



girl  
**G U N G H** 

THE COMING OF AGE  
OF A KEYBOARD  
WARRIOR

JASMINE H. LOW

# Girl Gungho

The coming of age of a keyboard warrior

Jasmine H. Low

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# Identity

“You’re pretty...

Pretty ugly, he grins. That’s my brother, getting back at me. I was upset that I had to share my playmobil toy men with him. Why did I have to share?! Cheeky, not hurtful but totally annoying and from that young age, I already knew I had to be pretty... gungho! In one of our sparring sessions, he copped a Taekwondo hook kick to his chin. I couldn’t understand why boys had such fun toys so I wanted to be a boy called Peter and asked my aunt if our doggie Porgie could have a *peepee*, why couldn’t I? I was not going to have any less than what my brothers had. I knew I’d have to be better and stronger than them since I didn’t have that one membership thing. It wasn’t envy, it was the early days of my want for equality.

Who am I?

I’m a girl, gungho with long black wavy hair that’s not unusual for a person of southern Han Chinese heritage with a chance of meatballs in our DNA makeup. We suspect Dad’s lineage via his high bridged nose which I have none, traces our paternal DNA back to the Arabian traders or possibly even the great Indian conquerors and with his father adopted, this suspicion is highly palpable. Pencil in hand, heart of glass like Blondie’s on my sleeve, I charge like an italicised sans serif *Ubuntu* font on a mission to be the best version of myself. Some days I feel like a modern day Mulan out to protect and serve my family. Other days I feel frustrated that I’ve not yet come out of the entrepreneurial closet as a Unicorn. On one of those navel-gazing days, I happened to have

Australia's highest-paid radio duo Karl & Jackie O' on air. Karl mocks Jackie O' as he does, and says, I don't know why you women will somehow find something to feel insecure about.

18 and full of promise, I hid my pimply back as I travelled overseas for the first time under a crisp striped shirt mom bought for me from Petaling Street. It had a green logo - Accost, it said. A headband kept my hair slicked back like in that *Greased Lightning* music video and I was ready to face immigration officers with a no-eggs, no-meat declaration on my first entry down under as an overseas student.

*Where are you from?* An inquisitive man ahead of me in the queue asks, spotting my red passport. *China?*

No. Malaysian, I announced.

He nodded downward in disappointment that he had guessed wrong and turned away before I could add the trailing word... Chinese.

I had never been asked that before and in that minute, I felt a sense of belonging. I claimed it and from that day onwards, I was a Malaysian. Malaysian Chinese, if they press on.

It was 1988 and Australians were out on the harbour celebrating the bicentennial - 200 years since the arrival of the first fleet. It turned out to be the largest questioning of national identity the country had ever witnessed with many parties calling out for Aboriginal rights to be recognised. And so I enter this liminal passage as a teenager, unaware of Australia's subliminities like Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country when a First Nations Elder isn't present



at a ceremony, oblivious to the greatest find at Lake Mungo of a man and a woman whose cremated remains date back two ice ages to some 50,000 years ago. I left my values at the airport, got disoriented and experimented by stretching values and principles. My heart would ache whenever I watch footage of The Stolen Generation in a documentary or listen to classic rock like Australian Crawl's *Reckless*. This book is my coming of age between the liminals.

Growing up, my brothers and I played freely, cycling and running with our three-legged dog Spotty around the horseshoe shaped street lined with 25 x 75 foot terrace houses in a working class suburb whose residents were a genteel working class mix of races. We climbed up our tree house like how Daddy climbed up the corporate ladder. Two red plastic chairs with plastic ropes strung across it a thousand times, jammed up between the Rambutan tree with its metal legs tightly wedged around the trunk in our front yard. We cycled without a care to piano lessons a stone's throw down the road and readied our fingers in anticipation that teacher may bring down a pencil if we hit the wrong notes. She gave up on my brother who wasn't a natural. We played in the park on our skateboards and roller skates and cooked Maggie mee in Milo tins using newspaper as fuel! I'd follow mum to the morning market every Saturday only to be lost in the folds of the latest British New Wave band zine and Beano comics while mum and aunty sought daily bargains at the makeshift wet produce market setup on an open carpark lot. I cherish those mornings, leafing through the magazines imported from so far away, listening to adult conversations at the newsagent, women bargaining, men heaving pickaxe cleavers carving meat from carcasses, chicken and their feathers strewn around shitty cages, oh, the smell and the din! I loved every moment!

Weekends would come and my neighbour and bestie Carol and I walked to the *pasar malam* night market - such a social affair it was too! We'd bump into school friends, school teachers, Wesley Methodist church members and even spot a famous personality or two! A head nod was enough to make you feel right at home for us 12-year olds. We'd race home pumped up with adrenaline but we were mostly running scared because there was a rumour going around that there was a Hantu KumKum (an urban legend vampire who'd seek out virgin girls and drink their blood dry)!

It was a good thing we were forgetful. Carol and I took to walking a little further the next day. This time in daylight and accompanied by another bestie, Lenni. Our youthful naivety and adventurous spirit egged us on as we power walked from suburbia through to the leafy green back roads of Federal Hills, dotted by large colonial bungalows of the black and white blinds kind, then nervously crossing the road just outside of the same location where in two years I would be outraged by a boy who molested me by grabbing my tiny tween breasts before running into the National Mosque to hide! I ran after him until I ran out of breath then ran back to school, reported the incident and cried my eyes out in front of my counselor. I felt violated and angry that he got away! How could he?! How dare he!? I was shocked and disturbed to learn that years later, it would have been a crime scene for a bigger violation, one that harmed a girl from my same school to her death in 1999. I think of her mother's pain and I think of the ones who got away. Surely, they cannot have gone far from their conscience to entrap them. That's too kind for such a heinous crime. I think of all the little girls and teens, women and grandmothers, I think of boys who have grown into men having to live with the pain. I think of Fortnite gamers dressed in their latest feminine skins (they all prefer to wear

female skins! Ask any boy who plays Fortnite why). They kill and spawn with cereal in their small mouths, the older ones stream their game play and others watch. This supercorridor underpass still stinks of piss today and links my alma mater to two great icons; Kuala Lumpur's first and tallest building *Dayabumi* meaning Force of Earth and inside of that force, the city's first McDonald's outlet. Oh, what a marvel it was! This building would stand testament in postcards I'd send to the new friends I made in my Australian high school just to show them that hey, look, we really don't live on trees. And just like that, Carol and I landed on the other side of a first world after Form Five.

The three of us were smiling in triumph as we walked swiftly past the Puduraya Bus Depot before coming to a screeching halt: flasher alert! Lift his white lungi did he, this one man, in a bid to shock us three. Shocked we were - three teenage girls running like missiles aiming for detonation where we landed. By the time I reached 18, I would have had three occasions of witnessing colourful penises, and Porgie's pink *peepee*. I decided then, I'd rather be an emancipated young woman than wield one of those special membership passes as if one would need that to gain entry into the most exclusive clubs on high street.

Mum finally relented and bought me my first pair of Nikes. That sporty cyan swoosh sewn onto a beautiful white leather canvas set her back MYR70 and while she didn't understand why I needed it so badly, I understood the power of negotiation and proudly held my prize — a pair of *expensive* imported shoes, an upgrade from the local Pallas. I was part of the *Oxford Five* in school you see, and one of the things we did was we shoe-swapped. We were the cool kids of the 80s closely mirroring the lives of American brat packers like Molly Ringwald in the hit coming-of-age movie, *Times Square*. Sanjot had the Saratogas and

Kareem Abdul Jabaar's. Lenni had the Adi tennis classics. Carol's parents didn't relent so Bata it was. Malar had her head in Mills & Boons adventures, one a day and had no interest in shoe swaps. But three of us wore mismatched shoes and that was our *thang!* We were too cool for school. And I perfected the art of removing my bra during class. What Gen-Xers we were with no cares, no worries and some style, so we thought! It was our identity!

Gentrification swooped in before we even knew how to spell it. It came through the printed word assembled in magazines with a Pegasus logo and a yellow box on the cover. It came in the 1980s as the colour TV. I was hooked on technicolour and TV TIGA's OST was hardwired into my brain. Mum came home one day with a surprise -- Greased, my first cassette and I was so enamored by American culture that moment on. Bowzer's deep bass voice provided me the foundation to chase that American dream down in Australia. And within a year, I talked myself into buying my first bikini and walked down Queensland's Broadbeach barebacked, brave and gung-ho. My back cleared up and life was peachy thereafter.

Someone once told me, find someone to love or find something to do. That became my truth for 20 years. Someone else told me I was promising as a writer. So I've guarded these stories, writing whenever I could. In the next few pages, I share stories based on those life experiences and observations with the hope that with each short, that promise can hold some truth and I'll be fired up to keep writing.

Jasmine Low

25 April 2021

Sydney, Australia



Leave me a message: [www.jasminelow.com/book](http://www.jasminelow.com/book)

For my mother, Shirl.

A girl with curls.

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# Chapter One

## Girl at Play

The stories in this chapter were written between 1998-2015 in and around Kuala Lumpur's Golden Triangle; Jalan Imbi, Jalan Sultan Ismail to Jalan Raja Chulan. It was at that time that the author discovered the KL arts scene, nightclubs and revisited Hick's Road's beef ball noodles where Shirl used to bring the author. It wasn't quite the same.

An old uncle and a younger one, both dressed in white Pagoda t-shirts, knee-length brown pants that were two sizes too large held up by a brown buckled belt. These men were the masters of Midnight Diners in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's Bukit Bintang district. Their shack was just about 3 sqm and within that confine, they would brew up the most delicious wonton noodles where the most elegant of girls sweaty from clubbing gear and men in black would loudly sup and slurp. On that same street, another delicious brew of beef ball noodles *Ngau Kee* would cater to men in suits, ladies two-by-two and our motley crew. Across the road, there was a lady who was tall and toothless. She would befriend taxi drivers and chat with them. I only realised later that it wasn't just a friendly chat but a negotiation taking place. She had a friend who was sometimes there, sometimes not. And just from where they patrolled, a group of poets and musicians would show up for open mic gigs at the Doppelganger and Troubadours shows. That row of quaint shophouses along Tingkat Tong Shin provided a backdrop, a stage where actors would strut the streets and rehearse their lines to an audience of taxi drivers, soul-searching backpackers and wonton slurping executives. Every moment savoured, I watched and was lost in search of my very own self.



# Time out

This piece is about her —  
that woman in us all.

It was the year of living dangerously  
Through the pages of that magazine,  
Those 'dog – eared' pages.

I lived through her large rimmed sunglasses,  
Peeking and seeing positions even contortionists would have found a  
challenge.

And I simply loved lurking in and out of her emails,  
And tug gently her personal drawer where she'd keep a stash of that  
And I would creep into her room in the middle of the night  
And watch her fall in and out of love.

It was unusual how they'd just listen  
To her ceaseless words of wisdom  
For she was just not ready, she'd proclaim  
Cranberry juices calmed her  
And her uterus track  
For she was simply not ready.

Because free spirits like her live like no tomorrow  
She'd bodysurf and yearn to appear on headlines the next day  
Nothing was going to stop her

from having some Time Out...

*Written by the author for Time Out Magazines and performed at the Time Out KL Launch, 25th March 2008, Frangipani Bar, Changkat Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur.*

# The Arrival

Listen 

Tirelessly, she draws on her liner  
Practises her opening numbers  
Stretches her lips from side to side  
Holds her head up  
Grabs her hair back  
Smiles, and pretends to yawn  
Cackles, then angles her neck to let out a stream of laughter  
She is ready.  
And she dials for her public cab  
6 2 5 9 2 0 2 0  
On her way to the club in ampang  
Cabbie queries while 'tick tick' goes the tambang  
in the mirror he sees her.  
Young, pale, eyes defined  
too beautiful to stare just once  
and he stares  
while she escapes into her other world.  
the world of the night  
when she is most awake  
when you are most lonely.  
And she contemplates the savouries of the night  
she plans her lines  
she can already see the intricate lines on your face,  
she sees the make of your shirt,  
the name of your dog  
the size of your shoe.  
And she slams the door SHUT!  
For she has arrived.  
And so will you.

*Written and Performed at Doppelganger Open Mic, La Bodega Lounge Tingkat  
Tong Shin on 3rd of July 2005. First published in British Council's 'Poetry Lives in  
KL' Collection 2007.*

# The Mysterious Alibi

## Girls who don't kiss and tell

So long as you are mysterious, keep your lips sealed and keep your eyes peering alluringly from the boughs of your lashes,' Herman barks, louder than he normally does in an overtly put-on British accent he learnt from watching *The Saint*.

Staring at her, he softens his tongue and quietly whispers, 'I get for you, you get osso, o'kay sayang? Just smile and say you donno if you donno o'kay? Even if you know, you must say donno cay? Now go, be good ge ge. Find mat sallah ham-sum (handsome), you osso senang lah (life will be easy),'.

## Karaoke bar, 7.37pm

Kissie lowers her eyelids, then lifts up her head at a 45 degree angle, peers alluring at the Him and with her mouth slightly ajar asks the imperial question, 'Hi handsome...you single? You enjoys your stay in Kay Ell? My name is Kissie Kissie. One kiss. Twice, happy. Yours?'

The Him stares with his thin upper lip unbroken, laced with yesterday's traces of a brown shade overshadowing the lip, he lets out a guffaw.

'Hah, hah, hah! Hey Kissie Kissie. How ya doin, gurr! So what's a gorgeous gurr! like ya doin' teasin' handsome men like me, eh?!' The Him snorts and slaps his large pink hands on Kissie's \$6,500 collagen-implanted buttocks.

Slaaaaaaaap!

'Owwwww...,' shrills Kissie while giggling.

Running through Kissie's mind that instant was the Him's perfectly manicured lawns, just like the ones she'd seen in last week's episode of *Desperate Housewives* on the hotel pay TV while that Him was handling her buttocks and breasts in clockwise and anticlockwise motions. She saw the Him's gorgeous brunette wife, dressed in lovely tight dresses just above her knee like the ones featured in last month's collection on page 5 of *Her World*. And of course, the delicious

gardener who kept the Him's gardens trimmed perfectly and the Him's wife's Brazilian trimmed to the rim.

## Jalan Alor, 8:23pm

Kissie's reveries are abruptly interrupted by the foreigner patting her behind repeatedly, 'Lady, you like to sing? I didn't know I'd find a lady like you in this city! You like to join me for a drink?' Leaning over to the rest of his colleagues seated around him around pink tablecloths at Restoran Fatty Tuck, the Him motions for his mates to make a space for Kissie to join their table of eight, with the motive that she might invite Him home for a taste of Asian hospitality.

'Ah, tonight's special, Sir. Our Fatty frog legs stir-fried with garlic and ginger. I highly recommend this to all visiting tourists, especially the French. They adore it! It's also excellent for keeping a man's heart strong! Ahhhh...' winks the restaurateur cheekily while motioning to his waiter to pull out one of the caged amphibians on display.

And pulled it out he did, the frog wincing away, wishing it was a prince!

Also our chilli pipis – very nice, very fresh mussels. Cooked like my grandmother's recipe. Spicy little but delicious! How's that to start? O'kay?

'Ummm... yes sure boss! Plus one Pineapple Fried Rice. And a Tiger beer in a mug. No peanuts, I'm allergic to nuts,' the mysterious bearded man requests. Herman sensed this man secretly lived life on the edge. But he always remained in control. He seems the Tom-type, Herman thought.

## Bedroom, 1:07am

Kissie had never seen such painful marks on skin. Wrapped like a band around His right arm were augmented circle rings of singed flesh. Kissie suddenly felt frightened. The red raw pungency intimated that the flesh was still fresh. 'Never expect so nice man have this type fetish!' she thought, deflating her usually high sexual appetite.

'What's the matter, baby? It didn't hurt.....,' The Him snarls, watching Kissie stare at His arm. His fever was getting worse. But it was probably just the heat.

'Oo..I think it hurt bad. What happened?' she asks, reaching out her index to touch it.

SLAP!!

The Him withdrew as quickly as he extended his heavy hand, 'I'm sorry, baby, I'm sorry' he says, reaching out to touch her lip which had slightly parted to reveal a tinge of ruby red. It wasn't her lipstick.

In shock, Kissie coiled up on a corner of the king-sized mattress and let out a livid cry from under her breath, 'Don't you e...v...e...r...! Away! Stay Away!'

The Him tried to reach out to caress her hair. But he had lost Kissie. He lost her the moment he made eye contact with her. She could sense his spirit was not one that came from a good place, and that's why she went with him cautiously.

## Months later

### Ubud, 6:03pm

'Oh ...this is beautiful! I so happy, Tom Tom! I never feel so happy, darling!' shrieks Cassandra. Turning around to hug Tom, she stares at their reflection in the mirror with the imminent Ubud sunset in the background.

'Me! Kissie is here. But so far away from my sistahs. Ummm...miss dem! I want them to see me wit Tom. He is my hero!' Cassandra whispers, smiling and contently watching her hot humid breath condense.

Cassandra's ultimate dream is to find a man who would never judge her, love her unconditionally and always open the door for her. And, to win the coveted title of 'Ms Universe Dream Girl', which she did six months ago. 'Impossible dream,' she and her sisters would lament. The girls in the neighbourhood would conjure up stories of their own personal heroes. This happened at their Monday afternoon ritual at the Three Sistahs Café. Late lunch, story exchange about their weekend

'catches' and with replenished pockets, the girls would be off to a polishing at the manicurist or for a new wave at the salon. Sometimes, if one sister had to throw away a bad fish back into the sea, the other girls would chip in for her weekly maintenance. Maintenance was expensive. But it had to be done. Because each one secretly believed in the 'impossible dream'.

'Ala....if only the girls see me like dis now. I so happy happy! Maybe tonight I don't sleep. After if I wake up, Tom become like the other evil Hims! Eek! Only enjoys me one night. I dun want! So tired...dun wan...'

'Darling, are you alright?' he smiles, grasping her tight from behind.

'Oh... Tom Tom...' Cassandra puckers up her lips and places it against his. 'Just now I feel little sick. Maybe flu. But I so happy! Happeeeee, honey! I am little person in big giant world. Still, you found me!' she gleamed, teeth showing and rather unlady-like actually. But Tom didn't mind.

'I'm happy too, my darling. You're every woman to me. Now, forget about your past, young lady. They can all say what they want. They will never understand us,' Tom kisses her gently. 'You, my sweetheart, will come home with me soon. I know it's too soon but I knew from the moment we met. We will be amongst the 35% of people in my country with mortgages,' he grinned, recalling the news report on Channel Ten the other night.

'Huh? Wow 35%? OK, hunnee,' Cassandra nods nonchalantly as she was really not into politics or the economy.

'You say is right. My past does not matter, ya? Now, about our future... we begin tonight o' cay?! I oredi call room service and order you Nenas fried rice – your favourites. No nuts...' she teasers, leading him by the hand towards the Jacuzzi. 'Darling, please off the lights. My eyes hurt. You promise to love me? I want my body to be special present to you,' Cassandra lets her white linen drawstrings drop to her ankles. The lovers embrace and lock. Tom rests his hands on her breast and lingers around her waist. She tenses. The moment has arrived for her to share herself with her lover. He loves her. She knows he does. She braves herself. And removes her thongs.

Herman prods Kissie's lifeless body. He left Alor for Ubud the moment he received the phone call. He was her father, her provider, her only family, her lover. He was devastated.



The call came late in the evening. The person on the other line sounded blasé and that, already annoyed Herman.

'Hallo? Mr. Herman? Selamat soreh. This is Roman Liem, Special Task Polisi Indonesia. I found your number in the deceased's purse. Are you a relative of a Lim Ka San, 5' 9" with shoulder length black hair, fair skin with a tattoo of a tiger on his breasts? Dia tu bapak, yah?'

'Deceased? What?! How?! Tattoo. Yes, I know her. She has no relatives. No, not bapak. She is a transsexual,' Herman replied, confused.

'Her? Kissie? Enggak, nooo, Lim Ka San. Do you know Lim Ka San? On passport, date of birth is 25<sup>th</sup> February 1974,' the caller rattles on.

Herman stiffened and blurted out an affirmative 'yes'.

'Well then, Mr. Herman, we need you to identify the body. When can we expect you?'

In a few hours, he would be on a flight to Bali to claim the body of his lover. Still in a daze as the airplane taxied down the runway, Herman started to recall the things Kissie had told him about her new lover. Herman had not paid much attention as he had assumed Tom was just another client. Just that this time, Kissie appeared to really like him.

After every rendezvous at city hotels around town, Kissie would come home and describe to Herman minute details of their bedroom secrets – hers and Tom's. It seemed Tom was a gentle six-footer. An ex-sportsman, Tom was recently divorced and had been living in Kuala Lumpur for almost a decade. As much as Herman cringed at every detail, the more Kissie revealed, the less of a threat Tom became. Herman was entrapped with so much knowledge about the two lovers that in his reveries, he was the *trois* in a *ménage*. So when Tom asked Kissie to go away with him for a week at one of the finest resorts in Bali, how could Herman say no? Tom seemed to genuinely like her. Funnily enough, despite knowing so much about Tom, Herman had never met him. He usually doesn't meet them.

Herman and Kissie shared an unusual relationship. One which none of their friends would tolerate nor understand. How can you let your girl flirt with other men?! Herman's friends would mock him. And hers would tease Your man? Huh! How come he let you play play with all the Hims ah? But they didn't understand. It was a knowing. That's what

Herman called it. Just a knowing. Kissie felt the knowing too when she first set eyes on Herman's cheeks - pink from his recent London stint as a cook at the restaurant on Piccadilly Circus.

They both knew that their time together was not possible in this lifetime. What's possible is to establish their soulmate status in this lifetime and guide each other towards the next for their hiatus.

It was odd having to watch Kissie dress that morning. Pressed shirt neatly tucked into her pants with her hair lowered in a pony tail and no makeup. Handsome.

Herman sat there looking for a while, hiding behind his newspaper, sipping his kopi-o. Unaware, he toggled his hairy mole vigorously, believing that each stroke ensured a sure-win for his four-digit punt. He remembers Kissie bolting towards him, smacking his hand from his distinctly poised mole at the centre of his chin before grabbing her handbag and rushing out the door. This was the man he truly loved but had set free. Kissie is free. And on her way to getting her first passport!

'Suspected causes of death: meningococcal septicaemia and...' the wiry man says matter-of-factly while pulling up the stained white sheet covering her corpse, abruptly interrupted by a bawling Herman.

She lay there taut, unyielding with maroonish bruise marks around her neck. Her \$12,000 breasts stood still in perfection.

Herman had fully supported Kissie's full transformation and sat through every mood swing, every hormone imbalance. Some days he would regret his investment. Some days he would revel in it. She remained as fine in death.

'Kissie!!!! Kissie!!!!' Herman weeps. He remains silent for a while. The silence didn't affect the Coroner. The cadaver did.

'What is that? Meningo-what? Some kind of cancer?' Herman vaguely queries, staring at Kissie's lifeless visage. He picks up fragments of the Coroner's drone.

'...and suicide,' the Coroner continues, intentionally lowering his voice to avoid being heard by a distraught Herman. There were more tests to be done anyway.

'It's a bacterial infection, Mr. Herman. An inflammation of tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Symptoms: high fever, headache, stiff neck, flu-like symptoms, dislike of bright lights and nausea. In the deceased's case, his brain just swelled so fast so quick it cut off all blood to his brain so there was no hope,' explains the Coroner.

'She. But how did she contract it?' Herman asks, stressing on Kissie's gender. How annoying it is when people do not acknowledge Kissie for who she is. Just because her ID renounces her gender.

'We carry the bacteria at the back of our nose and throat without ever realising it. In some people, the bacteria penetrate the body's immune defenses and pass through the tissue lining into the bloodstream. Once in the blood, meningococcal meningitis or septicemia. There's a possibility he was already dying of meningococcal septicemia...'

'Tom! What happened to Tom?! Where is he?' cries Herman, once again interrupting the Coroner. 'What happened to the guy who was with her? Tom. Was he in the room too?'

'You must understand, the bacteria cannot survive for long in the air. He.. uhm, she must have contracted meningitis by being very close to someone. Do you know if he was close to someone who was not well? It's just a pity because it is a treatable disease if identified early. But it doesn't matter anyway.'

'How dare you?! It does matter!' retorted an angry Herman.  
'He, uhm...Kissie was found sprawled naked in bed. No guy. He left. A local checked him in - we're still questioning him. We suspect he was most likely paid by the unidentified alibi. Tom, you say?'

She overdosed, Mr. Herman. Sleeping pills. We were all taken aback. We suspect she didn't even know she was dying from the disease. It's just a pity. So young, so beautiful this Kissie. There's a note addressed to you,' the wiry man's voice echoes her name as he slowly draws the covers over her face. The Coroner slides the plump white note into Herman's hands.

The knowing.  
Herman to himself,  
She knew.

Now, at last, he could be free.

*First drafted in August 2005 seated along Jalan Alor in an outdoor eatery, fan blasting tropical heated asphalt, inspired by some facts and some fiction. For many months, I spent time with Freda, a standup comedian and performer. We've become life-long friends and have kept in touch. I was fascinated by his life stories, his life, his writing, his love affairs, his comedy, his struggles.*

# Dancing Queens

## Liquid dreams

Follow my eyes

and let's take a 5 second glance

make a 360 around the room

a room full of queens

raining men wearing finely designed torsos sinewed and keen  
shirtless, they are flinging translucent beads into your eyes

Blink once twice and thrice between curtained cubicles sighs

follow my eyes

c'mon take a 5 second glance

Let your eyes do the horizontal and crowdsurf onto her cleavage

Head North of her curvaceous plunge pass her secret box

Staccato prance over her left shoulder and you'll arrive

Eye to eye with that crush from school a mere hour away

Hugs, shrieks and kisses in the air dancefloor

come closer

look through the martini glass

let's get lost in invisible moments

between sips of mai tais

nods of nonchalance

and greetings of raised eyebrows

deafening beats numb my brains

I wonder if they have the same effect on you

I like it so much  
Better than chocolate  
Drag me to the dancefloor now please!



*Inspired by many nights watching people dance at Liquid Bar Central Market & Frangipani Bar in Changkat Bukit Bintang, the author was always rather flexible as captured in this selfie at age 12.*

# Samanth

## Showgirls in suburbia

Sam got out of the tiny Mini in a huff. The hotel doorman who's seen it all is blinded by the stark white dress. Sam is slightly flushed, beads of sweat around her forehead, white bunga raya tucked neatly behind her ears and an obvious corset holding the lady man's bulbous package. She's seen it all, this girl they call Sam. She's seen just about it all.

It's Tommy's graduation day. His mother arrives promptly at 11am in a body hugging lycra top, short denim skirt and heels above sea level. She always looked the best in the room. She always stood out. Except when Sam was in the room.

In traipses Sam in a pristine white shirt neatly tucked into black tailored jeans. Hair pulled back as a sign of respect for her boy. Tommy gleamed. It had been awhile since his family had gotten together – and in such regalia. It had been a long while.

'Take me with you,' she repeated. Innocence dripping, she placed her hands on Sam's thighs and longingly traced the cords on his pants. This man whom she had fallen in love with since childhood had the most intensely brown eyes. His high cheek bones enunciated his Caucasian heritage. His dark features and curls hinted of a more Southeast Asian parentage. Raising tingling sensations on his back, her fingers had stroked Sam into a poise of erection. He knew her longing. He had never been with one like her before. They usually had to have chiseled chins, coarser voice and thicker lips. They were usually men he would allow deep into him, hurting him while they penetrated his walls and

ejaculated on his back. He sensed her yearning and tonight, he sensed a longing for someone softer.

She moaned and squirmed while Sam topped her. He pleased her with such deep love, pumped her madly. Grabbing her buttocks, Sam had never imagined a woman could have made him so hard. The veins along his torrid flesh fell in and out of sight as he entered her. 'Yes, yes...hmmm, give in to me, give in to me,' she would repeat. Sex with Sam acknowledged her reddened sex and each time he fulfilled the promise, she would offer linear scratches all the way down his back from the blades of the shoulder down to the dimple of his behind. It was incredible sex. And the conception of Tommy.

'Will you take me cruisin....and buy me diamonds?' Sam purred suggestively into the ears of the Japanese salesman. 'You say you will wait for me...will you, my handsome man?' she would further tease. Sam was used to handling seemingly tame Asian men at dinner shows. Five minutes ago, the really bad local band tried their part in entertaining the really bored guests at the appreciation dinner at the hotel pub. The staid crowd were a mix of nervous salesmen, accountants and yappy this-is-my-first-job Chinese executive girls. And Sam. She didn't feel out of place. She always fit in. And she would tell her tale.

'You like? You see, just before I was born, the Angel ran up to God and said...Dear God! Vagina! There's no more stock! And so God made me. I, ladies and gentlemen, am Sam'.

*Written 10 January 2007 inspired by and written for my friend, Freda.*



# Chapter Two

## Girl in Love

Sunday school set me up with expectations of everlasting love of the Jesus kind. The kind where you'd offer the left cheek if you were slapped on the right. The kind of servitude, unconditional pure love that is God dependent.

"Rules for happiness: something to do, someone to love, something to hope for."

— Immanuel Kant

Back on earth as humans do, we yearn to experience the meaning of love and I've found there's more to these four letters of expectations than just romance. Enduring feelings of romantic love, fleeting crushes that lead to lifelong friendships, sibling rivalry that has stood the test of time. As that same pesky cheeky fella of a brother would say to me, love is a feeling you create for yourself. It is you who falls in love, you who sustains that feeling, you too who would feel it so intensely or not and it's all within your own psyche. Isn't it like your own doing? That same brother that called me pretty... ugly. And of us all, he is the one who's married and sustained his marriage with three children, a mortgage but no dog. For years, I've thought he must love himself quite a lot.

The only danger in falling in love so hard, is that you tend to lose yourself while searching for commonality and calibrating your values so that you match the other person. And when values can't quite fit the cogs, we fall back on principles, which are not the same as values in that values are innate in us and going against that in principle, can lead to a very unhealthy human being, almost toxic. And we all know love isn't toxic.

# Piscean

'There's plenty in the sea, my love'

Listen 

Night has devoured you and before you awake  
She would have spit you and gargled you out from her arid throat

My dear, I fear you will lose your white light despite your pristine  
thoughts

But you let Her.  
You let Her consume you.  
And you, greedy, seek more.  
She gives you more.

And you take.  
And you take.  
And you crave only more.

That hunger will never cease until you rescind Her. Her darkness  
engages you and entices you to hide underneath her pit. You smell  
dank as she releases you at dawn only to take you in again at dusk.

You are the fish heading one way  
whilst I'm the other heading in your direction  
Any which way, we still entwine and circle to complete the other

When you're up, I'm down and vice versa  
When we swim, the other's tail in the other's face  
Eyes on either sides of our faces, yet we never get to see eye to eye

The other is always better, smarter, more beautiful  
I dance around the circle to save you, to heal you, to love you  
Too bad we'll always be swimming in the opposite direction

I'll always miss you  
It's the 2 second rule  
2 seconds too late  
And when I fall out of love with you  
You will fall in love with me  
And that, my dear Piscean lover, is our life.

Hence it is our lesson in this life to forgive and to love

Regardless  
To be kind yet practical  
Regardless

Because we're the last signs on the scope  
Because we can.

*Two seconds too late, this chase around each others' tails between those born between February 19 and March 20, mark the Pisces, the 12th star in astrology with references to Ancient Greek mythology, religion and constellations. This poem is about duality and acceptance of oneself.*

# I'm not loud by nature

Listen 

Some nights, I wish I was lightning  
A startling flash of light,  
unnerving and unafraid of consequences as I strike  
But I'm not so bright

Or, thunder, that offers no compromise in its loud and crashing sounds  
as they hit the surface of the black tar road along Jalan Raja Chulan  
But I'm not loud by nature

I could dance up the beautiful steel structures of the KLCC  
like the sensual winds of the South China Sea  
But I'm not so graceful

I think of the Monsoon rain, fierce and unrelenting,  
bravely descending upon the city lights at Teluk Chempedak  
like how I wish I could stealthily approach you

But I haven't

I could display these attributes the way Mother Nature intended  
If I was born during December, the last month of the year  
A time of reckoning, madness and forgiveness

But I wasn't

So I bask in the consistency of the constant rays from the full moon  
And instruct it to shine down upon you when you're asleep  
And I call upon dawn to come just as you're about ready to rouse  
And invite the warm sun rays to wait till noon, so moisture evanesces  
from your skin  
Leaving you thirsty  
For me

I am as vast as the ocean  
And as faithful as the perpetual rise and fall of the waves beating  
across the shores,  
I place my wishes in a bottle, hoping it'll reach you in the next continent  
of your mind,  
But this constant chase between the tides is tiresome  
And I fall into a deep slumber only to be jostled by a deep rumble  
In between pulses of thunder and lightning, there you are  
I chase you deeper into nightfall I falter and miss you by two seconds  
too late

At the end of our lifetimes,  
We will realise that there may be a thousand lightning bolts,  
A million decibels of thunder  
Endless windstorms  
would have picked us up in their passionate haste

But there's only one of us,  
One of me,  
And it is this consistency  
That earths us  
And it is this  
That lasts forever.

*Written 12 Jan 2009 / Rewritten March 2021 following an in-depth critique by Malaysian playwright Dr. Ann Lee. The author writes about a duality in her identity, in her love for her native country, torn by a new love for her adopted place of abode. A new country. Like two lovers courting and dancing, these two countries beckon her like a lover promising more than they can deliver. Will she go with her head or her heart?*



# Chapter Three

## Girl woke up Gungho

Years of fluoride must have blocked her pineal glands because she slowly aroused from a long deep slumber and awoke more alert than ever before. She's always had this 'knowing', but I'm sure many little girls like her do. It's like an earthing experience that connects your heart right into the soil when your toes are dipped into it, and toe nails get dirt under them and you're dirty. It's like when you don't wash your hair and it starts to smell funky. It's when you're earthed, brought down from lofty ideals, unrealistic goals and come to a realisation the purpose of your life is not to chase. That the keyboard has a purpose, and it's not for you to wield weapons of destruction through flippant comments or ideals as shields. The age of the internet has enabled and empowered us to be so full of opinion, vigour, thought and pizazz, but only within the confines of the keys. And if you don't touch type, your personality may come across languid or recalcitrant. Like a former prime minister. Blackened finger with arms akimbo, the girl is gungho and ready to really live in her skin rather than out of it.



# Murmurs

When one door opens, another shuts.

She was seeing somebody else.

Fallen hard, she murmured.

You'd do the same, she choked.

She announces, I'm leaving tonight.

She leaves nothing behind but a murmur,

Anger suddenly transforms her into a lemur,

A primate lesser than a simian,

A mammal on fours scurrying like a cold blooded amphibian.

The genteel voice asking her to stay disappears into the distant path,

Like an EU sanction against the importation of Malaysian oil palm,

In an apparent bid to fight against deforestation, so apes have room to play,

The murmurs suggest a warring of minds,

of who's right or wrong,

of past misdemeanours of the most sickening kind,

where hearts are broken and deeds unspoken,

If those who leave are deemed brave,

Then those who stay are cowards.

And I stay.

# Flight 1116

## Nobel dreams from Stockholm to Amsterdam

Taxiing lull before takeoff  
Memories of you and her, I tradeoff  
Unabashed you kiss my head from above  
My left sole still cold from cobblestone love

*You say I'm a riddle* scribes a disappointed Nobel  
Eighteen and fidele  
A dynamite inventor became of this poet  
Bequest his accumulation all to five laureates

Sunset scene from tempered-glass view seats  
Words wedged in NBT wood sipping a whiskey neat  
Intermittent beads of light would flickr  
Like curt prose Tshiung Han See would deliver

Angled decline  
we descend from the climb  
Godless world views string us in Existential Inertia  
I held my breath from Arlanda to Schiphol and am reminded of her

She peers at us from across the aisle and sees me near,  
You switch off form eyes open sober,  
Excel spreadsheets show your latest plunder,  
We have arrived in a new world order.

*Written November 2010 aboard Flight KLM1116, the author explores the idea about where all of our memories and experiences go. What if they could be collectively stored? Edward Feser's paper on Existential Inertia suggests that, once in existence, the natural world tends to remain in existence without need of a divine conserving cause - a claim refuted by St. Aquinas Five Ways as reported in the 2011 American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 85, No. 2.*

# Motherland

## Mother-tongue tale-telling

She's there among us.  
She is our mother.

She is Chong Qing.  
As large as that 3,000 year old city of thirty one million individuals  
She snuggles beside the thighs of Yangtze and Jialingjiang  
And she breathes life  
Last Sunday he was significantly impressed  
Spotting her in dancing unison at the people's park  
A duck rice meal and she was off like the ChungKing express  
Qing Qing seals off her pregnant suitcase with red tape  
Even redder is her passport, tightly concealed between her navel and  
navy jeans  
And her cheeks, blossoming with that certain tell-tale glow  
The women from China  
My father would proclaim  
Are so pure, so innocent  
The women from China  
My mother would blame  
Are so profane, so manipulative  
The women from China  
And I, me in the middle  
Are the centre of attention  
We, are one for all

We travel on an express train from Dusseldorf to Prague  
And visit several bleak european cities  
We are the new age Chinese female  
And they know as they look at us with suspect  
Nationality aside  
We look the same  
As do Greeks, Italians and even DJs of Ibiza fame  
But we dress, think and eat different

Those women from China  
Say those other women of similar heritage  
Who live in lovely manicured gated communities,  
Are dangerous!  
They steal our husbands  
They have children with the silly bastards  
Then leave in search of their American Dream,  
Leaving our poor bastards in a love stupor, unmasked and in trouble  
We, are the new Chinese women  
The daring females who voice opinions  
We light up Chinatowns  
And indulge in fusion conversations  
Qing Qing from Chong Qing  
Dons her wings  
She is ready to take flight  
Like a newborn bird leaving its nest for the first time  
For when she lands  
I will cease to exist  
As I was once exotic, you see  
Admired, desired, feared.  
But now the multiplicity in WE  
Our long black manes  
Our phonetically similar names  
Make us no different than just two independent women  
Yearning for some space in this crowded, crowded world.

*Spoken word piece written intermittently between 2003-2008. Performed at  
Time Out Kuala Lumpur's Launch Party on 8 March 2008. Frangipani Bar,  
Changkat Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur.*

# When men leave for Mars, women stay Earthed

Cowards die many times before their deaths -  
Shakespeare [Julius Caesar]

If those who leave are deemed brave,  
And those who stay are cowards,  
I dream of that day a Nanyang maiden sailed south on a steam ship,  
Sent to claim a new land, fortune and a filial husband to keep

If those who leave are deemed brave  
And those who stay are cowards  
You know she'd call the Sun out if it failed to rise  
But who would know the years of tears she wept for her mother only  
her eyes

If those who leave are deemed brave  
And those who stay are cowards  
She learned how her husband's non-confrontational unease  
Never toppled regimes nor paved the way for peace

Those who left were found alive  
Hungry, thirsty and chanced by fishermen  
And tales tell those who stayed fought demons  
If they had stayed on, they may have perished and  
an entire generation not flourish into who we are today

Stay or leave, we weigh the loss,  
Toss a coin to measure the toil,  
To let go, let it go back to the soil,  
To let her go, let them all be,  
Only then will I be truly free.

It's not where you start but how it

Ends.



Every morning, Shirl asks for a plate of Bangkok Lane mee goreng doused in a sweet, tangy and spicy gravy garnished with lettuce, tofu, cuttlefish and egg. The dancing men have been stirring up this delicious dish since the 1920s, working improv on woks that spin against the charcoal fire. Penang or Puerto Rico, you can take the girl out of the island, but you can **never** take the island out of the girl. Gungho she is and always will be!