

A car is shooting along a relatively quiet road in the later-middle part of the night. It is late and the world is empty after a Chinese ten-course dinner that took too long to wear itself out. The family inside the car are anxious to retire, but there are forces acting upon the car. The rain, for one, that acts as a downward force, a steady beating from God on the vehicle's roof top. The friction between the worn-out tires and the asphalt, lessening with time as rainwater pools on the surface. Then, there is Fate, the force that acts upon everything in every direction. On any random night, with or without rainfall, on any random tired car with its washed-out passengers, it is the only force that we are not able to calculate with a formula.

The rain is slowly cleaning the car, wiping away the grime and the bird defecation. Rain on a car window gives the impression that it is sweating rivulets. In one perspiring window of the lonely car on the quiet road in the damp night, there is the pale face of a girl. She is dazed and beautiful in the dim light. Her *Chindian* features arrange themselves into an expressionless mask, but her eyes blink with secrets that she is too young to bear, things she has become tired of knowing. From an outward angle, this could be a painting, framed by the black panels of the sweating window. Grim watercolours, lots of dark hues to illuminate the white face with the haunted soul. Postmodern. Otherworldly. "Girl in Car in Rain". Eighteen by fourteen inches.

But this is not a painting. This is a story, of a car containing secrets and a family. In these types of stories, reality is skewed. This eighteen-year-old girl is really only a baby. In another interpretation, she is an old woman, her soul being the oldest in the car. In her ears are eternal earphones, plugged into an iPod perpetually playing music. This way, she does not have to listen to the sound of her own loneliness. This way, she does not have to listen to the rain. But this does not mean she is entirely oblivious. For instance, she knows that the girl sitting meekly beside her is crying. She knows that the woman slumped in the seat in front of the crying girl is hanging on by a precarious thread, to her sanity and to her marriage. And she knows that the man in the driver's seat is having an affair.

Then again, she has known this for a very long time.

Things never change, but people do. For one brief moment she allows herself to think that this is the centre of everything. Then, she reminds herself that she is like him too. His blood runs undiluted in her pronounced green veins and she would rather be on this side of the car. If a line was drawn from the gear shift to the license plate, it would delineate the weak and the strong. She would never be like them. It was not in her nature. She religiously defined herself by her horoscope as a water sign, attuned to the waves of emotion, the controller of relationships. She would never cry for man or boy.

She notices something in her peripheral view. Far ahead there is a bright light hurtling towards them on the one-way street, an angel in the darkness.

She tries to scream, but there is no sound.



It was Mike who was driving his gunmetal-grey Toyota Wish in that thick, groggy night. All the women in the car were sleeping, so he stepped on the accelerator pedal to get all of them home faster. He had just added a water-fuelled booster to the five-year-old MPV earlier this week. It supposedly enhanced the engine's performance.

Mike had been driving people around for years, long before he had a family. There was always some deal to chase, some scheme to take part in. Tomorrow he would have to pick up some Saudi Arabians in town who expressed interest in a land deal. His wife, Chris, did not understand. She would nag about how if these Saudis or Bruneians or Indonesians really were loaded and interested to do business in Singapore, they would have their own high-flying connections with reputable Singaporean companies. They would not have to strike deals with him, a struggling nobody who was trying to do too many things at once. She regularly insinuated that he was no better than a free tour guide, driving people around

chasing empty dreams and collecting astronomical mileage and gas bills. In the end they were the ones who were taking him for a ride.

At least she stopped throwing him out of the house every three weeks. But that was only because their younger daughter had jumped off the neighbouring block one morning in May.

Now his wife slept beside him on the passenger seat, sedated by their elder daughter's anti-depressants. It was his remaining daughter that worried him more. He had not wanted her to take the medicine in the first place. He did not want his child moving through life like a zombie. But this creature was worst. This blossoming woman who threw tantrums, could not wake up in the morning, and stared out of the car window in a way that reminded him of her late sister. He did the best he could, sending her everywhere, to her university and to all the other social gatherings. Sometimes, he and his wife did not dare to fall sleep, in case they would wake and find the police in their flat and the bed empty again.

Mike never had a real family. His mother, rumoured to be a Malay woman, had left him on the door step of his father's residence in Jalan Kayu. According to hearsay, his Catholic father of Chinese and Indian descent had refused to convert to Islam, forcing his mother to run away. He grew up with his cousins thinking his uncle was his father, and his real father eventually went to Thailand and married a Thai woman younger than his son. As a result of his unstable upbringing, he always wanted his children to have what he did not. Stability. Siblings. But his elder daughter was alone now, like he always was. Maybe things were destined to be this way. People claimed that it was karma for his "scams" and shady business dealings with people who have cursed his family. But with allegations like these Mike chose to believe in God, not karma.

Recently, behind his wife's back, he brought their remaining daughter to a psychiatrist in Mount Elizabeth recommended to him by one of his many friends. He wanted her cured, and this man supposedly could motivate people to do things. He was also

psychic, and could see spirits. When they were there, the psychic psychiatrist said that his younger daughter followed them into the room, and that she was with them all the time. In her old room she shared with her sister, where she watched her sister crying while she changed clothes. Her elder daughter was shocked and started to cry. How else could anyone have known with the door locked? It must be real. She must be sitting here in the car with them, in her seat behind him that was now forever empty, staring out the window and listening to her iPod that was plugged in her ears even when she jumped.

He was going to sell this car soon. For a smaller one. They did not need so much space anymore. And this one had problems starting some mornings.

Suddenly, he heard his wife shout in shrill urgency, "Mike, *watch it!*" And he yanked the steering wheel as hard as he could.



Maureen received a call at around three in the morning. As always, with unexpected calls in the middle of the night, she had a sinking feeling that something irrevocably terrible had happened. She got out of bed and hurried down three flights of stairs in the darkness, feeling her way for the security alarm. They had it installed recently into their newly constructed terrace house after the safe had been stolen along with tens of thousands in foreign currency. No one would think that people could get away with that kind of robbery in Singapore, but the suspects were never caught. Still, Maureen preferred to count her blessings. She had a husband who loved and supported her, a successful career as a banker, and three equally successful children who got scholarships to study at Ivy League universities and went on to build successful marriages and careers.

Maureen liked to help people. It went beyond a passion to become some sort of a calling. People who were lost and directionless found clarity and purpose within minutes of her sorting out their lives. She was always there for her siblings and their children, which

gave her lots of work to do even though she was semi-retired. One of her regular “beneficiaries” was her younger sister, Chris. Although only a year apart in age, the two of them could not be more different.

After fourteen years of courtship, Chris had stubbornly married Mike, despite the family’s protests that he was an ex-convict who could not give her a good life or a stable family. A few years later when their children were in kindergarten, Chris had come to her to borrow a sum of money to pay off Mike’s debts. She only did so as a large resort after the sale of their Hougang mansion for a smaller flat in Ang Mo Kio did not produce enough cash. A decade or more later, Maureen had received a hysterical phone call from her sister at six in the morning. She rushed down to the mortuary where they had to identify her niece’s body.

Now that the phone was ringing again at an ungodly hour, Maureen said a silent but fervent prayer to God who was the underlying source of her strength. In a brief moment of weakness, she thought of her pilot husband, Chun, who was away on a flight, and her children who were either abroad studying or on business trips. For a split second, she wished they were here with her. She had a sinking feeling that this time; it would be too late for her to save anyone. After a moment of uncharacteristic hesitation, she picked up the receiver.

“Hello, Maureen speaking.”



Picture this. Let’s say, there is a male foreign worker driving a truck. He is from Bangladesh, Sarawak, Vietnam, Cambodia, wherever they import these migrant things from. And the truck, you do not need to know what it is carrying, you just need to know that it is big. Massive. You also do not really need to know what the hell it is doing transporting

whatever in the middle of the night. This is not about realism. It is about setting. You need to know that it is raining. Pouring. And the huge truck is sliding a little on the slippery road.

And this man, he is your typical foreign worker, with skin like ebony and if he were walking across the road instead of driving on it, he would blend into the darkness. He is the kind that we take one look at and automatically assume will commit rape. On his day off, he probably hooks up with some maid – Indonesian or Filipino – and they have sex in her employer's bed. He makes about eighteen dollars a day.

What we do not expect is that he has a family, somewhere, impoverished and suffering. What we do not expect is for him to take a wrong turn and be currently driving on the wrong side of the road. You see, everything must follow a plan, right? Wrong. Fate does not follow a plan. Fate makes up the plan as it cruises along the deserted shortcut to the PIE. It lies in between the nooks and crevices of what we know and what we do not expect. At a hundred and twenty kilometres per hour, it is hiding in the glove compartment.

What we do not expect is that this *bangla* could need spectacles, but cannot afford them with his meagre salary, and cannot see in the wet darkness. (Or is it the dark wetness?) What we don't expect is that he does not see the grey MPV hurtling towards him until it is too late.

Or is that what we think we do not expect?

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We are in the car again, driving somewhere. Everywhere, someone is waiting for us. There is always a permanent, interchangeable somebody expecting our arrival at varying locations. This is a metaphor. My family is always moving so that we do not come to the realisation that we have been travelling in slow, excruciating circles. The circle is another metaphor. For an inordinate amount of time now I have not been able to see a trajectory.

Only endless circles that flow into the overarching shape of a larger infinity. In truth, somewhere is really nowhere, and that is where we are going.

I am only pretending. I am only pretending to be someone. I am only pretending to be something, who is only pretending to be a person. "Look up into the stars and you're gone". It means the same thing as looking at the sea. In the face of such vastness and emptiness, you are bludgeoned on the head with your own insignificance. Repeat: I am nothing and no one.

I look out of the car window. It is the shape of a gently-rounded trapezium. At a hundred and twenty kilometres per hour, you do not know what things are. I couldn't tell you where I am even if I bothered to try, even if I consulted the Singapore directory tucked into the corner of my mother's seat. To me, maps are meaningless things. It has always been this way. I cannot tell people where I am. I concluded that I must have been born without direction. When I am lost and people ask me for the nearest landmark, I reply, "I see... a tree". When I look outside now I see trees in the darkness. The rain is like static on an almost-trapezium-shaped television screen. But because of the rain I know there is a sky. What is rain but the sky and the sea upside down? I have been fascinated with both ever since my inexperienced love for a fellow classmate left me crying in the rain at East Coast Park. You see that line in between that delineates water from air? It is another metaphor.

My sister has always been obsessed with horoscopes. She used to say that she is like water, and I am like air. During the eighteen years, she tried at times to evaporate into my state of being. Nowadays, there is nothing I dream of more than condensing to be where she is. She has not come home in months. I know that it is because she is dead. But sometimes I pretend not to, especially with that bastard that she fancied herself in love with. I used to text him all the time after she died, innocently asking whether she was with him and if he knows what time she will be back. Then my father told me to stop before I get sued for harassment. Am I only pretending? Maybe I do not understand what "dead" means. Maybe

that is why I wear her slippers and leave them on floor mat beside the door so that it looks like she has come home.

They tell me to use her computer, to pack her clothes in plastic bags and store them in cardboard boxes and in my head I am thinking, 'why can't she come back to wear her own fucking clothes?' I do not want to clear away her cosmetics even though they are shades too light for me. So I stay, decomposing in our preserved room that reeks of stale air and memories. The other day I did try to switch on her Macbook though. They advised me to deplete the battery once in awhile. It was like a dead thing. I thought maybe it too had died of loneliness. When I managed to resurrect it in the end, it stared, blinking and frozen, with a downloaded clock whose second hand was shivering in between two seconds. The calendar and the virtual yellow post-it notes were forever immortalised on the day before the day that she left. I waited for them to automatically update themselves, but they did not. Perhaps, they could not. I slowly begun to see that it was a useless thing, but when I tried to switch it off, nothing happened. I had to pull the power plug to kill it again. Some things are better left dead.

It is raining elephants and hippopotamuses. I believe my sister is in the rain. She wrote in her diary once that she wanted to be thrown into the sea after she expired, so that she could rise up to sky and upon seeing the abject misery, cry for the world and come down again. When the rain comes, I am relieved. It is like my sister is here once more, sitting beside me. We did not throw her ashes into the sea. Instead we kept her in a columbarium at a Franciscan parish in Bukit Batok, so that the people who are doomed to spend the rest of their lives searching know where to find the remnants of her physical existence. That does not mean that she is not in the rain. All that it means is that the rain is not a metaphor for her tears. I do not like it when she cries. That last night, she was crying. I was crying too. And when I woke up, she was gone. Forever, this time. I stopped crying after that. The tears on my face must be a metaphor for something else.



Before the rain dies I must tell you about the horrible fantasies I have been having of late. I do not tell the psychiatrist because I do not want to be diagnosed as mad and be sent to IMH. I need to graduate from university before I can become insane. Insanity is not a mental affliction – it is a choice like everything else. I no longer know whether I am pretending not to be mad or pretending to be. I brandish it before me like a sword, a shield, an excuse. For why sometimes in the car I think, ‘what if?’ What if a truck. A van. A lorry. One of those monstrous things carrying sand or gas or concrete is hurtling towards us right this instant, an unseen predator in the wet, slippery darkness. A whole ten tonnes of Fate. My father swerves, the car skids, my mother screams and then – nothing. Darkness, or a very bright white light. What if it could be painless? So fast, so disorientating, and only lasting a fraction of a second. It would be like nothing. Like all of us falling asleep and waking up together in the same place.

I tell myself it is neater this way. Clean, like the world after blistering rain. This way we are freed from our karma, and people would stop looking at us as though there was a dead baby floating over our heads. This way they could stop inviting us to lavish dinners as compensation and they could move on. Think of us only as an obliteration, a unit that had been deported, a hole in the fabric of a former existence. Like all those families that disappear in natural disasters. Sometimes they never even find the bodies. One swipe of God’s very large finger and we’re gone.

The only way that I can understand death is if I do not think of it as an end in itself. For some, it would be a means to an end. A metaphor, like everything else.

(3370 words)