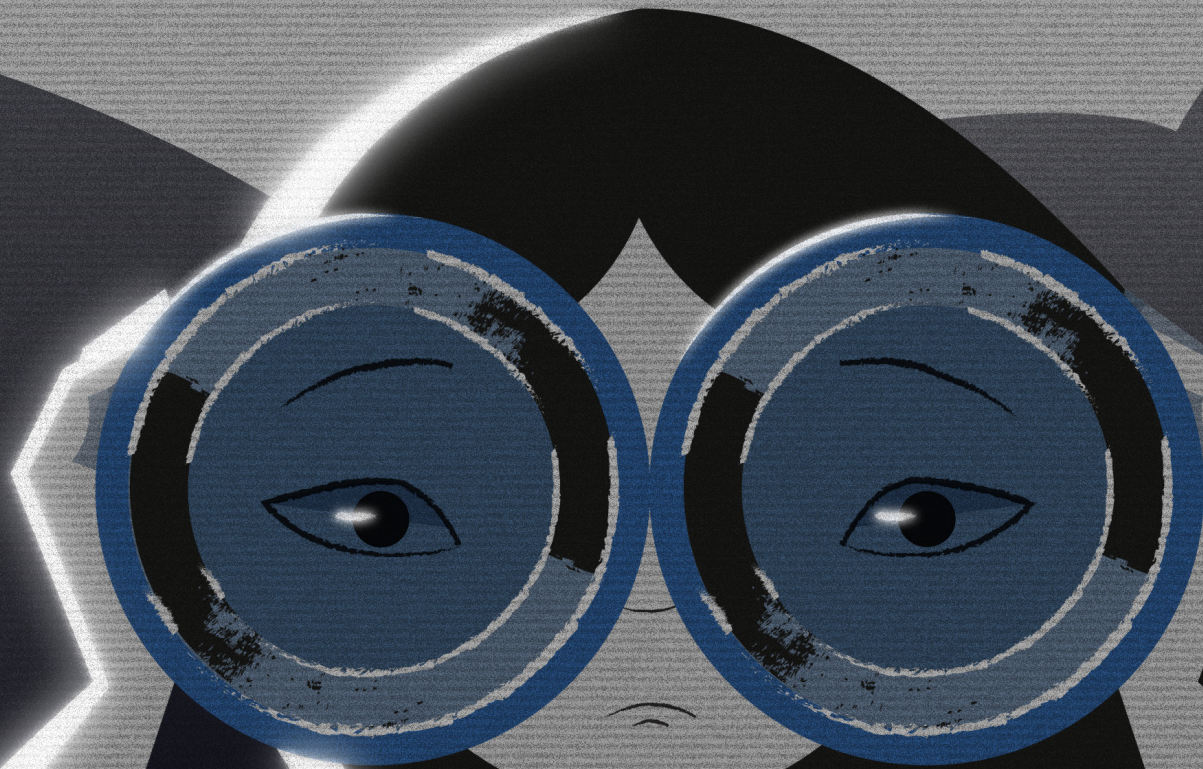


**AMANDA LEE KOE · JOSHUA IP · POOJA NANSI  
SUFFIAN HAKIM · NEO XIAOYUN**



**PEERING  
INTO OUR  
FUTURE**

Peering Into Our Future: A Series of Unfortunate Short Stories

# mutant

Published by [Mutant Communications](#)

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Produced in Singapore

First Edition



**PEERING  
INTO OUR  
FUTURE**

A Series of Unfortunate Short Stories

**mutant**  
for good

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# Foreword

This year marks Mutant's 10th anniversary.

When we launched Mutant, the goal was to build one of the best PR and content agencies in Southeast Asia, and then continue expanding. Looking back, while I can confidently say we have achieved these goals, there's one area we haven't focused on as much – and that's ensuring our work has an impact that extends beyond clients, to make a mark and leave a legacy.

Throughout my life, I have fought for what I believe in. I've run ultramarathons for charity, joined protests, volunteered around the world and, back in my days as a journalist, written articles about worthy causes to amplify voices that needed to be heard. Doing something positive for society that creates a lasting impact is important, and so we thought it was high time to wrap this into Mutant's values and mission.

That's why Mutant is launching its inaugural, team-driven CSR initiative, **Mutant for Good**. We see this as an ongoing movement that will galvanise a generation of passionate and enthusiastic advocates, who in turn will continue to educate and inspire their communities to take action and make change.

This year's campaign focuses on ocean conservation. The magnitude and multitude of life in our oceans is breathtaking (no pun intended) but so is the damage being done to it. We may feel separated from it on land, but life in the oceans is just like ours – complex and resilient but fragile, and in need of tremendous care.

As anyone in the conservation space knows, trying to encourage change isn't straightforward. Despite being a life-affirming source of support for millions worldwide, marine ecosystems are under immense stress from global warming, overfishing, and pollution. As an island nation, Singapore has a responsibility to care for its rich coastal and marine biodiversity. However, media coverage on the issue has been surprisingly scarce, and most coastal conservation efforts have been isolated and inconsistent.

We wondered how we could get others to consider our home of Singapore and its place amongst the oceans, about our role in protecting not just the land but the waters that sustain us.

That's when we decided to make ocean conservation personal through the power of storytelling.

What is happening to the oceans affects us all, and with Peering Into Our Future, we hope to educate, facilitate and revive the deep connection that we Singaporeans, as island dwellers, have to the marine world.

*Joseph Barratt,*

*Founder and CEO of Mutant Communications*

# Preface

It all began on a rainy Thursday in February.

The Mutant team met not over Zoom nor at their usual office, but at an event space nestled on the top floor of a building in Clarke Quay.

Rain-splattered, wind-swept, and in need of caffeine, the Mutants made their way inside the aggressively air-conditioned, black-walled room for their annual team kick-off, prepared for a day of presentations and team-building exercises.

They'd been promised a go-karting excursion in the afternoon.

But before racing around a track could happen, there were business matters to discuss: a review of the previous year, sales targets, team KPIs, HR announcements. There was also the matter of introducing a new initiative – Mutant's first-ever corporate social responsibility campaign.

What happened after the cause – ocean conservation – and partners were introduced, no one saw coming. The Mutants were broken into groups and given an hour to come up with a pitch for a CSR campaign they had only learned about a handful of minutes prior.



Laptops were opened, fingers flew across keys, voices whispered across round tables, private Slack channels were created, decks were quickly thrown together.

When the hour was up, the Mutants breathlessly began their pitches: art installations, augmented reality games, educational programmes, a giant claw machine, a documentary film festival.

It was all very grand.

But would it be impactful? Would it inspire people?

Maybe.

They all knew they could do better.

Over the next few weeks, the Mutants continued to mull over how best to approach this CSR campaign, how best to bring attention to the incredibly urgent and important topic of ocean conservation.

And then finally, they realised: it should be done through storytelling.

They should imagine what Singapore might be like if there is no action taken to conserve the ocean and marine life.

They should work with their NGO partners to develop the content pillars and gather the scientific data to ground these stories.

They should engage local, award-winning writers to work closely with their content team and pen the short stories.

And they should bring those compelling, heart-wrenching, unsettling stories to life through a dynamic social media campaign.

So, that's what they did. And here they are, months later, thrilled to present *Peering Into Our Future: A Series of Unfortunate Short Stories*.

Inside, you'll meet a lonely wife, a family out for a day at the aquarium, an exhausted seawall real estate broker, a thoughtful birthday girl, and a plucky hawksbill turtle.

Inside, you'll find versions of Singapore that feel surprisingly familiar, that feel futuristic, that feel dystopian.

Inside, you'll learn what life could be like if oceans continue to rise, if conservation efforts are not taken seriously, if not even magic can save us.

The Mutants can't promise that these stories all have happy endings – but there is always room for hope.

They hope these short stories entertain you. But most of all, they hope they inspire you to consider the environment around you, to be more thoughtful about your choices, and to take action now.



**Wherever we look,  
we will find them.**

by Pooja Nansi

# **Wherever we look, we will find them.**

Sophie had been following this evening routine for the last eight years: clean up after dinner, finish up on the day's work emails, settle down on the couch to watch TV till she felt herself drifting off to sleep. She knew the motions like clockwork, carried out the actions without having to think. Her body followed through the movements from one task to the other without ever being fully present. Sometimes she thought she could do this in her sleep. She knew she was cleaning the dishes or refilling the kettle or watching another documentary but it felt like she was always somewhere else, living another life in her head while her body lived this life in the apartment she shared with Dan.

She didn't know when life had become a predictable schedule she sleepwalked through rather than a thing to be lived. Two years of lockdowns and social distancing in the pandemic meant she and Dan had found themselves forced to really confront each other after a decade of marriage. Initially, she had thought having to work and live in the same

space would mean they might find some of the closeness that had existed at the start of their relationship. But as the days dragged into weeks, the weeks to months and the months into a year, it felt like they were just living in their own private isolations together. The only constant in their relationship had become silence and the glow of the flickering screens they gave their attention to instead of each other.

Tonight, as the lights in the neighbouring flats dimmed as families finished up their dinner routines, Sophie found herself yet again numb and sitting alone in darkness. The only light on her face from the harsh glow of the TV showing a documentary about the ocean.

*Huge amounts of plastic waste are dumped in the environment and microplastics now contaminate the entire planet, from the highest summit of Mount Everest to the deepest oceans.*

The narrator's voice cut through her distracted thoughts. There, staring back at her, was the image of an alien jellyfish floating in solitude in the eerie depth of the ocean by itself. By all means this looked like a tranquil, glowing existence, but something about it frightened her.

In the early years of their relationship, she was sure that she hadn't been so lonely, sure that she and Dan had felt close to each other. She was sure that this was the truth and that she wasn't imagining it. Surely they had once left their respective workplaces giddy with anticipation, come home and chosen outfits that the other would like. For her, it was

the emerald dress that showed off her collarbones; for him, it was the grey twill shirt she thought he looked so handsome in. Surely they had gone to dinner, sat at a candlelit table, their ankles grazing against each other, causing jolts of electricity to course through their bodies. Surely they had been set alight by each other's presence and giggled through an evening laced with too many martinis?

After racking her brain to remember what the restaurant had been called, she couldn't be sure she wasn't confusing reality with a scene from a rom-com she had watched last week. When was the last time they had had a meal together?

*In 2017, Belgian scientists announced that seafood lovers could consume up to 11,000 plastic particles a year by eating mussels, a favourite dish in that country.*

It had been gradual. First, they stopped making an effort when they were tired, assuming that the other would understand. Then it became easier to order a meal and stay at home, in front of the TV in what was initially comfortable silence. Then they stopped ordering the same meal to avoid coordination, each of them ordering what they wanted, when they wanted, thinking that the other would sort themselves out. They stopped eating together, they stopped sleeping at the same time, or in the same bed. They justified it by saying it was more convenient with their different work schedules. And eventually, even though it was just

the two of them always in the same house – especially in the peak of the pandemic days, always next to each other – they might as well have been oceans apart. These days, the silence between her and Dan was so deafening that she felt like she was underwater, disappearing into an abyss.

What would it feel like to actually disappear? Like the pieces of plastic shown under a microscope in the documentary droning on on her TV, making themselves smaller and smaller, shredding over time into fibers even tinier than a singular strand of fine human hair – particles so miniscule, they become airborne with ease, take flight, embed themselves into everything, your food, your skin, your bloodstream. How different was that from how things felt now? She was always present in Dan's space, but she might as well have been invisible. Was it true that the less you could see of something, the less you thought of it, the more easily it could become an intrinsic part of you? Like this silence, this distance, this separation that had become embedded in their relationship.

*Microplastic pollution has been detected in human blood for the first time, with scientists finding the tiny particles in almost 80% of the people tested.*

She thought about how the plastic take-out container she was eating her reheated dinner from was possibly disintegrating even as she held it, tiny fragments, invisible to the eye floating into the atmosphere, perhaps

finding their way to the rest of the world, carried by the wind, by her own body.

She thought of all the ways in which she longed for Dan to return to her, how their fights had gotten from bad to worse, until they decided, again in the name of convenience, that it was better to stop talking at all. She thought about how the words we say or do not say to each other stay suspended in mid-air, until they land somewhere we never intended them to.

*We know particles can be transported throughout the body via the river of blood.*

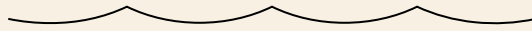
The concept of quarantine, meaning “forty days,” has been known since biblical times. This was the amount of time ships were kept docked and isolated to prevent the spread of the Black Death. The astronauts of Apollo 11, Apollo 12, and Apollo 14, were quarantined after returning to Earth to prevent possible interplanetary contamination by microorganisms from the moon.

How do we learn to live together and not hurt each other?

How can intimacy and distance be such a precise tightrope walk, where one tilt too much to either side can cause you to lose balance and fall off the path altogether?



*In water, marine organisms often eat microplastics, assuming they are food. This can trick their bodies into thinking they are full, and result in them starving to death.*



Sophie's eyes blinked open reluctantly to the blazing glare of the morning sun. She had stumbled into bed last night and forgotten to pull down the blinds. She didn't feel ready to face the world today. It was as though overnight, something had shifted in her. She had been living this existence day in and day out for 664 days. She knew this because she had spent one particularly boring Zoom meeting calculating how many days had passed since the announcement of the first lockdown. The thought of showing up on a screen hour after hour, forcing a smile through meetings she frankly just didn't care about felt unbearable.

Without thinking twice, she texted her boss to say she would be unable to show up to work today as she was feeling particularly unwell – not a complete untruth, she told herself.

She stood in the shower for a long time, letting the hot water run down the small of her back. She dried her hair, put on a pair of clean jeans and a t-shirt, grabbed a tumbler of coffee and left the house. She found herself on a bus route she knew from childhood.

This was a journey she had taken often with her dad on special days when he would let her play hooky from school. They would have a

breakfast of kaya toast and soft boiled eggs together and take a bus ride to the local aquarium. They would sit together for an hour or two, never saying very much to each other. But he would always hold her hand, and they would sit in awe in that tranquil, glowing existence. Sometimes quietly pointing out a majestic giant stingray gliding over their heads to each other. Then they would leave to share lunch somewhere nearby before heading home.

Her relationship with her father had been an odd one. They had never said "I love you" to each other, and outside of these outings, they hadn't really been super affectionate, but somehow Sophie had always been aware of his quiet, unconditional love and these outings to the aquarium were her constant memory of her time with him, of the unspoken, unacknowledged closeness they shared.

Returning to the aquarium alone and as an adult felt quite different to her. For one, she hadn't as a child been aware of the problematic ethics of the space. How they entrapped creatures who had entire oceans to roam into a comparatively tiny space they were forced to relentlessly share with others, how the specific ecosystem needs of these varied species were often neglected.

Sometimes, she thought, when imposed, closeness can kill.

As she sat on a bench in the blue tinged light, she wondered to herself if all relationships could be explained by how she felt in the aquarium.

How very much she resonated with the conundrum of these floating creatures all around her. On the one hand, they were protected from all the harm they could face outside of this controlled environment – from microplastics and straws and grocery bags that could suffocate them. She had read that it was probable that hundreds of millions of wild birds have consumed plastic, and by mid-century, all seabird species on the planet are predicted to be eating it.

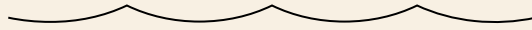
On the other hand, the marine creatures were trapped in this glass infrastructure pretending to be an actual body of water. They were arguably safer, but also living only an imitation of some semblance of a happy, healthy life.

Sophie wondered what it would take for her to feel truly alive again. Some part of her no longer wanted to live in this fragile glass bubble of her life. She no longer wanted to be stuck swimming around and around in circles only to bang up against the glass of her goldfish bowl and realise that her life felt like it was full of constraints. She felt trapped and suffocated. She desperately needed to come up for air.

She walked towards the heavy glass exit doors and pushed them open to step out. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to brightness again. She found herself taking big, deep breaths, trying to fill her lungs and regulate her nervous system. She stood out in the open allowing her body to slowly calm down, to return to itself. She realised how alien the sun felt

on her skin. How surreal it felt to be in such a wide open space with the giant shadows of trees playing on her skin. How strange, but how wild, and how free.

She decided to walk the five kilometres home.



By the time her key scraped in the lock, Dan had been waiting for her to come home for hours, worried because he had realised she was not at home, was not responding to his messages and had not picked up his calls.

She couldn't recall the last time she had seen such an intense expression on his face: a combination of relief, anger and affection that would remain etched in her mind forever. She had been taken aback by it. She hadn't known such a force of feeling was still possible between them. Perhaps ironically, it had taken her absence for the distance between them to shorten, the distance created – as was now clear to her – by constant presence, by taking each other for granted.

“Where on earth were you Sophie?” he asked, clutching her hand as they sat next to each other on the couch. She found herself telling him everything. She spoke hesitantly at first, but then it started flowing out of her at a speed she could not control. That she had gone to the aquarium, because it was where she had found comfort with her father as a child, how she missed him, how lonely she had felt in the last couple of years,

how she had felt trapped, alone, how she had missed Dan. How she felt like she was the microplastic in Dan's world while watching that documentary last night. How she wanted to get away from the constant influx of pollution in the world, the constant glare of screens, the constant thrum of voices in her ears, how she had probably subconsciously wanted the feeling of the expanse of the ocean. How instead, she had found herself in another artificial environment, yet another simulation of freedom, of nature. He listened. And when she was done. He said nothing but continued to hold her hand long into the night.

They sat together for hours in comfortable silence as the lights of the neighbouring flats started to dim and then go out until the only glow lighting up their faces was from the documentary on their TV.

*Scientists already understand that plastics continuously fragment in the environment...*

Sophie knew that there were still many things left unsaid between them. She knew that this wouldn't be the last time that distance would come between them either but she did know this was the most at peace she had felt in a long time as she leaned her head into the crook of Dan's neck, as the electric underwater hues of the ocean from their screen washed over their faces and reflected on their walls.

She didn't know how in many more ways the outside world could hurt them, or how many more ways they could hurt each other with closeness

or with distance. What she did know was that all they had to work with was already within them – even if they forgot this every so often as they constantly stared at screens into other worlds.

*“When I started doing this work in 2014, the only studies being done involved looking for where they are,” says Alice Horton, a marine scientist at the UK’s National Oceanography Center who specialises in microplastic pollution. “We can stop looking now. We know wherever we look, we will find them.”*

The background is a dark blue gradient with several light blue rays emanating from the top right. Three stylized fish are depicted: a small one at the top, a larger one on the left, and another large one on the right. The fish are rendered in a simple, geometric style with a textured, stippled appearance.

# WaterWorld

by Joshua Ip

Do Not Frighten  
The Near Extinct Animal

# WaterWorld

*"Water, water everywhere..."*

"I hate that fucking theme song," swore Xiao Ming under his breath as the family of four trundled through the Dragon King Gate, the famed entrance to Singapore WaterWorld. Tinny music piped in through glass speakers – it was said the audio system at WaterWorld was designed to make listeners feel like they were in an actual fishbowl. And in a sense, they were: a massive clear dome surrounded the theme park like an inverted glass bowl, teasing glimpses of the famous attractions within while also keeping the air conditioning from escaping. This was Singapore, after all, and it was bloody hot. WaterWorld, with its climate-controlled environment to preserve its fragile denizens, was thus a favourite haunt of Singaporeans on weekends. Xiao Ming sighed. It was a favourite haunt of the Lees, too.



After they tapped their entrance cards at the Dragon King Gate, with the titular park mascot reciting a draconian welcome in five official languages, the Lees made their way through the soaring hallways towards the centre of the park. Just as the giant, translucent dome tinged the entire park a sullen blue, the walkways of WaterWorld were filled with aquatic displays on all sides. Part aquarium with educational exhibits accompanied by didactic voice overs on eco-conservation, part late-stage-capitalism theme park with thrill rides, costumed characters and really expensive snacks, WaterWorld had something for everyone. (Except Xiao Ming, whose patience was running really thin after two paragraphs of exposition.)

Xiao Hua broke free from their parents' hands, and started running towards the brightest and most colourful display she could see. Xiao Ming rolled his eyes as his overprotective mother ran after his sister. He popped out his phone and continued his game.

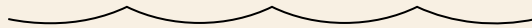
*"What are you playing, Xiao Ming?"* his father asked. *"Can't you spend some time learning about WaterWorld? It's an educational experience."*

*"My game is a post-apocalyptic survival simulation in a world short on water, it's a pretty damn good educational experience,"* Xiao Ming muttered, but his father was already off, walking towards his wayward sister.

Xiao Ming gritted his teeth as another heatwave struck the limited oceans left in his game, leaving them at 15% vitality. The fiery animation of rising ocean temperatures decimated his stocks of kelp and seagrass – that would seriously hurt his fish population in the next game stage. Cursing, he jabbed his finger furiously at the front of the heatwave, trying to move his precious few lobster colonies out of the path of the underwater conflagration.

*Hotspots, hotspots everywhere!* His planet was turning into a massive seafood steamboat, except with no buffet top-up – and his parents still wanted to force him to look at the kitschiest place in Singapore.

“Some people have no fucking sense of priority,” he swore under his breath. “I’m trying to save the earth here!”



“So pretty! Mama help me take a photo!” Xiao Hua squealed and posed in front of a series of tanks lit with multiple lights to create an ethereal scene. Strawberry anemones (“ooh, just like a strawberry!”) floated in suspension, their tendrils drifting behind them. The voiceover droned on: “Sea jellies are cnidarians that have been around for at least five hundred million years...” The display flickered through multiple colours – a sickly green (“like ice cream!!!”), a melodramatic blue (“like jello!!!”), and a sinister red (“also like ice cream!!!!!!”), as the voiceover continued to extol the longevity and resilience of the humble jellyfish. Xiao Hua loved them

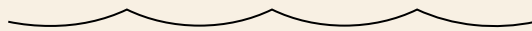
all, and demanded her mother capture multiple shots of her in each hue, backlit by a crown of jellyfish.

“Oh look at the pretty fish!!!” She ran over to a display of bioluminescent fish, glowing dimly in the dark environs of the aquarium, and in the process nearly bowled over her brother, who was still absorbed in his game. She pressed her face against the glass, gazing wide-eyed at the fish. (“It’s like she’s never seen fish before,” commented Xiao Ming.) “Fish!! Oh my god, fishy fish!!!”

This was possibly the best day of Xiao Hua’s life.

She gawked at the ugly face of a stuffed elephant fish, its plough-shaped nose and elongated tooth plates reminding her of A UNICORN (!!!!!). She shrieked with delight when the audio-animatronic ornate spiny lobster began to crawl towards her, hydraulic mechanisms activating its exoskeleton. She squealed when she touched the simulated skin of the yellow mesh sea star – so slimy! The WaterWorld staff nodded indulgently. “Yes, that’s what it feels like. You wouldn’t believe how much effort it takes to get the texture just right and nature-authentic!”

Mrs. Lee cnidarians – simi durian?



As he watched his daughter bounce from exhibit to exhibit, Mr Lee sighed. *Was this the best WaterWorld could offer these days?*

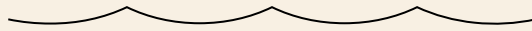
He couldn't really blame Xiao Ming for his lack of enthusiasm. For all of the impressive lighting effects, the vaunted fish displays looked like ikan bilis dipped in glow-in-the-dark food colouring. And the few shrimpy specimens barely moved, as if they were stuck in a thick, viscous fluid.

Which...they were.

All of the park displays used NewerWater, which was some kind of bio-nutrient gel water substitute designed by NUS that was supposed to sustain marine life through skin contact – he didn't entirely understand it but it had been explained to him as wireless charging, but for fish. It made them look like they were fossils suspended in amber, barely moving. He peered closer as their mouths gaped open, and occasionally closed, the only signs of life. As if they were drowning awake.

Nevertheless, Xiao Hua seemed to enjoy the bright colours of the display. Perhaps he would use his mid-year bonus to invest in an animated fish display for their home, the kind inspired by the Tamagotchi and Digimon of generations past, where you could tend your digital pets and watch them grow, evolve, and occasionally die from neglect. A sign of prosperity and surplus for the geomancy-minded, and just a dash of colour to liven up his stark-white living room. The rich cerulean tones that filtered through the wall-to-wall displays at WaterWorld were probably the best part of coming here. He had forgotten how much he missed the colour blue.

His reverie was interrupted by a series of warning beeps and explosions emanating from Xiao Ming's handphone. That dratted game again. So much violence! And so bad for the eyes! Do you know how expensive it is to fit someone for spectacles these days? If his degree keeps going up, he'll need to get new lenses – again. Mr. Lee's internal monologue merged with his internal cost spreadsheet and leapt to unpleasant conclusions.

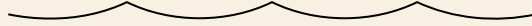


Mrs. Lee looked earnestly at the small font of the exhibit text describing the grey reef shark, located on a tiny panel underneath the giant skeleton hanging from the ceiling. Most of the younger guests oohed and aahed at the length and aggressive posture of the shark, with its full set of dental history making an impressive mouthful. But Mrs. Lee was one of those people who just really enjoyed reading exhibit text.

The blurb said the grey reef shark had a tendency to put on a threat display by arching its back, raising its snout, depressing its pectorals and making exaggerated swimming motions, after which it would engage in a rapid biting attack if ignored. This description reminded her, oddly, of her husband. Mr. Lee, arms akimbo, was haranguing his son about the moral decrepitude of video games, and Xiao Ming was just shrugging it off. *What was that metaphor? she mused. Water off a duck's back?*

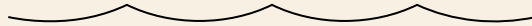
Such a strange turn of phrase. Why would you pour perfectly good water on a duck?

Oh, and now where was Xiao Hua again?



Xiao Hua revelled in the entire WaterWorld experience - even the character meet and greet with HurHur and Heiheihai, the audio-animatronic park mascots that would tell your fortune, and even croak the park theme song (Water, water everywhere...). She would never admit that she found them slightly creepy.

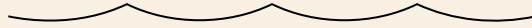
She begged her parents to buy her a giant dollop of fish-flavoured cotton candy. She lined up for the Adult Shark rollercoaster and its more tame Baby version that doo-doo-doo-dooed around the perimeter of the theme park. She was enchanted by her photo opportunity with the Little Nonya Mermaid, that strange portmanteau of cultures and ethnicities. Yes, she decided she wanted to be a Nonya Mermaid when she grew up, and work for Singapore Hot Airlines, sailing the air currents in a giant balloon.



Mrs. Lee stopped at the historical exhibit about corals. She read: *When corals are stressed due to warmer waters, they expel the zooxanthellae from their tissues and turn white. This is known as coral bleaching.*

Oh dear, everything just seemed to remind her of her husband these days. Mr. Lee's arm actions had reached new levels of vigour, and he was going quite white in the face. Perhaps she should do something about it.

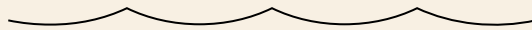
Oh look, another exhibit.



Mr. Lee caught his breath and sat down in a huff, exhausted from educating his son on proper theme park etiquette. They had been in WaterWorld for barely two hours, and he was already a broken man. Xiao Hua had run off to God knows where. Xiao Ming's eyes had never left his phone. His wife was squinting at exhibit annotations.

He needed a caffeine pill. He needed to take off his shoes. No, he needed an adult conversation. Surely his wife would understand the burden he carried – the heavy burden of history. Of knowing how things were in the good old days, and having the responsibility of transmitting that history faithfully to the next generation. After all, human civilization was an oral relay race, mouth-to-mouthing stories of the past from parent to child, tonguing each nuance into the next receptive orifice.

Where had his wife disappeared to?

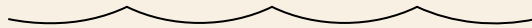


Mrs. Lee, like a fish, had cultivated a series of evolutionary physiological and behavioural adaptations in response to imminent danger. Cephalopods such as the humble cuttlefish produced a cloud of ink to obscure the view of predators. The yellow watchman goby burrowed itself deep into the sand to escape danger. Sensing Mr. Lee approaching, she identified from years of marital experience that he was about to

launch into one of his patented diatribes. Mrs. Lee had this series of hemming and hawing noises that she had cultivated to steer away from any tricky conversations, but tapping on her subconscious survival instincts, she instead decided to deploy camouflage. The blue tang fish could make itself translucent to escape the view of predators when in danger. Mrs. Lee froze stock still, her naturally bland colouring blending in with the dim environment around her.

Mr. Lee stomped right past her, harrumphing to himself.

Mrs. Lee sighed. Marriage was hard.

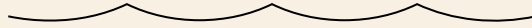


When did he start becoming such a nag? He just wanted to sit Xiao Ming down and explain to him about how WaterWorld used to have dolphins. Amazing creatures, the same size as a human adult. Like fish but not fish – underwater mammals. How did one explain a mammal again?

Anyway, he wanted to talk about dolphins and how they could do tricks. They were basically undersea dogs. And that book he read when he was younger about them having super-high intelligence and leaving the planet to avoid the climate catastrophe. So long, and thanks for all the...? Aiyah he forgot already. But surely Xiao Ming would have loved to see dolphins at WaterWorld back in its heyday. The dolphins would have convinced him to put down his phone. To open his eyes. To be a brother to his sister. To be a good son. The dolphins would have been better parents.



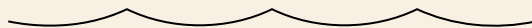
Wait, what was he thinking? Wait, where did Xiao Ming go?



After three hours of high-intensity interval sprints from exhibit to exhibit, Xiao Hua finally began to slow down. Mrs. Lee, again operating on animal instinct, left her note-reading to anticipate the needs of her child.

“Mama, I'm thirsty,” whined Xiao Hua. Mrs. Lee instantly dug into her magical mom-bag and produced what looked like a moist sponge on a metal stick, which she dabbed at Xiao Hua's lips. After she had sufficiently hydrated her daughter, she tapped a button and swabbed the stick all over her sweaty body, where it would extract every last drop of moisture released from her pores, and purify it for later consumption. Some trace amounts of her perspiration would escape to the atmosphere of WaterWorld, where it would later be siphoned out of the air by the giant scrubber intakes positioned every few metres around the park, and sent into WaterWorld's reservoirs. This was why entry to WaterWorld was free – the admission fee was calculated in the trace moisture contributed into the environment by its guests. The water cycle paid for itself.

Refreshed, Xiao Hua stretched her springy legs. Time for another set.



Xiao Ming wandered off. He hated WaterWorld. What was the point of dwelling on these memories of fish? That NewerWater mockery of real, wet OldWater? He hated how his parents continued to rant and rave

about some super-artificial time capsule of something that didn't exist anymore because of the actions of his father's generation. Literally crying over the milk they spilt. He found a side door beneath a green exit sign and ducked out.

Once he was outside, he toggled on the bubble mask that would enclose his head completely, generating a self-sustaining atmosphere that would continue to maintain itself at the correct level of oxygen for him to breathe. More importantly, it would capture every drop of moisture from his exhalations and reconstitute it for intake via a sippy straw. He had been inculcated into this mantra since he was born: *not a single drop should be lost*. He felt the need to go, and he released himself into the urine catheter almost subconsciously as he walked away from WaterWorld. That too would be purified and returned to his suit's reservoir.

Outside, scorching dry wind assaulted him. He put his phone in his pocket and concentrated on driving his feet forward against the parching heat. It was just a short walk to what used to be the beach. Concrete gave way to an expanse of red sand. He found a rock and sat on it, looking out west towards the setting sun. On his right, the tip of Johor jutted out like an accusing finger, and in the distance towards the left, he could see the expanse of the Riau plateau. Between those high points, the dried-up, deep canyon that used to be the Malacca Strait fell away, cracked land sloping down into the shaded depths. If he looked south

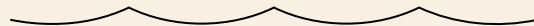
he could probably see the bounds of the old continental shelf, maybe catch another chunk calving off into the depths of trench and waste.

The Malacca Canyon was flecked with white, shaded gold by the setting sun. He couldn't tell the white of fishbone from the white of styrofoam. Carcasses and cartilage, the fossilised history of where some creature choked to death with a bolus of microplastics in its gullet. The former seafloor was coated with a thick layer of man-made debris, plastic shimmering when it caught the light, an iridescent tableau of death. The OldWater had long dried up, but the sheen of plastic still remained, a reminder that some things really do last forever.

He had heard rumours that rare deep pools of oceanic water still existed – former undersea trenches in what used to be known as the pelagic zone. Humans avoided the deepest part of the former oceans, though they did have the capability to traverse them – dune buggies could trundle down the slopes that used to be shores, but it was a bitch getting down the continental shelves.

Lips dry, he took a tepid sip from his moisture accumulator, his game forgotten.

This was the real thing, the actual endgame consequence – it wasn't something he could save.

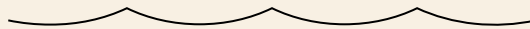


Some fish have a lateral line – a network of sensory organs that help them detect the changes in the water around them – pressure, or movement, or temperature. Mrs. Lee *sensed* Mr. Lee leaving the building, in search of their son, or perhaps an alcoholic stimulant patch.

Well. There was little she could do about that.

A collection of factoids scrolled through her mind – what needed to be cooked for dinner tonight, Xiao Hua's homework, the appropriate timeline to keep all the Lees hydrated, and did you know that the scribbled anthias species swims facing the current, as if swimming in place? Someone had to keep the knowledge for the family while they all struggled with their petty feelings, and she only had one brain. Did you know that the female marbled rockfish can store sperm for months before fertilising their eggs within their bodies, and at one shot bear thousands of larvae? Did you know that cold water anemones could reproduce both sexually or asexually?

Mrs. Lee knew.



Xiao Ming wandered a bit too far and lost track of the “shoreline”. His father always said not to go too far – the ground was unstable past the old waterline. *Sinkholes*, he would say. *That land is not our land. It belonged to the ocean. Be careful where you plant your feet.* Xiao Ming scrunched up his face and tried to trace his path back to the rock where

he was originally stoning. And then he saw his father. His bubble mask was misted with condensation, but he imagined a look of displeasure by default.

But as he got closer, his father looked pensive – wistful almost. Looking out at the valleys between Bukit Indonesia, Bukit Malaysia, Bukit Singapura. Where water used to connect us, where we had channels, now just depth and gravity.

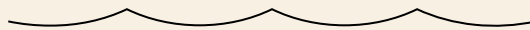
“In the old days, we would swim at the East Coast,” he started. “Still so dirty, plastic bags washing up and all. When I was young I got stung by a jellyfish. When I got older, we didn’t see those anymore. You were more likely to get slapped in the face by a used condom.”

*Gross.*

“I remember...” and then he stopped, trailing off into his own thoughts. Father and son looked out at the expanse of dead dryness, the graveyard of more than half the world’s living creatures. As the sun slowly descended, the shadows of the land masses rose like a dark tide coming in. Mr. Lee placed his hand on his son’s shoulder. A tentative squeeze.

“Come back when you’re ready.”

Then he turned around and walked away.



After a minute or two, Xiao Ming felt a tug on his shirt, and he turned from the scene of desolation before him – he imagined his father had thought better of it and came back to deliver the lecture he was expecting.

Instead, it was his little sister.

“Won't you come back to WaterWorld?” Xiao Hua whined. “It isn't the same without you.”

“Xiao Hua, I hate WaterWorld.”

“Why?”

He thought about what to say to that open, feckless face. Because it's fake – yes, that went without saying. There were hardly any real fish in the theme park, because there was hardly any real water in the theme park, because there were hardly any real fish and real water in the world. Why would you spend your time chasing a fantasy? Living in a fantasy land?

“It's everything I ever dreamed of, kor.”

He thought to himself, Well, it's what I dream of, too. Of a world with water abundant, just a decade ago, before his first blinking memory. Of sharks, those apex predators, cruising quickly and quietly, dorsal fins parting the breakers, sniffing out the slightest hint of blood.

He dreamed of the grey reef sharks swimming through the trash-ridden canyons, snarling at the foreign objects suspended around them, choking on plastic. He imagined himself a shark in those last, searing days. Trapped in an evaporating pool of water, thrashing to stay alive, gnashing his teeth. As his skin cracked and blistered in the direct rays of the big light, no longer filtered through the layers of the water he breathed like air, he glared at the bipedal figures gathering around him, those tasty mouthfuls of red liquid, the crunchy-framed ones from the Up There. Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun. How he wished he could get his teeth on them.

# The Last Tales Of The Merlion

by Suffian Hakim





# The Last Tales Of The Merlion

## Prologue: The Merlion Says Goodbye

It had seeped through the thinnest of cracks, this element of life.

It rose into the air as part of an imposing wave, before slapping against the crumbling seawall. And so this fluid, so vital yet so dangerous, rushed into the hairline cracks of the once-great structure, before bubbling up to its roof, against the blanched scales and open wounds of the chimaera perched there.

"This will be my last story," said the chimaera, his proud voice a low rumble against the roar of the ocean. "The sea calls to me."

Its words fell on terrified faces, huddled together against the cold, their eyes darting from the hairline cracks that striated their haven, their *sentosa*, above the roiling waves to the relentless waves pounding against it. The chimaera's companions, a tribe of no more than fifty souls, began crying. They beseeched him not to leave them.

"I am not leaving you to die by the deluge," said the chimaera, turning its proud head back to face the sea.

"Where will we go, O Merlion?" they asked.

"You will know," replied the Merlion. "When my three tales have been told, you will know your fate. These are tales of those who came before you, so they may guide you for what is to come after."

The Merlion's followers exchanged dark looks. Behind them, the land once known as Singapore sat, festering, blighted, its once-grand concrete jungle now a ruinous shadow of a once-thriving society. The people inched closer to their protector. "We are ready," they said.

The Merlion then perched itself at the edge of the seawall, and began the first of its three tales...

### **Mr. Dyson De Souza, Seawall Realtor**

Many centuries ago, in the distant year of 2165, there lived a realtor named Mr. Dyson De Souza. A realtor was part of an ancient construct called a 'job', in which people partook in a certain set of activities that would earn them currency to get all the things they needed to live...and more. Eventually, when they earned enough currency, they could stop going to their job. Back then, however, most of them went to their job until they were 70 or 80, too old to enjoy what life they had left.

Anyway, a realtor, also known as an estate agent, would be the middle person in the sale of land or a building. Yes, back then, the idea that plots of Earth were for specific individuals to own was rather prevalent. It was part of many problems that led to us inheriting what we see before us: the sea, rising up like a giant maw to swallow us whole.

But let's get back to Mr. De Souza.

It was a torrential late July in 2165. It had dropped below twenty degrees celsius for the first time in Singapore's history. Mr. De Souza was sitting in his office as heavy raindrops battered the thick climaglass windows. The windows were a godsend. The material was less brittle than glass, kept the elements out and controlled thermal flow.

Opposite him sat three gentlemen from the Ministry of Culture and Community. In the middle was Mr. Bok, balding, bespectacled, beer-bellied. To his left was Mr. Syed, stout, smiling, smart. To his right was Mr. Selveraj, short but serious and severe.

"With the Marina Bay Seawall coming up, the Merlion statue will sit in its shadow," said Mr. Bok. "Singapore's icon needs to bask in sunlight."

"A notion I completely agree with," said Mr. De Souza. He cleared his throat. It was difficult for him to speak like that. In circumstances outside of work, he would have said, "Ah-buh-den? Of course lah! Confirm we need to move the Merlion."

“And it needs to be on the seawall,” said Mr. Selvaraj. “The seawall is a symbol of national pride. An engineering marvel. Our protector against the ravages of the rising tide.”

“And not to forget, prime real estate,” added Mr. De Souza with a winning smile. There was a time when that smile was difficult to muster, despite his many years as a realtor. Today it was easy. This would be his final deal. After he brokered this, Mr. De Souza wanted to move to the Himalayas, natural high ground in India.

“Hear hear,” said Mr. Bok.

Mr. Syed leaned forward and spoke conspiratorially. “I hate to play devil’s advocate here, but is the seawall really more historically significant than the Merlion’s current location in Fullerton Bay?”

“Of course,” said Mr. Bok, throwing his colleague a look of disdain. “Perhaps you are too young to remember, or to care about our history. In the year 2100, our nation faced a wet, nasty surprise. We had projected sea levels to rise by only a metre, but instead it rose by four! As the tides churned around us, we scrambled to build the great seawall. Within a year, we built one that stretched for more than 50 kilometres and ten metres high, protecting our southern coast from the rising waves. By the following year, we built seawalls that reached Malaysia. Of course, they paid us handsomely for helping erect those barriers for them.”

Selvaraj did not share his colleague's excitement. "Can we please focus on the discussion at hand?"

This snapped Mr. De Souza to attention. "Yes!" He gestured to the document before them and concentrated on the words he spoke. "If you're agreeable to the terms set forth by my client and their vendor, can I get your signatures here, here and here – for all three of you of course – and we can begin the process of moving the Merlion to its glorious new perch."

Mr. Syed and Mr. Selvaraj looked to Mr. Bok.

"Very well," said the balding man. "May this be the beginning of a beautiful new business relationship."

But it wasn't so beautiful for Mr. De Souza. As soon as he got started on what was called paperwork, which was essentially the creation and duplication (mainly for the various departments within Accounts) of documents in paper form. Paper was a kind of portable surface on which humans of that time wrote anything they wished to communicate.

Paperwork was one of many reasons why those past Singaporeans toiled away. Their 'job' wouldn't just be performed at their place of work. They brought it home, just as Mr. De Souza did that fateful day.

For three days and nights, Mr. De Souza did not sleep. Instead, he worked on The Merlion Migration Plan, a great document that was essentially

a bunch of words that, due to their strategic combination, and the signatures attached to them, meant that moving the Merlion was a legal act. But there were a lot of words to type out.

On the first night, Mr. De Souza powered through. On the second day, as sleeplessness dragged at his eyes and hands, he began slapping himself, occasionally stabbing himself in the palm with a butter knife to stay awake. On the second night, he drank the equivalent of three pints of coffee, black and bitter. On the third day – and at this point Mr. De Souza couldn't really tell day from night – he began writing the conclusion to The Merlion Migration Plan.

At slightly past noon, he heard the voice.

It alarmed him. Not for the fact that it was a disembodied voice in his home. Not for the fact that it was a guttural, animalistic growl. But Mr. De Souza, in his overworked state, was frightened by the content of what the voice said.

“Oi, you *siao* or what? Take a break lah!”

Not many people spoke like that these days.

“Hello?”

“Hello hello, your head ah! De Souza, you better rest, or else you go *siao* one!”

"I'm not siao." He had said it unconvincingly. 'Siao' was the vernacular for 'crazy'. And a person who was not siao would not be speaking to disembodied voices in the middle of the day.

"Okay, I show you who am I (sic), you don't *kancheong spider*, hor?"

"Uh...okay?" Mr. De Souza braced for the worst. The phrase 'kancheong spider' meant to panic like a spider, which was strange, because he had never seen a spider scuttling about in panic. What was stranger was that this voice spoke in the tongues of the lower socioeconomic statuses, those who either could not or refused to adopt Globalized English as their everyday lingua franca. "Go ahead."

"You say one ah!"

There was no other way to describe what happened next other than that a chimaera *climbed* out from the documents. With its great amber front paws, it clawed onto Mr. De Souza's desk and dragged its great feline torso up. Then, with a great heave, it pulled onto Mr. De Souza's desk its lower half: that of a fish, with scales and fins, blanched in the Singapore sun.

"What's up, brother?" greeted the Merlion.

"I'm going crazy," muttered Mr. De Souza, rubbing his eyes and then rubbing them some more when the Merlion remained in his field of vision.

"They always tell us to have work-life balance. I should have listened."

"Don't talk cock lah! You're not going crazy," said the Merlion, mock-admonishing the weary man. It lowered its voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I am here to help, Dyson."

"What the hell was in that coffee? Am I hallucinating?"

"Of course, lah! But just because you hallucinating means I cannot be here, meh?"

Mr. De Souza was pretty sure he was not, in fact, hallucinating, despite what the Merlion said.

"Why are you here...how are you here?"

"How am I here? I'm fine, thank you."

"No I mean...through what means?"

"Ah...magic."

"Magic?" Mr. De Souza got up. "Okay, I have very obviously gone insane from overwork."

"You wait first, let me explain, can or not?" The Merlion stared at the man, its feline eyes narrowing angrily. "So many people suffer like you one."



They work too hard, they pollute the Earth...there's so much negative energy in this world. When you worked three straight days ah, that was the spark. The negative energy reached...what they call it ah?"

"Critical mass?"

"Is it? I thought that one is how you describe the public ah, after they watch the fiftieth *Fast and Furious* movie?"

"No."

"No meh? Maybe you correct lah. So negative energy reach critical mass. So the only thing to counter it is *magic*. I am that magic, lor."

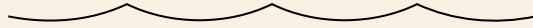
The Merlion rose to its full height, and while there, on his desk, it was no taller than a table lamp. In his mind's eye, Mr. De Souza could see that the Merlion, in essence, was far greater, easily towering over the man.

"I have to go back to work," Mr. De Souza said, shaking his head, hoping that it would be enough to dislodge the hallucination before him from reality.

But the Merlion was still there, looking out the window, scanning the land before him. "The land is so beautiful," it said, its voice now a sad whisper. "It don't deserve what's coming."

This alarmed Mr. De Souza again. "What is coming?"

"You don't worry, De Souza," said the Merlion. "That one not your problem."



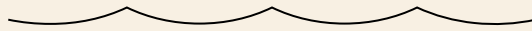
The top of the Marina Bay Seawall was usually a bustling flurry of activity. There were shops and promenades built atop the concrete-and-metal structures. Families would gather on the weekends and watch the waves rise menacingly towards their land, only to be interrupted by the great barrier.

But on the day of the unveiling, there was chaos. Thousands flocked to see the Merlion moved to its new perch atop the seawall. They jostled and they pushed and they shoved. They yelled, they cursed. The seawall was not meant to take that kind of weight, nor that kind of energy. But it was a sturdy, formidable structure, and it would stand for centuries more. But the first hairline crack was formed that day, under the weight of the clamouring masses. Perhaps because it was the year of SG200 – 200 years since Singapore gained independence. There was much to celebrate, and patriotic fervour permeated through the people.

At the unveiling, the Minister of Culture and Community gave a speech about icons and their place in nation building. "But nothing builds a nation quite like the will of you, its people," said the Minister. The speech roused the crowd, who cheered and gave thunderous applause. After the speech, the Minister of Culture, with one hundred cameras trained on him, pulled the large cloth behind him to reveal the Merlion. He pressed a button and jets of water spilled from the chimaera's mouth.

The volume of the applause dipped a bit, because some among the crowd were too astonished by what they saw. "It's...moving. It's alive!" they exclaimed, their eyes wide and glassy with what they were witnessing.

It was only a handful of them, however, and their words were greeted with laughter or mockery. The rest, as always, only saw what they wanted to see.



"Is it just you, Mr. De Souza?" asked the stewardess. A chest pin on her batik dress projected a hologram of the words 'SIA: 193 years of getting you exactly where you need to be', coupled with an image of the arrowlike SIA Supersonic Carrier Class 5.

"Yes, just me."

"Not many people go to the Himalayas alone these days." Her smile faltered momentarily.

"You could join me. I just bought a prefab there."

The stewardess bit her lip, an altogether enamouring sight. She then quickly cleared her throat, and assumed once again the professional demeanour that the airlines had cultivated over the past nearly two centuries. "Perhaps I'll speak to you after flight, Mr. De Souza."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Mr. Dyson De Souza leaned back in his plush business class seat. He pushed a button, and it expanded and unfolded into an opium bed. Nanobots at its legs worked against the turbulence of the flight, ensuring the bed did not budge a Planck's length. The former seawall realtor looked out the window. The plane was above the Marina Bay Seawall now, the Merlion sitting at its new perch, writhing and roaring above the roiling oceans.

He felt strange. He always thought he would leave his country but eventually return with new eyes, a new soul. He thought his country might look upon him with new eyes and a new soul as well.

But the further he got from the seawall, the more certain he was that he would never see it again.

### **The Merlion Messiah**

This land was not beholden to seasons the way so many lands upon Earth are. Even so, it seemed the land was definitely at the final petals of its autumn, and a dark winter loomed.

The people came to their Merlion perched atop the mouldy seawalls. They had changed since the chimaera last saw them. But the Merlion, too, had changed in some ways. But in some ways, it had not.

He still loved the people of the land.

And everyday the people would come and one of them would sit upon its head and pretend to be king of the land. They would chase one another round its tail. And as the sun set they would sit with The Merlion and watch day turn magically into night. And the Merlion would be there with its people, laughing, playing, watching.

The people loved the Merlion and the Merlion loved the people. And the Merlion was happy.

But then the days grew hotter, and the people stayed inside their homes.

"Come people," called the Merlion, "come, sit on my head and watch the sunset with me."

"It's too hot to play," said the people.

"Yes, it is," said the Merlion Messiah sympathetically. "By nearly four degrees celsius since I first got here. But come, I have water to cool you. And you can use my body as a shade."

"No, we want to leave the land for cooler climes and spend money on things we cannot get here," said the people. "Do you have some money?"

"I don't have money, but I can take sea water and turn it into fresh water. Perhaps you can sell it for money?"

And so the people gathered the fresh water and carried it away. And the Merlion was happy.

But the people were gone for so long. And the Merlion was sad.

And then one day, the people came back. The Merlion roared with joy.

“Come people,” called the Merlion, “come, sit on my head and watch the sunset with me.”

“But we are hungry,” said the people. “The world is changing and food is hard to find.”

“Take my flesh,” said the Merlion. “Ration it so everyone has some to eat.”

And so the people hacked into its scales, and cooked its meat, and there was enough to feed everyone. After the meal, on a rare, mild day, the people sat with the Merlion and watched the sunset. And the Merlion was happy.

But as the sun dipped beneath the horizon and the stars crawled out over a troubled Earth, the Merlion realised it had to tell its people to be better. So the Merlion said, “You need to tell others. Stop burning fossil fuels for it is making the oceans rise. Your actions have melted so much sea ice that entire species of penguins have disappeared off the face of the earth. The loss of algae on sea ice also means entire populations of krill have been decimated, resulting in countless communities of whales

dying from starvation. Don't you see we are all connected? From the most humble blade of grass to the greatest President, we cannot forsake one another. Stop cutting down trees. Stop using plastics so that marine life can thrive. Earth can still be saved."

"But how else will we travel quickly? How else can we power the machines that entertain us? How else can we make space for big houses for us to live in? You make us sad, Merlion," the people said. "We don't want to see you anymore."

And so the people left. The Merlion would call out for them, but nobody would come. For a long time, the Merlion was alone. And for a long time, the Merlion was sad.

The people regretted not heeding the Merlion's advice. The world around them fell apart, and they struggled to cope with a rapidly changing Earth. Chaos wrapped the land in darkness and while the land was still there, the country was no more.

When the fires and the screaming faded away, fifty of them climbed the seawall. They cried and embraced the Merlion. "We should have listened."

The Merlion was just happy they came back.

### **Let There Be Water**

In the beginning, there was nothing. There was neither time, nor space, nor a firmament, whatever one of those might be.

And then it happened.

A sudden paroxysm, truly *ex nihilo*.

Nobody really knew what came before it. Everyone had their theories, of course. Whatever you believe in, this sudden paroxysm birthed all that we know, and all that we can ever know. They called it the Big Bang. I call it Provenance.

At first, all the forces that have played such an integral part of our lives, including gravity and magnetism, were all one force. Everything that is – from the blood pumping in your hearts to the most distant galaxies – was squeezed into a space much, much, much smaller than an electron. In these conditions, the very idea of a particle was inconceivable. Merlions and human beings? Even less so.

But the explosion continued, splitting into the four fundamental forces of our reality. The first quantum particles collapsed into existence. And as the infant universe continued expanding, these quantum particles began attracting others, until the first atom was created: hydrogen.

As the universe whooshed towards thermal equilibrium, more and more atoms of hydrogen formed. Over the next few seconds, it would become the most abundant thing in the universe.

And as more and more hydrogen came together, a thoroughly fascinating thing happened. Under the pressure of billions of other hydrogen atoms,



some of them fused together, giving out vast quantities of energy in the form of heat and light. The first stars were born.

As large stars formed throughout the universe, gravity began to properly pronounce itself. And so the stars pulled together and formed galaxies.

Now, in the heart of these stars, more and more hydrogen was fusing to become helium. Too much helium, however, was not sustainable. Something had to give.

And so these stars went supernova, beautiful explosions that lit up the universe and forced helium to fuse some more. Even heavier elements would then form within the violence of the supernova: carbon, nitrogen, iron and an unassuming little element named oxygen.

All those heavy elements from multiple supernovae were caught by the gravity of certain stars. Some of them landed in the pull of a mostly average yellow star that we call the Sun. The material swirled for millions of years until finally coalescing into the spheres we know today: planets and gas giants.

The third rock from the Sun is our beloved Earth.

Now in those early days, 4.5 billion years ago, Earth was a very different place. The coming together of all that material made for a very hot, rocky planet. It was also spinning much quicker than today. But there

were chemical reactions going on at the time – the elements were experimenting with one another, so to speak.

One of those experiments combined hydrogen with oxygen. Water found its way to our home. It was generally too hot back then for water to exist in its liquid form. Most of it was still vapour. But a high volume of hydrocarbons in the early Earth's atmosphere provided the atmospheric pressure required for the first pools of water.

After an epoch, Earth calmed down from its violent, tumultuous birth. It slowed down its rotation and orbit enough for water to take hold and claim this planet. But underneath all that water, Earth was still active, with vents inside its new oceans for the release of complex hydrocarbons.

Nobody knew when exactly it started, but somewhere near these underwater vents, catalysed by water, life began.

Then came a point when there was too much oxygen in the air. Earth had to do something.

And so life evolved.

All of life, for over three billion years, was sustained by water. For eons, water flowed, quenched the thirsts of many, many, many trillion species. It became part of complex systems. For humans, water is integral in our digestive system, in how we remove waste from our body, in the proper function of all our organs, from brain to stomach. Water was

there, going along with the machinations of humans, migrating from the rivers to the fields when ancient Egyptians invented irrigation; facilitating the proper function of Albert Einstein's cerebral system as he conjured his Theory of Relativity; giving life to every world leader, philosopher, artist out there.

For some reason, when the anthropocene went into full gear, human beings began abusing water. They polluted it. They burnt fossil fuels and upset the delicate balance of the global water census. For equilibrium, we needed a certain amount of water in liquid form, as ice, and as water vapour. When the polar ice caps began melting, the ratio became entirely unbalanced.

Can we really be upset, then, that the Great Flood is upon us?

### **The Great Flood**

Having finished reciting its stories, the Merlion then said to its people, "The waves are coming, but there is still hope. There is a land that the water cannot touch. It is a land high above the waters, at the rooftop of the earth. You must build a vessel after I leave. I will show you how to go there."

The people began their work.

For forty days and forty nights they toiled atop the seawall, using parts of it and the still-existing architecture of Marina Bay Sands to build their

vessel. By then, the waves were so high that they crashed near the top of the seawall, frothing against the feet of the people. But as twilight approached and the waves calmed, the people completed their vessel, their ark.

The Merlion came to them in the night, its proud steps waking sleeping babes and sleepless adults alike. "If you heed what I say, this will be the last time I see you," it whispered, as soft echoes reverberated within the aluminium room. "Parting is part of life's great journey. But it is necessary for growth. You must part your home so that you may reach greener pastures. Your ancestors should have parted from their greed and their destructive ways of life – their failure is why you are here. But life is, before anything, about renewal and rebirth. So rise above the towering waves, so that you may thrive alongside the earth as we once did, thousands of years ago."

"Why won't you come with us?" asked a child.

"Because, if all goes well, then my time here is at an end. No more critical mass." The Merlion smiled as he remembered a Mr. Dyson De Souza, from what felt like several lifetimes ago. "Okay lah, okay lah, I better go now or else I will never leave sia!"

And before the humans could process the shift in the Merlion's tongue, he disappeared. No magical pops or fizzles. It was as if he had sunk into the air.

The following day, as they sat in the vessel, praying, shivering, the first seawall broke. It wasn't the one they were on. This one was part of the structure that lined what was once East Coast Park. But it wasn't long before the sea swept in towards them.

They couldn't help but cry as the waters swallowed the land that was once theirs. Against the onrushing currents, trees snapped like twigs under a boot, debris disappeared like salt dissolving into water. Everything that had defined their society was cleansed away by the ocean.

It took less than fifteen minutes for the sea to reach them at the top of Marina Bay Sands.

Someone at the front of the vessel cried, "Undock!"

A loud mechanical click announced that it had disengaged from the rooftop of Marina Bay Sands. And then, with a splash, the vessel was on the choppy surface of the water. It whirred ahead, rocking violently in the choppy waters.

They rode the ocean currents and made frequent detours from their paths to avoid large tidal waves. Powered by the sun with solar panels atop their vessel, the people traversed the ever-changing face of the Earth.

After another forty days and nights, they finally reached the place told to them by the Merlion. They found a thriving community there. They met the descendants of Mr. Dyson De Souza, the descendants of others

who had the foresight to come to this part of the world, and swore they would not repeat the mistakes and follies of those who pursued creature comforts without considering the harm it would bring Earth.

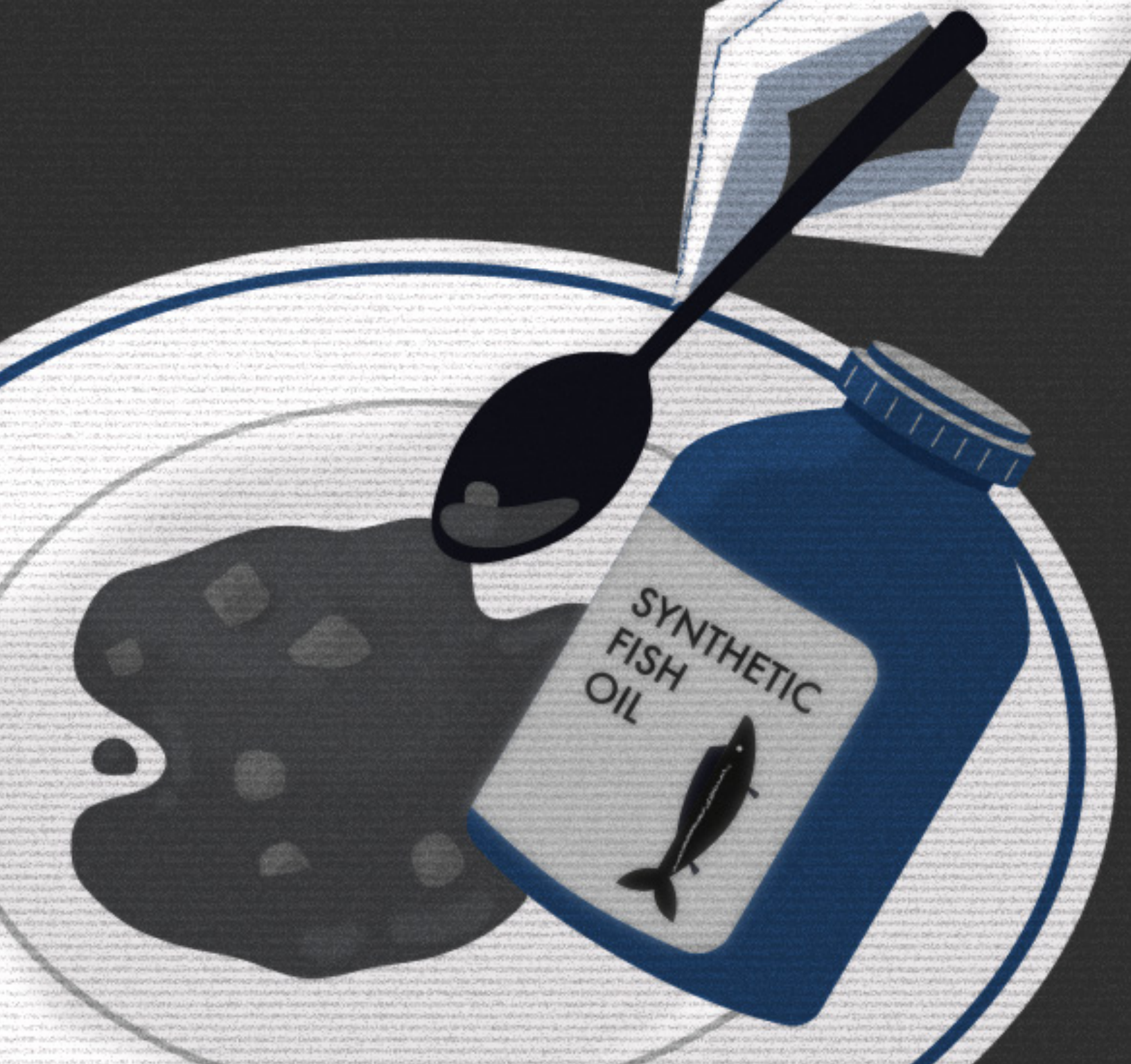
The people learnt to live as the others did. They lived in harmony with Earth, eating only what they needed, using only that which could be used again. There was peace. No individual ruled over them. They ruled as a people.

One day, under clear blue skies, a boy asks his mother, "Will the Merlion ever come back?"

"No," the mother said as they looked out into the placid, serene ocean. "If we do this right, it won't have to."

# Sweet Sixteen

by Neo Xiaoyun



# Sweet Sixteen

Janice would never forget the look on her parents' faces when she told them about Granny's plastic container full of dried seahorses.

She was seven, and thought there was something ethereal about the way their prehensile tails curled up, how the bony plates of their bodies still showed. She recalled her first encounter with an estuarine seahorse on the coastline of Changi. It had been slightly purplish-grey. When her mum spotted it she enthused over the creature and pulled up her solar-powered Olympus camera to snap a photo as though this was her very first sighting.

"Isn't it cool that these are fish? No scales though, just overlapping bony plates. See - it's camouflaged, swaying with the seagrass that their tails curl around. David, come see! Who knows how many moons may pass before our next one?"



The offending plastic container had Winna and David whisper-shouting about “population collapse” and “overharvesting for unproven medicinal functions”. David was more reserved and hesitant, but relented when Winna suggested having the animal rescue and rehab centre staff mediate the issue.

The stash of seahorses was no longer in Granny's storeroom the next time Janice peeked in. Janice was glad she had snuck away an illicit piece before the whole container disappeared. Granny never spoke a word about it, but the old woman's brows seemed more deep-set than Janice recalled, especially as she ladled out the herbal broth. Sitting back down, Granny would sigh over her bowl, commiserating with the soup. Janice couldn't tell the difference – Granny's broth tasted just as delicious and was just as thick. Winna never failed to compliment Granny on her weekly sambal cricket dish or any of her other experimental plant-based and insect-based dishes. Granny only carried a wan, almost vacant, smile. David would chime in to praise the way Granny retained the inimitable flavour profiles of favourite Singaporean dishes – from chilli crab and chicken rice, to assam laksa and fish head curry, exclaiming that Janice does not even need to know what she's missed!

It was years before Granny told David how devastated and broken she was when grounded seahorse powder, the final taste of meat, was removed from her dinner spread.

*Poor Granny.*

Janice cast her birthday wish, and gingerly opened a time capsule she had prepared five years ago. The contents before her were more sprawling than she remembered. Apart from Granny's seahorse, there was a postcard from the National Blue Waters' Sea Cucumbers Sanctuary. Singapore had, decades ago, begun a sea cucumber regeneration and breeding programme, spinning out from citizen vigilance efforts that tracked down trafficked sea cucumbers, and intercepted volumes of the echinoderms at land, air and sea customs checkpoints. Consistent media attention and the ignominious label of being the “#1 Shipping Hub for Illegally Harvested Sea Cucumbers” dramatically shifted consumer demand by acknowledging the ecological value of sea cucumbers and limiting the overall consumption of them to annual affairs.

Sea cucumbers now rejuvenated seagrass meadows and mother reefs near the Southern Shores' Marine Protected Area, and harvests were capped at 100 per week. Co-founded by an angel investor and a coalition of Orang Laut descendants, the sanctuary was a modern, living museum that preserved the islanders' cultural culinary heritage, knowledge about rearing and harvesting, and beliefs around the consumption of sea cucumbers. Janice swelled with pride knowing that the sanctuary had also become a place of refuge, rehabilitation, and employment for those displaced by rising sea levels, in particular the Sama-Bajau, Moken and Orang Laut peoples who had long-standing lives by the sea. Janice had heard that the Sanctuary would soon be starting their regenerative

ocean farming arm that aimed to produce a steadier supply of mussels, clams, oysters and seaweed.

Janice thumbed the watercolour prints of Haeckel's famous illustrations, the inspiration for the community-organised void deck murals under her HDB block. She remembered being motivated to educate others about how the ocean was not a negative space, not merely a water vessel, but a lively home to a staggering array of fascinating critters. Anemones, corals, sponges, brittle stars, porcelain crabs, glass shrimp, stingrays and octopi emerged vividly from the once-blank walls. Residents started lingering around void decks, children playing hide-and-seek between the walls, and the art became a topic of conversation, just like the weather.

She picked up a catfish skull, another intertidal artefact from Changi Beach Carpark 6 but one that stirred up fond memories of a church disaster-relief fundraiser with her cell group. They had carved "Jesus" on the underside of the catfish skulls, where the bones were shaped like a crucifix. It was said that of all the creatures in the sea, the catfish is the most hated and looked down on, so God puts his imprint on it because it needed the most help. The "Jesus" adorned skulls were sold as art pieces during the fundraiser, and in ten weeks, raised \$9,000 towards flood relief efforts in Johor. Janice turned the skull over and smiled at the tribute of sympathy for the most-hated sea creature, appreciating the humble reminder that we, too, came from the sea millions and millions of years ago.

In the time capsule also sat strings of discarded fishing lines and dried-up seaweed. An SD card containing a soft copy of Illustrated World Encyclopedia of Marine Fishes & Sea Creatures – it was also stored on her e-reader and she had read it over and over. An enamel pin from her 7th birthday of a manta ray, one from her 8th birthday of a hawksbill turtle, and one of her own designs that she entered into a futuristic marine life art competition, which Winna had transformed into an enamel the following year. A figment of Janice's daydreams, the art initially did not resemble any creature before Winna helped make corrections so it looked like a nudibranch or sea slug. Janice always felt an inexplicable connection to this creation, and for the year that the design was taped onto her wall, she sometimes could swear it was alive, especially when the evening light fell upon the pink, purple and orange watercolours.

4.59pm. Janice knew from her parents that she was born right at this time, sixteen years ago. Winna and David were heading for an intertidal survey at Changi beach, when the contractions started building. By the time the gynae delivered the child, it was 4.59pm, coinciding with the exact time of the lowest tide of the whole year.

Janice felt an unmistakable pull towards the water. The low tide for the day would be at 6pm – she could still make it if she left now. Janice undid her bun then re-tied it, fluffing up her humidity-matted fringe, undecided. The worst part of turning 16 would be facing reminders every day that she had a stuffy national examination at the end of the year. *Standard Deviation Assignment Four* on her table and *Covalent Bonds* on her

mind, she wheeled her bicycle out the front door. Once outside, the thick canopy sheltered her from the blazing afternoon sun. It always amazed her that it could feel cooler outside than indoors. *Urban heat island effect*, she mused.

As she cycled, towering sea almond, casuarina and angšana trees continued to provide a green umbrella from the sun. Native trees have overtaken the rain tree and broad-leaved mahogany as the predominant choice for streetside plants, creating natureways that mimic the forest structure and provide a suitable habitat for native fauna. Roads have been a single lane each way for some time now; with soaring prices for electricity, policymakers decided that the few who could still afford their electric vehicles did not need as much space as before. Roads and expressways – all 10,000 land-kilometres of them – were transformed into highly effective ecological corridors that connected every island, nature reserve, buffer zone and national park on the island, to the delight of the slender squirrels, colugoes, pangolins, palm civets, whip snakes, oriental pied hornbills, and straw-headed bulbuls.

An hour later, Janice's water shoes squelched in the sand as she stooped among rocks and marine debris, doing what she always did. Her childhood aspirations of working with sea creatures flooded her mind. Hours spent chest-deep in the marine sanctuary off the shore of Terengganu, furiously scrubbing barnacles and biofouling off sea turtles, and any marine creature that needed the scrub. Days spent

going from Traditional Chinese Medicine shop to shop in Singapore's Chinatown, pretending to have asthma. While Winna asks furtively if the store still carried shark fins to help with Janice's "asthma," David would be outside within line of sight, ready to call the authorities. The mornings of their annual pre-dawn intertidal trips to the Jurong Islands, trying not to fidget out of excitement. Sometimes big-fin reef squids drawn to their torchlights came floating by, and one time, Janice thought she saw a floating rice grain, only for David to identify a pygmy squid! Still, Janice's favourite squid was her mum's favourite – the bobtail or dumpling squid. Janice called it Dumbo because of how its two big, round fins propelled its spherical form and helped burrow it into sand after kicking up a plume of silt. Janice loved those mornings – so early that the stars were still out. Winna, David and Janice always treaded carefully because life teemed everywhere they looked – seagrass, crabs, shrimp, clams, fish, stars, urchins.

Winna often shut her eyes on such mornings. Janice noticed every time and she never broke the silence. She knew Winna was recalling the crucial moments of a mass-based movement that advocated for Jurong Island's rehabilitation. Once housing several petrochemical industries, Jurong Island had been rewilded and was now the beating heart for national citizen science projects – its forests home to government-supported breeding programmes to stabilise wild populations of endemic fauna, its waters cleaned and monitored patiently as marine biodiversity return from mother reefs some 20 kilometres away.

Janice was proud of all the change people like her parents had spearheaded in Singapore. Yet, in Janice's own 16 years, she felt as though there had been more setbacks than achievements. What gutted her most was hawksbill sea turtles going extinct, the final death knell from a mixed bag of factors including human harvesting to make tortoiseshell products, human consumption of turtle eggs nesting on tropical beaches, the steady loss of nesting beaches to land reclamation, and the degradation of coral species. Janice mourned the loss, wearing a palette of greens, olives and browns for weeks on end. She had just completed her SCUBA course, topping the class in her mastery of neutral buoyancy and efficient air usage in the dark, murky waters of Pulau Hantu. But all she could think about was the press release from IUCN confirming the extinction of the keystone species and what would happen next. What fills the empty space? Would they remove hawksbill sea turtles from the Land Acknowledgement? For weeks on end, Janice researched. Some sites lamented ecological collapse and unforeseen tipping points as the human race pulled pieces out from a metaphorical Jenga tower; others argued that the data did not support the idea of a fragile nature at risk of collapse, and that, historically, extinction is usually inconsequential to overall ecosystem function. Janice tried to rationalise this, to feel better, but there was only an abundantly bottomless and queasy sensation in her chest.

Wiping her tears, Janice stooped. *Shucks, soaked my bum.* She always forgot how high Changi's water levels were. In her own lifetime, the sea

level had risen 30 centimetres, which meant that the area for walking had shrunk considerably. It was crazy to think that the sea levels were projected to rise another 50 centimetres by the time Janice reached the ripe age of 76. Even though it was no longer the norm to have children, much less look forward to grandchildren, Janice thought about afternoons with Granny, foraging for edible pearl conch snails, or *gong gong*, trying to spot the camouflage that made them match the brown sediments around them and then flip them over to expose their smooth, pearly white undersides. What's even more amusing are their eyes – with individual eyestalks, the conch could technically look in different directions; casting one eye over at Granny and the other eye over at Janice.

“It looks funny, Granny. The name is also funny!”

“And delicious, too! Sorry - carried away. You won't have known, and you also... don't need to,” Granny sheepishly added.

Granny's weathered face now looked crestfallen. She did not need to hear another lecture about the environmental impact of eating harvested seafood. Janice took a deep breath. “Don't worry, Granny. Actually, I'm curious – how did *gong gong* taste? How did you cook them?”

But that was ages ago, before the blanket ban on harvesting and foraging. Before the exemptions for descendants of islanders and 'sustainable harvests' were overthrown. Devastated, Granny and her fellow former



villagers of Pulau Ubin launched petitions, revived their social media accounts to rally for reversal, and spoke at inter-ministerial closed-door dialogues – to no avail. Policymakers did not budge – they weighed in favour of a nation-wide 'equitable' policy of harvesting bans, arguing that the norm had now shifted towards ecological preservation and protection at all costs. Resident groups and former islanders, devastated and broken, captured these beloved seafood recipes into a cookbook, the flavours and fragrances living on in households, as reprints sold out island-wide.

*But, a thought like a burst of electricity fired in her synapses, that brings us closer to the moment of reckoning, right? Of realising we are an island, in a nation of islands, on a blue planet, upon which we depend. Stunned, she looked around. Waters more than mid-way up her shin snapped at a fresh scrape.*

Her vision blurred as she peered at her wound, and that was when she spotted the speck of pink, purple and orange, sitting on a piece of sea sponge nearby. A nudibranch? A class of sea slugs related to garden snails, the nudibranch had evolved to become a beautiful, vibrant, diverse group of sea snails that lost their shells in at least seven separate occasions of parallel evolution. In Janice's lifetime, the blue pearl of the ocean had been acidifying at a rate so fast evolution couldn't keep up – shelled mollusks couldn't pull calcium carbonate from the ocean fast enough to build up their shells, so they succumbed to their fate, gradually dissolving in the

acidic waters. Janice wondered how it would feel to have knowledge that acid rain was melting away at the roof of her HDB. Maybe evolution had unwittingly prepared the nudibranch for this terrible moment. At least ocean acidification doesn't affect the nudibranch?

"And you are from...?" Janice mused aloud as she carefully cradled the creature in her hands. Nothing lifted her mind off the tragic trajectory of the world better than animals. It was her special coping mechanism, her path to detachment. "Are you a Glossodoris? Hypselodoris? Or just unidentified?"

"Um. Hi."

Janice jumped. Wait – the pink-purple-orange slug spoke?

"Do you remember me?"

Janice inhaled. *The pin from my 9th birthday?* She didn't need an answer. It was the slug - animate, vividly coloured, in a pool of water in her cupped hands. She couldn't help but grin. *This is so wild. It's like we met in a dream when I was little and now we're here. The little slug vibrated, Yes.*

Overhead, the skies were a remarkable shade of dark blue. As regional air routes were progressively canned and served by high-speed rails, the sky slowly cleared. Granny loved blue skies. She never failed to take photos of a clear, blue sky and send them to people with a simple, "This made me think of you", or months on, "Do you remember this moment

we spent together?" She used photos to connect, share, communicate joy, and celebrate life. She wanted everyone to remember that blue skies couldn't be taken for granted, that they're the clearest manifestation of the sharp drop in air pollution and contrails.

"Are you hungry?" Janice asked, suddenly aware that it had been quite some time since her Impossible Sandwich at lunch. "What do you eat? Sponges or ascidians?"

The slug dithered a while and vibrated as if annoyed. *Don't you know? I eat whatever you dictate.*

"Not sponges?" Janice confirmed. She was feeling a bit silly for asking, but what did the slug mean by *dictate*?

Slug shook its little rhinophores left to right. *Nope. I eat what my Artist dictates.*

Janice placed the slug on an exposed maze coral. "If I asked you to harpoon a tiny fish — like an anemone — you could do that?"

*Whatever you dictate, you're the Artist.*

Janice pondered the gravity of the statement. A creature, something non-existent two hours ago and still unidentified now, eating outside its ecological niche. Adaptive and flexible, but also dangerous. Yet it was so small and it was a single slug – what big harm could it wreak?

Slug read Janice. "That's precious, coming from a human."

"Okay, let me see you take in the maze coral," Janice challenged. Slug paused meaningfully. When it opened its mouth, it expanded into a seemingly bottomless cavern, some ten times the size of its resting pose. Before Janice could scream *stop*, Slug had fit the entire hard coral in its mouth. Amazingly, Slug grew not a single inch. It remained as it first was, a slim 4-centimetre long nudibranch.

"Where did the coral all go?" Janice sputtered.

"I wasn't eating because I was hungry. I developed an appetite because you suggested it. So it all went in my radula, and right out the back door." Slug was smug. "Corals are interesting. Hard, grainy, but a bit slimy on the top because it's trying to clean itself."

"That's crazy!" Janice shouted. That was a perfectly good maze coral, a species that had made a comeback at Changi's shores, once shipping activities dramatically reduced in the Singapore's Straits. Janice learnt about the years-long, nation-wide movement to *Change Changi's Destiny* in her social studies textbook. The movement achieved its aims of not only overturning the coastal reclamation plan, which would have effectively destroyed all existing coastal biodiversity, but also worked with policymakers to curtail large shipping along Singapore's North Shores, and reducing the overall shipping volume. It was a landmark movement, the culmination of the 250 years of unceasing

land expansion and land reclamation. "Can we grow forever? Honour your land acknowledgment!" was the rhetoric rallying cry, and both the movement and the policymakers were lauded in the eventual decision, a civic cooperation that was remarkably forward for its time, and hailed for its role in awakening a broader, mass consensus for ecological consciousness. For homework, Janice interviewed her parents about their participation.

"There were no straight answers," Winna said, recollections of the victory gleaming in her eyes. "But between the looming elections, corporations willing to relocate, petitions, campaigns and close-door sessions, the policymakers accepted that the tide of public opinion weighed against them."

"Not to forget, the baby dugong carcass that floated up on Changi Beach, and the large crowd it gathered!" David added, still emotional about this topic, years later. "Scientists believed it died on impact with a passing cargo ship." Janice thought it macabre. It was horrifying to her that animals had to die before people could properly recognise their intrinsic, essential place. This – the tiny nudibranch downing the whole maze coral out of appetite and not for survival – was macabre, too.

"I don't know what to do with you," Janice confessed. She had been a key part of advocacy educating religious groups against the practice of 'ethical release' or 'mercy release'. This felt worse than that, considering

the harm she'd witnessed Slug do to the maze coral in mere seconds. "You're one of a kind. You have no ecological niche. You're unknown to science, unknown to everyone in the world."

"Please," Slug scoffed. "There are more wonders in this world than science can fully grasp, catalogue, and study. Besides, I am not unknown to this world – I am known to you."

It's true, Janice thought. Humans don't need to know something before they can commit to its protection. Fifty years ago, scientists who had no clue how many invertebrate species existed on Earth made rough estimations that there were about 1.3 million species of invertebrates, and that at least 30% of them were at the risk of extinction. Though nobody knew exactly the number of species, the twin decisions to cap global emissions and to issue a worldwide moratorium on further deforestation saved countless unnamed species. Fast-forward, the world is now at an estimated 1.5 million species. If humans spared a thought, extended some care to life – human and non-human alike – we could all thrive.

"I'll take you home," Janice whispered. Fetching a fat-bottomed test tube she always kept handy, she collected some sea water and gingerly placed Slug inside. On the way home, the single-lane roads were clogged with peak-hour traffic as they usually were, while the expanded bike lanes were crowded with cooperative cyclists. Under the casuarina trees, Janice wondered what it meant to be harbouring an unidentified

nudibranch, and, crucially, how she might harness her art for the world. Could she draw a hawkbill back to life?

Something flashed in the bush. Janice, deep in thought, wheeled to a stop.

*There! Fireflies.*

Janice turned off her bicycle's headlamp. Soon enough, the fireflies regained their light rhythm, recalibrating their blinking patterns. The *on-off, on-off* blinking of the firefly calmed her. She was happy to see these local mangrove fireflies around, for these bugs – which were actually beetles – were known to be highly particular to environmental changes and susceptible to human impact. Soft-bodied, flat and between one and two centimetres long, fireflies can produce light through bioluminescence, and their luminance depends on species, life stages and sex. They are incredible to behold.

Even Slug peered out from its bottle. He only knew about bioluminescence from the ocean. It seemed terrestrial creatures were as capable. Just then, an electric car zoomed by, and the fireflies lost their light rhythm. For a while – a minute, three minutes – all was dark. *What happened to the fireflies? Will there be a second chance to see them?* Janice wondered. Right before she pedalled away, she checked once more. Only darkness looked back at her. Then suddenly: a blink.

*Tonight, Janice decided, I will introduce Slug to Mum and Dad.* She would present her idea of using her art for revitalising the ocean. She would start small, but she would make steady, pulsating progress. Janice rode away, resolved and relieved.

After the birthday dinner, Winna was vehement against the idea she heard. "How would drawing extinct creatures back to life be different from playing God? It would be just like the scientists who revived the woolly mammoth, only for it to die a cruel death by the severe lack of suitable habitat and range for its behaviour!"

David was more supportive, though, especially once he met Slug. "And then what?" David asked, intervening on Janice's behalf. "We all have an impact on this earth, just by living. We just have to make right by our actions. If it's truly as you say" he paused, examining Slug, who was now adapting to its new saltwater tank home and gobbling bits of microplastic as willed by Janice. "You have a lot of art to make."

The next day, Janice headed to the community centre, where the neighbourhood's stash of paints, sketch paper and art supplies were housed. Passing through the communal food forest, she admired the coolness of the breeze and smelled the damp earthiness of fresh soil and layers of vegetation – from ladies' fingers, corn, and banana plants to climbers such as luffa and green beans, and finally, the ground-dwelling edible perennials such as wild watercress, pennywort, and asystasia.



The path undulated, cresting and falling from thick undergrowth of roots. With its lush, fertile tropical climate, food forests were encouraged and cultivated across the island as the predominant way to produce and supply local vegetables at the weekly farmers' markets.

In the common lounge, Janice got to planning, researching, outlining, sketching. She wanted to make sure the proportions were correct before painting, and pulled up *Illustrated World Encyclopedia of Marine Fishes & Sea Creatures* on her e-reader. The power grid, running solely on renewables, no longer supports the energy consumption of individualised internet streaming. Janice studied the only two sketches of hawksbill sea turtles it had. She had to get the colours right. Slight variances translated to real life differences in the physiology of the animal, and that affected the rest of their lives. She wanted to make sure they fit right into the existing ecosystem, in a somewhat balanced manner. If she drew a hawksbill sea turtle, she wanted it to have enough sponges, algae, fish, comb jellies and cnidarians to feed on. The science was boggling. The project, seemingly compact, now seemed planetary.

David came by to let Janice know he spoke with his marine biologist batchmates to ask about how and whether hawksbill sea turtles could possibly adapt or migrate out from sunny tropical beaches, so that Janice's creations could reproduce into the next generation, but there were no satisfying answers.

"Doesn't matter, if we haven't solved the root cause for extinction, drawing more of the adults of any animal doesn't solve the problem. It prolongs it," Winna said, setting down her home-packed bananas and freshly made chia seed pudding. "For all we believe of their sentience, this only sentences more beings to suffering." Janice groaned and slumped forward. Her mum's presence was both comforting and demoralising. David protested the defeatist mood, but it was clear no one in the room had answers for how to revive the hawksbill.

The mood grew sombre until Slug cheered everyone up by suggesting that Janice draw dugongs. David fetched more rainwater for the watercolour palette. Winna stood firm, but felt her resolve slip at the thought of possibly reintroducing some dugongs. She'd seen them visiting the seagrass meadows of Singapore's southern shores multiple times – the sight moved her to tears. She recalled the old myths of how sailors mistook the tame, round herbivorous "sea cows" as sensuous, seductive mermaids. *Well, they are as rare as mermaids – that's the only similarity they share*, Winna thought bitterly.

Now, Winna was navigating Janice's sketch. If there was something she couldn't stand, it was artists getting marine creatures proportionately wrong. She guided Janice's hand over the curve of the tail, the roundness of the belly. "Granny always loved dugongs. Said they gave her 'body neutrality goals' as a girl going through the crazy 2020s. I draw dugongs for every one of her birthday cards," Winna quipped.

*Granny.*

Janice wanted to involve Granny in this project, somehow. The night was getting late, and Janice still had homework to get to. Tomorrow, she thought. *After my evening walk, I will sketch Granny's favourite estuarine seahorses with her help.*

# OUR GIRL

by Amanda Lee Koe



# OUR GIRL

Our girl was born in the middle of August in 2001. She would have turned twenty one this year.

She could detect the magnetic fields of the earth. The angle, as well as the intensity, which meant she had a natural compass inside her for the latitude and longitude of her natal beach. She was a true-blue Singaporean, an eastie who knew without a doubt that she was home every time she was close to East Coast Park, no matter how far she'd travelled and how long she'd been away this time. The waters around here smelled different; even the waves sounded different to her ears. There was a certain pattern to her seasonal migrations.

In the beginning, our girl was thrilled to be back. She fell in love with the shallow waters and the easy currents all over again. But after a month, two months tops, she would begin to feel restless. She loved Singapore, but it wasn't easy to live and linger around this island.

It was small. The beaches were artificial. And the people here seemed to always be watching. She needed more space.

Had she been content to remain in the vicinity of these shores, our girl would never have known how far she could swim, how deep she could dive. If she did not venture further afield, across borders and into international waters, she would never have guessed that she could swim three thousand kilometres, dive three hundred metres deep, and hold her breath for up to an hour.

But it wasn't just about how much further and deeper she could push herself out there. It was also about how much less room she had to manoeuvre, in the smallest ways, back here. Maybe it didn't seem like a big deal, but our girl had seen a green turtle amble ashore around the Fort Road side of east coast, where it was spotted right away by an over-excited member of the public who wouldn't stop taking pictures and making phone calls. In hardly any time at all, an entire team of park rangers swarmed her. They placed a wet towel on her to help cool her down, even though she had paced herself well and was doing just fine. Her blood was drawn for tests, and she was tagged on one of her back flippers. It was all perfectly well-intentioned, but something about it didn't sit quite right with our girl.

Having a metal geotag pierced on her flipper would have driven our girl to pieces. The green turtle didn't seem concerned – after a while you forgot

the tag was even there. But to our girl, it was so much more than the tag itself. It was the awful, banal fact that someone in a coat in a lab would know where she was at any given time.

The green turtle didn't really see what the problem was unless you had something to hide. Our girl had nothing to hide. She just wanted to be free.

Out there, no one was watching. She could revel in her alone time. Wade through pristine coral of dusky pinks and bright yellows. Dive down a cliff reef with the sunlight streaming down her mottled back. Hang out with sharks and clams. The furthest she'd swum is where the Pacific Ocean meets the Indian Ocean. How inconspicuous she felt, looking around at the infinite blue extending in all directions. Our girl never tired of riding a tide, or the dinky feel of coral stubs under her flippers. She had a taste for sea urchin, knew how to dislodge its spiky shell and dig into its ochre cream. And she had a mate, waiting for her close to the Dampier Strait reefs. They had sex in a warm current near Kabui Bay last summer. Not all turtles are monogamous, and no judgement to those who get laid just to propagate, but she'd decided he was the one for her. He approached her from the front, then paddled behind her, nipping her neck and waiting for her reaction, before he hooked himself onto her with his claws as gently as he could. She supported both their weight, surfaced regularly for air so they could both breathe. Afterwards, they drifted off to nibble on a buffet of sea sponges. He had a cute, pointy jaw.

After a few months, when she was sure that every last egg was fertilised, she journeyed back to Singapore to lay them. On her way over, she heard about the fate of one of the elder hawksbills who hung out around Marine Parade. He was in his forties and had terrible eyesight – over the years, he'd ingested a whole bunch of plastic bags and straws. These days, plastic bags look and move a lot like moon jellyfish. Even though our girl was younger and savvier than the elder hawksbill, she herself had swallowed a particularly translucent plastic bag a couple of years ago. When the elder hawksbill washed up dead on the East Coast Park shore, startling a bunch of aunties who were practising tai chi by the sea, park rangers took his corpse away and marine biologists opened him up. They found that he was in the pink of health, but all the plastic he'd eaten by mistake was still in there, undigested. It takes a plastic bag a thousand years to break down. The trash was taking up so much space in his stomach it had given him the sensation of fullness: he'd forgotten to eat and starved to death.

Our girl paddled away from the east coast, towards the southern ridges instead.

Nearing the southern islands on a low dive, she did not see the gill net stretching across the seabed. It was more than a hundred metres long, five metres high, weighed down by anchors fifteen metres deep. The mesh sizes on gill nets are designed such that fish only get their heads through, not their bodies. It's called a gill net, because a fish's gills will



get caught in the mesh even as it tries to back out. Turtles are certainly not the fisherman's targeted species, but gill nets capture bycatch indiscriminately, and while the use of such nets are discouraged, they are still legal in Singapore. At first, our girl tried to move back, but the mesh held fast, cutting into her skin. Panicking, she surged forward to see if she might be able to push through the gill net, but the transparent monofilament fibres were too strong. Elsewhere on the net, she could see an entire shiver of black-tipped reef sharks, at least eight of them. They were still struggling, but their movements were slow and oddly graceful. Closest to her were a pair of poisonous native red egg crabs. One was very still. The other was thrashing wildly even though it had already lost two of its eight legs. It was hard to say how much time passed as our girl pushed and pulled back and forth, trying to get her head out. She stopped only when she saw the skeins of red floating past her, dispersing in the water. It was her blood, from where the net bit into her neck.

As she stopped moving, our girl noticed that all the reef sharks had gone still. It had been her own movements on the gill net that made them look like they were struggling. They had already been dead when she swam into the net. She checked on the crabs. The one with six legs was down to five now, but it was still trying to fight its way out. The adrenaline had worn off and her neck was starting to hurt very badly. It had been some time since she last surfaced for air.

She thought about the last batch of eggs she'd laid two years ago. None of them had been fertilised – she hadn't met a suitable mate back then. She thought about how out of a clutch of a hundred eggs, only ten or twenty would hatch. How out of a thousand hatchlings, only one would survive to adulthood. She didn't have the numbers for it, didn't know if that made her one in ten thousand or a hundred thousand, but she knew she was here, and she knew she was drowning.

By the time the paddle-boarders came upon her a few days later, our girl's body had started to bloat. She grew so buoyant that she lifted one side of the anchors off the seabed. At first, when the paddle-boarders saw her shell bobbing up and down the same spot in the current between Sentosa and Singapore's mainland, they thought it was two turtles mating, *hurhur faster take video put on TikTok*. When they got closer, they saw that her shell had started to disintegrate, and her head, which they thought was in the water, had been severed from her body. From googling the colour of her shell and the serrated scutes, they identified our girl as a hawksbill turtle. They wanted to cut her free from the gill net, but then they grew worried and thought it would be better to wait until the relevant authorities arrived. They were afraid of being liable.

Eventually, it took a couple of volunteer divers and a crew of marine guards to get the heavy gill net out of the water. Our girl wasn't the only casualty. There were twelve dead black-tipped reef sharks, white bellies starting to decompose, eyes glassy and empty, mouths wide

open. The two red egg crabs were still in the gill net, too. One was long-dead, and the other now had four legs left. It had barely enough strength to scuttle away, but it was very much alive. Impassioned and enraged, the paddle-boarders asked the marine guards why nets like that were still legal in Singapore when they were so destructive, and when there was not a single target species in the net as far as they could see. The marine guards shrugged. They were just the personnel who patrolled the seas, and it wasn't even uncommon, bro. Just last month, another hawksbill turtle had met a similar fate in a gill net. That one only had his flipper caught, and drowned all the same.

The paddle-boarder held his phone right up to the marine guard's face, to show him the search result, which said that hawksbill turtles were critically endangered.

"Critically endangered," he repeated. "And we're letting them die like that? Why can't we just ban gill nets?"

"Eh, eh," the marine guard said. "What we? Don't come and we me, hor, please."

The marine guard told him to email NParks, the Maritime and Port Authority, the Minister of Environment. This was above his pay grade, there was nothing he could do about it.

The paddle-boarders, who were weekend fitness buddies, agreed to do just that, and couldn't stop talking about exactly what they would write in their angry yet eloquent emails on their way home.

But when they got home, after taking a warm shower, changing into clean clothes, and having a late dinner conveniently delivered to their individual doorsteps, one of them was arrowed with a last-minute deadline, due ASAP even though it was still the weekend, and the other decided to finish the TV series he was halfway through – if not now, then when? Sunday was almost over. In a matter of hours it would be Monday again, again, again. They would be back on the train, up the escalator, in the office, with tasks, bosses, clients to spend their billable hours on. Now that they were back in their apartments on reclaimed land, away from the sea, the decapitated turtle and rotten sharks and mangled crabs and that awful, giant net seemed unreal. A marine mirage, one of them called it. No point actioning it, in any case, when had writing an angry email ever really changed anything? It was all just good for pantry talk. Something to impress colleagues with. How was your weekend? Wa lan eh, this headless hawksbill turtle...

In her last conscious moments on the gill net, when our girl started gasping for breath and swallowing sea water, she tasted the umami of uni on her tongue. From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw her mate. There was no way she would have missed that profile. Oh, she could cut oysters on that pointy jaw. She shuddered with pleasure as

she recalled the way his longer tail tucked tight under her shorter one as they floated together. The waters were warm. The currents were gentle. Her neck had stopped hurting. She could smell the grassy, milky scent of East Coast Park. She would take her mate to her secret spot behind the breakwater, where there were plenty of molluscs to be had. She could sight the shore now. Soon she would feel the fine sand beneath her legs, her belly. She would crawl out of the sea, find a nice place beneath the casuarina trees, fling away loose sand with her flippers curled up like spades, dig a pit for her babies.

When they hatched and found the edge of the water, she'd meet them there.

## **Further Information and Resources**

To learn more on how you can be involved with ocean conservation efforts in your community, please [register your interest here](#) and check out the great initiatives hosted by our NGO partners:

[Coastal Natives](#)

[Ocean Purpose Project](#)

[Our Singapore Reefs](#)

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Launching a CSR campaign is no easy feat, even when an entire company is working toward the same goal. If it weren't for the help and support of several partners, Peering Into Our Future would have never truly gotten off the ground.

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