



Sardines

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SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English, Vol. 54, Issue 2, 2017

So many people. So noisy. And those flashing lights. As she sat among the huge crowd she wondered if she had come to a madhouse rather than a Klinik Kesihatan. The ticket she had taken from the machine on arrival was tightly clutched. The ceiling fans were not all working. Her palms were sweating so much that the ticket she held in her right hand was now crumpled and soggy. *Will they be able to read it when my turn comes? I might lose my place and have to start all over again.*

The crying of babies from the Mother & Baby section of this huge clinic gave her some relief from the maddeningly-loud Tannoy system informing patients which room to go to.

Satu, kosong, dua, tiga: kaunter empat, a robotic voice boomed as the numbers 1-0-2-3 flashed up on the bright red LED screen. It was her turn. She went to the reception counter to enquire which clinic room she should go to. The tudunged-receptionist pointed with her outstretched right thumb in the direction of a room on the far side of the clinic. *“Bilik dua, yah!”*

Only now did she fully appreciate the size of the throng gathered in this clinic as she made her way through to Room 2. There were even more people standing than sitting. It was a struggle getting through them to the other side of this vast clinic. She kept bumping into people and had to apologise. *Yah, sorry, yah.* She feared she would collapse.

She stopped abruptly at the door. A doctor was shaking a patient’s hand. The man said goodbye and left. She sat in the newly vacated chair. It was still warm. *This seat is so hot he must have been here for ages. I’m so hot orredi. This hot seat is only making me worse.*

She had just sat down when the doctor who was about to be seeing her got up from *his* seat and abruptly left the room. *Probably gone for a toilet break. It looks so busy here. I suppose these doctors don’t get much time for anything, even a toilet break,* she thought. As she waited for his return she began looking round the room. She tried not to catch the eye of the other three already in consultation with their doctors. *“...yes, doctor, I am taking these pills. Every day. I swear...”*. *“...if you don’t lose weight, you will have to go on insulin. Injections!...”* *“...my niece is studying to be a doctor you know, doctor. In London!...”* *“...You are wanting abortion? Cannot! Illegal...”* *“...actually it’s my hasben who has the problem...(whispered)...he can’t do the sex thing no more lah...”*

She didn’t want to be in earshot of these conversations. She and another three patients were sitting at four small desks arranged in a square formation. There was a patient immediately to her left, barely a foot away, a middle-aged woman, wearing an ornate tudung. Another, a bald older Indian, sat directly opposite, partly hidden by the outline of the doctor with his back to her. She could not see the man fully but could clearly hear the conversation going on. There was a third patient, an old auntie with a lined and wizened face, sitting diagonally opposite, currently engaged in a consultation with a fourth doctor.

She felt awkward. She looked around the cramped room and up at the ceiling to avoid eye contact. She felt she was intruding on private conversations. An army of nurses and clerks streamed in and out of the room noisily opening and closing filing cabinets crammed with cardboard folders. The noise and confusion of it all grated on her.

The place had a peculiar smell. She was sure someone had recently been sick in one of these rooms. The stench of recent vomit coupled with disinfectant was definitely in the air. There were even more people than herself and the other three patients in that cramped room. They sat to one side against the wall. Three women and one man. *Who are they? Probably more patients waiting,* she thought. They had ringside seats to watch and hear all that went on in this place. Occasionally she heard a whispered *‘Aiyoh’* coming from them. At other times she couldn’t help but notice some lip-pointing and head-nodding.

Ya Allah! Semaknya! I wish my hasben earned enough so I could have afforded to go to Prince Court instead of this nightmare. We are like macam sardin in this place!

After what seemed like ages but, judging by the stained, pharma company-branded plastic wall clock, was only fifteen minutes, the recently absented doctor reappeared. He sat in his chair. He said nothing. He pressed the top of his ballpoint pen ready for writing. A thought flashed through her mind: if he should suddenly succumb to a heart attack and die right there, she would be unable to assist the subsequent inquest by even giving his name! She didn't even know if he *was* a doctor. The only paraphernalia of doctorhood was his white coat and stethoscope. He had no name tag, did not introduce himself nor ask *her* name. Like all the other patients in this overcrowded clinic she did not feel brave enough to ask "Excuse me, you doctor, kan? What's your name?"

He didn't speak. She had waited long enough in this place so she forged ahead with her story. "Doctor, I am here because I am pregnant!" She paused, expecting a response. Nothing. She might just as easily have disclosed that she knew where all the 1MDB money was hidden for all the reaction she got. This *Doctor Incommunicado* (a name she gave him in her own mind) was clearly not interested in her. She continued. "You see doctor, I am delighted to be pregnant. It's just that there is one, eh, em, one, eh, problem. It's 'em, my hasben, really. Not me lah! He, em, has, eh, syphilis".

This had a sudden, dramatic effect on *Doctor Incommunicado*. He sat bolt upright. His eyes widened. He leaned forward in his seat. He actually spoke! *Okay?*

He moved sideways and peered round to her left, looking beyond her. He hooked his left index finger in a "come here gesture". She looked around behind her towards the four sitting by the wall. Doctor Incommunicado appeared to be addressing the man who now silently mouthed the word "*me?*" as he pointed his finger at his own chest. *Why is he inviting this stranger over to the desk? Is he dismissing me already? I'm not finished yet.*

She was puzzled hearing the doctor actually speak to this stranger, asking him loudly, for all to hear, "so, how long have you had syphilis?"

From her left, she heard the creaking sound of chair legs being moved suddenly on the floor. Out of the corner of her right eye she could just sense heads nodding in her direction. Already she could hear whispered voices from three women by the wall. *Isy, and I was just sitting right next to him!*

She glanced at the man, face now purple, who suddenly stood up, knocked over his chair in his hurry to reply to the doctor. *I DO NOT have syphilis. I have NEVER HAD syphilis. I only came here for my blood pressure check!*

But Doctor Incommunicado would not be put off. But your wife orredi tell me that you have syphilis! She is NOT my wife, doctor. I am not married.

Throughout, she sat as if paralysed by what she had seen and heard. She felt her face hot. The perspiration, which was bad previously, was now a virtual stream coursing between her shoulder blades and onwards down her back. She could feel her clothes now completely stuck to her. Sitting here in this overcrowded clinic her thoughts were racing around her mind like the balls in a ping-pong machine colliding with each other. This madhouse had convinced her that she and her hasben *must* find the money somehow to pay for Prince Court. *I wanted a quiet peaceful clinic where I would see the doctor on my own. Where I could tell him my wonderful news about our first baby. And also get his advice on what to do for my hasben. Instead I get this madhouse. I will never again set foot in this place,* she thought.

Though he was a complete stranger to her, she felt emboldened witnessing his response to the doctor. She now too stood upright and declared loudly: *Doctor, this man is NOT my hasben lah! My hasben is visiting his sick elderly mother in Kedah.*

Immediately she made for the door. The purple-faced stranger was in her way as he too tried to get out of this crowded place in a hurry. He pulled on the door handle so forcefully that the door swung open wildly banging against the open filing cabinet.

As they both tried to rush out they became awkwardly wedged in the doorway, her left shoulder against his right. She extricated herself by nudging him out of her way. Behind her she could hear a woman's whisper: *See! I knew it all along. Of course he's her hasben.*