

Waiting for Ghani

Shih-Li Kow

Susi went to the library for the first time on a watery Wednesday evening. Pausing at the entrance to shake the rain from her umbrella, she watched the fountain dance a shimmy of high-high-low high-high-stop. She was an hour early. Ghani's shift only started at eight o'clock when the library closed. She would have liked to wait outside for him, but there was no bench where she could sit, and the steps were wet with rain.

She straightened her back, drew a long breath, and stepped through the automatic doors. The Nepali security guard sitting by the door got to his feet, startling her. They gestured at each other, communicating with their hands. He wanted her to place her dripping umbrella in a tall vase which she did. When he indicated that she should store her grocery bag in a cabinet, she mimed that she wanted to keep it with her. She held it open, offering an inspection of its contents. He shook his head and said, 'No, no, no,' as though she was smuggling contraband into the library.

A few people turned to look. Flustered, she surrendered her bag and accepted a plastic token with a number.

She cleared her throat and asked, 'Is Ghani here?' Ghani had a room somewhere in the building; he was the live-in caretaker handyman.

The guard muttered a few curt phrases that she couldn't understand. He waved his hand as if to usher a queue, except there was no one behind her. He said, 'Go, kakak,' addressing her with the common term used for Indonesian domestic helpers in Malaysia.

From his garbled Malay, she could tell he had not been in the country long. Yet, he had decided in their brief exchange that she, who had worked in Malaysia for fifteen years and had come to the library dressed in her best weekend outfit, was a *kakak*. She pushed through the turnstiles, irked that he was right. Her clothes, careful makeup, and localised accent had not disguised the fact.

Inside, she spotted a display case with a black, rough-surfaced rock the size of a human head. Volcanic stones commonly found in her village in Sumatra looked like that. Next to the rock was a printed page. She didn't read well enough to make out the text, but she recognised the

date and a few words: Earth, day, burn, air. A meteorite had crashed outside the library the previous month; that must be it. Ghani had called her that night in a melancholy mood. He said if it had landed on him, he would be dead. On an impulse she later regretted, she had asked him how much it was worth if he sold it. She should have been more sympathetic. More affectionate. More wifey.

She wandered past the bookshelves into a seating section. At a table, three young women hunched over their laptop computers. Another woman read a book, her body curled into an egg-shaped chair, the type of unfamiliar furniture Susi avoided. The woman had kicked off her running shoes, her hair was untidy, and she looked as if she wanted nothing but to be in that chair reading that book with her knees tucked to one side under a shawl.

Susi scanned the wayfinding signage for restroom icons. Luckily, she did not have to ask for directions. Under the bright lights of the restroom, she wiped her too-red lipstick off her mouth with a wet tissue. Next, she removed the black makeup on her eyebrows and eyelids.

A pretty young woman in rubber boots and a cleaner's uniform came in and grimaced when she saw the pile of damp tissues in the sink. Leaning against her mop, she said in Indonesian, 'Where are you from, ibu?'

This girl had recognised Susi as a compatriot.

'Jogja,' Susi lied. Her village was five hours and three buses away from the city.

'I'm from Medan.' She slid her eyes toward Susi's rhinestone-studded shoes with a slight, disapproving frown.

Susi didn't want to engage in conversation. She scrubbed the stubborn dark mascara streaks below her eyes one last time, threw the tissues into a bin, and hurried out of the restroom. She should not have come like this, painted like an old street worker. She thought, If I leave now, Ghani will never know I came.

She hadn't expected the security guard to take her bag. That wasn't part of her plan. The bag contained a five-kilo packet of rice, a kilo each of cooking oil and sugar, a marble pound cake, and two packs of cigarettes. The groceries and cigarettes were a private joke. Ghani delivered those items as unspoken payment every time he visited her. Money was too vulgar when he was in her bed every other week, and she pretended not to notice that his gifts cost the same as her hourly rate back when she took on customers for extra cash. Back when she was

younger, braver, and more impatient for a better life. Now it was just Ghani on alternate Sundays, and, after five years, he still brought her groceries.

After cleaning her face, she returned to her seat and waited like someone who had missed the bus after a late shift. She snuck glances at the reading woman, envying her ease. Susi had planned to surprise Ghani, knocking on his door and brandishing the groceries as a prank. Maybe he would laugh, stop behaving like he needed to reimburse her for sex, and finally acknowledge they were in a committed relationship.

Time was running out on her. She had managed to stay in the country without a work visa, evading the immigration raids through luck and street-smart friends, but the constant watchfulness and the physical strain of cleaning people's homes were creeping up on her. She couldn't remain in Malaysia indefinitely, living as an illegal immigrant without a family. And Ghani, a Malaysian, knew it too. He knew she hoped for safety and legitimisation through marriage.

'We will be closing in fifteen minutes. Thank you, and please come again.' The voice over the PA system repeated the announcement. The reading woman looked up and smiled at no one in particular, unfurled her legs and folded her shawl in a few fluid movements. Susi watched her emerge from her chair as if newly hatched and followed her to the short line of people at the counter.

The woman chatted with the librarian. She said, 'Thanks, dear. See you next week.'

The librarian said, 'Good night, madam.'

Susi slid her plastic token across the counter. The librarian said, 'Kakak, you collect your bags there from security. This counter is for books.'

Susi said, 'Oh, I forgot. I'm sorry.'

'It's all right. Do you have a book to check out?' The librarian's tone was kind, just short of condescending.

'No. Thank you, dear.' In that instant, she decided to call young women "dear". The word escaped between her teeth, a soft and gracious sound, unlike the hacking, birdlike "kakak."

She wandered to the meteorite display and watched people leave. The village where she came from had no libraries or bookstores. The school was barely functioning. Maybe things had changed now. She wouldn't know. She hadn't gone home since she left. Without a work visa, she would not be able to re-enter Malaysia and she didn't dare take the risk.

‘Susi? What are you doing here?’

She turned around to see Ghani. ‘Visiting,’ she said, smiling.

‘You came to see the meteorite? Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I didn’t want to bother you. I should get going.’

‘Yes. I have to lock up the library now.’

She walked to the security guard with her plastic token and retrieved her grocery bag and umbrella. She bunched the handles in her fist. She didn’t want Ghani to see she carried a gift laden with expectations.

Ghani spoke briefly with the security guard and waved him off.

Susi said, ‘He was rude to me. I couldn’t understand what he was saying.’

Ghani said, ‘Ah, these foreigners. He’s just been here two months, still skinny. You can always tell by the size of their pot bellies how long they’ve been here.’ He laughed and stopped. ‘I have to lock up now.’

He looked at ease as he carried a large ring with a bunch of keys in one hand. He hollered ‘Good night’ at the librarian who raised a hand in return as she walked out the door and he waved at the pretty cleaner who had changed out of her uniform into blue jeans.

Susi had only ever seen Ghani in her flat. Although he moved around comfortably enough between her bed, her bathroom, and the small table where they ate together, he treated her things with a deference that made it clear he was not home. Here, she was the trespasser.

She was reluctant to leave, but she had lost her nerve. All the sassiness she mustered had fizzled out in the past hour amidst the unfamiliar, serious orderliness of the library. The imagined scenarios which propelled her here — the surprise visit and laughter, the groceries dismantling the polite charade they had kept up for too long, Ghani inviting her to see where he lived, Ghani showing her around where he worked and introducing her to people, Ghani finally starting to talk about living together — were all gone.

He said, ‘If you’d like a drink, I can get you one from the vending machine.’

‘No. No. You’d better go and lock up. Do your job.’

‘Wait here. I have to lock the main doors from the inside, but ...’

‘I’ll wait. Here.’

A small crowd milled around at the top of the steps. People opened their umbrellas and shook out their raincoats. A few ran to their cars. She looked about in vain for the reading woman who had become a reassuring figure. Everyone had gone home to where they belonged.

Ghani came out again. He said, 'What would you like to do now, Susi?'

'I don't know. I thought you could tell me about the meteorite.'

'There's nothing to tell. I've told you all there is to tell. I could show you the crater outside, but it's raining.'

'I don't want to look at a crater in the rain. I'll stay for a while, and then I'll leave.' She had volcanoes in Sumatra. She didn't need to see a little crater made by a rock.

They stood shoulder to shoulder and watched the jumping water jets in the fountain. The headlamp beams of cars turned the thin rain into silver needles.

She said, 'Do you have to switch the fountain off?'

'It's on a timer. It goes off at eight-fifteen sharp. Anytime now.' He checked his watch. 'Anytime now. Wait. See?' The fountain stopped right on cue and he slapped his thigh.

'I really should go, I suppose.'

'Come with me. Since you're here, let me show you something before you go.'

As he led her through a side door, she wondered if his room was tidy and whether it had an attached bathroom and toilet. With the library lights turned off, they made their way in the dim illumination of sparsely-spaced emergency lights. He went behind the librarian's counter and returned with a torchlight that he placed in her hand. She followed him and found herself next to the meteorite display again.

Ghani lifted the Perspex cover over the rock and set it on the floor. He said, 'Switch on the light.'

'Are you allowed to do this?'

'It's okay. I will put everything back. Go on.'

She aimed the pale purplish light in the direction of the rock. The rock fluoresced, glowing in a rich magnetic blue that seemed to throb in the dark. Flecks of gold and red sparkled and swam when she moved her head.

She said, 'Oh. I thought it was just a normal rock.'

'Our eyes don't see everything. Sometimes, we need a little help like this UV light. Special, isn't it?'

‘Yes, special.’ In a surge of recklessness, she handed him the bag. ‘For you.’

Ghani said, ‘What’s this?’

‘Rice, oil, cigarettes. You know, the usual. You don’t need to keep giving me these things.’

She kept her eyes on the rock. The iridescence reminded her of gas fire, kingfishers and peacocks, night skies and coral reefs, a midnight blue dress she once had. She exhaled slowly and said, ‘What do you think? We might even fall in love if you’d allow it.’

She waited for his reply. She wondered if the pretty cleaner had also stood in this same spot with a torchlight in her hand. Susi asked herself if the sight of a fountain switching off and a glow-in-the-dark rock were rewards for patience. My dear, she breathed soundlessly. How gentle the sound of possible affection.

She waited. The books around them were plentiful and distant, filled with so many silent words trapped on paper. She thought of the packets of rice and sugar stashed away in her kitchen. She had already sold the cigarettes to a man who lived next door. Sold them for much less than what they were worth.

Shih-Li Kow is the author of a short story collection and a novel. Her short stories have appeared in various anthologies and journals including *Mud Season Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Short Fiction Journal*, *The Mekong Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.