

The Expat

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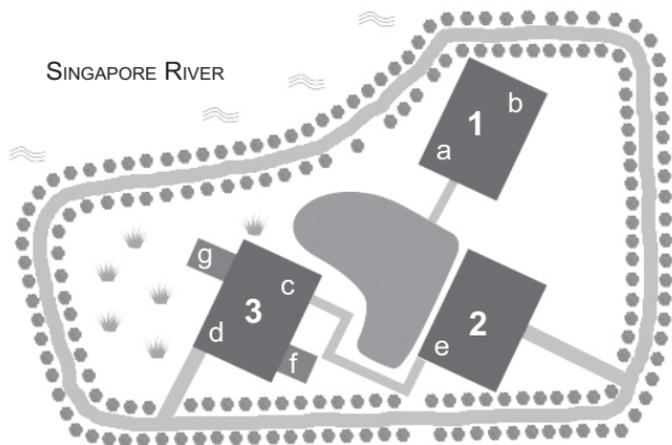
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For Mama, my unconditional fan

Map of Water Heights



1 Tower 1

2 Tower 2

3 Tower 3

a Julia & Paul, 6th storey

b Rogier & Emilie, 30th storey penthouse

c Dave MacKenzie, 6th storey

d Marijke & Rutger, 19th storey

e Function Room

f Toilets

g BBQ pits

Night had fallen, and thousands of insects, buzzing obsessively, had taken over the impenetrable forest. She was covered from head to toe with tiny flies and ants that she could feel but couldn't see. Scratching only made the itch worse, or caused little sores that kept bleeding. Thirst and fear dominated; she was long past the stage of worrying about spiders and snakes.

She was tired, so incredibly tired. She couldn't keep this up. The cold metal of the barrel stabbed her in the back. Trying to escape was futile. They had stopped. It was pitch-black and she had no idea where she was. She could hear the sound of voices further on, whispers, could smell the scent of sweat and cigarettes. Orange tips lit up, floating in the darkness. Her knees shook.

Suddenly, he turned on a torch. A beam of light shone over the damp grass at the edge of the forest. The crickets stopped their chirping. Startled, a bird rose up with a racket, a monkey shrieked. She blinked; the sounds were silenced, like a video that was suddenly paused.

She started to shake and perspire. What she saw taking place before her eyes was sickening, so degrading and unimaginable, impossible to watch. She peeked to her side. He was calm, controlled and icily composed. How could this not affect him, how could he do this to people? Some of them were mere children. He pushed the barrel against her jaw, forcing her to watch. He was enjoying his power, deriving pleasure from her fear. Her head buzzed.

He shone the bright light in her face, and then turned the torch off.

Black spots danced before her eyes. Slowly, the whispering increased. The writhing mass was left alone. The mosquitoes would be able to continue feasting, uninterrupted, like hungry wolves.

1

It was a Friday evening; the night sky was clear and full of stars. The salty air of the sea was carried on the breeze. Yellow lights from rows of waiting ships flickered off the coast, from smaller islands and farther away, from Sumatra. The prestigious Skybar, located in an enormous hotel and the architectonic pride of Singapore, offered an impressive view out over the city. Thousands of lights from skyscrapers, office buildings, hotels, marinas and streets decorated the island like a pointillist painting. This is where it all happened, in the Manhattan of Asia.

Julia de Rijck leaned against the railing of the crowded rooftop terrace, felt the cool steel penetrate right through her thin, airy dress. Paul's hand rested on her hip, his forearm against her lower back. They stood there in silence. Behind them, the buzzing sounds of the many guests. Julia barely knew a soul at this Global Tax Consultancy event, but she needed to be here because of Paul. She leaned further out over the railing, a glass of Champagne in her hand, a thin silk scarf wound loosely around her neck. Fifty-five storeys down, the people on the street looked like wandering ants, the cars like toy cars.

'A hypnotic height isn't it, darling?' she remarked. When Paul didn't respond, she looked sideways. He removed his hand from her hip, and the fabric remained stuck to that very spot. Paul rummaged around in his trouser pocket, fishing out his mobile

phone. His forehead shone, and his shirt was soaked through. He smiled and winked at her, blowing her a kiss. ‘Just a sec, love, I have to take this call.’

Before she could even say a word, he turned around quickly and disappeared into the crowd. The sea wind picked up, and the silk scarf slid from her neck, right over the railing. She reached for it, but it was too late. The red cloth twirled through the air, dancing in the wind.

Oh, what a shame. A farewell gift from friends, the scarf was now floating, billowing and then straightening, like a seahorse, moving ever farther away.

Although it seemed centuries ago that she had stood there on that autumn afternoon at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, it had only been two months. She remembered how overwhelmed she had felt by the beauty and pleasant warmth when she landed in Singapore. Amazed by the variations in the architecture of buildings and houses, the friendly taxi drivers who told her in rich detail about their green city, the efficient infrastructure, the Asian food, and how orderly and clean it was there. Something else Julia found so incredible about this island, this urbanised jungle, no larger than the Northeast Polder back in the Netherlands, was that it was home to an amazing 5.2 million people.

It was a major leap, moving to a country where she knew no one, where she had never been before, and where she couldn’t just pop round to see family or friends. Julia stood behind her decision though, and had even quit her job to help Paul’s career. Moving from the ever-so-familiar Netherlands to Singapore, at the drop of a hat, to live among the Chinese, Malays and Indians, and a handful of expats, was still a radical yet exciting adventure.

Julia took the last sip of her Champagne and before she could find a place to set down her glass, a waiter had already taken it from her hand. Paul had retreated to a quiet place in the glass corridor leading out to the rooftop terrace, and stood half hidden from sight by a large plant. He had his mobile phone cradled between his ear and shoulder, gesturing with his other hand like a symphony conductor. She checked her watch.

What could be so important at half eleven on a Friday evening? Julia actually already knew the answer. This was part of what Singapore was all about, and it was also one of the reasons it was so successful, this city that was awake 24/7. It was the beating financial heart of Asia, a hub for foreign investors and career hunters.

Her scarf was probably hanging like a tiny streamer, all alone in the foliage of one of the trees decorated with Christmas lights lining the street below. It should be easy to find another scarf like it here. After all, Singapore was one giant shopping paradise. Seen from up here, all the Christmas lights above the streets created the illusion of a clear, starlit sky. Christmas in the tropics was a strange experience. She had always associated Christmas with cold weather.

She took a sip and felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Carice.

‘So?’ she asked in her throaty voice. ‘What did you think of John Duxton?’ She was looking at Julia, beaming expectantly.

Carice’s slender body was swathed in a simple black dress that was knotted at her neck. She seemed taller than usual with her pumps and pinned-up blonde hair. Like Julia, Carice also preferred simplicity. She wasn’t really the type to go for make-up, flashy handbags and jewellery. She was a tax adviser. Her motto was always ‘The more memberships and events, the bigger

your network, and the more business you get'. As the organiser of this annual event, she had managed to nab the Indiana Jones of the financial world as guest speaker. Paul was a huge fan of this investment guru and trend-watcher, and had bought a signed book from him, *Hot Spot Commodities*, in which Duxton gives investment advice, or tips to help you get even richer. The crux of the book's message was to invest in gold, and biochemistry, because of the future food shortages. Duxton's children from his second wife had sung a song in Mandarin at the party, winning the hearts of all the Singaporeans.

'Johnny-boy had an interesting story, but those songs ... The only thing stopping my toes from curling up are these high heels,' Julia laughed.

'Yeah,' Carice agreed, 'really embarrassing. But tell me, did you ever hear from that bloke from Boston Bank?' She was referring to the Brit whom she had met the weekend before in a Japanese magic bar. He was there with two giggling Singaporean tarts, whose tittering had only gotten worse with each new bottle of Dom Pérignon. By the end, the girls were passed out, snoring in one of the velvet booths, half strewn over one another, not far from a singer who was enthusiastically belting out cover songs from a stage to an audience of none. This was when Julia and Carice had struck up a conversation with the Brit. Julia had gotten his card; he had said that he had a job opening for her and had immediately ordered another bottle. Even though the bank sector didn't really appeal to her, she had to consider all her options.

'Talk about embarrassing! I called him first thing on Monday, and he couldn't even remember who I was.' The idea of having to go without work for too long was weighing on her. What was she supposed to do? Hang out around the swimming pool all day? Or

throw herself into volunteer work as occupational therapy, like so many other expat wives did?

‘What a twat,’ Carice mumbled.

Julia nodded and looked around the terrace. There must have been a hundred guests there. As ideal an occasion as this might be to network, she didn’t really like having to sing her own praises. A bit further away, Paul was talking to a portly man in a colourful batik shirt; a woman in a headscarf was standing next to him. Julia turned back to her friend.

‘Last week I had that interview at All Goods, remember?’ Julia continued. Carice was a member of the Association of International Business People, and had told her about the job vacancy. ‘I’ll find out next week if I got the job. I have a good feeling about it.’

Julia had the advantage that she could start right away. In the Netherlands, she had worked for years as a marketing manager for a prominent cosmetics company, where she had been responsible for the skin care product lines. By resuscitating face creams that had fallen into oblivion with the addition of innovative anti-wrinkle formulas, she had put them back on the map in Europe. She would be easily able to pull the same rabbit out of a hat for the whitening creams in All Goods’ cosmetics line. After all, for Asian women, the beauty ideal was porcelain-white skin, much like that of a wax statue.

‘You can enjoy your freedom a bit longer, Jule. Although I can imagine that you are slowly tiring of all the shopping, the lunches, manicures, art exhibitions, fairs, morning coffee dates, expat gossip, and days lounging around by the swimming pool.’ Carice was counting off these activities on her fingers.

Julia sighed and knitted her eyebrows. ‘What I really want

now is the routine of a job, the challenge, new co-workers, meeting people from other cultures, and mostly, my own money. We're running through it like water.' You never knew when a buffer could come in handy; Julia had become aware of this fairly early in life. Besides, she would rather not have to use Paul's credit card. She hadn't done this in the six years prior to their move, although she really didn't have a choice right now. Right after they arrived in Singapore, Paul had opened a joint bank account so they could make the switch to using the local currency, the Singapore dollar. Their expenses would have cost them huge amounts of money otherwise, because of the exchange rate. Since Julia didn't have a job, she wasn't allowed to open a bank account here.

'I wouldn't like that at all either, being dependent on a bloke,' Carice sighed. 'If I feel like buying a pair of Manolo Blahniks, I do it.'

'Exactly. And when I use Paul's credit card now, it's not the same.'

Her attention was suddenly drawn to Paul, who was waving her over. He was still talking to the man in the batik shirt. 'I think Paul wants to introduce me to someone.'

Carice turned around. 'Go on then, there are still a few people I have to speak with too, before they leave. I'll go ahead and give you a kiss now in case I don't see you later. I'll be in Shanghai next week. Will we see each other on Thursday at the Working Ladies cocktail get-together? We can hit the town together after that. I heard a new club has opened up.' She winked. Julia knew exactly what she meant – she was planning to hunt for a great bloke. Carice's hunting grounds were rather limited in this respect; she was attracted to black men. In spite of her many lovers, she had not yet been lucky in love, or even seen a shimmer of it in the

distance, at least not without getting her heart broken.

‘Great idea. There’s a really hot rasta who works at that new tapas bar in Chinatown. Okay, bye now.’ Julia laughed and edged her way through the other guests – ‘people with the highest voltage’, as Paul called the investors.

‘Nice to meet you, Julia.’ They shook one another’s hand. The man, Sarip, was smiling at her. He then introduced the woman dressed in robes, who, as it turned out, was his wife. She gave Julia a thorough once over.

‘How long have you been in Singapore?’ This was always one of the first questions she got asked when she met someone for the first time. It helped establish the hierarchy; being here for two months meant you were a newbie to the expat life, particularly when you said it was your first foreign assignment.

Julia took Sarip’s outstretched business card from him with both hands, one of the first things she had learned upon her arrival in Singapore. This custom applied to everything someone might hand you, since taking offerings with one hand was considered impolite here. ‘Alibaba Coal & Mineral Mining’ was printed on the card.

‘Sarip and I know each other from the Formula 1 races in the city,’ Paul explained. He took his mobile out of his trouser pocket and glanced at it quickly. ‘They live near Dempsey Hill, you know, near those English barracks that have been converted into bars and restaurants.’ It was one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in Singapore.

‘My wife and I are originally from Java,’ Sarip said. ‘We also have a house there, but we chose Singapore because of our children. The schools and universities here are better. Everything is so safe and efficient here, and even more important, it’s got

a favourable tax climate.’ He grinned, exposing rows of pearly-white teeth. Many investors and companies parked their liquid assets here, and the world’s most prominent banks all had offices in the city. Sarip’s wife, Siti, stood quietly next to him with a glass of bitter lemon in her hand, nodding now and then.

‘Have I already told you what a genius your husband is?’ Sarip said, placing a hand on Paul’s shoulder. His shirt crept up over his ample stomach, exposing a bit of skin. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘Asians would just rather do business with their own kind. We understand the culture and try to support each other. The banks didn’t understand that their image needed to change, but your husband did. It was a really smart way to gain our trust.’

Julia smiled at his enthusiasm about Paul. Her husband’s plan was to give the United Bank of Asia Pacific a make-over, and that was why the company had asked him to go to Singapore. He was an analyst, specialised in numbers, and his nickname around the office was ‘the Spreadsheet King’.

‘Paul has tapped into an entire new group of investors.’ Sarip pointed to himself to indicate he was one such investor. ‘He won our trust by doing something about the flashy, flamboyant image, and by cutting costs, which also meant having to sack people. And of course by also ensuring we got good returns on our investments.’

Julia could see from the dimples in Paul’s cheeks that he was very pleased with Sarip’s praise. She really admired the fact that he had studied local cultures, had read books, talked with people, all so that he could avoid insulting any local people. Sarip was one of Paul’s better clients. He had acquired land exploitation rights from the Indonesian government. From these mines, he extracted coal, gold and precious stones, and exported them all over the

world. As he was talking, a gold ring set with a ruby sparkled on the finger of his left hand. Next to it, on his little finger, he had the longest nail that Julia had ever seen. One thing was certain: he wasn't doing any manual labour in the mines.

Sarip continued for a while about the business and his own success, but then rather unexpectedly, cut the conversation short. 'Sorry, excuse me. I see someone I really need to speak to.' He rushed over to a man in a tailor-made suit. Paul took immediate advantage of the situation and whispered in Julia's ear that he had to go to the toilet. Julia decided to strike up a conversation with Sarip's wife.

'So, Siti, what line of work are you in?'

'I have been an estate agent for expats for a year.' Siti began to tell her about her company. Julia remembered that she had seen a sign for Siti's company, High Rise Real Estate, somewhere. With a smile, she took the woman's business card. If her husband had the longest nail on his little finger, then she won the prize for the largest diamond ring Julia had ever seen.

'Mine are still at the printer's,' she fibbed.

'What do you do then?' Siti gazed at Julia with her shining brown eyes. Her eyelids were lined with black kohl pencil, and her lips were coloured burgundy.

'I work as a marketing manager,' Julia smiled uncomfortably. As silly as it was, it simply sounded more interesting to say that she had put a popular anti-wrinkle cream on the European map than that she was currently not doing anything.

Her thoughts and their conversation were slowly being drowned out by the volume of the music. The guests at the Global Tax Consultancy event had to make room for hip young people out on the town. Julia could feel the bass beat in her stomach,

and it was getting harder and harder for them to understand one another. The palm trees on the roof terrace bent in the wind.

Both women looked around, somewhat bored. Where were their husbands anyway? Julia gestured with her head. Paul and Sarip were standing at the bar, engaged in a lively conversation with two young Singaporean girls.

‘I think it’s time to call my driver. He’s waiting downstairs. I’ve got to get up early tomorrow – our oldest son, he’s 13, will be playing in his first polo match,’ Siti explained diplomatically.

The men quickly turned around when their wives came over to join them. The two girls, their skin as smooth as satin, took to their heels, sashaying their tiny bums out of there.

‘High time to leave, Sarip.’ Siti placed her hand in a quasi-friendly manner on his upper arm, but Julia could see that she was secretly digging her nails in. She shifted the strap of her handbag higher and pulled her headscarf back slightly, her dark eyes flashing. She clearly did not appreciate his flirting with the girls.

‘Yes, I was on my way to come get you.’ Sarip avoided her look by looking at his full glass of cola.

‘Shall we get one more, Jule?’ Paul tossed back his beer.

‘Sure, why not.’

‘I’m sure we’ll run into one another again. Singapore is small. Nice to meet you,’ Siti said. Her eyes were already trained on the exit.

An hour later, Paul and Julia also left the roof terrace. The glass lift on the outside of the enormous skyscraper whizzed earthwards with them. The numbers on the built-in digital screen showed the floors changing faster than the seconds that ticked by. Business-wise, it was a great party, with all those international contacts, the luxurious Skybar and the successful people.

Soon, Julia thought, I'll be back in the race.

* * *

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and checked his watch again. Taxis carrying passengers arrived and left again. He figured that they must have already come through customs by now. It usually went pretty quickly when you only had hand luggage with you. Just when he was about to grab his mobile from the centre console, someone rapped on his window. A man in uniform gestured with his forefinger. As his window slid down, the parking attendant said, 'You can't park here this long, sir.'

'Five minutes.' He smiled, held up five fingers, and then rolled the window up again. They shouldn't moan so much, these uptight civil servants. Just as the traffic warden walked to the next car, the three of them came walking out of Arrivals. They looked like the perfect family. He started the car.

The back door swung open and the woman and little boy were guided into the car. He looked behind him and saw that they were holding on to one another's hand tightly.

The dull thud of the door slamming shut briefly shook the frail body of the boy back and forth.

'Everything go okay?' he asked the man once he got into the seat next to him. He locked the car's central locking switch. They ignored the woman and little boy in the back seat.

'Easy, no problem,' the man answered. He handed him their passports immediately.

'They look even better than they do in the photos,' he remarked. He smiled with satisfaction. As they drove away from the airport, he slipped the documents into his jacket's inside

pocket. 'You're expected in Batam this Saturday. A new shipment. You'll have the visa by then.'

'Yes, boss.'