

Reconnections

For GenderTension

By TheSpiralledEye

Noah grinned down at his graduation cap; in lieu of a personal design he'd pasted white fabric to the top and gone around with a pen getting all his friends in his classes to sign it. No matter how hard they tried, there was just no way they would all still be this close in a few years and he wanted something that reminded him of what college had really been about; getting out of his shell and making friends for the first time. Now he just had one more name to collect; the most important one really. He'd save Lucas for last partly out of nerves and partly out of necessity. Despite his reserved and shy nature Lucas was the most popular guy in their graduating class. He may not have been the most outgoing person but he was handsome and funny; the sort of person he drew people in. Plus, he had a habit of keeping people at arms length which of course, only made him that much more alluring. Well, to other people, not Noah. He took special pride in knowing he was Lucas' best friend, the one who actually knew him better than anybody. Noah's heart warmed slightly as he approached the gaggle of well wishers and Lucas spotted him and instantly pushed the others away with an apologetic smile.

He was a big guy, bald and heavy set with plenty of natural muscle; the sort of person who could easily look intimidating in the wrong light. But the man had such an infectious smile and warm personality that anybody who spoke to him for five minutes knew he wouldn't hurt a fly. Unless the fly messed with somebody he cared about of course; then the fly got splattered across the floor. A lesson the guys messing with Noah on hazing week freshman year had learned hard. Noah grinned, waving the cap in the air with his pen.

"There you are, man!" Lucas grinned, "Cool idea!"

He took the pen and managed to find a corner without any names on it, a corner Noah had discreetly kept his hand over while holding the cap to other people to ensure Lucas would have space. He took it back with a grateful smile just as Lucas turned more sombre.

"Thanks for saving me from the crowd, things were getting a little awkward." He rubbed at the back of his neck, "Hey, do you think we could chat somewhere real quick, somewhere private?" He asked.

“Of course, is everything alright?” Worry instantly filled him but Lucas shook his head.

“Nah, just gotta tell you something.”

Noah’s heart gave an odd little flutter which he ignored as they walked off to the side; he wasn’t sure what he was expecting or hoping Lucas would say but moving to Singapore was not it.

“Why Singapore?” He blanched, “That’s ages away!”

From me, the unspoken words hung in the air. Noah had already been accepted into an entry level position at a well respected legal office; not that he would have moved cities to be with Lucas if he’d known, that would be ridiculous. The fact that he was even thinking about that option was...confusing.

“I just feel like I need a place where I can start fresh, be a new...person.” Lucas kicked at the ground awkwardly.

“Why?” Noah felt his temper flaring, “You’re one of the coolest guys I know, you’ve got looks, chicks hanging off you left and right, not to mention the grades to get a job anywhere you want.”

“And I want a job in Singapore. And don’t act like having girls hanging around me is a good thing. You know how I hate it.” Lucas said defensively, “Quit being so weird, this is exactly why I haven’t been telling people, everybody just expects me to be happy already. ”

“What, you’re not? How? You have the perfect life!”

Normally, Noah didn’t have much of a temper but for some reason this confession had his blood boiling. Things were just fine here at home, why did his best friend have to all of a sudden just dump him and their group out of nowhere? He shouldn’t be this mad, he knew it was stupid, people moved after college that’s just how things were yet...he felt abandoned. Not just that but this had to be in the works for a while and Lucas had not said a word to him; since when did they keep secrets?

“I’ll email and chat to you on social media all the time.” Lucas promised, “We’ll still be friends.”

Noah ground his teeth and tried to smile; everybody knew those were empty words. Sooner or later, he knew those messages were going to stop. Lucas forced the conversation in another direction as they returned to the crowd but Noah wasn't listening. He had woken up this morning thinking it was the dawn of a new chapter in his life but now that he faced the idea of a new chapter without Lucas the idea seemed hollow.

Two Years Later...

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we shall be starting our descent into Singapore's Changi airport momentarily. Cabin crew prepare for landing."

Noah took a deep breath, watching as the glittering metropolis appeared through the cloud cover. He'd never been to Singapore before, hell, he'd never gone out of the country; part of him still couldn't believe he was doing this. He had been right in his suspicions; only months after arriving in Singapore Lucas had deleted his social media accounts or abandoned them. Leaving only email as his point of connection. At the time his friend had explained he wanted a break from the hellscape that was online profiles and honestly, Noah couldn't blame him. At least he wouldn't have if they had still been video chatting or doing the occasional phone call; which they weren't. Then the pandemic hit and everybody's lives went up in a ball of fire; by the time Noah realised Lucas had not responded to his last email, months had passed and he decided, through a heavy heart, to let the friendship die like Lucas so clearly wanted. Even though the decision killed him inside. But then the message came three weeks ago, an email from Lucas after all this time inviting him to come and stay with him in Singapore during his next holiday.

A spiteful part of Noah wanted to decline, or ignore the message outright but he'd never been able to say no to Lucas, the man had some sort of strange hold over him that Noah had never truly been able to explain. He'd developed suspicions over the years of course, what young person didn't go through some sort of identity crisis post college; he had almost been expecting it. The fact that it was of the sexual variety though, that had thrown him. He'd never had anything close to romantic or sexual feelings towards any man...except Lucas; but even then he didn't know if that is what these feelings were. Maybe he was just jealous of the older man's confidence and drive, maybe he was just a really good bro. God, that sounded like excuses even to himself. He had often laid awake at night trying to fantasise being with him in a romantic way and ended up just weirding himself out; it felt

wrong and right at the same time. Could you be romantically attracted to somebody but not physically?

The runway was fast approaching and the kindly old Asian woman who had been seated next to him patted his hand.

“It’s okay dear.” She said warmly, “I was a nervous flyer once too.”

Confused Noah looked down to see he was gripping the seat so hard his knuckles had turned white. He blushed, not bothering to correct her, better to think he was a nervous flyer than having a minor mental breakdown over his own sexuality. Still, as the wheels hit the runway he swallowed; this whole trip his anxiety had been building; what if he met Lucas and he did realise his feelings were romantic, what then? He was only in Singapore for a few days! Or what if he was wrong and ruined his friendship with the coolest guy he’d ever known just because he didn’t know what he wanted? He was so sure he’d done that once already he didn’t want to go through it again...

His mind was a beehive, buzzing with activity as he disembarked and went through the song and dance that was baggage claim and customs. After the email he had done some googling and found nothing but the abandoned social media accounts; bereft of any updates or posts in almost two years. Two years could change somebody a lot; physically and personality wise, what if he couldn’t recognise Lucas when he saw him? He glanced at his reflection in the polished metal of the baggage carousel; his face was a little sharper and he’d aged five years in the two that had passed but who hadn’t with everything going on. He grabbed his suitcase and headed for the gate, sucking in a deep breath and stepping out along the walkway brimming with people greeting their loved ones. He glanced over the crowd, most of them Asian, it should be easy enough to spot a six foot tall white guy in the crowd yet nobody stood out.

A cold, nervous sweat broke out on the back of his neck; this was fine, he was probably just running late. Singapore had crazy traffic didn’t it? Maybe? Yeah that was it. There was no way he would snob him after all this set up or worse, forget. He shuffled awkwardly over to the wall and watched the crowd from his flight slowly disperse; loved ones reuniting with hugs and happy tears after two years of lockdowns. Noah’s guts continued to twist as he glanced across the massive room in the hopes that he’d see Lucas approaching, out of breath with an apology and explanation on his lips.

Maybe it was nerves or maybe it was the fact that it was pronounced with a thick Malay accent but at first, Noah didn’t recognise the sound of his name being said. The second time though he turned, shocked to find a beautiful dark skinned Asian woman with long hair smiling at him nervously.

“Noah, hello!” She gave him a nervous wave, nervously tucking a hair behind her ears.

“Hi.” He smiled awkwardly, “Are you a friend of Lucas’? Did he send you to come get me?”

He was sort of miffed, after two years the least his friend could do was come pick him up himself.

“No,” The woman met his eyes again, she looked almost frightened, “I uh, my name is Adannya Tan but...back when we knew each other my name was Lucas.”

A roaring filled his ears as a plane took off, no wait, that was the blood rushing in his ears, blocking out all sounds but his rapid heartbeat. This...this couldn't be Lucas, Lucas was white and buff and chiefly, *male*. After all this time apart, he'd decided to start off their reunion with a prank?

“That-Is this his idea of a sick joke?” Noah gaped, balling his hands into a fist, “He put you up to this didn't he?”

That had to be it, that's why she was nervous. He bit down on his lip to try and keep his temper, whoever this Adannya person was, this practical joke wasn't her fault. She was shaking her head vigorously.

“No, Noah really, it's me.” She insisted, “I know I have been through some pretty big changes but I swear it's me.”

“Oh really?” Noah raised an eyebrow, “If that's the case, what happened the last time we saw each other in public?”

“I signed your graduation cap, you'd saved a corner just for me. We talked about my move...you didn't take it well.”

Noah blinked in shock.

“We first met when I punched a dude for hassling you freshman year.” She added, “I...I told you after college I needed a fresh start. This is what I meant.”

She indicated to herself and Noah’s eyes raked across her figure; curvy, full figured with dark hair and bright blue eyes; she looked like she just stepped out of a modelling catalogue. This was his buff, gentle giant friend from two years ago? He looked, desperate to find any trace of Lucas but there was nothing, even the shade of his blue eyes had deepened from light ocean blue to dark.

This was too much, he had been on edge this entire trip already trying to sort out his own feelings for Lucas and now he’d thrown him this curveball right out of the gate- *literally*. He-no *she*, was looking at him full of anxiety, awaiting his reaction with baited breath. He knew it was the wrong thing to say but before he could stop himself, his true gut reaction spilled out.

“What the fuck have you done to yourself?”

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The drive was awkward to say the least. Noah knew he’d insulted Adannya with his words, she had clearly been hoping for a better reaction but he refused to apologise or even really look at her as they departed the main highway into the city proper. What the hell did she expect to happen, springing that shit on him? She couldn’t have maybe, emailed him about transitioning or sent him a damn photo? What stung most of all about the secrecy though was that she had never thought to confide in him about it. This wasn’t exactly the sort of thing people decided overnight; Lucas had probably been thinking about this for years, way back in college. All those nights they had chatted about, what he had assumed, to be their deepest secrets and desires and not once had he ever had the inkling Lucas could be trans. Why would he not trust him with that? Did he seriously think he was some kind of bigot?

“Here we are.” Adannya announced, pulling into the underground parking lot of an apartment building. “I’ve got the guest bedroom all set up but...there is a hotel down the street if you prefer.”

Noah thought for a second; did he really want to spend his days here spitefully sitting down the street from the person he had been wishing to see for months? No; he was pissed at Adannya but not enough to throw his whole holiday away.

“Let’s go upstairs.”

She beamed, almost skipping over to the elevator.

“We’ll get you settled and go out for tapao!”

“What’s that?” He’d researched Singapore cuisine before coming and not come across that dish.

“Ah sorry,” Adannya blushed, “Singlish, it means takeaway. The view from my apartment is really pretty, we can get some food delivered and watch the sun set.”

“Sounds like a date.” Noah replied dryly, she giggled halfheartedly and then turned silent.

This was going to be a very awkward holiday. He tried not to feel guilty about it; Adannya was the one who ruined everything with her secrets and reveal, the fact that you could cut the tension in the air with a knife was entirely her fault.

The elevator opened up into a beautiful sunny apartment with huge windows taking up most of the living room wall. It was hardly prime real estate but Noah could see for miles; the streets and shops of Singapore and off in the distance the great branching arms of Gardens by The Bay. He had been looking forward to visiting; it was one of the biggest attractions for a reason, now he could barely muster the energy to care. He was so mentally and emotionally exhausted he was glad Adannya took it upon herself to order them food; he simply could not handle a busy restaurant right now.

“You look shag, Noah.”

And he was awake again, did she seriously just suggest...? Adannya burst into giggles.

“Oh God, s-sorry!” She laughed, “That means tired, I wasn’t asking you to...yeah, I just meant you look tired. Maybe you should have a lie down and I’ll come get you when food arrives?”

Noah felt his cheeks burn.

“Yeah, good idea.”

He wished the ground would swallow him up; what a stupid thing to assume. The guest bedroom was laid out neatly, and he collapsed into the soft sheets, revelling in the fact that he could lie down properly after the long plane ride. He only meant to close his eyes for a moment but the next thing he knew the mattress was sunken and there was a soft hand on his bare arm gently shaking him awake. Warm orange light momentarily blinded him as it streamed through the window temporarily blinding him. As he blinked his vision clear, Adannya's face came into view, her dark hair hanging around her like a black curtain. The light made her skin glow and her eyes shine in the most beautiful way as she smiled; for a moment his sleep deprived brain seemed to stop thinking all together.

“Food is here.”

The spell was broken and the memories of the past few hours came flooding back, along with his hurt and bitterness.

“Thanks.” He pushed her hand away a little to harshly but did not apologise.

“I got us Hainanese rice, it’s a must try for anybody on their first trip.” She held up a container of chicken and rice that Noah had to admit, smelt amazing.

They sat on her couch, the foot of space between them feeling like an ocean as they ate in silence, watching the orange glow turn dusty purple as the city lights turned on. His eyes wandered the apartment, taking in the numerous photos and decorations; Lucas had always been pretty spartan in his decorating, at least at his college dorm but this place was the complete opposite. Photos of Adannya and crowds of people at parties decorated frames on every wall; tokens and memorabilia such as theme park tokens and frags dotted each shelf. Never in a thousand years would have believed his old friend lived here. Noah took a deep breath, time to rip off the bandaid.

“So...how long have you been like this?” Noah winced, he probably could have worded that better.

“Fully this?” Adannya asked, “About a year but I started experimenting with different levels’ I supposed you’d say, as soon as I arrived.”

“Levels?”

“I suppose that’s how I would put it. I started with trying a few more feminine clothing items, then I went to the black market and got the trinket that let me change my race and gender. I played around with it a bit, trying out new looks, new personalities, changing my voice and such before finally I settled on this one.”

She tapped a small carving of gold and jade attached to her necklace.

“It’s permanent now, but I still like to wear it from time to time.”

Noah felt an uncomfortable lurch in his stomach.

“You...changed your personality?”

“Yeah!” She beamed, “I was never comfortable in my own skin so I thought once I changed I could finally be myself but it turns out so many years of repression took their toll. So I used this magic to...speed things up I guess.”

She was saying it as though it were that simple, like choosing to paint her nails a different colour not fundamentally altering who she was as a person. Was Adannya even his friend anymore, the more they talked the more she seemed like a stranger.

“I know this must be weird for you.” She chewed on a piece of chicken in thought, “How about we go out tomorrow and I’ll show you the sights, you can meet some of my friends!”

“Do they know who you actually are?” Noah blurted out before he could stop himself.

“This is who I really am.” She replied coolly, “I think the question you meant to ask was do they know I was a man once, and no. They don’t. I would like to keep it that way.”

“What, you think I’m the sort of asshole who would out you?”

“If you had asked me yesterday I would have said no without hesitation but given how you’re talking to me I thought it was worth checking.” She crossed her arms over her generous chest and glared at him; Noah felt his blood pressure rise.

“Hey, I think I am dealing with this pretty fucking swell considering you didn’t give me any warning after disappearing for two years! What, did you expect me to step off the plane and take it all without batting an eye?”

Adannya froze for a moment before snorting and bursting into laughter.

“I’m sorry I just...did you just use the word ‘swell’? What are you a nineteen fifties paper boy?”

Noah tried to stay mad, he really did; but she had a point and her laughter had that infectious quality that meant he was struggling not to smile. Eventually he lost the battle, bursting into laughter himself until they were both wiping away tears. All the nervous tension in the air turned to giggles as they finally got ahold of themselves. It was only when she leaned against his shoulder that Noah realised they had somehow shuffled across the couch close enough to touch.

“I’m sorry.” She sighed eventually, “You’re right, I was pushing things. You’re the only person from my life before that knows about me yet I guess I was letting those old anxieties rush to the surface.”

Noah just nodded, unsure how to respond, he could feel the warmth from her dark skin wafting onto his own. It sent butterflies racing and he had no idea how to feel about it.

“I think I’m going to go to bed.” He said finally, “It was a long flight. I want to be rested for sight seeing tomorrow.”

“Of course.”

He closed the door to his room and sighed; things were confusing enough before now he had no idea what he was feeling towards his old friend. He was not lying about being tired; he was in every sense of the word. The flight and surprises that came after had drained him completely physically, mentally and emotionally yet he lay awake staring at the ceiling trying to reconcile the Lucas he knew with the woman in the next room. Part of him wasn’t even sure she was his old friend; only time would tell.

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Noah tried to discreetly pick the rice from between his teeth as they drove through the city. Rice for breakfast was not something he could ever get used to. Adannya was taking him over to the Universal Studios theme park to meet some of her friends; a touristy day to be sure but with several locals at his side surely he wouldn't look like too much of a hick. Adannya was wearing a pair of tight jeans and a light, flowing pink shirt that contrasted against her dark skin. He could not help but notice she was a few shades darker than most locals; he wondered why she'd chosen it, but it felt rude to ask.

By the time they had reached the spinning globe at the front of the park Noah was already sweating in the humid heat. He almost resented Adannya for looking so fresh and clean; he was about to ask how she was not sweating buckets when all of a sudden she squealed. Jumping on her toes and running ahead where another screaming woman and her friend was. They hugged, welcoming a third lady into their little huddle and leaving Noah feeling like an awkward interloper. They were speaking so fast he could barely catch every other word, their Singlish completely incomprehensible to him.

"Sorry! Sorry, this is my old friend Noah from America!" Adannya beamed, "It's his first time in Singapore. Noah, these are my best girl friends Nadia, Zaria and Luna!"

Noah gave a tight smile; Adannya's thick accent seemed to have doubled since seeing these women and for some reason that made him uncomfortable.

"Oh a man flew all the way here to stay with you?" Luna teased, "Seems our Adannya is getting bored of the local men, eh?"

"Well she has sampled a lot of them." Zaria said slyly, giggling when Adannya smacked her on the shoulder.

"Aiyoh! You're a real gossip, you know that?" Adannya sighed, "She's just trying to make you uncomfortable, Noah. Ignore her."

"Mission accomplished." He mumbled, though he didn't think the ladies heard him.

Since when was Lucas a flirt? He hadn't dated anybody in college, hell, Noah had even suspected he might not be into anybody period but now apparently he was sleeping with half the city? Adannya finally noticed his silence and grabbed him by the wrist.

“Come on, if we don't get in line soon the wait for the Mummy coaster will be a mile long!”

Noah had always loved theme parks; the screams from the coasters, the smell of popcorn and cheap fizzy drinks, even the crowds. They were like mini cities dedicated to fun but today no matter what they did he could not fully give in to the fun. Every second seemed to hammer home a new change his friend had gone through; she squealed, she yelled, she flirted a little with the man showing them to their car on the rollercoaster. After each ride the four women would spend a minute or two fixing their hair and make up after it got blown everywhere. Noah remembered asking Lucas one day why he was bald by choice and he'd just shrugged saying that spending so much time fussing over a bunch of dead cells seemed like a waste of time. He'd respected him for that; Noah had wished he was more like him, not caring about physical appearances so much. Judging by how long Adannya spent tossing up between the minion barrets and the spiderman ones in a gift shop, that was no longer the case. Even her taste in food seemed off.

“Look, I'll just come right out and say it.” Noah made a face as he pushed the box away, “Curry powder does not belong on popcorn.”

“Sacrilege.” Adannya gasped with mock horror, grabbing a handful and scoffing it down, “This is how popcorn should be. Right girls?”

“You know what, I'm with Noah on this one.” Luna chimed, “I prefer it to the western way, butter and salty all the way.”

“Ha!”

“Well you butter loving idiots can enjoy your flavourless mess, I am going to get more proper popcorn.” She said with a superior smile, skipping away to the vendor.

Noah watched her go, that uneasy feeling still in the pit of his stomach; it intensified as Adannya's three friends all suddenly rounded on him.

“So tell us,” Zaria said eagerly, “What was Adannya like back in America, she never talks about it or anybody from before she moved.”

“Never?”

“Never.” Luna confirmed, “We thought it would be a mystery forever until she told us you were coming to visit a few days ago.”

Another stab of hurt pierced his heart, Adannya had not mentioned him once before now?

“Well, she was...nice.” He tried awkwardly, “He-She was a good friend to me.”

Zaria rolled her eyes.

“Come on, get to the good stuff. How did you guys meet?”

Noah felt his discomfort rise.

“Why don't you tell me about her first.” He tried, “Is she really that...flirtatious?”

The three woman all shared a look and Noah could practically sense the silent conversation that passed between them before they turned to face him again.

“Not really.” Zaria admitted, “WHen we first met her she was a bit of a party girl, loved a good drink and a night with a fella, you know? But it was never excessive. She was more into one night stands than relationships.”

“Secretly, I always thought she was hung up on somebody,” Luna added, “so when she said you were coming to visit we all sort of assumed...?”

Noah felt his cheeks go hot.

“Us? No!”

“That's disappointing.” Nadia sighed, “I think she could use a good man in her life. Anyway, you promised to tell us how you both met back in college!”

Noah fiddled with his napkin.

“There were these guys, giving me a hard time and she sort of stepped in and got me out of trouble.” Noah blushed, this story was a lot more embarrassing when it was a woman saving his ass rather than a six foot, muscle bound bald dude.

“Wow really? I didn’t think she could fight!” Nadia gasped.

“I don’t. Not anymore.”

Noah and the other jumped; why did he feel like he just got caught talking about a friend behind their back? Adannya’s face was like thunder, her hand half crushing the popcorn bag.

“I was just telling them how we met.” Noah said quietly, “It’s nothing...too private.”

“Maybe not to you.” Adannya replied shortly, “But for me that whole life is ancient history I’d rather leave be. Come on, let’s go get in line for another ride.”

The three ladies gave him a sympathetic look.

“She’s so cheem.” Zaria shook her head before turning and saying, “That means confusing.”

Noah nodded and mumbled to himself.

“Right, yeah cheem.”

The women giggled at his atrocious accent; perhaps he should leave the Singlish to them.

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Zaria, Luna and Nadia waved them off outside the park and Noah was genuinely sad to see them go. Not because he particularly enjoyed their company but because Adannya had been in a sour mood ever since she caught him talking about their past and he really did not want to be left alone with her. Once they were out of earshot he lowered his gaze.

“I’m sorry if I crossed a line, I swear I didn’t mention anything about...Lucas.”

“I know.” She replied, “But in the future, can we just leave the past in the past?”

'Our past' Noah thought bitterly, *'yeah, we'll just throw it all away just like you did me.'*

"Come on, let's go get some street food. I'll go take you to see that Merlion all the tourists love so much."

The air was so hot and moist Noah felt as though he were drinking it; he really wished they could have just driven to wherever this street food was, he was not built for this tropical climate.

"Maybe we should get you some cooler clothes." Adannya suggested after a few minutes of silence, "Something tells me you're going to sweat through everything you packed in a single day."

"How can you stand it?" He panted, Adannya shrugged with a sly smile.

"Guess I am just built of sterner stuff than you."

"Wow, rude."

She stuck out her tongue at him and before he realised what he was doing, Noah returned the gesture, making Adannya laugh. She really did have a pretty laugh; it was so unlike Lucas's deep, warm chuckle and yet it made him feel just as safe and at home.

"I love Singapore." Adannya sighed, "It's this giant melting pot of cultures, the food, the languages, the people; it's easy to get lost in it all."

"Is that why you came here?" Noah asked seriously, "To get lost?"

"More like to get found." She breathed, "I wanted...I wanted a fresh start where I could be myself with no reputation or preconceptions to hold me back. Singapore was so big and bustling, who would notice one new person in the crowd? I thought it would be the perfect place to find myself and I was right."

"So why didn't you tell any of your old friends?"

Why didn't you tell me?

“I just wanted to work it out on my own.” She said just a little too quickly, something unidentifiable shining in her eyes, “And I reached out to you didn't I?”

“After two years.”

“A drop in the ocean in the grand scheme of life don't you think?” She said breezily but Noah just shook his head.

Adannya smiled awkwardly, muttering something in Singlish he couldn't understand beneath her breath before pointing forwards, “There he is!”

Noah looked forward to see the great stone statue, body of a fish, head of a lion with water spraying out of its mouth. He had seen it on countless ‘What to do in Singapore’ lists and now he was standing before it. His face twisted into one of complete boredom.

“Wow, a fountain.”

Adanya snorted.

“Yeah, that was my first thought as well.”

“I mean, it's a really big pretty fountain but...yeah.”

“Want to get a picture with it?”

“Hell yeah.”

Adannya turned so they were shoulder to shoulder, shrugging with looks of mild confusion on their faces as she snapped a selfie with the merlion in the background.

“Here, let me.” Adannya grinned, clicking and tapping away at her screen for a few minutes before Noah felt his phone ping.

She had sent him a photo, a copy of their selfie but with a custom frame made from waves with little silver hearts around it. The word ‘Besties!’ swirling in the foam. His good mood dimmed slightly seeing that word for some reason and it must have shown on his face.

“What? Don't you think it's cute.”

Cute. Such a girly word; it perfectly suited Adannya; this extroverted, flirty woman he'd just met but it ground at his ears like tearing metal. This was all wrong.

“I think I'd like to head back now.” He mumbled, putting the phone away and the photo out of his mind. Adannya's smile fell.

“But why, it's only lunch time, we can do loads more sightseeing and I haven't even gotten you that street food.”

“I am tired.” He lied, “I'm going back, what's your address, I'll get a taxi.”

Adannya gave it to him, looking disappointed; maybe he wasn't being fair but neither was she and frankly, all Noah wanted right now was to be far away from her. The second he stepped into the taxi he deleted the photo but it still burned into the back of his mind.

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Being back at the apartment was only marginally better; all those mementos and photos felt like stabs to his gut. More reminders that he did not know this woman. If it were just a physical change maybe he wouldn't be so bothered but Lucas and Adannya were totally different people body *and* soul. Noah dug his hands into his hair and pulled, a frustrated noise escaping from behind his clenched teeth. He liked Adannya, he did but she was not who he came to see. He could barely figure out how he felt about either one of them let alone both!

He flopped down on the couch, staring sightlessly out the window trying to get a grip on his thoughts. An idea slowly crept into his mind, like a snake sneaking into a garden. It was wrong, at the very least rude but...he had to know just how much his friend had changed. Noah began to snoop. He started small, casually opening up drawers and cabinets in the living room finding everything from cook books to useless knick knacks. There was no memorabilia from his life as Lucas, not even a graduation cap or certificate. He moved to the bedroom, going straight for the top shelf and bottom corners of her cupboard. Noah didn't even know what he was looking for really, a cardboard box with year books? Hell, even a photo from their time at college? But there was nothing; not a single hint to show her life before Adannya.

The computer hummed quietly from the desk in her bedroom and Noah walked toward it with trepidation. He knew better than anybody that a personal computer was

second only to phones when it came to privacy. You just did not snoop on somebody else's PC, it was common courtesy.

She had no password protection.

In for a penny in for a pound. He began clicking on files; photos of trips with friends, documents for work, music; all fairly normal stuff, there wasn't even any sneaky porn hidden away. What ate at him though, was the lack of games. Lucas had loved games, they had wasted many a weekend away playing grand strategies together; now she didn't even have minesweeper. What she did have was a dozen bookmarked websites full of clothing and make up tutorials, half a dozen for hair as well. What happened to the guy who said there was no use fussing over a bunch of dead cells?

The sound of a key in the lock made him start and quickly closed down everything. Just making it back to the living area as Adannya walked in. She was smiling but it looked almost false, artificial.

'Just like everything else about you.' Noah thought bitterly.

"I hope you got some rest!" She said in a voice that was just a bit too cheery, "I got us a reservation at a real atas place, real fancy. Go put on your best clothes, I am taking you out for some quality Malaysian food."

He was growing to hate that accent, hate the Singlish slang she kept putting in his sentences. It was a constant reminder that he did not know this woman at all and judging by the breezy way she was acting, she didn't know him either. Either that or she was ignoring his obvious discomfort; regardless, Lucas would never do either and Noah hated her for that.

"Great." Noah grit his teeth, "I can't wait."

~

Noah was the envy of every man in the restaurant; he was sitting, eating the finest food Singapore had to offer with a beautiful woman opposite him. Adannya had dressed to the nines, with a silky blue dress and glittering stones in her ears and around her neck. They made her eyes stand out all the more stunningly. She had taken his breath away when she'd walked out of her room ready to drive them and he had only gotten it back in time to lose it

once the first course was served. He couldn't pronounce half the ingredients in his noodle dish but it tasted better than anything he'd ever had.

And yet, he was still grumpy. That combination of strange anger and frustration boiling away beneath his skin. Adannya seemed to sense it and in response was being extra chirpy, pretending as if everything was totally fine and chatting away amicably; ignoring his single word replies. When the waiter came to the table she even tried to get him involved with the conversation; leaning over slightly to show off her cleavage and asking if he had any suggestions for places to take her friend from out of town. Something about the way she said friend really ate at him, there was too much emphasis on the word, as if she wanted this waiter to know they definitely were not together. Which they weren't, so it shouldn't bother him, but it did. When the waiter finally escaped, Adannya finally lapsed into silence.

"I'm trying my best, Noah." She sighed, "Really I am. Maybe...maybe this was a mistake inviting you here. Maybe you should just go home and forget about me."

"Like you forgot about me?" He hissed pointedly, anger coming to a boiling point.

"I never forgot about you!" She replied in a low whisper, aware of all the prying ears at nearby tables, "You should feel flattered, you're the only person from my old life that even knows about me."

"Flattered? *Flattered?!?*" He laughed bitterly, "You just up and left, ignored me for two years then sprung this on me and expected everything to be okay?"

"I'm still me-"

"No you're not!"

The back of his chair slammed against the floor as it fell, he was on his feet now, standing over their table. The whole restaurant had gone silent; the room all waiting with baited breath to hear the salacious details of what this fight was all about. Despite his anger, Noah meant what he said earlier, he would never out somebody no matter how pissed off he was.

"Let's go talk somewhere private." He muttered, "Before I say something stupid."

They walked out, the maitre de handing them the receipt with a worried look on his face. They made it about halfway down an abandoned side street before Adannya swirled on her heels and faced him.

“Well, out with whatever it is you want to say.”

“I don’t know you.” Noah said simply, “You...you’re nice don’t get me wrong but your body, your race, your gender, your name, hell, even your personality have been changed. For all intents and purposes the guy I liked, *my friend*, is gone.”

“That’s not true.” Adannya said quietly, “I know my body has-”

“Aren’t you listening?” Noah cut in, “I could deal with that! I won’t pretend it’s not a little weird but you said it yourself, you used that magic to change who you are on the inside. That’s what I care about.”

She blinked at him in awe.

“It is?” She whispered. “Not...me being a woman?”

Noah sighed, running his hands through his hair.

“I’m not going to pretend that’s not part of it.” He said after a while, “It’s hard when somebody you know suddenly looks so different and expects you to call them a different name. Especially when that fact is sprung on them when they are expecting the old them right up until the last second.”

Adannya made a guilty face.

“But that fact that you changed who you are, what about you is Lucas aside from your memories? What part of you is the person I knew? The person I...cared about. I’ve basically flown half way around the world to meet a stranger who replaced my friend.”

Noah swallowed and looked at his feet, there was a lump in his throat and his eyes were burning and he furiously swiped at them before choking out.

“And I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

His jaw hurt from grinding his teeth and he felt his cheeks turning red with emotion and embarrassment. This trip was such a mistake. A soft hand found his shoulder, then another hooked under his chin, forcing him to meet Adannya's eyes.

"That's not true." She whispered, "I'm still your friend, yes I am different and I sped up the process a bit with magic but this is who I always wished I could be. Haven't you ever wished you were more outgoing or confident?"

Noah nodded.

"So did I. I withdrew so much around people because I felt like a lie. Everybody loved Lucas but...I wasn't him, he was just a part I was playing because growing up everybody told me the real me was wrong."

Noah had never considered that. What did that say about him? Was his best friend somebody who didn't exist? Or were they standing right here in front of him?

"This is me." Adannya held his hand tightly, "Louder and prouder than ever but I am still and always have been your friend Noah."

After a moment of silence she continued.

"Are you the same guy from two years ago? Have you not changed at all? Matured? Grown?"

"Well, yeah of course I have changed but I don't think that's a fair comparison."

"Hear me out, are you the same person you were when you were fifteen? Ten? Eight? Would you say your personality has majorly shifted since then?"

"Yeah?"

"That's what I did, I used that magic to help me become the more confident, outgoing person I wanted to be. I guess you could say I cheated." She giggled, "Got all my character development instantly, more or less."

Hearing her speak so openly about it all made him feel guilty for snooping earlier. Noah looked into those deep blue eyes; they were shining slightly with so much emotion. For the first time, he took into account how hard this must have been, confronting a person from her past, especially when their reception was far from warm or accepting.

“Okay,” He breathed, “I think I get it.”

“How about we use the rest of your trip to get to know each other a little better, I think we both just expected things to sort of fall into place like old times when that clearly couldn’t happen.”

Noah nodded, there was the Lucas he had known, soft, caring, always looking to solve problems rather than cause them. As Adannya smiled, hopefully Noah couldn’t help but notice a slight lift to the right side of her lip. A slight imperfection Lucas had as well and finally, the two began to merge together into one person within his mind. Not wholly, but it was a start.

“I uh, really made a scene in there, huh?” He blushed but Adannya waved him off.

“What’s life without a little drama?” She grinned, “I bet those patrons are still gossiping about the couple who had a fight in one of Singapore’s most atas- I mean fancy, restaurants in Singapore!”

“Is that place really such a big deal?” He winced and Adannya threw an arm around his shoulder casually.

“Oh yeah, I made that reservation weeks ago.”

Noah groaned as she cackled; his cheeks were red with embarrassment but if he was honest, this was the happiest he had been since touching down. They made their way back to Adannya’s apartment and the rest of the night had felt like a sleepover scene in one of those sorority films. The two of them had curled up on the couch with takeaway in hand talking about old times.

“What about Jess, what happened to her?”

“Three kids, and a fourth on the way!”

“No!”

“Yup, Mick and her tied the knot and now they are living out the suburban dream somewhere in Wisconsin making jam.”

“Sounds like absolute hell.”

“I know!”

Noah hadn't even noticed how much time was passing until the sun began to rise across the bay. Adannya rubbed her eyes sleepily before cursing in Malay.

“I was going to take you to Gardens by the Bay this morning!” She pouted, “It's beautiful in the morning light but there is no way you can appreciate it with no sleep.”

“Let's just crash.” Noah sighed, “We wake up when we wake up.”

“Sounds good.”

~

When Noah woke the next morning there was hair in his mouth which was...odd, to say the least. He opened his eyes to find more hair, long and dark pressing against his face. He pulled back and froze, he was still on the couch where they had decided to sleep earlier that morning but instead of being at opposite ends somehow they had congregated in the middle and he was now curled around her, one arm resting over her side. It was rising and falling with her steady breathing and Noah was instantly aware of what a precarious position he'd gotten himself into. Trying to remove the arm by stretching up he risked her waking up to his palm hovering over her breasts, not a great look. But moving it down had the same problem with her ass; speaking of, it was currently pressed right into his crotch. God, what he would not have given to realise that. Morning wood was normal, everybody knew that and when you woke up with a gorgeous woman next to you, pressing into your dick you didn't really have much control over how your body reacted.

Noah desperately tried to will the erection away; things had just started to feel normal with Adannya again, he didn't want to make things weird. He'd stuffed all his confusing feelings for her old self in a box since arriving and he would have liked just one day without

them thank you very much. Adannya stirred, nuzzling into the front of the couch and forcing her back against his chest; Noah was sure she must have been able to hear his heart pounding. Carefully as he could he tried to sit up only to awaken her with a start, giving him just enough time to move across and stuff a pillow over his crotch. Hopefully she didn't read too much into that in her sleep-addled state.

"Wha time'sit?" She mumbled, man that sounded cute.

"Uh, one thirty." Noah glanced over to the clock, "We could shower and go grab some food? Hit up the Gardens?"

"That sounds awesome, I'll get the rice cooker going."

"What do you have against toast?"

"Good taste."

He stuck his tongue out and she returned the gesture in a reverse of yesterday; Noah couldn't help but wonder if they were developing a thing. It felt nice, a new little habit they hadn't had before. Noah showered and spent most of the time with the heat turned off trying desperately to not think about how nice Adannya's body had felt resting against him. He was grateful they were heading out, all of a sudden being alone with her in her apartment felt far more intimate than it had before. Luna had been right, a man flying halfway across the world just to spend a few days with a woman had certain...connotations, even if he didn't realise it at the time.

These thoughts plagued his mind as they drove, only ceasing when they finally arrived and he gaped up at the giant tree-like structures that were the city's most iconic attractions.

"Incredible." He breathed.

"Just wait till they light up this evening," Adannya beamed, "It's beautiful, come on, let's go walk them!"

"Wait, what?" Noah blinked, "You can climb those things?!"

"Not like a monkey you dope, there are stairs and walkways inside and at the top."

“Oh.”

Noah felt his cheeks turning red, that was really obvious now that he thought about it. Even back in college when she was Lucas, Adannya had this talent for pointing out the obvious when he missed it. It had been one of the things he was most envious of. Now, with her added confidence she managed to make him feel even more stupid.

“Hey now, you’re a tourist, I don’t expect you to know everything, that’s part of the fun of hosting!” Adannya looped her arm through his. “Now let’s go!”

She tugged him along; Noah could feel the curve of her breast resting against his arm. He had been so busy being angry with her he’d not taken into account just how beautiful she really was. Now that the dust had finally cleared he could not *stop* noticing. She teased him as they made their way to the top of one of the skywalks, looking out over the city in the blazing afternoon sun.

“Ni Hao Singapore!” Adannya cried, throwing her arms up wide.

“Adannya, people are staring...”

“Let them.” She shrugged, “Why do they matter?”

He thought for a moment, yeah, why did they matter? Noah felt a genuine grin split across his face as he joined her in yelling a greeting to Singapore. Below him the people walked like ants, in the distance he could see a cable car and the glittering metropolis beyond contrasted against the bustle bay. It was beautiful; he could finally see what had drawn Adannya to this place two years ago. She was laughing now, clapping proudly at his daring before grabbing his hand and weaving them through the clouds.

“Let’s get into the cloud forest before you burn to a crisp.”

“More like melt.” Noah chuckled, wiping sweat from his brow, “Where does a guy get some of that ‘sterner stuff’ you’re apparently made of?”

“You must earn it through blood, sweat and tears!” She dared before winking, “You’ve already got one down.”

How could somebody be so wonderful and so frustrating at the same time?

The cloud forest lived up to its name, a huge indoor terrarium full of mist and plants with walkways slowly making their way up a giant, green, flowered covered mountain. The air was mercifully cool and Noah enjoyed listening to Adannya explain to him all the different plants and why they had been arranged thus. Occasionally others would walk by and say hello, evidently she came here often enough to make friends with other regulars. Noah frowned as he listened to the change in her voice though. When she spoke to others, that thick accent returned, yet when she was talking to him, it was just a slight twang. He waited until she had finished talking with a gardener to pull her aside to one of the seats beneath a greenery arch and mentioned it.

“I didn't even realise I was doing it.” She said as she waved him off, “Probably just a habit.”

“Adannya, I know I haven't been the best but...you don't have to hide any part of yourself from me anymore. I promise.”

She looked at him with wide, surprised eyes.

“I won't pretend I'll be able to take everything in stride, I'm not perfect but...please be yourself. You deserve to be yourself.”

For a moment she just looked at him, that unidentifiable emotion still swirling in her eyes, then she swallowed and looked away. Her thanks was barely audible above the hiss of mist sprayers but a second later, the extrovert was back and she was dragging him to his feet.

“Enough of that mushy stuff,” She smiled, “Let's go to the top!”

The rest of the day passed by in a blur of laughter and fun; they travelled across the entire Garden, Noah had no idea so many flowers even existed, let alone in one place. They reached a photo spot, a wall of multicoloured flowers of all shapes and sizes but no matter what they did, their selfie didn't look right.

“Hangon, I'll ask somebody to take it for us.” She suggested, running up to a strange man and asking something in Singlish before he took the phone.

He waved, saying something and indicating to them to move closer together. Adannya's cheeks dusted pink.

"He uh, says to get a bit closer, we're not in the frame." She mumbled, Noah carefully placed an arm around her shoulder.

It was a platonic gesture, one he had done many times and yet now, every nerve felt as though it were on fire where their bare skin met. The man said a few more things before finally taking the picture and Adannya practically jumped out of his arms. The photo was great, though Noah winced slightly while taking in his blush. It looked like something from an awkward first date. Now that he thought about it, a lot about today felt like a first date. He pinched himself, he had only just gotten Adannya's friendship back and here he was ruining it with a little crush. The same little crush that had hurt him so much when she moved away to begin with. Had he seriously not learnt his lesson the first time?

"Noah?"

"Hm?"

"I said let's go, there is a rooftop bar nearby with a great view of the music and light show they put on at eight. Weren't you listening?"

"Sorry, distracted." He rubbed at his neck, "This place is just really pretty."

"It is, isn't it?" Adannya smiled, her eyes were sparkling in the evening light.

As she turned to lead them away his eyes dipped along her figure. Yeah...really pretty.

~

Mai Tai's should be listed as a dangerous substance; something so sweet and easy to drink should not be so damned strong in the alcohol department. They had only arrived but already they were on their third cocktail each, lazing on the sun loungers the bar had set up facing the gardens.

"Here it goes!"

Music began to echo out as the lights all over the great tree statues lit up in patterns. Swirling lights and colours that painted them in beautiful lights. Maybe it was the alcohol in his system or maybe it was just the joy of a day well spent but Noah felt more relaxed than he had in months. Adannya too, dark hair fanned around her head on the lounge looking like something out of a movie, the lights from the shows giving her dark skin a pinkish glow that made her look almost magical.

“You look incredible.”

The words slipped out before he could stop them and he hastily added.

“Like, you look so relaxed and at peace. I am glad you’re happy in your own skin now.”

“Thank you, that means a lot.” She played with the straw of her drink, “I think part of the reason I cut ties with everybody was because I was worried what they might think of me like this.”

Noah hesitated for a second before pushing forward.

“If you had told me, back in college that this was your plan...I would have supported you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah of course, this all took me by surprise but you’re my friend. I want you to be happy. I just wish you would have trusted me. I told you everything back then, you were my closest friend, I thought you felt the same but it turns out, you only let me see a tiny fraction of who you are.”

“Is that why you were so angry? Not because I’m trans but because I didn’t tell you?”

Noah nodded.

“Petty, selfish I know.”

“No, Noah, I...I get it.”

They sat there in silence, letting the light and music wash over them as they finished their drinks. The high pitched whine of a firework met his ears and Noah sat up with a grin as an explosion of golden sparks appeared in the air followed by a burst of blue and red. He'd always loved fireworks; something about how they were fleeting, never quite the same always fascinated him. He was grinning ear to ear like a kid, finishing up the last of his drink before he felt somebody's eyes on him. He tilted to the side and found Adannya watching him, head turned fully away from the show.

“You okay?” He asked and she shook her head as if to clear away cobwebs.

“Yeah fine, sorry.” She turned back to watch the last of the sparks showering down over the bay, “Just...thank you, for what you said. I'm sorry I didn't send you any words the last few years. That was unfair of me.”

Still tipsy he leaned over and placed a hand over hers.

“I'm here now, that is what's important, right?”

She nodded. Noah couldn't be sure who moved first, but he was leaning forward and their lips were brushing. His eyes slipped closed just as golden light flared in the sky and then, they were kissing. He should have stopped it; a drunken mistake but Noah knew he wasn't that intoxicated. He brought up his free hand, intending to push her away but instead burying it in that long dark hair, cupping the back of his head and deepening the kiss. A breath moan escaped her and he swallowed it down just as the final whistle of rockets exploded sounded and they broke apart. For a second they stared at each other in shock, then Noah went to speak only for Adannya to do the same, then again, then they were both giggling like a pair of teenagers.

“Okay uh, sorry?” She chuckled finally, “Mai Tai's and the atmosphere-”

“Yeah, totally.”

More silence.

“Okay so that was a lie.” She threw her hands up into the air, “Fuck, things were going so well and now I’ve made them awkward.”

“I think I moved first.”

“Oh good, so will you take the blame for this?”

“Hell no, you already did that, no take backs.”

They laughed again, nervous energy slowly filling the air until they lapsed into silence again. What the hell, the water was already murky, why not get it all out?

“I think I had a crush on you, back in college.”

Adannya said nothing.

“When I came on this trip I thought I would figure out once and for all if I was gay or bi or whatever but that sort of had to take a back seat.”

“You never dated anybody in college.” She whispered.

“Neither did you.”

“So...have you figured out how you feel?” The question was tense, there was so much emotion behind it Noah couldn’t help but feel like he was at the edge of a precipice. How he answered might not just decide the fate of his trip but his relationship with Adannya. There was no going back.

“I think it’s just...you.” He decided on, “I like you Adannya, you’re kind and funny and you get me. I think I would like you no matter what body you were in.”

Now that he said it; Noah knew it was true. It was so simple this whole time how had he not seen it? Now though, he had an entirely new thing to be anxious about; did she feel the same way? Adannya was sitting with her hands in her lap, fiddling with the hem of her skirt. The pause became an awkward silence, the party goes around them at the rooftop bar all fading into the background, like they were the only two people in the whole city.

“Please say something.” Noah begged after a moment, “I’m dying over here.”

Adannya bit her lip and Noah's heart fell into his stomach; she was going to reject him. Fuck, he would have to go stay at that hotel for the rest of his stay there was no way he could-

“I wanted to tell you.” She whispered, “Before I left, I wanted to tell you the real reason I was moving. I would think about you all the time when I got here, I wanted you to know the real me so badly and yet I was too scared to do anything. I thought, if you rejected me it would be too much.”

There were tears in her eyes now.

“I was such a coward and...I couldn't figure out why! I don't give a damn what people think about me now because I love myself, normally that's enough but I think maybe...I think maybe I like you too. That's why your opinion matters so much to me.”

She finally met his eye and Noah let his body react first, reaching out to cup her face. She leaned into the touch; it felt right.

“Can I kiss you again?”

“You'd better.”

Their teeth bumped together at first thanks to the laughter but soon their lips were gliding across one another in perfect sync. Adannya's lips were so soft and tinged faintly sweet by the lingering mai tai; Noah had never imagined what it would be like to kiss her back before her change; now he knew even if he had this would be far superior. He cupped her face, brushing a finger across her high cheekbones. Her hands were grasping at the front of his shirt and Noah's heart began to beat rapidly as she pulled away with a gasp.

“We should stop.”

“I thought-”

“I want to keep going, *believe me*, but...if this is going to happen I think we should both be sober, no?”

He hated to admit she was right; now that he had finally tasted those lips he never wanted to stop. But this was not some holiday fling, this was a person he wanted to do right by and there was no way he was going to let hormones and the heat of the moment ruin it.

“Good idea, how about we go home and tomorrow, we go on a date.” Noah suggested, “A proper one.”

Adannya smiled widely and nodded before blushing slightly.

“That’s what the man who took our photo thought today was, he told me to ‘smile wide, you caught a good looking fellow!’”

Noah would be lying if that didn’t make him feel a bit special. He’d never thought of himself as particularly attractive but if a stranger thought he stood a chance with somebody as beautiful as Adannya then he couldn’t be too hard on the eyes.

“Do you agree?” He asked with a cocky smile and Adannya just scoffed.

“The last thing I need is you getting a big head but...maybe.”

Another round of fireworks started up and Adannya jumped up to get them more drinks. When she returned, the ever dangerous mai tais in hand she hesitated before squeezing onto Noah’s lounge with him. It was a tight fit, they definitely spilled some of their drinks trying to angle the straws in their mouths and Adannya’s hipbone was digging into his side but he didn’t care. If he could be anywhere in the world Noah knew he would choose to be here, slightly sticky with mai tai and grinning like an idiot.

~

Noah had spent the night tossing and turning; not because he was stressed but because he was excited. Most people were nervous before a first date but normally, they had at least a little time to prepare before said date started. Since he was staying in Adannya’s apartment, their date basically began the moment he walked out the door. As the sun began to rise and rolled over and stared at the blank wall; knowing that only a few feet away on the other side Adannya must be waking. Was she as nervous as he was? He brushed over his hair nervously, wishing he had a mirror, or sexier pyjamas, plain red boxers seemed almost cliché. Thinking quickly, he grabbed his towel; maybe he could rush over and shower before

Adannya woke up and then he'd be the one to make the best first impression. He stepped out into the living area and-

Adannya was there, still wearing her silky nightgown, a towel under her arm. Silently both their eyes dipped to the item and then back to one another's faces before bursting into laughter.

"Looks like we both had the same idea." She shook her head in disbelief, "You shower, I'll make breakfast. I'll even debase myself by getting out the toaster."

"You're a gem."

"Don't I know it?"

By the time they were both showered and dressed, Noah's nerves had completely disappeared. They sat together on the couch talking and eating while Noah pretended not to be jealous of the red bean bun Adannya had decided to have over toast.

"So then, what will our first date be?" He asked, "You're the host, you decide."

"Well, you've been in Singapore for days already and you still don't own a single tacky mug or 'I Heart Singapore' shirt so, I think we should head to the markets!"

"You're going to make me look like a total tourist."

"Yup!" She sounded absolutely delighted at the prospect, "Now, chiong! Hurry up and let's get going!"

He grinned, realising that almost overnight his feelings about Singlish slang had totally reversed.

~

Say what you want about South East Asian, these guys knew how to do shopping. Singapore had everything from luxury designers in gold and black storefronts, which he and Adannya walked past with a laugh noting the prices, to little mom and pop market stalls. Plus everything in between. Bugis Street Market was unlike anything he'd ever seen and indeed had all the touristy knick knacks a person could wish for along with other more authentic

souvenirs; not to mention clothes, games, homewares, hell, Noah was sure he could find a kitchen sink in here somewhere if he tried hard enough.

“Alright, our mission is to find you the most tourist trap-y souvenir possible.” Adannya decided, “The tackier the better.”

It was an odd sort of first date but Noah couldn't help but grin; it *did* sound like fun. Feeling bold, he grabbed her hand, enjoying how relaxed and happy the simple gesture made him feel.

“Alright then, mission start!”

They were through no end of coffee mugs, magnets and T-shirts; Noah even managed to find a particularly lopsided one that said ‘I went to Singapore and all I got was this lousy shirt’, which had a certain appeal but Adannya insisted was not tacky enough.

“Here!” She cried, placing before him, almost reverently, a mug with the worst drawing of the merlion he had ever seen on it.

The poor thing looked like he'd been half melted, one eye was clearly bigger than the other and the water had been painted white instead of blue giving it a far dirtier first impression than was probably intended.

“He's hideous.” Noah gaped, “I love him.”

“We'll take him.” Adannya grinned to the man selling it who didn't look particularly pleased they had insulted his work right in front of him.

Still, considering just how many of these mugs were sitting on his stall, Noah had to guess he hadn't sold a single one and was in no position to complain. He handed over the few dollars and grabbed his change only to realise Adannya had disappeared. For a second he panicked then he spotted her, chatting amicably with another stall opener, holding up a blue swath of fabric against her. A dress, patterned with dolphins and silver waves at the hems.

“It would look great on you.” He insisted, feeling a little awkward saying it but knowing it was true.

“You think? Oh, but we are supposed to be shopping for you, I shouldn’t.”

“No, please.” Noah smiled, “Grab it and try it on, there are some bathrooms over there where you can change.”

Adannya beamed ear to ear, handing the money over and rushing past him, quickly giving him a peck on the cheek.

“You’re the best.”

She emerged a few minutes later looking like she just stepped out of the little mermaid. She turned on her toes a few times, smiling and allowing him to look at it from all angles. The dress was loose, but tight enough in all the right places to show off her figure. He could see the gentle slope of her shoulders and curve of her ass clearly and he had to quickly think very unsexy thoughts to avoid embarrassing himself in the middle of a public market.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She breathed, “I never much cared for clothes shopping...before. It’s amazing how much fun it becomes when you have a body you want to decorate.”

An idea popped into Noah’s head and he offered his arm.

“Then let’s go get you some more adornments.”

“Noah, this is supposed to be a date, not a girly shopping trip.” She argued but Noah just held up her hand to stop her.

“The point of a date is to have fun together, right? Getting to see a sexy lady try on clothes is pretty fun in my book.”

Adannya narrowed her eyes playfully.

“Noah, are you indulging my love of clothes just so you can be a perv?”

“Maaaaaaybe.”

She laughed, taking his arm and squeezing it tight.

“I think I can live with that.”

It was silly really, travelling halfway around the world just to follow his date around at a mall. If he had gone on this date back in the states he'd have been bored out of his mind and yet, here with Adannya, he was having fun. He could not wipe the smile off his face as he sorted through racks of clothes looking for things he thought she would like. He happily carried her bags as their purchases began to pile up but mostly he just watched her. The way she bounced on her toes when she got excited, the goofy grin that was permanently on her face, the way her eyes lit up when he passed her something she adored. There was that old adage that if you were with the right person, any activity felt fun and for the first time Noah understood. Just seeing her happy and unabashedly herself lit a warm fire inside him; a sort of mixture of affection and protectiveness.

What's more, he could see the signs now retroactive. The way Lucas always hesitated when he got excited, as if he were mentally reigning himself in before he reacted or the way he avoided malls and shopping all together, claiming he found them dull. All that time, he had actually been hiding his true self and Noah felt a stab of guilt for never noticing. The way Lucas had always encouraged others to open up, the way he always tried to fix every problem; it had all been because he couldn't do anything to help himself.

“Noah! Stop paying for everything!” She pouted as he handed over yet another bill in exchange for a set of blue butterfly earrings. “I am the one who's supposed to be treating you!”

“You deserve it.” He said quietly, “You spent so many years helping me when you were hiding, I want to treat you for once.”

Maybe from the outside it looked like he was trying to buy her affections but the soft smile and shine in her eyes told Noah Adannya understood what this was. It was an apology, this was him giving back after all this time and not a single one of these gifts had strings.

Gently, he poked the metal studs into her ears, watching as a gentle pink dusted over her dark cheeks at his closeness. This was a simple gesture, putting in a new pair of earrings in the middle of a busy market; yet it was one of the most intimate moments of Noah's life. The way Adannya gazed right back he knew she felt the same way. A warm breeze wafted the scent of spices and fruit juice their way and Noah's stomach growled.

They had spent the whole day without him even noticing and now the sun was slowly beginning to set behind the tall buildings.

“Come on, sayang. Let’s go get something to eat.”

Noah wasn’t sure what that word meant but given the soft look she gave him, he could guess. They grabbed kebabs, and walked the streets with no real direction, sharing bobba tea for dessert. It took almost five minutes for Adannya to stop laughing after Noah had his first sip and almost gagged on a bobba bean, she ended up whacking him on the back until he finally caught his breath. Hardly a romantic moment and yet the mood still felt warm and comfortable; for the first time Noah didn't feel like he was going to blow his chances at any second.

They sat on a bench overlooking a small park as the sun finally disappeared, bathing the area in cool orange and purple light as the day faded. With confidence that was still new he leaned back and put an arm around Adannya and she instantly leaned into his side. They fit perfectly together and he sighed in contentment.

“Today has been really nice.” He said eventually, “But there is one thing left on my to do list.”

“Oh?”

They rested their foreheads together, eyes closed; just enjoying one another’s presence for a moment before Noah leaned in to kiss her. Her lips were still sweet from the bobba tea, or perhaps that was just her natural flavour, who could tell; he would just have to keep kissing her to find out. Something he was eager to do. She surprised him with her passion, tilting her head and deepening their kiss almost instantly with a deep moan. The sound travelled straight to his crotch and suddenly Noah felt a heat that had nothing to do with Singapore’s weather.

“Shall we go home?”

Home. That was such a powerful word; they say home is where the heart is and Noah realised that his home was wherever Adannya was.

“Yeah.”

The drive home was an awkward mix of anticipation, excitement and anxiety as Adannya did her best to keep her eyes forward and on the road while he sat there silently waiting for the drive to be over. They managed to walk to the elevator before finally that tension broke and Noah found himself pushed up against the glass walls, handrail digging into his back as Adannya attacked his lips. He just groaned, not complaining about the awkward angle at all as the doors finally hissed closed and they began their ascent up the building. Alone at last. Her long fingernails brushed the nape of his neck before she anchored herself with fistfuls of his hair, the slight twinge of pain made him shudder. It was as if she were marking her territory; making him *hers*; he loved it. In a way, he realised, he always had been, even since they first met. He broke away from her lips, kissing down her neck so that he could watch the reflection in the mirror behind them. He could see the perfect shape of her ass as it quivered and he grabbed a handful of it, listening to her groan as he massaged the sensitive skin through the fabric.

He swore the ride up took less time than usual and as the little bell chimed he found himself pushing back against her; feeling her breasts press against his chest as she walked backwards into the apartment, never stopping their make out session. Noah wrapped his arms around her hips, pressing his palm into her back in an effort to somehow bring them closer together. She made a delicious whimpering sound; desperate and horny, it went straight to his crotch. He felt his cock twist just as they stumbled into the couch, Adannya pulling him down onto it with a breathy laugh.

“Bedroom is too far.” She whispered between kisses. “I’ve been wanting to do this all day.”

Her short dress was bunching around her hips, revealing a set of almost innocent looking white panties, framed with lace. They contrasted against her dark skin and hair beautifully and Noah couldn’t help but stare as she pushed them up into a kneeling position.

“See something you like?” She teased, lowering the dresses shoulders and wiggling out of it entirely.

“A lot of somethings.” He replied huskily, watching as her breasts bounced in the matching bra.

He reached forward, hesitating for a second as if asking permission before gently cupping her tits. They were full and round, they felt real as any born woman’s and just as beautiful. Gently he ran his fingers along the lace at the front, finding two hard as diamond nubs at the

front and pressing against them. Adannya sighed shakily, biting her lip to keep more sounds from escaping.

“Don’t do that,” He admonished, “I want to hear every sound you make.”

He could tell she was nervous; for all her bravado this was still the first time he was seeing her fully naked, female form. As his eyes roamed over it she tried to distract him, pressing herself in close and kissing at his neck while she unbuttoned his shirt. Noah looked down over her shoulder as the beautiful peach shaped ass that was in full view; panties stretched across the cheeks. He reached down and grabbed it, squeezing tight and growling almost primally at the feel of her soft mounds under his fingers. The touch took her by surprise and he felt a puff of hot air against his neck as she gasped. He took the opportunity to unhook her bra and push her back so he could see that chest in all its glory. She hesitated but Noah laid a kiss at her temple.

“I want to see all of you.” He whispered.

Adanya took a deep breath and sat back on her hands, letting the bra fall forward where it was mindlessly discarded and forgotten by Noah. Even as it looked over her naked breasts with awe Noah could see the doubt in her eyes and he decided then and there to never let Adannya doubt her body or choice ever again. Lovingly he leaned forward and kissed at her clavicle, travelling down between those heavy breasts and along the curve until he took one of her dark nipples in his mouth. He rolled it around his tongue, licking gently and drinking in his tiny gasps and moans as he increased the pressure. A hand cradled the back of his head, pressing him more into her breast as he began to gently scrape his teeth along the skin. He could have stayed there forever, but his own need was beginning to call. He was hard as rock and straining against his pants almost painfully. Soft fingers brushed against his stomach as Adannya moved to help him and he was forced to stop his ministrations in order to remove the rest of his clothes.

Adannya sat watching him, dressed only in those white panties. Her chest was rising and falling as a small wet stain appeared at their front. She opened her arms and pulled Noah down on top of her with a sigh and he pressed himself against her mound. Even through the fabric he could feel her wetness. He couldn’t help but grind down against her, trapping his hardness between them as they both gasped and moaned, stealing kisses and touches as they teased one another. Finally the dam broke and Noah couldn’t wait any longer. His hands came to rest on her hips and Adannya obediently raised her hips to allow him to remove the last piece of clothing between them. They came away slick, the dark hair

between her legs already glistening with moisture as she opened her legs and wrapped them around his hips, drawing him close.

For a moment he hesitated on the edge, tip pressed against her hole. Balancing on one hand he reached the other over to hold her face, pressing their lips together in a deep kiss as he slowly slid inside. A deep groan escaped him as he parted her folds; she was so tight and wet, he could feel her squeezing him on all sides as her legs tightened around his ass. He did his best to take it slow but she felt so good, he could not wait to be fully buried inside her. When they were finally flush Noah almost didn't want to move. Being buried deep inside this heat was glorious but the more primal side of his brain took over and he drew out slightly, revealing in the rough feel of her inner walls against his cock before thrusting back in.

It took them a moment, as with all new lovers, to find a rhythm and yet, Noah didn't feel awkward. Being with Adannya felt right, even when things were not picture perfect and she felt so good regardless he didn't care. When they did begin to move in tandem it was like the last puzzle piece finally falling into place. Her legs rhythmically squeezed him, pulling at his hips as if she couldn't wait to be filled by him again. Noah buried himself in the crook of her neck, kissing her neck and drinking in her scent. He felt like a dying man who just discovered water; how had he lived his entire life without this? Going without now would feel like going without oxygen.

Adannya began to pulse around him, her moans getting higher in pitch as her hips began to stutter. Noah angled himself deep and thrust hard at the deepest part of her and she wailed.

"There! Again, please!"

How could he say no? They writhed together as she tightened further around him; Noah was so close to the edge but he held back, he had to know what she sounded like when she came. His balls tightened as things built, he was so close and then Adannya arched her back, pushing him flush with her as she made a ragged cry that could have been his name, it was too rough to tell. He could feel her pussy pulsing hard as she came, slickness squirting at the head of his cock pushing him over the edge too. Noah bit down on her shoulder, cumming silently but not subtly as his legs shook. They collapsed against one another, Noah enveloped in her arms and legs like a full body hug as they breathed deeply. With a warm sigh he pressed another kiss to her temple, then chin, then clavicle as she giggled. The laughter turned to a moan as he pulled out.

"Tissues are in the coffee table drawer." She said sleepily, "Then get back here."

“You prepared.” Noah replied wryly, making quick work of the mess and returning to her side to cuddle up on the couch.

They probably would have been more comfortable if they moved to her bed but the idea of being apart for even the few seconds it took to walk there. Adannya snuggled into his chest close and they laid together, looking out at the glittering lights of Singapore. Noah was beginning to love this city just as much as she did.

“Do you think this still would have happened if I was a man?” She whispered and Noah tightened his hold.

“It doesn’t matter.” He insisted, “I love you, no matter the body.”

“You love me?”

“...Crap, you’re not supposed to say that on the first date are you? Or right after sex.”

She shifted, rising up to face him and pressed a soft palm to his cheek.

“I’ll forgive you,” She smiled softly, kissing his nose, “ because I think I feel the same way. I think maybe I always did.”

~

The days in Singapore seemed to pass in a wonderful, pleasurable blur now that he and Adannya were officially together. They actually struggled to go out and see the remaining sights because every time one of them would pull the other back into bed. It was more than just physical though, they spent hours curled around one another, whispering late into the night talking about anything and everything; from the deep and meaningful to the completely benign. Despite being thousands of miles from everything familiar to him, Noah had never felt more at home.

Often, when people look back on their lives they realise there was a pivotal moment that changed everything, maybe even decided their path for the rest of their lives. More often than not though, nobody realised these moments were happening until they had long past and the repercussions were apparent. Noah, though, knew he was currently in one such moment, this trip to Singapore, ‘meeting’ Adannya, falling in love; this was what would define

his life going forward. And he was falling in love, he knew it and what's more, he could tell Adannya was falling for him as well. Their relationship was only just starting and yet there was none of that early day nervousness. He could read her like a book and she him; they were at peace together, two halves of the same whole.

"You've got your passport?"

"Yes."

"And you did a final spot check of the apartment? Remember one of your socks ended up on top of the book shelf the third time we—"

"Adannya, it's fine." Noah laughed as they pulled up to the airport, "Even if I did forget something, you can just bring it to me when you come to visit in a few months."

She gave him an apologetic look.

"I guess I keep hoping something will happen and you'll have to stay." She sighed, "I feel like we are just getting started and now you have to go."

Noah placed a hand on her cheek and said with deathly seriousness.

"You'll wait for me?"

"Oh yes." She responded with a dramatic waver to her voice, "All my days."

They both burst into laughter, earning them several odd glances as they finally got out of the car and headed for the terminal. It had been an incredible trip, not the one he had been expecting, not even remotely but somehow it had turned out even better. Not only had he finally come to terms with his own feelings toward his friend but they were fully reunited and starting a relationship. Already he knew it would be a matter of time before he ended up moving here to be with her permanently but for now, they were going to have to do things long distance.

"When I come back will I have to tell anybody who I...was?" She asked quietly but Noah shook his head.

“What matters is who you are now, it’ll be our little secret.”

“You’re the best.” She sighed, looping her arm through his and leaning on his shoulder as they walked to the departure gate.

His holiday might be over but he could tell this was the start of a whole new life together. Mentally he was calculating the costs of moving, perhaps he could do it in the off season and get cheap shipping for this stuff. Or maybe he would take a page out of Adannya’s book and start over totally fresh. Working in finance, it would not be hard to get a job in one of the trade capitals of the world. Most people would say planning to move across the world for a woman after only a few days together is madness but to him, it just felt inevitable. Noah glanced up at the ever changing board of flights and chuckled.

“My plane is delayed.”

“Really?” Adannya could not keep the excitement from her voice. “How long?”

“Long enough for us to get mai tais together at the bar and maybe sneak away to an abandoned office...” Noah grinned at her, she smiled right back.

Neither were worried about the distance; they ran through the crowd toward the bar not caring who stared, as far as Noah was concerned, they were the only people in the world.

