

**Tay Kai Xin Ranice**

## **NATURALISM**

**1.**

*A bench in the zoo. Slightly wet, with branches and dead leaves all around. AARIELLE sits. Silence and deep thought. Suddenly, she talks to someone in front of her, an invisible someone.*

**AARIELLE** We fell in love in the strangest way, you know. Sal and I came here once when we were young. I think it was around secondary school. It was a school trip and we were supposed to look at the capuchins, but it was going to rain – you’ll know when it’s about to rain because the earth smells like wet grass. Anyway, it was drizzling so we came here. And I remember standing here...looking. Doing nothing, just looking at a gigantic glass enclosure in front of me with the bluest water I’ve ever seen. And I remember my nose pressed against glass looking at this white, majestic creature, swimming towards me with fur that was dancing in water. I said, “hi”, and it stared back with black beady eyes only inches away from mine.

Sal came up from behind me at this point. He grabbed me by the shoulders and spun me around, pushed me towards the glass. I was startled, obviously. I mean, who on earth sneaks up behind someone like that? But he put his fingers on my chin and lifted my face towards his. And then, with the gentlest, softest voice he asked me, “hey, can I kiss you?” “Wait, what? What do you mean?” and he said, “they’ve gone back to school. I figured you were missing when at the exit, so I came back.” I just looked at Sal, I mean, what was I supposed to say? He leaned in, put his hand on my cheek and smiled, “you knew this was coming.” His breath smelled like lemongrass. The next thing I knew, we were making out at the polar bear exhibit.

Sal proposed to me last week, so we’ll be going away next month. To the States. It was his idea, because he was always the creative one anyway. The idea was to leave and...well, I don’t know, but we’ll go somewhere where nobody knows us. Together. We’ll change our names. Make a life. Have children. Raise them. Sal says that he’s going to set up a dance school there, teach ballet to young children and honestly, I cried when I heard that because, well, you can’t ever imagine how beautiful Sal looks when he dances. Like liquid – pure ebbing water – the bluest water you’ve ever seen. Soft, but with the strength of a bear.

I have loved him since the very day I saw him dance.

2.

*Another bench in a park. There are used tissues, leaves, and food packets around it. SAL sits. He is drinking. He looks battered, like a person worn by life, but speaks with unexpected vigour.*

**SAL** It's not a crazy story. She was always careless with her things. Always leaving her jacket behind, forgetting her pencils, losing her purses. My secondary school existence – and primary school – was made primarily by my picking up of her belongings and giving them back to her. Trust me, this girl will forget her breasts if they weren't attached to her body. It's funny though. The way we learn to love. It's not romantic or anything. Look out for someone often enough, and you'll fall for them too. It's only normal.

It took me months, okay, months, to think of how to freaking propose to her. We've been together for, like, twenty years so imagine how impossibly difficult it might be to surprise this little scoundrel. So one day, when I was practicing in the studio, it struck me. I would wear the ring around my neck and over it, every piece of jacket that she had ever left behind. Yes, so, long story short, she undressed me, found the ring, and cried. And we slept in the studio that night, beside the piano with her curled up beside me. It was dim, but I looked at her – I couldn't help it – and I noticed how her skin was the same shade of beige, her hair the same shade of brown...yeah. It was, like, we were made for each other.

3.

**AARIELLE** Mom would never approve of our relationship, though. She was always old-fashioned, and a very typical Chinese parent. I remember how the first time I tried to broach the topic, I was all "Ma, what's going to happen if I marry a dancer?" And she went all, "A dancer? Like your brother? Well look at your brother then, he's pathetic. He can't even support himself with the money he's earning. I will never allow you to be with someone who cannot make you happy." How chummy.

I tried again. I told her, "But, Ma, he makes me happy. I've never felt any happier watching him dance. It's all I've ever lived for." She stopped cooking, the fryer was still in her hands, and she came up to me and answered, "you said the same thing when you watched your brother's first recital. You don't love this man. You just miss your brother. You'll fall for anyone who reminds you of him." "I will love whoever I find most beautiful."

"Nonsense. I used to love your father when he was beautiful too." "You still love him now," I said. She turned around and placed the fryer back on the counter. "I don't," she said, "I divorced him."

She walked out of the kitchen after that. And I've never been able to forget those words, "you'd fall for anyone who reminds you of him."

4.

**SAL** Parents are annoying. I personally find it amusing how they're the people closest to you, yet the ones you keep the most secrets from. I'm estranged from my mother so that doesn't bother me. Aarielle's mom is the irritating one, but don't tell her I said that. She'd call me every damn night and so every night I'd have to make a deliberate effort to divert her calls. I guess caring for your children can take a toll on anyone. The last time I met her mom, she had these massive eye bags. She was, like, just sitting on the couch, talking to herself.

One night, I was again practicing in the studio – god forbid everything happening when you're busy in rehearsals – she called me. Well, okay, at this point, I just had enough because she'd been calling me night after night and I was ready to tell her to stop that bullshit, because I owed her nothing, and this was my life, and that was hers, and that she should never call me again so goodbye and have a nice life.

That's why I told Aarielle that we had to go away. Somewhere where nobody will find us because that's the only way we'll be together without hurting her mom. Aarielle said her mom cried that day.

5.

*A garden bench. Surrounding it are garden tools and carnations. WOMAN is tending to her flowers with gloved hands. She is a nice, congenial old woman. Someone who reminds you of your grandmother.*

**WOMAN** Aarielle. The name means lion of god. She was always strong. Always beautiful. My second-born. She came to me after my divorce.

Matthew, chapter 19, verse 14. "Let the little children come to me," it said. "You see Aarielle", I would say, "your Father in Heaven wants you near Him. He loves you." We were both sitting on my bed. And she scans the room, as if she was searching for something, and she asks, "Who is my real father?" She asked me questions about her dad all the time. How does he look like? What does he do? I said he was thin. He had the softest skin.

But he was strong. I told her that he would walk around in a bathroom. That made him look like a polar bear.

She used to laugh when she heard this.

When she grew up, she loved her brother. I think it was because he was always like a father to her. She was always looking for him. They would spend nights together in the room, playing. When her brother started ballet, she would go to every recital. Sit in the front row. Give him flowers. They were inseparable.

6.

**WOMAN** Things started to change when he grew up. He started to leave the house early. And then he came home very late. You need to understand that he never used to be like this. He became angry. You could see the bitterness in his eyes. It upset me, of course. He walked around the house, saying how he never believed in love.

Then, slowly, he wouldn't come back at all. Except once, when he came back to collect his shoes. That day, I sat on the coach. Prayed.

Aarielle continued to look for him. Sometimes, she wouldn't come home either. When I asked her if she's found him, she never did.

Of course, I was worried. He was my son. How can I not? But I tried. I tried to call him every single night. I wanted to know that he was okay. Then, I wanted to know that he was alive. I never knew because my calls were never answered. But even if he was dead, I just wanted to know what happened to him. I had to. You don't know how it feels, to listen to the ringing, just praying. Useless because you're a mother but you can't reach your son. Lonely because he is your son, but he isn't there. There isn't anyone at home either. One night, however, my call was picked up. There was no way I would mistake the voice at the end of the line. Low, gruff, angry, but Sal's. "I'm okay. I told him. Okay. Just do what you need to do. It's okay. I understand. You don't need to come home if you don't want to. I just need to know that you're okay." I started crying at the end of the line. He hung up.

Abasalom. He was my first-born. I named him after the son of the king of David.

*Blackout.*