

## SHORT STORY

## Silent Dreams

CYRIL WONG

"I love you," said Charmaine over the phone.  
"I love you too," replied Krishnan, in a dulled and sleepy voice.

"How much?" she asked teasingly, knowing he was worn out from working the whole day. It was already eleven-thirty in the evening.

"Very very," he answered. She could hear the trace of a smile in his voice, and grinned herself.

"Alright, go and sleep now. I give you permission."

Krishnan simply grunted, too tired to laugh, and then issued a muffled "good night." She imagined the phone dropping away from under his jaw to fall beside him on the bed as he went unconscious with sleep.

She hung up with a sigh. She looked at the phone in its cradle a moment longer, before deciding to gaze at the wall beside her bed, watching the light slide across it in parallel lines as a car passed down the road just outside her house. She wanted to tell him about what happened today when she was giving tuition in the afternoon.

She had just finished her degree in Microbiology at the National University but had yet to find a job. She spent her free time now giving tuition to primary school kids like Syafarin who was sitting for P.S.L.E. this year and needed help with his English. She wanted to tell Krishnan what had happened at Syafarin's flat when she was there. But unlike her, Krishnan had already found a job at a public relations firm, and he was usually exhausted by evening when they met for dinner or spoke on the phone before either of them went to bed.

She figured she would tell him tomorrow evening over dinner. But she could have forgotten it by then. She was not even sure it was important. When it happened, it had felt significant, momentous even. But she could feel its importance pass as she got up to brush her teeth in the bathroom and then turn off the bedroom lights. It was likely she would forget about it by tomorrow morning.

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This was what happened that afternoon.

After she had a late lunch by herself at the coffee-shop downstairs on her block, Charmaine went home and took a nap, hoping to wake up in time to take a bus to her student's place for his weekly, two hours of English tuition. She forgot to wake up, as she had embarked on a dream about Krishnan buying her the latest Swatch watch for her birthday at the end of the following month. When she did wake up, she realised she had twenty minutes left to get to her student's place. She quickly jumped out of bed, changed into a shirt and jeans, grabbed her wallet and her mobile phone from the bedside table, and went downstairs to hail a cab.

In the cab, she remembered that she had not only dreamed about Krishnan buying her a birthday present, but she had also dreamed briefly of something mother had said before about him. Something racist, no less. This was not good. Now she was even hearing her mother's comments about Krishnan in her dreams. The line her mother had said about how "Indian men beat up their wives" comes on unexpectedly like a bad infomercial in her head now and then, but never in her dreams before. This was a first. She tried to forget about it.

The radio in the cab was playing some old, Chinese song with a throaty, female singer. The car smelled of cheap cologne. She told the driver where she wanted to go, and sat back to stare out the window into the ghost of her reflection. She did not bring any stationery along with her, hoping that she would be able to use those at Syafarin's place when she got there. Syafarin had been improving



in the English assignments given to him by Charmaine since the day his parents first hired her. She was proud of that fact, and she was looking forward to the day when Syafarin would call her after his English examination results were out, to tell her he had an A for the paper. His parents were aware of his improvement and treated Charmaine with great politeness and warmth whenever she came over to their home.

"Go by ECP, can or not, huh?" asked the driver suddenly, turning his head slightly to the back in Charmaine's direction. He had greasy hair and a narrow face. She thought of an animal with a narrow face. "Can. Go by ECP," she replied, as the singer on the radio sang a high note at the end of her song. She looked out of the window, and this time watched the couple in the shiny, red car beside the cab. The husband was at the wheel and telling something to his wife next to him, gesturing at the same time. They looked like they were arguing about something. The car drove off ahead of them.

She thought of Krishnan. They had dated during their university days together. He was probably the best thing that had happened to her in school. They hoped to get engaged at the end of the year. Their parents had objected at first, her parents more so than his. His parents had even invited her to their home for dinner. Before she came over, Krishnan had told her about how they had tried to talk him out of seeing her, even threatening to cut off his allowance. She remembered how he had held her hand in the park as he told her this, the brush of his breath so close to her face, followed by his tongue in her mouth after she had told him how happy he made her.

When she got to the front door, she heard shouting coming from inside. It was Syafarin's parents. They were fighting loudly in Malay. She did not recognise any of the words that came fully formed through the door. She hesitated before knocking politely, but loudly enough to be heard. The argument stopped and then she heard the shuffling of feet across the floor.

It was Syafarin's father who answered the door. He was wearing a white shirt and a dark-brown sarong. His hair was slightly messy, as if he had just woken up, and he had a tired expression. He managed a weak smile and said, "Oh, Charmaine, come in. He is in his room."

"Hi uncle," she said, and stepped into the narrow living room. Syafarin's mother was at the table inside the kitchen. "Hi auntie," she called politely. The mother turned slightly with a distracted look on her face, but barely glanced in Charmaine's direction, then looked away again to stare at something on the table. She was not wearing her usual scarf over her head. She had long, curly hair that was longer than Charmaine had guessed.

She went to Syafarin's room and opened the door. It smelled of freshly ironed clothes. The boy sat at his table beside his neatly made bed with his head buried in a comic book. It was something about Archie and his friends. He closed the comic and turned around. "Close the door," he said, and smiled in an embarrassed way. He had a dark and chiseled face. He would grow up to be a handsome guy, she thought. She sat down beside him. She was about to ask if his parents had been arguing earlier, but decided against it. She thought it best to pretend as if nothing had happened outside in the living room. She said instead, "So did you do the exam paper that I gave you for homework?"

"Yah, I finish it already," he replied, and handed her a practice test paper for her to mark. They started the lesson proper, she sitting next to him and observing him as he answered all the questions in an English Assessment book. She noticed that the din was slowly starting again outside. His parents were starting to argue heatedly again in Malay. Soon, his mother's voice rose from the kitchen where she was probably still seated, which was then matched by a loud retort by his father. She peered up at the white wall above Syafarin's head and tried to imagine his father sitting on the couch and yelling in the direction of the kitchen. She wondered if her own parents had ever fought like that. But that was impossible. Her mother was a subservient woman who agreed to everything her father said.

Syafarin acted as if nothing was happening, but quietly completed each question in his assessment book as he was told. She felt it strange and discomfited at first, then simply sad. He had always been a hardworking boy when it came to his studies, and he had a sweet and quiet, polite demeanour.

The fighting went on for about half an hour, then died down to a close, after which a silence came over the flat, so quiet that her comments on Syafarin's answers seemed almost too loud in the aftermath of their argument. Soon, two hours passed and the session was over. She was glad the fighting was over, so that she would not feel awkward walking out into the living room into the heart of a verbal storm. She said "goodbye" to Syafarin, who said "bye" with another of his shy and embarrassed smiles, as she stepped out of the bedroom.

In the living room, she was surprised to see Syafarin's mother sitting on the sofa, as her husband stood behind her with a hand on her shoulder. She was staring into the blank screen of the television, while her husband was looking at the back of her head. They did not

see her as she walked behind them to head for the front door. They seemed to have made up during the course of her lesson. The moment lasted for only a few seconds. He finally turned around and saw her. "Oh, finish already," he said, lifting his hand off his wife's shoulder. The woman with curly hair—slightly brownish, Charmaine realised—turned around too and offered her a warm smile now, although she did not say anything.

Charmaine smiled back, wondering what had just happened. Before they had fought like a couple on the verge of divorce. Now something had happened to change all that. "Come, I open for you," said Syafarin's father, as he unlocked the front door and showed her out. "Bye," she said to both of them and left the flat, hearing the door click shut behind her as she walked down the corridor to the lift, thinking at the same time about what she had seen. Syafarin's mother on the sofa, staring into the depths of the television. Her husband's hand on her shoulder. In that moment, silence, like an invisible third person in the room, smiled benevolently over them.

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Now, lying in bed and waiting for sleep to arrive, she thought of Krishnan. She had wanted to describe what had happened that afternoon to Krishnan, so that he could help her figure out why it had occupied her thoughts until evening, when she had dinner with her parents at home, chewing on rice and imagining what could have passed between Syafarin's parents in that moment when his hand was on her shoulder. Was it love? How long had Syafarin's parents been married? She had looked across the table at her parents eating in silence. There was a different form of silence: one of resignation and an unspoken compromise, with only the shadow of an affectionate bond between them. She did not want Krishnan and her to be like them after they were married. When she saw her parents, she asked herself if this was what most marriages became at the end of the day.

What did it mean to love another forever? Could one truly love another for that long? Or did one simply surrender to the rhythms of living together, long after love had flickered to dimness, because it was easier and it was something you were used to?

She recalled the brief scene again. Syafarin's father staring into the back of his wife's head, his hand on her shoulder. There had been a peace in that moment. A peace that must come from love made richer, more profound even, through time. That even though a couple could fight as terribly as they had fought, they could still return to that shared silence, that intimate peace, after so many years.

She turned in her bed and looked at the phone. She wished Krishnan was not tired, and that he would talk about this with her. She wondered if one day Krishnan and her would share that kind of peace. She loved him. And he loved her, she was certain of that at least. She thought of the years ahead. She thought about how they would live together. He had not asked her yet for an official engagement, but she knew he would soon. But still the questions came on like light bulbs inside her head, one by one: Would it last? Years into their marriage, would they sit, say, at the dinner table with that wordless stillness like an unseen halo around their love? The phone seemed to glow in the dark. She swung her legs off the side of her bed, sat up, and stared at it, willing it to ring. She felt her vision getting clearer. She was becoming more aware of the feel of the bedsheets against her legs, the slight breeze coming in from the open window. She would ring him. He would be annoyed about being woken up from sleep, but he would be patient and listen to her. He would listen to what she had to say.

Cyril Wong is a Singaporean poet/writer. His two collections of poetry are *Squatting Quietly* (2000) and *The End Of His Orbit* (2001).

## AT A MAD DREAMER'S "SAARCUS": The 11th Saarc Writers' Conference, 7-9 Oct 2004

KAISSER HAQ

Let me first apologize for the bad pun in my title—before the reader can respond with a grimace! Also, I should make it absolutely clear, I have used it without any malice, purely in a spirit of mischievous chaffing. Indeed, it is impossible to harbour even a simple grudge, let alone malice, against the "Mad Dreamer". Not for long, at least.

A few months later I got another invitation—to the 11th SAARC Writers' Conference, scheduled for September in Delhi and Chandigarh. Later the venue was restricted to Delhi and the time changed to October. More frantic phone calls from Reena followed: they had wanted to invite the Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University but as he was out of the country could I get in touch with the Vice Chancellor of Jahangirnagar

flight details a.s.a.p.? Could I get any funds from local sources to buy my ticket? Could I get my fellow-delegates to email their conference papers without further delay? I began to suspect there was something quixotic about Ajeet-ji's operations.

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of which there have been eleven so far. It was quite by chance that I became an invitee to these remarkable jamborees.

When a SAARC Writers'

delegation visited Dhaka early

this year I was introduced as "a

poet and professor" to Ajeet-ji

and her aide-de-camp Dr Reena

Marwah (besides being

Programme Co-ordinator at the

SAARC Writers' Secretariat).

Reena is a Reader in Economics

at Delhi University). Soon after I

got an invitation to the forthcoming 10th SAARC Writers'

Conference in Lahore. A series

of frantic phone call from Reena

followed: could I co-ordinate the

air passage of the Bangladesh

delegation? Could I send her the

material would be published

Islam, the novelist Selina Hossain and I, hopped on Biman to Kolkata, and took the Sahara flight to Delhi, where we were met by a man from a travel agent. His list included Syed Shamsul Huq's name and he didn't seem to believe that Huq wasn't coming. There was a note of suspicion in his voice: was he thinking that we were responsible for Huq's non-arrival? It was with marked reluctance that he finally escorted just the four of us to the parking lot and loaded our luggage on the rooftop rack. In ten minutes or so the bags were secured with twine and we were ready to start. But there was only one exit, where the parking toll had to be paid: quite a bottle-

neck. It took us forty-five minutes to extricate ourselves; at least in that corner, we decided, India wasn't shining.

We had been given to understand that delegates would be put up in rooms at the conference venue, the India International Centre or I.I.C. We were taken to the YMCA instead and told to be ready for our pick-up by 9 am. But we didn't want to be rushed and asked to be picked up at 9:30. Then we delayed a little more since we were sure these things never started on time: the inaugural session was scheduled for 10 am. When we finally went in, led by Professor Anisuzzaman, respondent in a flowing kurta, we found that it has started on time.

Four of us, then, Professor Anisuzzaman, Syed Manzoorul



artwork by russell

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