



SHORT STORIES BY:



PAUL GNANASELVAM

ALISTAIR YONG

JEANNETTE GOON

HADI M. NOR

MARC DE FAOITE

TIMOTHY NAKAYAMA

CLAUDIA SKYLER FOONG

MARCO FERRARESE

ADRIANA NORDIN MANAN

TERENCE TOH

ANUAR SHAH

NIZAM SHADAN

EILEEN LIAN

WILLIAM THAM WAI LIANG



EDITED BY:  
ZURAIRI AR



LOST IN PUTRAJAYA



# LOST IN PUTRAJAYA

# Broken Kaleidoscope



TIMOTHY NAKAYAMA



I have been looking up at the same hot air balloon for the past fifteen minutes.

But I cannot say why.

It is not particularly beautiful, nor is it especially eye-catching; some of the other balloons in the clearing are a lot more stunning.

Yet I continue staring up at this red-and-yellow balloon.

They are all tethered, the balloons in the clearing — the late evening launch is many hours away. It is two hours before noon; the temperature is rising, the sky is half-occluded by crescents of white clouds.

The colleague who has been badgering me to catch this four-day event? “Aiyoh — you’ve been back from the US and working here for five years now, and you’ve never once been to the International Hot Air Balloon Fiesta? It’s just a stone’s throw from our office, lah!”

Yes, it is. From where I am standing, I can see the office atop its hill, a gleaming construction of steel, glass and concrete, with its distinctive origami-style roof and eaves. It basks in the morning sunshine, a vision of understated elegance overlooking the lake and other Precincts.

To others, it is the Putrajaya International Convention Centre. I just call it *the office*.

I turn my attention back towards the red-and-yellow balloon.

It is a strange sensation — I am staring up at a balloon, but I do know not why. There is something about the balloon that must have set the gears of my brain in motion.

There are, however, no sparks of recognition or recollection. I am at a complete loss as to the reasons behind my actions.

This is not the first time it has happened.



### **5 years ago - Before The Interview**

I sat there, trying my best to appear as nonchalant as a graduate with half-a-dozen job offers already on hand would be.

The truth was – I had two. Both were abysmal.

As I looked around the small waiting room, located just a few feet from the opulent boardrooms, I realize that *this* was more to my liking. Plush and luxuriant furnishings, elegant and peaceful surroundings – *this* I could get very, very used to.

All I had to do was convince them I was the best candidate for the job.

“Alex Yong,” the secretary called out.

I thanked her and headed for the furthest boardroom, a spring in my step, my best game face on.



## 5 years ago - The Interview

There were two of them.

Mr. Naza was the Director of Sales and Marketing back then; very impressive considering he was only in his early 30s. Slender and bespectacled, he oozed charm and confidence.

Mrs. Chen was a senior HR manager that time, in her mid 30s. Her pulled-back hair and the short, clipped way she spoke gave me the impression that she was a woman who was all business.

“So you took the one year off after college?”

“Yes, Mrs. Chen. I traveled for about a year, working the odd job here and there to supplement my travel funds. I thought it would be a great learning experience, to help toughen me up a little before joining the workforce.”

Both of them nodded in approval at my slick answer.

“Alex, it says here that you’ve only got one parent?” Mrs. Chen said, having picked up my file to give it a second go-through.

“Yes, Mrs. Chen. My father died shortly before I went to the States.”

“Oh, poor thing. Must have been hard. Your mother, did she try to get you to stay on in Malaysia instead?”

“No, not at all. She was adamant that I go. I’m an only son, and my parents had saved up a fair bit of money. I completed all three years there.”

“With very good grades too,” Mr. Naza said, looking up from his own copy of the file.

"I just bunkered down and did my best, sir."

Mr. Naza closed the file. "Alex, you're a very promising young man. We could use someone like you in Sales and Marketing."

"Thank you, sir. I would like to work here. It's an impressive place."

"It's a lot of hard work, Alex. Late hours. Clients pushing you to the limit."

"I'm ready for all of that, sir. Nothing that's worth it ever comes easy."

He smiled. "It's a challenging job. But the rewards are well worth it."

He paused then, a master salesman at work.

"So, Alex, are you sure you want to work here?" His smile was all-knowing.

He had me. Hook, line and sinker. He knew it. I knew it. Mrs. Chen knew it.

"I'm sure, Mr. Naza. Incredibly sure."

There had been a tiny voice at the back of my head, which I assumed was my poor conscience trying to get a say in the matter. I vaguely remember it saying that I could do better elsewhere, to go for a job that was more in line with my own inclinations.

I wonder how differently things might have turned out had I listened to that tiny voice instead.



## The First Year

I learned a lot during that first year.

In the first six months as a lowly Sales and Marketing Executive, I learned that we had to go above and beyond the call of duty to impress our clients, even if that meant answering a client's call at three in the morning.

That is how it works, the seniors reminded us over and over again whenever we new recruits complained. After one year, we knew the drill — we were the grunts, the lowest of the low on the totem pole.

I remember one rare night when Mr. Naza gave me the green light to leave work at six, a time where I would normally still be at the office. I called my mother immediately; I could hear the surprise in her voice at the unexpected news, followed by her unreserved happiness.

By the time I parked my ten-year old second-hand Wira in the one-car driveway of our small two-story house in Puchong, it was already half past seven.

All my favorite dishes were on the table — oyster omelet, roasted chicken, and braised eggplant.

"I'm happy you're home early today, boy."

"I did something good. That's why the boss let me off early, Ma," I replied, before stuffing my face with food.

She paused before saying, "You've been working this job for almost a year now. You come home late almost every night. Can you cope?"

"I'm a tough boy, Ma. You've brought me up to be one."



“But, boy, are you happy at your work?”

An unspoken answer formed in my mind.

It had more truth in it than the one that came to my lips.

“Not bad lah, Ma. Fun and enjoyable.” With filial grace and piety, I placed a choice piece of chicken on her plate. “Here, Ma. Eat up.”



### **The Third Year**

I looked down upon the lake, its surface reflecting the glare of the harsh afternoon sun. I looked out across the surrounding precincts, taking in the sterilized beauty from my vantage point.

“You’ve earned it, Alex,” Naza had said, several weeks before. “You’ve performed exceptionally well in the last two and a half years. If anyone deserves it, Alex, it’s you.”

There was a knock on the door, interrupting my reverie.

“Boss, here’s your coffee.”

She handed me the hot coffee, freshly brewed, from the café a block and a half away.

“Keep the change,” I said. I could afford to be magnanimous now. After all, Alex Yong was now a Manager of Sales and Marketing. Alex Yong had moved up the totem pole.

She protested, but it was a weak effort at best; I knew how much they earned, these new recruits.

"It's okay, Rina. Really."

I thanked her again, and gently waved her away. She got the hint and closed the door softly as she exited the room.

My room now.

I returned to the windows, admiring the world anew from my lofty position.

I took a sip from my coffee. Dark and decadent. Just the way I like it.

Things were going to get better now.

At least, that was what I told myself.



### **The Fourth Year**

In the fourth year, everything started going downhill.

I had the notion that once I hit Manager, I could live a cushy life. No more toiling; I could sit in my office, enjoy the view and head home at six.

Mr. Naza quickly disabused me of my fairy-tale notion. There was even *more* work, and a ton of additional responsibilities. That and of course, the inevitable power games, the endless office politics.

I could no longer avail myself of anyone's succor. Mr. Naza had been my unofficial mentor since I joined the agency, but he was the numero uno now, the topmost head on the totem pole — he had no time for my whining or foibles now.

Where at first I had basked in the glory that was my promotion, I now saw things in a much darker light.

The clients, both potential and existing, I was supposed to wine and dine them, to agree to almost anything short of outright larceny. A year ago, I would have looked at the lavishness of such “lunches” and “dinners” and thought, yes, I’ve made it.

But in my fourth year, the illusion started to waver. Behind every smile and handshake was a greedy opportunist. It all felt like a sham, a sorry group of people gathered together, looking to increase whatever power and influence they possessed to further their tawdry little lives.

Life at home was not much better.

I had a contractor perform some major renovation work on our little home.

I did not ask her, but I think Mother could sense the changes in me; I talked less, and rarely smiled. She never mentioned a thing, but I could tell, by her glances and her occasional remarks, that she was worried and concerned for me.

I remember one day, Mother came up to me, carrying a plastic box filled with books.

“Boy ah. Tomorrow they renovate bedrooms, so I gathered some of your things. Where you want me to put these books?”

The box was filled to the brim with books. Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Le Guin, Tolkien, Austen... Had I really read all these books? There were so many of them.

“Just put it anywhere, Ma. If there’s no space, I guess you can just throw it away or donate it or something.”

Mother looked at me then, a strange expression etched over her features. Was that sadness, disbelief, or disappointment? I was far too tired to tell the difference, or care.

Oh, and about the dreams...



### **The Dreams**

They started coming to me, the dreams.

Always the same.

The very first one went like this:

I opened the door, turned on the lights, placed my sneakers onto an overflowing shoe-rack, wondering why I owned so many pairs of shoes.

The room was barely studio-sized. There was a tattered old leather couch by the corner, a queen-sized mattress next to the couch that looked way too big for one person, an old study table, and an ancient-looking cathode-ray tube TV.

I knew the room well.

It had been my dormitory room during my three years in college, in the States.

But there was one part of the dream that did not quite fit.

A man, sitting on the couch.

"Hello, there," the man said.

He was Asian, probably Chinese. He looked to be around my age and build. There was something familiar about him, but I couldn't quite place my finger on it.

"Uh, hello," I replied. "Why are you in my room?"

"Your room? No. This is my pad. You've got the wrong room. I must have left the door ajar."

"What are you talking about?" I heard myself say. I looked back towards the door. I had opened it with a key... or had I?

"I really think you've got the wrong room, mister," the man said.

I looked back at the door, then at the man, then around the room.

I was very sure that this was indeed my room. But then — how had the man entered my room?

At that point, I woke up, only to fall back to sleep minutes later.



### **The Fifth Year**

Things went from bad to worse.

Every time I looked into the mirror, I saw a man in his late 30s, a decade older than the Alex Yong I knew.

Even Mr. Naza had abandoned me, preferring to mentor the agency's newest hot-shot superstar junior executive.

I now had a luxurious high-end 2-bedroom condo unit in Seri Kembangan, where I occasionally stayed the night; it shaved off about thirty minutes from the daily commute. I estimated that I would be able to pay off the loan plus interest in approximately 30 years.

Oh, and it was during my fifth year with the agency that the blackouts came.

I'm not exactly sure when they started, but I would occasionally forget certain things or moments: it could be a piece of vital information shared by a colleague, the research I had done for a sales pitch, even the dates of social outings with what few friends I had left.

And the dreams — they only got worse.



### **The Dreams**

It was the same dream over and over again.

The same dorm room. The same furniture.

But not the same man.

Or at least, not the same man every time.

The near-familiar Chinese man was gone now, replaced by other, stranger men. First, there was the buff Vietnamese man. Then there was the Italian hoodlum. Soon after that, it was an African man, long and sinewy, whose gaze pierced right through my soul.

Different men, but each one saying the same words.

More recently, just three months ago, the man had morphed into an old man with skin the color of ivory, and a long white beard.

"I really think you've got the wrong room, mister," he said, looking at me with sad, pitying eyes.

But when I tried to reply, everything became a blur, and I found myself sitting in a leather chair, staring at a computer screen.

"Alex? *Alex?*"

I brought my vision into focus, half-expecting to see the old man with his sad, sorrowful eyes.

But I knew I was wishing for the impossible.

The only thing I saw was the client, snapping his fingers in front of my eyes.

"Hey, man. Are you okay? You kind of spaced out on me."

"I'm fine. Sorry, where were we?"

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was one of the older secretaries.

"Mr. Yong," she said, "the lady you were out for lunch with yesterday stopped by and left me her card. She told me she had forgotten to pass it to you yesterday and could I please pass it to you."

"Lady?" It could have been any one of a handful of female clients; I valiantly tried to remember, but once again, my overworked brain failed me.

The secretary promptly stepped into my room, placed the card on top of my desk, and exited just as swiftly as she entered.

My fingers started reaching out for the card, but their journey was stalled when the client got right back into the discussion.

“Alex, I don’t think you’re hearing me right. Listen, this is what I really need.”

He continued, each word about what *he* needed, what *he* wanted.

All ten of my fingers scurried back to the keyboard; whoever had dropped the card could wait. The client sitting in front of me was negotiating a five-figure contract, *and* he was a big fish to boot. Doing a good job on his week-long seminar might halt my steady decline; stuff it up and I would give my enemies at the agency another excuse to plunge their knives into my back. It was my job on the line.

I ignored the card and listened.



### Two months ago

I cannot remember much of the past two months. Everything seemed to revolve around work; I was in charge of one of the agency’s huge international events.

My mother was in the living room. She was looking at something in a brown manila file. She went quiet — absolutely quiet.

There was tension in the air, but I had too much on my mind to worry about it.



I barely acknowledged Mother's quiet "Good night, boy" as she headed upstairs to retire for the night, engrossed as I was in my work.

At about midnight, I took a break. I picked up my smartphone and decided to select a new ringtone. That was what I did every few weeks; with the number of calls I got in a day, having the same ringtone for more than 2-3 weeks would drive me up the wall.

I found a suitable one minutes later. I had always loved the song, from way back in my college days; it was a song that I could imagine singing right then, in the middle of the night, because it offered the salvation from my current predicament that I was so looking for.

I changed my ringtone, but I did not sing.

There was work to do. A lot of it.

The next morning, my mother found me on the family couch, sleeping. The lights and ceiling fan were still on.



### **The Now**

Perhaps it is the heat. Perhaps a case of dehydration. Perhaps it is the stress finally getting to me.

Whatever the case is, I am now currently down on the ground.

It had been a lightning-fast transition: one minute I had been standing, still looking up at that damnable balloon,

the next, I was on the ground. My head must have slammed into something hard on the ground because there is a dull pain at the back of my head.

I lie there, looking skyward at the red and yellow balloon, blood streaming down my nose. Remembering.

Was it the knock on my head that jarred the memories loose? I don't know.

But the memories are there again.

All of them.



## **6 years ago - The Year of Traveling**

There were three of us in the wicker basket.

The guide was the only one who knew how to launch, fly and land a hot air balloon. He was trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

The other man is me, Alex Yong. Twenty-two years of age, a fresh US college graduate.

The woman next to me is the love of my life, Preya.

I met Preya in college in the States.

I first laid eyes on Preya during a college event, the International Cuisine Festival. Seeing as how we were the representatives of our country, Preya and I and a couple of others decided to volunteer to cook some of Malaysia's best-known dishes.

Preya. The girl could throw it down in the kitchen. Her vivacious locks of thick curly hair, aquiline nose and big happy eyes were certainly easy on the eyes.

But Preya was far more than that.

I fell for her because of the way she made me *feel* whenever I was with her.

By the middle of our first year, we were already a couple.

We talked of many things and shared everything. There were no secrets, no games to play, nothing to fake. Our love was there, out in the open, shining brighter than the stars on a clear midsummer's night.

We graduated in the same year, and decided to take a year off before returning to Malaysia to join the workforce. It would be our one year of traveling, seeing more of the world, experiencing life first-hand.

And so we found ourselves in a hot air balloon, flying over the Canterbury Plains, New Zealand. We watched as the world sped past below us.

"Are you sure?" Preya asked.

"Yes, love. A writer. My boyhood dream. I've been thinking about it for three years now."

She smiled that enchanting smile of hers, "Alex. Go chase after your dreams. When you start writing books, I'll illustrate them for you. With my colors, pens and magic, I'll bring your stories and characters to life! We'll share our adventures with the world!"

I smiled too, the most contented man in the world.

Then I remembered something.

"Here you go, love," I said, handing her a slender brass tube, no longer than eight inches.

"What is it?"

"Your birthday president. It's a kaleidoscope."

"Oooh!" she cried out as she peered into the tube. "Wow, Alex! Where did you get this?"

"I bought this at the market yesterday, from some old man claiming to be a Russian immigrant. He was selling all sorts of odds and ends in a small cart. So, what do you think?"

"It's so pretty!" Preya said, her right eye still glued to the kaleidoscope. "Look at how all the colors come together and create all these intricate patterns. Seamless, not one broken line or pattern."

"The power of reflection and symmetry, love."

"Yes, I know that, you doughnut. But it's pretty amazing how something so simple in principle can create something so beautiful."

"Simple things are the building blocks of beautiful things," I said, smiling as I kissed her on the forehead.

"Damn right, son," said a voice just behind us.

We looked at the guide in surprise, and Preya even blushed.

"We need more people like you two," the man said, grinning.

Preya and I hugged each other and looked out at the world once more.



### **The Now**

Everything is coming back to me. The holes in my memory are being stoppered and all the memories that eluded me in the past are rushing back to me now, the little details falling back into place.

Finally, I can see the big picture.



I had once wanted to be a writer. That explains all those huge scary tomes I used to love delving into both before and during college.

No wonder Mother had been sad for the past few years; seeing her son slowly give up on his dreams, all for the sake of money, prestige and power. No wonder she had not thrown out any of the books during the renovation of our small Puchong house. They are still in that plastic box, in the storeroom. I might have lost hope in myself, but Mother never did.



The brown manila file my mother was staring quietly at that night contained the X-Ray from the Neurological Department. It showed four growths in my brain, pressing upon the nerves that control memory and thought.

“We’re going to do a biopsy,” the neurologist had said, “we’ll have the results in two weeks’ time.”

My father had died of brain cancer.



“The good news is that those growths in your head are benign; they won’t metastasize. The bad news is, we’re going to have to remove them,” said the neurologist two weeks later.

“What if I don’t get them removed?”

“You’ll continue suffering memory lapses and your thought process could be severely impaired. And if it continues growing, even your motor skills will be affected.”

“I’ll be out for several weeks?”

“Try several months. This is your brain we’re talking about. It’s rather complex machinery. You’ll need to rest extensively.”

“I don’t have the time, Doctor.”

“Aiyah, Boy! Listen to the Doctor lah!” Mother admonished me. “Your work or your life is more important? Please!”

I looked at my mother. In her eyes I could only see cold, naked fear; it was the fear of a woman who had lost her husband and might lose her son to the same killer.

I looked at the neurologist. In his stern face I only saw myself, a walking time-bomb.

“Doctor, can it wait, just for a little while? Maybe two more months — tops. I’ve got this really big project at work...”



The lady I had met for lunch that day?

Preya.

She just showed up one day, right out of the blue, right before lunch. I didn't know what she wanted; we had broken up after my first two years at the agency.

"You and I," she had said, "we need to have lunch now." Her face was ice, her voice a command, rather than a suggestion.

"I have a meeting at one in the afternoon..." I protested.

"So we'll come back before one. Now, Alex Yong Sze Wai. Get out of your chair and come with me."

We ate a simple lunch at a nearby cafe. Well, I ate. She scolded.

"You imbecile. You fool," she berated me, "are you really risking your life for some stupid project at work?"

"I'm guessing Mother told you."

"Of course, she told me! She's probably hoping that I'm the only one who can talk some sense into you!"

"I don't know why Mother called you, Preya. The two of us broke up three years ago. She shouldn't —"

"That's not important right now. I broke up with you because I didn't like the changes I saw in you. But it doesn't change the fact that I still care about you. And your mother. Very much so."

I said nothing.

"Are you seriously going to delay the operation because of work?" she pressed me.

"Yes. This is a major, major event. I can't just up and go. They depend on me. I have loans —"

"And your Mother? Who do you think *she* depends on?"

Preya's scorn laced every syllable, every word. The service staff started taking notice, and so did several of the other suits in the cafe. But I paid them no mind; they were inconsequential.

"Is your work really so important that you would ignore the wishes of your mother? Who had to see your father die from the same illness?"

"It's important work..."

"And your mother? Is she not important? When you gave up your dreams and your goals, I could understand it, Alex. I did not like it. Not at all. But I could understand it. This place..." and here she raised her arms, gesturing to take in the entire administrative capital that was Putrajaya, "so cut off from the heart of the city, so cut off from everywhere, is your home now. And that's exactly what you've become. Cut off from anything and anyone that you've ever cared about. Why? Because of money. Because of prestige."

"Preya, I've heard enough," I said coldly, "I'm going to go back to the office now."

"Whatever happened to your dreams?"

That was the last I heard from her as I walked back to the office, leaving her sitting alone in the cafe.





That hot air balloon we flew in during our one month sojourn in New Zealand? It had red and yellow vertical stripes with red and yellow half-circles just above the mid-line. It has been a thing of beauty, our very first balloon ride.

As the hot air balloon rode on the air current, we looked out at the world below and peered into the sunset just over the horizon. We spoke of the future, of life and dreams.

We enjoyed the flight, even though we already knew its destination.

For Preya and me, the future beckoned; our dreams would be the only things that kept our flights aloft, and the only fuel we would need, to reach our destinations.



It is the dream again.

But this time, I know things I did not know before.

My shoe-rack is overflowing with shoes because they also hold a large collection of shoes a size smaller than my own.

My queen-size bed is too huge for one person because two people sleep on it.

And the two who once called this dorm room home are now sitting on that old tattered leather couch.

“Hello, there,” the man says.

I know this man’s face. I see his face every time I look in a mirror. Except that this is a younger me, a me that is full of hopes and dreams and who has vowed never to give up. I have not seen him in a while.

“Hello,” I reply, “what are you doing in my room?”

“Your room?” the woman says. She is a young Indian lady. Beautiful to my eyes. But she has always been so. The last I saw of her was in a cafe, near my office, sitting alone as I stormed off.

“I am Alex Yong,” I reply, firmly, “this is my room.”

The man and woman get up, their hands entwined in an embrace of affection and love.

“Damn right it is,” the Alex Yong looking at me tells me. “What took you so long, bro?”



“You okay, mister?”

I open my eyes, and look into the face of a very young man I do not recognize.

I look past his head, and my eyes return to that very plain red-and-yellow hot air balloon, still tethered against the half-occluded backdrop of the afternoon sky.

“Better than I’ve been in quite a while, actually,” I try getting up, but my legs and feet don’t take kindly to my inner instructions.

“Mister, you’re bleeding from your nose,” the young man warns me. He is kneeling beside me and quickly reaches for a tissue pack in his leather satchel.

At that very moment, my smartphone, a few inches to my right, just beyond my grasp, rings.

The new ringtone I switched to two months ago rings out loud, the dulcet voice of the singer wafting through the air, singing those words that seem so appropriate for the life I have lived so far, words from a song that I came to love in my college days.

*“I once was lost... but now, am found.”*

*“Was blind... but now, I see...”*

The young man offers me a tissue. I thank him and wipe my bloody nose.

“Your phone, mister?” He grabs it, dusts it, and hands it back to me.

I take one look at the screen, see the caller’s name flash on my screen, and I smile.

“Thank you, my good man. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to talk to someone. About a balloon ride, many years ago.”