

Vincent

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HE HAD A debate with a friend. Was it wrong to make single, older men fall in love with him, when he had no intention of committing? He liked to stroke their beards, lie in their warm, broad chests, and whisper gently into their ears *I feel so safe lying in you*. “It’s the fantasy of love,” his friend had said. “Something only *bo*— something I didn’t expect you’d buy into.”

She was about to call him a “boy”, and was right not to. Zachary hated it whenever anyone — anyone not in bed with him — called him that. Just because he hadn’t had a relationship at the age of 24 didn’t mean he knew nothing about love. That it could take the guise of a comfortable illusion, masking what was supposed to be, what people said he truly deserved — a real, genuine connection — was something he was well aware of. But he was convinced he could tell the difference, when it wasn’t love.

When the pandemic had eased out to allow for more social (and bodily) interactions, something within Zachary declared loudly that the interior worlds he’d been leading were not enough. He had not a real personality beyond that mildly useful imagination, which, though was capable of churning out unassailable arguments when the occasion called for, was bound to be worthless now that real, human interactions were inevitable. Who cares about a university mind? he thought. It doesn’t show on Instagram, or Tinder. It doesn’t arouse.

It doesn’t feel safe.

Two months before his first date, Zachary’s parents had been informed of their son’s extraordinary interior life. It entailed a complex-sounding analysis of his own feelings leading all the way from childhood up to that well-rehearsed moment.

Your approval isn’t needed.

There’s nothing wrong with me, or you, or anyone for that matter.

It was one of his strategies, to throw out these remarks in various iterations so his parents would know it wasn’t them in charge. His mother only repeatedly asserted in a wary voice that nothing had changed and he was still her son and his happiness was all that mattered; but with the dad, whose informing was on a separate occasion, Zachary told him he had considered not telling him at all. He would wait until that day — the day his father would finally pass — came. He thought this

without malice at all. Still, when his father responded with an ashen face, Zachary couldn't tell if it was because of the morbidity of the subject, or his realisation of the gravity his son had been carrying all this while. When he eventually responded with tears and hugs, and an instance of "I love you *very much*, son" – an assurance he preferred not hearing – Zachary concluded that the conversation was a resounding success.

So when he came down the stairs one evening to announce "I'm going out with a 45-year-old man," it could be said that the lack of shock on his parents' faces (that is, on his preferred gender and not his preferred age) was hard-earned. Zachary had long planned, rehearsed and finally performed this intimate project two months ago, like it was a Hollywood audition he was finally accepted for. Now, it was time to walk the carpet, holding the arm of a possible Christian Bale. That was his type: silver-fox, secure, but also shapeshifting. It surprised him, too, that a man's propensity to be unpredictable was so important to Zachary, and Bale was the epitome of that. They had now a movie premiere to attend, and no doubt another in line soon, which would eventually culminate in their acceptance speech of an Academy Award. Their arms locked with each other, of course, while holding that hard, heavy golden statuette before finally letting their long-withheld erections fly in their hotel room to make wild, ferocious post-Oscars love. It couldn't be too far-fetched now, could it, given how he planned everything to the letter, every step of the way?

What's his name?

Jesse.

White guy?

How would they know? Yes.

From where?

He's white but Malaysian.

Why didn't he just say from Malaysia? Never mind, probably to explain the slightly uncommon combination, that's all.

But when Jesse first opened his mouth, Zachary was indeed surprised by the voice. It was really Malaysian, with a slight Chinese twang in fact, and not British, or American, or Australian as he had secretly thought it would be. Jesse looked a little different from his picture. He was wearing a worn cap, a blue T-shirt and a pair of shorts, quite differently from the black suit and slicked-back hair shown on his dating profile. Not exactly a Bale. Not as insouciant or experienced-looking, but still very exciting.

Hi, Zachary.

Hello, Jesse.

Why so formal?

Am I?

Want to make a good impression is it?

He couldn't help but notice that voice lying beneath that beautiful face. Want to make a good impression, don't you? is what Zachary would've said. If blindfolded, people would think himself the is-it guy and Jesse the don't-you guy, he thought. But did it need to matter, when he sounded so friendly? When Jesse sounded so much like home? And nobody would call that a bad thing. Zachary made it a point to himself that he would love them all – black, white, brown, beige, and of course, yellow, because love didn't depend on images. Love was understanding before words were even spoken, and he knew at that point, that whatever stories Jesse had to tell him were already familiar to him. "I know, Jesse." "I know what you mean," he could hear himself saying. In the craft of understanding men, Zachary had many role models, mostly from TV – men who were so liberal and cosmopolitan they would "get" him before he even tried to explain anything. *That* was going to be him and his imminent boyfriend. So of course not, it didn't need to matter. Zachary could now go on to take a lot of pride in that evening. In how he never gave too much thought to the disparity between their voices. How he cleverly diffused the compliment when Jesse remarked on him sounding and looking "quite different". And how he was able to attract this rather promising candidate – one who had a little of himself, of home, but also, not too much.

"IT GOT BORING quite quickly. I don't know why. I think it's because he didn't understand my poem, said it was too *heavy* for him," Zachary was telling Vincent, his second date, who was five years older than Jesse. Vincent had come to visit from England, and there was no disparity in their voices, this time.

"Do you like poetry?" Zachary stroked at the English man's stubble.

Zachary didn't know if asking that would lead them to a similar fate he and Jesse suffered. The English man only said, and quite adamantly at that, "You're *not* heavy, I know that."

Vincent didn't look like Bale at all, but he had enough in common. He said very little, as was characteristic of men with their stature. Being some decades older, what could faze them? They weren't brusque. Only concise and to the point. Blasé men sure of their circumstances. So when Vincent paused too long for comfort after saying that, this was useful in Zachary knowing the

English man wasn't lying. Wasn't feigning tenderness for the boy's dangerous-sounding question at a possibly inappropriate stage of their no-strings-attached relationship. No-strings-attached, Zachary knew better than to violate that. He didn't need to entertain other possibilities when men seemed less enthusiastic than was hoped for. He didn't need to imagine what they could possibly be thinking. "Is the boy in love with me?" "Is it going to be trouble from now on?" "What if his poetry turns out to be awful?" None of those, because any man who couldn't appreciate words – his words – were either younger than him, or not "blasé" enough for his taste.

Are you going to write me a poem?

No.

Why not? You think I won't understand it?

No.

So you *do* think that?

No, because I think you will.

And that will be a problem?

Yes, because you're too old to be my boyfriend.

Ow. So why don't you date younger men?

Not into younger men.

Younger than me, not you.

Why do I have to, when I've got this sexy beast right here?

An old beast.

The older the be'er.

Vincent would laugh whenever he did that. He found it amusing the boy wanted so much to sound like him, when he found him perfectly adorable the way he was. The way he was supposed to be: youthful, carefree, organic. But he also believed that that accent no one else in the country was using because he modified it to his liking, was precisely why he loved the boy. Why he knew he would understand his poems – even though he had not read them – when those closer to him, he knew would not.

You know, you don't have to be anyone, right? Not me, not Jesse, not Jack or Jameson or wha'eva.

Are those the men you think I dated?

You tell me.

Hmm... maybe, if they look anything like you.

And Vincent would let out a chuckle before having to kiss him out of sheer, irrepressible love.

He would have to guide their tongues in every direction into corners they didn't know existed within them.

I love you, *very much*.

Cut that out.

Beautiful boy.

Cut that out, too.

Zachary had said jokingly, of course.

VINCENT HAD WANTED to offer Zachary a ride back home, and as much as the boy was too drained to walk to the MRT after their passionate love-making, he declined. It would be an awkward scene to have a tall, white man back in his hometown – Bukit Tinggi, Klang – where the scorching sun was bound to expose his ruby cheeks more accustomed to London's milder weather. The Klangians would take glances at his flustering face, not knowing that doing so was as good as mocking him. "I don't bloody care," Vincent would've said. "I just want you safe, on your way home," he would've whispered gently.

But no. He was too tired to remark on the many differences between London and Klang, like how, as he was mindlessly staring through the tube of the train, palm gripping on his overhead handle, everyone was still wearing a mask. Double-masked even: white inside, black outside; black inside, white outside. Some with a face shield, or a visor, as he preferred to call it for no good reason, on top of all the masks. The English wouldn't care at this point. Maskless. No black, no white. And it's not that Vincent would talk about these incessantly, it's just that his presence – one the crowd was bound not to overlook – would provoke Zachary to register these differences vehemently, when he really didn't want to.

In any case, Zachary knew he was somewhat exaggerating, and he would be readier to chide himself for this psychological weakness in some years' time, when Vincent was one of many he knew in his lifetime. Vincent from New York, or Vincent from Paris? Vincent the daddy, or Vincent the twink? No, it was not within him to love another twink. Too young. But he would meet many more Vincents, he was certain. One day, an older and more well-rounded Zachary would no longer be overwhelmed by these differences. But before that happened, it was easy for men like Vincent – the one from London, that is – to proclaim to him "I don't bloody care", or give advice like "You don't have to be anyone". Of course, he bloody had to. In this world they lived in, some voices sounded more accepting than others. And the more accepting voices were by nature more

attractive. In all ways, sexually as well as non-sexually. Perhaps Vincent had to learn it as well. Perhaps it didn't come to him as naturally as Zachary thought it did. Maybe his mother taught him religiously when he was a boy himself. But what Zachary knew was that learning that – the new voices – was a painfully deliberate process for him. Just like how a poetic voice had to come out of the nastiest pain, so too was that adorably arousing voice he adopted when he whispered “the older the be'er”. The one which made Vincent say “You don't have to be anyone.” But it did work for them, no? Zachary and Vincent wouldn't have been moaning on the kitchen countertop with the boy chanting “have I been a good boy, Daddy?”, if Zachary didn't start planning and learning everything, while the idea of visiting a boy like this took first form in Vincent's mind many years ago. “Someday I will arrive somewhere for a boy who needs me,” his subconscious must've promised him. And when he finally arrived from England, both of them would be ready for each other, having already spoken in the same voices. There was nothing inorganic about this process. How could it be when it was just two men trying to speak in the only language affording them true love? The language of “I'm at your complete fucking mercy, Daddy!” “Punish me, Daddy!” was not spoken elsewhere, but on that kitchen countertop, where Zachary felt an inexplicable fury at his friend who dubbed him a “boy”, his love a “fantasy”. He wished she was there to witness them, completing each other, and loving each other in a way she never would understand. The tiny boy from Bukit Tinggi conquering his Daddy from London. Every “Daddy” chanted a rebellion, an atonement, for all the parts he could be, and wanted to be, with the only man who would let him – Vincent from England, who understood his poems before the boy had even written them.

IT WAS 11 in the morning when Zachary arrived home. He had to ring the doorbell for leaving his keys at Vincent's. No sound.

Again. No sound.

Where are your masks? The voice of his father from the doorstep. He felt glad now that Vincent didn't come along.

Threw them away.

Wait there.

The bell wouldn't sound and the gate wouldn't open because there was no power. Zachary waited under the sun while his father fetched for the keys. The old man had to do it himself, pry the screws open at the hinges of the control box so the gate could be made loose. Zachary stood at

the other end. He watched his father fumble with the keys. He began to sweat, and then his father began to sweat, too.

What time is it? Zachary asked.

About noon, the old man answered.

The gate was loose now, and Zachary stepped in.

Had your coffee?

Yes, but I can have one cup more.

They had few things to bond over. Coffee was one of them. Zachary had had an Americano earlier at Vincent's, but nowadays he couldn't care about the amount of caffeine he ingested. Neither could his father, it seemed.

Where is she? Zachary asked.

Washing.

Washing what?

Herself. Taking a shower.

They were talking about Zachary's mom.

I'm going to do that, too, Zachary said. After I eat.

Good.

After I eat with you.

Good.

It was leftover breakfast Zachary was eating. His father sat at the table's other end not saying anything, before beginning to swipe through his phone religiously. In the noise of their laboured breathing, Zachary was knifing the toast like a surgeon trying to remove a tumour. His movements careful, deliberate, no doubt the newfound product of having recently made Vincent's acquaintance. Vincent dined like this. He would, at an appropriate angle, fork with his left hand into the toast, or whatever it was being forked at, then saw away at it with a knife in his right hand, also at an elegantly efficient angle, before gently placing that newly detached bit of carbohydrate into his mouth. This was what he was doing. He had already sounded like Vincent, but now he moved like him. Except Vincent would always saw away at the right size, a morsel neither too much nor too little for a satisfactory bite in the mouth. Zachary's were sometimes so inadequately small it would fall off the fork before it even reached his mouth. But why care? Vincent was not there. There was only his father, who loved his son so much he would let him do or cut anything, in any way he wanted. Zachary could cut the toast, snip at it, slash at it, make a gash or two or

three, and he would respect all his choices, just like how he did without pressing for details when Zachary showed up in the morning still in his clothes the night before. His son was not expected to explain where he lodged himself for the night, who he was with, or what he was doing, because he – the father – was a man who respected freedom. What he asked in return was only the same, the freedom to be left alone and not be expected to venture into the territory of imagining another man – one only a few years younger than him, and not looking or sounding like him at all – calling Zachary *his* own beautiful boy. Touching the trail of hair on his torso before gripping both his arms, hard, as if they were doing it for anything other than sadistic pleasure.

No. Zachary had no need for any “irrepressible love” because the boy had never been owed anything. In this household, everyone had the right to think and believe in whatever they wanted. Liberal, or not. Progressive, or not. These shouldn’t in any way obstruct the love a father had for his son. They didn’t. He couldn’t speak for Vincent and his family (that is another man’s business), but he knew his son had *no need* for what he believed he needed.

AND NO ONE could call that a fantasy, Zachary thought as he washed himself in the shower. His mother had no doubt finished cleaning herself and gone to join his dad, who probably found it pointless to shower since he would indubitably sweat again later. The house had no power. The water was cold from the heater not functioning. Zachary was now craving the warmth found in Vincent’s chests, again.

I don’t want you to leave. He texted.

Water was so cold. Awful shower.

Why? The English man responded.

No power.

Poor boy.

I don’t want you to *leave*.

Zachary had to, somewhat, wait before the response arrived. He switched off the phone, then switched it on again. He had to wait for some time to pass before the phone could be ready again. He was used to it now, restarting it from time to time, sometimes over and over again, and then waiting each time for however long it took for the phone to run again.

There’s a home to go back to. There’s mine. Then there’s yours.

We can be each other’s homes. Zachary typed this rather too quickly.

You know I loved your poetry.

You didn't read it.

I did.

When?

When we were together. I loved it, very much.

He must've been too tired to remember.

Thank you, Vincent.

That's the point, I've read your poetry.

Zachary felt soothed, but he also felt an impending danger.

And something else behind that wall of danger.

You're not heavy, at all, boy.

Don't say that.

I did, many times. You just pretended not to hear them.

What was he supposed to do after Vincent left? Look for more like him? What were the odds of another man handling him in that way, when they were both speaking in a language so few understood?

Zachary, you know my home welcomes you, anytime.

How uncomfortable it was, he thought, to hear his name being spelt out so neatly like it was just three ordinary syllables surrendered to a long list of passengers' names in a pre-flight announcement at an airport. And not least by the only man who had the permission to call him "boy". What was the reason now to visit his home, in England or wherever, when he had forfeited that privilege the boy tendered to him? The English man must've said it – Zachary's name – with a fuller knowledge the boy had now no access to. There must've been something invisible in that choice, or perhaps there was no other choice, Zachary thought, and must at least be permitted that thought.

This, was alright. This – a love that takes the form of using the real name of the boy you love as much as your childhood even if it would make him feel something like being cast into an ocean to find a new continent by himself – was alright. And Zachary, who left his keys, his masks, and maybe his poetry too (he couldn't remember) at Vincent's, could now sleep, and begin to swim in his dream, peacefully, knowing that those articles which were in his possession before, were in more than good hands.

Not disposable, not essential, not even like souvenirs, which were always neglected after some time, but at ease, and remembered, in Vincent's tender hands.