

Curiosity is the cure for boredom. There is no cure for curiosity.
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craigslist Singapore Personals—Casual Encounters—M4W

Friday 22nd May 10.09 p.m.

I wonder where you're reading this?

Wherever it is, you're restless. Why you're reading this is much more important. There's something missing in your life. You may have even a term for what you're looking for. Discrete passion? Private raunch? Dirty soulful sex? You want to go into the office in the morning with that glowing look that you haven't seen in the mirror in way too long—that sexy sparkle your colleagues will recognise, even the slow-blinking tech guy.

You want to think of your lover in idle, and not so idle, moments, whether it's recalling the night before or the night to come ...

A darkened room. You feel the warmth from strong, sure hands resting on the backs of your thighs. You lay perfectly still. Waiting. Waiting to feel those hands move up your body, slowly, deliberately. Then, fingers unexpectedly brush between your legs, gently exploring, easing into the soft silkiness there and inching closer. Your outstretched fingers scrunch the crisp white sheet in anticipation of what will happen next ...

Can you imagine yourself as the woman becoming slowly and exquisitely restless in that room? Then read on.

I'm an Australian expat seeking irregular intimacy with a sophisticated woman. I'm early 40s, sexually assured, fit, 5'11", and have hair (in the right places).

You're a sexy, well-dressed lover with stimulating kinks; sexually adventurous but still curious about some things; well groomed but not a princess about it; sex-fit. You're admired by others, but you're looking for something more. Age is not as important to me as other attributes but I suspect only a woman over thirty has the sexual confidence I adore. I'm happy to be proved wrong though.

I'm looking for a relationship—but only a sexual one. I haven't posted like this before and you've probably never replied to other ads you've browsed late at night. But you're reading this now because you're curious.

We're both busy so we'll invest in our times together—and they'll be memorable. The recollection of our last meeting will be something to smile secretly about while listening to some corporate drone waffling on endlessly on a conference call.

So, wherever you are reading this—in bed just before you turn out the light, on your phone as you wait for your date to arrive (tut-tut), or on the train home (don't worry this is Singapore, no-one's

going to look at what you're reading)—think about it. I understand if you need a glass of wine before replying; the possibility of breathless sex does deserve some savouring after all.

Let's do the photo thing and perhaps meet to discuss what a typical tryst might look like. Anticipation is half the fun.

'I never have more than one drink before dinner. But I do like that one to be large and very strong and very cold, and very well-made.'

James Bond, *Casino Royale*

Alex loved Kat's responses. She came across as a woman who knew what she wanted and, despite her intermittent coyness, wasn't shy about it. He was a little disappointed she hadn't included more personal information about herself though. Surely the unwritten rule on internet flirtation (their exchanges hardly counted as dating), particularly if it was supposed to be discreet, was that revelations about one's personal details proceeded in lock-step with the other party: a sort of guarantee of mutually assured destruction if things went to hell. Never get into a relationship where the other person has less to lose than you, isn't that what they said? She'd given away nothing about her age, race or work. But then, that was perhaps less important, given the circumstances of their connecting, than the fact she liked sexy texting. She had replied to an ad under Casual Encounters after all, not an advert for a lifelong partnership on RSVP. She looked Asian, probably from the South East, but the light in the photo was poor in an uneven, nightclubby sort of way so he couldn't be entirely sure—but her love of durian was a giveaway: he'd never met a Caucasian who liked the foul-smelling fruit. A Singaporean colleague, after boasting of its aphrodisiac qualities ('When the durian is out, the sarongs go up!'), had then confessed that you had to try durian seven times before you could like it. For Alex, life was too short to try and squeeze in another five attempts.

Drinks were about right, he thought. An invitation to dinner implied too great an investment, not in the financial sense but in time. Someone who responded to an advert like his probably wouldn't be planning to provide a twenty minute summary of her primary school years. That might be expected in negotiating the foothills of a traditional date but not one resulting from a M4W post.

Her request for a favourite picture from *The Sartorialist* website was a bit of a surprise. He was familiar with the website—its creator posted pictures of stylish and quirkily dressed people snapped on streets around the world—but he couldn't pretend he was a regular visitor.

Had Kat's request been a last-minute, qualifying check? He'd recently heard a radio interview on the BBC World Service with an American psychologist talking about how people selected partners. The academic's main observation was that the attributes that made someone superficially attractive for a date were not necessarily those that were most desirable in a lifetime partner. Nothing too outstanding in that. But what had him still sitting in his car listening, when he'd already arrived home, was her relating research which showed that while men had only three criteria for going on a second date ('pleasant looking', 'a nice person' and 'interesting and interested'), women had *three hundred* potential reasons for *not* meeting a suitor again. These ranged from, 'He wore a black belt with brown trousers,' to, 'He did an Austin Powers impression before the entree had even arrived.'

Would sending back the wrong sort of photo (polka-dot leggings; hipster in camouflage; double-breasted jacket with no tie) have constituted a dating derailment with Kat? If it was a test, he seemed to have passed it.

Kat's phone chirped.

Alex: Thinking about tonight. Would it be too forward to kiss your neck? A

His text was simple but it immediately brought on a flush through Kat's neck and breasts. She shifted in her seat and looked around. Everyone else on the proposal team was working intently on their laptops. Six hours to her meeting with Alex. She thought for a minute before replying. She wasn't going to play text-timing, whereby variations in mood/enthusiasm/ardour could all be conveyed, the tone changing depending on whether the replying text was sent ten seconds, one

minute, one hour or one day after receiving the incoming one. She did need to think about her response though—the first text in a relationship was significant after all.

Kat: Glad I'm not the only one! That would be lovely and positively bashful after your earlier demands for my worn underwear. Must remember a dab of perfume. K

Once home, Kat stood in front of the mirror in her underwear, a newish matching black-and-tan set—she'd wanted to set high standards from the start of the day—and appraised her body. She suspected that men didn't appraise themselves. They would either criticise or admire: one or the other, good or bad, hot or not. Appraise was more subtle. A woman's body could be perfect for one style of dress but not another; her ass full and sexy for one date, full and frumpy for another. She did not think of herself as a vain woman but she paid attention and thought it prudent to look at herself from time to time through a lover's eyes. She was of medium height, skimming 5'8" in a good pair of heels, and her mother's genes had given her a slimness that saved her hours in the gym and allowed her angst-free breakfasts. Her breasts could be bigger and were no longer as perky as they had been but could still fill out a cashmere sweater or halter-neck dress in a way that would warrant a second look. Her belly wasn't flat—she liked her 70% Green & Black's too much for that—but was discreet enough to allow her to wear almost anything apart from her mother's 1982 catsuit. (She knew this because she and her two sisters had spent a gleeful morning during a recent Christmas break trying on some of her mother's old clothes. They'd ended up having lunch at the local cafe wearing the old outfits (including her older sister in their mum's yellowing wedding dress) much to the bewilderment of the staff and fellow customers. Her legs looked stronger than they actually were—there had been no false modesty in her email to Alex—but her ass was okay. She decided that her bush didn't need a trim. She'd had a wax a couple of weeks ago and all was well within the bikini line. There wouldn't be any sex tonight anyway, she was pretty sure of that. They'd tick-tack a little more. A little more chat, a little more flirting, a little more teasing, a little more banter. Why rush? They would never have this moment again. She liked the thought of delayed gratification. Just because the relationship was to be based on more primitive needs didn't mean that they shouldn't follow the traditional courtship patterns. She and Alex would go through all the necessary steps, but the process would just be accelerated. Isn't that what internet dating was all about? She would shave her legs though.

Kat emptied her lingerie drawer onto her bed.

Alex settled into his chair. He'd chosen it because it was in the corner of the rooftop bar, at the far end, opposite the entrance, and he'd be able to get an early view of anyone entering. He felt he would need the time to decide if it was her or not. He didn't want to approach the wrong woman; there was a fine line between a casual greeting and a lecherous accosting when there was enough lust in the air—sexual undertones swirled through the bars and streets of Chinatown on a Saturday night like a fog in a Victorian detective mini-series. The place was beginning to fill but there were only about ten people in the bar at the moment. All in quiet twos and threes, fortunately: the last thing he needed was a braying birthday party date-bombing with funny hats, drinking games and errant champagne corks.

The digital photograph of Kat was grainy. Kat was in profile, laughing at someone. It looked like a three-drinks-down kind of laugh. Dark shoulder-length hair, skin the colour of the Singapore River after a heavy storm. He hadn't brought it with him since he could hardly sit in his chair holding up the photo as each new woman came through the entrance. Some things were just too

clinical. It was the kind of picture someone would send to prove they're a real person but that didn't give any real indication of looks.

Kat was no doubt short for Katherine. He'd ask. But then, on second thoughts, why would he? They were meeting just for sex. Details of family, job and interests were all irrelevant. He would call her whatever she wanted to be called. He was only now starting to realise just how different a NSA-fuck-buddy date might be. Kat might not even be her real name. He wondered if he should move. He was a little early and there was still time. A seat at the bar would mean he might be easier for her to find.

His phone buzzed.

Kat: Sorry, will be another ten mins probably. Couldn't get cab. K.

Hmm, cold feet? He decided to stay where he was.

Alex: OK, no rush. Sitting on the far side opposite the entrance. White shirt, dark trousers, sweaty palms.

The seat was too low and squashy. He was worried he'd struggle to get out of it when she arrived—assuming that she would, and that her text message wasn't the start of a long, slow, apologetic retreat from the rendezvous. Scrabbling about from the depths of the leather sofa like a horny crab was not the suave, cool image he wanted to project. His flailing about would almost certainly mean he'd knock his glass of water over *The New Yorker* he'd taken out of his leather bag. The water was to make sure he didn't croak on greeting. Being unable to rise from the seat with accompanying dry rasping was definitely not the right impression. Maybe concentrating on the latest, worthy article on the urban underclass would distract the twitching crab-toad he was in danger of becoming. He felt sixteen again. But without the gangling self-confidence powered in equal parts by hormones and naivety. Alex took a deep breath, braced himself and stood up. There, no flailing, no rasping. He sipped his water. It was going to be a great evening. He moved a bit to the right of the sofa where it was less of an indented perv-trap; the couch almost certainly designed by a man to ensure that women exposed a good length of thigh and, with a bit of luck, their underwear, whenever they attempted to get up. There was a similar sofa opposite, with a low, glass table in between, and that is where Kat could sit. These were accompanied by low benches and stools of heavy, dark wood—no doubt sourced from some Indonesian klepto-forest he thought. To the right of Alex was a small bar hosting a couple of young barmen with stupid haircuts doing unnecessarily flamboyant things to perfectly good booze. As he sat down in his new seat, he noticed a small sign on top of some nearby DJ equipment indicating that one 'Pimp Dazz' would be on at 9.30 p.m. This was worrying: Alex hated having shouted conversations in loud bars and clubs. It would be doubly hard since this meeting was to, firstly, confirm personal chemistry and, secondly, establish the ground rules for their NSA relationship. He did not want to be caught yelling, 'Do you swallow?' in the, admittedly unlikely, event that Pimp Dazz decided to go for a quiet, reflective moment between tracks. (Not that the question was on his list of prompts for the evening, but one could never tell how things would progress—Kat seemed pretty forthright.)

There were more air kisses around him now, with bright laughing people swerving and ducking between each other like koi carp in a hotel foyer pond at feeding time. The bar was starting to fill but was still not so noisy as to prevent conversation. *The New Yorker* was left unopened; he was too apprehensive to read even the lightest of articles and he now worried that it might also look pretentious. He supposed he could look at the cartoons again though. Bringing *The Economist* would have been worse, he thought, but at least comparing a chart of Sierra Leone's per capita

income against that of Venezuela over the prior decade might prevent an untimely hard-on. A slim volume of early nineteenth century love poems (extra points if privately printed and/or in the original French) might have been more appropriate. At that point, however, a strong case could be made for pretentiousness tipping over into irony, thus risky. Of course, one person's off-putting pretentiousness might appear as a soul-smouldering connection for another. How else could hipster babies be explained?

Alex frowned, a clear and present case of over-analysis. And women were supposed to be the ones who over-thought things. He wasn't looking to be her soul mate. In the next couple of meetings, they just needed to satisfy each other that they (amongst other things and in no particular order): were good kissers, had a post-teen attitude to personal hygiene, had a high-ish libido, were generous in attending to the other's sexual needs and curiosities, had frisky imaginations, could keep a secret, were amusing as well as amorous in bed, were interesting and interested. Reviewing the list again in his mind, Alex noted two things: that for a set of criteria around selecting an appropriate NSA partner, it had (i) more non-sexual elements than he'd anticipated and (ii) it was a longer list than he'd expected—and that was without Kat's input as well.

He sent Kat a text.

Alex: I think we should use the meeting to set some ground rules.

Her reply came almost immediately, she was hopefully already in the cab then.

Kat: Ground rules?

Alex: Yes, this is a game. A game needs rules.

Kat: Agreed. But don't forget to kiss my neck!

So it looked like she was coming after all. Good.

He was also pleased she understood the importance of having some rules. They should start with the principles of the arrangement. One thing he'd learned in corporate life was that if people agreed on the principles of the thing then the rules usually fell into place without too much controversy. If one moved to defining the rules too soon then people got snarled up in the specifications. He'd get some principles written down. He'd bought a folder (covered in dark red linen, specially purchased), pad and pen along for making notes. A waiter approached him (again) to ask if he wanted a drink.

Sitting in the back of the cab, Kat thought about standards. She knew that the common expectation was that hooking up with someone for casual sex involved, even required, a lowering of standards compared with looking for a man as potential relationship material. She believed the opposite: that if one was going to meet someone just for sex then they needed to be very, very good at it. It was the difference between a specialist and a generalist. One might overlook a man being a bit rough and rushed when going down on her if he was domesticated and could stack a dishwasher properly—a kind of clit versus kitchen trade-off if she was to be crude about it. But he'd need his amorous A-game on if she was to bed him. She wasn't sure that men saw it that way, though, in fact possibly the opposite—that one-night stands were easy lays.

She considered what she and Alex would talk about. Sure, they had developed an easy exchange in their email and text messages but her standard dating press-release couldn't be applied here. The one that went something like:

'So tell me about your background, Kat. Where were you born? Where did you grow up? In Singapore?'

'No, actually I was born in Hong Kong. My mother is Cantonese and my father was in the Spanish diplomatic corps at the time. As you can imagine we moved around a lot, mostly in Asia. I did my final years of school here in Singapore and stayed on.'

'Where's your family now?'

'On Facebook now. All over. I have three sisters. One's in San Fran, there's another in Malta of all places and the last still lives in Hong Kong. My folks have retired and spend time between Barcelona and their place in Bali, where they escape the European winter. All my sisters are lawyers except me—both my parents were lawyers, too, although my father never really practised.'

'Malta? Where is that exactly?'

'Just off Sicily. I've been there a couple of times. I like it, it's good to see small countries still doing their thing. Raffa lectures there in maritime law; Malta's a bit of a centre for it apparently.'

Her date would then nod with interest at her cosmopolitan family CV and pick up a thread or two. Then she'd ask him the same thing. The trouble was, these familiar, comfortable exchanges couldn't be used tonight. What do you talk about when just meeting for sex, Kat wondered. The Relationship Subcommittee meeting in her head had adjourned during the taxi ride from her home. Kat sometimes felt that her thoughts were guided by a series of committees that received submissions, papers and recommendations, and made subsequent rulings and decisions. Sometimes, the forums fell back on that staple cop-out of indecisive committees and requested that further analysis be conducted. In her bleaker, more confused moments, special reports might also be commissioned; recent ones being *The single woman in Singapore: towards a definition of 'settle'* and the groundbreaking, *Can or cannot?: staying friends with ex-lovers*. Half the Committee had believed that the meeting with Alex was a mistake and no good could come of it whilst the other members were in the 'You go, gurrrll!' camp.

Kat saw him first. He was in profile as he turned and spoke to a waiter but she was pretty sure it was him on her initial scan of the room. Even so, she was grateful for his tentative wave of recognition as she started to weave through the tables and chairs. On an initial glance she wasn't disappointed by the man she was due to meet. He was perhaps a bit more disheveled (a haircut a month overdue) than her mother or Relationship Subcommittee would prefer.

Kat was much further across the floor than Alex would have liked when he first saw her. Despite having gone to the trouble of positioning himself so that he could see Kat as soon as she came into the bar, she'd seen him first. Damn the waiter. Not that he would have wanted to try and make an exit, but he had been looking forward to observing her approach at some leisure. Now she'd already covered half the bar. He stood to greet her. She looked good, really good. He immediately recognised her as the kind of woman who leaves a sex trail across a busy room like a fine shimmering spider's thread draped over a dewy lawn. She was wearing a cream dress with shoulders that could be pushed down the arms for greater sexiness when out clubbing or kept high so as not to overexcite the senior partners (or, more particularly, their wives) at the office Christmas party. Kat had them at mid-point, with the sleeves just crossing her collarbone; she could clearly go either way this evening. No bra-straps so probably strapless, if she was wearing one. Small breasts. Lovely brown shoulders. Arms athletic without doing unnatural things with barbells. The dress was well-fitted and close without being unfortunate. It ended just on the knee.

Her pale shoes were high but she walked well in them. Some women in Singapore struggled so badly in their high heels that they surely moved no faster than their great-great-grandmothers in bound feet must have done through the lanes of old Chinatown.

Kat's hips weaved through the tables as if the furniture had been specially placed in order to force her into a slow, sexy slalom. Her hair was dark, shoulder length as in her photo, but now with a slight curl. Her almond eyes were lively but she wasn't grinning now. If anything she was scowling slightly as if she'd just remembered an urgent domestic task. Her hair bounced slightly as she moved towards him, not in a ludicrous slo-mo shampoo-ad kind of way but in time with her hips. Chinese, he thought, but not fully. She was too tall, and her features were sharpened with something else—the Middle East, South American? Hot though. If she'd practised the walk, it didn't show. He noticed the eyes of other men following her through the bar, looking to see who she was heading towards. He loved it when an attractive woman, watched by others, headed towards him. Some of life's greatest pleasures are pretty pathetic, he thought as he extended his hand.

Kat realised that once she started walking towards Alex she was committed to at least one drink. They'd made eye contact and it wasn't as if she could suddenly swerve to the right at the last minute and dive off over the side into the taxi rank on Ann Siang Road. She tried not to smile at the incongruity of their meeting, fearing that if she started to do so she'd lose control and start grinning uncontrollably like she had that time she'd tried those dodgy mushrooms in northern Thailand, or, even worse, giggling. Lots of people met on first dates (if that's what it was) but not necessarily with such an intimate prior exchange. She looked down and bit her lip, careful not to remove the lippy, though. Alex was standing up, tall, dark, and, yes, good looking so he hadn't lied there. Good looking in a model sort of way but a model who might be holding a chainsaw in an agricultural catalogue and not one posing with an Italian hand-stitched calf-skin briefcase. Slim—yes, he'd be sex-fit. He looked tentative, his smile careful. So he should be, she thought. Kat was aware now that they were being observed by others in the bar—they were so obviously a first date. Damn! She was minded to give him a deep tongue kiss and grope his ass straight away to disabuse the voyeurs.

'Hi—Kat?' His greeting was more questioning than he intended as if he'd had a sudden, last-second doubt in his mind that it was her.

'Yes. Alex.' She said his name slowly and clearly like it was a password—but with a lovely smile. She put her hand in his and he shook it. Her grip was firm, which he liked. Perhaps she worked for a western company, their staff tending to have firmer handshakes than local employees. He leant forward to kiss her as agreed and Kat arched her neck a little to allow him to brush her skin with his lips. She wore a scent he didn't recognise.

Kat sat down opposite him. She carefully kept her knees together, turned to one side. Great knees. He was glad she hadn't succumbed to the leg-splaying trap; an extra mark there, classy. Kat looked at him and smiled.

Alex waved to a waiter. He hoped that this wouldn't be one of the occasions where, now that he wanted one, the waiters would become either blind or bloody minded and he would end up having to do big-wave semaphores like someone on-screen at a football game waving to their mates.

But the waiter had a thousand-yard stare as if auditioning for the role of a VietCong fighter who'd just been B52'd into the Stone Age. Alex waved again with a little more vigour. He'd always felt that the inability to catch a waiter's attention was a poor reflection on his masculinity, like not being able to find a parking space within a hundred metres of the theatre or elegantly removing a humping canine from his ankle. At last the waiter caught his eye, beamed and came scuttling over.

The drinks list was the usual Singapore bar fare. A pathetically short beer list, (if two brands of beer could even constitute a list), various cocktails with names ranging from the mildly sexually suggestive ('Low Moan') to the militantly vulgar ('Dirty Fuck'), a good range of scotches, some show-off vodkas and a wine list that read like a bin-end sale.

Kat perused the list without enthusiasm.

Oh God, please don't let her be someone who takes more time to order a drink than to drink it, thought Alex.

'I'll have a mojito, thanks.'

'And I'll have a dry martini, please, with an olive. And stirred, not shaken. Thank you.'

Kat caught his eye as he turned back from the waiter, 'You must show me the difference between stirred and shaken one day ...' Her eyes were bright and her grin cheeky.

Alex knew then that this curious arrangement they'd constructed could work. 'Stirred' might mean gently rubbing a warm scented oil onto her lower belly, lower and lower with each stroke until the tips of his fingers were slipping under the waistband of her underwear, Kat sighing and her hips shifting slightly as her body sought more. 'Shaken' might be taking her hard from behind, gripping her shoulders as she knelt in front of him, her hair wild and over her face as they both lost control, then pulling her up, still in her, one hand across her breasts, the other fingering her clit, no let up, both panting, not wanting to stop. Kat got it.

He tilted his head slightly acknowledging the innuendo, 'Stirred is slow and careful and controlled; you don't want to bruise the gin or weaken the martini by melting the ice too much. Shaken—well, with a shaken martini you just whack the hell out of it, to hell with bruising—it's more about the theatre and the motion and the hit. Why, which do you think you'd prefer, Kat?'

Kat loved living in Singapore. She had only been there three years but that was longer than many foreign professionals lived in the city-state before they were re-assigned to Buenos Aires or Taipei. Most visitors, whether expats on two-year contracts or foreigners stopping over for a couple of days on their way to Europe or the 'real' Asia never saw much of Singapore beyond their immaculate hotels swarming with staff, or manicured condominiums. But Kat liked walking the back streets of Geylang or Tiong Bahru with their Chinese medicine shops with hessian sacks of dried bits that could have been plants or small creatures, or small bits of bigger creatures. Some of the old trades still existed, if not flourished, in the side streets. Like the joss-stick makers (with thick, sweet scents drifting out onto the street from the tiny workshops), parrot astrologers (the bird selecting the tarot cards with its beak for the client) and street barbers (who offered nose and ear cleaning as optional extras). Then there was the Thieves Market next to Little India, so-called for obvious (now historical) reasons, where elderly men squatted next to piles of Nokia chargers nearly as old as Kat, unidentifiable bits of transistor radios or 70s crockery that was ugly even when it was new let alone once it was chipped and stained. Kat had only ever bought one thing there—one stall-holder had been using a huge old Peranakan spices mortar and pestle, almost the size of a piece of carry-on, to hold down a tarpaulin providing shade for his rather disturbing stall of dismembered Barbie dolls: heads, arms, legs, and, of course, well-endowed torsos, all in neat piles. She'd helped him replace the antique kitchenware with some discarded bricks, feeling a little guilty about being another expat in Gucci sunglasses snaffling a piece of old Singapore to use as a courtyard ornament. Given how little business the geriatric traders did, Kat suspected that they only went out every Sunday to be able to get away from beady wives telling the same old stories.

She knew that Singapore was seen as boring ('Asia for beginners') and even mildly oppressive with its fines for chewing gum or not flushing a public loo and the have-a-baby-for-your-country campaigns. She loved the mix of people, languages and food —Chinese, Malay, Indian—plus an airport-lounge of other nationalities—resulting in one of the few truly multicultural societies. Shopping and services were honed to a level of polite efficiency and (generally) smiling interactions that were rarely found elsewhere. It started with the smooth moving immigration queues at Changi Airport and continued through to the taxis, hotels and shops of the island. Want a couple of bags of ice delivered at midnight for an impromptu after-after party? A man with a van will be there in fifteen minutes. Need a fallen hem repaired during a lunch break? The seamstress in the local mall will fit it in somehow. One became so used to the courteous service, from bus drivers to wait-staff to government bureaucrats, it was quite unsettling when one came across a (rare) scowling uncle or taciturn auntie having a bad day. But adherence to the rules, no matter how inappropriate to the immediate problem, was paramount and could supersede common sense. This literal interpretation of policies and procedures could be very frustrating if one had experienced some of the more free-wheeling societies in Asia, where a smile and a handful of grubby notes ('emergency administration fee') could get a document stamped that afternoon. But Kat realised she couldn't have both—it was either a case of deep potholes or due process—and as she got older she appreciated the latter more.

The island's trees and plants still entranced her, particularly after returning from a trip through more anaemic climes. She'd rub the thick leaves, as firm and strong as an artificial rubber plant in a dentist's waiting room. Singapore's stems thrust up ever higher through the undergrowth, growing visibly almost daily. Some of the plants were so vigorous she thought of them more like animals than vegetation. And then, amongst the many shades of green there was the welcome colour, from the corrugated flash of a red and orange giant lobster claw, as brash as a road-sign, to the pale smudge of a tiny orchid in the gloom beneath the larger plants. Everywhere growth—sprouting from cracks in old walls, cascading in leafy ropes from the roadside trees, dripping for hours after a late afternoon storm.

Kat liked that most of the foreigners were in Singapore to better their circumstances, whether it was a dusty construction worker from the slums of Dhaka or a Red Bull-fuelled hedge-fund manager from Boston who had an 'on-target earnings' of a million dollars a year. They were all there to do more, to do better than they might have done back home. Singapore provided an environment—economic and political stability, hard-working and well-educated people, stuff that just worked—where they could do this. It was a refreshing change from the more jaded societies of Europe and North America.

Despite the aura of twenty-first century efficiency Singapore could still surprise with its colour and vibrancy. She liked leaving the office of an evening to walk to dinner with friends and stumbling across the braziers that could be found every couple of hundred yards during the annual Ghost Festival around August each year. Chinese families would pay respect to their ancestors by laying out food offerings, seasoned with smoke from burning joss sticks and paper. There'd be the accompanying *getai* concerts throughout the HDB residential districts, where various amateur performers would celebrate. Red chairs at the front were reserved for the ghosts in attendance. Kat liked that. For her the chairs represented more than an eccentric tradition or even spiritual insurance, but more an acknowledgement that the past was greater than oneself. She was the person she was because of the people who came before her, the sacrifices they'd made and the genes they'd bequeathed (even the way her little toes twisted a bit to one side). She liked to think of them all sitting in the front row nodding their heads, enjoying the entertainment, even if it was at times under-rehearsed and out-of-tune.

In August there was the Geylang Serai Market—a crush of crowds, colour and smells as the Muslim community stocked up on clothes and treats to celebrate the end of *Hari Raya Puasa*, the Malay term for Ramadan. Kat particularly liked to go down with a couple of girlfriends in the evening when families gathered around the many food stalls to break their day's fasting. The smells of the grilling fish had her hungry before she'd even stepped from the taxi. The market's stall-holders came into Singapore for the festival from all round the region and she invariably came away with a couple of cheap *kurtis* and 'must have' wooden items like tissue-box holders.

Kat had even got used to sweating slowly but continuously whenever she walked outside, 'like a piece of old cheddar left out too long at a picnic', she'd emailed home at the end of her first week. At first she was very frustrated at how slowly the locals walked, but after a while she realised that it was a coping mechanism: hustlin'n'bustlin' along New York or Shanghai style was simply too debilitating. Slow but steady was the Singaporean way.

That Singapore was one of the food capitals of the world was well-known but she continued to be surprised by the variety and combinations of cuisines available. For a basically greedy woman like Kat, Singapore's range of food made its other frustrations much more tolerable: *bak kut teh*—pork ribs simmered in a rich, herby dark broth, perfect for fighting off a cold picked up in some freezing conference room; *wanton mee*—charred bits of barbecued pork over noodles, served 'wet' (in a broth), or 'dry' (the soup separate); carrot cake—actually not carrot at all but turnip—she liked it served dark with extra soy sauce; chicken rice—the staple of many an office worker on a quick break from closing the month's accounts; *otak otak*—minced fish in a slightly blackened banana leaf, a perfect shopping snack; satay—best from the smoking stalls behind the Lau Pa Sat food centre (the beef satay from stall 3 was divine); prawn *mee*—stir-fried noodles with a mix of morsels ranging from bean-sprouts to prawns and squid that varied by stall-holder but were always best with extra *sambal* chilli and a squeeze of fresh lime; *laksa* in all its forms (she preferred the sweet-sour Penang variety); *nasi lemak*—sometimes on the weekend she'd go across the road from her apartment to the one-eyed Malay woman for a serving wrapped in a banana leaf; *rojak*—a surprisingly addictive dish of fruit, roasted nuts and fermented prawn paste; fish-head curry—a huge red snapper head in a spicy curry sauce, usually from one of the restaurants in Little India.

And of course, the ubiquitous chilli-crab, though Kat was more partial to the recent white pepper variant.

When she'd been overseas for more than a week or so she'd start to long to hear the *ah pek* at her favourite *kopi-tiam* clacking over to her in his wooden clogs with her *kopi* and *kaya* toast, the sweet, creamy coconut spread perfect with a cup of bitter-thick coffee after a big night out. She'd have bought the weekend *International Herald Tribune* from the Indian kid on the corner earlier and finish her coffee whilst reading about the latest books and fashion from overseas. But she could have done without the 'graak-thpui!' of the old uncle clearing his throat and the yield landing with a splat on the floor a few feet from where she was sitting. At least in Starbucks there'd be a spittoon, she thought.

Despite their enjoyment in planning the events on The List, mostly it had been sex in his shophouse —on the bed, on the sofa, on the floor, back on the bed, and once, memorably and painfully, on the wooden stairs to the upper level, one step at a time, from the bottom to the top. Sex against the wall where her studded belt left little gouges in the plaster for her to notice whenever she later passed that spot. Sex so frantic that it had her begging him to stop, then, half-an-hour later, wanting it again. Sex that left her cunt aching and sore, that was more rough fighting than making love really, but then he would look at her in that way he had and it would start once more, and as soon as he'd entered her the initial sting would be forgotten and she'd be deliciously full again and her hips would start moving and he'd thrust harder and she'd grip his upper arms and hold on so tight her knuckles went white with the strain. Sex where they'd fall asleep on the floor afterwards and wake an hour later stiff and creaky. Sex where his cock would be rubbed so raw he'd have to arrange himself carefully in his boxers to avoid abrasion. Sex where the wet patch would eventually cover most of the bed. Sex where she'd need to take four Ibuprofen before lunch the next day. Sex where no matter how wide she opened her legs she thought she would never get him close enough to her. Sex where her hair became so matted and knotted it took two washes and ten minutes of brushing to remove all the tangles. Sex where they'd kiss so hard her lips would still be tender the next day. Sex which left her La Senzas ripped and awaiting repair in her sewing basket. Sex where his face would become so covered in her juices that his eyes stung and he could still smell her three hours after showering. Sex where they'd wake kissing each other, their need too urgent to wait for teeth to be brushed. Sex where she'd have to rise carefully from her office chair, holding her lower back like her grandmother had done during that freezing Spanish winter holiday. Sex that left her glowing guiltily afterwards as if everyone in the elevator could tell what she'd been doing only thirty minutes earlier. Sex where they needed to watch themselves in case they blurted out something that wasn't in the spirit of The Rules. Sex that made porn look like last week's weather report—for a small sheep-farming town in Patagonia. Sex where sometimes her orgasms left her shaking and winded as if she'd been in a car that had rolled down a steep slope. Sex where she'd find inexplicable nicks and marks on her body in the shower two days later. Sex where sweat would drip from his face onto her back as he knelt and took her from behind. Sex where she once snapped off a weak piece of his teak headboard as she desperately tried to hold on while he slammed into her. Sex where her period made no difference and the washing machine would have to run the whole evening to get through all the sheets and towels. Sex where, the next day, it was as if they were seeing the world through a sharp new erotic lens and everything became sexier, from an exposed bra-strap on the bus to a curl of dark chest hair against a white shirt. Sex where they didn't fuck at all but kissed for an hour, taking it in turns to lead, experimenting with different ways of kissing, from soft and lingering to forceful and demanding. Sex in the middle of the night, both waking too groggy to make sense but Alex hard and Kat ready. Sex where she ended up with a dozen reproachful messages on her phone from neglected friends and family. Sex where one of Alex's colleague's young sons had asked the guests at a weekend pool BBQ in a clear piping voice, 'Mummy, why does Uncle Alex have so many scratch marks on his back?' Sex where an 'absolutely no hanky-panky' bath ended up with an inch of water on the bathroom floor. Sex where she snarled, spat and slapped as he mounted her from behind, excited as she was by her own submission but, at the same time, resenting the compliance—fighting it made her feel she had more control than she really wanted. Sex where her underpants would be stained with his leaking cum when she went to the bathroom the next morning. Sex in the stifling heat of a Singapore Sunday afternoon where their sweat would be churned into a pale slick cream by their sliding bodies. Sex where she was so wet he could barely feel her and he'd have to put a finger in alongside his cock. Sex where one of their phones only had to buzz with a message from the other for them to become aroused again. Sex that left her shaky-starving and spooning cold spag-bol into her mouth at two in the morning. Sex

where, fiddling with her hair in a meeting one day, she'd found what could only have been a lump of dried semen. Sex where, when he was deep inside her looking into her eyes, he thought they could never part. Sex where she heard her aching jaw click as she started her presentation to the Board the morning after a marathon blow job, which both of them had been too greedy to stop. Sex where her housemates would jealously look up from their cornflakes when she stumbled into the apartment, sleep deprived and bedraggled, for a quick shower and a change of clothes before heading into the office. Sex where she once screamed so loud that she was grateful for the unceasing construction noise from the apartment block across the street. Sex that left his house reeking of fucking, the sour, acrid smell hitting them when they returned from a quick run to the corner store for more beer and milk.

Sex where they did things she couldn't tell her sisters about.

