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Writing Sample

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Sharlene TEO

Sister Island

1.

My sister Lin has fallen in love. Love leaks out of her like light under a doorway. I would like to say it becomes her, but very little does; the same way very little becomes me. I'm not saying we are hideous, just that beauty is not our strong suit. There are three years between us and two pairs of thick ankles, two pairs of part-time spectacles, two lightly-made up faces erased by floral towels every night. Lin has her hair cut in a bob, and I wear mine in a shoulder-length shrug of dead follicles. Our parents are gone. We live together alone.

Lin turned thirty-three last month. For her birthday we invited a few of her friends from church cell group over for dinner. I prepared sambal crab, fried rice, and rendang. I am not a very good cook, and watched as everyone tolerated the food and even asked for second helpings. Our guests' teeth shone in the dim lighting of our living/dining room. We had a black forest cake for afterwards.

The object of Lin's affections is a bespectacled male named Peter. They met through Lin's work (she is a private physics tutor). Peter is a diary entry, scrawled in red ballpoint ink: Bukit Merah, East Ave 3, Wednesdays at 4:30. He is poor at physics. He is fifteen years old.

Almost sixteen, Lin says. We are sitting at the dinner table. I rest my spoon on its surface. A grain of rice sticks onto the formica.

It's illegal. I say. It comes out as a harsh, whispered blurt.

Don't say like that. Lin replies.

She looks like she will cry.

Aside from some weight gain, my sister's face has remained the same since childhood. There's that soft, gormless jaw, fuzzy eyebrows always furrowed over schoolwork. She too could look fifteen, if you subtracted: family deaths, too much salt and condensed milk, torrential rain-on-shins, the ineluctable indentation of time on skin.

2.

Last week I went shopping after work. I went to Takashimaya, the Japanese department store full of affluent tourists and red marbled plinths. I emerged with flesh-coloured stockings and a Swedish fruit slicer that would reduce even the most stubborn of pears into tidy discs.

It was a balmy evening, sky tepid dark. The crowds were thinning. I decided to visit the newly opened shopping centre next door.

It is billed as an Entertainment Lifestyle Complex. A cinema-cum-bowling alley occupies its top three levels, and thus the entire building has taken on a bizarre Hollywood theme.

Going up the escalator I drifted past several full-scale models of the Alien and Predator monsters. A waxwork of Marilyn Monroe grimaced from the corner of a chain pasta restaurant. At thirty-six, I've never seen any of her movies. The air in the building smelt like a curious, heady melange of popcorn and polystyrene, school uniforms and factory bleach. Too many kids. I caught a glimpse of my reflection: a stray ghost lingering around the arcade machines. *So this is where young people hang out*, a small voice rattled off in my head. I wanted to smack it. Here I was mythologizing my teen-hood, missing pimples and old compact discs, a fading frieze of hopeful days and chronic indecision.

I came out of the building and cut through a path lined with big trees. My bus stop was on the other side of the road. I was hungry and eager for home. On either side of the path were green metal railings. I strolled for a few minutes before veering to the right. Just ahead was a couple embracing. Goopy shadows, reaching and shifting; they looked like they might melt in the heat. The boy was clad in the khaki coloured uniform of a neighbourhood school. He had sloped shoulders and a filler face. The girl wore sand-coloured trousers, familiar looking shoes. I looked up; there was Lin.

I'm sure that if I hadn't caught them, Lin would have kept him a secret right until it ended, less out of discretion and more out of a not-knowing-what-to-do. Besides which, we never speak about such things.

What things? Peter is a clouded mass filling my sister's life, lending it heat, and glow, and gravity. Aside from that stolen clinch, the weight and content of his mass is a mystery to me. In many ways I appreciate the ambiguity; people don't like to hear the details of their relatives' love lives.

It's too cringe-worthy, too proximate. Maybe their relationship is a chaste, pensive fancy and I am a bitch getting my paw-prints all over it; drooling with speculation, misunderstanding. Maybe their relationship is a groping frenzy of hormones and I am an ostrich, burying my head in the ground so as not to imagine. Either way, I hate being this dog. I hate being this ostrich.

3.

After sitting in silence for some time, we clear the dinner table. Lin's face remains puffy as we wash and dry the dishes and pack the leftovers. When it's all done, we sit side by side in front of the television. I handle the remote, flick through channels. I settle on a Korean horror movie.

Two sisters have moved into a grand, mouldy mansion. They are sharing it with their stepmother, who looks no more than five years older than either of them. The sisters are played by a pair of young actresses with moonbeam complexions. Shot from a distance, the house is an elegant structure located in

some parallel, gothic Korea; dark wood as if charred by smoke, everlasting marshlands.

In this scene the younger one lies in her bedroom and stares at the ceiling. She tries to sleep. The wardrobe creaks. With gruesome languor a figure with limp black hair rises up from the foot of her bed. The girl's eyes dart open, wild and frenzied, an animal alert. A white hand rises up and rests on the blanket by her feet; fidgets with deliberate slowness. Feels its way upward, creeping and creeping.

An advert comes on for washing detergent. Another phantom hand appears. This one is pink and healthy. It is spooning powder into a shiny machine. A soiled blouse comes clean.

He's a kid, I spit out slowly.

Min, please don't say that.

It's true, though. How long have you been with him? I ask.

Not long.

A couple of months?

Three months, Lin replies.

How did it happen?

It just did.

I turn to her suddenly.

What if his parents find out? You're so stupid. You're *thirty-three*. He's *fifteen*. You will get thrown in jail. I can't help you. What would Mummy and Daddy think? They're not here anymore, can't pull you out of this.

It doesn't have to be like that, says Lin. Her face crumples.

And think about our relatives, I add. What they would say. Especially Auntie Florence, that big mouth.

You're the one who goes to church every Sunday, I continue. Miss Godly. *What would your cell group think.*

My sister is shaking.

Have you done this before? Had other relationships?

Lin's face has discarded its flush, is now pale and stricken. She doesn't say anything.

The film has come back on. The younger sister is being chased through the house by the limp-haired spectre. She runs into the corpse of her stepmother, throat slit on a chaise lounge. The final girl gasps and makes sharp, clumsy turns. After a near miss, she edges into a room draped with curtains and cowers under a desk. It is never a good idea to hide from these things, and she seems to know it; panic written all over her face. This is the point where the film morphs from cryptic into stupid. The score is so clichéd; pockets of silence, interjected with screeching, ominous strings.

4.

When we were six and nine years old, our teenage cousin thought it would be a good idea to lock Lin and I behind the scariest door. The cramped cupboard in our uncle's cul-de-sac smelt of dusty brooms and lizard urine.

Shut in with my little sister, I discovered my violent claustrophobia. Gaspings and choking, I kept hitting the door with my fists. Lin whined and twisted my t-shirt. I batted her away. Gently, and then with as much force as I could gather. She fell and hit her head with a loud thud, started to cry. Sharp gulps of pain. I was the one who couldn't breathe. When our mother found us and unlocked the door, we tumbled out like an apology. There was a trickle of blood down the side of Lin's face. My mother hollered so loudly that all I could do was put my hands over my ears. Lin did not speak for three days afterwards, but after that she was fine.

For years after the cupboard incident, I would get this lucid dream that Lin was lying just below me in bed. I would feel her small hands twisting and clawing at my t-shirt. Small hands, super-dexterous; pulling me down. I tried to shake her off but I could never move. The hands never grew, even as Lin turned ten, twenty, thirty years old.

Now I am lying facedown on a fraying pillow. The portable fan whirs softly. It is three a.m. I've been having that dream again, over the last few weeks. It starts with the gentlest of onslaughts, almost nostalgic; consciousness lifting, kneading my thoughts into putty. And then it begins: small hands tugging on my t-shirt. I feel the neurons in my brain clicking and whirring as my hands turn cold and I struggle to breathe. If this nightmare has a colour it is a sickly tone of blue; dappled in shadow. The episode lasts no more than a minute.

When it's over I sit up, petrified and spent. I wonder if my dream was triggered by what we watched earlier in the evening. The young girls running around the burnt-out house, with its peeling wallpaper and insistent ghost.

I think about Peter. Peter Goh. He has an adult's name, fully-formed. Yet he's just a blur by the sidewalk. I swear I can remember being fifteen. Fifteen is a frog-egg, a tiny cipher, compared to being thirty, or thirty-three. (It makes me

sick.) Peter could be any of those perspiring, harried teenagers swinging from the handles of a bus. (It makes me sick.) Three months is a long time for a teenager. (It makes me sick.) Fifteen: tuition schedules, pocket money, shirking off childhood. Childhood sticking to the shoulders. (It makes me sick, sick, sick.)

Maybe he's loitering around my car-park right at this moment, hands in his pockets- nervous, besotted. I check the time on my phone. 4:20a.m. My throat feels dry, and I need to pee. In the bathroom I flick on the light. Pee and flush. Feet on cold tiles, uncurling. I wash my hands and squint at my crumpled reflection. I look old. I turn out the light.

In the corridor the air is hushed. I stop outside Lin's door. For a moment I picture an unmade bed, uncharacteristically messy cupboard, desk scattered with ballpoint pens. I imagine her soap-worn hands shoving clothes and books into a duffel bag, unlatching the lock of the front door with delicate consideration. I picture the clock by the kitchen reading 2:00 a.m. as she takes four flights down to the car park, where the young boy will be waiting.

I push the door open slightly, allowing a slice of light to enter the room.

In the corner I see the figure of my sister asleep: a half-covered peninsula, rising and falling, facing the blank wall.