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Bandar Sri Permaisuri

“That’s a gay town,”

he said.

“And you a weird boy,”

before he walked away.

He hates the place it seems.

I think he hates me more.

Almost a decade and a half ago when I was 12,

when I began to stare more closely at the sunrise on my body;

when I first realised goodbyes could empty everything inside us, softening

the hateful hearts of yesteryears; when I was able to watch myself sleep

a little longer, bracing myself for the new haters in my new school

who loathed me before we knew each other,

I moved here.

Breaking the dawn was a Hainanese chicken rice restaurant

thronged by different tongues. Behind, the scissors whispered,

an Indian barber shop that charged me eight ringgit

every time I re-appeared unsightly in the mirror. A ‘Hero’ supermarket arrived

months later, for the true Heroes who had been yelling at their own fearless darlings

day and night; who would screech even louder if they left the store with bags

of bleeding *siham*, *kangkung*, *cili padi* and *ikan kembong* still sitting idly

at the innocent cashier counter.

I went down to the playground every evening to meet up with Pameela, Jun Jie and Farah; their familiar faces still resurface in my dreams.

Nevermind if you are a *Malai Yan*, *Tong Yan* or *Keling Yan*, we *suka*-heartily played together. Together until our pet names startled us from the colourless bird cages dangling above. Our mothers are poets too - their angry voices sounded like verses. There were nights we re-united, with pocketfuls of shillings to buy from the *Ting-Ting man* snacks, and breads, and sweets on top of sweets that had outweighed his shabby motorbike so that he too could go home safely. The beeping sound of his small horn was *Merdeka* to us.

Waves of *Mamak* stalls, convenient stores and condos had crashed onto its aging body the last time I flew back. Each of them strains its flabby muscle as vehicles grind through its clogging arteries. None of its organs is untouched.

Far apart, the remaining trees chant, in distress < in unison < in ways we no longer hear < we no longer care ...

I wish he knew where the falling leaves had buried my sandals and my textbooks in which I put down how he, and others, had made fun of me and my softness as I sobbed.

Because he, who once called my home “a gay town”, who despised our existence, has moved there with his family after I left dejectedly for Singapore.
