

Rich Shapero

HIBISCUS MASK

a novel



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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media
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Behind, a motorbike threatens, grind ascending, forcing Kell aside. It's Chulia Street, a wet night with no sidewalk. He's on the asphalt behind a mother and stroller. To the left, lit cafes and flaming grills, hawkers stirring laksa and waving ladles. On the corner, ball-capped tourists and headscarfed locals, umbrellas in hand, folded but ready for rain. In a couple of hours, the street girls would appear with their penciled brows, padded bras, narrowed eyes and sly smiles.

Kell turns, enters Love Lane, hopping puddles, hearing stray whistles and shouts as he crosses the frozen traffic beneath a trapeze of lights, headed toward one of the neon eateries. An American—collared shirt, sand-colored pants, an exemplar of science adrift, lost in a foreign land. Lonely and lost. Threatened by age, forty-two, and a clashing heritage. His black curls and stern jaw came from an Irish father, but

the fire of Sicilia burns in his heart, a disharmony barely noticed in the Asian land.

Lonely but aware in a way few locals are: Kell understands the equatorial jungle. And the jungle is everywhere, crowding Penang's largest city, surrounding towns, swallowing homes, woven into the lives of the people.

A bar hustler calls, stepping forward, motioning. Kell waves him away.

He knows the horde, plants and pollinators, birds and bugs, leeches and charmers, monsters and freaks. A botanist, an intellectual, he is nonetheless shrewd. He understands life as a struggle and expects conflict; and this, along with an inborn agility, keeps him safe. But being a man without a woman—That's not the life he'd imagined. He has no desire to count years without love, but what he wants he hasn't found.

He ducks under the awning of a corner cafe, scanning those seated out front and standing around the bar. A thin woman, swarthy, likely Indian, is fixed on him, raising her hand, moving from behind a table. Not the woman he's looking for.

"Mr. Kell?" She touches her fingers to her heart.

Kell stops, stares, nods once, unsure.

"Nitti asked me to meet you," the thin woman says. "She's waiting at a club a few minutes away. My name is Yrine."

An intermediary? He was expecting a woman named Nitti. They'd found each other on a dating app and agreed to this time and place the week before.

"I live here, in Georgetown," Yrine says. She has black

pearl earrings and her nose is sharp. Her eyes read his concern. She motions, starting between the tables. "She's at the Qing Club. Will you come with me?"

He's rooted for a moment, wondering. Is Yrine some kind of chaperon? In her procedurality, it seems some custom is being honored. After two years in the country, he is still confused by things like this. Kell ignores the uncertainty and follows.

Women who are willing to consider a non-Muslim are in the minority here, but during his stay he's met quite a few. His mind has been often engaged, his heart almost never. With her, however— With Nitti, his expectations are higher. From the video she'd posted and from their phone conversations, he'd gotten a sense of her gravity and depth. She was more thoughtful than most. She wasn't looking for entertainment or a night of good humor, and that's fired his hopes. Intensity, depth of feeling, a desire for real understanding—

"She's eager to meet you," Yrine says.

The Indian woman speaks excellent English as many here do.

"But she's nervous," Yrine adds with a smile.

Everyone's nervous meeting a stranger, he thinks.

He follows Yrine over a five-foot rain gutter and across Chulia, then down a side street with hawker carts like pandanus thickets crowding a shore. They'd been pedaled into place early that day, and they'd vanish when the last of the girls had gone.

"It's a bit hard to find," Yrine says.

Kell recalls the phone interactions, the pics and the video he watched. Nitti's voice is small, high-pitched but lofty: the

kwee-kwee of a serpent-eagle circling in the clouds. Lips full, skin coppery, nose bowed like the bud of a bamboo orchid; hair black and iridescent as a drongo's tail. Nitti is a beautiful woman.

"She's a rare creature," Yrine says, as if she could hear his thoughts.

Kell is walking beside her now. Smoke rises from a hawker grill, carrying odors of curry and scorched shrimp. A hunch-backed woman stoops over a wok.

Mingled with Nitti's gravity was a playfulness and irony like his own. It is hard to stifle his hopes. He wants it all: kinship, purity, heart in hand; a life together, weighty but keen. In advance of a first encounter, he's had thoughts like this before. It was all just ignorant desire. Was Yrine going to join them?

"You work at the Botanical Gardens," she says.

He nods. "I'm creating gingers. And you?"

"I manage the desk at a small hotel near the Hin Depot."

They are past the hawkers now. The street here is dark, warehouses looming on either side. Beneath a balcony in a ring of motorbikes, rempit punks sit like macaques, smoking, yawning to show their fangs as the two pass.

Yrine veers toward a leaning warehouse, slows, looks into a barred window and opens a black door. A red wall appears, painted with ideograms. She crosses the threshold, turns right, draws back a scarlet drape and enters a vestibule. Wooden birdcages hang from the ceiling, wound with tinsel.

She stops and faces him. "Can I see your passport please?"

Kell stares at her.

"There are men who prey on women like Nitti," Yrine explains. "I need to make sure you are who you say you are."

Kell is speechless.

"She's driven an hour and a half to see you," Yrine says.

He sighs, removes his passport from his pocket and hands it over. Odd moments were a part of romance in a foreign land. There were always surprises.

After inspecting his passport, Yrine returns it to him with a smile and continues forward. He follows her across the vestibule, ducks beneath an arch and steps into a long room lit by flashing red lights and red paper lanterns. Around a stage at the room's center, small groups and couples huddle at low tables, eating, drinking, adding murmurs to a fog of Asian music.

Yrine leads him past the stage. A giant serpent with a dragon's head is poised over it, jaws gaping. In a dim alcove, a woman is seated at a high-top table, turned half away. Her bare neck and shoulders are visible, along with a red hibiscus pinned to a black coif, braided and bound up with meticulous care.

The hibiscus is a splash, like fruit thrown at a wall. Its petals are flounced and the anther is gone. The woman's arms are gently muscled. Her skin looks burnished, smooth as a costly fabric. As they approach the table, Kell can see the hibiscus edges have creped. Removed from the stalk, it has started to wilt.

The woman turns. For a moment the light from a rotating

strobe obscures her face, then Yrine takes the seat at her elbow, Kell moves to a vacant chair, and enough shadow returns to Nitti's features to see them clearly.

The bowed nose, the high brow; gentle cheeks, coppery and poreless. And her eyes—forlorn, startling eyes—dark and deep and pointed with light. They track him as he seats himself. Cautious, polite but private, evaluating.

“He’s tall, isn’t he,” Yrine says.

Nitti seems not to hear.

Kell tips his head. “Thank you for making the trip.”

A fragrance reaches him—sweet, exotic, like steeped clitoria.

“I had a feeling,” Nitti says softly.

Then her gaze—guarded but daring—ventures forward, approaching with the foggy music, crossing the space between them. The rapport they’d struck during their conversations had been no illusion.

“I wasn’t listening,” she apologizes. “What did you say?”

“I thanked you for making the trip.”

“You’ve come the longer distance,” she says. “You’re far from home.”

“I’m a water gentian. The stem broke and I floated away, thinking I might take root somewhere else.”

“A fine explanation.” She laughs at his words—lightly, poking fun.

“I’m here because of the jungle,” he says.

“Your profession,” she nods. “I’m intrigued by that.”

There’s an invitation in the dark eyes.

“The jungle is us,” he says. “Our real nature.”

“Us?”

“Threat and attraction. The fight to survive. Things that don’t matter are swept away.” He’s trying to touch that depth, the authenticity lurking beneath her flawless composure.

“You change the genes of plants,” she says.

“For me,” he nods, “that’s exciting: feeling a breath of the creativity that fashioned our world.”

“How God might feel,” Nitti says.

“Or an artist,” he says. “I painted with my fingers when I was a child.”

With these words, he gives access to an *élan* from his youth, waving his hand, diluting his earnestness with a smiling naïveté, surrendering adult aspirations to the triumph of simple curiosity.

She responds to his buoyancy and the wonder in his eyes as if it’s a lucky gift. Her smile, Kell sees, is raw and authentic; and in its ripening is an assumption about the inherent generosity of life. Her face shifts forward, her shoulders relax.

A silent moment. A moment of understanding. You don’t have to be on guard with me, Kell thinks. The defenses are gone now. When they spoke, they would be talking like old friends, in a simpler language, unselfconscious, like people who have known each other all their lives.

And then, in a heartbeat, Kell sees a chasm open between them.

Nitti draws back. In response to some hidden emotion, her dark eyes harden. Has something surprised or disturbed her?

“You’re staring at me,” he says.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

Kell feels an electric chill in his chest. “What’s wrong?”

He looks at Yrine, and she’s as surprised as he is.

Nitti rises from her chair, turning her head, hiding her face. She’s stepping away from the table.

Why is she fleeing? Kell leaves his seat.

She’s moving quickly now, passing the stage and the dragon’s head, and he’s hurrying after her. *Blind instinct*, a rational voice objects. But Kell doesn’t care. Nitti’s a white morph of the paradise flycatcher. You might see her once, but you could look for the rest of your life and never see her again.

He catches up to her as she enters the vestibule.

Speaking her name, he grabs hold of her arm.

She halts, stiff and quivering, not fighting him off, burying her feelings.

“Where are you going?” he says.

She shakes her head.

Beneath the birdcages, against the wall, there’s a bench and a stool.

“Please,” Kell says, gesturing toward them.

She eyes him for a long moment. Then she sighs and sits. Kell descends with her.

“What happened?” he asks.

“You reminded me of someone.”

“Someone who hurt you,” he says.

She seals her lids, still upset by the recognition.

“No,” she sighs. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

A laugh beneath her breath. “I suppose I am.” Her tone now is self-accusing, as if disclosing the truth might shame her or unveil something unworthy.

“Fear is love’s enemy,” Kell says.

“That’s a child speaking.”

He can’t tell if her words are critical or accepting.

“Is a child listening?” he asks.

She seems to mull the question, agitated but tempted, weighing the risks of answering.

“Perhaps,” she says finally, drawing a breath. Her eyes meet his—warily, cautiously. “Is that what you’re looking for?”

“It is,” Kell says.

The sound of a wooden flute reaches them, moody, mystical.

“I’m not a child,” Nitti says.

Speaking to her, he thinks, is like a jungle trek. The screen of green admits your vision at every angle. With every step, you’re drawn into its unseen depths.

“You’ve been married,” she says.

“I have.”

“What happened?”

“It was a miracle while it lasted.”

“There have been other women since, no doubt.”

He nods. “Wonderful women.”

“Don’t entertain me, Mr. Kell.”

He laughs. “And some not so wonderful.” Then more seriously, “You can be friendly.”

Nitti exhales. She closes her eyes and leans her head to one side. Then she reaches toward him, opening her fist.

Kell looks at the delicate palm and the narrow fingers.

"I'm sorry," she says.

He clasps her hand, feeling its warmth and the curl of her digits.

"You left your country," Kell says. "Like I did."

"That was years ago."

"Boston is halfway around the world," he says. "What made you do that? Set down so far from home." It seemed like a simple question.

"You're making me nervous." She opens her eyes and looks away.

"I don't mean to."

Nitti is shaking her head. She takes a breath as if about to speak, then stops herself. Kell can feel her power, fierce but precarious. She's like a leaning putat at the river's edge, trunk still growing. How long could she hold the pose before her roots gave out?

"You're the one I've been—"

"You don't know," she says. She pulls her hand from his and settles it in her lap, edgy as a mimosa now, leaves folding up. Between them, a vacuum of feeling opens. She's made a quiet decision, he sees.

She straightens herself, calmer, resolved. There's a kind of nobility in her resignation, as if she is choosing the moral path, doing what's best for them both.

Her brows arch and her eyes meet his. "I'm attracted to

you, Mr. Kell. But this isn't going to work."

Nitti rises without looking at him and heads for the outside door.

The next moment, Yrine steps into the birdcage room. She looks puzzled.

Only then does Kell realize that the doors of all the cages are open.



There was no forgetting her. Days passed, but his fixation didn't abate. Other women lived on the surface of things. Nitti was somehow in touch with the core. Kell imagined he could feel her desire—her need—along with the void of confidence and trust. He called three hotels near the Hin Depot. Yrine was a desk clerk at the third. She didn't respond to his first call or his second. When he stopped by it was her day off. But on Monday of the following week, she showed up at the Ginger House.

He's in the open-air enclosure, walls of green wire mesh around him, sun shining on his brow and front. Kell raises a small potted plant, touching its stalk, pleased with its strength. He pinches a withered leaf and removes it, then checks the dampness of the soil with his middle finger. His cellphone chimes.

He replaces the pot on the trestle with dozens of others and exits the pen, seeing Yrine ascending the path with one of the Botanical Gardens' staff.

Kell waves to her and steps forward, touching his fingers to his heart.

“Thanks for coming,” he says.

“I doubt I’m going to be any help,” she replies. “It’s been years,” Yrine sighs, looking around.

The high wall of the jungle rises from the Gardens’ border, scored by a hanging cascade and bottomed by nibung palms.

“The Fragrance Atrium is new,” he says, “and so is the Orchid House. The aviary and animal pens went up five years ago. When were you here?”

“I was a teenager,” Yrine replies. “It was only flowers and forest then.” She recalls, “You were flooded last August.”

“We were,” Kell says. A typhoon as fierce as a dozen monsoons had drowned the Gardens. He points to a raw face on the canyon wall. “A peak came away.” He swings his arm. “This turned into a lake. Monitors got through the fences.” The eight-foot reptiles were like dinosaurs descending the slopes. “They were swimming here, around the enclosure and in the shed. When the sun came out, they climbed onto the roof to relax. One of the females left eggs in the pantry.”

He motions her to follow him, leading the way up the path. Through the enclosure entrance, over coiled hoses, beside the seedbeds and trestles crowded with plants.

“Our creations,” Kell says, scanning the growths. “Your country is ginger’s gene pool. Did you know that? A hundred and fifty species, more or less.”

“And the purpose?” she asks.

“We’re looking for new gingerols—oils produced and

stored in the roots. To treat disease.” He leads her down an aisle through more mature plants. “Gingerol affects the production of insulin, prevents the formation of blood clots. It can be used as a febrifuge, a diuretic or a purgative.” Kell stops before a chest-high growth. “Pharma pays the bills. I’m not driven by altruism,” he admits. “I like playing with plants.”

“This one’s attractive,” Yrine says.

The inflorescence is a spike of amber shells.

“An alpinia,” Kell says. “Smell.” He raises a shell to her nose.

“Like cardamom,” she says.

“It doesn’t exist in the wild. We made it here, using foreign genes.”

He turns and touches the leaves of a costus ginger. “Our power to change them has limits. Some plants have qualities we can’t edit out.”

“You’re going to stay here?” Yrine asks.

“I have no plans to leave,” Kell says. “Penang’s a good place for me. One of the oldest rainforests in the world, and I don’t have to live in the jungle to make use of its genetic material. Can we talk about Nitti?”

Before she is able to answer, thunder booms down and rain right behind. It is four and things will be wet for a while. Kell motions, leading her through the enclosure into the office, where he stops beside a desk with a printer and piles of documents. Through an open door, the lab is visible with its incubation cabinets and instruments arrayed on counters. A woman in a white coat is opening a freezer door and removing a frosted tray.

"I want to see her again," Kell says.

"That's not going to happen," Yrine replies.

"Why not?"

"Nitti's an unusual woman," Yrine says.

"She said I reminded her of someone. Do you know who that was?"

Yrine shook her head. "I don't think it matters. Getting close to Nitti can be difficult. Nothing comes easily with her. Ask her a question, you won't get a simple answer; you may not get an answer at all. Her shifts in mood, unexpected retreats, sudden advances— Things must be inferred. Parts of Nitti are hidden."

"Have you spoken to her," he asks, "about that night? About me?"

"I have." Yrine gave him a discouraging look. "She's not what you're looking for."

"What happened in the Qing Club?"

"I don't know," Yrine shook her head. "She had a strong reaction to you. I'm not sure why. But she doesn't want to see you again—of that I'm sure."

"How long have you known her?" he asks.

"We were childhood friends," Yrine says. "We lost touch after she left for the States. Last year we found each other again." Her brow creases, her delivery slows. "Back then," she says, "the family had money. Now, Nitti's father is unemployed. He's a well-meaning man who loves his daughter. But—" Yrine lifts her chin and eyes him gravely. "Like others," she says, "in similar circumstances, he is forced to

depend on an attractive daughter and the attentions of men to keep things going.”

At this, Kell falters.

“What are you saying?” He shakes his head.

Yrine holds his gaze, sharing her pity, her regret and compassion.

For Kell, it’s a waterlogged sun rising over a black swamp.

“She’s a prostitute,” he says.

Yrine recoils. “It’s a terrible unkindness to use that word.”

“What else would you call it?”

“Nitti’s relationships with men are ‘arrangements.’ There’s affection, support, companionship. It’s not about sex. Some don’t even involve that. The money is viewed as a gift to the family.”

She reads his skepticism and that provokes her.

“It’s a committed connection,” Yrine says. “An exclusive one. She’s faithful, and the man must be too.”

“How long has she been doing this?” Kell asks.

“You’re not in America,” Yrine says, ignoring his question. “Romance isn’t everything. Marriages are still planned by parents here. The ability to provide for a woman matters.”

Her look turned glum. “For poor Nitti,” she mutters, “it’s an impossible situation. Her grandfather was a rubber merchant. He had money before the war. That paid for her home and the schools in America. But the rubber trade died and the money ran out. By the time she returned, her grandfather was dead, her mother was ill and her father was jobless. He’s past the age of employment now.”

“I was a prospective ‘arrangement,’” Kell says.

Yrine sighs. “She knew right away you wouldn’t be interested in something like that.”

The rain is rattling on the metal roof.

“What if I was,” Kell says.

His words surprise her. Yrine frowns. “I’m not sure.”

She’s a rare creature, he thinks. What was the risk?



Kell lives in a small house in Jelutong, ten minutes from Georgetown to the north and ten from Gelugor to the south, the site of University of Science, Malaysia, where he keeps an office.

Many of the country’s locales were named after growing things. The jelutong tree could reach fifty meters; its heartwood was white and its grain was straight, but it was soft and prone to insect attack. The place he rents is on a quiet street with jungle nearby, green hills visible through the bedroom windows.

Two days after their meeting at the Gardens, Yrine arrives at his house before dinner. Susilo, Nitti’s father, has determined the size of the gift. Kell places the appropriate amount in an envelope, which Yrine delivers. Three days after that, Kell returns from work in the late afternoon and dresses for the visit.

It’s an hour and a half from Jelutong to Ipoh. He takes the southern bridge, crossing the water from Penang to the

mainland. Beyond the welcoming arch and toll plaza the way is level, transmission towers and palm plantations on either side. South of Taiping, the road cuts through mountains rocky and green with forests steep and dense. He speeds through Kuala Kangsar and descends into the Kinta Valley, a wild aisle bounded by cliffed humps and limestone knobs.

It isn't yet sundown, but the sky is roofed and the air has dimmed. The knobs rise toward the veil of clouds like playthings dropped by a giant, clawed walls and grown-over crags, battered scarps shadowed and silhouetted. As he enters Ipoh, the monoliths loom over stores, body shops and roadside homes.

The address Yrine has given him is at the edge of town, in a woodland that verges a winding river. Kell follows a narrow roadway, spots the number painted on a board, and turns onto an unpaved drive. He eases his car across a weedy apron and switches the motor off. The house is good-sized, on ten-foot stilts, paneled with coffee-colored wood and trimmed in black, with a gray tile roof. A large octagonal room projects in front, with stairs rising to it on either side, a sign of prestige in an earlier time.

He opens the car door and steps out. The stilts are peeling and the ground needs raking. As he crosses the apron, the wistful call of a malkoha reaches him. Dusk is settling, but the air is warm.

The vanes of one of the octagon's shutters shift. Someone is eyeing him through the louvers. Then the shutter opens and the face of a gray-haired woman appears. She fixes on him,

pinches her lips with what might be disapproval and motions him toward the stair on the left.

Kell reaches the stair and starts up, grasping a stilt. They protected houses from floods. These were four-sided so snakes couldn't climb them. At the stair's top is a door carved with Islamic stars. Before Kell can knock, it swings back.

The elderly woman faces him—broad nose, thin lips, haggard and dun. Her gnarled hand twitches him across the threshold. The octagon is a guest room, he sees. The woman leads him to a low table surrounded by chairs.

A decanter of tea stands on a silver tray circled by cups. The woman halts behind one of the chairs and nods to him. Kell sits and she departs. A few moments later an old man limps through an archway supporting himself with a cane.

His beige linen suit hangs loosely. His hair is combed straight back, and through the silver threads, his scalp is visible. The hitching gait and fighting eyes give an impression of obstinance and frailty.

"I'm Susilo," the old man says, "Nitti's ayah. Welcome to our *ruang tamu*." He raises his brows. "Shall we have some tea?"

He takes the chair beside Kell, reaches for the decanter and pours the cinnamon liquid into two cups. As Kell watches, his discomfort mounts. Acting casual would be difficult. Whatever the causes, this man had put his daughter in a terrible position.

"You're a scientist, I'm told," Susilo says. "A student of our jungle."

His wording is good, but his diction is wobbly.

"There's no place on earth like it," Kell says.

Susilo smiles. "A man respects what he loves."

Kell recognizes the reach of his words, but he does his best to accept them as a compliment. Don't be too quick to judge him, he tells himself. It would be easy to condemn the man.

"You father new plants," Susilo says.

"Gingers," Kell nods. He gives an example of his genetic forays.

Playing the good host in his guest room is something the old man seems glad to do.

"The science is still in its infancy," Kell says. "My little group knows as much about ginger genetics as any team in the world."

As he speaks, smoke coils from an incense pot on a window sill. Kell knows the wood by its fragrance. Aquilaria is used as a disinfectant. In a dwelling like this, by a river, humidity is high. Fungus and fern spores fill the air.

Susilo plants his cane between his thighs, setting his hands on the ivory knob. "How long will you stay in Penang?"

"I have no plans to leave," Kell says.

Was the old man partial to a longer stay, imagining future payments? Or would a longer stay trouble him? Did he have reasons to fear a more serious attachment?

Susilo is sad-eyed. "She's my only child," he says softly.

Nitti enters the room with her face averted, brisk but casual, in a mango blouse and white slacks. She approaches the chair beside her father, bows her head and seats herself.

Polished, concealing—an enamel box with its lid closed. Kell reminds himself that the discussions about the arrangement had been with Yrine. She had assured him that Nitti would be pleased to know him better. Sitting across from her now, he wonders.

“I was drawn to your daughter,” Kell faces Susilo, “instinctively.”

The old man turns away.

Kell meant to allay his fears, to share the depth of his feeling, but Susilo doesn't want to know. How is Nitti taking this? She seems calm and unruffled, legs folded to the side, hands in her lap. Her brow tips, the piercing eyes pointing down. She's been through this before, Kell thinks, imagining how the burden must have grown heavier over the years.

“You may break off the arrangement whenever you like,” Susilo says. “But as long as it lasts, you must remain faithful to my daughter. Her health depends on that.”

“I understand,” Kell nods.

“You're a professional man,” Susilo says. “I will expect you to act professionally. Nitti is a special woman. She must feel safe with you, protected by you. Do I have your word on that?”

“You do,” Kell replies.

The old man faces his daughter, fisting the knob of his cane. His eyes are stern, and so is his unspoken message: don't be accommodating, don't be in a hurry to please; don't show this man too much of yourself too quickly. Nitti takes it all in without a whisper of agitation.

Susilo sighs and leans back in his chair.

"You're a fortunate man," he says, growing cordial again, as if Kell is now part of the family. Kell feels relief and more than a little sympathy. He understands the old man's concern, and his formality has taken some of the sting out of the venal aspect of the match.

"You have your appointment," Susilo asks Nitti.

"Tomorrow morning," she replies.

Susilo smiles at Kell, takes the cane from between his knees and rises. "I'll wish the two of you good evening." He bows to Kell and limps away, crossing the patterned rug quietly.

Nitti rises, extending her hand. "May I show you our serambi?"

Kell rises with her. Her hand is light, airy and warm. The woman who'd shown so much agitation at the Qing Club—puzzling, unexplainable agitation—now seems entirely self-possessed.

She leads him down a corridor. Following closely, Kell catches a sachet of nutmeg and clove, a scent from the undersides of dark leaves. They released their fragrance when you crushed them. It was desire for spices like these that had led to the region's colonization. Nitti's father was old enough to remember English rule.

She opens a door and they step out onto a veranda facing the river.

Shadows, twilight. The loud ringing of cicadas suggests a storm. On the river's near side: fan palms, drooping mengkuang, rock speckled with lichen, and a narrow path following the water. On the far side, the jungle climbs to a ridge: a

thick understory, boles upright and leaning, crowded with ferns and woven with climbers; and above, the crowns of tall trees.

Nitti looks at him and laughs—a carefree laugh, the laugh of a child. But there was something practiced about it. She asks about his adventures in other countries, flattering and teasing, as if he’s led a life of indulging his whims. He plays along, saying that he works as little as possible, always has time to play the lothario, and receives the attentions of a Casanova wherever he lands.

“I’m younger than you are,” Nitti points out.

“I’ll be a good guide,” he replies.

“You’re just trying to say the right words.”

“Were those the right ones?” he asks.

A half-smile, curious, knowing. “Women are fools for men like you.”

They study each other.

“You have dangerous eyes,” Nitti says.

“Why dangerous?”

“Do you want something alcoholic?”

Kell wonders if there is liquor in Nitti’s home.

“I will if you will,” he says.

“I don’t drink.”

“You’re Muslim.”

“It’s not that,” she says.

“You want to be in control,” he guesses. He sets his hand on the veranda rail.

“I do,” she replies, putting her hand over his, as if to make her control explicit.

Across the river, a rustling reaches them. Kell spots the whipping branches. A troop of monkeys—dusky langurs with white eye rings—are leaping through the tree crowns. Beside the river, a stork-billed kingfisher, apricot and blue, rises from a sapling with a scarlet screech. Nitti's hand is caressing his.

For real affection, he thinks, the magnetism had to be equal—a woman had to be as attracted to him as he was to her. The wariness from their first meeting is gone. Nitti seems relaxed, in good spirits, but— How authentic is this advance? With how many men had agreements been struck?

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

“I'm wondering,” Kell says, “who was here on this veranda before me.”

“This was your choice,” she reminds him.

“I'm just curious.”

“His name was Amin,” she says. “He was smart and good-looking but short. It wasn't love, but we were friends. Good friends, if that's what you're asking.”

“How long were you together?” Kell says.

“Almost a year.”

He nods slowly, trying to imagine. “Thanks. For being honest.”

Below them, the river zags between boulders, dishing over a pale slab. He can see the fenced borders of an untended orchard with bananas, papayas and rambutans.

Where the river looped, the house jutted out. A window is lit.

“The waterside wing,” Nitti says.

To the left, farther downstream, the current slides through a sluice, hissing and swirling beneath arching palms and twisted lianas.

“Soothing,” he mutters.

“There’s a swamp that way.”

Nitti takes her hand from his. When he looks up, her lips are humorless, her eyes deep. Thunder sounds in the distance, and in response, the langurs gabble to each other. They know what thunder means.

Kell moves closer, invading the space between them. Nitti draws a quick breath. Her lids close, and his lips touch hers.

A world opens for him—the world of another—as broad and as thick as any jungle on earth; and, for being the threshold of a human heart, so much more welcoming. *Nitti*, he thinks, and *Nitti* again.

This will be no “arrangement.” Kell feels certain of that.



He’s in the green mesh enclosure, standing beside one of his lab assistants, examining a print-out of sequence profiles for edited torch gingers well into the growing phase.

“How’s F-238?” Kell asks.

The assistant turns and points at a leafless stem, three feet tall with a swollen bud at its top. “Blissful,” she says, approaching it. She touches the bud, angling it toward him. “Like a slitted pupil, don’t you think?”

Kell laughs. To the ginger explant, they had knocked in

genes from the eye of a local tree frog.

On the path below, a dozen monkeys have corralled a group of tourists. Some of the animals are begging, holding their hands out. One jumps onto a man's shoulder and shrieks. When the man drops his sandwich, the monkeys gather around it to fight for the spoils. Kell checks the hour. He'd risen that morning with Nitti in his thoughts, and she's been there all day. Now finally, it's time to leave. He removes his lab coat, bids his staff goodbye, and heads for the Gardens' parking lot.

He reaches Ipoh and the house by the river at sundown. As Kell pulls onto the apron, he sees an older Chinese man working a pair of tarnished shears, pruning the small trees around the house while he hums to himself. As Kell approaches, the gardener smiles. He has no front teeth.

This time it is Susilo who spies him through the louvers. He directs Kell to the right stair.

At the top, the old man welcomes him. "Are you hungry?" he asks.

The elderly woman stands in her smock two feet away, silent, dour as before, smelling like furniture oil and antiseptics. "Prawan can fix you something," Susilo offers.

When Kell declines, the housekeeper steps away. Nitti is seated by the low table, speaking to a man in a jade suit. Her hair is hanging free in thick black waves. She and the man rise together as Susilo canes toward them.

"Our new friend," Susilo says, introducing Kell.

The man in the jade suit extends his hand in the Western way.

Nitti introduces the man, Kell hears the word “doctor,” and he shakes the man’s hand. The doctor’s polite enough, but his smile is forced. Considering me, Kell thinks. Guessing, judging— Then the doctor is saying goodbye, and Susilo is leading him toward the right stair.

On the table is a document. Kell watches Nitti stoop and retrieve it. She puts her arm through his and escorts him out of the guest room, down a corridor. At the corridor’s end, the walls open around them, hung with tapestries. She turns to a door on her right, opens it and invites him inside.

An armoire, a gold-trimmed vanity with an oval mirror, a bed large enough for two, and a window with bamboo blinds. Her room.

Nitti sets the document on the vanity and pulls a fresh hibiscus from a vase. She looks over her shoulder at him. “What if I refused you now?” she says.

Her expression is tentative, as if she is asking herself the question. Kell doesn’t respond. She’s toying with him, he thinks. But the toying hurts. In the vanity mirror, he sees her raise the document and slide the hibiscus stem under the clip. Then she turns and hands papers and blossom to him.

“What’s this?” He lifts the scarlet petals to see.

It’s a medical report in English. A gynecology exam with an STD panel.

“Are you pleased?” Nitti asks.

Kell meets her gaze, hearing and seeing her cynical edge. She’s been demeaned, he thinks, and he’s part of it. Kell sighs, feeling the magnetism wither to nothing.

Silence. Nitti watches him. He looks away.

“Let’s go out,” she suggests.

Disengaged, glum and apathetic now, he obliges her.

They go in his car. The place she chooses is a ten-minute drive. She says little; and he, not a word. Fortunately the traffic is light, because Kell’s attention isn’t on the wheel. He’s feeling the transaction acutely, considering the many questions his “gift” posed. His dismay fills the air between them like a bad cologne.

Nitti directs him where to park. They leave the car, walking beneath covered arcades, not touching, not speaking. Kell had been to Ipoh’s Old Town before. The city was trying to revive it. Cafes and galleries had sprouted among the markets and kopitiams. Storefronts and alleyways, weathered and chipped, had been thinly overpainted. The treatment was meant to look stylish, but the decay showed through.

Nitti ushers him down a narrow lane into an eatery. The hostess struggles with her English, and when they’re seated, the waitress is worse. Kell can’t understand what she’s saying, so Nitti makes the selections. A few minutes later, the food arrives. Kell is polite, reserved.

While they eat, silence divides them. Midway through the meal, he sighs and proposes they go their separate ways.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

Nitti shakes her head.

He looks past her. “I shouldn’t have imagined—”

“It was the doctor’s report,” she says.

Kell doesn’t answer.

"Are you angry with me?" she asks.

"No. It was my mistake—"

"Stay with me tonight," she says. "I promise—"

"Nitti—"

"Don't do this." She's pleading now.

"Nitti," he sighs. "It's really love— That's what I'm looking for."

"I know," a spasm of sobs wells up. "I know," she says. "I know, I know."

Her eyes are brimming. "We can't give the money back."

"I'm not asking you to. The fault is mine—"

In the car, headed back, Nitti seems beaten; then, as they approach the house by the river, grimly determined. She keeps her silence, eyes red, hands in her lap.

When he parks on the leaf-littered apron, she remains in her seat while he turns the ignition off. Kell exits the car, circles and opens the passenger door. Nitti grabs his wrist as she rises. Crossing the apron, she wraps her arm around his, like a liana with bloody sap, clinging tightly.

They take the back stair and climb to a dark landing. An inside light is on.

Nitti opens the door, grasps his hand and starts down the corridor. Kell's steps are grudging. He's going to resist, to excuse himself.

They reach her bedroom, and he plants himself at the threshold.

"I'm not going in," he says.

"Don't be afraid," she says.

Kell doesn't reply.

"Hold on to me," Nitti says.

Kell moves his free hand to loosen her clasp.

"No," she protests, and he can feel her strength; at the same time, a weaker sound churns in her chest. She's after control, but she's struggling as well to soften herself. "Can't you understand?" Her voice is muted, like the purr of a leopard cat. "I want love too."

That's not love I'm hearing, Kell thinks.

"Don't leave," she says. Nitti's dark eyes are big before him. She's using the pause, turning the knob.

Unbalanced, urged forward, he crosses the threshold.

By Nitti's vanity, a candle is burning. There's a bowl of sectioned starfruit on the bedstand. Without a word, she begins to disrobe.

Kell raises his hands, palms toward her.

She's unbuttoning her blouse. Bronze light flickers across her shoulders. She drapes the blouse over her vanity stool, ribs shifting like sago spines.

What are you doing? he asks himself.

She reaches behind to unfasten her bra.

Her vertebral groove is shadowed, then the knobs appear as she shifts.

The bra comes free, and Nitti turns.

"How am I?" she asks, her voice tremulous as a child's.

Her nipples are stippled like gecko skin, rugose around the tips.

Leave, Kell thinks. Turn and leave.

“I’m alone,” she says. Unaffected, naïve. Fearful but needy. She slides off her skirt.

A shiver between his shoulders invades the back of his head.

Nitti raises her hands and begins to unbutton his shirt.

Kell tries to push her away, but the push is weak.

She fingers the waistband of her panties, and the fabric rolls down her thighs.

She’s as hairless as a child.

“For you,” she whispers, stepping closer.

Her smooth mons is like the flesh of a doll.

She knows how to arouse men, and that’s what she’s doing. She’s unfastening his belt. He does nothing to stop her.

You’re a fool, he berates himself. The fact that he’d paid, and the absence of real emotion, would pain him when it was over.

Nitti prods his hip, guiding him toward the bed.

She crawls onto the mattress. He follows, and they stretch out together.

Nitti’s fingers cross his chest. Kell puts his hand on her waist, doing his best to act familiar, though there is nothing whatever to feel familiar about.

She touches his middle. He strokes her back.

Then her fingers spider toward his groin.

The instinct of lust emerges from hibernation, opening its eyes and looking around. Nitti’s face is in darkness now, the candle behind her. She’s focused, regardful perhaps. Or crafty, absent expression. Or perhaps she has no face at all—the wavy hair is only a shell. If the woman in his arms has no awareness—no thoughts or feelings—what does it matter?

A whining reaches him—faint, high-pitched, at the limit of hearing. The niggling of conscience. A signal to leave.

It's the fruit on the bedstand. A nimbus of gnats is hovering over it. In the flickering candlelight, he can see them like jungle spores come alive, drifting around Nitti's hollow head. A dance of dots, a weaving of threads. A veil with no face to cover. Or a diaphanous fabric, meant to be shaped.

I'm a tailorbird, Kell thinks, sewing leaves with strands of silk. An army of weaver ants knitting a nest. A botanist splicing genes, trying to fashion the lover he wants. Making the best of a bad situation.

He can no longer hear Nitti's breath. There is only the whining of gnats, the thrum of threads, the hum of a river. Wriggling leeches and empty webs. Beads of rain on a moonlit window, frog spawn floating on a moonlit pool.

The woman beside him rocks onto her back, knees bent, thighs reflexed, flesh smooth and rubbery.

A frog in the jungle.

Can a man find bliss with a frog? He can if he's not too proud. A frog on a trembling leaf, spotted and streaked; a frog in the mud, eyes bulbed, lips on your cheek; a frog in a tree, stuck on a branch, eyes slitted and sultry, or leaping into the air, harlequin-pink.

This frog has her calves by his neck, knees bent on either side of his head, legs folded over his shoulders. Has he teased the amphibian from her? Through the dark and damp and caught breath, he feels her advance.

Or he imagines it. They are animals, creatures, strangers.

But— Impelled by lust, by instinct, the freedom of blindness, he's straining toward her. Is she with him, doing the same, taking the risk?

Doubt, trepidation— The fear of knowing too much. Close, very close. He senses it, even as his belly and loins are warmed by the froggy basket. His hands slide down the froggy thighs, through the mucid flume and around her backside where it's soft and fleshy.

Froggy hands hold his head, knobby digits tangle his hair. Sighing or hissing, ape or amphibian, what does it matter? His chest expands, gulping the air, lunging, gasping. The frog's middle is silky, her heart nipped, her insides slick— He's in the water with her, stroking in tandem, frogging across the moonlit pool—

Who are you? at the back of his mind.

But closer, closer; together, so very close now—

Then a reflex shock, muscles lock and spasm. And, with a suck and croak, the wogging issue pours out of him, blanching the water.

Breathless, sweating, a marshy wallow, a ceiling of clouds.

Kell's arm folds. He rolls onto his hip, shedding his distortions.

Frogs, he thinks. Cute, clammy, delicate, alien—

Was it something in her, sordid, alluring? Had he launched a parody to lighten his self-condemnation? Or was it only the eye of F-238, slitted at the back of his mind?

A sliver of moon appears in the window. She's on the bed, inches away, silent, half on her side with her knees still bent. Kell slides his arm beneath her neck and grasps her thigh,

rotating her toward him. Frogs, reflexed and croaking. He can see her face now, bowed nose, mussed hair, the moonlit eyes impossibly deep.

Contact. There is contact, strange as it is.

Kell edges closer. He kisses her lips, and something seems to relax inside her.

And now, as the kiss draws out, her legs lengthen, her thighs touch his.

He places his palm on Nitti's middle, feeling the soft flesh of her belly. He kisses her again, and Nitti—a beautiful creature no caring soul would deny—whispers to him, caressing his temple.

"Sayang," she says.

He doesn't know the word, but her fragility pierces his heart.

"Terima, terima."

How could he have considered leaving? She wants the same thing he does. He kisses her nape, her ear, her neck. He moves his hand under her waist, circles her trunk and holds her close, settling his head with his lips to her ear. With this woman, he sighs, love is entering his life.

Nitti stiffens. It's as if his sigh stopped her.

She's murmuring now, a sound of reserve.

"Jangan," she says. Regret, discomfort.

She wants to be open, but there is something held back.

Amid the promise and the nascent hope is Kell's perception of some kind of blockage. In this, their first moment of real contact, Nitti is a bloom not yet free of its bud, a hatching still in its egg, an insect not yet emerged from its molt.

2

The next morning Kell wakes in Nitti's bed. She is stretched beside him, facing the window. Through it he sees a bounty of green hills, tangled slopes and marshy valleys.

He touches her nape, puts his hand on her shoulder.

They rise together and, without speaking, they dress.

In the dining room, Prawan serves them coconut rice. Their quiet persists until the housekeeper leaves. Then Nitti sets her spoon down.

"Last night—" Her eyes search his.

Kell waits.

"The way you held me—" She's barely audible.

"I was in a strange state," he says. "I imagined you were . . . a jungle creature."

She blinks, nervous, uncertain.

"A cute one," he says. "A tree frog."

Her lids flare and she laughs.

"I felt close to you."

"And I to you," she says.

"You found the innocence in me: the boy who marvels at wild things."

"You were very emotional," Nitti says.

The dark eyes watch him.

"We need love," Kell says, "but only the child inside us can receive it."

She considers his words.

"It comes back to that, doesn't it? When we're young," he says, "we're open. And we expect the best with good reason—most animals have caring mothers."

Nitti looks at her rice, mulling his words or bothered by them.

"There's plenty of science on the subject," he says.

"Did you have one?"

"One what?"

"A caring mother."

"I did," Kell says. "Tender. Mindful. Devoted. She wasn't tough enough. When my father left us, she retreated from life. She was ruled by fear, and the closer I came to manhood, the more threatened she felt. But when I was young, I was loved. Her heart was open to me and I trusted her."

He speaks the next words slowly. "It wasn't that way with my wife."

"Tell me," she says.

"We were grownups together," Kell says, "but we couldn't

be kids. Commitment we had. But no play, no spirit, no depth. There was no younger version of us.”

Nitti is silent.

After a minute, she sighs to herself. Then softly:

“With men, you might say I’ve been guarded. Distant. Not trusting. I know what trust is. I knew love too, when I was a child. Protected. Cared for.”

“Did you feel that way with me last night?”

She’s silent, her face unexpressive. Remembering her feelings perhaps, or reluctant to share them.



North of Ipoh, at a fishing village named Nibong Tebal, a small river flows into the sea. Kell knew a man there, a marine biologist who owned a small boat, and when Kell asked for a favor, the man agreed.

Two days after their first night together, Kell drove Nitti to Taiping for dinner; and when they finished, he surprised her. They continued north to Nibong and met the man at the dock.

The boat is moored at the river’s edge. The man climbs into the stern and fires the engine while Kell and Nitti seat themselves on a thwart by the bow. As the boat creeps away from the dock, nightjars call from the shoreline scrub, lift into the air and fly inland.

Kell circles her waist with his arm. She responds in kind, hugging his shoulder, putting her hand on his leg. They watch the long ripples on the water’s surface wrap around the boat

as it turns. Spicules of mist frost their cheeks, and the engine hum joins the *whishing* as they head downstream. With the pilot in the stern, lost in shadow, the craft seems to move magically, driven by desire or impulse alone.

The lights from dwellings disappear behind them. The silhouettes of trees on the banks rise through the night on either side; and then, as the boat reaches the river's mouth, within those dark silhouettes, dots of light begin to wink and sparkle. Kell extends his arm, pointing.

"I see them," she whispers.

Pteroptyx beetles throng the berembang trees. Drunk with yearning, flashing with hope or hunger or whatever they felt.

A fish owl hoots. The boat's hull scrapes the branches, then the motor dies and the bow nudges the bank. The golden blinking surrounds them now.

Kell puts his lips to Nitti's. Her hand presses his pectoral, matching his feeling. They breathe as one, touching their tongues, sharing their natures, joining the signaling of spirits in the branching bush.

It is more, much more than Kell expects. An open portal. A headlong plunge, a covenant of trembling, fragile but fearless. As the kiss draws out, it grows in intensity, pointed and ample, infused with the movements of the blinking creatures. The jots squirm toward each other, linger and drift apart, as if driven by the surge and subsiding of deep emotion. And then, as if all the world is caught up in the moment, thunder sounds and the sky blinks too, a storm brewing over the sea beyond the mouth of the river.

Cracks, deep booms. The pilot speaks and the boat shakes. He's fired the engine, he's turning the bow away from the bank.

A minute later, they're headed back, speeding upriver. As quickly as it started, the storm fades. There is only the motor's hum and the blinking of stars in the sky. One of them is falling, Kell sees: a plane is landing, returning to earth. His arm is around Nitti, holding her close.



The next afternoon, Kell is in the Ginger House lab, creating a plasmid from an actias moon moth he'd netted the week before. He'd snipped off the hind wing tips and put them in a small tube with a pair of glass beads. After freezing the tube, he'd used a shaker to pulverize the moth tissue and a centrifuge to spin out its DNA. A lab tech had run PCR tests to amplify the genes Kell wants to use, and he's pipetting the amplified gene now, adding Cas9 and *Agrobacterium* for transfection in an electroporator. In less than a second, the shock will insert the moth genes into the explant of a spiral ginger.

Kell's phone chimes. He sets the tube down, removes a glove and slides the mobile from his pocket.

It's Nitti. A tender greeting, then she invites him to stay with her the following weekend. "There's something I want to show you," she says.

On Saturday morning, Kell crosses the bridge from Penang to the mainland. He enters Ipoh beneath a clear sky,

sunlight flashing on the limestone knobs and vaulted hills. When he pulls onto the apron, Nitti is at a window waving him toward the octagon.

The door opens and she embraces him with a breezy smile. She's wearing a white blouse, linen pants and jungle boots. He'd dressed for a hike at her request.

"Ready?" she says.

She leads him back down the stair, around the house to a shed. Twists of periwinkle are rooted in the cracked stucco, and the little pink flowers are blooming.

Nitti steps inside. "We'll take a parang."

She selects a big-bladed machete with a silvered edge and hands it to him. "You know how to use it," she guesses. Kell nods.

He follows her through the untended orchard to the path that verges the river. As the flow comes into view—the glassy skirts, the tumbles and froth—Kell hears a scream. He lifts his head, and they watch a rusty kite dive through the blue into the jungle on the river's far side.

"Hurry along," Nitti says.

She has some purpose, something important she wants to share.

A stick insect with pink wings flies between them, settles on a shrub and turns into a twig. As they round a bend, the ringing of cicadas mounts. A small troop of macaques is gathered in a stand of flowering cloves. Two are grooming each other. A large male approaches Kell, testy, sauntering. Nitti points at a nursing infant. The mother holds the

newborn with a furry arm while it sucks on her dug.

A minute later, they reach a slat bridge.

"We cross here," she says, stepping onto the swaying span, boots clacking.

On the far side, beyond a grove of wild banana, the jungle's green barricade rises. As they enter the dense growth, scores of voices greet them, whistling, clicking, rasping and buzzing. Rain had been heavy the night before, and the boughs are still dripping. Kell swings the parang, clearing vines and saplings.

"Where are we going?"

"A special place," she replies.

A butterfly sails between them, its orange wings framed in black, margins scribbled and toothed.

"A cethosia," Kell says.

"A freed soul," Nitti smiles.

The trees are taller and the crowns thicker. The jungle grows shaded and cooler, a profusion of smells wafting around them: sodden moss, acrid lichen, a burst of floral perfume, mold and defecation. There's no path here, but Nitti moves without hesitation, finding a way through spiny rattans, stilted roots and thorny lianas as thick as their legs. The weave is tight. You couldn't spot an anglehead lizard or a langur whole; you'd peer through chinks for an eye or a tail.

"Do you see them?" she says.

Kell parts two giant tear-shaped leaves and steps through. A stand of trees rises before them, trunks vividly hued, tan and apricot, ocher and rust, all barked with the same

elongated puzzle pattern.

"They haven't changed," she says. "Every tree is exactly as it was when I was little. The same color, the same pattern, the same size. Put your hand on one."

Kell does as she asks, feeling how cool and smooth it is. "They're tropical eucalyptus," he says. "They're growing, but very slowly."

The trees are hard as iron, leaves long and fledged like arrows where they attach to the stems. Kell points. On an amber bough, a scarlet trogon looks down like a sentinel, watching them both.

"It's a library," Nitti says. "Can you see?"

He can't. And then he can: there are documents everywhere. The ground is covered with bark curls, and around the trunks scrolls are tented and piled, like ancient texts read and discarded.

They continue forward, boots rustling the scrolls, crossing the sanctum of vanished sages till they reach the edge of the grove.

"It's just ahead," Nitti says.

She speaks in a muted voice, like a child sharing a secret; and Kell responds, feeling a welling regard and camaraderie.

The undergrowth is dense here, so he takes the lead, swinging the parang. Vines are woven tightly, twisted and braiding; the boles are slick and the fronds are glossed. Without warning, the wind picks up, carrying droplets that freckle their faces.

"Kell—"

There's excitement in her voice. When he looks, Nitti's cheeks are glistening and a wet lock hangs by her ear.

"See it?" she says.

A tan hump of hill appears, its front wafered, its crown bushy-headed. Lower down, beyond a covert of wild cinnamon, a mouth gapes—a black hollow with pale lips. The Kinta limestone is riddled with caves.

Nitti moves in front of him now, leading the way between crossed boughs and dangling leaves, pink and green. She halts before the opening.

"Clap," she says, "three times."

With each nod of her head, they clap their hands.

"To scare off the evil spirits," she says.

On a lip of rock above the cave's mouth, swiftlets roost, tittering and clicking, coming and going. The two of them clamber over the broken threshold, the day behind, their dim silhouettes looming on the pale walls, bigger than life. With every step, the arch seems lower, the mouth seems to close; the angle of light changes, and they are shrinking together, smaller and smaller, until their shadowy selves are like shuffling dwarves.

Nitti pauses and draws a candle from her pocket, and when the candle is lit, she leads the way into the dark interior. Stalactite bosses gleam on a wall, pointed and dripping; fringes and pipes, folded drapes, rippling veils. There are holes in the ceiling above—circular holes, the bottoms of wells. "Here," she murmurs, heading up a slump and around a blind corner. She raises the flame, lighting a wall with glittering

gills. Below them, stalactites lie in pieces, fallen from a beam like teeth from a jaw.

"I was seven," Nitti says. "There was a boy. We would come here together."

Kell hears her hesitation and the echo of a wistful memory.

"Taseen was his name," she says. "He called it 'the Temple' because it's like Sam Poh's cave."

"I've been there," Kell says. Sam Poh was a monk.

"No one knew about this one but us." Nitti motions him forward.

"Look." She raises the candle. On the wall before him, Kell sees a fossil scallop with rays spread like the fingers of a reaching hand.

She waves the light, continuing forward. "He was always making things up." They're in a room, Kell sees, and the room has pockets—alcoves where children might huddle and whisper.

Past a boss built by a hundred slops, alongside an eave with hanging needles. It's perfectly humid now and their skin is slicked. She halts before a four-foot stalagmite. Kell comes up beside her.

Nitti turns and kisses his cheek, regarding him silently. Then she sets her free hand on the stalagmite's nose.

"We cleanse ourselves," she says.

She raises her palm, wet with the dripstone's water, and washes her face. He follows her example.

Beyond the dripstone, Nitti turns down a gleaming corridor and enters a larger cavern with ribbed walls and a high

fluked ceiling. At its center, a helical pillar stands. The pillar's turnings are studded with stalactite clusters, all finned and dripping. It's like something pulled from a giant's gut.

At the base of the pillar, a niche appears.

"The Secret Chamber," Nitti says.

She stoops and crawls in. Kell follows, squirming onto a shelf beside her.

Nitti sets the candle on a scorched bracket.

The niche is narrow and tent-like, walls hung with gills and streaked with damp. The shadows cast by the wavering flame make the space collapse and expand.

"It's smaller than it used to be," Nitti murmurs.

He can hear her breathing. And he can feel her relief—her calm, her peace. It's as if they have entered a hidden dimension, an interior place where the threats of the world would never reach you.

"Do you know the expression '*budi bahasa*'?" she asks.

Kell shakes his head.

"It's the sensing of things beneath the surface. Subtle things. That's what I felt the night at the Qing Club. '*Budi bahasa*.' The power of things unspoken."

Her words puzzle him. "You were frightened."

"I was," she sighs.

"What frightened you?"

Nitti takes a breath. "You reminded me of Taseen."

Kell frowns. Then he recalls the moment and replays it for her—the *élan* from his youth: a wave of his hand, a naïve smile with wondering eyes.

Nitti looks as if she'd been struck. Her shoulders sag, her lips tremble.

Kell reaches for her hand and clasps it.

"Taseen—" She's trying to explain, but she speaks his name with a groan. Then she seems to lapse into her past. "I miss you," she says, "I miss you." A small white moth is fluttering beside Nitti's brow. "I'm so sad," she says, speaking now to Kell and herself.

"We played 'Strangers,'" she tries to smile. "No one could tell who we were. They didn't recognize us."

Kell holds her hand tightly, his eyes on hers.

"We didn't change inside," she explains, "we just looked different, and only we knew. Once we disappeared," she says. "We were invisible. No one could see us. With Taseen, I was—"

She looks away.

"You were what?" he asks.

Her chest is heaving. "Losing him—"

Kell sees a tear descending her cheek.

"I want love too," Nitti says.

He still has hold of her hand.

A long moment passes. Then she speaks again.

"Will you ever find the one you're looking for?"

Silence in the Secret Chamber.

"I think I've found her," Kell says.

She turns half toward him.

"I could be your Temple, Nitti."

Her dark eyes seem suddenly plumbless, and her smile is

like a child's. It seems that a powerful love—true and private—has been set loose around them.

He lifts his fingers to blot her tears, and a shadow arm climbs the wall, circling the chamber. She sees it and flinches, huddling aside.

Kell watches her, hand still raised, frozen midair. The movement frightened her, and it was more than a reflex. She felt threatened—even here, in this hidden place.

He wants to reassure her, to calm her fears. But she's turned, and she's clambering out of the Chamber.

They cross the large cavern slowly, in silence.

A few minutes later, they are out in the open again, squinting at the jungle around them.

As they start back, a mournful sound comes from the sky. A white-bellied eagle is circling down. The bird spreads its wings and lands on the rim of a nest in the crotch of a pulai tree. Then it calls again.

"Crying for her mate," Nitti says.

The pulai trunk is buttressed and deeply fluted, and the nest is made of thick branches. Kell wonders if it was there when Nitti was young.

"What happened to Taseen?" he asks.

"He didn't have a choice," she says. "His father got a job in Kelantan."

Her voice trails off.

As they approach the river, it begins to rain. Kell uses the parang to cut free a heart-shaped elephant ear, and he holds it over them both.



They spent the rest of that day in bed together. For Kell, intimacy with Nitti was like holding on to something precious and then losing your grip, expecting it to land with a crash; and then finding that somehow the object hadn't fallen; it was suspended, intact, eager for the shelter of his arms if he would only reach out.

Rapture, confusion. Alone, at risk, almost forgotten; then abruptly restored, remembered, and with a kiss from the heart, taken back. He began to understand: there was a difference between Nitti-the-woman and Nitti-the-child. They could both be buoyant or frightened; both might embrace or recoil from him, but in different ways.

Nitti-the-woman could be cunning—pleading, servile—or she could be bold; if the impulse gripped her, she wasn't afraid to make demands. Then her unease would surface; he'd see an eclipse in her face and the germination of thoughts—thoughts she'd keep hidden, and words you would never hear.

Nitti-the-child was simpler. She wanted badly to be honest and open with him, and she shared kind thoughts, immature jests, feelings wringing and deep. But there were troubling thoughts too. Nitti-the-child needed love as much as the child in him. But there were dangers for her that Kell didn't understand; dangers that he might unwittingly expose her to. With these fearful things, Nitti imagined she was on her own. Amid his concerns about her, Kell thought of himself. Her

vacillations were painful. The more he cared about her, the more risk he felt.

A breeze makes the gauzy drapes billow. The fabric is tinged with twilight gold. Night is falling. Naked, Nitti crosses the floor, returning to the bed.

Kell opens his arms, and her body folds against him.

A kiss, a soft kiss. Her hand is a bird that lands on his chest, stroking his pectoral with her wing. Kell scuttles his fingers behind her, making a treeshrew that—very gently—climbs her spine. Nitti shrugs while his kisses land. Then the shrew reaches the base of her neck and she falls to giggling, while the bird hops over his belly.

He slides one arm behind her shoulder and the other between her legs, cradling her, lifting her. “Kell,” she sighs. Her rear is silky, its divide like the midrib of a leaf, cheeks yielding as his hand rides between them. Her shoulders, her thighs, her rippling sides, smooth, so very smooth—river rock polished by seasonless water, water that had never stopped flowing through the oldest jungle in the world.

She’s reveling in his caresses, loosing whimpers and gasps that slice and scissor and turn in midair, as fast as feeding swallows. Nitti spreads her arms now, not to receive him, but to yield herself up.

“You’re my boy,” she says.

“You’re my girl,” he replies.

Without a knock, the door opens.

Prawan steps forward holding a silver tray, undaunted by their entanglement.

Kell reaches for the bedsheet and pulls it to his waist.

Nitti doesn't react—there's no sign of shock or agitation.

The housekeeper takes a glass of water from the tray and passes it to Nitti. Then she edges toward the vanity, sets her tray down and opens the vanity drawer. She retrieves a drug-store jar and removes a pill.

Nitti holds her palm out and receives it with her head bowed. As Kell watches, she puts the pill on her tongue and drinks from the glass to swallow it down.

Prawan checks the pitcher. "Shall I—"

"No, we're fine." Nitti sets the empty glass on the bedstand.

With that, the housekeeper turns and exits the room. Kell listens to the soles of her sandals clapping against her heels, wondering at what he's witnessed.

"She's very free with you," he says. "And us."

Nitti's quiet as a mouse deer.

"Can I ask what you're taking?" Kell says.

All at once she's a creature being hunted, crouched among twigs and branches. She turns to face the open window.

The river's susurrus reaches them, the rasps of crickets, the burping of toads. Kell puts his hand on her wrist and feels it stiffen. The child, the carefree girl, is frightened. And now—for whatever reason—she's being shuttered away.

Nitti-the-woman raises herself and closes the window.

"Wasps," she says.

There are two on her pillow and a half-dozen more in the air between them. Night wasps are swarming somewhere nearby.

Kell leaves the bed, grabs his shoes and, with one in each hand, begins crushing the hovering insects. Nitti retrieves her slippers and does the same.

As the last orange body falls to the floor, she faces him.

“Like you,” she says.

Kell ticks his head, not understanding.

“Looking for a new home,” Nitti says.

He brushes a dead wasp from the sole of his shoe. “I hope I have better luck.”

She returns to the mattress, kneeling across it, reaching for him. She manacles his wrists with her hands, pulling him toward her, jaw set, dragging him across the bed, then forcing him onto his back and hovering over him straight-armed, breasts pointed down.

Nitti kisses him, but her lips are sealed, and he can feel her teeth behind them. Her innocence is like the tail a gecko has shed. This is the Nitti who’d faced him across the table in the Qing Club—aloof, suspicious, with a reflexive antipathy.

She’s straddling him now, knees on either side. She’s not inviting him in, but she isn’t barring the way either. Kell grasps her hips and forces her down.

It’s a new lust for them—grave, dark and narrow, absent endearments. Nitti gives him a whiff of scorn, then grudging acceptance— Instead of cooling his ardor, her reluctance piques it. He’s crossed the threshold, entered her body. But despite the fact that he feels her heat, he realizes: there’s a deeper threshold. The door to her heart is elsewhere, unopened, and there’s a child behind it, listening.

Nitti looms over him, arms and legs planted like the aerial roots of a strangler fig. The roots, he imagines, are grafting together, building a prison around him; and that magnifies his desire. He's a captive—adoring, enraged at being so unable, enlarging himself inside her restraints, boiling to rise.

He knows jungle rules from his science, and she knows them from life—although the history of her learning is still opaque to him. Kell grapples her shoulders, pulling her down. He claws her waist, thumbs digging in, a spiny rattan daggering up an unwilling trunk. He closes his jaw on her bicep, gnawing a bough; rolls her onto her hip, and like a parasite climber overtopping its host, he pulls himself over her, shading her out.

Through the leafy darkness, he sees Nitti's eyes: two points of light approaching. She's strange to him now, a wild creature flouting the earth—a winged lizard, a flying snake, a caped colugo— And he's the bug-eyed tarsier on a naked bole, trembling, clinging—

"Nitti," he whispers, feeling deceived, yearning for the purer spirit.

For an instant, he sees it: a perfect creature, glowing gold but no longer human. She's a cicada molt stuck to a tree, like her successor in every detail, but empty, hollow, devoid of life.

Nitti's freed herself, she's rising again, clambering over him, humped like a tortoise, reaching her hands, his hair in her fists. The creature he's struggling with is hardened, incensed with a spiteful desire and grimly demanding.

If she's speaking, Kell barely hears. His ears are thronged by simian grunts, stuttering insects and shrieking birds. Her trunk is erect, towering over him. High above, he sees the two points of light, fixed and severe.

He can feel her thighs on either side of his head, and he knows what she wants. Distant love, abasing love, ministrations without fond words or foolish regard. She wants him to honor her harshness, and if he has needs of his own, he can manage that himself.

Kell bows to her demands.

From the jungle come the hoots of a night heron, the moan of a clouded leopard, the chucks of a terrified monkey. And the two points of light—

Nitti is a giant tarantula, descending from a billowing tube of web, her eyes glowing. He's crossed the line, and her trip wire is trembling.

She shakes, her arms dart around him, imagining she'll send her sharp fangs into him and suck his essence.

But Kell isn't going to be prey.

He's shifted, he's hardened. He's using his length to slide out of harm's way. Not a bug in a tree, food for a spider, but a cryptic snake, invisible, hidden in darkness, watching the drama from the forest floor.



Is it rain or distant music? Music playing, perhaps, at the back of his mind. A pattering, rhythmic, resonant

and—listening carefully—tuneful. A gentle descent of arms and mallets, a bedtime jingle played on a toy marimba. Through the modest drops sound random scratchings, whir-rings, chirps. Then gradually, subtly, the downpour mounts. The bug sounds fade. The mallets beat firmly, the patter turns into a pounding.

There's a storm outside, beyond the window. Boughs in the orchard whip, and the river below sighs and wheezes.

Half asleep, Kell feels for Nitti, touches her blindly. Then he opens his eyes.

She's on her side, a nostril budging with silent breath, her hand curled like a girl's beside her cheek. Kell lifts his shoulder, rising slowly over her. He lowers his lips and kisses her brow. Beneath the lid, her eye is shifting. Lost in dream.

Was she back in the Temple, hiding in the Secret Chamber with Taseen or himself? The rain comes still harder, flooding the roof, hugging the room. In the jungle, he thinks, the trunks are shuddering and the lianas are banging.

Then, as Kell lowers himself and leans back on his side, Nitti gasps. Her middle twists as if something has hold of it and is squeezing. Her arms squirm, her knees flex. Beneath her lids, the dreaming eyes twitch.

As he watches, Nitti's lips part, and a scraping noise comes from her throat. She seems to be struggling for breath. A choking groan, her trunk buckles, and when she tries to draw air again, she's unable.

Kell puts his hands on her shoulders, ready to wake her. The room is shivering, the rain's a deluge. In the jungle, the

humus is drenched and the swamps flooding; the tree crowns are crabs, their arms reaching out.

Nitti's near leg jerks, while the other pedals, as if trying to get away from something. Her body is arching and crimping from some malfunction that can't be interrupted and must be endured.

Kell shakes her. "Nitti—"

But she doesn't wake. Her head bucks, neck craning, mouth gaping wide. She's choking, panicked, gagged by a terror she can't expel.

Kell shakes her again. Nitti's lids part, and a full-throated scream fills the room.

"Wake up." He cradles her shoulders and raises her.

Nitti's eyes are fixed and staring. Can she see him through the darkness? She twists, recoiling, knees hitched, jaw spasming. Is she awake?

She screams again—at him, as if he's the one who's threatening her, as if he has followed her out of her dream.

"Please—" He shakes her fiercely now. She's kicking and flailing her arms, thrashing her hair, refusing. What does she imagine he wants?

"You're safe," he says, "you can breathe, you're awake—"

Has she heard him? Her gape remains, but the scream is gone, and spasms in her trunk are subsiding. She's no longer breathless, no longer fighting.

She can hear him, he thinks. She knows he's trying to calm her, assure her, comfort her. She slumps onto her side, limp, yielding.

Nitti's eyes frighten him. They're open, staring, but not at him. She's aware he's there, isn't she? An imploring sound rises, faintly, in her throat.

Then her eyes close.

After that, there is silence. Silence and stillness.

The rain is no longer pounding. The storm has ended, and so has the struggle beside him.

Nitti lies motionless in the darkness, looking stiff and cold.



Light divides the curtains.

Kell opens his eyes, seeing Nitti curled beside him, still asleep, her dark hair draped over her shoulder. Her lips are parted, and the tail of her mouth is kinked as if she's remembering something. An innocent, untroubled face. The fears that beset her the previous night are gone.

He eases his legs over the mattress edge, puts his feet on the floor and is about to stand when he catches sight of an object on the bedstand: a child's toy, a white goose with orange feet. He picks it up and the rubber body compresses between his fingers, releasing a honk.

He looks at Nitti, sees the noise hasn't wakened her, then he puts the toy back on the bedstand and rises. Naked, he makes his way into the bathroom.

The air is warm, the tiles cool to his feet. He turns on the shower, and when the temp is stable, he steps in.

The spray prickles his chest. He soaps his hands and

lathers himself, thinking of the two Nittis. The woman, sometimes unsure, but as often hard-boiled, tough and demanding; and the sensitive child, so easily frightened, so fragile, so much at the mercy of forces beyond her control.

The unfulfilled promise of Taseen and the Temple haunted her; but this, Kell thinks, is a good thing. However deep the wound, it wasn't too late to heal it. The boy's departure was no abandonment. Nitti had no reason to believe she didn't deserve Taseen or had proven herself unworthy.

He steps out of the shower and grabs a towel.

The bathroom door is ajar, and through the crack, he sees Prawan shambling around the bed. Nitti is awake now, standing naked by her vanity with her foot on the stool, spreading lotion down her leg. Kell watches her doze the white liquid, acutely conscious of how little he knows about her.

"You needn't bother yourself," Prawan is saying. "I'll send him on his way."

Kell listens for Nitti's reply, but she's silent.

He wraps the towel around his middle and steps out of the bathroom.

Prawan lifts her chin, watching him.

Kell meets Nitti's gaze, then he removes the towel, pats his rear and dries his genitals. Nitti laughs. Prawan acts as if there is nothing to see. A moment later, she departs to prepare breakfast.

"She's a virgin," Nitti mutters, as if that explains the housekeeper's harshness.

She faces the window and opens the curtains. Light

washes over her poreless skin, her contoured limbs and the middle without a fold or wrinkle. The vase on her vanity holds a fresh clutch of hibiscus blooms.

Kell tips the vanity's mirror up and regards himself. "You were dreaming last night," he says.

"People dream when they're asleep."

He faces her. "Whatever it was, you were frightened by it."

Nitti turns to her dresser and takes a bra from a drawer.

"How old were you when you married?" she asks.

"We met in college," he says. "I was nineteen."

"How long did it last?"

"Eight years," Kell replies.

"She hurt you." Nitti looks at him.

He nods.

"But you got over it."

"I did."

"So you'll be okay," she says, "if a woman hurts you again."

"No," Kell says. "I won't be okay."

"I'm regretting yesterday," she says softly.

He studies her as she puts the bra on.

"Showing you the Temple," she says. "There's no help in that direction."

She spoke the words simply, and when she looked at him, her eyes were bleak.

"You'll like me better if I stick to my lessons."

"Lessons?"

She nods. "Good ones, from a woman my father knew."

"What did you learn?"

“How to please a man,” she says, “without exposing yourself. How to control your feelings, keep them private.”

“That’s not what I want,” he says.

She picks up a blouse. “You don’t know what you want.”

As changeable as a calotes, Kell thinks. She’s turned green, and her crest is bristling. Nitti continues to dress, while he stands there watching, mute and slighted.

She moves past him into the bathroom. He puts his clothes on. When she emerges and seats herself at her vanity, he tries to engage her in conversation: simple things, trivial things that have nothing to do with desire or emotion. Nitti doesn’t reply.

Prawan brings them nasi lemak, which they eat from a tray on Nitti’s bed. As soon as the meal is done, she returns to her vanity.

He is irrelevant now, as overlooked as a flatworm in a puddle.

When Kell says goodbye, Nitti doesn’t turn her head. So he leaves her bedroom on his own and makes his way to the front of the house.

As he enters the octagon he sees Susilo in a morning robe, kissing a woman’s hand. She looks in her twenties and is dressed like a Chinese street girl, in a tight silk wrapper and heels.

Kell pauses, uncertain whether to face the old man or return back down the corridor. Before he can decide, the woman moves toward the right-side door and starts down the stair behind a buzzcut boy in motorbike gear.

Susilo closes the door, plants his cane and turns, seeing Kell watching him. Without missing a beat, the old man raises his brows and closes the distance.

“A man must have his pleasures,” Susilo smiles with an inevitable look. He slides his arm through Kell’s. “Are you leaving us?” He sighs as if he wishes Kell would stay, then he escorts him to the threshold the woman crossed moments before.

“I care about them,” Susilo nods, “but they don’t care back.”

In his eyes, Kell sees a sorrow—something maudlin or tragic. And the sorrow seems shared, as if the old man is comparing their failures.

Susilo opens the door for him and bows. “Please come again soon.”

Kell descends the stair, hearing the door close behind him.

He makes his way to his car, seats himself, starts the engine and pulls across the weedy apron.

On the way back to Penang, the sky turns gray. By the time he reaches Taiping, it’s raining, and when he crosses the bridge, the downpour is fierce. The pylons and suspension cables ripple through the windshield, and traffic slows to a crawl. On Kell’s left, the sea is rafted with fish farms. In a moment of somber reflection, he imagines he’s one of the residents. The storm means nothing. He’d been born underwater and spent his life there, senses blunted, confined in his pen. The world above, enormous and far-reaching, was a mystery to him.

3

The return to Jelutong and his work at the Ginger House does little to steady him. His moments of connection with Nitti had been vivid and real—with the ardent frog, in the Nibung delta, among the scrolls on the way to the Temple, hearing her words in the Secret Chamber—She had wanted to be close. The desire to ignore the limits of an “arrangement” was as much hers as his. What had caused her to shut him out?

Had she seen something in him that changed her mind? The barriers between them had collapsed quickly. Was that threatening her? When she’d talked about using her “lessons” to keep him at a distance, it sounded like she was setting the prospect of love aside. He’d imagined they were past that. If they weren’t, maybe it was time to let Nitti go, to try and forget her.

An emotional thought, he knows. And an impossible one.

He's been stirred—keenly, intensely—and he's not willing to detach himself from those feelings.

Give her time, he tells himself. It had all happened so quickly. He needed the patience of a transformation technician like the two in his lab. They could sit for hours beneath a steel flow hood, focused, meticulous, peering through the eyepiece of a microscope, probing edited explant tissues with tweezers and needles.

Three days pass, and at the end of the third, Kell sends her a text message. Two days later, he still hasn't heard back.

He buys a note card from the Gardens gift shop, with a drawing of a frog on a branch, and he handwrites a remembrance to her. Their first night together. Her tenderness and depth. He seals the note and sets it on his bedroom dresser. At midnight, geckos invade the room. They climb the walls, whisking and barking, and when dawn finally comes, they're walking upside down on the ceiling.

He showers and dresses and drives to Ipoh. When Prawan opens the door, he hands the envelope to her. She takes it, gives him a mystified look and closes the door in his face without a word.

The drive back to Penang is a long one. Nitti is avoiding him. She must know how he feels. Hurt, puzzled and angry—Is she indifferent?

It's past noon at the Ginger House, and he's in the green mesh enclosure, sweat trickling down his brow. It's hot and humid enough that the white *hedychium* blooms are releasing their fragrance. Kell's mobile chimes.

It's Yrine, and she's concerned.

"I've never seen her like this," Yrine says. "Whatever happened between you—"

"I didn't do anything," Kell tells her.

"She's locked herself in her room," Yrine explains. "Susilo called me. I went to the house, expecting—" She exhales. "I stood outside her door and knocked and called her name. Finally she spoke to me. She's terribly upset."

Kell tries to imagine her state, to guess at the cause.

"She kept talking about a temple," Yrine says. "I couldn't make sense of it."

Nitti's upset with herself, Kell thinks. Her weakness, her fear. She's upset that she bared her secrets to him and she couldn't unshare them.

"What do you think I should do?" he says.

"Are you going to continue with her?" Yrine asks. Her tone is bleak, as if she thinks it might be better if the relationship ended.

Kell kept silent.

"It doesn't look like it's going to work out," Yrine says.

After an uncomfortable pause, he recounts an affectionate moment with Nitti, speaking more for himself than Yrine. He's like a bittern standing in a river, staring at a wall of jungle, trying to see through it.

When the call ends, Kell's unable to focus on work, so he drives into Georgetown and wanders the streets.

As usual, the traffic is thick, cars barely moving, walkers crowding the shops and stalls. Ice kacang, sauces in bottles,

a maze of boxed shoes, worn awnings and bright umbrellas. The colors are jarring and so are the smells: hong bao and dried fish, honeyed meats, pickled fruit soaking in bins.

Tourists in summer dresses jostle past, women of Islam with scarves on their heads, a goateed cornetist playing jazz for change, an old woman squatting on a flattened box with her arms raised. The human market, hatching desires and sating needs, few essential and all of them cheap. How could you live without a glass-beaded purse, an origami fighter jet or a new straw hat?

And then the riot of sound and color fades. A quiet block where the buildings are painted in soft pastels. Jewelry stores line the street, men seated out front with loaded shotguns. Kell wanders into one. A pendant or earrings, he thinks, wondering what Nitti might like. He pauses. What are you doing? he asks himself, still skimming the cases. Buying her a gift seems crazy. He doesn't know if he's going to see her again.

Kell decides on a necklace, a simple gold chain.

It is on his way back to his car that he happens on the carver.

Beneath a white umbrella she's seated, wearing a leather apron, moving a tarnished knife blade over an effigy in wood—a naked female acrobat who'd started a flip and was frozen midair. The acrobat's body looks soft and smooth, almost like flesh. As Kell passes, the carver looks up and her pause triggers his own. She has a serious expression, a gravity that seems out of place in the trifling bazaar. Her eyes are all pupil, her hands netted with seams. Her face had been worked by a master carver, cruelly and deeply.

She passes the naked acrobat to him.

The wood is light, gold with green streaks. Kell holds the acrobat's legs with one hand, turning it, touching its waist with his fingers. "You know your subject."

She doesn't respond. Did she understand what he'd said?

He hands the figurine back to her.

The woman eyes him carefully, as if trying to make up her mind.

Kell turns to leave, but she raises her hand to stop him. She nods at his feet, directing him to remain where he is, and steps into the shadows at the rear of her stall.

She returns a moment later with a wooden mask in her hand. A breath, a squint, then she raises the mask between them, pivoting it, showing one side and the other. It's a female face in pieces: a cheek, the chin, part of the nose, one eye orbit and a curve of brow, all held together with vines and creatures.

She passes it to him.

It's carved from the gold-green wood, Kell sees. The mask is light and its planes are smooth, sculpted with leaves, stitched with frog legs and moth antennae, snake tongues and spider silk. Where the eye should be, a seed capsule grows; and a lizard's tail loop takes an ear lobe's place. One side of the mouth has an uplifted corner that calls Nitti to mind. It's as if the mask can see humor in its own disjointedness.

"Hibiscus," the carver says.

Kell scans the mask's features, looking for a flower; then his thoughts stumble, realizing she's referring to the wood.

Even so, at the word “hibiscus,” the shadow of Nitti looms over him; and the consonance seems so unlikely, he imagines for a moment there is some kind of message.

Kell asks the carver for the price, and it’s a pittance. So he buys the mask and carries it home, where he hangs it on his bedpost.

Late that night, he is awoken by the chime of his phone. It’s a message from Nitti. “I miss you. Please come.”



As he steps toward the house, Prawan waves him to the left stair. Kell had mentioned the stair to Yrine, and he understands now that the housekeeper is expressing her low regard for him. It’s the tradition for dwellings with double stairs to have favored guests ascend on the right.

He crosses the threshold and Prawan escorts him to a seat in the guest room.

“She’s prettying herself.” The housekeeper rolls her tongue, as if there is something she wants to spit out.

Kell sits, expecting her to shuffle away. But she remains standing before him, eyeing him unfavorably. Then she lowers herself onto the chair beside him.

“This valley,” she says, “is a safe place. Did you know that? The peaks and knobs protect us from storms.”

He raises his brows to her, showing he values the information. She looks like she’s been storing up things to get off her chest.

"We're accustomed to having our home used as a brothel," Prawan says.

Kell doesn't reply.

"Susilo never hid his treachery," she says. "His whores served him here, under this roof, then as now. Ibu pretended it wasn't happening. I could not. I was admitting them. And changing his sheets."

"Ibu was Nitti's mother," Kell guesses.

"Ibu *is* Nitti's mother." Prawan's eyes burn. "She's alive, young man."

Then scowling, "She was beautiful once, with all the graces women desire. Now— She has the old smell, the smell of things neglected and forgotten. And her husband's whores come and go, while Nitti has sex with strangers."

The housekeeper pulls a wooden pin out of her hair. "You've joined the outrage." She pushes the pin back in. "Aren't you proud?"

Her hatred is palpable.

"I despise you, Mr. Kell. And so does she," Prawan says. "She knows what you are. She knows Susilo sold Nitti to you. Every sick thing you've done— Ibu knows because I tell her."

With that the housekeeper rises, turns and departs, sandals clapping.

In the wake of this spleen, Kell is motionless, wondering. Nitti had said little about her mother. Was she there, in the house? Susilo was Prawan's employer. He must know how she felt. Had he given her latitude to air her contempt? Maybe the old man believed he'd earned it.

A door opens and Nitti steps forward in a wrinkled blouse and paint-spotted pants. Her hair is down. He stands, searching her eyes, reaching out. She clasps his hand, turns her face and gives him a perfunctory hug. Then she takes a step back, putting space between them.

Her expression is sober, as if she'd been thinking, preparing for something.

"We're going for a walk," she says.

"The Temple?"

"No, downstream. The other way."

She motions and they descend the right stair.

The Chinese gardener is on his knees beside the foundation. As they approach, Kell can see he's using a trowel to clear an overgrown drain.

"This is Kwik," Nitti says.

The gardener looks up, gives Kell a toothless smile, raises his trowel and salutes him with it.

Kell returns the smile. "I'm like you. I work outside."

"He doesn't speak English," Nitti says.

Kwik plants the trowel in the soil and reaches into his pocket. He smiles again, takes Kell's hand and places a dodol in it.

Kell laughs, unwraps the triangular candy and puts it on his tongue. Kwik returns to his work and they continue toward the river.

"We give him food and lodging," Nitti says.

The dodol tastes like toffee.

"Kwik has a crazy nephew," she says. "A rempit, a meth

head. He races his motorbike and runs errands for my father.”

“I may have seen him the last time I was here.”

Nitti sighs, guessing what that meant.

“Prawan doesn’t approve of Susilo’s behavior,” Kell says.

“Or mine either.”

“She wants to protect me.”

“Do you need protection?” he asks.

Nitti shakes her head as if to say, “You don’t understand.”

“This place, our home,” she slows her steps, “Prawan and my father—” She turns to face him, the depth in her eyes presaging some painful disclosure. “The troubles I’ve had—I couldn’t have survived without them.”

She halts, raising her head to gaze at the house’s projecting stern, stilted above the slope with the river below.

“The waterside wing,” Nitti says. “My mother’s in there. Ibu. She had a stroke,” she mutters. “She’s bedridden, senseless. She doesn’t speak.”

“That’s not what Prawan—”

“I know,” Nitti replies. “Prawan loves her. For Prawan, that means imagining Ibu’s still a part of our world.” She draws a breath. “Kell—”

He watches her, listening, waiting.

“I don’t want it to end,” she says.

“I don’t either,” he tells her with feeling.

She shakes her head, searching for words. There are mysteries, things hidden from view— He still knows very little about her.

“We aren’t held in high esteem here,” she says. “Ibu divided

us from our neighbors. Her strangeness, her delusions— My identity card says I'm a Muslim, but it's been many years since I visited a mosque. My father still goes on Fridays to pray. He does what he can to hold us up."

"Are you worried that your family's position will matter to me?"

"No," Nitti says. "But there are things that might."

From a grove of saraca trees, a knocking sounds.

They both turn, seeing two flameback woodpeckers ascending a trunk.

"They're always here," Nitti says, "and always together."

She leads the way down the slope until they reach the path that follows the river. As they step onto it, leaves rain from above. Kell looks up, seeing a tribe of langurs moving through the crowns. A pair of olive-backed sunbirds follows. The bank is tangled with thorny bamboo and mats of vine spilling down. Butterflies—orange cruisers—skim the leafage looking for blooms.

"We're being watched," Nitti says.

A water monitor drifts in the current beside them, a six-foot lizard with all but its head in the flow.

"He knows me," she says.

The reptile forked-tongues the heat, watching Kell with one eye as it shifts its shoulders and crosses the river, heading for the opposite bank.

Farther along, the shoreline trees thicken and the air does too. A hundred paces and the flow slows; and a hundred after that, the surface turns oily and reflective. The river divides,

raying into ribbons and torn sheets that wander the mire and darkened soil.

Nitti lets loose of his hand, stepping into a narrow ravine. Water rills through the stilts of small trees rooted there.

“You know these?” She looks down.

Pale green urns crowd the declivity, each with black liquor within.

“I do.” He kneels.

Some of the urns are small as thumbs, some bigger than fists, all rubbery—the strangest plants in the jungle. “*Nepenthes ampullaria*,” he says, squeezing the walls of one, touching its mouth.

“Monkey cups,” Nitti says.

They eat insects, skinks, frogs by secreting digestive juice. The black fluid within is a soup of dissolved bodies.

“This was Ibu’s place,” Nitti says. “That’s why we’re here.”

Kell lifts his head. “This ravine?”

“And the swamp beyond.”

He rises, seeing urns clustered in the mulch between rills, on the crotches and knees of the dwarfish trees. He grasps a bole. Despite the warm day, its bark is cold.

“Tembusu,” he mutters. Ironwood, ancient and hard as prison bars. “Like perfume,” he says, “when they’re blooming.”

She nods. “The wind carries the scent to the veranda.”

“In May,” Kell says.

She nods again. “The month I was born.” Nitti looks downstream, then she reaches for his hand and leads him up out of the declivity.

As they continue along the path, the mulch blackens and the pools grow. The tembusu dwindles, replaced by hedges of fern. Nitti's grip tightens.

Nipah palms appear in clumps, trunkless, the large fronds rising straight from the muck. Kell spots some bulbuls in the scrub. Nitti halts on a prominence.

The path has ended. The black waters are all around them, and the air is soupy, damp and pungent. In a place like this, every breath you drew had been used by other creatures.

Why had she brought him here?

"A peat swamp," Kell says. "Swarming with leeches, no doubt."

She nods. "The striped ones follow your steps. If you wade in the water, the buffalo leeches come quickly." Nitti bites her lip and exhales, as if steeling herself to make some important disclosure.

"My childhood was here," she says. "Keributan."

Nitti speaks the name with a bleakness that matches the water's torpor. The stench of mold and rotting duff is rising into Kell's nose.

"The swamp belongs to a snake," Nitti says. "A python, as long as three men. The first time I saw it," she points, "it passed that rock, parted those palms and slid into the water. I was five."

Kell follows the track, wondering if the snake had been watching her as he is now.

"The cicadas were quiet," she says, "and the birds too." She circles her hand around. "I had never heard such silence."

Is this why she's brought me here? he thinks. It was more than the drama of her telling. She was sharing some kind of secret.

"The next time," she says, "it was coiled there, in the ferns with the sun on its back."

Even in Nitti's most revealed moments, Kell thinks, there had been things hidden.

"I could see the patterns," she says, "on its scaly back. The black and amber reticulations. Its blue iridescence.

"And again, before I left for the States," Nitti points upstream, "I saw it winding through the ironwood and the monkey cups. I was ten feet away. It could have swallowed me whole."

There is fear in her voice, a shrinking candor. And Kell sees fear in her eyes, but there is courage as well. She wants to trust me, he thinks. To rely on me.

"It's still here," Nitti says.

She doesn't look, but he does, scanning the marsh around them. The growth is dry in spots. You would hear a rustling, he thinks. Or you'd spot its long head sliding through the reeds, eye blazing with sun, the forked tongue snipping out.

"I saw one feeding at the Zoo Negara," he says, "when I first arrived."

"It coils around its victim," she says, "binds its chest—"

"They squeeze," he nods, "until they've stopped the prey's breath."

Nitti is staring at him.

"The jaws open wide," she says softly, "five times as wide

as its body. Five times.” Her lip snags. “Its head slides over you like a giant sock, and then you’re inside.”

Nitti inhales slowly, deeply, as if bracing herself.

“That’s my dream,” she confesses. “The one I always have. The one I had the night before you left. I’m sorry I pushed you away.”

Kell accepts her words in the quiet, remembering. Trying to imagine.

“In my dream, there’s a storm,” she says. “It churns the black waters. Waves become walls, steep walls that curl and crash into each other. The giant python waits on the shore, coiled on the bough of a naked tree, orange eyes watching.”

“How long has this—”

“The past is my enemy,” she says. “I can’t allow it to steal my life.”

“Can the past do that?”

“It can,” she murmurs. Then she straightens herself. “Keributan,” she says, scanning the swamp. “Poison in the monkey cups, leeches in the pools. The leaves fall and join the decay.”

On the return, Kell is silent.

As they pass the spot where the swamp begins, he notices a tall nyatoh with a long-legged huntsman on it, arms spread over the rough bark. Like a warning not to return, or of some contagion or infection received.

Once the swamp has vanished from view, Kell stops beside a banana thicket.

“I want you to know,” he clasps Nitti’s arm. “I’m not afraid of things that have pained or frightened you. Honesty

will only make us stronger.”

Nitti sighs and touches his cheek.

He reaches into his pants pocket and draws out a small white box. “For the future,” he says, and he hands it to her.

She opens the lid, sees the gold chain and lifts it out.

Kell fastens it around her neck, saying something about the chain protecting her heart from troubling thoughts.

Then they continue down the path, sun bright and the river as well.

As they approach Nitti’s home, Kell notices some oddities in its upkeep. In front the stilts are clear, but facing the river, they’re bound with vines. In places, the vines have reached the walls and wandered across them. A breeze lifts the leaves and swings the tails. Hasn’t the gardener noticed the encroachment?

Kell sees a small fig tree rooted on a windowsill of the waterside wing. And when he looks at the pane, he sees a silhouette on the drape. A woman—one with stooped shoulders and her hair bound up at the rear. Her profile thins magically, ghostlike. She’s turned, she’s raising one arm—The drape shifts. Is she peering out at them?

“Ibu,” he murmurs, glancing at Nitti.

“No,” she says with alarm. “That’s Prawan.”

Kell nods, but slowly, unsurely.

Nitti seems troubled, distracted, as if she is unsure herself.



On their way back from the swamp, it had seemed to Kell that Nitti's sharing of her childhood fears was stringing a new bridge between them. But by the time they enter the house, she seems dispirited, exhausted or disturbed by something malign.

She retreats to her bedroom and lies down. Kell goes looking for Susilo.

He is seated on the veranda with a glass of tea in his hand.

Kell pulls a chair closer and sits beside him.

Minutes pass without either saying a word. Then Kell wades in.

"In the States," he says, "when someone acts or speaks without thinking of others, we say they're 'taking liberties.'"

"I know the expression," Susilo replies.

"For a housekeeper, Prawan takes liberties."

Susilo sips his tea. Kell isn't sure if he's going to answer.

Finally, the old man speaks. "Nitti cares for you," he says.

"And I care for her," Kell replies.

"Her fondness," Susilo goes on, "upsets her. Her hopes have raised some fears." He pauses, holding his words back. "It's normal for a father to worry about his daughter."

Susilo's tone and the wear in his eyes hint at a long disquiet.

"You're Nitti's good fortune. I believe that now," the old man says. "And because you're close and are growing closer, it's time that I share some things with you. Unpleasant things." He frowns at his tea.

"Nitti told me about Ibu's stroke," Kell says, "and how her neglect of Islam isolated you from your neighbors."

“Our family has been through difficult times.” Susilo looks toward the river. “My wife was ill. Ill in her mind. Before the stroke.”

He sets his tea on the table beside him.

“She lived in a world of her own. When we first met, I was attracted by that. Her exaggerations, her fantasies. She performed in amateur dramas. She thought she would be a great actress. She imagined sharing the stage with a star of the day, and she talked about having an affair with him, even though they were strangers.

“I went along with this. ‘It’s harmless,’ I thought. ‘She’s a rare creature.’

“My view of things changed with her disappearances. I’d go to her room in the evening, and it would be empty. Prawan knew where she was. It was only by accident—”

He shifted his gaze toward the swamp.

“Through the dining room window, I saw a torch in the darkness down there. I waited up and confronted her. She didn’t care that I knew.” Susilo bowed his head. “I was still in love with her.”

“What was she doing?” Kell asks.

“Our imam would’ve called it heresy. I did what I could to keep it secret. Her nightly visits to Keributan—the name she gave the place—seemed to connect her to spiritual things, to give her a comfort she needed.”

A shiver climbs Kell’s neck.

“It isn’t just ‘isolation,’” Susilo says. “We have laws against these kinds of things. She could have been arrested.” He faces

Kell, pained, squinting. “Things turned ominous quickly. She would return bleary-eyed with her clothing soaked, her face scratched by thorns, leeches hanging from her legs. There was a place she bathed and a gathering of creatures and forces only she understood.”

Kell pictures a woman in water to her waist, the black swamp circled around her, silvered by the moon. “Prawan was a part of this?”

Susilo nods. “She was wedded to Ibu’s madness. She still is.”

A cicada sounds like a braking railroad wheel, metallic and shrill.

“Except for Prawan,” the old man says, “my wife was alone. The people around her were ghosts that came and went, appearing through the fog and sinking back into it. She began to judge us, to make demands. Small things at first—rules, taboos. Foods that couldn’t be eaten, words that couldn’t be spoken.

“People suspected. When Ibu was out in public, there was no hiding her strange state. I did what I could to preserve our privacy.”

It’s a jarring picture for Kell.

“The pregnancy,” Susilo says, “seemed cause for hope. I thought motherhood might bring my wife back. But she was already lost. Nitti became part of Ibu’s delusion—before she was born. My wife believed the infant was her companion in her nightly rites. Then the discomforts came, and as they mounted, so did her protests.”

Susilo pauses and draws a breath. When he resumes, his voice is trammelled with grief. "She thought something foul was growing inside her."

He craned at Kell over the arm of his chair.

"If you care for my daughter," Susilo says, "you must understand how Ibu's fantasies would affect a child. They were frightening to Nitti. Terrifying."

It's hard for Kell to imagine.

Silence except for the river's sigh.

"Ibu is in the waterside wing," Kell says.

"She is."

"You visit her."

Susilo shakes his head. "Kwik and I take flowers from the garden and put them beneath her window."

He was acting as if his wife was already dead.

"Considering how things turned out, you might think she had the powers she claimed. I'm Nitti's guardian now. But this house and the land it sits on was deeded to Ibu, and she passed control to Prawan in the event of her death or disablement.

"So," Susilo downs the last of his tea, "it's Prawan's home now."

The information surprises Kell.

The old man looks across the river, into the jungle.

Not the trunk of his family tree, Kell thinks. Or even a branch. Nitti's father was an epiphyte rooted in a vee, living on dew.



Kell returns to Nitti's room to find her stretched on the bed.

She opens her eyes, sees him, smiles and reaches out her hand. He sits beside her.

"You like what you do," she says, "at the Gardens."

"Very much."

"There's a feeling of power," she guesses.

"And powerlessness," he says.

"When the gingers don't change as you wish."

"That's right."

"You cut their old genes," she snips two fingers, "and add new ones."

"Something like that."

"You have to know what you're doing," she says.

Kell nods.

"Could you change me that way?"

He laughs. "I may like you the way you are."

"May?"

He's silent, waiting for her thought to pass.

"What if I asked you to?" she says. "How would you do it? Where would you cut?" Nitti touches her sternum. "My heart. My head—" She tips her crown toward him.

He puts his hand to her ear, feeling the fine strands by her temple.

"Would it hurt?" she says.

“It might,” he replies, “depending on what you asked me to change.”

The latch clicks. Kell turns his head.

The door swings open and Prawan steps forward, silver tray in her hand. She avoids looking at either of them, sets the tray on the bed, removes the jar from the vanity drawer and shakes out a pill. She passes it to Nitti along with a glass of water.

The housekeeper’s hand dips into her apron pocket and emerges with an object. She places it on the vanity counter beside the rubber goose and slips the medication back in the drawer. Then, as quietly as she entered, Prawan departs.

Nitti puts the pill on her tongue and washes it down.

“What do those do?” Kell asks.

“They calm me.” She speaks without looking up.

The new object on the bedstand, Kell sees, is an empty perfume bottle of amethyst glass. He reaches for it, lifting it by its atomizer bulb.

“I played with that,” Nitti says, “when I was a child.”

“The toys please you?”

Nitti shakes her head. “Prawan thinks the memories will—”

“Will what?”

“Draw us together. Ibu and I.”

“Prawan wants that?” he says.

Nitti nods.

“What about you?”

“Oh no,” she shakes her head. “That will never happen—”

Her voice is unnaturally high, and her eyes are a child's. There's a hint of pleading in them.

He wants to help her, whatever help means. But what can he do? The memory of an intimate smile—tender, wistful, the promise of safety and bliss—lived in his heart. He could bring it to mind any time he wished. His mother, his Ibu, was the sun that shone over him, no matter how far he roamed. That's what he knew about the roots of love. Nothing more than that.

Nitti's strange mother, a defeated ayah, the imperious Prawan— What Kell had learned was already too much. It exceeded his understanding. If he knew more, would he develop convictions, answers? As a partner— Could he ever be any use to Nitti?

"It will be hard," he says, "but I'm going to try."

Nitti regards him.

"To give you whatever help I can," he says. "I'm in love with you, Nitti."

She clasps his wrist and bows her head.

"Will you trust me?" he asks.

She nods.

Kell faces the armoire and opens the door. "Take me for a walk," he says, "down the waterside wing."

She's as still as a cat gecko frozen on a leaf.

"Nitti—"

"I'd rather not."

"We're close in many ways," Kell says, "but in others, I feel like I barely know you."

“Please,” she whispers.

“I need to know about this,” he says gently, “don’t I?”

His question hangs in the air between them. Finally, she nods.

As Kell retrieves some clothing for her, she sighs and rises like a child called to a task. He helps her dress and they leave her room, starting along the well-lit corridor.

“When was the last time you saw her?” he asks.

“I was sixteen.”

“The place where she stays— She’s been there the whole time?”

Nitti nods. “Ayah sleeps alone. When I returned from the States, I took my old room.”

“Prawan cares for her,” he says.

Nitti nods. “Prawan makes special food and brings it to her. Prawan washes her. Prawan takes her clothes off and puts them on.”

“Special food?”

“The same as before,” Nitti says. “Prawan tells us everything.” Then softly, “I don’t want to know.”

They pass through the empty dining area. Through the window, Kell sees a leaning fence crowned with beaumontia. The twisting vine was dragging it down.

“Ibu never leaves?” he asks. “Prawan never escorts her out?”

“Never,” Nitti says.

“I’m trying to picture her, before the stroke.”

His attempt to summon an image unsettles Nitti. She is trusting him, and the trust is taking courage.

“She was taller than I am. Her hair was clipped short. She preferred men’s clothes. Prawan searched the markets for them. Ibu liked to look at herself in the mirror—a tall mirror beside her bed. Sometimes she’d be an actress, posing in it, raising her arms, speaking her lines.”

“You were with her?”

Nitti nods. “When she let me.”

The entrance to the waterside wing comes into view. Nitti slows. Kell can feel her reluctance.

“I’m listening,” Kell says. “You were with her, in her room.”

“Prawan made up her face,” Nitti says.

He can hear the agitation in her voice.

“How did she make it up?” Kell asks.

Nitti shakes her head.

“She wasn’t trying to be attractive.”

“No,” Nitti says.

They reach the turn and make it together. The hall down the waterside wing is visible now, a lone door at the end on the left.

“Tell me about the stroke.”

“She was bathing,” Nitti says. “Prawan was with her.”

“What did it do, physically?”

“Twisted her spine,” Nitti answers. “Froze her arm.”

“She can’t speak?”

“Not a word,” she whispers.

An old woman, Kell thinks, crippled, bedridden, left to the care of a crazy housekeeper who’s dripping poison into her charge’s ear.

Closer and closer they draw to Ibu's sanctum. The edge of fear in Nitti's eyes sharpens with every step.

"I wasn't the child she wanted," she says.

He's gripping her hand, coaxing her forward.

"She used Keributan to threaten you," he says.

Nitti bows her head.

Was she hiding her face, ashamed or afraid— Kell couldn't tell.

"It's more than a place in the peat swamp," he says.

"Keributan," Nitti answers, "is the dark water beneath us."

"I don't understand."

"We're suspended above it," Nitti says. "All of us. We're at Ibu's mercy: she can hold on to us, or she can let go."

Her fearful words echo down the dimly lit passage, joining their muted footsteps and uneven breath. Elsewhere the house is tiled, but here the floor is wooden and damp. A briny stench rises from the planks.

"She brought back sludge in a jar," Nitti says, "and salved herself with it. The smell of Keributan was everywhere."

Kell sees her nose twitch. Can she smell the swamp even now?

The door looms closer. Nitti stares at the knob as if she thinks it's about to open.

She halts. Her head ticks, hearing noises or voices. All at once she's shivering, shaking uncontrollably, chest heaving as if she can't breathe.

Kell circles her shoulders with his arm, swinging her around, escorting her back down the hall.

It isn't until they've rounded the corner and the waterside wing is out of sight that Nitti's heaving fades. Clarity reappears in her eyes. She blinks, and her tongue wets her lower lip.

"It's always with you," Kell says softly.

"Always," she sighs.

With that sigh, it was as if an awful secret had passed into the world.



He knows more now, but the knowledge had come at a price. He'd pushed her too hard. They sit in the guest room for an hour, then Kell suggests they go outside. He wants to get her away from the house.

They cross the river and climb a rise. With his new awareness, the relationship is evolving in ways he would not have foreseen. He's closer to Nitti, more conscious of the threats she feels. At the same time, there's a new distance between them, as if what he'd learned demanded, for her, a new kind of self-protection.

She was more vulnerable now. And part of her had gone into hiding.

A grove of borassodendron palms rises ahead, roofing the sky with bushy sprays. They wander beneath, not holding hands, not speaking. Filmy ferns, jewel bugs and selaginella, branching and blue. A scatch of woodshrikes, the whirl of cicadas— All the wild things he knows so well. But Nitti is an enigma, a maze to which he is not admitted. His heart

wants to retract like a snail shrinking into its shell, but he won't let it. He'd asked for her trust, and he's going to earn it.

By the time they head back, a gray light has settled, a twilight before twilight's time. Kell had planned to spend the night with her and return to Penang the following morning. Prawan serves a light dinner, and they return to Nitti's room.

As soon as she's closed the door, Nitti begins to undress.

Once she's naked, she turns to him, removing his belt, unbuttoning his shirt.

Nitti settles him on the bed, palming his chest, hiding her eyes.

She swipes a match, and a bead of fire appears at its end. She lights the wick of a beeswax taper, and with its shadows wavering over her, she stretches beside him.

Kell kisses her lips. His hand feathers her back, a mitt-shaped macaranga leaf idling in the breeze. He feels her tongue on his cheek.

Then Nitti stands on her knees and folds his head in her arms. Kell's heart is sluggish, but he returns the affection, using both hands to squeeze her waist.

Is it me? he thinks. Where is the desire that usually surfaced so easily?

Her lips cross his brow, nipping his lid, steaming his ear. Her thighs clench one of his, like a hammerhead worm cornering prey, leaving slimy secretions. Kell's hand divides her rear, an army of ants descending into a glade.

"You're distracted," she says.

He thinks, Maybe I am.

She hurries ahead, attacking his groin with her hands and mouth, like a pangolin tearing open a termite mound. He raises himself, watching her bob in the strobing light. It's shadow puppetry, done for laughs, like a flameback pecking grubs from a branch. The jungle images are reflexive and unthinking.

Kell takes her face in his hands and lifts it. Her features shift with the flicker. Puzzling brows, an uncertain lip—

Had it always been there? He hadn't noticed it before. A jagged line at the corner of Nitti's eye. Was it a scar or a mark she'd carried from birth?

He puts the tip of his finger on it. "Were you hurt?"

Nitti turns her head. "Don't."

He pinches her chin, moving her face back to where it was.

But what he has learned taints his view: he is seeing her now in two dimensions. There's a living child, treasured and safe in the Secret Chamber; and there is one half-dead, bereft and alone, sinking into the waters of Keributan.

What does he know of this strange creature?

Who is the real Nitti?

There's a guise, a mask. For the first time, Kell can see it.

Does he love her? Yes, oh yes—certainly yes. Why can't he feel it?

He can see the side of her nose, straight and poreless; the corner of her mouth, blissful and untormented. And through the carved leafage, a lock of unbraided hair hangs wavy and fine. But her cheeks, while smooth, are no longer soft and yielding; they're stiff and grained. One eye is a seedpod,

immobile. The other is hers. Nitti's dark eye, guileless and true, ever and always, rapt at times, at others so fearless it swallows your own—

That eye is fixed on him now, peering through the orbit of the wooden mask, wondering.



Rich Shapero's novels dare readers with giant metaphors, magnificent obsessions and potent ideas. His casts of idealistic lovers, laboring miners, and rebellious artists all rate ideas as paramount, more important than life itself. They traverse wild landscapes and visionary realms, imagining gods who in turn imagine them. Like the seekers themselves, readers grapple with revealing truths about human potential. *Hibiscus Mask* and his previous titles—*Beneath Caaqi's Wings*, *Dreams of Delphine*, *The Slide That Buried Rightful*, *Dissolve*, *Island Fruit Remedy*, *Balcony of Fog*, *Rin*, *Tongue and Dorner*, *Arms from the Sea*, *The Hope We Seek*, *Too Far*, and *Wild Animus*—are available in hardcover and as ebooks. They also combine music, visual art, animation and video in the TooFar Media app. Shapero spins provocative stories for the eyes, ears, and imagination.