"BEFORE THE VALLEY"

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Before the Valley

Rachel Heng

The candles were already lit when Hwee Bin arrived. Her mistake—she'd missed the announcement at breakfast saying today's party would take place in the Big Hall, instead of in the Rec Room. What was wrong with the Rec Room? she mentally complained, while taking her place in the crowd. Birthday celebrations were always in the Rec Room. But, catching a glimpse of potbellied Kirpal in his wheelchair, Hwee Bin softened. Likely the change had been made because Kirpal was so popular, and more residents than usual were expected to attend. Typically, birthdays were local affairs. Hwee Bin was in Ward 4, one of the fourteen-bed wards, which was a bad thing every day of the year except her birthday, when it meant that she could count on at least thirteen other people showing up to her party. A relief, since Hwee Bin had never been good at making friends, even before.

"Before" was the shorthand residents used for their lives prior to Sunrise Valley. Before wasn't talked about often; it felt unseemly somehow, self-indulgent, to dwell on one's past life. What did it matter, for example, that Cynthia, from Ward 8, had been an actress who starred in the horror films that used to be made here in Singapore, back in the sixties? Or that Hasmi, from Ward 12, had been a lawyer and was even rumored to have owned his own firm? They were all here now, Sunrise Valley residents one and the same. Sure, Cynthia was in a two-bedder with a garden view, and Hasmi had one of the few, coveted, and very expensive single wards. They still had to come to the linoleum-tiled dining room each morning for the same soggy kaya toast and watered-down coffee. Still took their seats each evening in front of the television, which blared, alternately, English-, Chinese-, Malay-, and Tamil-language soaps. Wards aside, were the residents not all in the same boat? The details might differ—mild dementia, children too busy to visit, loss of leg function, no living relatives—but the crux of the matter was the same. You were stuck in Sunrise Valley regardless, whether it was paid for by your dwindling pension, the government, or an erstwhile child.

Of course, Cynthia and Hasmi would disagree. Those in the smaller wards were most likely to let slip details of their Befores—nothing too obvious, just a hint here, an old business card there—because they couldn't bear being lumped in with everyone else. Hwee Bin understood. Once, she, too, would have bristled at the thought of sitting among strangers in the dining room that smelled like a hospital, eating from childish plastic bowls. But you got used to it. And if you didn't—well, some didn't.

A scuffle broke out to Hwee Bin's left, then a wail.

"Sh-h-h, sh-h-h, Hazel, never mind, let her have it, sh-h-h, O.K., O.K., she'll give it back to you. . . ."

The aide fussed and soothed, but Hazel's cries only grew louder. The nature of the offense: her neighbor had snatched the graying stuffed rabbit that Hazel carried everywhere. Baobao, she called it—one of the few words she still spoke. Baby. Even with the rabbit restored to her, Hazel continued to storm, flailing at her neighbor's face as if she were a nightmare to be banished.

Hwee Bin averted her gaze. Seeing Hazel like this made something open up inside her, a frightening abyss she had to carefully ignore or risk falling into. Just a year ago, Hazel had sat with them in the common dining hall, carrying on entire conversations, eating on her own, and complaining loudly about the food. "Curry as thin as my diarrhea," Hwee Bin remembered her saying once, when they were seated at the same table. Back then, Hazel's eyes had been bright and impish, her wispy white hair neatly pulled back with a shiny red clip. "You got diarrhea?" Hazel had asked. Hwee Bin shook her head. "Lucky you."

Hazel had had mild dementia then. Many of them did, and still lived happily with everyone else. But, six months later, she had disappeared from the dining room. "High-D," the others whispered, shaking their heads, and then they spoke of Hazel no more. No one liked to talk about the high-dependency residents, who lived on the third floor. Stroke victims, the paralyzed or severely incapacitated, the self-harming, and, on rare occasions, those who had lost all hope and simply refused to eat or move. There was a special ward in High-D for those with advanced dementia; that was where Hazel lived now. High-D residents were always in wheelchairs, and wore large, pillowy gloves that looked like oven mitts.

With her teeth, Hazel now tore off a glove and flung it in the aide's face.

"Take her out, please," Mrs. Tan called from the front of the room, where the candles for Kirpal were slowly burning down. Mrs. Tan spoke in what Hwee Bin called her "weekend voice," the warm, syrupy tone she assumed on Saturdays and Sundays, when Sunrise Valley teemed with families and visitors. Her usual voice was rigid and cold, often crackling with impatience. One understood, Hwee Bin thought. As the floor manager responsible for some twenty wards and more than a hundred residents, Mrs. Tan could not be saying please and thank you in her weekend voice all the time or nothing would ever get done. But today was Wednesday. Could it be . . . Hwee Bin craned her neck to see the front of the room.

Sure enough, a tall, slender young woman stood beside Kirpal's wheelchair, one hand on his shoulder.

"O.K., Dada-ji, we sing now?" The woman smiled, and the smile lit up her lovely face. Her throat was like an egret's, long and graceful and smooth. She put one hand to it now.

"Indian girls, when pretty, always so pretty," Ah Gau, from Ward 5, said. He spoke in Hokkien.

"Pervert," Hwee Bin hissed back.

"Say only! Say also cannot?"

“Sh-h-h.”

“Kirpal also always say, ‘Satveer this,’ ‘Satveer that,’ ‘Satveer so smart,’ ‘Satveer the most pretty’—”

“Are *you* Satveer’s grandfather?”

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you.”

Ah Gau and Hwee Bin were drowned out by the singing, a dissonant chorus of residents’ voices slipping in and out of synch. Mrs. Tan led the song in English, and the residents sang along in whatever version they knew. Ah Gau began singing in Mandarin, Hwee Bin, rather proudly, in English. She liked any chance to practice. Hwee Bin was born the youngest child of seven, at a time when her older siblings were already working, and thus, despite her father’s having been a *karang guni*—rag-and-bone man—and her mother a laundrywoman, she’d been afforded the rare luxury of school. After attending the convent school up to Form Six and even learning a few words of French, she’d gone on to take a typing class and got a job as a secretary at a small shipping company. Eventually, she’d had to leave, of course, once she married and had her children. But how many of the women of Sunrise Valley could say that they’d once read “Le Petit Prince” to a roomful of elegant Brits at the Raffles Hotel? In hindsight, Hwee Bin saw how shamelessly she’d been used by the convent nuns to raise funds for the school, trotted out at charity galas and school fairs like a prize pig. Never would she have allowed her own child to be paraded in this way. And yet those golden evenings, filled with the scent of cut roses withering in tropical heat, the gloved hands of wealthy women cupping her chin, the applause and admiration—they would stay with her always.

“. . . Happy birthday to Kirpal, happy birthday to you!”

The room broke out into cheers, cameras flashed. Kirpal, however, was covering his face.

“Don’t take photo. You said no photo,” he growled.

Silence fell. Kirpal was never tense. Known for his dirty jokes and the endless supply of M&M’s he doled out from his pockets, even to the diabetics, he was usually the life of any party, the one to brighten so many of their gloomy afternoons. Everyone had a Kirpal story. Hwee Bin herself had met him on her very first day at Sunrise Valley. Her daughter had just left, it was teatime, Hwee Bin’s few belongings—a Bible, eyeglasses, and some laminated photos—had been tucked away in the cabinet by her bed. She still remembered the terrible loneliness of walking into that dining hall for the first time, meeting the rheumy eyes that looked up at her from their cartons of Milo and chrysanthemum tea. Everyone was so old, so, so old. And yet they looked like children, with their paper bibs and dribbling mouths and meaningless gurgles. Oh, it was horrifying. Surely she did not look like that, surely she did not eat like that, sit like that. She had to call her daughter, she thought in a panic. She could not stay here. And then came the awful realization: even if she did call Doreen, all her daughter would say was what she always said—“There’s no other option. It’s just not safe.

What if you fall again?" Hwee Bin would take falling again over this dining hall, these poor specimens hunched in their chairs, napping in their tea. Then a loud wolf whistle broke her spiral.

"Who's the new hottie?"

It was said with such aplomb that, to Hwee Bin's surprise, she began to laugh. The wolf whistler beckoned to the empty seat next to him. As soon as she sat down, Hwee Bin began to feel better. Kirpal had a way of looking at you, eyes half shut, challenging tilt in the chin, humorous twist to the mouth, as if to say, Now just look at what we have here. Something about him made you sit up in your seat and want to prove yourself. In a place where people came to die, you felt—for lack of a better word—alive. Along with his ribald cheer, Kirpal gave off an aura of no-nonsense pragmatism, a fatalistic acceptance of the situation, such as it was. He could calm any High-D resident, lift the spirits of any frightened newcomer. In the months that followed, Hwee Bin learned that Kirpal welcomed every new face—man or woman, hearing or otherwise, upright or wheelchair-bound—with the loudest wolf whistle he could muster.

So it made them all uneasy to see Kirpal cover his face now, snapping at his beautiful granddaughter, who had come all this way on a Wednesday afternoon, had perhaps even taken time off work to visit him. Not many residents had granddaughters who would do such a thing, buy helium balloons, hire a professional photographer, all just for a birthday, when birthdays were a dime a dozen around here.

"Dada-ji, it's O.K. I stand next to you," Satveer said.

Finally, Kirpal acquiesced. But even Satveer's dazzling smile could not compensate for the stony look he directed at the camera. Flash, flash, flash. The photographer took out a small electronic device, one that looked like a Walkman, and pointed it at Kirpal's closed mouth. Satveer chattered away brightly. Hwee Bin caught fragments from where she was sitting: *My Dada-ji is a man with a rare gift, my Dada-ji has a true work ethic, my Dada-ji would take me to the beach*—and so on. If it had been anyone else's granddaughter, Hwee Bin might have found the way the girl was going on a little exaggerated, even mildly irritating. But it was natural to feel enthusiastic about a grandfather like Kirpal.

"Reporter," Ah Gau said, gesturing toward the photographer. "From the *Singapore Tribune*."

"Don't talk nonsense," Hwee Bin said.

"Not nonsense. I heard from Cynthia! Arrange by his granddaughter, big interview."

"Heard from Cynthia means true?"

At that moment, cake was distributed, and Hwee Bin didn't press further. They tucked in, rainbow sprinkles sticking to the corners of Ah Gau's mouth, Hwee Bin's fingers growing oily from the grease that seeped through her paper plate. Strawberry icing and sponge dissolved in a cloying paste on her tongue as Korean pop music—the aides' favorite—streamed from the radio. The residents chewed quietly. At the front of the room, Satveer was still speaking animatedly into the reporter's tape recorder. Her elegant arm was slung protectively around Kirpal, who said nothing and refused to take his eyes off his lap, where a slice of strawberry cake sat untouched on its plate.

Breakfast the next morning was nasi lemak, Hwee Bin's favorite. The fried chicken wings might be soggy and the peanuts low in salt, but the rice itself was soft and fragrant with the rich scent of coconut milk. And the belacan was always good—extra spicy and not too sweet. Hwee Bin carefully arranged each bite just how she liked it: a spoonful of rice, a morsel of egg dabbed with belacan, a piece of chicken. As she began to eat, Kirpal rolled up in his wheelchair.

"Good?" he said. "Mind if I join you?"

She nodded. Hwee Bin was in the habit of coming early to meals so as to avoid the awkward sting of solitude. Kirpal, on the other hand, typically arrived late, surrounded by his rotating posse. She'd never seen him come to breakfast at this time before. If she were Ah Gau or Cynthia, she might have questioned him about it. But, being herself, she just went on making neat, delicious mouthfuls of nasi lemak. Kirpal didn't speak, either. He ate slowly, his eyes fixed on the empty space between their trays. There they sat, fluorescent lights flickering overhead, the smell of fried chicken mingling with that of the lemony antiseptic cleaner used to wipe down the tables. The longer the silence went on, the less Hwee Bin was able to enjoy her nasi lemak. The chicken seemed oilier than usual, the rice overcooked.

"Did you have a good birthday?" she said at last.

Kirpal looked up. Over the whites of his eyes crept a fine spiderweb of pink blood vessels. He seemed not to be thinking of his birthday at all. He had, Hwee Bin thought with a shiver, the air of a defeated man.

"Lovely," he said at last.

More silence.

"Did you like the cake?" A faint note of desperation entered her voice.

Suddenly, she thought of an afternoon many years ago, Doreen coming home from school to find her sitting motionless at the dining table, while Lisa, barely six months old then, screamed in the next room. Children have an uncanny instinct for their parents' pain, Hwee Bin remembered thinking, as she watched Doreen's face change. The girl didn't yet know that her father had left—in the most humiliatingly clichéd of ways, for a woman he kept up in

Johor Bahru—didn't yet know that Hwee Bin feared not being able to find a job, didn't yet know that they might lose the flat in which they lived. But Doreen took one look at her mother and seemed, instantly, to acquire a maturity she had not had that morning. She poured her mother a glass of water, setting it down on the table before her with such care that it broke Hwee Bin's heart. Then she went to calm the baby. Soon the flat was quiet again. Hwee Bin took a sip of water and felt that she might go on.

"Yes," Kirpal said. "It was delicious."

It took Hwee Bin a moment to realize that he was answering her question about the cake. The silence that fell again was unbearable. Were their roles reversed, were she burdened by some private grief, Kirpal would surely have known how to comfort her.

"Your granddaughter is very beautiful," she said. "And so filial. Sweet of her to come yesterday."

Kirpal didn't answer, but instead cupped the bottom half of his face with his hands. His knuckles were enormous, as twisted and shiny as oiled walnuts. His fingernails, impeccably clean, made small white smiles against his skin.

"She still working at Procter & Gamble? Young people these days work so hard—my Lisa, she does advertising in New York, so long hours and doesn't even pay well. Doreen also, every day work until eight o'clock, no time to eat dinner. She's still single, you know, forty-eight years old. I worry, does she want to be alone forever? But you know how they are. . . ."

As Kirpal remained silent, Hwee Bin continued to spout meaningless chatter, even though she knew that she was somehow saying the wrong thing, that she was making it all worse, was turning the blade of some invisible knife between his ribs.

"Oi! Kirpal!" It was Ah Gau, shuffling in excitedly on his walker.

Gratefully, Hwee Bin stopped mid-sentence. In his armpit, Ah Gau gripped a newspaper. No doubt it would be damp, and a little smelly. Still, she was relieved for his presence, even when he spread the newspaper out on the table in front of them and it was dark with sweat stains.

"Look!" Ah Gau jabbed a finger at the page repeatedly. "*Wa!* Famous *leh* you!"

There they were, Kirpal and Satveer, he in his wheelchair, she leaning protectively over his shoulder. Around them were the colorful balloons she'd brought; on a table in the background was the cream cake studded with slices of strawberry. But it wasn't the balloons or the cake or even Kirpal that Hwee Bin was looking at. It was the words, those strange, incomprehensible words, marching across the top of the photograph, above Satveer's smiling face and her long, cascading hair, printed as simply as if they formed any ordinary headline.

"*retired hangman celebrates 90th birthday*." Beneath it, in smaller font: "Former state executioner was known for his affable nature."

"What does it say?" Ah Gau asked in Hokkien. "What does it say?"

Attracted by his loud voice, some of his wardmates had come over with their trays of nasi lemak. They crowded around the newspaper, pointing and exclaiming.

"Why never interview me?" one asked in Cantonese.

"Wa, Kirpal! Famous like Cynthia? You also movie star?" another said in Malay.

"What—" Ah Gau spoke slowly, in English now, enunciating each word. "What does it say?"

They were all staring at Hwee Bin, mouths hanging open like hungry, slobbering dogs. Kirpal, too, raised his heavy-lidded eyes to meet hers. She tried to see it in his face: the man who, for decades, had made a living taking the lives of others. She stared at his large-knuckled hands that lay open on the table, palms as smooth as the inside of a seashell, from which she had so often accepted M&M's and high fives.

He saw her looking. Slowly he brought his hands together, as if to pray.

"Go on, Hwee Bin," Kirpal said. He spoke gently, in English, as intimately as if they were husband and wife. "Tell them what it says."

Some weeks later, Doreen took Hwee Bin out for the day. The aides insisted on pushing her to Doreen's car in a wheelchair.

"You know it's all for show, right," Hwee Bin said as soon as the car door was closed. "They let me walk around any old how when you're not here."

"I'm sure that's not true," her daughter replied primly. "If that's true, then why am I paying them so much?"

Not that much, Hwee Bin thought. She was in a fourteen-bed ward, after all. But, if she said that, Doreen would only start complaining about Lisa, living it up in New York with no thought for her mother and her responsibilities.

"Where do you want to go?"

Hwee Bin shrugged. Doreen drove them to the nearest mall, but, because it was Saturday, the underground car park was choked with crawling vehicles looking for a space and ambling families trying to remember where they had parked. Doreen and Hwee Bin went around in slow, frustrating circles for almost half an hour. The air-conditioning in the car was broken, and something rattled in the engine each time Doreen accelerated.

"You should get that fixed."

"Where got money? When it finally conks, I'll just sell it for junk and take the M.R.T. like everyone else."

Hwee Bin pinched her nose. Doreen knew very well that her mother couldn't go on the M.R.T. The escalators went too fast, their steps were too steep, the train doors that opened and shut didn't allow enough time. These day trips would end, too, then.

Finally, they found an empty space. Doreen backed the car into it with jerky, aggressive turns. Hwee Bin's daughter had always been tightly wound, but she seemed to be getting worse of late. Hwee Bin wondered about her life. Was she not lonely? Didn't she want a family of her own? Though, in truth, Hwee Bin knew very well the reason for Doreen's solitude. After her father vanished, she'd built her walls carefully, painstakingly, as only a child knew how, so that no errant gap would let in the light of pain. And now here she was—living on her own, working days and nights and often weekends, so busy she had time to see no one, not even her own mother.

But Hwee Bin didn't actually know that. Possibly, Doreen kept strings of lovers, held dinner parties with her school friends, was a regular social butterfly. Perhaps she had a husband, a child, even. An entire life kept secret, like the one her father had once had with his second family, across the causeway. His blood ran in her veins. Just because Hwee Bin had always taken Doreen at her word didn't mean that it was true.

They made their way to Toast Box, in the basement of the mall. A long line snaked from the counter, and it seemed as though the parking situation would repeat itself.

"*Kopi O gao*, *siew dai*, right? Want any toast?" Doreen said, joining the line.

Hwee Bin shook her head and went off with her walker to find them a seat. She hovered between two tables, each occupied by a couple who had finished eating but continued to sit silently, scrolling on their phones. Finally, one of the women brusquely tapped her husband on the elbow, gathered their shopping bags, and left. Hwee Bin took a seat. Her shoulders hurt. The café was jammed with strollers and screaming babies, toddlers pressing their cheeks to the tiled floor, glossy paper bags filled with shoes and clothes blocking the aisles. The stool Hwee Bin sat on was wobbly and had no back. She found herself missing the plastic chairs in Sunrise Valley's dining room, with their cushioned seats and sturdy, curved spines. Nevertheless, when Doreen arrived with the drinks and toast—even though she'd said she didn't want toast—Hwee Bin started on her usual refrain.

"Work very busy?"

"Busy, yes. My boss just quit, so they're getting me to do all his work. It's a nightmare—"

"Wa, promotion?"

“No.” Doreen clicked her tongue impatiently. “That’s not how it works. You don’t just get promoted because—never mind.”

They drank their coffee. Doreen picked at the kaya toast. It was bothersome, how she kept breaking off small pieces and getting the sticky green paste all over her fingers, instead of just picking up the whole thing and eating it properly. But Hwee Bin swallowed the admonishment on the tip of her tongue. Her daughter was not fourteen anymore.

“So busy, got time to cook dinner every night?”

“You know I usually just *da bao*. A new coffee shop opened across the road, the Hainanese curry rice not bad. Next time I bring for you.”

“*Aiya*, girl, so unhealthy. How can you every day *da bao*?” Hwee Bin paused, weighed her next words carefully. “If Ma is at home, Ma can cook soup for you, steam fish like you like.”

“It’s fine. I try to make congee myself, since it’s easy. And I eat a lot of fruit.”

“Eating hawker food every day is not good. Even if you eat fruit.”

Doreen stopped picking at the toast. The corners of her mouth were dark with coffee. Hwee Bin thought of the nun at her convent school who’d given out waxy packets of chocolate milk every day. “Drink up and show me those chocolate smiles,” she’d say, and Hwee Bin would gulp down the powdery calcium supplement that she learned, later in life, tasted nothing like real milk, but had found so delicious anyway.

“Don’t start with this now.”

A warning in Doreen’s voice. But Hwee Bin had to go on. She saw her daughter so rarely, she had to give it her best shot.

“I get around O.K. with the walker now. My bedroom is just sitting empty, gathering dust. I would be very careful. You just have to leave the food and kitchen things where I can reach —”

“And the physio sessions? And your medication?”

“I only do physio once a week now that my leg is better. You could take me. It’s not more work than coming to visit. And I can take my medication myself—you just have to set it out each morning with some water. It’s only the bottle lids I can’t manage with my fingers, and the labels are too small to read—”

“And the commode shower?”

Hwee Bin fell silent. The plastic wheelchair with its open seat, the aides' rubber-gloved hands sliding between the cheeks of her buttocks, she, sitting, naked, placid as a cow. No, she could not ask Doreen to do that.

They finished their drinks. Doreen left half a piece of toast behind, and Hwee Bin did not have the heart to say, as she usually did, that one ought not to waste good food.

"Look, Ma—"

Just then, the woman at the next table let out a grating shriek. Doreen leaped to her feet, sending her stool clattering to the floor. Something large and dark scurried under the table. Others jumped up, too; some whipped out their phones and pointed them toward the ground.

"Get up, Ma, get up!" It was easy enough for Doreen to say. Hwee Bin struggled to get to her feet, determined not to stumble or fall. She was strong, stronger than her daughter or anyone else would imagine. Everyone was still screaming, filming, threatening to call the health-and-sanitation board, or the police. Someone yelled, "This place should be shut down! Such disgusting pests coming straight from the kitchen!"

So on and so forth. Young people had never lived with rats. The creature was under Hwee Bin's chair now. Slowly, she got up, and now she was standing, now she took hold of her walker. Doreen was gesturing frantically, her face so scrunched in fear it was laughable. Despite all Doreen's brusqueness, all the power she held over Hwee Bin, she was, at her core, a little girl afraid of a rodent. It occurred to Hwee Bin that she was wearing sandals, and it wouldn't be good for the rat to bite her. Yet, if she did get some disease and died that way, it would still be a better death than a slow decline in Sunrise Valley's high-dependency ward. Doreen was shouting for her to move. *What's wrong with you, Ma, move, move!* All this noise over a little rat.

Then she felt it: the rodent's weight on her left foot, its sharp claws digging into her flesh as it moved, the feeling of warm, filthy fur on her skin. Screams, more screams—not from her, though. She had known rats in the dilapidated row house she'd lived in as a girl, had been woken up by the sound of their teeth chewing through thick gunnysacks to get to the rice, but never had one touched her. It was a sickening feeling. Then a quick, awful scuttling of the claws, and it was gone, a flash of black dashing out into the glitzy fluorescent lights of the mall.

"Are you O.K.?" Doreen said, grasping her mother's arm protectively.

Looking into her daughter's face, Hwee Bin seemed to see her at every age. A little girl arranging colored pencils on the cold tiled floor. A teen-ager briefly venturing into rebellion, short skirt, permed hair. A young woman in her first job, boxy jacket with shoulder pads, a lightness to her walk, as if all the world awaited, as if all the world were at her feet. And now here she was: middle-aged, overworked, childless, alone.

To think that she'd imagined Doreen capable of saving her. Moving out of Sunrise Valley would take her no further from death.

What would happen to the rat? Hwee Bin recalled the neighbor boy she'd played marbles with as a girl, who she'd thought had terrible aim but realized, years later, had been holding back on purpose to draw out the game. That boy was long dead. Found with blood seeping from his nose and gums, bruises pooling in the crooks of his knees. For most families on their block, there were weeks when food ran short and all a child might have to eat was some slices of sweet potato in watery congee. It was in such a week that the neighbor boy, empty stomach gnawing like an animal trying to get out of his body, had chanced upon a box of rat poison in the kitchen and mistaken it for food.

"Take me home," Hwee Bin said to her daughter. Doreen, pale as a baby chick, drove carefully this time.

Now Hwee Bin was the one who sat with people at mealtimes, and Kirpal who was alone. Satveer had not come back to visit after his birthday. Hwee Bin thought of her often, sitting in some air-conditioned conference room with men whose paunches strained against their shirts, who stared at her long neck as she went, line by line, through whatever contract was under discussion. Beautiful Satveer, intelligent Satveer, well-meaning Satveer, whose Dada-ji had once taken her to the beach. What emotion had moved her to contact the newspaper, take the day off, buy the balloons, request that Mrs. Tan hold the celebration in the Big Hall and not the Rec Room? What misguided pity, secret pride, warped vanity had made her chatter away to the reporter about Kirpal's past when he himself would say nothing? All that mattered for Satveer was the outside world, the world that would read the article in the *Singapore Tribune* the next morning and say, How touching. How brave. What sacrifices a man like this must have made for our nation. Impossible for her to imagine was the world of Sunrise Valley, where her mild, jovial grandfather who had taken her to the beach actually had friends—friends he cared for, friends with internal lives and moral compasses and hypocrisies of their own. Friends who had to sit next to him at lunch and think about what he had done.

He had not intentionally kept it from them, Kirpal had explained. No one talked about their lives from before. That this was true did nothing to stop the residents of Sunrise Valley from peeling away from him one by one. Nothing this exciting had happened since Madam Seet had been caught in bed with a male aide. "I just feel like we had a right to know," Cynthia said, every time the topic was discussed, which was every occasion that Kirpal was not there. "I just feel like we had a right to know." Low voice, lips pursed, she lived for the performance. Know what? Hwee Bin wanted to ask. What was there to know, and why should they have a right to anything at all? But she kept her mouth shut. She had, after all, read the English headlines out loud to Ah Gau and his crew that very first morning, aware, the entire time, of Kirpal's soft, unblinking eyes on her.

The *Singapore Tribune* article was parsed over and over. Kirpal's "unique ability" to put prisoners at ease had often moved them to donate their organs before the end. To stay healthy, he "cracked a raw egg into his coffee" each morning. A young prison officer, he had started out as an assistant to Mr. Gloucester, a British hangman in the colonial prison services, "well-versed in the Table of Drops."

Hwee Bin was often enlisted to translate some English word or another. And there was no doubt that she was flattered by the attention. She was never alone now; the others had grown comfortable with her at last, and these days, even when the conversations had nothing to do with Kirpal, they included her out of habit.

No one, really, was against the death penalty itself. "No use feeling sorry for them," Hasmi, the lawyer, said. "I've met these drug dealers—trust me, you don't want them near your kids." Here Cynthia would shudder dramatically, wrap her bony fingers around her shoulders in a girlish manner that, a long time ago, might have been charming. "Someone must do *lah*," Ah Gau said matter-of-factly. "Otherwise how to keep Singapore safe? But—*aiyo*. Something wrong with him, do for so many years, so many people." The issue, then, was not the act of hanging itself but the consistency and equanimity with which Kirpal had seemingly carried on for so long.

And how did Hwee Bin feel about it? If there was one thing she had learned in her eighty-two years of life, it was that she could grow accustomed to anything, anything at all.

It was still some months before Kirpal would begin to wake up with long scratches down the sides of his arms, and no memory of how they had appeared. Some months before the aides would recommend mitts for what they called his "night fidgets." A year before a bed jacket would be imposed. For anyone other than Kirpal, mitts and jacket would come much sooner. But Kirpal would wheedle the staff, charm Mrs. Tan, tease the aides. Once the residents would no longer have anything to do with him, he would turn his attention to his minders, direct all the cheer his nature could muster toward them. Being human, they would not be immune. But they were professionals. And eventually, as Kirpal continued to rake his fingernails into the thin flesh of his arms night after night, they would be left with no option but to move him to High-D.

For now, though, Kirpal still sat in the dining room in his wheelchair, feeding himself, his limbs unencumbered. What was it that made Hwee Bin rise from her table—Cynthia, interrupted mid-sentence, shooting her a look of annoyance—take her tray, and cross the room to where Kirpal sat? There was no one thing she could point to. Later, she would say that Kirpal was taking on the faded look that Hazel had had before her precipitous decline. *Curry as thin as my diarrhea*. The weight of a rat's claws on her bare foot. *He cracked a raw egg into his coffee each morning*. When her car finally conked out, Doreen would take the M.R.T. *My Dada-ji is a man with a rare gift*. The neighbor boy lying pale with blood trickling from his nose.

No one would save her.

Hwee Bin sat down. Kirpal looked at her with his soft, soft eyes. When she spoke, it was as if to an old friend, someone she had played marbles with in the sticky caress of the monsoon morning, on a street that once held so many lives, and families, and children, but had long since ceased to exist.

“Tell me,” she said, “what it’s like to die.” ♦