

His Excellency's Visit

The first thing I noticed when he came through departure was not his sharply cut olive-green military garb or the eight men clad in black surrounding him. It was his moustache, a thick, bristling, mass underneath his jagged nose, broken several times over. Of course, I knew about the moustache. It was an icon, a dark rectangle, perfectly right-angled at all corners. When Time declared him Person of the Year in 2009, that moustache sat prominently right in the middle of the cover.

His Excellency had come to Singapore to see Gardens by the Bay, looking for a new national project. For the three days I was attached to His Excellency, I did not once see a single hair out of line on his face. It was unflinching, staunch, no gust of wind could force it to shift even slightly. Years later, I tried to grow a beard myself. It was always wiry, patchy. My kids hated it, my wife, ex-wife, said it was too scratchy so after several months, I shaved it off.

Back then, my ties never matched my jacket, my belt never matched my shoes. I stood there in an oversized suit at the Arrivals gate, holding a placard for, "His Excellency". I had been told not to approach but instead to identify Yacob, His Excellency's escort.

Yacob and I had been exchanging emails for months, cordial exchanges of information. I think that is when it began, between those Sincerely's and Regard's, the subtle shift in signing off my email, Jebediah Lim to Jebediah, to Jeb. Eventually, Yacob requested my private email so he could send information unscreened by his government, informal notes without His Excellency's know-how. Most notably, a list. The Do's and Don't's of His Excellency. Don't chew gum while speaking to him (not an issue). Don't sit before him. Don't initiate conversation. Don't make any jokes about the moustache. Never joke about the moustache.

Actually, there was this photo, this one photo of His Excellency, when he was just a young colonel, eyeing for a spot at the top. Before the coup, before martial law, the disappearances, the assassinations, the car-bombs. Before any of it, he was a dashing soldier,

ready to fight and die for his country. And on his face lay a razor thin moustache, a slim black line almost tenderly caressing his stern upper lip. A handsome, slender, man with the same jagged nose. His government published this photo, to humanize His Excellency. Let the people know that he was once a person, like them, before he became this steel statue.

It did not work. The people, they took the photo and they drew penises all over. Vulgarities scrawled, folded into paper planes and thrown over the parliament walls. His bureaucrats scrambled around the parliament gardens; lighters tossed around freely as they burnt every paper they could find. But one lucky plane caught an evening breeze, flew over the wall, past the tiny flames below, through the window and onto His Excellency's desk. The next day, he reinstated martial law. Cancellation of all public services, schools included, a strict curfew, and military patrols on the hour.

This was maybe two, three weeks before his visit to Singapore. I don't know why he didn't cancel. But I think it was pride. I think he would not stand for some youngsters to stall his long-planned trip to our little island. He could not let them win. Even with his face, plastered with genitalia, on the nightly news around the world.

No, especially not after that. He knew in a day or two, the news would forget this humiliation when they saw him shaking hands with an orangutan at the zoo. It's simple. People like the bizarre. And people are forgetful. You just have to keep moving.

I couldn't have done that. I used to, I still hate any attention. I like to be hidden, unnoticed. But sometimes, it happens. Like in secondary school, there were these placement exams. The results were pinned onto a corkboard at the front of class. I scanned quickly through the list looking for my name. Jebediah Lim Kim Hong. Nothing. I had to turn the paper over, to see my name there in the bottom five of the class. I went home and asked my mother to change school. My father found out and he yelled and yelled. When he was done screaming, he caned my sides. The sides are an unusual place. My friends, their parents typically went for

the palm or the butt. The sides are rare. Not for me though. Because if it was the palm, people would see, and if it was the butt, people would know by the way I was sitting. No, the sides were perfect so nobody would know that one of our top ministers came home and beat his youngest son. But he's dead now. So, I can say these things.

Where was I? Oh yes. The airport. The men surrounding His Excellency, they looked like squished up statues made up of muscles and scar tissue. Modern-day centurions. They came over to me and in seconds, enveloped me within their huddle. From the outside, it seemed insane that even one person could stand inside. But there was space for four, with room to spare.

Standing across from me was Ali, His Excellency's manservant. Ali was a stout man, a stern face with an angular buzz cut. He was sweating through his white shirt, patches along his chest. Beside Ali was Yacob.

Fresh-faced, clear-skinned, bright brown eyes. His hair was black, long, wavy, combed to the side. Where Ali was stout, Yacob was slim. His narrow shoulders fit snugly into his sleek black suit. Yacob wore it as if he'd been born with it. I sank into mine like it was splashed onto me. With a soft smile, he extended his hand.

"Pleasure to meet you finally, Jeb."

"Likewise, Yacob."

A firm handshake, once up, once down, Ministry standard. But Yacob does not let go, and neither do I. Once more up, once more down. Still, the clasp remains. A throat clears.

We both break contact, and I see him for the first time. His Excellency. 70 years old, but he does not look it. He stands tall, better posture than me, larger arms too. His face is scarred, potholes on his cheek, a large gash over his eye.

The gash was the result of a failed assassination by his then-Chief of Staff, who drew a pistol and fired during a cabinet meeting. His Excellency simply leaned back as the bullet trailed above his eyebrow. He dared the Chief of Staff to try and fire another round. The Chief

of Staff brought the gun to his own head and fired. This was how the Royal Newspaper wrote the story. Yacob told me over drinks that His Excellency had simply dropped his pen and while bending down to get it, gashed his head against the corner of his table. I laughed until Yacob told me that the Chief of Staff was due to be disappeared, so it was two birds with one stone.

His eyebrows were thick, jagged. Two craggy peaks above his brown eyes, a softer hue than expected. And of course, the moustache.

When seen altogether, his countenance was a battering ram. I faltered, but then my Ministry instincts kicked in. I gave a small bow, my hands clasped behind my back. His Excellency nodded and raised his eyebrows at Yacob. As Yacob ushered me out of the huddle, His Excellency placed his face directly in front of a guard's electronic fan.

"Which door are the cars waiting at, Jeb?"

"Uh..."

"He's quite something isn't he? Give it some time, you'll get over it."

"Right. Um...The cars, they should be at Door 2."

"Then that is where we shall be."

He smiled again, before turning to the entourage and directing them to the second door.

I watched the huddle rotate towards the door. I imagined them circling around His Excellency faster and faster, until their feet lifted off the ground, spinning into a tornado pulling me and their fleet of bags across this country.

#

Yacob and I are sitting at the bar in the lobby. We've taken off our ties, our shirts are untucked and we're sticky with sweat. I take out my handkerchief to wipe some of the muck off my forehead, but receipts tumble out. Records of the day's events. I still have them now.

1. A ticket stub for the Singapore Zoo.

Can you imagine? An visiting dignitary and I still had to pay for him and his bodyguards.

In the sweltering heat of the zoo, we waded between crowds and light wafts of manure. We were making little progress with our bulky party. His Excellency frowned and coughed. Yacob waved his hand, and, in an instant, the bodyguards dispersed. When we reached the tigers, His Excellency pushed through throngs of children to lean against the metal rail. He stared at the tiger intently, as it paced and prowled. I wonder what he was thinking. If he felt some connection to the caged beast, destined to die in captivity. It looked up once, then slunk away. His Excellency turned to Yacob and nodded. Yacob faced me.

“We’re done here.”

“Does His Excellency not want to see the polar bears? Or the orangutan?”

“No, he’s done. Call the cars.”

Yacob motioned to the guards, and we were back in our convoy, rolling across the Singapore highways. We did not take any photos at the zoo.

2. A business card from our dinner reservations.

After the hotel, the convoy moved to a nearby restaurant. It was a new place, *Ori(End)al*, fancy fusion food, East meets West. Pandan croissants. Deconstructed oyster omelette. Rojak sliders. It was a hassle to book the entire space but that was one of His Excellency’s many conditions. Our table was at the window, His Excellency’s seat had the perfect view of the super-trees.

The second we step through the doors, His Excellency stops. He leans over to Yacob and he whispers. Yacob slides next to me, big smile still.

“We need to leave.”

I face him, shocked. His brown eyes look back, unwavering.

“Jeb, do you understand?”

I nod, despite my alarm. He announces His Excellency’s gratitude to the staff, and spins on the heel of his Oxfords. I rush after, dodging the burly shoulders of the security detail.

“Should I call the police?”

“What? Of course not, Jeb.”

“What’s the problem? Is he sick?”

“No, no. He wants something authentic.”

The security detail takes His Excellency to his room. Ali follows Yacob and me as we head to Newton Hawker Centre.

3. Receipts from the hawker centre. Or really, chits with scribbles.

“What’s good here, Jeb?”

“Good isn’t enough for His Excellency.”

“Come off it, Ali. He wants authentic. It can be authentically bad. Jeb and I will handle food. Ali, why don’t you get the drinks? See that stall? Just get... ten? Sound right, Jeb?”

“Ten what?”

“You’re right, you’re right. Fifteen. Ali, just tell the lady there, tell her you want fifteen drinks. Let her pick. Sound good?”

“Yacob, I don’t know if they will-”

“Ali, you be careful, yes? Don’t come back with her number too.”

He smiled a slick smile as Ali ignored him, barging through the crowd.

“What should we buy, Jeb?”

“Newton Hawker Centre is pretty famous. Everything’s good, really.”

“Everything? We must find out if that is true.”

And with that, Yacob dove into the crowd, between queues, sweaty bodies, trash cans. I gave chase but he was a phantom, only materializing to overpay and compliment the hawkers. The flash of his teeth made every hawker feel like they had a Michelin star. I picked up the food, many hawkers disappointed that I did not possess the same charm as the man that ordered. I stumbled through my 谢谢’s, terima kasih’s, thanks, and they responded with grunts.

By the end of our whirlwind, I was standing where we began, thoroughly dehydrated and carrying far too much food. Just when I was about to collapse, a straw slipped into my mouth between my heavy breaths. Yacob was holding a packet of sugar cane juice.

“Drink, my friend. You look exhausted.”

As Yacob sauntered away, all bags in hand, Ali appeared at my side, his perspiration mixing with the drinks’ condensation. The two of us, slowly becoming puddles of sweat on the sidewalk, watched as Yacob hailed a taxi and chatted with the driver through the window. The question slipped out of my lips before I could stop myself.

“What is he?”

Ali grumbled.

“Unnatural.”

#

Yacob ordered another round, and I obliged.

“It’s a shame we won’t get to see the beaches before we go. I’ve always loved the beach.”

He sipped his whiskey, letting the ice clink against the glass.

“You’re not missing anything, Yacob. All the beaches, they’re fake. Most of them at least. We shovelled sand into the ocean. It’s just more city, not beach.”

“I would have still liked to see. When I was younger, my family, we would take weekend trips to the sea. Sit in the sand, and let the hours go by.”

“Must have been nice.”

“It was.”

Yacob, like me, was a minister’s son. But his father had been a minister in the previous cabinet, the one overthrown by His Excellency. Or replaced. The coup was never a coup. It was the restoration of traditional values, or the saving of a crumbling nation. Never a coup.

There are no records of the orders given on that day. No footage of troops storming the parliament, or black bags fastened around necks. The only trace of that day is the transcript of a speech by His Excellency, declaring a new dawn. A new dawn with many missing, including Yacob's father.

Taking care of His Excellency was meant to be a softball. An easy win, a simple diplomatic conversation about the environment, not nuclear policy. A task assigned to me even though I was so junior, because I was a White Horse. Meaning really, that my father's success had put me on the fast-track. All I had to do was give His Excellency a good time. And in reward, I'd be made Deputy Secretary of the Americas Directorate. The same position my father held when he was only 35. I was 34.

No risky moves, no big mistakes, and the post would be mine. But I had to know.

"Yacob, if your father was his... enemy, how did you become his escort?"

Yacob sipped from his glass, swirled it in his mouth. He leaned in and whispered.

"There's no one left."

He sat back and smiled. I didn't understand. I was about to probe further, when Yacob waved exuberantly.

"Ali! Join us for a bit."

I expected the ground to give way as Ali plodded towards us from the elevator doors.

In his low growl, he murmured.

"No drinking, Yacob."

"His Excellency is already asleep, Ali. Don't worry about it *lah*."

He winked. I had been doing my best to cover up my Singlish. My mother always said, the second my father joined the Ministry, he forgot all his Hokkien. So, I started trying to clean the Singlish from my mouth. But it dripped out, with taxi drivers, waiters, coffee shop uncles.

"Relax, Jeb."

He placed a hand on my shoulder.

“We didn’t come to Singapore to see an Asian England. We came here to see your country. Am I wrong, Ali?”

“...No. Come, Yacob. We must prepare His Excellency’s questions for the Minister tomorrow.”

Before leaving, Yacob patted my cheek.

“Cheer up *lah* Jeb. Today went good! Tomorrow will go better.”

He mimicked Ali’s gait and stumbled towards him. Yacob waved good night.

That night, I lay in my hotel bed, several floors below His Excellency’s Presidential Suite. I thought of Yacob, the lightness of his step, his long incisor teeth, how they framed his face look a wolf’s. His brown eyes, a steady gaze that saw everything.

“There’s no one left”.

It rang in my head, bouncing off the inside of my skull. No one left. His Excellency, having removed so many of his rivals, perceived or real, had run out of options for allies. And here Yacob was. Qualified, Cambridge-educated, smart, but his father one of His Excellency’s former mortal enemies. So, while the country continued to disintegrate, Yacob slipped between the smoke clouds landing at His Excellency’s right-hand.

I could fool myself, tell myself I was his counterpart. But I wasn’t. I was Singapore’s Ali. Sullen, moody, clumsy. A rigid worker, who only sought to fulfil the objectives of others. While Yacob leapt from opportunity to opportunity, I dragged my feet, hoping the weight would keep me unnoticed. I tossed and turned for hours, before falling into a deep sleep.

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Taken from Motherland National Archives, recording from July 22nd, 1981.

I recognize that these are unusual circumstances, but these are unusual times.

For the last two decades, I have sat idly by, watching the current administration drive our country into the ground. Failed economic policy, radical social reform, land redistribution. Only some of this administration's catastrophic failures in the last year alone.

As the Chief of the Armed Forces, my job is to secure our country from outside threats. But the greatest threat comes from inside our borders. Nay, inside this very building. The democracy that was foisted upon us has brought nothing but misery. And its architects only seek their self-serving desires, to sell our country out to the highest bidder.

In my hand, I hold a list of names. Parliament members who have knowingly conspired to burn this country and sell its ashes to make a profit. I have certifiable proof of their misdeeds.

Silence, please.

(Sound of gunshot)

Thank you. We are currently in a fight for the very soul of this nation. A war. And I shall fight this war. I will not rest, I will not die until every single insect is burnt out of their hiding hole. Including those in this room. Officers, please.

(Sound of movement)

It is a new dawn. We shall build a stronger nation together. All I ask is for your loyalty.

(End of recording)

#

While the Minister of Environment, His Excellency and Ali talked in the conference room, Yacob and I sat at the coffee shop downstairs. I thought we should wait directly outside, but Yacob told me it could take them hours.

“This, this is good, Jeb. This is good coffee. I’ve never had anything like it.”

“In the old days, they used to sift it through a sock. See?”

I pointed to the painting hanging from the wall. He sipped through the straw, and I could see him savouring the flavour in his mouth. His words rang in my head. No one left.

I blurted.

“Yacob, do you plan on staying with His Excellency?”

As relaxed as ever, he smiled.

“You shouldn’t ask those questions so loud, Jeb. Why do you ask?”

“The files, they say every few years, he cleanses his cabinet. And now-”

“Like a volcano, he is overdue for an eruption. Yes?”

I nodded.

“Ali has been his assistant since the 80’s. Was that in your files?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

Yacob’s toast and eggs arrived.

“Ali was a young lieutenant assigned to His Excellency, only a mere general back then. There were five of them. Five lieutenants. After their posting, four of them continued their careers, becoming businessmen, civil servants, one a pilot. Do you know how many of them are still alive? Just Ali. And that was by staying with him. You see, Jeb, the most dangerous man isn’t His Excellency. It’s the man beside him, the one whispering into his ear. Why do you think we are here? For years, Ali has been telling him about this place. How we could be the next Singapore. This little island utopia.”

“And that’s what you want? To be Ali?”

He downed the last of his coffee, crunching the ice between his teeth.

“Of course not. That would be ridiculous.”

Heat rose to my cheeks.

“Ali does not like you, Yacob. You’re not safe.”

“What, did he tell you I was abnormal? Unnatural? He tells me all the time, Jeb. He has issues with my way of life. But he won’t have me killed.”

He took a bite of the toast, the crumbs falling all over his suit.

“This is absolutely delicious. It’s just bread. Why is it so good?”

“It’s the kaya.”

“You’ll have to find me some, Jeb. It’s absolutely divine.”

I sat there, sullen. I could see Yacob’s future in my mind, a late-night entry, a broken door, three masks, a van, a long drive, and the ocean.

“Don’t pout, Jeb.”

I didn’t reply.

“Trust me. I know what I am doing.”

He put down his toast and leaned in close. I could feel his eyes on me, his warm breath on my cheeks. When he spoke, the bounce in his voice was completely gone.

“The winds are changing. Things are developing. His ways, they’re gone. In a year or two, Ali, His Excellency... Trust me. I know what happens next.”

He straightened up, wiped the crumbs off his pants and dipped the toast in the egg.

“Now stop worrying and drink your *teh*.”

Yacob and I sat there for another hour. We made small talk about the differences between our two countries. Any places he wishes we visited. Foods he’d like to have again. Both of us ignoring the conversation we just had and, that this would be our last time alone. Their flight was tonight. The Business Class lounge and then home. His Excellency and Ali would return to Parliament. Yacob would leave too, but his final destination would be the ocean. Adrift, among other bodies, the others who failed to see the warning signs.

Still, today, I wonder what would have happened if I had pressed Yacob, if I had asked what he had meant, what winds were changing and where they would be go. Would it have been different? Would he have disappeared the way he did? Would the revolution still have succeeded? Would His Excellency have shoved his pistol into his mouth and pulled the trigger?

Would Ali have been put to trial at the ICC? But I did not ask him that day. I drank my kopi, sweat in the afternoon sun, and talked as if our world were not coming to an end.

His Excellency got on a flight back home that night. A week later he would be dead. I shook Ali's hand. Yacob took my hand and pulled me into a hug. They parted through glass doors. Yacob waved at me from beyond immigration.

They say Yacob never boarded that flight. They being Interpol, the CIA, all of them. They also say that Yacob was the one that convinced His Excellency to call in the tanks, to "quell the rioting students." Ali echoed that, the words grinding through his short teeth. He was the only person who could be questioned with His Excellency dead and Yacob missing.

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Retrieved from ICC Archives, recording from November 30th, 2008.

I'm happy to cooperate. I have nothing to hide. You will see you are accusing the wrong man and that an innocent, great man is now dead.

I had been monitoring the situation closely. But as per His Excellency's instructions, I was not to disturb him with internal matters of the state unless it was truly dire. He wanted to soak in Singapore in its full glory and take part in its magnificent culture. I am glad he managed to do that in his final days.

My eldest daughter sent me the video. Truly shocking. The barbarism of that crowd. They claimed they wanted democracy. Absolute mob rule. That officer, yes, he was wrong to fire. But he deserved a fair trial. No, the girl deserved one too. But he was simply doing his job. And she knew the risks of rioting.

After immigration, I informed His Excellency. I had hoped the crowds would have dissipated before we returned. But they had only swelled since the first sparks of the riot. His Excellency was distraught. His country was in shambles, all because of the actions of a violent

minority. He asked, how can we save them? I told him we could not save the police or the crowds from afar. Upon our return, we would figure out the most viable, rational solution.

This is when Yacob entered the conversation. He slid in between me and His Excellency, not before shining his smile at me. His signature smile. If you find him, pluck out his teeth. That will break him.

He told His Excellency that the crowds were not fading because the students' will could not be broken by bullets. They would need to be broken by shells, treads, metal beasts roaring across the capital. He was always so... poetic. He said we needed tanks. It would be the only way to save the officers from the protestors, the protestors from themselves.

Of course, I implored His Excellency to ignore Yacob's words. He was telling His Excellency to slaughter his own people, still with that stupid grin upon his face. His Excellency nodded solemnly. He told me to call the Motherland Guard. I pleaded with him, I begged him. But he commanded me. How could I disobey? The man was my life. He had given me everything. So, I sent in the order and I prayed.

Yes, that was the last time I saw Yacob. Once the orders were given, he was gone. No, I did not notice that he did not board the flight with us.

(End recording).

#

While His Excellency boarded the plane, the tanks rolled through protestors. During his layover in Frankfurt, the nation had exploded into fury. Students, labourers, wives, mothers, sons, daughters had piled into the streets armed with whatever they could find. When he disembarked, the Parliament building had been completely occupied. Upon landing, His Excellency was greeted by rifles, carried by high school students. Their security detail splintered. Half stayed with His Excellency. The other half ran. The guards that remained, they

were hung outside the Parliament building for five days before being taken down by the UN Peacekeeping Mission.

I don't doubt that Yacob told His Excellency to send in the tanks. But I think he did it to spur the people into action. The only way to free the people was through their own suffering. They had to see they only had one option left. If anyone had asked me, I'd have said that. Then maybe Yacob would have come back. He would have returned to Singapore. I would not have continued in the Foreign Service. I would not have met my wife in the Americas Directorate. We would not have divorced seven years later, after the birth of our second child. I could have gone to the beach with Yacob. And we could have watched the waves come in and wipe away our footprints.

I was never promoted to Deputy Secretary. With all the commotion surrounding His Excellency's suicide and the revolution, everyone forgot about his visit to Singapore. When he died, so did my career.

I have thought of sharing my story. But nobody came to ask. All these writers, they forgot that Singapore matters. They forgot that we were His Excellency's inspiration. That his last thought before the bullet pierced his skull was that Lee Kuan Yew died in his old age. I don't know that, not for sure. But I think it was.

Back then, when my wife, ex-wife's snoring would keep me up, or now, when dreams of a life gone by would wake me, I return to that moment. My last minutes with Yacob, in that coffeeshop. To the peace of it all when certainty was still possible. The noisy metal of the benches, the auntie taking orders, the condensation from our coffee dripping onto my pants, Yacob's handkerchief dabbing away the moisture, and that brief moment when he looked into my eyes. That is often where I fall asleep, dreaming of Yacob, of the water, of the waves, of both of us floating, urged on by the ocean breeze.