

TOUCHED

WINNER OF THE 2021 SOFT PUNK FICTION COMPETITION.



SHORT STORY BY CLAIRE CHEE
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By the time I was sixteen, hiding my condition had become as easy as breathing; which was fine, until I met someone who made breathing difficult. The first time I met Hakim was also my first time in the Malay-owned general supply store, two streets away from my parents' Chinese medicine shop. Our palms glanced as we exchanged items over the counter and I was shocked to feel that he was also wearing gloves – a commonality I'd never come across before in the damp heat of this city. I remember looking up, tripping into his smile, grabbing my items and leaving. Soon enough, his smile would stoke the least of my longing compared to the shallow dimples in his lower back, the down on his arms, the fullness of his long calves. This photo is of us on the curb outside his store, you can still see the grease stains on our gloves – these ones almost worn out – from the fried chicken we often had for lunch.

I was born on the 29th of February at the break of dawn – a liminal time of a liminal day – pink and unclean. It had been the Year of the Dragon, but years are only as auspicious as people make them; some dragons cough and sputter instead of breathing fire, some pigs find truffles instead of dragging their bellies through the mud. I discovered my condition when I was twelve. I had scooped a wounded sparrow from the sidewalk, where it had been directly in the sights of a scowling ginger cat. Exhaling in triumph, I looked down at my cradling hands.

The urgent wail I emitted; I can still hear it now, seventy-six years later.

The sparrow had begun to decay in my palms. Its chestnut feathers thinned so fast that any micro-movement turned them to powder that sifted through my fingers. The skin on its chest began to pull apart along the axis of its fragile ribcage, revealing a mass of tiny, dark organs. Terrified, I dropped it all on the ground and ran home with my palms upturned, not daring to dust them out of uncertainty of what had happened. I began to menstruate a few months later – they might not have been related, but at the time I felt that it was all a visceral curse of existence.

Curses, unlike what I was taught about colds or cancer, couldn't be fixed with herbs. My parents could not figure out why wolfberries did not disperse the faint stains on my fingertips or why acupuncture did not relieve the mustiness that seemed to emanate from my body. For years, I watched them frown while concocting daily brews that did nothing except make us feel like we were trying. Showers followed brief embraces. This photo is of me, doing my homework on a three-legged stool outside their shop to the sound of fat monsoon-drops sliding off the awning, the smell of ginseng and liquorice root braiding itself into my hair.

It took months before my parents agreed to have Hakim over for dinner. Back then, the violence of the Singapore riots still rippled through their minds. The remarks about 'his kind' did not end when he entered our home, and my patience wore like the fraying rubber band around the thick sugarcane stalks we kept in the kitchen. When my Ma pulled me aside to question why he also had gloves, I finally snapped. I told her it was none of her business, lying that Hakim just had a rash.

Ma had thus far been wrong about some lessons she taught me as truths: school was not primarily a blessing and some boys can stop once you let them start. There had been a particularly tiresome day spent around the girls whose tongues always danced dangerously between fraternity and violence; of hearing flippant theories about my parents conceiving a smelly little baby by feeding a poultice of their rancid medicinal herbs to a dog with diarrhea, before eating him tail and all. I met Hakim afterwards behind his store, in the mood to be reckless but not knowing how. Hakim saw the static in my eyes and engulfed me in a hug that ran from our lips to our groins. It lasted a few seconds before I shoved against his arms, cursing his misstep in Mandarin; my nervousness at being touched at all turned to irritation at being touched wrongly. Hakim exhaled an apology as the first tears careened over my lower lash line. I tried to apologise too, for being –

I forget, because Hakim didn't let me finish my sentence. But he pressed his gloved palms to my cheeks, the pillared fabric absorbing what was asked of my reaction. He told me it was okay and I believed him. I asked if he needed to wash himself and he called me a bodoh. That's why, when Hakim hadn't offered to show me his hands after the first time I'd shown him mine – I left the matter alone, sure it would be revisited in due time. People who have questions they would rather not answer can always recognise the outline of the same knot in someone else. Our hands had only a small role in our eventual love-making anyway.

Looking back, it could've been to distract me from his own condition, but Hakim often helped me experiment. We would often kneel in unified undress, my bare hands in my lap, his gloved hands holding the test subject of the day. The most informative was a piece of white bread. Hakim touched it along the nape of my neck and the ridges of my spine, brushing through the darkness under my arms, behind my knees, across the softness of my stomach, the planes of my face. We noted how the rings of mould on the bread varied along my anatomy, stumbling to the conclusion that something in my physiology caused a spoiling reaction with organic matter, more strongly through sites of sweat. The most beautiful test was with the apple and jasmine flower; the way they shrunk into their centres, releasing scents that were deep and wet, beyond health but still recognisable by name.

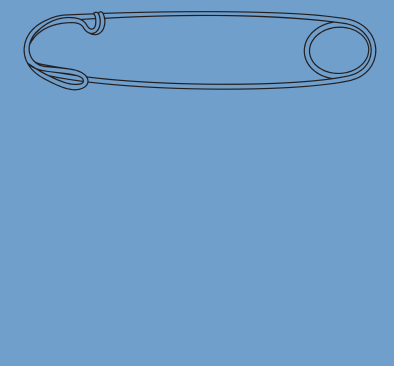
The most honest test happened in the late afternoon just before that first dinner with my parents, with an offcut of the chicken Ma was going to cook for us, retrieved in the afternoon when she had been marinating the rest of it. The decay bloomed with aggression, clawing its way through the sinews, offended by how hard the meat was to overwhelm – until it finally succeeded, leaving a grey heap of soft flesh in my hands, giving off an odour that made my tongue escape into my throat. Hakim held my hair back as I vomited, his own eyes red-rimmed with nausea. My food that night was tainted by disgust at both what I had just witnessed of myself and at my parents' visible discomfort sharing a table with Hakim, the two of them alternately staring at an old stain on Hakim's gloves as if they'd found the key difference from their clean, laundered daughter.

The following day at lunch, I was still dour. Hakim asked what would cheer me up. I looked at him, impatient. Hakim sighed.

He slowly slipped off his right glove. We both stared at his hand – lighter than the rest of him, with fingers that were a little crooked, but otherwise normal. He reached into the plastic bag our lunches came in, pulled out a chicken drumstick that had been gnawed clean and held it between his thumb and index finger. I squinted in the afternoon glare; nothing seemed to be happening. Then I saw it: a twinkle from where his thumb was touching the bone, and a gradual spread of radiance from its perimeter, until the entire bone was solid, pure gold in a matter of minutes. I realised then that I had been under the impression that his secret was worse than mine. My fury was immediate. I told him I had to go home, and stood up. Hakim unfolded his indignant frame and said he thought I'd be different, that I wouldn't be like his parents. I scoffed that he was lying. His parents must love his talent, as would mine or any one's. No, he flared, this 'talent' is haram and they think it's from Shaytan, here to tempt them into a life of opulence. They are scared and ashamed of me – not everyone worships gold as much as you stupid Chinese hoarders. Our gazes locked like a finger trap. I took off both my gloves and picked out another bone from the bag. It began to weaken as we watched, blowing away in a cloud of decomposition. Hakim sat back down, and I did the same. I don't have a photo from that day, but picture us staring straight ahead at the world, sun-dappled cheeks, gloves in our lap, hands clasped – me and my misunderstood Midas.

In my youth, I often forgot that things could rot for other reasons. Shortly after the gloves came off, so did some decorum – in old age I can admit, mostly mine. Of the most shameful: I slumped when I had a craving for smoke-crustured pork belly slices that I knew would go unfulfilled; jostled with irritation as Hakim's energy slowed mid-fasting; bristled when he still would not – even though he said he *could* not, for propriety's sake – introduce me to his Ibu. Each time my body reacted, his irises would lower, his dense lashes a visor. My heart would twist, and we'd spend a week or two grabbing apologetic, loving fistfuls of one another. But inevitably, again, I would be riled and he would wait. By the time the bill calling all young men for National Service passed, what remained between us was chafed threadbare. Hakim disappeared into a raucous khaki herd while I went off to university on a scholarship. There, I met the man I would eventually marry, now also folded into memory.

The university was bigger than the world I had known, and my sense of self swelled to fit it. I spent what little money I had on perfume and satin gloves, which came into style with faraway starlets. I learnt about letters and art, tasted better ways to cook chicken than frying and lost faith in the herbal remedies I grew up with. The edges of recollection are becoming blunt these days, but I can remember the time I sat in the wrong lecture theatre. I had only realised my mistake when the lights dimmed and the professor began speaking about material science. I was trying to slink out of the cellulose glow of his slides when he mentioned metals: how silver corrodes, how galvanised steel gets replaced by copper after a few decades and how gold doesn't decompose, impervious to air, water, acids and much else. Without being subject to wear, the professor said, gold would last indefinitely; unaffected, benign, abiding.



CLAIRE CHEE is based in Singapore with work in *The Inkwell*, *The Selkie* and *Sine Theta Magazine*. She was raised in Hong Kong, studied History of Art and English Literature in Edinburgh and had recent support from the Yale Writer's Workshop. Claire is currently copywriting full-time, painting when she can and missing large gatherings. Find her on all socials @claireredaktyl.

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"Low Visibility" & Other Poems

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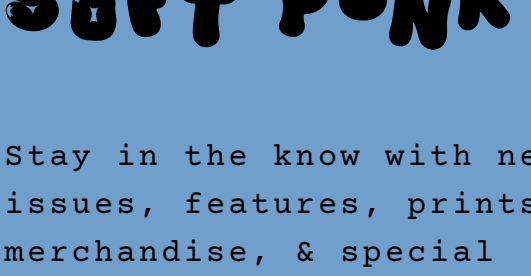
Fredy from the Bar
BY SARA LUZURIAGA



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