

Tujuh

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The girl could not be older than 5. Had she lived, she might have done great things. Things that #MeToo has enabled. The smile that is now forever etched on her face in rigor mortis is presidential. But her head is seven centimetres too far from her mangled but beautifully placed body. She is cut at every joint, though the lacerations are not neat. Her limbs are similarly positioned precisely seven centimetres away from her torso. They elongate her, giving her the appearance of a certain maturity in death that she never got to experience in life. Her blood-spatter pattern is grand, splayed around her in varying shades of crimson density. She is curated thus in the grimy bathroom of her parent's four-room flat. From an angle, she appears like the centrepiece of a Romantic painting. This is the angle where Eli is positioned. He crouches for a better view. Whoever did this must have a taste for the sublime, he thought. A psychopath with a penchant for Raden Saleh's aesthetics. In honour of this great Indonesian modernist painter, Eli shall call this work *Posthumous Portrait of Su Ying*. The media is calling its progenitor the Ramadan Ripper. But who *really* is the artist?

“The malaikat sure fucked it up this time ah?”

That unmistakable voice is coming from somewhere behind him. He knows that she is not supposed to be here. But, Kat has a knack for getting into places she's not supposed to be. Kaypoh Katrina. This unapologetic bravado of hers is

the reason he fell for her when they were both starting out in their careers—he, the straightlaced officer of the law and she, the idealistic scribe of the people. Together, they would change the world. These days, they have both shed their naivety to do something less savoury. Their endless tussle with shady characters, present company included, had done them in. Between them, they have put a lot of bad people away and let worse people roam free. That baggage defines them, bonds them. These days, they jest for old time's sake. For lost love.

“What do you mean?” Eli mumbles tiredly without turning around, just loud enough so that she can hear him. The crime scene has his full attention.

“Shaytan. Hantu. They're all supposed to be in lock up this month kan?”

“You might as well buka puasa now. That filthy mouth of yours won't get you to iftar, much less syurga.”

He still has his back turned to her. Something about the scene seems amiss. He cannot seem to put a finger on it. It might be the fast. Or it might be Kat who is making it hard for him to concentrate.

“Tread carefully now, Eli. You wouldn't want me reporting that the police have no clue whatsoever, do you?”

Heaving a heavy sigh, he finally turns around to face her. God, he hates her jealousy. Yet, even now, her presence makes his heart race. He is standing at some distance from her, though the emotional gulf between them is way greater.

“How'd you get past the guards?”

“I'm very persuasive, E. Don't forget that I charmed your pantat gempal once.”

Eli grimaces at that but does not respond. Instead, he

holds her gaze, and for that brief moment, Kat senses nothing. It is like she is staring into an abyss. This has never happened. So, this is how it feels to finally be over the love of your life, she tells herself.

Eli saunters over to her intending to say something but then decides to move past without offering any comments. He childishly takes pleasure in the look of surprise on Kat's face. He is not being an asshole, he tells himself. She rejected him first, ten years ago when he proposed.

He is dying to tell her that her profession is a joke, nah, dead. Like Su Ying. Deader. If this had not been clear before, For-None-Desk has ensured that this is now no longer disputed. The state-of-the-art media operating system, named after the late state-sanctioned newspaper editor, has rendered moot the need for 'specialist desks' in the newsroom. FND scans public and private social media platforms for news, aggregating and publishing the most popular ones. But, it also sieves out dangerous content, sending the names of the perpetrators to the police in seconds. Two weeks ago, amidst what was officially deemed a 'minor' public uproar, politicians bulldozed the FND bill through parliament. The law now necessitates that all licensed news platforms install FND. Since then, Eli has witnessed first-hand how busy some of his colleagues have become. Su Ying runs the risk of getting buried by For-None-Desk. He grunts.

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In the decade that he has toiled at the Criminal Investigation Department, Eli has primarily processed homicide cases of jealous spouses and gang fights. Most times, though, he finds himself dealing with cat murderers and peeping toms. In these

straightforward cases, intellectual finesse is confined to filing complex reports for simple incidences. Little effort is required to solve the whodunit part of the puzzle. Even that pleasure of creative bureaucracy was taken away from him when the Force introduced the BrainBot pilot programme to automate police work. Eli is his team's guinea pig. Or, as he often jokes, a sacrifice to the gods of progress. He isn't much of a techie, but from what little he understands of it, BrainBot comprises nanobots that 'leech' themselves onto an officer's cerebrum to simulate that person's thought patterns. These little digital mites then transmit radio frequencies to a 'shapeshifter'. That's the term used by those humourless designers over at the Digital Transformation Department to refer to the android at the receiving end of these signals. The shapeshifter can take on a variety of imitable forms of living things that it has copied from the real world, human or animal, to perform low-level physical tasks based on the behavioural algorithms of the officer that it's modelled after.

For Eli, this means a mechanical twin, his very own Man Friday, or Morph Friday, that acts and behaves like him, though not completely under his control. There are perks. In the office, Eli no longer needs to fill up tedious reports. In the field, he can deploy Friday first into a raid or unleash him as a sniffer dog to detect suspicious substances. His productivity figures are up. He has now closed twice as many cases as Dr. Chris Kuan, his team's hitherto best detective. Chris is a government scholar with a pedigree backed by the fact that he was conferred some fancy computer science degree from the University of Cambridge. Since they got acquainted, Chris' most repeated phrase has been: "What privilege?!"

Eli is cut from a different cloth, a fabric of inferior quality. He blames his Malay genes. Government data indicates that his kind are not predisposed to the serious pursuit of science and math, preferring instead to dwell on ‘activities’ like music and philosophy. They are also susceptible to a slew of chronic diseases because of their unhealthy diet of sugar and coconut milk. Santan is Satan, the government campaign goes. Unfortunately, Eli is typical of his kind. He loves his nasi ambengs and teh tariks. He is also guilty of pursuing a master’s degree in art history as an adult learner. He graduated at the top of his cohort on the back of sheer passion and a constant stream of caffeine. All these do not bode well for Eli as a detective in the age of big data. Fortunately, Eli is also an amateurish political pundit of sorts—a superpower honed by his love for critical theory. Those dispassionate political animals in office may have duped his fellow citizens, but all that Derrida and Foucault have made Eli no man’s fool. He can see beyond the ruling party’s list of accolades in the media. In truth, its party cadres are beleaguered by the charge of Chinese privilege. So, when the Force issued a call for test subjects for the BrainBot pilot, Eli made the best use of his humanities education to eloquently position himself on the application form as a viable role model for his community. Two interviews and an injection later, he has become the new Chris Kuan.

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I’ve seen mangled corpses at the scene of a samseng turf war. The splatter of brain matter on an unremarkable pavement in the aftermath of a suicide jump. A body so badly decomposed that the first responders couldn’t tell if it was even human. The stuff of nightmares—day in, day out. After two years of rookie

policework, all that gore just fades into the background. Nothing stirs me anymore. Nothing but Kat. Our time together was brief in God's grand scheme for the universe. I met her when I was transferred to the drugs division in my third year of service. She was then an intern reporter covering court cases. Our first year together was intense. We did so many haram things, and regretted none. At least I didn't. It was never enough for me. Kat, though, wanted to rein it in. About a week after our first anniversary, Kat said that we were treading on dangerous ground. She had noticed that I had gotten more and more unhinged when we made love. In fact, she could no longer call it making love. Once I had even left bruises on her body. I had chalked it up to the heat of the moment but in truth, I had acted deliberately. She forgave me, my trusting Kat. And I behaved. I wanted so badly to be with her. So, over the next few months, I dialled it down two notches. Kat was the happiest I've seen. Just a bundle of joy. We double-dated. We chased after the best brunch deals on the weekends. We even stopped our late night trysts. Our friends thought we were just the sweetest couple. I pretended like it was fine and dandy but I craved something more primal, the old us. I discovered a semblance of it in Jazreel, an addict, my informant. Jazreel didn't mind my animality. Or maybe she was just so out of it that it didn't matter. Jazreel and I met at my apartment. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On one of those Fridays, when Kat thought I was at the mosque, she came to my apartment to deliver my birthday gift by hand—front-row seats for us to a concert by my favourite indie band, Hannah's River. She intended to slip it under my front door when she noticed a pair of lady's sneakers. She hung back,

waited at the opposite block till Jazreel and I emerged from the apartment. My hands were all over Jazreel. All over too was Kat and I. I've missed her so much since. I long to touch her again.

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So many toys, so little time. But she must wait until it gets dark. That's when she can truly be herself. Relentless and hungry for flesh. She settled for less the last time they scoured. That was too easy, and too messy.

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This time, Eli sees an inkling of Chua Mia Tee's techniques. It might have been inspired by the painting *National Language Class*, or that other one, the name of which escapes his mind at the moment. There are seven of them at this crime scene. They are housed in an unoccupied automobile workshop in Kallang. At the head of the round wooden table is a scrawny Malay man dressed all in white, wizened in look and authoritative in demeanour, owing to the way he is glued to the wall. Once again, he is quartered at the joints, at intervals of seven centimetres. He is the teacher, and the centrepiece of this work, much like Su Ying was with hers from three days ago. Around the table are his students. Six torsos glued to six chairs, headless and limbless. Every single one of them too is dressed in white. It is hard to tell their ethnicity but it appears that they have porcelain skin. This time, though, the cuts are cleaner, with not a single drop of blood to be found. Carved artistically into the wall beside the teacher is the Malay word for seven in Jawi: *Tujuh*. Eli is familiar with this archaic script because he has recently picked up the habit of reading Malay

hikayats in Jawi. Seven bodies. Seven centimetres. Seven in Jawi. The word that springs to Eli's mind is 'overkill'. He chuckles at that thought, but immediately puts on a straight face so as not to seem disrespectful to the forensic officers who are still working the crime scene. The Jawi carving, though, is the break he sorely needs for this case. He is probably the only officer in the Force who can decipher it. Very few people know this. The artist has reached out. Eli decides that he is ready to have this conversation. He also decides to call this work *Epic Poem of Kallang* to commemorate Chua Mia Tee.

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She's getting better at it. She wonders if he's noticed. She has dropped hints.

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I don't know her beginnings, but she belonged to Ayah, who got her from Atok. Tujuh had been in my family for years. She's the family heirloom, Ayah once said. I was never superstitious, though. I've always believed her to be a figment of Ayah's imagination. Up until now. She first appeared to me in the form of a regal Sumatran tiger, tame to my touch, but full of unbridled power. The hunger. The insatiable hunger. It's what I remember most from our first rendezvous. It was the first night of Ramadan. I was home on medical leave following the BrainBot injection.

I was alone in my apartment's library, a room that I had originally planned to be a baby room should I ever settle down. For some reason, I recall fussing over the issue of male infertility in this godforsaken city and that maybe nanobots could one day change all that. Maybe they could even alleviate

the pain of cancer patients. Who knows what the future holds?

It was Thursday night, a sacred night. Therefore, a night to reflect on a hikayat. I had begun a modest collection of four great classical books on the Malay world. I had settled on the Bahasa version of *Serat Centhini* because I was in a 'cultural' mood that night. Besides, it was the only Indonesian text in my possession. I don't speak a single word of Javanese but felt the need to reconnect with something of my heritage. Something of that ilk did appear. I was midway through the text when it happened. At first, a growling. Then, a flickering shadow. Moments later, I looked up from my text and noticed Tujuh hulking by the door. It was as if she had been there the entire time, watching me. She looked at me the way affable stray cats stare at the kind souls who bring them dinner at void decks. I was her kind soul that night. I fed her yesterday's rendang to keep her at bay. But I could tell that she wanted more. I, too, desired more. Meat for Tujuh. Beauty for me. We were becoming.

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Her hunger overpowers me. She cannot wait for the sun to set. Every good Muslim will be breaking their fast then. Tujuh considers herself a good Muslim. She fasts. Never skipped a day. But she has also over-indulged in the evenings. I know that now. She has not stopped at *Posthumous Portrait of Su Ying* or *Epic Poem of Kallang*. There have been grander works. Have these turned her into a sinner? The laws of nature are not governed by human right and wrong. They say the month of Ramadan is devoid of evil spirits, ghosts and monsters because the angels have been diligent at reining them in. But Tujuh does her disagreeable thing on Ramadan evenings. She has not

been reined in. So she cannot possibly be a monster. Neither am I, Eli, lover of art.

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Pieces. This is the word that springs to mind when I think about how I've come to crack the case. The only detective to have pieced it all together, as I imagined a newspaper headline to read. I sniggered at that bad pun. I'd solved the case but I couldn't tell anyone. Not even my beloved Kat can know. It wasn't my brilliance that did it. It was the Jawi script. The final piece of the puzzle. Since the night *Tujuh* first came to me, she had visited me countless times after. Our rendezvous had settled into a kind of cosy routine—she'd materialise, I'd feed her, and she'd curl herself by my feet as I pored over books while sunken in my single-seater sofa for hours. On one of those nondescript Thursday nights, I had in my hands *Sulalat al-Salatin*, reading it aloud to practise my Jawi. She was lazing somewhere near me as she normally would after her meal. About thirty minutes in, I found myself at an intriguing part of the text—the episode when the old lady of Mount Ophir is conveying her elusive queen's rejection to a marriage proposal by the tyrannical Sultan Mahmud Shah of Melaka by way of a list of impossible demands.

My feral companion perked up as I uttered the words “Akan peminangnya *tujuh* dulang hati nyamuk, hati kuman *tujuh* dulang...” (“And as for my dowry, *seven* trays of the hearts of mosquitoes, *seven* trays of the hearts of germs...”). Breathing unevenly in between growls, she animatedly scratched a symbol on the vinyl floor of my study. The act couldn't have lasted more than a minute, but my memory of it seems longer. Most of all, I recall the alarm I felt at my

companion's uncanny resemblance to my pseudo-colleague Friday as I witnessed that act. When she was done, I got down on my knees to inspect her handiwork. It was the Jawi word for *Tujuh*, the same Jawi word that was etched into the wall at the *Epic Poem of Kallang*. That was how I came to know her name. That was also how I had cracked the case. Unceremoniously. A piece of deeply buried memory that for no rhyme or reason just popped into my mind a few days after the crime scene.

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We, us, are in the last leg now. These final ten days are holy because nestled somewhere within them is that one special night, *Laylatul Qadr*. The most sacred of nights, so shrouded in mystery that no one can say for certain when it will appear. But, we know when that happens. No, we will not tell you. We will do one better. We will reveal it to you. Our masterpiece, our magnum opus. On *Laylatul Qadar*. We know just the artist to emulate. Affandi, the grandmaster of Indonesia's Impressionism. Affandi who is not afraid to reproduce the world in all its glory, messiness, ugliness. Affandi who loves his women—his wife Maryati, and most of all, his daughter, Kartika. We too have women we love. One of them has outlived her purpose. Almost a namesake of Kartika, she too possesses a deep passion for life, sadly now misplaced. I had desired to touch her for some time now. Now, with *Tujuh* as my partner, I finally can. It is not just lust that drives me to possess her. It is also mercy. She has suffered far too long as a casualty of this *jahanam* era. Her old-fashioned ideals belong to a generation long past their time. I was once like her. I was once with her. But, we will immortalise her in the style of Affandi's *Reclining Nude*.

Glossary

Arb Arabic

b.i Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian)

b.m Bahasa Melayu (Malay)

Lt Latin

Ur Urdu

The Beginning

Ada hati [b.m] In the context of this story, it means “I have heart” to signify that Sakatimuna has feelings.

Transgression

Mayang pinang [b.m] Flower clusters of palm leaves

Prayers From A Guitar

Ustaz [b.m] Islamic scholar

Isyak [b.m] The fifth daily Muslim prayer of the day

Sejadah [b.m] A prayer rug

Taqiyya [Arb] A short, rounded skullcap. It is usually worn by Muslim men for religious purposes.

Salah [Arb] Prayer

Asatizah [b.m] Plural of Ustaz (Islamic scholar)

Madrasah [Arb] A school for Islamic instruction.

Qibla [Arb] The direction of the Kaaba (an Islamic site), to which Muslims have to turn towards when praying.

Salaam [b.m] Greetings

Doa selamat [b.m] A Muslim prayer to seek the protection of God against calamity in this world and the afterlife.

Tahlil [Arb] A form of remembrance—or Islamic devotional act—which involves repeatedly uttering the phrase ‘There is no God but Allah’.

Baju kurung [b.m] Traditional Malay attire for women consisting of a knee-length blouse worn over a long skirt.

Kain tenun [b.m] Woven fabric

Assalamu’alaikum [Arb] Greeting used among Muslims which means ‘peace be upon you’.

Pakcik [b.m] Uncle

Quota

N/A

The Chip

Ibu [b.m] Mother

Ayah [b.m] Father

Datuk [b.m] A title of respect

Second Shadow

Kuku Besi [b.m] Kuku translates to ‘nails’ and besi to ‘metal’.

Tujuh

Rigor mortis [Lt] Stiffness of death

Malaikat [b.m] Angel

Shaytan [Arb] Satan

Hantu [b.m] Ghost

Buka puasa [b.m] Breaking fast

Iftar [Arb] The meal eaten by Muslims after sunset during the month of Ramadan.

Syurga [b.m] Heaven

Pantat gempal [b.m] Fat ass

Nasi ambeng [b.m] A fragrant rice dish consisting of steamed rice and chicken or beef curry.

Teh Tarik [b.m] A hot milk tea beverage found in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

Hikayat [b.m] Traditional Malay sagas or tales

Jawi [b.m] Jawi is a writing system used for writing the Malay language and several other languages of Southeast Asia, and is based on the Arabic script.

Ayah [b.m] Father

Tujuh [b.m] The number seven

Atok [b.m] Grandfather

Ustaz [b.m] A Muslim scholar

Syariah [b.m] Sharia or Islamic law

Serat Centhini [b.m] A twelve-volume compilation of Javanese tales and teachings, written in verse and published in 1814.

Laylatul Qadr [Arb] This is one of the most sacred nights in the Islamic calendar. It takes place in the last ten days of Ramadan.

Jahanam [Arb] Hell

Gold, Paper and Bare Bones

Doa [b.m] Prayer or supplication

Ayah [b.m] Father

Jalan-jalan ke [b.m] travel to

Songkok [b.m] A cap commonly worn among Muslim males in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and southern Philippines.

Encik [b.m] Honorific for Mister