

Manducate

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It wasn't easy for Anselm to weave his way through the network of endless narrow tunnels and dark alleys, but he finally made it to Kumar's studio apartment in Chow Kit. The thick curtains filtered the seeping sunlight, casting the unit into shadows. He found T-shirts and boxers strewn about in the otherwise neat and tidy studio. Kumar was asleep, so he tiptoed to the kitchen. A polystyrene box gagged by half-eaten mee-goreng sat on the marble-topped kitchen counter. Anselm walked into the small living room adjoining the kitchen towards the balcony and drew the curtains apart.

"For once, some colour," he thought. He was pleased to catch sight of the freshly ironed coat, shirts and slacks that Kumar was going to wear for his interview on Monday hanging on a nail in place of a painting. He tugged gently on the knotted silk neck-tie that coiled around the collar, still in its plastic covers from the laundry. The huge five foot by three framed oil painting of golden lotuses laid between the sofa and the sliding doors. Kumar did artwork to obtain relief from work stress; this was the one that fetched a handsome sum at a charity auction, but later procured by the artist himself.

Anselm rolled away the sliding door and stepped outside. He beamed at the sight of the red and green caladiums flourishing on the narrow balcony. He took a deep breath, sucking in the KL skyline. KLCC, Menara Telekom and Exchange 106 jutted out into the blue skies like metallic mushrooms on a large field. Leaving the sliding door ajar, he walked back in, appreciating the whiff of cool air that followed. He sat on a stool next to Kumar's bed, rolling his feet on an empty vodka bottle on the floor and trying to discern if Kumar was really asleep.

"Wake up sleepy head," he called out. Kumar's eyelids fluttered. "Cook me something. It's almost lunchtime."

"You again?" Rubbing his dark eye bags, Kumar rolled down the blanket, revealing the athletic buttocks of a broad bodied person next to his bony self. The stranger's legs stretched beyond the five-foot nyatoh bed. Kumar slumbered upwards and stared into space. Searching about under the sheets, he produced a pack of cigarettes. Anselm handed him a lighter from the bedside table. Lighting one, Kumar ran his fingers over his parched lips in between the puffs. "Not slept like forever," he said and offered the pack to Anselm.

“You know I can’t,” Anselm said as he got up and pushed away the pack of Marlborough. “Who’s that next to you?”

“You don’t know him? That’s our old friend Derreck Quah.”

“Derreck? You sure?” Anselm’s eyebrows rose.

“Of course. My ex-team manager. Reported me instead, bastards! Misappropriation of company finances. Fucking thieves, they escaped! I was the scapegoat,” Kumar bristled.

“Where did you find him?” Anselm asked curiously.

“After all these months, I found him on Grindr,” Kumar smirked. “Of course, disguised as Fridolf. Pretending he didn’t know me too,” he chuckled.

“Fridolf?” asked Anselm as he got up from the stool, squinting his eyes.

“You never told me you’re coming,” Kumar said. He got up from the bed in one abrupt motion, his naked body revealing a belly sunken by protruding rib bones, flabby upper arms, blackened patches scattered on his elbows and scraggy hair that had started greying around his chest and groin. He dropped the burning stub onto the tiles, and stared briefly at it before scratching himself agitatedly.

“The bed bugs at it again,” he complained. “They keep biting all night, Anselm. But this Fridolf here hardly stirred.”

“Kumar,” Anselm exclaimed nervously. “Kill the flame. Use your heels,” he seethed, before walking over to the kitchen and opening the fridge. “Your stock is running out,” he said after scrutinising its content. “Will it be enough to see you through for the coming week? The MCO is extended.”

Kumar looked up and yawned, exposing his almost serrated row of teeth now blotched with purplish cavity. “Ah, you said you are hungry,” he said absent-mindedly, tracing a finger over his mouth.

“Aren’t you going to cover your buttocks at least?” Anselm snapped.

Kumar looked around the room but ignored the clothes on the floor and staggered towards the kitchen counter. “I had something in mind, Anselm. The pork belly appa used to make those days, remember? But I can’t recollect the recipe.” He frowned. “A bit complicated, a Chinese dish.

I was thinking, I can cook that today just to beat the randomness and this clanking sound in my head,” Kumar said as he massaged his temples.

“That’s because your Chinese boss lives in your head,” retorted Anselm. “He has hardly left. That’s the last piece sticking in your head like meat between your teeth. Irritating, isn’t it? When they did not invite you for the product launch, you should have known. Bloody leeches. Suck people’s blood, then get them arrested some more. You haven’t forgotten all those business drinks, how they attracted you to their scheme of things and trapped you like a fly in a spider’s web.”

Anselm lifted his t-shirt and pointed to his navel. “Listen Kumar, you must hear your own voice from now on, the one coming from your guts. What’s taking you so long, start on lunch lah!” He scowled, realising that Kumar had been standing about the kitchen counter absent-mindedly.

Kumar quickly took out a large mound of meat wrapped in a thin blue cloth.

“You can cook that today Kumar,” Anselm decided as he laid himself on the two-seater sofa opposite the kitchen counter.

“What do you mean I could hear my voice? You mean I spoke Chinese?” asked Kumar, curling his lips.

“Cantonese,” said Anselm. “If not how to work in Chinese firm? Fired as well,” he giggled after a second thought.

“Sad. I don’t remember so much, at all. But I know they took everything away,” said Kumar, examining his empty hands. “Even Cassey left me, Anselm.”

“Ya lah, they put you on newspaper. Where to go and park his face?” Anselm dangled his legs over the sofa’s armrest. “But look on the bright side, the new job will do you good. Maybe Cassey will come back. You get angry with Derreck Quah, but we all have to suffer.”

“I think I need to scratch myself a bit,” Kumar excused himself. “These bugs, I think they’ve gotten everywhere in the house. They bite with a vengeance,” he noted, as he began to scratch his back, belly and crotch. “I think they’ve gotten even under my skin now.”

“Wash your hands,” Anselm shuddered, bending an elbow over his eyes.

Kumar ignored his remarks. “I will make coffee first.” He pulled out two sachets from an overhead compartment in the kitchen cabinet. Soon the smell of coffee filled the house and

invigorated his senses. Scratching his sides, he handed Anselm a mug and followed him to the bed. They stood at the bedside observing Fridolf, Kumar with his hands folded and Anselm taking small sips of the coffee.

“What a fine specimen,” Anselm said softly as he bent down to touch Fridolf’s blond hair. “I can’t see his face buried in the pillow.” He slowly ran his finger down Fridolf’s spine and into the cracks of his buttocks and stopped. “Still warm,” he declared. “How did he end up here? This is not Derreck Quah,” he reiterated before walking back to the kitchen, pulling Kumar away from the bed and settling himself on the sofa’s arm.

“I approached him on Grindr a week ago,” Kumar explained, arranging garlic, a large onion and dried chillies on the kitchen counter. “Very shy guy. Said he was an expat, an auditor who travels. Staying at Hilton, KL Sentral. We went for a drink at Brickfields. He kept denying he’s Derreck Quah. But I held on to my suspicion. He looks like one, doesn’t he?” he asked, producing a large chopper from the drawer. The knife glinted, its reflection cutting across Kumar’s face.

“Yes, especially his hair. Maybe he had bleached it gold. Such an obsession with Chinese fellas nowadays. *Abbb*, look, wet raincoat,” he said, picking up a soiled condom from under the sofa. “Blushing ah you,” he sniggered.

Kumar burst out laughing. Clutching his belly, he replied, “We were snorting on left-over ice.”

“You make me proud.” Anselm winked as he tossed the condom into the dustbin. “So, what are you planning to do?” He asked, pointing to Fridolf, his face now suddenly stern and intent.

Kumar stopped laughing. He started to chop the peeled garlic. Anselm got up from the sofa and walked towards Kumar.

“So?” he asked again.

Kumar rubbed the nape of his neck and went on to peel the onion and cut it up into cubes. Soaking the dried chillies in a bowl of water, he began to undo the lumps of meat from its stained wrapping and dropped it into the sink. “The last to go,” he said. “Enough over the last two weeks of MCO,” he said.

“Fresh,” said Anselm as he looked over the kitchen sink. “Look how they wobble,” he observed, poking the lump of meat. “Wish I had those on my buttocks. Always my favourite, you know,” he sighed.

“How do you want them served?” asked Kumar, opening the faucet and flushing water onto the bloodied meat. “I think I will slice them up, stir fry with minced garlic and dried chili. Top up with fresh onions. Spring onions would be good but I’ve not been out to the grocer downstairs. I’ve got everything else though,” he said, pointing to a stack of dark sauces.

“Sounds good,” Anselm approved. “Maybe you want to add a bit of hoisin sauce, make the meat shiny and tangy.”

“Why?” Kumar asked. “I’m adding star anise and black pepper.”

“Haiya, Chinese meat cook like Chinese lah,” Anselm waved his hands dismissively. “And add a tablespoon of oyster sauce. Then only tasty.”

Kumar looped a dark blue apron over his neck and tied it loosely around his naked torso. He placed the meat chunks with identical cuts on a chopping board. “Look,” he said, lifting and showing off the purplish red meat with a grin. Then he gave the meat a final rinse and patted it with a dry rag. At Anselm’s signal, Kumar began chopping the meat into small biteable cubes. Blood oozed out from the fine strands of fat that held the meat together. “Reminds me of pork,” Kumar said after he was done.

“No, less fatty, but has a marble-like appearance. Looks pretty much like beef,” Anselm replied.

Kumar poured out thick soy sauce over the meat and put it aside, then he began to cut up the dried chillies. Once ready, he placed a frying pan over the stove and put it on low heat. Then he poured olive oil into the pan and sautéed the spices with garlic and dried chillies before adding the meat.

Anselm cleared the coffee table. “No rice?” he frowned, when Kumar handed him a bottle of chardonnay.

“Only meat,” Kumar said. “MCO, how to go out?”

“2006, Jacob’s Creek,” Anselm read the label. “Not Penfolds?” he inquired, puckering his lips.

“You bought it,” Kumar reminded him as he dumped the onions into the searing pan.

Switching off the gas stove, Kumar dished out the meat onto an oval, flat pyrex and laid it on the small coffee table. Anselm took out wine glasses from Kumar's wardrobe and poured out the chardonnay for them. He placed a fork at each end of the large plate. They sat facing each other.

"Bon appetit," said Anselm, and raised his glass as he took the first bite of the meat. "So good." He closed his eyes with pleasure. "Funny how something so odourless and uncanny, simply melts in your mouth. Go on, eat," he urged Kumar, who was silently watching him. "Chew slow and steadily, feel the texture, savour the juices."

"Derreck Quah definitely tastes better than his looks," said Kumar. At that moment Anselm stopped chewing and glared at Kumar. A moment of silence passed between them. Then, they both burst out laughing, Anselm almost toppling over from his low stool.

"I can still taste the vile nature in his butt cheeks," Anselm remarked drolly, squinting his eyes. "But he's gone – isn't that good?"

"Indeed," Kumar replied, lifting up his drink and straining to look through his glossy eyes. "Cheers. Ah, I forgot. Even you forgot about the grand finale my brother. We have reserved the last piece of Derreck Quah, remember? Shall I bring him out?"

"Bring out that louse," laughed Anselm, his gaze fixed on the 4-foot fridge. "Remember how you had to serve Derreck Quah? All those long nights you spent on his projects. How did you even manage?" wondered Anselm.

"All I got in return was a stab on my back," Kumar glowered.

"Did you eat everything?" Anselm asked.

"No. I disposed most of it. They were too much, tough, greasy and putrid in most areas. Not fond of smoked meat either," he said, wiping his hands on his back.

"What about the legs, hands, ribs? What did you do with them?" Anselm queried.

"I boiled them. Waited for the meat to fall off the bones. I ground the meat in the food processor. Used a hammer to crush the bones. Then I flushed them down the toilet to feed the septic pool."

Anselm covered his face in dismay. When he looked up, his eyes were teary. "I am so proud of you. You defeated this demon."

“But you said we can only take him out, once we’re done with everything, once we are victorious,” Kumar chided.

“Wait, where did you keep those candles?” asked Anselm wiping the ends of his mouth. “I should have not started eating. Sorry.”

Kumar got up and produced three thin, red candles that the Chinese lit during the hungry ghost festival, their wickers still covered in wax, ready for the final ritual. Anselm bowed and received them ceremoniously. He pushed the plate and glasses to one side. Kumar gave him a lighter and stood quietly with his arms crossed over his apron, observing with subdued silence. Anselm lit the base of the candles and placed them in a row on the coffee table before the plate of stir-fried meat and drinks.

“He thought he could get away with this,” said Anselm, his face glowing like amber against the bright light of the candles. “Go and bring him out,” he declared.

“Like John the Baptist?” Kumar padded over to the fridge. “He’s pretty iced,” he reported.

“Bring him,” Anselm shouted impatiently.

Kumar soon trotted up to the table, bearing a baking tray, and on it sat the severed head of a human, its face frozen by time. Its slit eyes were half closed and pointed in the direction where the lips curved. The hair looked like dried sponge and had begun to fall about in crumples. Its tongue hung out from one corner of its mouth, held by the hardened red cavity that filled the mouth. Kumar placed the tray behind the row of candles and between the plate and glasses.

Anselm groaned deeply. “Happy now, eh?” he asked. “We took everything back. Good thing he broke into the house, looking for your laptop.”

“And good thing you came through the wall, just in the nick of time to strike him,” said Kumar.

“Didn’t do much. He was so easy to take down despite terrorising the office staff like a gangster. Just one strike, gone. Dead. Oh, is this where I hit him?” Anselm asked, pointing to a large dried patch of blood on the head’s forehead that ran up its cranium.

“Yes,” said Kumar. “I cracked it up even further. Took out the brain and cooked it with margarine and Spanish onions. You loved the appetizer last week, served with potatoes *au gratin*,” he said, smiling at the memory.

“Such monsters must not walk this earth. He shattered your life. There is no way of picking up the old life anymore. He should pay for this.”

Both Anselm and Kumar dined silently, observing the head before them. Anselm reached out and pulled out a few strands of hair from the head, examining it.

“What hypocrisy, Kumar. Bleaching his hair gold, but leaving the nose hair, jet black?” said Anselm. “Asshole!”

“Good thing the tongue is stuck to its mouth. But a lesson too late.”

“Get rid of him.”

“But how?” asked Kumar, scratching his head. “I keep hearing him in my head, early mornings especially,” he shuddered.

“Ghosts don’t trouble us Kumar. People do. Tongue without brain is impotent,” he answered curtly. “Boil it and break it. Flush it down the sewage. His host is waiting.”

“But, but, no matter how docile he seems, he may not put up with so much shit, what if he comes back?” Kumar seemed genuinely perturbed.

“Don’t ask so many questions!”

The man on the bed stirred and caught Anselm’s attention. “Look, he’s getting up. What did you give him? A couple of drinks won’t knock him out this far into the afternoon,” Anselm thought out loud.

“He planned to bunk in overnight after sex. I was on bed, ready to be conked out when I heard a hellish shriek coming from the kitchen. I saw him staring right into the refrigerator. He was shouting something, “*was zum bolle!*” before passing out. I dragged him up the bed and gave him a shot of syabu. Then I passed out myself. I brought home Derreck, Anselm, seriously,” said Kumar, his eyes downcast.

“My friend,” said Anselm calmly. “Derreck Quah is here. He has joined us in this final dining, yes? So who is that?” he pointed to the bed.

Kumar thought for a moment. “That’s Fridolf, Anselm, isn’t he?” he realised, covering his mouth in anguish. “Oh, what have I done? He has seen the mess in the fridge Anselm,” said Kumar, breaking out in cold sweat.

Anselm reached out and held Kumar's hands. When he released them, Kumar found a packet of blue and white crystals embedded in his palms.

Kumar's eyes grew moist and rheumy. "But nothing seems to be enough, Anselm," he said. "It does not make me feel adequate. I feel the emptiness. The voices keep increasing, they are now taking hard bites at my brain," he said, rubbing his forehead.

"Take it," said Anselm. "You would need it now. You need to live."

"I have an interview. Cassey promised to return if I found a job," Kumar proclaimed earnestly.

Anselm laughed, slapping his thighs. He produced a glass bowl and placed it on the table. Kumar obediently emptied the crystals into the bowl, stirring them with a long thin bamboo stick. He carried the bowl in one hand and held a small narrow transparent pipe, signalling he was ready.

"That's my boy," said Anselm as he moved closer and sat with Kumar. He used the lighter to heat the base of the glass bowl. A thick white cloud materialised and Kumar inhaled it through the glass pipe, first into his left nostril, then into the right. His eyes began to roll back and forth.

"Go and fetch that meat chopper," Anselm instructed. Kumar obeyed. He then led Kumar to the bed, where Fridolf was lying on his back, running his hands down his chest.

"This is not Derreck Quah," said Kumar in between short breaths.

"You have to do this, or else there will be no interview. If there is no interview, Cassey is not coming back," Anselm elaborated starkly. "If Derreck Quah wins, he will haunt you, stirring your dreams with retribution."

"Okay," stammered Kumar. He ripped off the apron and threw it away. "I'm ready," he announced, parting his legs.

Anselm turned to Kumar, looked into his eyes and ran the back of his hands gently down Kumar's crinkled face and caressed his overgrown beard. "I can't stay for long. I'm going back into the wall. I trust you will do the right thing. Call out for me, once you're done," he said and disappeared into the wall behind the bed.

Kumar blinked a few times and gripped the chopper tightly. "One more time," he said. He climbed up Fridolf and sat on his stomach. Fridolf grimaced, tears flowing out from his eyes. He mumbled out, "*was zum teufel*," as saliva frothed from his mouth. "*Gott rette mich!*" and he began to cry.

Kumar poured all his surging strength into his limbs. They swung up and down for an uncounted number of minutes until he grew dizzy. He felt the room spinning. He wanted to throw up.

“Anselm Kumar,” he heard a voice permeating the pungent air. He cocked his ears towards the wall and waited.

“Anselm Kumar,” he heard it again. “You are free now,” it said. “It’s over.”

“I have an interview,” Kumar remembered, dropping the chopper onto the bloodied bed sheet.

“Come now,” said the voice. “Come out Anselm Kumar, I’m waiting,” said the voice again.

Kumar got down from Fridolf’s twitching body and walked towards the balcony. He pushed away the soft curtains and stepped into the balcony. The pigeons on the railing scampered off in fright. The gathering dark clouds had blanketed the valley before him. He fixed his gaze on the vast openness. His mind only stirred into the present when the conductor atop the KLCC connected to a bolt of lightning like an arthritic finger. His eyes flickered. He strained his ears for Anselm’s voice in the midst of the howling winds.

“Anselm, are you here?” he called out urgently. “You better come back and help me clear this mess. I’m scared,” he admitted, biting his lips hard, and broke into little sobs. “Please come back Anselm.”

“I’m here,” Anselm’s voice boomed from inside the studio. “Close the sliding door and come inside. We have lots to do.”

Kumar turned back and rubbed his head vigorously. “Thank God,” he breathed in relief. “I will change the bed sheets, stock up the fridge, wash and mop the house. Lots of work, lots of work,” he muttered, wiping the tears from his eyes.

“Wash your hands first Kumar. Maybe a shower would help.”

“I’m so glad you’re back.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Steak.”

“Good. Eat early, sleep early, get up early. Tomorrow you’ve got that interview. You don’t want to disappoint Cassey, do you, Anselm Kumar?”