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William

Tham, Malaysia[/caption]

Hotel Imperial A short story by William Tham

So I sit here, on the balcony while below me, London unfurls. The traffic lights are barely seen because of the traffic, and I feel snowdrops melting in my hair. Unforgiving grey skies and the cold drive me back into the room, which is mercifully still being heated.

There is only myself left. The others are long gone, leaving me as the only denizen of Room 72, Hotel Imperial. It is Christmas but the overflowing streets are grim. The ground chokes with too-cold air and choking clouds of traffic.

Our travel through the country had been a disaster from the start. We had started out at Edinburgh. But only three of us survivors ended up in the derelict Hotel Imperial with its faded walls, trying to determine the next stage of the trip. After interminable arguments, they left me alone.

Hotel Imperial is old but it tries to look younger than its years. But its free internet is a sham and the walls still smell of bathroom disinfectant. There are some old posters from the Empire Exhibition of 1925 which still adorn the walls. I peer at them sometimes. There's a picture of an Englishman and his foreign attendants. Where are they from? Colombo, Sudan, and Jamaica. Who is that in the corner? I peer. For all I know he could be my grandfather.

That same grandfather once travelled the world as a student. He told us he was a sailor. He showed us some pictures. There he was on a steamer bound for Hong Kong. There he was with some other compatriots, huddled at Trafalgar Square. A woman in the background squints, repulsed. And then there he is at the Hotel Imperial. "The grandest hotel in London," he said, misty-eyed. "We won a Christmas raffle and we stayed there for three nights."

It is now decades later and I sit in the mouldering hotel, watching television with nowhere else to go to. The screen replays television dramas that I have watched countless times up in my dorm, when I once dreamed of travelling the isles. But now, so close to my goal, I don't feel like going any further. I am exhausted by the travelling and the chaos of my studies.

My family, still old-fashioned despite years in business, sent postcards to me all the time although I never once replied. Visit Madame Tussauds. Go to Westminster Abbey. Take a photo with an unsmiling Palace Guard. I have done none of those things. Once in London, I set up camp at the Hotel, unsure of where to go next.

"So you will go travelling, right?" my grandfather told me at the airport, on the eve of my departure. "Enjoy yourself. You young chaps have so much money nowadays that you might as well take an adventure. Go to London and Paris, then to Berlin and Munich and Amsterdam and Istanbul. So many opportunities these days..."

He died a few weeks ago, and I did not hear of it until recently. So, cocooned in the Hotel Imperial, I have time to think about a man who arrived here as a coolie and left speaking perfect English with a London drawl. He was the one who had told me about Limehouse, where he had toiled with desperate men ready to break their backs for bread, and a gleaming country that was for the longest time the capital of the world.

It is still cold. I hear carollers down below, wishing each other while electric lights fight the night. But the hotel is dark. A few lights have blown and the shadows creep in. I turn off the television and raid the bedside table, where a token packet of shortbread forlornly waits. The hotel matches my gloom. Already I feel as if my life has been leading up to this quiet point.

I think of the exams that I have crammed for and the dismal results that I have hidden from my parents. I think of scandals and stories that I have tried to leave behind. But here in this old hotel that ponders the end of empire, I wonder if this country that I have made my home for four years has accepted me. A student from an ex-Colony, pursuing a degree he doesn't want, still holding on as the snow blankets London, while his wild friends sink inexhaustible sums into nightclubs and train tickets


into nightclubs and train tickets.

I take a postcard that I have been meaning to write for a while. I seat myself by the rusting heater, my hands numb with cold, and begin writing to a family that I have tried to stay away from for so many years. Christmas greetings from the Hotel Imperial. And a story of a boy, not quite a man, eager to run away from fate.

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– Tham Wee Nie (@thamweenie) [August 22, 2013](#)

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RETURN TO SHORT STORY CONTEST HOMEPAGE 

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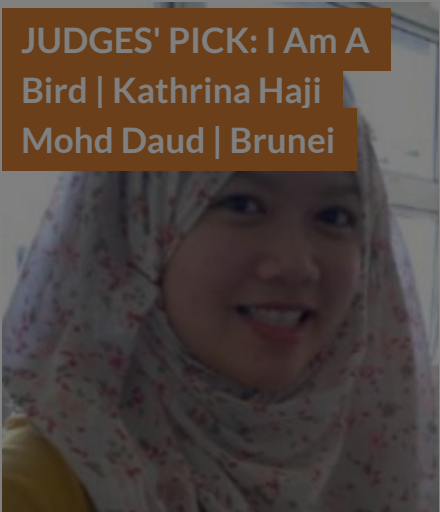
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