. Please don't scare me like that; I just watched a scary movie yesterday", Rezal replied in a tone between shock and relief.

It was not really a surprise to see Nizam there, smoking a Camel. After all, he was his best friend and coincidentally his course mate too. Mechanical engineering was a passion they shared (at least one of them did) and their breaks were more often than not in sync with each other's.

"I'm not trying to scare you, Zal. It's just that I've been having these weird dreams, you know? I keep dreaming of-"

Nizam stopped to take a long drag; he had a penchant for taking long pauses in the middle of his tall tales.

"-dreaming of witnessing the end of someone's life. Funny thing was that I couldn't see anything at all; I could only hear unfamiliar voices asking them to repeat the shahada part-by-part."

Rezal could see Nizam quivering at the end of his sentence. He knew that Nizam had consumed "mind-widening" substances before and wondered if his words were left over from a bad trip.

However, when Nizam spoke with such conviction he knew he was not joking.

"Maybe it's time I changed my ways."

"Oh please, the patron saint of Geylang and the Clarke Quay clubbing strip change after just one epiphany?"

"People aren't allowed to change anymore; is that it, *Pak Ustadz*?"

Rezal hated being called *Pak Ustadz*. It reminded of him of his madrasah days, where he was supposed to be groomed to become a religious scholar. It reminded him of the shame he ostensibly brought onto his entire family when he returned home one Thursday night reeking of Jack Daniels, and how gargantuan the right hand of his father looked that night.

"I'd give this a week. No, wait, till Friday evening; I'd probably see you at Fleek anyway that night"

"Screw you *la*, giving me shit over this. Is this how someone would treat his fellow brother?"

"Enough *la* with the fellow brother thing. Alright then, since we're on the topic: what are the names of the angels recording your good and bad deeds?"

"That's Raqib and Atid."

"Nope, it's Munkar and Nakir. *Ah* see, question like that also you don't know."

"Your head *lah!* It's Raqib and Atid. Munkar and Nakir are the ones in the grave asking you the questions in your grave"

Rezal immediately realised his error and eked out a wry smile, tail between his legs.

"Eh bro, lecture start already *ah*. Need to go alr-"

"Ya *lah*, ya *lah*. Anything text me."

Nizam tossed his cigarette onto the ashtray and trotted off. Rezal, on the other hand, pressed his' against the ashtray, watching the orange glow of the tip slowly disappear into a black and grey compound. The last puff of smoke reached for the sky, carrying with it words that could not fit the quota of the fifteen-minute break.

## *Stadium*

"Pass, pass!!"

"*Oi*, pass la!!"

"@\$":#@\$:( \$"!!"

Ikhwan exclaimed in disgust at Malik's attempt on goal as Faris looks at the ball roll harmlessly out of the void deck. The trio were the closest of friends, a bond forged from their days in primary school. As fate would have it, they ended up in the same secondary school albeit in different streams; Malik and Faris the "brighter" ones.

The day had ended rather sourly for them but for vastly different reasons. Yet with a football in hand and a void deck as their National Stadium, any drab day could be turned on its head with a cup final held at the void deck. The Football CCA held their trainings on Wednesday afternoons like these and



had it not been for the fact that Ikhwan had just been suspended, he would have been put through his paces already.

Everyone who was in the upper secondary level knew about the incident that led to Ikhwan and another hapless chap's suspension; there was a long queue in the canteen at the Malay food stall, Ikhwan took it upon himself to join the queue at the front, a chap behind called him out on it and amidst insults about their mother's vaginas and false claims of illegitimacy, punches flew and kicks rained on each other's torsos.

It did not take long for the brawl to end seeing as Ikhwan was gifted with cinder blocks for fists and the leg strength of a horse. The hapless chap ended up needing attention at the outpatient clinic at the A&E and Ikhwan landed himself in the discipline master's room.

"Eh faster take back the ball *la*, you kick what!!"

Malik scurried out to take the ball as Ikhwan shared a freshly lit cigarette with Faris. It was his way of seeming charitable despite being the only one brave enough to procure contraband packs from shady characters near industrial areas.

Play soon resumed and all of them took turns scoring goals and keeping them out, with staggered smoke breaks of course. Ikhwan was Messi, Ronaldo and the national goalkeeper all at once in his mind; whatever he lacked in social decorum, he made up for with his colourful imagination.

As fate would have it, Faris miscontrolled a ball wildly and it rolled sweetly for Ikhwan. This would be the goal to complete his hat-trick, from 30 meters out. Ikhwan took three steps and gave the ball a piece of his mind, proudly exclaiming 'GOAL!' at the top of the lungs before the ball even left his foot, *a la* Ronaldo.

The ball flew and crashed into the top corner; the corner window of the utility store that is. A loud crash ensued, and fragments of frosted glass fell upon the dirty concrete. How serendipitous; police officers were responding to complaints of rowdy school kids playing football under the void deck and were greeted by the sight of three boys looking at the shards in horror.

The whole shebang ended under fifteen minutes; the officers asked for their ICs, spotted a half-full pack of contraband cigarettes in Ikhwan's pocket and duly got the trio into the police car to be questioned further at the neighbourhood police centre.

What a Wednesday it turned out to be. Being suspended, breaking a window and as luck would have it, getting caught with contraband cigarettes; Ikhwan finally got his hat-trick after all.

## *Mutiara/Farid*

Friday night at one of the clubs by the riverside. The entrance was surrounded by pasty servicemen looking to forget the sorrows of the week and social butterflies gathering enough courage to enter and taking a short smoke break respectively. In the inside though was a vastly different scene. Streaks of strobe lights littered the poorly lit club, gyrating together with clubgoers in unison. Beer towers and inebriated hypebeast hangers-on eyeing potential targets to grind against; surely there is no better place to spend a night out than here.

Mutiara or Tiara for short, and her friend Lucy were sequestered in a booth watching the night pass by. They had their fair share of booze and gallivanting from club to club and were just beginning to wind down what has been a pretty dreary week.

Tiara had just broken up with her boytoy after finding a video story of him spooning one of her friends on Instagram, on ladies' night no less. So much for sisters got each other's backs.

“Eh, don't you have your brother's engagement to go to later? You wanna bounce first or not?”

“*Nanti lah*, it's not so early; my *barang barang inai* already prepared also.”

One would be hard pressed to assume that Tiara was anything but au natural; a curvaceous figure, assets and all. Ten years ago, Tiara was Farid; a lanky seventeen-year-old who had an affinity for crop tops and was the *mak andam* at his cousin's wedding.

Life had not been easy since her transition but here she stood, a specialist buyer at a luxury fashion house and the occasional makeup artist for the people in her inner circle.

Beloved by her extended family, a unicorn in a Malay stable, she enjoyed the kinship and sense of belonging others like her could only ever dream of.

Through sips of their Bloody Mary, both ladies poured their hearts out to each other on their misgivings about their personal lives; how much of a *sundal* Tiara's man was despite her showering him with a love supreme, the office slut in Lucy's office slowly extending her hooves towards their mutual eye candy. Their conversation was occasionally interrupted by invitations and/or trips to the dance floor, the sort of attention that provided opposition to misgivings about their undeniable beauty.

At about five twenty, patrons were slowly slinking out into the streets to hitch rides back home and the ones that remained were sobering up to take the first train an hour later. *Minahs* were kissing their golden-haired *matreps* goodbye, a scene reminiscent of forlorn lovers leaving on steamships to war.

Tiara and Lucy were more or less lucid by this point and were mulling over whether they should have a bite to grab before parting ways. A prayer call began sounding on Tiara's phone, indicating that the time for *Subuh* was now.

"Eh, you don't want to go to the mosque first?" Lucy asked in jest.

"*Aiyo* how to, when I'm dressed like this and drunk 'till I'm full?"

"You mean on normal days you'd wake up this early to pray?"

"I may be devilish *sayang*, but I have my angelic side too."

Julia went on to describe to Lucy about the dilemma she was facing lately while walking towards the train station. She spoke about how, upon completing the night prayers one day, she got to thinking about her own mortality. Having been present at both her parents' funerals a year apart from each other, she began wondering how the funeral procession would be like for her should she pass on.

Would she be accorded the rites or the sex she was born as, or as what she was now? While transitioning, the burning question then was how the world would receive her; now, it was in what state she was going to meet the Almighty.

She had read on Facebook posts from armchair religious leaders about the descriptions given by the undertaker about the horrid state the body of a recently deceased Malay man who had taken to the “gay lifestyle” was in; an unshakeable putrid smell accompanied the body which was basting in its own liquid waste from all orifices.

That made her question the very decision she undertook ten years ago and whether or not she was going to reverse the decision when death is close to approaching her door. Lucy could only lend her a listening ear as this was a situation unique only to those like Tiara.



“Baby girl, I think you know yourself the best. Anyone can have their say but ultimately you *tahu* in your heart what you must do; I can only support whatever decision you choose to make.”

Those were the words Lucy left Tiara with as they parted ways. As Tiara stepped into the train, she began searching her heart for answers.

“DOORS CLOSING... tititititi”

The train edged further into the dark tunnel, moving along the tracks that followed a trail not unlike the henna patterns that Tiara was accustomed to drawing; forms whose meanings are only given through context.

## *The Gravekeeper*

The pitter patters of Italian leather loafers and designer heels broke the silence that surrounded the cemetery that Saturday morning. A yearly pilgrimage to Jalan Bahar to commiserate the day their dear brother passed now seemed more like a mere formality than a trip borne out of affection.

No sooner had they arrived at their brother's plot than they spotted an elderly gentleman seated leaning against the tree directly in front of his grave.

Wearing a white round songkok with a Good Morning towel draped around his neck, the man gave off the aura of their *atuk*, a simple man who spent most of his time prostrating on his prayer mat and showering his cucu-cucu with affection only a grandparent could show.

"It's been a while since you visited him, no?", the elderly gentleman queried.

"How did you know this, *atuk*?", the one with the loafers responded as he extended a handshake to the elderly man.

"*Atuk* could sense that he had been waiting for long. *Atuk* can feel these kind of things. No matter how hard headed one can be, there is always a soft side to them"

"I doubt he had anything remotely similar to a heart", chimed the one with heels as the elderly gentleman went to work on the overgrown garden of weeds above her brother's grave.

After he was done the one with loafers extended his hand to him for a handshake, a few crumpled dollar notes in tow.

"Here, *atuk*. You should be at home relaxing, not straining yourself like this"

"It's alright, *adik*. I just hope that you continue to pray for him; *atuk* knows that you do and *atuk* knows that he's grateful"

"*Atuk*, forgive me for asking but do you know my brother from somewhere?"

"*Atuk* is but His mere servant; I'm just here doing a job"

After a round of supplications, the pair thanked the gravekeeper for his troubles and made their way back to the car.

"I can't seem to recall what his last words were", said the one with the loafers ruefully.

"Why should you? What does it matter anyway; all he ever did was sink you into financial ruin", the one with the heels retorted flippantly as she opened the car door.

The one with the loafers took a last look at the graveyard. His brother was flawed like the best of them; in and out of rehab centres, jumping from one halfway home to another. He recalled hushed breaths and tears across the intercom, of a man who took the wrong turn in life and was paying dearly for it.

The rain began to descend the moment he started the car. Driving past tombstones provided a sobering reminder of life's finiteness, of how fleeting moments are in one's being. As the white noise of rainfall ensued he felt funny, as if there was a message being relayed from a past he was only beginning to recall.



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In *An Asian Striped Mammal and Other Short Stories*, the stories tread upon the lives of anonymous beings in a Singapore that is hidden yet uncannily familiar.

There exists, amidst the occasional revved engines and orange sodium vapour lights, a host of characters who are as compelling as features on “high penetration” sites.

S\$10.00



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