

***Rebel
Rites***

***Deborah
Emmanuel***



Rebel Rites.

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Dedicated to

*my sister Sarah
who is always there*

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SELF-DESTRUCTION (2007)

The piteous vision folded into himself, retreating into to the familiar shell he knew so well. Foetal. "Why did you fail?" they asked him, in sharp voices of silver. The never-silent choir of angels mellowed into a discordant tune. He could only quiver in fear, unwilling to speak. "Hssssssssssssss" Then a flash of pain in his skull as they drove the first nail into his head, the hard metal connecting with soft, unre-sisting flesh before smashing into solid bone. It went deep. But he could take it. He didn't even scream. The choir swelled in anger, humming harder. They repeated their melody. Louder this time, Stronger. They were trying to scare him. But they couldn't. They were too beautiful.

"Why did you fail?" they sang. It was almost a roar. He looked up at them and spoke. "Because you were expecting me to. Don't think I don't know, you fuckers. Don't think you can deceive me for a second." Another nail. This one too deep to dis-regard. He tightened his arms around his knees and pushed his face against them, but couldn't stop the moan that escaped his lips. Their tune was getting uglier.

The third. He wailed in anguish as it pierced into his head, hating himself for the satisfaction he had just given them. The pain was blinding, but he could just about make out the smirks on their angelic faces. Their grotesque expressions were always at odds with their beauty. A wind gathered now in the courtyard. It came from nowhere, and swirled around them in spirals, lifting the gowns of the choir. White fluid material flapped around the boy and whipped him in the face and neck. The wind was vicious. It tore at his skin, causing more rivulets of blood to run down the sides of his face and drip into his eyes, blinding him even further. But still, he refused to break. "I HATE YOU!" he whined at them. He knew how pathetic he was now, but he didn't care. He was sick of it all, seeking their approval about everything. Why did he even give a shit? They only ever punished him. He wanted so much to hurt them back. It was too bad he wasn't powerful enough for that.

The next vicious nail. This one longer and wider than the first three. It went deep enough to reach his brain. He felt a dead throb thump in his head, and his heart palpitate. He was conscious because they were keeping him that way. The sweet strains of "Amazing Grace" began. The choir was in full glory now, their gray skin beginning to glow luminous in the fading light of dusk. The sun was setting on the courtyard now, and the trees began to sway threateningly in the wind of the oncoming storm.

The boy began to cry. Sobs wrenched themselves from his chest, whilst he tried to keep them inside. Racked with anguish, he could only see blackness. He'd never meant to fail.



The choir faltered. Maybe they had taken it too far. "Ssstop it" they hissed at the boy. The command echoed lightly in the wind. The boy continued to sob. He had made a decision now. He couldn't do this anymore. The torture would never end, he knew. His face was contorted in pain, exposed to them, his eyes open but unseeing. He gathered all his remaining will and brought a flicker of flame to life inside him. He thought of all the times they had condemned him. The flame burned stronger. The times they had thrown him to the ground. Brighter. The pain they caused him. The flames were clearly visible now. They licked his naked calves, and crept up further to his thighs then burst into a conflagration which consumed him. Soon all that was seen was his face and the whites of his eyes showing in his sockets.

His face was serenity. He was smiling now with the thought of escape.

The choir drifted backwards away from him, the heat too much for them to bear. They were unsure of themselves, shifting uneasily in the storm, droplets of water flying off their gowns. "SSSSTOP IT!" the greyest creature shouted, floating swiftly towards him with its perfect face twisted in panic. Then it could move no closer. The heat. Too much for it.

"I'm done. Goodbye" the boy said. He didn't feel any pain. Only thinking of rest.

The flames devoured him, reaching upwards. A tentacle managed to capture one of the trees, then fire leapt from tree to tree until the entire courtyard was suffused in orange light and heat.

The boy went out then, a statue carved from ash which caught in the wind and danced away. The choir stood silently for the first time, awaiting their fate in the cacophony of destruction raging around them. The boy would hurt them now.

BEFORE

This book was started as a factual account of my imprisonment. I wanted to write a poem but the story insisted on being told in prose form. I never wrote the poem.

One of my first memories is moving to my aunt's apartment at night. I think we had been evicted. My little arms clutched my L-shaped pillow as I buckled myself into the backseat of our old-school BMW and fell asleep. I awoke in a drafty room lit with mosquito coils, my mother cooing beside my sister and me to keep us calm. We slept in that big white bedroom until we were 14 years old. Before we were imprisoned by our education, Sarah and I would spend afternoons on the floor in meditative silence, drawing our dream home. We never got tired of trying to depict the stability missing from our lives.

My mother, father, sister and I existed in that big white bedroom most of the time during my childhood and adolescence. The peak of my cultural richness during that period was when I discovered *Play* by Moby tucked in my father's mammoth CD collection, while he was at daily church service. As a family we only watched bad dramas or football on television. My father never allowed the good stuff. I wanted *The Sopranos*, *The Simpsons* or *South Park* but all I got was *Renegade* with Lorenzo Lamas and Manchester United football games. We ate in front of the television with newspaper under our plates so we didn't have to clean the floor after. My mother would sometimes sleep with us on the queen-size bed and sometimes with my father on the single bed. Occasionally, I woke up to see my parents having sex. It felt a bit strange but I didn't understand why.

The situation was a product of financial disrepair. My father had been retrenched from his position as an aeronautical engineer years before. He decided to start his own consulting firm so he could be in control of his future, but didn't understand that he was also in control of ours. The consulting firm mostly involved him sitting in front of our

home computer looking at pictures of women. Occasionally, he would type up a document or have a professional-sounding phone call. Often he would shout at the person on the other side of the line.

We were terrified of my father's frustration. Sarah and I watched him physically, emotionally and financially abuse my mother. I curdled inside but thought I couldn't change it. All I was capable of was soothing my crying sister while we listened to my father curse and slap my mother. My mother hadn't finished school. She struggled with her lost education because my father called her stupid all the time. After dropping out of secondary school, she started working and became a secretary. She was working for my father when they conceived me. They got married in the Our Lady Of Lourdes Catholic Church because it was the only parish which didn't discriminate against shotgun marriages.

Even though we were a messy family, we were proud. My paternal grandparents were teachers from a town in southern India called Nagercoil. They were traditional, industrious people. My maternal grandfather had been a prominent member of the worker's union. He even had an old photograph of himself shaking hands with Lee Kuan Yew. My maternal grandmother was a conservative Catholic woman who only ever wore a silk blouse. Everybody was Catholic. Emmanuel, my surname, means "God Is With Us", and so I was taught to take Him everywhere, around the house, to church, to Catechism classes and to Mass on Sundays. I studied at The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus for 10 years. The school motto was "Simple in Virtue, Steadfast in Duty". There were prayers twice a day and shorts under our pinafores to preserve our modesty. Most of the time we were told to pray more, study harder, sit properly and be quiet. I tried to do those things because I wanted to be a good girl, even though I wasn't interested in my education. My hands scribbled and my eyes were trained on the whiteboard, but my mind was traversing galaxies. Writing and theatrics were always natural to me even if studying wasn't.

I was competitive, but as I got older I became less competitive and more desperate to be cool and loved. I wanted girlfriends and boyfriends. I wanted attention and adoration. There was a lot of fumbling around in the blackness until I met Lenny at age 15. He was 18 but still in secondary school, because he'd had to repeat a year. I liked his chauvinist jokes and the fact that he was an aggressive boxer. We were both very horny but I tried not to have sex with him because God had said

that I wasn't meant to fornicate. The first time Lenny tried to fuck me, I said "Do you have a condom?" He got angry with me and told all our friends the story, at the part when I asked for a condom, he put on a monster voice and contorted his face like I was some hard-nippled Frankenstein. I was simultaneously humiliated and empowered by the way I had clearly threatened him by my taking control of my sexual health. Yet his friends still saw the situation through his eyes; I had no right to expect him to act according to my needs as a woman. After a month, I succumbed to my hormonal urges. We decided to do the deed when his parents were out. After hovering around the shelf for ages, we bought a box of three Durex Extra Safe condoms from the 7-Eleven next to Lenny's HDB flat in Hougang. We walked back to his block, my heart rattling in my chest like the alarm-end of a snake. Lenny's room was minimalist: there was only a mattress on the floor covered in cheap cartoon bedsheets and a plastic standing fan. My virginity was lost frantically, thoughtlessly. After it was over, Lenny rolled off me and I turned away sobbing with guilt.

The next day I went to confession and told the priest my sin. He told me to say a whole rosary as penance for it. I'd never had to say that many Hail Marys to redeem myself before. After confession I felt holy, but it didn't take long for Lenny and me to leave Jesus listening outside the bedroom door again. Then I just dealt with the guilt and inevitable continuity of our sex life. Lenny and I stayed together for a year and a half, smoking cigarettes and playing metal music in a nameless band. I broke up with him twice when I was twitchy and twisted. It also became increasingly apparent that he wasn't The One. I wrote a lot when we broke up. It was consistent that I articulated my tumultuous emotional world with poetry and performance. Perhaps the attention distracted me from my unhappiness. My friends and I formed the school cheerleading team that I co-captained, and I was cast as the lead actress in the 150-year school anniversary play. My grades were mediocre but my extra-curricular scores were monumental. It was only natural that at 16 years old I decided I wanted to be an actress and enrolled in drama school.

During the mid-to-late teenage years, debt and violence cracked my family in different places. After my aunt's apartment, we moved from flat to flat after being evicted each time. Sometimes my father's sisters would pay the rent for us and sometimes they couldn't. When I

was seventeen my mother decided that she would get a job and move us into a low-SES rental flat on Henderson Road. These were government subsidised rental flats. Ours was a \$250 per month concrete box with one bedroom. There was a bathroom with a squatting hole and plastic shower head. There was no kitchen so we bought a portable stove. My sister and I slept on bunk beds and my mother slept on a fold-up mattress on the floor of the bedroom. My father slept outside the room on a bed along the wall, next to the front door. By that stage it didn't matter that my parents slept separately from each other because they weren't having sex.

At Henderson Road in the daytime, elderly people shuffled across walkways in thin cotton trousers and cheap rubber sandals. At night, there were the slurs of drunks and bitter voices of teenagers. We listened to ambulances, police cars and fights in the void deck. It was gang ground. When walking to my housing block from the main road, I would look over my shoulder at phantom footsteps and try not to meet the eyes of the Malay boys perched on railings smoking Marlboro reds. I didn't like to go home, so I stayed out. I didn't tell people where I lived or invite them over.

After Lenny, I dated a Malaysian cook who worked in the restaurant where I was a waitress. Both Lenny and The Cook had a tendency towards anger and misogyny. I always seemed to date versions of my father, but there was one boundary I would not test. When The Cook slapped me one day for saying "fuck", I broke up with him. Then I dated as few father figures as possible; a fast-food line of partners, victims to my promiscuity. Sex was a way for me to attain the worth that I couldn't find in the cesspool of myself. In nightclubs, I walked around in platform shoes with the two half-moons of my ass peeking out the bottom of my shorts to attract attention. My relationships with partners were full of lies and unfulfilled expectation. I said love but didn't know what it meant. I don't think I knew how to give anything except my body. I didn't know how fidelity worked either, until I met Niklas the Austrian hairdresser. He was the first and last person to ever leave me.

We started having sex the first day he cut my hair, and it soon became complicated. He didn't want to be entangled but I felt fidelity-inspiring love. He gave me ecstasy for the first time at WOMAD Singapore in 2006. The World of Music and Dance was a cultural performance orgy that happened at Fort Canning Park annually until they

shut it down—I think it was too bohemian for the authorities. At one point in the festival, I was curled around Niklas on the ground, licking sweat off the side of his neck because it tasted good. I don't remember this; my American friend Erika took photographs. When I think back to that behaviour, I'm unsurprised I was eventually imprisoned. Play according to the rules of your game, and if not don't be so blatant with your disregard.

I knew Singapore was not gracious with lawbreakers, but I talked to strangers about being high and flashed people my weed. I was proud of my rebellion. A couple of times, I sat with Niklas and Yusef puffing the ice pipe for hours. My kaleidoscope of escapism blurred the days into each other. One time Niklas and I were coming down, dunking each other and messing around in his pool; next thing I knew, I was screaming, "Stop! Stop! Stop!" because I thought he was going to drown me. Remembering that paranoid fear makes me want to eat my fingers. The years when I was eighteen and nineteen were drugs, sex and disrespect. I think I was trying to exorcise me from myself. I wanted to attain some out-of-body transcendence, enter a wormhole, eradicate reality. Niklas and I said goodbye at the bus stop outside Plaza Singapura. It was a silent, awkward parting like two astronauts letting go of each other, floating away into the darkness. A week later I had to drop out of drama school because we couldn't afford the fees any more.

I went back to forgetting. One night, I met James at the Ministry of Sound at Clarke Quay. I had taken some ecstasy and it was that point in the high when I felt cold, even dancing between warm throbbing bodies. I was wearing a cream-coloured bomber jacket borrowed from my sister, silk platform wedges and moon shades. When I walked into the smoking room, I felt James' eyes follow me. My head was a pleasure blur, but I could always feel when someone was watching me. It was one of the few ways I understood my worth, so I was quantitative in my awareness. I slouched in the smoking room corner for half an hour watching intoxicated clubbers before James came over. He was dark and slender, almost smaller than I was. I told him that I was shooting for Disney. It was my favourite way of introduction, talking about the Disney series in which I had played 15-year-old wannabe reporter Maisy, with nasal voice and oversized red spectacles. James and I exchanged numbers.

We met a couple of days later at my favourite café on Arab Street,

Café Le Caire. I hung out there because of the shisha and late operating hours. Also the Turkish coffee and the sweetest dates I had ever sucked on. James and I sat next to each other on a sofa and spoke for hours. He had a PhD in software engineering and that made me more attracted to him. I liked intelligence. Maybe he could teach me something. I also found out that he was eighteen years older than I was. I didn't care.

We fell in love quickly after a couple of months. We decided to use the L-word when we went to Vietnam for a holiday during the New Year weekend. We got high and talked until the sun rose from behind palm trees. That night, doors opened inside both of us. After that, we spent as much time together as possible. Even though he was much older, we understood each other. He loved me with loyalty and compassion, much more than I deserved. Sometime in mid-January, he went back to the UK for a couple of months to pack up and move to Singapore to be with me. When he left, I wept for days and felt the return of my instability. Instability and escapism.

It was the 27th of January, 2008. Obii, Fasihah and I were out engaging in some casual Sunday substance abuse, smashing pills at The Shack on Sentosa Island. I had met Obii and Fasihah on a night out months before, and they had assimilated me into their party crew. We were the last people at The Shack, a place that looked exactly like it sounded. We hung out there purely as an exercise in nostalgia. The Shack used to be a beach club called KM8, which was the place to be on Sundays. At KM8, tribal music and disco lights mixed with wet salty flesh. I spent a number of Sundays there intoxicated, attached to the mouth of some vapid male model or some intense guy with a bloated wallet. The Shack was KM8's corrugated metal ghost which we couldn't let go of. I walked down the beach and sat down to stare out at the sea frothing upon the shore. Maybe it was as wasted as we were. Later, we ended up at the Latin club Movida. I was so high that all the walls were LED cotton candy. When it was over, Obii and I shared a taxi ride home. When he dropped me off in front of my block, he tried to kiss me. I turned away and giggled, saying something mindless about friendship and complication, then put the incident deep in the basement of my brain.

Monday the 28th was meant to be mild as milk. The evening began predictably. I started at Roni's parents' mansion smoking joints while locked in his bathroom. Roni was a young law student with very wealthy parents. He occasionally asked me why I wouldn't fuck him,

but that was only when he was high. Otherwise we just made silly jokes and smoked pot. I often had to ignore when my male friends said that they wanted to fuck me or tried to snake their tongues into my sealed mouth. It was always just easier to forget. Friendship was manageable that way. After I left Roni's, I went to O Bar on Mohamed Sultan Road for a techno gig with Obii and Fasihah. I had many good nights with them, dancing under lasers while my eyes rolled back in my head in ecstasy.

The CNB came for us in a white van. Actually, they came for some other people and we just happened to be the loser by-products of that planned operation. When they arrived, I was smoking a cigarette outside. I watched them cross the road with the entitled stride of government-empowered bodies and felt concrete turn to ash beneath my flip flops. They went in the bar and turned on all the fluorescent lights, shouting, "CNB!" The glaring light made it all uglier. It was a mixture of fear and knowing that froze me. I recalled this moment with regret for a long time afterward, wondering why I didn't just run into the darkness of Havelock Road and deal with the consequences later. Instead I sat on the concrete ledge with a cigarette dangling limply from my fingers until one of the officers called my name. They had found my bag at the table. It was my favourite bag from Topshop which looked like a dead cat but at least was synthetic fur. I stubbed out my Virginia Super Slim in a bush and went inside O Bar to deal with the inevitable.

The CNB was looking for the deejay Sharik and his friend Fiddy Ross. Obii, Fasihah and I had been sitting at their table but I didn't know them. I'd seen them around during Clarke Quay escapades but it seemed like they didn't get it. Hip-hop caps and no manners, plus they hung out at Fashion Bar, a chichi velvet sofa wasteland. The officers asked me to empty my bag out and I disposed of a finished pill baggie in my wallet when they weren't looking. I felt like a criminal for the first time. That night I'd gone out without a spare T-shirt in my bag. Most of the time I was prepared for 24 hours of spontaneous entertainment, possibly going to work from a house I'd never slept in before. The officers asked what my dental gum was for. I wanted to say "to take the edge off." They collected us in a fearful herd and transported us to Clementi Station in handcuffs. There was no mention of rights or lawyers like I had seen on television. That's not how they do it in Singapore. In Singapore, when an officer suspects you of being guilty of a drug offense, they have the right to search you and your home without a warrant. It is also an

offense for you not to give a urine sample when you are asked to provide one. Obviously, I just did as I was told.

It was a surreal night. Out of the emotionally overwhelming sequence of events, cold metal clutching my wrists for the first time emerges the most tangible. An androgynous female Central Narcotics Bureau officer named Jean watched while I pissed in a small white plastic container like I was at the doctor. I felt sick, head buzzing and heavy. I wanted to lie down across the plastic chairs and sew my eyelids shut. The urine was put through a noisy machine and I tested positive for THC and MDMA. I claimed that someone spiked my beverage. They must have heard that reasoning almost every time with the young and oblivious, but they didn't give it away. The hard-line elderly Indian man taking my statement said "one look at me" and he knew I took drugs. Look at my clothes, look at my hair. I didn't know how conspicuous I was, but clearly he did. He reminded me of my father. I didn't like him.

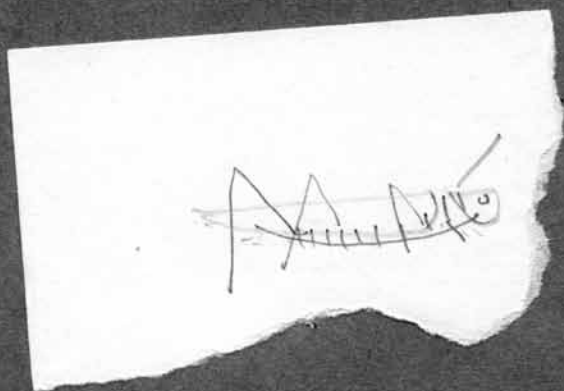
I called my mother from the station to say vaguely that I was in trouble and needed her to bail me out. It was 2am. She came to collect me with fear eating the corners of her eyes. My mother worried about me smoking the occasional joint, but she never told me to alter my actions with the expectation of obedience. She was a gentle lady who had no control over my searching teenage spirit. I was silent in the taxi on the way home, doused in shock and unable to explain what had happened. Over the four weeks while I was out on bail, I evaded her inquiries about what was happening with the CNB. I even evaded questioning myself, existing in a constant state of denial about what was evolving. During the bail time, Jean the CNB officer tried to coerce me into telling her the name of my drug dealer. I couldn't look at her face for too long because I was attracted to her; I always had problems with behaving normally around people I thought were attractive. I sat on a swivel chair in one of the faceless CNB cubicles, legs wriggling nervously. Jean asked again and again who "Adik" was and where he got his drugs from. I never told her what she wanted. I didn't know anything. I wasn't going to change the fate of another person...my own changed fate was enough.

At the time of my arrest, I was working full-time as a Guest Relations Officer in a five-star city hotel. It was a soulless sham. The moment I entered the employee entrance of the hotel I had to try to not have a personality. One day I came to work with my hair down and sunglasses on, and was stopped by the HR lady who had employed me on my way to

the female locker room. She said, "Hello, can I help you?" thinking I was some kind of impostor. I held in my smile when I took my sunglasses off, looking her in the eyes. She was sceptical of me for a good reason, but I just thought she was a bitch. The entire luxury hotel industry is about reining people in to behave in a way that keeps affluent people disengaged from the "help". I never wanted to be there but I didn't know what else to do. Some family friend had managed to set up an interview and I needed a job to save money to go back to drama school.

The whole experience working at the hotel began strangely, with fuzzy boundaries and teenage naïveté. I was interviewed by a Chinese Singaporean man in a classy cubicle, who asked me what my life was like. I told him I liked reading, writing, dancing and piercings. He asked about my piercings, and I told him I had a few in different places. He asked to see them. I wasn't sure. He said he thought piercings were art. I lifted up my shirt and showed him the rings in my nipples. We finished the interview and I got another interview. A little bit later he was fired. Maybe he had asked to see some other woman's nipples and she hadn't been so willing. I was glad to not have to look him in the eyes again.

I had dropped out of drama school because of money, so the job was for saving money so that I could go back. I didn't. In the three months I worked there, I put down all my cash on fashion, drugs and alcohol to keep me from going insane. Prison saved me from my life as a receptionist, for real. It would have been that or an asylum. I spent the rest of my bail time getting fucked up as usual, floating in a fiction where imprisonment would just go away. The last thing I did was go to the Malaysian beach town of Cerating with Niklas. By this time, getting high felt inconsequential, so we procured some weed, frolicked in the warm mouth of the ocean and chased legions of little crabs across the sand. James' earnest, trusting face strobe-lit my mind as Niklas and I ate plates of nasi lemak and made stoned love. It was a psychedelic way to say goodbye to freedom.



CHANGI WOMEN'S PRISON

On the 28th of February I woke up in Niklas' bed, had a shower and started my long public transport journey from Marine Parade to the Clementi CNB office to meet with Jean. Before going into the Clementi police station I went to Botak Jones for my favourite lamb chops with mint sauce. After eating I sat there and watched the mix of heartland residents and white collars in banal office clothing having their lunch. I often felt a kind of scorn rise, contained, from observing people whose lives seemed so boring and insignificant when mine was tumultuous as fuck. Fasihah came to meet me at the hawker centre, distracting me from my negativity. We made some jokes while sipping on teh ping, smoked a few more cigarettes and walked through the gates. I went to Jean's desk and sat in front of her, without looking at her directly for too long, as usual. She flipped through a folder that must have contained all the information they had about me and said in a well-practiced deadpan way that I was about to be sent to Changi Women's Prison (CWP) under the Drug Rehabilitation Sentence. At that moment, I saw all my obligations trickle away into a puddle of irrelevance.

As a futile cover up, I had told the managers from the hotel that I had smoked some weed on holiday and didn't know I could be prosecuted until they arrested me. I called Ramli from the hotel to tell him what was happening. He was as compassionate as he could be. That was also the day before the press conference for the Disney series I had been in. We had been filming the whole of December. I remember wrapping the shoot the weekend of ZoukOut, a dance music festival on Siloso Beach, and arriving there excited to pop pills and disco madly. That night, I lost all my belongings and some of my dignity. I went to the portaloos while James' waited outside for 20 minutes. He checked the door of my cubicle and opened it to find me sitting on the floor staring blankly ahead, lost in my drugged head. It was juxtaposition against the character I played in the series: nerdy fifteen-year-old Maisy. I missed the press

conference while I was in lock-up at Clementi and they explained away my absence. A few people still make Lindsay Lohan and Miley Cyrus jokes at me like I was another Disney brat gone wrong.

Since it was an offense against the Misuse Of Drugs Act, I would serve up to a year of imprisonment without trial but wouldn't have a criminal record because there was no conviction in court. They called it direct incarceration. I was too ignorant to ask about a lawyer or other ways of handling the situation. If you're a drug user you have less of a right to argue with the law than other hooligans dancing around the penal code.* The drug-test-machine-god decided your path. It was happy news for my future work and travels, but I obviously didn't give a fuck at the time. When I walked into the station holding cell, Fasihah was already there, curled up against one wall. She looked up at me in despair. Soon both of us were ships on a swollen river, sobbing and overflowing. Sitting on opposite sides of the concrete floor, we vacantly envisioned on washed walls the tragedy about to befall us. I had never been more terrified. My mind danced through suicide scenarios. It seemed like the only way to stop reality from grabbing me with its eczema arms and pushing me through the doors of a prison cell, I would have to die. Clearly. They took me to a room to remove my nipple rings and were incredulous when I had no tattoos. 'What? Non-conformist youth without any tattoos?' The hands of authority will always see offenders through a veil of subjectivity. Everybody has prejudices. No officer is an infallible robot...but people in power must present as flawless.

We were moved to Cantonment Station in the ubiquitous government-issue white van, then transferred into a musty-smelling Nissan. On the way there I pleaded with the makcik tudung driving to open my sealed plastic bag of belongings so I could make one last call. I took out my phone and dialled Niklas, asking him to get in touch with people and tell them what was happening. My voice was a frantic gurgle. I don't know how he understood anything I said. I also sent a number of

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* Under s 34(2)(b) of the Misuse of Drugs Act, the Director of the Central Narcotics Bureau has the power to order a person who has tested positive for drugs to undergo treatment or rehabilitation at an approved institution for a minimum period of six months. This is known as admission into the drug rehabilitation centre ("DRC"), or the drug rehabilitation sentence ("DRS").

"Going to jail, see you later!" text messages. Free Deborah giggled inside. Two other young women were in the car. One of them had a large, badly rendered Garfield inked on her bicep, and the other was slim and shrunk like a voodoo doll. They must have been something like twenty-seven years old, but already jaded and crusty. They leaned against the windows of the car in slack-limbed defeat until we arrived at the prison gates. Dread deadened me as we approached. It was real. The first sighting of the complex filled me with awe. That was when I still had respect for police authority.

The building had a commanding presence, all high concrete walls and barbed wire, in grey, white and light blue. We were told to call the wardens "Ma'am". There were only women wardens. I considered that "Ma'am" was how domestic help workers were taught to address their employers in homes all over Singapore. We filled out forms and put our possessions in storage. Dealing with bureaucracy while emotionally unstable is like punching yourself in the face. Except in this case Singapore had grabbed me by the wrists and was making me do it while it screamed "Why are you hitting yourself?!" My hands were shaking as I tried to explain on another form how many tattoos or identifying birthmarks I had. This was to describe my physical appearance in the event of an escape. I can't imagine how anyone would escape that place. There were key locked gates every five metres. They gave us white separates with no seams and velcro fasteners, then Fasihah and I went in a holding cell with Garfield and Voodoo Doll. I never thought I would be in such close proximity with women like that. I thought we were too different, but I would soon watch them eat prison food hungrily with their hands, and they would soon see my nipples shrivel in protest against the frigid communal showers. Most of my life until that point had been about surrounding myself with people similar to me; gangs of lopsided youth who were still products of some privilege. These women were too far destroyed for me to see myself in.

Garfield and Voodoo Doll had been there before. They told us about the master checks, when we would have to sit in formation for the wardens to count us. The master check formation changed for each number of inmates in a cell. All the inmates were counted three times a day. Cells could hold up to four women, but it was either in solitude, threes or fours. Two women in a cell could create 'deviant' sexual behaviour and they definitely didn't want that, even though acts of homosexuality

are only illegal for male partners in Singapore. The wardens would walk down the corridor, flipping the opaque sliding screens on the cell doors to reveal the windows one by one. The windows were small, not big enough for you to see the whole face of a warden on the other side, but enough for her to look in most corners of the cell. There were two tiny blind spots on either side of the door. I liked to sit in the blind spots and feel momentarily untouchable.

I discovered that the prison I had conceptualised based on American movies was very different from the truth of Singapore prison. We slept on the floor with a rattan mat to separate us from the ground. We were given one wool blanket which could either be used as a pillow or for warmth. The women told us that the shiny shower head coming out of the cement wall would turn on twice a day. We would have to collect water in a large red plastic drum the moment it came on, or go without water until the next time that evening. We only had twenty minutes, so if there were four of us in a cell, we had to fill the drum with water then use under five minutes each to clean ourselves and wash our underwear. The water we collected was for drinking and washing after using the squatting hole. Every day was the same routine, but time was a faceless clock. I never knew what hour it was. Later, I discovered the showerheads were the only thing you could see your reflection in. My distorted body in the metal convinced me I was actually there. I've felt this way a few times in my life; in situations so far removed from previous circumstances that I might have whacked my head and arrived in a concussed dreamland. The next few days were a blur of sleeping and sobbing. I lay flat on the cold floor to stare at the ceiling, thinking about the hopelessness of the situation and imagining where I could be instead. There was so much new stimuli but I had no idea what was happening. I just followed the instructions they gave me, placidly powerless.

The women were going through what I thought were heroin withdrawals but later discovered were from a cheap substitute called Subutex. They melted the pharmaceutical tablets and injected the mixture intravenously. Whatever this Subutex stuff was, it meant they were battling some spindly horrors. Both of them were shivering, nauseated messes. They were as nice as they could be given the circumstances, and for that I was grateful. Them telling us what to do prevented us from being shouted at by the wardens. I hated when they shouted.

They moved us to a different cell a couple of days after. Fasihah and I

met Ida, a girl about my age with an unremarkable face and one of the tightest bodies I've ever seen. Fasihah was a beautiful woman, vain and arrogant. She occasionally would comment how much my tits sagged considering their size or talk about how hers were like a pornstar's. She would say to Ida how tight her body was. I admired her ability to be exactly who she was without self-doubt, but I struggled to understand her intentions for saying the things she did. Sometimes they were a bit hurtful but perhaps it was just a lack of self-reflection.

The first visit from my family came a few days in. Immediate family could come to see you without jumping through too many hoops. Anyone else would have to deal extensively with the ringmasters. Inmates could get visits every two weeks if anyone came to see them that often. The first of the month was a face-to-face visit, and the next a televisit. This was when visitors would sit in a brightly lit box off-site to have a conversation with the prisoner. My poor mother, sister and James came to Changi Women's Prison to see me. My Dad had decided not to come because my mother was going. He didn't think that seeing me every two weeks was better than cradling his ego damaged from my mom rightly leaving him. It should not have surprised me. Our family environment had been a constant struggle against the way his anger controlled his actions.

I assumed that whatever James and I had was over, so it was shocking to see him. I hadn't seen him in a month. In that time I had been unfaithful to him with Niklas in Cerating. I told him over the phone the week before, lying on the top bunk bed in our Henderson Road shithole. We began the conversation talking about how cold it was in the UK and how he couldn't wait to come home to the tropical paradise he had found with me. Then I had to tell him the truth about what I had done and his voice had turned raspy like he'd swallowed glass. The guilt which gobbled me came more from the hurt I caused him than the actual infidelity. After that he was suddenly in front of me in a prison complex, looking forlorn and concerned. I didn't deserve it. It was so strange seeing these three people I loved intimately through the thick perspex of the cubicle. I was just one woman in a row of many others that day, whispering to the shards of our world through black speakers set in a plastic divider. I don't remember what I talked about with them when they came to see me. We babbled and felt sorry for each other. I could never apologise enough.

They didn't permit people who had been arrested with each other to remain together, so Fasiah and I were separated soon after. You had to be as alone as you could be. Even if we hadn't been admitted in the same circumstances, it wouldn't have mattered because Fasiah was twenty-five and I was nineteen. The inmates under twenty-one were isolated from older, more "corrupt" individuals. Sometimes I imagine what kind of stories I would have if I'd been hanging out with the OPs. That was a casual term we used for those over 21. I guess it meant Old Prisoner. I was a YP, a Young Prisoner. I wonder how hardcore it got as an adult. They dressed me in my permanent powder blue prison wear. It was printed with DEBORAH and DRS-60 directly under it. DEBORAH became irrelevant. None of the wardens ever called you by your name. That would have been too humanizing. I convinced the warden who looked like a lipsticked toad to chop most of my hair off because otherwise I would run out of my monthly soap bar ration in a week. The standard issue was China doll but that didn't work for my mass of crazy curls. She cut it as short as she could without making me look like a lesbian. DRS-60 was born.

We were treated like animals, branded with a number and caged, then shouted at and talked to like scum. Most of the wardens adopted facial expressions of deep scorn. There was also a procedure we had to comply with every time we moved through prison buildings. Standing spread-eagled like the Vitruvian man, we did squats so that the wardens could look into our vaginas and anuses. Ten this way and ten that way, to ensure we weren't smuggling objects in our orifices. It was one of the most humiliating things I've ever experienced. I soon learned how to go elsewhere in my head.

The day they took me away from Fasiah was really the beginning of my incarceration. Fasiah had been my connection to a pre-prison reality. They unlocked a cell and I walked into it carrying my clear plastic mug, toothpaste, toothbrush, soap and underwear—my only physical possessions in the alternate dimension I had entered. That and a book about the Congo James had left me, which I read too many times considering the interest it inspired. I knew when they shut the door behind me that I was about to be solitary for the first time. I sat down in a corner of the cell, head singing with all the stories I had ever known. Then I cried as quietly as I could to purge the feelings that would soon suffocate me from the inside. Something I had learned was not to let

any of the other women see or hear me. The cell walls were thin and the person next door would probably tell me to suck it up because crying doesn't change anything.

I sat in my white-walled concrete cave. The long fluorescent lights glared down at me to highlight how alone I was. Then a grasshopper flew into the cell and landed on the wall in front of me, like paint on a desolate canvas. My tears froze. There was another presence. At first I didn't know how to involve myself with it, then I decided it was a she. Personification works. Giving her a more human identity made it easier to communicate with her. She came into my new home as I thought about how dark it would feel when the lights went out, almost as if she knew what I needed. I spoke to her on and off for a long time, softly so it wouldn't sound like I was talking to myself. She lay across the wall at an angle like her head was cocked to the side, listening the way my mother would. I made a few jokes and laughed, sure she was laughing too. I didn't feel alone anymore. When the lights went out, I waited for her to fly away. She first hopped onto my straw mat right next to my head in some farewell gesture.

When she came back the next morning I thought I had lost it. Surely the stress of the situation had gotten to me. I went right up to her to check she was not paint, but she was real. She hung around her patch of wall most of the day and then flew away. Maybe it was some kind of intervention. Perhaps my perception was clouded by a search for meaning. I'll ever know what the grasshopper was thinking. I'm way less of a mystic these days, but her appearance was magical. I had been conditioned to believe in some kind of God after all. Magic was a way for me to explain what I didn't understand.

My isolation felt like months, but was only a few weeks. They did this to new inmates, maybe because there were still narcotics in their system or because there weren't enough inmates for a shared cell. During that time, I learnt how to appreciate the beauty of the world outside even though I did not feel like a part of it. When deprived of stimuli, the smallest changes in the environment are noticeable. The smell of rain was my favourite discovery, along with the scent of freshly cut grass. There was a slice at the top of the back cell wall where the concrete didn't meet. Through it I could see a little bit of the sky. I stared at that slice of sky a lot. I walked up and down the length of the cell a lot. The wardens would tell me to stop walking because of the sweat.

It was against the rules to exercise. I heard rumours about how it was because we might hurt ourselves. More likely it was because we would get too strong.

One afternoon after lunch I was lying in my cell staring at the ceiling when a voice punctured my daydream. "Hello...Helloooooo...Helloooooooo?" I sat upright and looked around manically. The hello continued. I cleared my throat because I hadn't spoken in days. "Hi," I said. "Hi," said the person back "What's your name?" I was stunned for a moment, not having had a normal conversation in some time. "My name is Deborah." She said, "I'm Dash." Dash and I shared stories, quietly. She was from a prominent all-girls Christian school that I knew well because it was next to the flat that my grandparents had always lived in. The school was known for having extraordinarily ugly uniforms. I told her about my convent education, feeling that I had found someone who understood what a lot of my life had been like. It was comforting. Dash and I communicated every day. Many days it was a simple "Good morning!" while we showered and a "Makan!" before eating. Other days we would have longer conversations. I was alone, but not alone. One day, I was being taken for a visit when I passed another inmate in the corridor. She was a lanky butch of Indian descent. We locked eyes for a moment while crossing paths. When I returned to my cell, glowing from the conversations with my family and clutching the *Life Of Mahatma Gandhi* by Louis Fischer, Dash said, "I saw you." I remembered the butch from the corridor. "I had a feeling it was you," I said. I don't know if it was in my longing for intimacy, but I was attracted to her after that. It changed something. I almost wished that she had remained an anonymous voice from the quiet.

Regardless, Dash and I continued our routine of conversation and morning greetings before breakfast. Prison breakfast was two slices of white bread sparingly spread with butter, fluorescent pink or purple jam. The jam was basically synthetically flavoured sugar. I liked the pink one better because the flavour was exactly like candy floss. The purple one tasted more like an unsuccessful Fanta grape. This was served with a kind of tea or coffee flavoured water. I think the drinks were decaffeinated, but I got such a stimulant buzz from them. It must have been the sugar. The next meal was lunch. This was often white rice with tofu and cabbage or soggy rice vermicelli. Dinner was white rice and a spicy chicken drumstick or sardines with braised leafy green things. About

2 hours after each meal Dash and I would be salivating for the next. The most torturous moments were trying to distract ourselves from the smell oozing out from plastic meal boxes stacked up behind the door. There were an incomprehensible number of conversations we had about what we would eat when we got out, and how good it would be to have a cigarette with a whiskey after that. Most of the time, I didn't eat much food from the colourful partitioned plastic boxes I was given. I dropped all my weight and it felt good, like one of the few things I could control. It was like purification; scrubbing myself clean of a disgusting being. I hated myself. I couldn't disappear fast enough.

There was this pair of wardens; Hamidah, a fresh pretty thing, and Sharul, a tight-bunned tall one. One day they took me to the doctor's station because I was flipping out. For a week in my isolation, I thought I was dying because I read a magazine article about the symptoms of cervical cancer and had been bleeding incessantly since I got to prison. I struggle with women's magazines being an authority. We were rationed a monthly supply of sanitary napkins but I ran out of mine quickly and had to ask for more. When the examination was over, I hopped off the examination table and started dressing again in prison garb. By this point, I was accustomed to being naked in front of wardens. They checked on us all the time. Even during shower time, our bare bodies were not a consideration as they looked through our cell window. We were cattle so it didn't matter. I almost would have been more comfortable being looked at like an animal than the next interaction. Sharul and Hamidah asked me if I exercised before I came to prison, protecting me from admitting to doing it currently, which was against the rules. They stared at my skin. I was pretty anorexic and did calisthenics in my cell when I was sure I wouldn't be caught, so I was taut. It might have been that they were curious, but I was ashamed they were judging my unclothed body. For some silly reason, I assumed it would be difficult to make an aesthetic evaluation of a crumpled hostage. I suppose nakedness is nakedness, regardless of the context. We have been conditioned to physically appraise everybody against our individual warped beauty standards; we attribute more or less value to a being based on what they look like when it's predominantly genetic. It's ridiculous and unfair. Even prison guards made judgements about the appeal of prisoner bodies. Sometimes I think that no matter how hard I rise up against it, I will always be an object. Sometimes someone tells

me I'm beautiful and it makes me want to hack off my face. Sometimes someone tells me I'm beautiful and it makes me feel good...then I want to hack off my face and stab a screwdriver into my frontal lobe.

They didn't find anything clearly wrong with my parts during the prison examination, so they decided to refer me to a hospital. It was about a month into my imprisonment. I was transported in a prison van. I had seen the type of van on the streets a few times before, painted black and printed with PRISONS in white. It was strange to find myself sitting inside of one. I was exhilarated to go beyond the prison gates. There was an exposed window and cage at the top of the van which I watched intensely. I saw a blur of trees go by, punctuated with lamp posts. It was like the "Star Guitar" music video and I played the song in my head, probably inaccurately. When we got to Changi Hospital, the accompanying officer put shackles on my ankles in addition to the handcuffs around my wrists. She walked me through the hospital, my feet shuffling and my chains rattling. I didn't know where to look. It was so demeaning. I wasn't a serial killer. I was a 19-year-old party girl. I kept my head down and tried not to look at anyone, afraid that in a sick joke from fate I would look up into the eyes of someone from my previous life. It was an arduous walk, the shackles weighing on my ankles. When we got to the examination room, I sat down on a chair outside exhausted, with the accompanying officer across from me. She was an older lady of Chinese descent, something like 40 years old with a pleasant pock-marked face. Even with her, I felt ashamed of my situation. I struggled to make eye contact when we began to have a conversation. "How old are you?" she asked. I told her that I was 19 and she replied knowingly, "So young." There was more silence. I could feel her watching me. Then she said "You shouldn't shake your legs like that. Be still and you will be calm." I stopped the nervous movement, very aware of myself. I sat up straighter in the plastic chair meant for people to wait on. Sitting on those chairs always made me nervous. I never knew exactly what was going to happen in a hospital examination room, but I knew it would be invasive. This occasion would be particularly invasive since the issue was me bleeding from the vagina. She asked me what my religion was. "Catholic," I said, "but I don't really know what I believe anymore." "I am Buddhist. For us, it is important to be still. When you start to shake, stop yourself. Pay attention to your mind." We sat there for longer, me focused on being still, and her still with her eyes on me. She emanated a kind of

peaceful strong energy that made me feel safe.

The nurse called me into the room where I was given a transvaginal ultrasound. Invasive as fuck but it felt like if there was something wrong with me, the white wand would have found it and photographed it. When the procedure was over, I got dressed and the officer put my shackles back on so she could walk me to the van. I was told by the nurse that if there was a problem, the prison would let me know. When I got back to my cell, I was invigorated by the excursion but wished that I had been better able to appreciate being outside. Instead I was anxious about my health or that somebody I knew might see me shackled like a serial killer. I wished that I had looked around at the free people and soaked up some of their freedom. I waited for a warden to come to my cell to tell me that I had cancer. I waited for anyone to tell me anything, but nobody ever did. Even when a warden did come, she never told me where she was taking me or why. I just had to guess while we walked through the greyness of prison stairwells and corridors.

One day I had a redemptive gift, some reprieve from my lowness. One of the wardens took me out of my cell and down to a block and corridor I didn't recognise. When we stopped in front of the door I looked up and saw that it was labelled with a colourful sign that said "Library". I wanted to cry with joy but played it cool. The warden said I only had fifteen minutes to pick. I walked around the small library, disappointed in the choices on the shelves. If that was what they wanted us to read I understood why the books James brought me got rejected. It was taking me so long to find something I would actually enjoy that I was about to lose hope, when on a bottom shelf I spotted *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being* by Milan Kundera. I had wanted to read it for a long time. The warden appeared behind me with "DRS-60! Hurry up!" just as I bent down to pick up the book. I took it back to my cell feeling like I had won something. I hoped that I would be able to get through it before it was taken away from me. Most days, I tried to read the new books that James brought but couldn't concentrate. My head was murky with depression. I read the same page for an hour sometimes, re-living my history while I tried to drown my sludgy brain in someone else's narrative. I tried to meditate and thought incessantly about what all of this meant for the future. It felt like parts of my worldview were imploding and rebirthing. I have never experienced anything like it since; a sequence of realisations about how delusional my perspective was and how far

away I was from seeing things the way they really are. It felt like a very rapid maturing; the result of me finally spending some time on my own to reflect on my existence. I had distracted myself for so long from what was happening at home and in my head with parties, drinking, altered consciousness. I constantly thirsted to forget but had found myself in a place where I was forced to remember everything.

Much of the lucidity came with an extreme new perspective. It was a way for me to overcome the cognitive dissonance my imprisonment created. I had to believe that it had happened for some purpose; that it was a logical sequence of events. My Catholic guilt had a sizeable part to play in this schema. It meant the creation of Old Deborah vs. New Deborah. Old Deborah was promiscuous and impetuous. She disrespected herself and her body, taking off her top on the dancefloor and posing for nude photoshoots, having threesomes, gobbling pills and sleeping for two hours before going to work as a barely-dressed waitress in a nightclub. New Deborah breathed the idea of karma and kismet. She felt that every action had an equal consequence, that the reason her life had been so tumultuous was because of all the hurt she had caused for those who loved her. She felt that given what she knew at that point, she had no excuse but to be in control of her future. It was liberating and intimidating to think that I manifested my own destiny. Unfortunately, I didn't take into account the process of amalgamating my destiny with other people. My solitary time in that cell was when I felt the freest in prison; my actions weren't dictated at all by the presence of other women—they were a game changer.

I was moved one day in the middle of shower time. The water would only be on for twenty minutes, but the warden took me from my solitary cell and unlocked the door to my new cell when the other girls were in the middle of their nakedness. I stepped inside and there was Aya, Tiny and Ah Boy. Ah Boy shouted at me to face the other way and wait my turn. I sat down obediently. Later I would find out that she didn't like people to see her naked because she was uncomfortable with her womanliness. She was as butch as they come; a loan shark and hoodlum but she had softness, and she thought it showed in the stringy black hair between her legs. Tiny was a KTV hostess who did the occasional sex work. She was only seventeen but her tongue was sharp and her stare was stony. There was a dark blue teardrop tattooed underneath her left eye. Aya had been a prostitute in Geylang for many

years. She had an infant who was looked after by her mother while she worked the streets.

Aya and I became friends because she was the only person who would entertain my philosophical rambling, usually bubbling out of something I had read. Sometimes she even put on her prison-issue spectacles to read a paragraph from my book. I read many books in prison. Some of them didn't make it through the wardens, like *To Kill A Mockingbird*. That was probably because it had the word 'kill' in the title. I am unsure if any of the wardens knew the contents of the book. There were a few books I got through which were enlightening; *The Alchemist*, *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* and *The Road Less Travelled*. In my fragile impressionable state it seemed they were divinities speaking to me. I absorbed the rainwater of wisdom. It flowed, hope in a time of need. Perhaps that is what organised religion does for people. I wanted to share the holy water so I read to Aya while she did things like sharpen one of the teeth from her plastic comb to use as a lip stud. Occasionally I took a vow of silence for a day, brought on by some Buddhist practice I was enamoured with. My cellmates made fun of me. In hindsight, I can imagine that I seemed strange.

I learned about humanity from becoming friends with many women I never expected to know so well. They were called "degenerates" by many factions of society: dropouts, drug dealers and women of the night. Even the wardens eventually surprised me with their humanity. A warden named Ratina was rough and wise. Her full lips were always set in a hard line but there was a giggle in her eyes that she thought nobody could see. She was usually nice to me because of how apologetic I was for existing. Every time she would flip up my cell window, I was curled up into a book, or into myself like a withered flower. Her hardiness made me look to her as some kind of older sibling. I wanted her approval, reassuring her fervently the couple of times we spoke that imprisonment wasn't going to be my new lifestyle. She asked "Are you coming back?" again and again. I got asked this many times by different wardens, as if any offender is fully accountable for being unable to leave the cycle of imprisonment once inducted. Prison made me feel like I was worthless but I can't even imagine what it did to women who didn't have a loving family and partner to tell them that they were not useless pieces of shit. In the first half of the year 2013, something like 70% of incarcerated drug offenders were repeat offenders. To me, imprisonment

seems like a way to keep the people who make a society look bad away from the eyes of the public. All of my cellmates in prison were drug offenders under twenty-one. The female drug offenders were given a Drug Rehabilitation Sentence (DRS) or sent to the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC), which was essentially imprisonment in Changi Women's Prison. Drug offenders had an entire level of the block. Most of them were of Malay descent. In the time I was there, seven out of my eleven cellmates were of Malay origin. This is clearly disproportionate, since they only make up about 13% of the population.

Uncertainty was a slow killer. It nibbled at my feet while I scratched the sides of my depressive pit. I couldn't clamber out. I turned into a socially dysfunctional paranoid weirdo. More than just obsessing about when I would be allowed to be free, many hours were spent sitting in a corner of the cell, knees to my chest, pretending to read a book while imagining what the other women thought of me. My sureness that they didn't like me gnawed at me. It was almost a self-fulfilling prophecy; as the gnawing made me unable to relax and have easy conversation with them, they felt my weakness and turned to strike with venom. Ah Boy started calling me Big Bird because of my fluffy haircut. She laughed nefariously at the shape of my nose and called it a beak. I pretended to laugh while swallowing the rising bile. Another thing which created tension was hygiene. The others were particular about the way things were clean. Every Saturday we would have a mass cell cleaning session. The wardens would give us detergent and we would scrub the floor clean. I was taught to be really pedantic about it. It turned out that my cellmates' particularity extended to the way I was clean as well. One afternoon, I was the subject of an intervention. Ah Boy and Aya told me that the fact I used my right hand to wash my ass after using the toilet was wrong. It was something which hadn't occurred to me before then. It was nothing that I had learnt as a child but apparently it was something that all of them knew except for me. They looked at me with such disgust during that conversation, uncomfortable in the eyes but righteous with their language. I felt like a kindergartener who had been caught eating sand. After that I made sure to use my left hand.

The intervention made me feel abnormal. I didn't understand how all the other women could exist so normally. Perhaps their lives had always been on the edge. Ah Boy even had a crush on the warden Hamidah. A few times, the two of them sat in her metal warden cage

making plans for Ah Boy's future. Each landing had one of those warden cages at the entrance gate to the corridor. Inside, Hamidah would sit in a cushioned swivel chair and Ah boy would sit on the floor, cross-legged and watching her face like it was a dying star. Most of the building was made up of metal cages, bars or concrete. The enforcers had to be protected from an uprising. I wondered sometimes if the wardens felt discomfort when they came inside our cells. It must have felt like being on the other side.

The rehabilitation timeline happened in three physical contexts and four stages. The contexts were in-care, halfway-care (if you were able to get it), and aftercare. It's funny that there was nothing caring about in-care. The vaguely caring thing was group counselling, but only for a few hours per session over ten weeks. The four stages were Admission, where a Personal Route Map was designed for you according to individual needs and risks; Deterrence, where you were exposed to the rigours of incarceration and at some point learnt to adapt but were adequately terrified of coming back; Treatment, where you were allocated a programme (like home detention, a halfway house or work in prison) based on availability and priority (more privilege than priority, since it was conventional/complete family units with middle-class earning that seemed to qualify for home detention); and Pre-release, where you did activities like sit in a room with volunteers in yellow T-shirts, singing along to "Stronger" by Britney Spears.

The officers told me that if I was well behaved, I could be released early. The sentence was up to a year, but there were cases of inmates getting out months ahead. Cellmates always had stories about some person who had escaped before her time. Usually the escape was into home detention. Home detention sounded like a carnival compared to the imprisonment shit I was dealing with. They would attach a device to the ankle that looked like a black watch, and set up a wired parameter around the house. The technology would know if you were inside the parameter when you were supposed to be. There was no way to take the device off without damaging it and alerting the prison. I think they didn't let me out earlier or on home detention because of my messy violent family, but it might have been because they saw me acclimatising and fitting in. James and my mother wrote appeals and enlisted lawyers to try and get me out as soon as possible. None of it seemed to do anything except prevent me from having a job.

There was lots of work you could do as a prisoner; laundry, kitchen and cookie (an affectionate name for the foreign slaves to wardens—most that I met were from China or India) were a few. My cellmates went to work one by one. I was left behind with jealousy as a companion. Sitting around in a prison cell was not my favourite way to be alive. I couldn't even write because they didn't let us have the materials for it in the cell. Life had always been so full of activity, so I felt like a forgotten rotting thing (which was probably the point). It even made me look forward to group counselling, the extent of our rehabilitation. It was rare that we got a change to our uneventful routine.

One afternoon we heard an unusual amount of movement along the corridors. The wardens were preparing for something. Ratina unlocked our door to give us some white T-shirts and black shorts. She said, "Get dressed for drill." I felt the anxiety of not knowing what "Drill" was. I was always afraid of doing something wrong and being shouted at or punished for not knowing what I was supposed to. It was an amplified feeling from my childhood, of being called on by a teacher when I didn't know the answer. Ah Boy, Aya, Tini and I put on our clothes and were guided to sit out on the landing. All the inmates from level three Charlie block were there. I saw Dash and we exchanged a secret smile. I recognized Shah, the peroxide-blond glue sniffer, a few rows in front. We were all looking around at each other, observing and judging. It was exciting to be in the presence of so many other people. They took us downstairs to the yard and lined us up in formation. Soon, I understood what "Drill" was. It was another opportunity for the wardens to yell, to drill into us. We were made to march in time with each other, but it was difficult for all of us to be in sync when we didn't have any relationship besides being prisoners. We weren't soldiers either. The entire "Drill" session was awkward. I had to look down and purse my lips to hide my laughter because it was so ridiculous. When the hour of marching around in the sun was over, we went back to the cell buzzing with the energy we had collected from the rest of the inmates. It was a good day. At least it was different.

When they told me at CNB that I would be sentenced to drug rehabilitation, I didn't know what to expect...but what I envisioned wasn't what I was given. All of the ideas I ever had about drug rehabilitation involved colour or care. Perhaps a collection of people sitting in a room drawing pictures of a drug-free existence with motivational pictures

on the wall. The group counselling sessions instead happened in another sterile concrete room. The windows were the only redemption. At these sessions, we would sit in a circle and talk about how to stop ourselves from taking drugs again. We talked about triggers, our histories and patterns. The same strategy was used for all drug users, whether they had a physical heroin dependency or occasionally popped ecstasy pills and smoked joints.

The counsellor was a woman called Charmaine. I knew that her aura of calm was manufactured, but I liked her. She told us one day that the best way to avoid a relapse was to avoid all the places and all the people we had experienced drug-taking behaviour with. That seemed ludicrous to me. Most of us were living in government housing and many had lived in a flat their whole lives. Our environment was our environment. How were we supposed to completely remove ourselves from our past? It would take either extreme determination or a devoted social support system. Most of the women I met in the drug programme were purposeless and alone, without devoted families and unconditional forgiveness. What they needed was healing, not punishment. They needed to be treated like they had value, so that they could believe in themselves and the future, instead of in the pleasure of a moment. The problem is that most of the mainstream demographic would rather punish people for not living by their rules, instead of nurturing them into realising how their decisions affect others.

Another thing that kept me going besides counselling was the visits. They left me inspired and disheartened at the same time. I was always left with an afterglow from seeing people I love, as well as helpless longing for it to be over. My sister came to see me every two weeks with either my dad or mother, and usually James did too. During another visit, Sarah, James and my mom brought news that my best friend Sheila's sister had died. Her sister had been a medical student in Melbourne. She had inexplicably gone into cardiac arrest while ice-skating. Tears slid down my cheeks but I didn't know who I was crying for. It might have been my lost life or hers. Empathy was not the strongest part of my psyche then. Soon after, James gave up his place for Sheila to come and see me while she was back from her studies abroad. I conjured all the positivity I could. We laughed and sparkled. We did not talk about our grief. We pretended we were not in a prison building. In short bursts, I almost believed it.

Prison No: DRS-60-08

Date: 5 APR 2008

Hello my love. I've just seen you for the second time this week, which was a nice surprise. After the visit I was taken out of my cell and put back with the others. They always surprise me with where I'm going, I never am told what my destination is. But there are always little clues that gather so I'm at least a little bit prepared. The last letter I wrote to you was very passionate in comparison to what this one is going to be. I'm accustomed to being here almost. I almost have no tears left. It's difficult for me to be particularly distraught, and if I feel some anxiety coming on I just lie down, shut my eyes, and pretend that I'm elsewhere. (I'll imagine the first time I held you, or Sarah, or comfort Mommy. I'll imagine lying next to you and staring into your eyes, knowing that the almost sacred privilege of this act will never be denied me again. There is no way for me to put to words what I have realised here.

(Or at least fully put to words) I know what my purpose is. I know who matters. I know how my actions will always affect the balance of the universe in some small way, which is why they are so important. I believe that I was losing my self-respect and I needed a wake-up call. I had always needed reassurance about everything, because I had never really been happy with who I was. My entire life has never been in balance. Until now. It's a shame that this epiphany had to occur in prison where it's very difficult to apply the lessons I've learned. I'm excited (OMG WHAT IS WRONG WITH MY SPELLING???) to go back into the world (this is not the world, it's another dimension altogether) and know that I'm a positive contribution. I remember you telling me once that you believe that I'm a good person. I think it's very easy for a "good" person to be on the other side of the scale whilst maintaining the heart they were born with. wait... I don't know if that makes too much sense but hopefully you

Fold

get my drift. The only thing that keeps me waking up in the morning is knowing how fortunate I am that when I leave, I will be getting it right. I will have you at my side. I will have my family. I have people I know matter. I have also realised who doesn't (and what doesn't) and I miss you. I miss waking up next to you. I miss watching Alan Partridge? I miss holding your hand. I miss CHOCOLATE? And guess what? We have instant noodles once a month so I still get my fix. (Maybe I shouldn't make "getting my fix" jokes anymore...) ~~they~~

Send my love to everyone when you get this. I love you. I can't wait to show you how much. I imagine me next to you every night while you sleep. I do. And know that when I leave here I'm yours forever.

The tele-visits were particularly annoying. It was difficult for me to be fully invested in the conversation when it kept getting cut off. The other person and I would often speak at the same time and words would meld together in unintelligible conflagration. Most ridiculous was that Singapore's technological advancement surely allowed for that to be an obsolete problem, but it wasn't. Fixing the problem was not a priority, perhaps because we didn't deserve it. Soon I learned to be patient, waiting for the laggy video before I spoke again. Another way I communicated with the outside world was in writing. James sent me sixty-one letters in the time I was there. I think I replied eight times. A few times I sent letters to my family and friends. It was through letters that James and I solidified our relationship, but ironically. Suddenly I thought he was funny, but I hadn't held funny James in months. I just spoke to him in a socially acceptable manner from behind the visit window. Looking into his face was strange, because what we expressed in text was incongruous with how we behaved in person. Our letters were romantic and poignant, but during visits there was an awkwardness between us as we tried to consolidate our minds and bodies. I loved James' mind for a long while before I was attached to his physical being and its behaviours.

When we wrote letters, they would take us out of our cells and watch us while we did it, because pens could be weapons. It was the only time I could write, so I worked slowly and exercised my vocabulary. One letter-writing occasion, the warden took me a storey up to the fourth level of Charlie block to sit on the floor of the landing, facing the wall as I wrote. She had some business on that floor but I did not want to imagine what, since it was the landing outside the condemned cells corridor. There was the silent air of death's breath. All the cells on the fourth floor of Charlie block contained women who were going to die. They were terminally ill or sentenced to lifelong imprisonment and death.

I had a lot of water to drink before I left my cell, so halfway through writing my letter, my bladder felt like it was going to rupture. The warden had left me on the landing and I wasn't allowed to move from my position without permission. I sat in pain and dread, focused on not pissing myself. My foot started shaking uncontrollably, and my face contorted with the effort of holding it in. My anxiety made it worse, since I was unable to detach my emotions from the physical discomfort. It was common for me to berate myself for the stupid mistakes I made. I was so angry with myself for drinking too much water. I should have known

better. Needing to piss would not be a mistake in most places but prison was different. When I saw the warden, I waved and shouted "Ma'am!". By this point, I was in tear-streaked desperation, crying most about the humiliation of being reduced to begging for a toilet. She looked at me how chickens inspect worms in disdain before they eat them, then led me hobbling to the squatting hole. At least I didn't piss myself. She would have been less sympathetic that I was so weak.

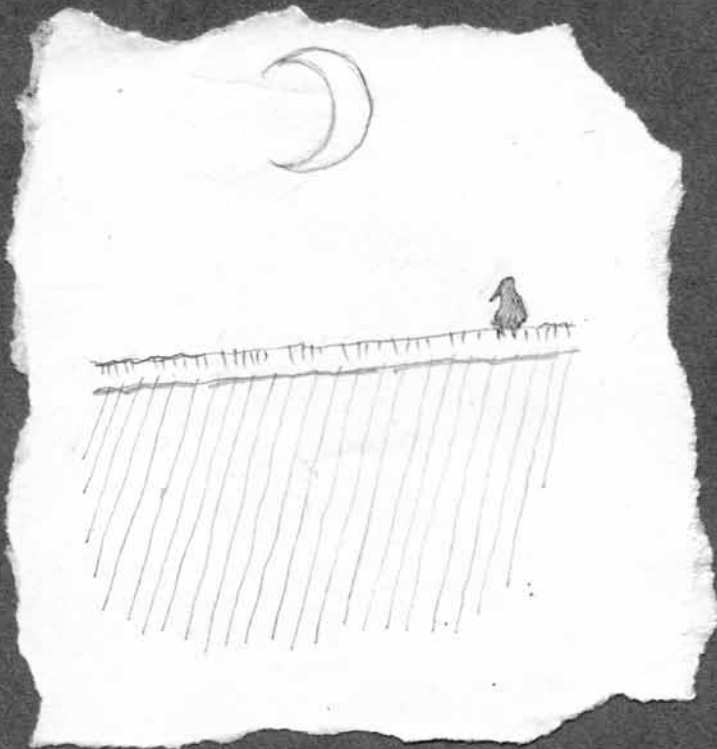
My timidness must have ingratiated me to the wardens because they put me up for placement in a halfway house after six months. A warden came to my cell one day to collect me. By then, counselling was over and I knew it wasn't visit day, so my gut churned with the prospect of change. They took me to an area I hadn't been to before. It was a personal interview space, for more isolated conversations than the visit space. I met a woman named Sister Swee Chin from The Turning Point (TTP). She didn't speak a lot of English but I guess she liked my vibe so they said they would take me as a resident of the house.

In the days leading up to my move from Changi Women's Prison, I ran amok and got my second thumbprint taken. A thumbprint got taken when they overturned a rock to find someone wriggling against prison rules. Mine got taken the first time for pulling the hair from my shins. You couldn't remove hair without permission. The butches would furtively tear theirs off to destroy the girly China doll cut. I only pulled my hair out with glassy eyes and idle fingers, but a warden flipped up my cell window to catch me at it one night while I was still in solitude. I goose-pimpled then to think I was one-step-out-of-three closer to extending my ambiguous sentence. A week before moving to The Turning Point I did it again. Then I had moved into the final cell I would live in before I left, with a Chinese girl named Kerri, Ah Boy and Aya. I was already accustomed to prison and a lot less afraid of what people thought of me. We made jokes and talked about all the things we were ready to do when our time was over, we walked up and down the two-metre width of our cell in a row like swinging pendulums.

Lunch was tau pok, bak choy and rice. It was Ah Boy's favourite. She taught us all how to dig the insides out of the tau pok and stuff it with rice and vegetables, and we all enjoyed eating it that way. After the food was finished, our meal boxes stacked neatly in a corner and the floor wiped clean with a good morning towel, we heard the warden leave. We could always hear the gate clang shut to lock. Ah Boy started clapping,

laughing and singing. Suddenly we were all making music, beating on the red drum, clapping hands and thumping on walls and beatboxing. I sang "Hotel California" loudly. It was one of the only songs we knew the words to; Aya had written them down in her exercise book that she received from working. It had been a long time since I felt that much joy, singing a cheesy Eagles song like a free bird. The rest of the cells laughed and catcalled, which inspired us to perform even louder.

The lipstickied toad flipped up our cell window on the sly. We clustered around the door of the cell so that she could smear our thumbs with ink and print our misdeeds. When that happened I could not be fully fearful. There were still remnants of music bouncing around my soul. The lost grace was an easy sacrifice at that moment, but even my spleen conformed to the rules after that. I left CWP a week later. I never told my family or James about the thumbprints, fully aware that it was ungrateful of me to foolishly jeopardise my freedom while they fought so valiantly for it. My last face-to-face visit before I was transferred from CWP was the day that James, my mother and my friend Erika came to see me. Sarah gave up her place for Erika, a blonde blue-eyed butterfly from America who had been my partner in debauchery for a while. We used to do things like go to the restroom at Forbidden City in Clarke Quay during a conversation with Will the Apollo-lookalike manager, just to switch clothing and fuck with his head. We wanted to see if he would notice. We drank copious amounts of vodka and danced in front of the DJ, flitting around like feral fairies. I think we were both searching for beauty and relief. It was strange to see her through prison perspex because our many adventures together were dimensions away from my concrete fortress. Close to the end of the visit, James asked me to marry him. I sat in stunned silence before my mouth shaped a shivering "No". I think that he was feeling afraid and needed some reassurance. The next six months would be bearable if he could see me, but we had discovered that the halfway house didn't allow anybody except family or spouses to visit. Perhaps he thought that if he was my fiancé, they would let him come and see me every two weeks. We were so comforted by seeing each other but I still could not bring myself to say yes. After I left the visit, I was confused about whether I made the right decision. I went back to my cell and thought about my ingratitude after all James had done for me, but still couldn't imagine myself married.



THE TURNING POINT

On the 18th of August 2008, I was transferred from Changi Women's Prison to The Turning Point halfway house. Aya returned to prison as I was leaving. She had been discharged a month before, after we said semi-sad goodbyes. I saw her in the concrete transition box during the daily swap over. This was the first and last room that inmates would ever see. We looked at each other from different sides of the same coin and knew we were of the same value; another addition to some CNB quota. A conversation from a long time ago played in the quiet of my head. She said she didn't know if she was coming back. She didn't think heroin was that bad. It was with longing that she imagined the liquid tsunami flooding her with pleasure. Later I understood that freedom was outside the prison walls for me, but there were many women like Aya who were freest within them. In prison, she had a place to sleep, food to eat and nobody could destroy her. Everybody has a different prison.

Leaving prison was quite anticlimactic. I expected there to be strains of a choir playing in my head or a butterfly landing on my shoulder, but it didn't happen. Sister Swee Chin came to pick me up in the halfway house van and we drove out of the prison gates. My heart stuttered in disbelief. The ride was like a camera panning too fast. I think I experienced more stimuli in that ride than in the previous six months. As we approached the halfway house, I daydreamed about my new environment and meeting the other women. I tapped my fingers on the door handle to Mandarin songs on the radio to distract myself from the nerves. The Turning Point is in Sembawang, close to Sembawang Drug Rehabilitation Centre. We passed the centre as we turned onto the road where The Turning Point was. The centre was high-walled and fenced with barbed wire. Seeing it gave me flashbacks.

The Turning Point is a Christian halfway house, running a religious-centred programme to rehabilitate drug offenders in a two-story

bungalow with an asphalt yard. It sits in the corner of a private housing estate on Jamaica Road (I found some irony in the name). There was another halfway house for Muslim women right next door, but all atheists and women of other faiths would go to The Turning Point. The Muslim halfway house has since shut down after its struggle with funding, leaving the Christian programme as the only halfway house option for transitioning inmates. It is a very non-secular system for a secular country. The rehabilitation structures in place for women are mediocre considering our resources as a developed country. I recall a joke that comedian Kumar makes during one of their sets. Singapore: first-world on the outside, third-world on the inside. We have the capacity to be progressive with our approach, but I don't think we are. We still operate on remonstrance and archaic conditioning methods. Sometimes I feel like we are Dubai's little sister, trying to hide it by wearing Western clothing.

The English-speaking director of The Turning Point was called Sister Felicia and the Mandarin-speaking director was Sister Swee Chin. I needed to brainwash myself to call people sister and brother. It felt like a cult at first. The Turning Point residents didn't call each other that. It was a religious salutation reserved for those we were meant to respect, kind of the way taxi drivers are "Uncle". At times I would rebel against it by using first names. For the Christian people it seemed to be some indoctrinated courtesy, but I don't know how much any of them considered inequality or togetherness outside the church. Out of the church context it's beautiful to refer to each other that way. I think if we saw everybody as sisters and brothers in humanity we could abolish all this racist, classist nonsense. Just like if we saw ourselves as animals, and all animals as having equal right to live without pain, we could stop mistreating them.

I met Sister Felicia the day I arrived. She was an absent-minded, luminescent bespectacled woman who wore orthopedic shoes. I loved her instantly. People respected her work with troubled women. She'd been honoured for it with awards and magazine articles. She sat me down in her office on a rattan chair to get to know me. Our conversation meandered through the story of my life and made its way towards God. Conversations at The Turning Point had a way of doing that, sometimes with less meandering and more directness. Straight up "Have you accepted Jesus?" It was strange to me that the Hindu and Buddhist women in the house were obliged to participate in the Christian activities

under the guise of rehabilitation. Perhaps we all saw it as a sacrifice to make for more freedom than in the prison complex, but I struggled to compromise my belief system. It felt like lying. My ideas about having respect for other people's beliefs and personal practices were definitely at odds with most ideas of the religious people I met at The Turning Point. I suppose it wasn't surprising. Religious fundamentalists tend to think that anyone outside the group should be converted or saved from their current ignorance and inferiority. It took me a lot of getting used to, being spoken to like I had no idea how the world worked...but my lips stayed hermetically sealed when confronted because I thought keeping peace was more important than being honest. It also made me feel superior that I didn't feel the need to convince other people that my perspective was obviously right.

My first day at The Turning Point was much less tumultuous than in prison. Sister Swee Chin showed me to my room up the stairs to the right. The whole second storey of the house had parquet flooring. It felt like I was in someone else's house and mine at the same time. Parquet had been the floor of many homes I had known before. At the top of the stairs there was an inviting space with a coffee table and books on shelves. It was meant to be a place for reading, but I never saw anybody except myself there. The floorboards creaked as I stepped on them. There was no way to walk around unnoticed in the silence of night. The second floor was the living floor. It had two dorm rooms and a private room for the chaperone of the night. Each dorm room had about eight double-decker beds. In the first place I lived as a child, we had double-decker beds and in the Henderson Road concrete box I lived in before prison, we also had them. I loved sleeping on the top. When I was shown the bunk assigned to me, it was piled with the bedding and clothes my mom brought. It was a top bunk, enclosed in a baby pink mosquito net which was hooked to the ceiling. My mother had found my favourite L-shaped pillow and labelled everything with my name in permanent marker block letters like she had done with my belongings in primary school. The L-shaped pillow was the kind of pillow that my paternal grandmother had. It was what she gasped her last breath on. I was strangely attached to the shape. The moment I was alone I buried my face in the pillow and sobbed. The softness of the cushion felt like my mother's arms and grandmother's spirit. The comfort of the bed and holding my own things, not rudely thrown at me by a prison warden,

undid me. The comfort was contrasted against the alien environment. The otherworldliness of the last six months (and what I imagined the next six would be like) swallowed me. Solace and loneliness. I hadn't touched a pillow in half a year. When I was a child, my father used to threaten me with boarding school deportment when I didn't behave how he wanted me to. It was a scary idea at that time, to be away from everyone. The idea had lessened in plausibility as I got older, but being away from the people I love was still as terrifying. The Turning Point felt like the boarding school I had always been threatened with. Except that it wasn't my father who put me there, it was the state.

When I was done crying all over my new pillow, I went downstairs to the huge garage area in the back where the other women were immersed in the activity of the day. There were twelve residents at TTP when I arrived, but the halfway house could accommodate up to twenty women. We had time after breakfast and the whole afternoon to bake cookies and carrot cake, and make beaded keychains. The items we made would be sold to sustain the halfway house. I had never spent time cooking or making crafts. I approached this group of women I would live with for the next six months with hands prepared to apologise for their uselessness. It turned out that I didn't need to. The women were welcoming and friendly, guiding my apologetic hands with the baking and ignoring my sorries. One of the women, Ah Loo, gave me the nickname Q Mo, which translates to Curly Hair. They talked about how pretty I was, how well I spoke English and how quickly I learnt the tasks. I accepted all the kind words without resistance, even about my appearance. I had forgotten what it was like to feel good about myself. The compliments turned me into hot chocolate.

That night I made a phone call to my mother and drank her love from the receiver. After that, I sat in the main hall and watched the night sky from inside the building. I also watched the Muslim halfway house, Taman Bacaan, clearly visible through the wire fence at the edge of our compound. I had seen Ida, my previously taut-bodied prison friend also arrive that day. She had been placed in the house next door. I saw that she had piled on some kilos in prison, and didn't have the same nubility I remembered. She looked weary. I imagine that I looked the same. At the beginning of my stay in TTP, I was confined to the inside of the bungalow. It was to discourage new residents from jumping over the gate to the enticing road and sprinting towards a short

lived freedom. It did not occur to me to escape. The severity of the consequences would far outweigh any immediate reprieve. That first night, I didn't sleep very well. Behind the halfway house there was a lot of forest. From my bed there was a clear view of the window with rustling dark trees in the frame. They looked like they were swaying with some kind of unnatural life. I had always believed in the good/evil dichotomy and therefore the supernatural. Whenever I was in a new place at night, the unknown was full of ghouls and monsters. I ran down a corridor of scary things, in and out of consciousness until the burgeoning relief of sunrise. When the alarm clocks of my roommates started to beep, I got out of bed and went to brush my teeth with the new pink toothbrush my mother had brought me.

There was a lot of food in The Turning Point and I had to get used to it. There were rows of shelves in a storeroom next to the kitchen with all the plastic jars of cookies for sale to the public, and open jars of sample cookies that had been deemed unsuitable for sale. There were also handwritten signs that said "\$2 fine for tasting" but in the coming months that never stopped me. There was a chest of drawers in the kitchen where we each had our own secret place to keep a stash of pleasure food. The first week I was there I was caught eating oreos secretly in the kitchen and got told off for it. Being a cookie monster was a comical thing to get in trouble for. We were only allowed to eat at designated times, but it was easy to get up in the middle of my craft time, go into the kitchen and have a secret cookie while nobody was around. It took weeks of self-discipline to quell my cravings. I just wanted to eat cookies all the time. There were a lot more opportunities for me to shove instant gratification into my mouth than in CWP, where there were only the standard three meals a day. At The Turning Point, my mother brought me oreo cheesecake and mutton briyani. I guzzled sweet tea three times a day. Within two weeks I had gained 8kgs. My family was ecstatic that I didn't look emaciated anymore. I didn't notice that the T-shirt I wore when I left prison strained across my arms and belly. Perhaps I didn't care.

There were some distinct characters I lived with. Most of the women were older, which was a change from prison where I only lived with women under twenty-one. Poh Giok was a sexless woman of about sixty-five. She had been in and out for years. Many repeatedly jailed women were androgynous. I think it was because the exhibition of 'masculine'

traits in prison amassed more respect so it made sense to develop them. Everybody wanted their prison experience to be palatable and I guess there was less shit to eat if the other women were afraid to fuck with you. Poh Giok always walked around like she had a mission, even though her stride was more like a stumble. Like many of the older women, English was not her most fluent language. I would say a few sentences to her and often receive blinking black-framed eyes followed by a laugh in return. Most of the women spoke Hokkien, Mandarin or Tamil.

There was an articulate English-speaking woman named Hima who I was immediately drawn to. She was gangly but confident. When she expressed incredulity, her eyes widened and her neck craned like a cartoon. I enjoyed talking to her because she understood most things I said. I could use my vocabulary fearlessly which was a new freedom. We told each other about our lives and I showed her photographs of my friends that James had sent me. She exclaimed how different I used to look. I think that the moment someone spoke like Hima did, I felt like they were a kindred spirit and part of my diffused culture. Growing up, most of my friends were part of the culturally ambiguous Singaporean population. My father was of Indian descent and my mother was Eurasian, a concoction of Asian and European ancestry. In Singapore, citizens carry an NRIC (National Registration Identity Card). On the NRIC, there are several identifiers indicated in this order: Name, Race, Date Of Birth, Sex and Country/Place Of Birth. My NRIC says Indian under Race, but that only describes half of my ethnic heritage. It doesn't take into account the ethnicity of my mother, but of course a father's ethnic identity is the default since he is a man.

At The Turning Point and through most of my life I have been crudely asked for my 'race' in the middle of conversations. I feel like the question is so that the asker can place me in one of the compartments they have in their head, an ethnic category and its symptoms, instead of seeing me as another human being. I don't understand how we are meant to be a harmonious, united society when we are constantly reminded on our documentation that our category is specific and different from others. The system we have been born into is what encourages these questions of 'race' even though we are all human. Many times when an elderly Hokkien-speaking woman visiting The Turning Point asked me "What is your race ah?" I would say "Mixed" obstinately, to be deliberately vague. Hima would laugh at my little rebellions.

Hima was one of the residents who never had letters written to her, never got phone calls or had visitors come and see her on visit weekend. There were a few residents who would stay in their dorm rooms or a different area of the house when it was the 1.5-hour visit period every fortnight. It made me feel quite self-conscious with my constant phone calls and letters but I could have been projecting. The stark contrast between their treatment and mine made me aware of my privilege, which is a counter-intuitive experience. Evolutionarily, we are competitive beings. We compare ourselves to the people around us, but this comparison mostly happens with us looking upwards. We look at someone that appears to have more and think "I want what they have". In many societies it is seen as an acceptable, even natural phenomenon because competition is a behaviour that drives us to improve and sometimes jealousy even fuels ambition.

I was very aware of the other young resident with a fawning family like mine. Linda and her friend Mei reminded me of the cool kids from school. When I was in school, I wanted to own the aura of "I don't care if you call me Pube Head. I am a Monarch!" but I never managed to do it. Sometimes Linda and Mei would whisper behind their palms, shift-eyed and giggling, sometimes they were screeching with laughter. They shaped their fingernails into talons and winged their eyebrows with pink tweezers. Linda's older brother brought gifts every visit in the form of consumables like Royce chocolate and creamy beauty potions. There was a price limit on toiletries, which he ignored. Whenever I saw her in the bathroom before bed, Linda was putting stuff on her face from a tub that looked like it held emeralds. It might have been whitening cream, an affliction of young Chinese women. When I looked at Linda and her gifts, it bothered me to remember that the reason I couldn't finish acting school and do the things I wanted was because I didn't have enough money.

At the same time, my understanding of privilege pulled me in the opposite direction. Instead of creating competition, it created gratitude. Comparing myself to the women I met over the course of my imprisonment and at TTP made it clear that though my family was "dysfunctional", it was more functional than many others. I knew that Linda's family was the prison anomaly, just like mine. It was when I compared my situation to Hima's that I could imagine what true solitude felt like. Even though I had to drop out of drama school over fees, I was supported and

motivated enough by my environment to pass my O-Levels at 16. I went to a semi-autonomous school and was told "I love you" by my parents. I felt alone in prison, but it was a fallacy. There were people thinking about me before they went to sleep, mailing me love parcels in their dreams while Hima lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling and accepting that nobody gave a fuck about her. Hima and I wrote letters to each other sometimes, but it wasn't the same as her father writing to her. I didn't have any right to my jealousy of Linda and her gifts.

Visits happened every fortnight on a Sunday, after we came back to the house from Sembawang Presbyterian Church. Sundays were the most exciting day of our week. We would wake up when the sun was already shining, get dressed in clothing for public consumption, put black eyeliner on and pack into the van. The church was lit like a classroom and the pastor spoke like a tired junior college lecturer. I did not want to learn from him. The service was attended by a majority of Mandarin-speaking conservatives. Though they tried to appear gracious, their eyes seemed uncomfortable when we were around. They knew who we were. Other people were allowed to define themselves, but when we arrived it was clear that we were together of a particular type; the self-destructive army. The normal church-goers didn't engage with us unnecessarily. Sometimes when I was in the bathroom a mother would hurry her child out so she didn't have to be in a confined space with me.

After the service was over, we would get back in the van and drive to the grocery store where we could buy snack delights for the week. After that, the sisters would take us somewhere to have lunch. Sometimes we went to lauded hawker centres like Chong Pang Food Centre or Adam Road Food Centre. Once or twice we had breakfast at McDonalds. Sister Swee Chin and Sister Felicia liked to give us something to look forward to. We went out for dinner a couple of times during my stay for special occasions. It was exciting to be let loose in the darkness of the night. There was a different kind of freedom in being cloaked in shadow even though we never did anything secretive under it.

When we got back to the house after church, we prepared the hall for visitors if it was visit weekend. We became a team of hostesses inviting guests into our home. When my family came to see me, Sarah and I would hold each other for a long time at the end and she would cry. My mother gripped my rough hands in her soft ones and spoke in her gentle birdsong voice. I watched her deteriorate in front of me as

depression took hold. She was incoherent sometimes. After I got out, my friends told me that when they bumped into her in church she didn't make sense. This was in the middle of the divorce with my father, coupled with her worry about me. I think there were too many shifts in the Matrix for her to be healthy, and the hour and a half was never enough for me to stabilise her world.

Days at The Turning Point began early. I don't think it was as early as in prison, but I can't be sure because we never had clocks in our concrete boxes. At TTP I would wake up and have to have a shower in the shared bathroom to begin the day. There was a rotating timetable with who got to shower later in the morning. The new inducts would have to get up the earliest, but I didn't care. It was a luxury to be in a private cubicle and put conditioner on my hair. Within a couple of weeks, it became less like toothbrush bristles were growing from my scalp. After showers, we had morning group devotion. This took place at the large space right in front of the main folding doors. It was where we spent lots of our time at the halfway house making crafts, and it was where we had visits. It was like a presentation area with rows of canteen tables. During morning devotion we sat in rows behind the long tables and listened to the employee or volunteer who had stayed the night before read us a Bible verse and share a sermon. Sometimes the sermon was in Hokkien or Mandarin and all of us who didn't speak the language slumped in semi-sleep. Occasionally I was unfortunate enough to have a translator, some strong believer in the Word Of God. Many of the residents were fervent Christians. The Turning Point would only accept a new resident on the condition that they participated in all these religious situations. After the morning devotion, we had fifteen minutes for breakfast. Then we spent 45 minutes doing area cleaning. Every resident was allocated an area to wash, wipe, sweep or mop. Later on in my stay, my favourite thing was raking the dead leaves in the outdoor laundry area or even better, past the gate along the main road. Many times I stood on the main road in a blind spot with a rake gripped in my fist, staring down the road and feeling the beginning of freedom tickle me.

From 9am we sang songs and talked about our feelings for an hour and a half. It finally felt like healing, being in a space where discussing emotions was encouraged. I grew to enjoy singing the hymns. Many of the songs lay sleeping on my tongue from my Catholic past life. I was

proud of my ability to sing. Doing it and receiving positive feedback from the other women was another event which beefed up my prison-degraded confidence. It was cathartic. The songs were memories of my innocence while imprisonment was like a maturity elixir which convulsed childhood out of me as I thrashed on the floor clutching my gut.

From 10.30am till noon, we did activity-based therapy consisting of baking and craft. So many activities at TTP became ways for me to prove my worth. Every moment of ability helped me to believe that in life after prison I would be able to achieve things. Making the beaded key-chains was my favourite occupation. The only other person who could make a beaded dog was Linda the night cream girl. Many of the other women struggled to transform beads and a length of nylon wire into a little pink dog. The older women often said they weren't smart enough or that it was too complicated for them. I imagined that they looked at the instructional diagrams and were overwhelmed by the mass of lines and numbers on the page. Perhaps it looked like mathematics, and they were always told that they weren't good at mathematics. Intelligence comes in many forms but our education system doesn't seem to support that school of thought. Those women suffered because of it, growing up to believe that diagrams would always swim in front of them like eels. It's pretty fucked up that comparing myself to systematically undermined women made me feel good, but I guess at that point I took what I could get.

Lunch at The Turning Point was an occasional gamble. We took turns to cook. Some would cook more than others. I cooked as little as possible. To explain my "inability" to cook, I would always quote this one occasion when I had failed my secondary school cooking exam because I had burnt the garlic. In TTP I cooked a few times and didn't burn the food or the kitchen down. One of the other women that knew what to do was always there to be a guide and to turn the fire down. We had a community of care and I was very grateful for that. It was the one merit of a Christian-centric environment.

After lunch, it was back to work. At times, the craft-making and baking were a chore, but they were definitely therapeutic. The repetition and focus put me in a headspace I hadn't been in for a while. It was calming and meditative. I don't think it worked the same way for everybody. I was training my work ethic because I wanted to have a better one for the future. I knew I was capable of being a valued worker. Again,

the urge and ability to contribute came from a place of self-efficacy. It was a place that many of the older women didn't have within themselves because they had been imprisoned repeatedly and it did nothing good for their self-esteem.

We would take a break for tea and then continue working until 4.45pm. At this point we were given two hours to do some exercise and have a bath. Being able to do exercise again balanced me. At TTP there was a large carpark around the house where I would run for twenty minutes several times a week. In the back garage space there was also a small gym enclosure with rusting equipment. My routine was to finish my run and then speed on the creaky stationary bicycle for another twenty minutes. Slowly, I became reconnected to my body. I started with observing it obsessively in the shared bathroom, checking the line of my jaw and lifting up my t-shirt to look at my distended belly in the mirror when nobody else was around. We weighed ourselves once a month and every time I got on the scale it said I was 62kgs. I convinced myself that the scale was faulty because I had never been that elephantine. The truth was that I ate a lot of biscuits and drank a lot of sweet tea at tea break.

I bled constantly while I was in prison and most of the time in the halfway house. It was a never-ending period. I was constantly producing more blood and losing it. Sister Felicia took me to the Polyclinic where I had my first pap smear and made an appointment for another transvaginal ultrasound. The results from the scans showed that I was completely normal, and Sister Felicia told me that many women had the same problem as a result of the emotional imbalance and stress of imprisonment. I wish someone had told me earlier so I didn't have to be so batshit crazy about it. At some point, the blood well inside me dried up. Perhaps it was indicative of my blossoming mental health, even though I was frequently depressed and angry. It was better than being afraid all the time.

Every day when dinner came around, I tasted a little bit more liberation in my food. Even when the cook of the day was mediocre and the prayer before meals was irritating, there was an awareness that one more day was almost over. After dinner we had time to do whatever we wanted. Sometimes I would make my twice-weekly five-minute phone call. Sometimes I would read a book or write. There were so many words and stories in my chest. They spurted out of me. I scribbled journal

entries, poetry and stories in pencil on lined baby blue paper. It was good to be able to erase my mistakes. I wrote in pencil for a long time.

WHERE DID SHE GO? (2008)

*I could not find her
I searched high and low
I could not find her
Where did she go?*

*Who are you looking for?
They asked
She could not say.
She did not know which words to use.*

*Where are you?
I ask.*

*I thought I got her in the poppies
Charred and Alone.
I was wrong.*

*She climbed out of my mouth
while I was sleeping
in the Elysium Fields.*

*I won't let me run away again
or I might not catch her.
She will not escape me again.
I have found her.*

After my confinement period was over, I would walk under the night sky for hours after dinner, gazing lovingly at the moon. James and I had spent nights staring at the moon together. It meant something to both of us. I wrote about it and thought about my loneliness. It had always been some kind of guardian, like it watched after me. Often I

had conversations with the moon while walking lines across the asphalt in front of the house.

EMPTINESS (2008)

*After all, what is life but an empty, meaningless and lonely void.
A space which we seek to fill.
A gap between a beginning and an end
about which we know nothing.*

I embrace its mystery.

This is what I think as I take my night's walk under the ever-changing vast expanse, darkly blue.

Tonight there is one constant, as there is every other.

The tufts of cumulus drift without purpose, and stars twinkle for seconds before they vanish again. I smell the salt of the sea; It wafts by, bringing with it memories of the seemingly far away past.

All is transient except for the moon.

She offers me solidarity in her steadfast sense of self.

Thus has my life been, ever-changing. I am myself, I am my own constant. The many morsels of knowledge and wisdom I have gathered thus far are mere additions to my soul. The very essence of my being.

I keep my face pointed upward and my eye trained on her.

I believe with every ounce of my Self that

We are all one.

She is surrounded by night, yet glows with her own light, so that she may see.

Looking for what may dispel her solitude.

It is such an unfortunate dance of fate

That

Only after he retires does she arise. Neither destined to meet.

Both always to be alone.

Sometimes, an attractive older lady we called Aunty Dolly would walk outside with me. We talked about her boyfriends and her job serving beer in rowdy hawker centres. Sometimes I would see Ida putting out the garbage in Taman Bacaan next door and give her a sneaky wave. We weren't allowed to communicate with anybody outside TTP. Sometimes, the night staff would stand on the verandah to watch me

walking. Maybe it was just to remind me that I was being supervised. Later on, a young woman named Hope came to live in the house. We too had many walks together, talking about our dreams for the future. Occasionally she would launch into Christian monologue. That is when I would stop listening.

THE BEGINNING (2008)

Dim light filtered through the delicate lace of fine leaves overhead. She was cold, and her nipples hardened against her milky white chest. She lifted her head off the damp undergrowth. The golden hair fanned out from her skull caught on scattered rotting branches which fell back down as the silken strands parted from them. She stumbled to her feet.

Alone and afraid, the woman frantically looked about her. There was nothing. The sun managed to penetrate only so far before all faded to shadows and darkness. It was difficult to see anything clearly.

Suddenly she felt exposed. So very cold. Her breathing quickened as her agitation rose. The need to cover herself was overwhelming. She had to find the man. He would know what to do. She gasped his name. "Where are you?" The choked words emerged as puffs of mist into the stifling air. Her sobs pierced the gloom.

All else was silent.

Twigs cracked underfoot as she crept forward. She did not know in which direction she was going but continued to call for him. "Adam?" They should not have had the fruit.

She stumbled over something on the ground and toppled. A hand pressed to her lips muffled the cry of alarm as she fell. "Be still, foolish woman!" It was him. She ceased her struggle. She heard him rustle in the brush before he thrust decency onto her lap. "Cover yourself. Have you no shame?"

"What has become of that hateful serpent?" she whispered. A rattle from the nearest hanging branches as she fastened the leaves and vine around her breasts and hips.

"Who is there? Come no closer." The woman froze, unable to quieten her harsh breaths. The man spoke again. "I heard you, snake. Are you but a coward now, in fear of showing yourself?" There was a slithering above them.

It fell to the ground at their feet. His reptilian tongue flicked at the smallest toe of the woman. She shrieked in terror. The man stamped at the snake with his heel. Missing the animal's head by a mere inch, the creature sank venomous fangs

into the foot of the man. Poison seeped into his veins. He screamed.

The woman searched desperately on the ground then triumphantly held up a jagged piece of rock. Faint light illuminated it as she took aim and brought the stone clean down upon the demon's head. Dark red splattered onto her hand and stained the grey rock she held. She let go of it as she dropped to her knees. The devil writhed in the throes of death beside her. It was bleeding profusely.

She took the man's head to rest on a creamy thigh. (At this time I ignorantly imagined that Adam and Eve were Caucasoid.) His face was suffused with pain. An artery protruded from the tautness of his tanned neck as he tossed his head from side to side, in battle with the killer.

The woman shoved her soft fist into her mouth to prevent the escape of her wails. He would leave her now. She knew his protection and the security of his presence would be one day taken from her. It had come. The man spoke. "Hide from Him now, or you will be punished for our disobedience. Leave me!" The woman was further wracked with sorrowful keening. She shook her head. "No! No! I will not!"

All at once the murkiness which surrounded them was banished. A brilliant light shone from behind the woman. The man struggled upright and they both turned to face the source. A magnificent orb of indescribable radiance hung above them some three or four feet. They averted their eyes from it, for looking at it directly caused too much discomfort.

"What have you done, children?" It asked.

"We have disobeyed you and so I have been duly disciplined. Please, have mercy on Eve...Her actions were out of ignorance. She did not mean to commit them." He fought to speak.

"No! I knew fully well what I was doing! It was all my mischief. Please, Master. Punish me instead but spare Adam this grief."

"Silence!" He commanded. "Kneel before me."

"But he is in such pain my Lord..."

"You dare defy me further?" He questioned.

The woman helped the man into position with much trouble. She could feel the cold of death coming upon his body, and shivering as droplets of sweat formed across his brow. The strain caused him to grunt and grit his teeth. He was very weak and angry with his suffering.

"Kill me, master."

The luminescence blazed brighter, as if in fury. The woman shrank back in fear. The man shut his eyes, prepared to meet his end.

"You shall not die, Adam. I will spare your life so that you may spend the rest of it labouring to survive, for after this hour your fear of death shall be so great as

to consume you." Immediately, the man fell upon the ground and into a deep sleep. The colour of life returned to him.

"Eve, after this day you shall experience unimaginable distress during childbirth. You shall only long for Adam, and your duty will only be to please him. Your efforts shall never suffice.

When you awaken, you shall be gone from my Garden. I banish you from it so as not to taint it with your impurity. You shall be clothed until the day you are turned to dust. For from dust you came, and to dust you shall return."

The light went out as the woman dropped to the undergrowth, unconscious. When the man and the woman awoke, they were clothed in leather and the Garden was forgotten. They were never again happy or content as long as they lived.

In my loneliness I latched on to anybody resembling a friend. About a month into my time at the house a woman named Selene checked herself in. Besides offering a rehabilitative space to women from prison, TTP also offered residential rehabilitation for drug-addicted members of the public. Selene was addicted to Dormicum. It was a benzodiazepine, a class of drug which had sedative, anti-anxiety, muscle relaxant properties. She had been an air stewardess, then after getting married and progressively unhappy, developed an addiction to it. She started taking the pills to go to sleep and soon couldn't stop. Selene had a five-year-old daughter who was mostly looked after by her mother. The family was very Christian and wanted her to get over her addiction, so they sent her to be rehabilitated. On Sunday visits they would come to the house after going for a service at City Harvest Church. I quickly grew to love Selene. We told each other everything. She guffawed like a donkey, made silly jokes and taught me how to eat durians even though I had been conditioned to hate them by my family. Sometimes she snorted when she was laughing infectiously. We became inseparable, chattering and whispering at inappropriate times. Since she spoke Mandarin and always sat next to me, the staff decided that she would be my translator. It was the only curse from her presence. I didn't want an effective translator. It was better when I didn't have to listen to the Christian people speak.

One morning we had a visit from two young Australian missionary sisters. The older one strummed her guitar and sang hymns in a voice I wanted for myself. The younger one told us about how she was getting married. At nineteen. I wondered if it was because her and her partner

wanted to have sex but couldn't until God let them. I ran to my bed excitedly to bring them photos of my friends and to tell them about my life. I was so excited to speak to people from a Western culture because many of my friends outside were from Canada, Australia and the U.S.A. Even though I sang Hokkien songs and learnt some Hokkien words to feel like part of the TTP group, I always felt like an outsider. The other women also believed that I was different from them. While I sat with the two missionary sisters babbling stories, the other women sat and watched without participating. Selene sat particularly far away. When they left, she made a sharp remark about how the two girls were only interested to talk to the "ang moh" resident. That was when our friendship started to crumble.

Selene's sister brought me paté and Carr's crackers during a visit one day. She believed that I must be a lady of some class since I spoke English better than anybody else. The truth is I had never heard of Carr's or paté, but I enjoyed the moment I put a paté-slathered cracker in my mouth. It was very tasty but in prison I realised that if I wanted to be a perfect person, I would have to stop eating meat. Being even remotely involved in the killing of animals wasn't a positive thing. I didn't want death where I walked, I wanted life. Though I felt this, I couldn't be vegetarian in The Turning Point. In fact, they didn't take vegetarians into the programme because it was disruptive to the routine. They would need to make the vegetarian person a different meal at lunch and dinner because there was always dead animal on the table. I'll be honest, I loved the taste of dead animal too. It wasn't until the Muslim Hari Raya Haji (Festival of the Sacrifice) that I had a strong negative emotional response to meat-eating.

Hari Raya Haji honours the time Ibrahim agreed to sacrifice his son under God's orders, before God's angel stopped him and said that he didn't need to, since God knew he was actually going to do it. Public holidays were days off at The Turning Point. We had our whole day free except for the usual Christianity sessions and mealtimes, so I decided to check out what was going on next door. The Muslim halfway house was crawling with people. Families of the residents at Taman Bacaan and friends of the organisation which struggled to fund it came for the festival. I watched through the slats over the front bedroom window as a truck unloaded goats onto the asphalt. Over the next few hours, there were prayers and there was blood. I could hear the cries of the

goats as they understood they were going to die. I sat on the window-sill and watched from behind my palms. At some point I began crying silent tears for the goats as I saw them die. I thought about how this was the atmosphere of all abattoirs; animals screaming in terror while they heard their friends perish. I didn't want to eat meat any more, but I thought I didn't have a choice. I also enjoyed it. It was quite the dilemma.

Many people I met at The Turning Point had a strong moral compass. One woman, Siok Chin, had been imprisoned at the age of fourteen. She and her partner had been found cooking opium in their house. They were imprisoned indefinitely. When she came to live with us, she was twenty-eight, having spent half of her life in CWP. To get out of indefinite imprisonment, a prisoner had to behave well. Siok Chin finished her O-Levels, A-Levels and a diploma while she was inside. She also became Christian. We were all excited to meet her. Her story sounded extraordinary. Everyone knew before a new resident was coming to live in the house. It would ignite the anticipation of change, appealing in the face of routine. When a new resident came to live with us, energies would shift and there would be more stories to share. It turned out that Siok Chin was a direct product of her prison trauma. She became things she wasn't at her arrest: organised, conservative and strongly opinionated. She told me stories of her ex-partner and how he had become explosive over the years, blaming her for what happened to them, spitting fire in his letters. Many of the other women didn't appreciate or understand her. We became friends. I appreciated that she was a thinker. I marvelled at how people respond so differently to the same situation, yet that their responses often fall into predictable categories of behaviour. Siok Chin was the reformed but previously uncontrollable youth, and her partner was the angry victim. Sometimes it looks like we are all stereotypes.

One day we noticed a couple moving into the house directly across the road from TTP. We could see into its windows. We all gathered on the verandah and watched the truck unload furniture and boxes. The house was a colonial black and white bungalow, an iconic style scattered about Singapore. The bungalows had been built in the late 1800s to house high-ranking government officials, judges and plantation owners, then were left to Japanese soldiers during the occupation. Now they housed the occasional military person, yuppie or swanky

restaurant. The Caucasian couple were probably military personnel working at the wharves, which I could smell during my night walks. They were young and had a dog they walked around the neighbourhood. When I was running outside the house I would stare through their windows. I imagined their life as mine, with James and I walking our dog, stable and happy, imprisonment far behind me. I wrote about them in a letter to James. He said "Stop spying on your neighbours, you pervert!" In TTP I could write more letters than in CWP but slowly and surely, my urge to communicate trickled to a drip. My selfishness dictated that I chose to stop writing when my heart didn't need it. I didn't care that James wanted to hear from me. I didn't care that he wrote letters to me in CWP containing detailed stories just so I would have something to read from someone who loved me like a lunatic. In the letters I did scribble, it was painful to articulate my situation and the future thoughtfully. I tried to sound like I was processing but it was unnatural. I had plateaued and was comfortable where I was.

Sometime in September, I was allowed to speak to James on the phone. It had been so long since I'd heard his voice that I'd forgotten what it sounded like. In my head, his voice was an entire wise rainforest. When I heard it on the phone again, it was a single angsa tree, not nearly as large or deep as I remembered. He sent me a sketch he had drawn of Sarah and me from a photograph for my birthday, curled into a plastic pipe he had begged a workman in his office to cut to size for him. He wrote to tell me about his mission to send the drawing before my birthday, not having a proper postal tube and seeing a workman walk by with a pipe. His spontaneity was attractive, almost unexpected, and when I looked at the drawing I realised he was creatively skilled in a way I wasn't aware. It was the same feeling of knowing him from his words and now art, juxtaposed against his far away physical being. Then in October after she vetted another contemplation-soaked letter from James, Sister Felicia decided he could visit me. Right before his grandmother died. Family members of people I loved kept dying. I wondered if I was going to die too. I'm sure I had died for some people. My family and James had maintained to most of my friends that I had transferred to work in a Bali hotel. When I checked Facebook after it was over, there were posts on my wall and messages from people asking me where I had disappeared to. I wonder at which point I died for them and if they cared when I came back a revenant.

At the end of November James returned from his grandmother's funeral in the UK. I sat on the bench outside the halfway house, inside twitching until I saw the taxi drive up with my father, Sarah and him in it. I ran up and held him so tight his eyes must have bulged out. We cried together. That visit, the residents lined up in front of all the visitors and sang Hokkien hymns for them. James watched me with laughter in his eyes. Then I gave him a blue beaded dog that I had spent the last few days making for him. We gripped hands across the table and he made jokes about my strange new habits. Pre-prison Deborah didn't do handicraft or sing Hokkien songs. Later I found out that my sister had felt neglected and unimportant because I had paid so much attention to James during the visit. I didn't know what to do about it. It seemed like the only thing which would make it better was if I was out of the place because she couldn't dismiss her sadness otherwise. The next visit, Sheila came to see me. She was back from Melbourne for the holidays and told me that she was going to ZoukOut (the dance music festival on the beach that I went to every year) in a couple of weeks. I wished I could be there. Sheila's eyes were dark and her body more slender from wading through the cesspool of her sister's death. Later I would find out that she was partying and snorting powder off tables to deal with it. After seeing Sheila, it was a struggle not to smirk in the face of faith. I knew that no omnipotent being would decide to kill her brother and sister. There could be no good from that. It made me irritated to be around when the other women watched lively Christian concerts on the weekend. They would sing along and clap while I would seethe at their ignorance. They were also into watching this Taiwanese Hokkien drama called *The Spirits Of Love*. The theme song was called "Wa Meng Ti (I Ask Heaven)" and it contained lines like this (translated):

*The wind is furious
The rain is also furious
Furious of me for being useless*

and

*Oh, I ask Heaven, I ask Heaven
But Heaven still wants to make fun of me further
I try to forget thee, so I get drunk and more drunk daily*

At the time, I didn't know what any of it meant but I liked to sing along to the lyrics that were actually our inner monologues. As much as I wasn't into television, sometimes it was pleasing to watch the fucked up lives of others on a screen for entertainment. On occasion, *The Spirits Of Love* reminded me that nothing in my life was ever THAT bad. After the drama I would go to my bed with a smile on my face and the knowledge I was one day closer to leaving The Turning Point. I was pretty sure that God was an imaginary being, so I wasn't afraid of the forest devils anymore. As I lay in my mosquito-netted cot, I would imagine life after captivity. I worried about how I looked and how I would be perceived. It was difficult for me to like the way I looked because so much of my value had always come from my giant head of hair. I wondered if I should get hair extensions. I worried about how to be a good person and how to return to an education. Going back to the same drama school was not an option because we still didn't have any money. James told me in a letter that getting hair extensions would not help me to accept myself. I conceded, but my lack of an education was still a festering wound.

Days hopped along and I applied for Home Leave. Well-behaved residents with a family qualified for one day off during their six months. It was another privileged-based reward (considering that if I had no family then it was not an option) that I benefitted from. Perhaps residents without a family should have had a different reward for equality's sake. On the home leave day, residents would be released into the hands of their family for 12 hours. I applied for Home Leave on Christmas Day. It was agreed that James would pick me up on his Vespa (named Kathleen after his dead grandmother...I didn't know how I felt about sitting on her) for some intimate time at his house, then we would go to a gathering with my father's family and end the night with my grandparents and mother. James would spend the whole day with me and take me back to TTP, Sarah would spend two-thirds of the day with me, and I would see my mother and father for one-third each. It was our first Christmas as a splintered family.

Before Christmas, the sisters took all the residents to Sembawang Mall to buy things and hang out. Every month, James left me some money to spend on our weekend shopping trips. For this Christmas shopping trip, I had \$50. I bought a \$10 colourful maxi dress and an ice-blended coffee from Starbucks. I also bought a pair of black and fuschia harlequin tights to wear under my dress during the bike rides. I thought

they were radical when I saw them in This Fashion but then I never wore them again.

On Christmas Eve, we went to Sembawang Presbyterian Church for the service. Sat in the pew, I was unexpectedly overwhelmed with emotion and had to excuse myself to go outside. I sat on a bench in front of the church and felt sorry for myself. I was confused that this was how I felt in the face of my twelve hours of freedom on Christmas. I shed a few tears and considered how I didn't know what I was doing or how my life would turn out. It was difficult to be truly excited about my brief interlude the next day because it wasn't really all over yet. I was frustrated because I felt ready to tackle the world and get my life back on track, but I couldn't. I had to wait another two months.

Christmas morning came sparkling. I woke up early to shave every bit of me smooth in the shower, anticipating my time with James. When breakfast came around I was too edgy to eat, and singing hymns had never been more of a chore. James came to collect me at 9am on Kathleen. I put on my helmet with fumbling fingers and climbed onto the scooter clumsily. As we drove down Jamaica Road, I inflated with so much joy that my chest exploded in a cry of elation. James was terrified enough to slow down the bike. He thought that I'd fallen off. When we got to his apartment we went straight to his room. I felt awkward being alone with him. It had been so long since it had just been him and me. The only natural thing seemed to be for us to reconnect intimately, to seal the chasm between our minds and physical bodies. We undressed and expressed our love. The awkwardness left before we were finished. As we lay in the aftermath, I tried to shake off the strangeness of the situation. I was under the jurisdiction of Changi Women's Prison having sex in my boyfriend's room on Christmas morning. Weird. I was breaking a promise I made in the signed agreement from the day before. It said that I would not do certain prohibited things during Home Leave. Smoking, check. Alcohol, check. Sex, oops. James and I cocooned in each other, talked in feather voices and giggled until it was time to start the family visits.

We got back onto Kathleen and rode to Holland Village, where my sister, father and aunt lived. It was the same aunt we had lived with in my childhood. I walked into the living room where my father was on a mahogany chair, put my arms around him and stood like a statue for a long time. A few weeks before I had said honestly that he and I had

never really got along, but now we could try. He had taken it very badly. My father always had difficulty with accepting reality, even with things that he had done with his own hands. I never wanted to hurt him but sometimes it seemed he chose to hurt himself. It is why my ability to be at complete peace with him blossoms and shrivels in endless cycles; a field of morning glories. Every year since we were children, my father had found some money to buy Sarah and me a new dress for Christmas. That year I was given a short black lace number. It was a stunning dress but I was larger than before and felt like a sausage in it. I wore it anyway to make everyone happy though I was uncomfortable. My father and sister told me how beautiful I looked. I tried to believe them. On the balcony while my father and sister were smoking a cigarette, I received a gift from my ex-boyfriend Jeff by way of James. It was an iPod Nano filled with music he had bought for me. We got into a taxi and made our way to a different aunt's house for Christmas lunch, while I filled with groove listening to Santigold on my new iPod for the first time. I had forgotten what modern music sounded like. As I moved in the back of the taxi, shoulders bouncing to the beat, I also realized that I had forgotten how to dance.

When we got to the shophouse on Marshall Road, it truly felt like Christmas. The gathering at this other aunt's place was always inundated with warm light and brandy butter (though I could only have a surreptitious spoonful before abstaining). They were a successful family of doctors and teachers. It was a little bit overwhelming for me to be there, surrounded by aunts, uncles and cousins. Many of these relatives only made occasional appearances at Christmas or birthdays. Now everybody was trying to act casual while their jailbird kin surfaced from the depths of disgrace. I'm sure most of them were happy to have me there, but there was the palpable strain of an unfamiliar situation. Our Christmas ritual was different without my mother and with my strange new aura. On top of that, most of them didn't know how to talk about the situation. After stuffing my face with as much Christmas food as I could, a few of us ran around the back alley spraying party ribbon at each other. James' camera clicked wildly. We got lost in fits of joy and I almost forgot everything that had happened in the last ten months. Then time ran through the finishing line and I had four hours left. It was time to go to my grandparents for dinner.

When I arrived, my grandmother made a laughing comment about

how I'd gotten chubby. I beamed in return but it bothered me later. Was it out of concern? Was it a way of saying "Hey, I notice you"? Was it some deranged conversation starter? I don't understand the purpose of saying things like that, but they are said too much in what seems to be fat-shaming ignorance. Anyway, I didn't care enough about the comment to hold back from eating everything I could and loving my grandmother with abandon. My grandmother is a spectacular cook (I guess many grandmothers are, after the time to practice). She made my favourite Devil's Curry, brussel sprouts and baked salmon fillets. Erika was there, along with Lenny, my first boyfriend to whom I lost my virginity at fifteen. It was strange for me to see him in my prisoner state, but we were still good friends. He performed jokes and sarcasm like the entertainer he was, and everyone at the table clapped wildly for him.

After eating, we moved to the favourite post-dinner position; sprawling on the burgundy carpet in front of the television. I was glad it was off. There were many Christmas dinners with *Home Alone* flashing on the screen for the 542nd time. My grandmother had Christmas hymns playing softly in the background instead (no escape!) but it was the lesser evil. I was immune. We sat on the carpet I had known from childhood, guffawed at my ugly tights and glowed. I spent a lot of time talking to Erika. It was easy for us to be together, but not as simple. We used to be fairies, tittering and light but I had become heavier since she last saw me. 8.35pm approached and then it was my time to go back to The Turning Point. It was only two months more but I was devastated. The day had been better and more beautiful than I expected. When we left the flat I tried my best not to cry. James and I got back on his Vespa. The night air pushed itself into my face, cold and sweet but the taste was bitter. As we approached The Turning Point, my tears spilled. James and I parked in the corner outside the gate, kissing and clutching at each other out of sight until I had to go inside. I felt like Cinderella and kept reminding myself that I was being irrational, that time would continue to go as quickly as it had gone that day and then I would be gone. I knew it was a lie. Time is only a rocket when you are happy. After entering the house, I was greeted with smiles and quick-fire questions. I told the women about everything except the sex. They listened with shining faces and fluttering hands, and I felt the comfort of coming home to a different family.

The afterglow of Home Leave lingered. It was peaceful perfume.

Within a few days I accepted that I really would be done with my punishment soon. Then on the 2nd of January I received a letter from James.

LETTER NO.53

31ST DECEMBER 2008 (D-7)

Dear Deborah,

I love you. I have lots I want to discuss about Christmas day, mostly about how great it was, but I'm gonna leave it until next time because I have something I have to tell you.

A couple of days after you told me that you had been with Niklas, I slept with Gemma.

I'm sorry.

It wasn't meant as revenge or anything like that. It was meant to make me get over you, but it had the opposite effect; I felt guilty afterwards, even though I had broken up with you at the time, and it made me realise how much I wanted you back.

I want you to know that it was only once. I know why I did it and I know it won't happen again. I told her afterwards it couldn't happen again and how much you mean to me. We spent another weekend together and nothing happened. Since we reconciled I have been completely faithful to you despite Singapore's seemingly easy temptations. But that hasn't been difficult for me. I only want you.

I feel worse about keeping this from you than about the fact itself. I should have told you immediately, as you told me, and I wish the fuck I had. I didn't because I was scared that it would start an 'arms race' and there would be no way back for us. The whole situation made me realise I didn't want to lose you. I always intended to tell you, it never occurred to me not to, but I convinced myself it would be better to tell you to your face when I returned. I pictured us having a long conversation to explain everything that happened while I was away (something I still think we should do) before we decided our future together. Of course that was impossible after you went to CWP. Then I didn't want to write about it because others would read it and because you had enough to worry about. I thought about telling you on Christmas, but I couldn't risk ruining your special day – I really don't know how you're going to take this. I'm telling you now because keeping this from you has been killing me, especially last week, and it makes me feel like a hypocrite, which is something I never want to be.

I'm sorry for not telling you sooner. Truly I am.

The worst thing for me would be if I lost your trust. You said you have learned that the only person you can truly rely on is yourself and I understand why you say that. But I will always be there for you and if you forgive me for this I will never again keep anything from you this long.

Please forgive me. I love you. I feel you in my core. You are a part of me and I don't want to lose you.

Love,
James

So many emotions washed through me. James had slept with his ex while I had been riddled with guilt about my trespasses, trying to stop my heart drowning in its own blood. The revelation made me feel betrayed and stupid. It was as if all that guilt was for nothing because we were even. After a few days those feelings went away. Someone else's sins could not obliterate mine. It didn't work like that. Every hurtful thing I had done continued to exist. Every sin had its own life. Once I realised this, it allowed me to be truthful about other things. I told James that I wasn't sure about us, but I had been afraid to tell him. His dedication and loyalty over the course of my imprisonment made me feel like I owed him something, even though the only thing I should owe was stability in myself. I wrote to him that I didn't know where I was going or where we would end up. I told him that with eighteen years between us and me in prison I didn't know how we would reconcile the different stages we were in. He replied with acceptance and understanding. The next time he came to visit with Sarah and my mother, it was frustrating. We had a thought tangle dangling above us, but all we could talk about was what I had done that week and the beaded strawberry I had made for my sister. I cuddled my mother for a long time when I saw her. James had told me in a letter that my mother felt I liked to make her feel stupid. It was because I had asked her what the worst outcome of the divorce was and what book she was reading.

One month before my release I knew that I had to make a plan. Drama school was not an option because of the price, so I started looking at polytechnic diploma courses on the internet. That's when I discovered a new course at Singapore Polytechnic called Applied Drama and Psychology. The course was meant to give students the ability to use drama and their understanding of the human psyche to educate

and create change. The course was accepting its second ever intake of students who would study for three years. Upon this discovery I felt I was meant to study it and use theatre to help people. It was a kismet explosion. Sister Felicia took me to the polytechnic sometime at the end of January. We walked around looking for the reception office. I was in flip-flops and daggy flour-encrusted shorts. Sister Felicia wore her sense of purpose. It was a peculiar-looking mission.

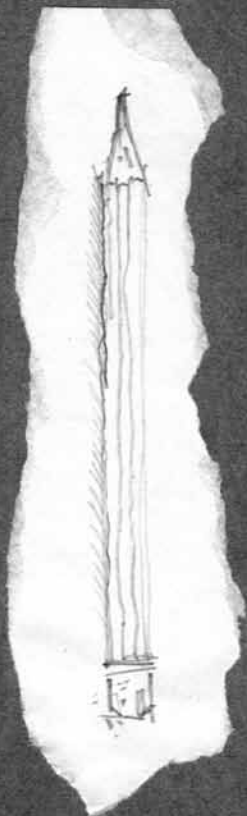
We opened the glass swing doors and walked up to the front desk. I felt the intimidation of institution walls standing stoic around me. It was cold and quiet. When we talked to the administration woman, she said that admissions were closed. She asked me about my secondary school grades from five years before and I told her my O-Level aggregate. It was seventeen points. She suggested that I consider the landscaping course. My face contorted and collapsed. I begged. It was devastating that I had done my penance and found a direction, but the past was still choking me. The woman at the counter felt sorry and told me that I could write a letter of appeal if I wanted, but with my grades the chances were microscopic. I scribbled the letter of appeal in 2B pencil on a tear-drizzled sheet of paper. I wrote about imprisonment and the bright future I could see in the distance yelling at me to catch up. I wrote about giving chances. When we left the office, I slowly found calm. I had done what I could and would wait for the outcome. Then I would deal with the consequences of that. As time went slowly on, I prepared to leave the halfway house. I wrote letters to people and had as many conversations as I could with the other women. We talked about what my plan was and how I was going to be. I told them that everything was going to be okay. I could feel it.

On the 12th of February 2009, I was released from the custody of The Turning Point and into the warm arms of the future. My mother, sister and James came to pick me up in a taxi. I left in a cocktail of fear, joy, nervousness and sorrow. The Turning Point had become my home. Was that how Stockholm Syndrome worked? For other women, CWP had been a safe place where they did not need to engage with the torture of reality. Had TTP become the same for me, familiar as my ten-year convent education? Buzzing, sighing and crying, I said goodbye to The Turning Point. We loaded all of my belongings into the back of the taxi. I told Sister Felicia I would keep in touch. When we started driving, I looked back and watched the house until it was gone.

HOME AGAIN (2009)

*My first day out.
I had to take stock of what I owned.
One 20-year-old body with female parts.
Very dark hair which had a tendency to define me,
in the way it could not be controlled.
Very dark eyes, shadowed with a kind of skepticism about the present.
A complete loss of touch with fashion.
Ignorance about how many pounds had been distributed to my being,
to top what I already had a year before.
Pale skin for a brown person from a lack of sunlight.
Books and books which I had been too depressed to read.
Cynical writings about life and the absence of God in mine.
One family in two parts.
One boyfriend who had waited.
Friends separated from me by a membrane of experience.
A smart mouth.
An expectation that the universe had morphed while I was gone.
I could not identify the assets and liabilities from this list.
Yet I was returning to a normal existence
Which I felt was completely abnormal.
But...
I should entertain the line.
The line of expectant faces,
thirsting for my acknowledgement of...
Where I was.
Who I was.
Was I the same?
No I'm not the same.
I'm not the same.
I'm a new person.
A new Deborah.
A good person.
Not a bad person.
That's what I was before.
A bad person.
But I'm not anymore.*

*A bad person.
And I wanted them to know.
I wanted everybody to know
Who I was now.
I was good.
Not bad.
I was good.
So I sat there like a good girl.
In the backseat.
Watching it all whizz by in a primarily green, brown and grey slideshow on speed.
Because I was staring at the ground.
Amazed at how quickly it was going by me.
Astounded at how far away we were getting from where I was before.
I was out of the comfort of my routine.
I was out of my zone.
Wait.
What am I doing?
Is this really happening?
Am I really here?
I've never been here.
Do I want to be here?
I don't know this.
I don't know what to do.
Send me back.
Send me back to where I belong now.
I don't belong in this world.
I don't belong with these people.
I belong there.
With the others.
I want to go back.
Then it was familiar for a moment.
Then the voice of reason.
Deborah.
Snap out of it.
We're home now.*



AFTER

It felt like home when I moved in with my mother and grandparents. I hadn't ever lived in that apartment, but I knew it well. My grandparents had lived in the same Housing Development Board flat since I was a thumb-sucker. My mother had grown up there. It was all comfortable and familiar. She cleared out half of her wardrobe so that I could share it. I slept on a Pokémon print mattress on the floor with my L-shaped pillow. Before falling asleep at night my mother and I would talk softly, telling stories and gaining lost time. Suddenly time was almost infinite; there was more than an hour and a half for conversation. I could even exit gates without permission.

I enrolled in night classes at the Institute of Technical Education, a vocational institution which secondary school students used to rudely call It's The End. Students that went to ITE were usually there because they hadn't qualified for secondary school, but I was happy to be present and responsible for my future. I was going to prepare for a retake of my O-Level examinations, and was determined to qualify for the Applied Drama and Psychology diploma at Singapore Polytechnic. In the first few mathematics classes at ITE my brain groaned and spluttered like gears of a stopped clock tower trying to tell the time again. During most of my schooling, I had read Terry Pratchett and Harry Potter under my desk but still managed As, Bs and the occasional C. Mathematics was an F until O-Level, when I spent two months in front of my textbook so I could manage a C. Acing the examinations were going to be an effort.

After a month of classes at ITE, I got a call from Singapore Polytechnic to say that they wanted to interview me for placement in the course. I fretted and screamed and stood in front of the mirror in a parade of outfits which were all unsuitable. I decided on a long stretchy grey skirt, a glittery striped tank and a black glitter bomber jacket I stole from my sister. I felt shiny and invincible. My father went with me to the interview. We walked up the hill to the faculty of Communication, Arts and Social Sciences slowly because he had a slipped disc in his

spine and it hurt him most days to walk. When we got there, my nervousness turned into a three-dimensional blob of every feeling I had ever had. It threatened to eat me. My father held my hand to calm me down, then I wobbled and walked through the glass doors of the faculty administration office. The interview was in a meeting room with a large oval desk. I sat on one side with the two lecturers who ran the programme on the other. I told them everything, tears trailing down my face and me trying to contain them to project stability. When we said goodbye I was prepared to never see the two lecturers again. Then they called me a week later to say that I had been accepted into the programme. I don't remember ever feeling more gratitude than in the moment they told me.

This book ends with the acknowledgement that we are all products of culture and upbringing. I was exposed to violence growing up and it entered my behavioural vocabulary. When I was a child, I did not hesitate to hit my little sister when she made me angry. This carried on into adulthood. All of us are products of our environment.

I struggle to share parts of my story where my father caused us pain because I don't want the past to dismantle the future. When my mother died, I was more angry and ready to blame. Over time I realised that I was continuing the cycle of violence and that love was the only infallible way to heal. We should be healing hurt instead of creating more of it.

Punitive systems propagate hurt instead of healing. Most evidence seems to point to restorative justice being the way to break the cycle, instead of authoritarian punishment. Yet even with information and evidence available, we do not make the necessary changes to our systems. Perhaps due to inertia or a fear of change, we continue to punish those who do not live according to our rules.

Then you might ask: How is it that imprisonment seems to have improved your path? My answer is that I am privileged and educated. I do not and never did appear to be a person who has been to prison. My first language is English and I speak it well, which impresses people in a postcolonial society. I have a family and friends who suffuse me with love and who supported me from all angles upon my release. Not many women I met in prison could claim these things.

That is why I have written this book; it is a way for me to openly question a system that does not seem to be interested in helping other human beings to grow the way I have.

I will say it again: Love is the infallible way. Imprisonment is not.

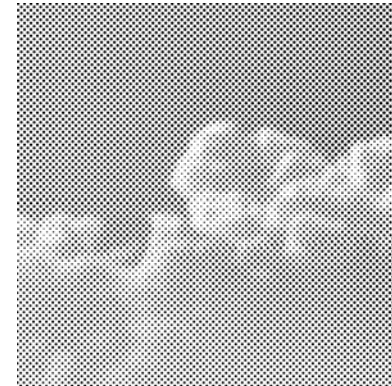




PHOTO: CAMILA MENDES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Emmanuel is a Singaporean writer, performer and four-time TEDx speaker. Her work and dialogue has featured at festivals like The Singapore Writer's Festival, Bali Emerging Writers Festival and Queensland Poetry Festival. She is a founder of SPEAK., a monthly curated poetry event that features local and international established and emerging voices. Deborah also educates in writing and performance workshops, makes music with her band Wobology and acts on stage and screen. Her poetry collection, *When I Giggle In My Sleep*, was published by Red Wheelbarrow Books in 2015.