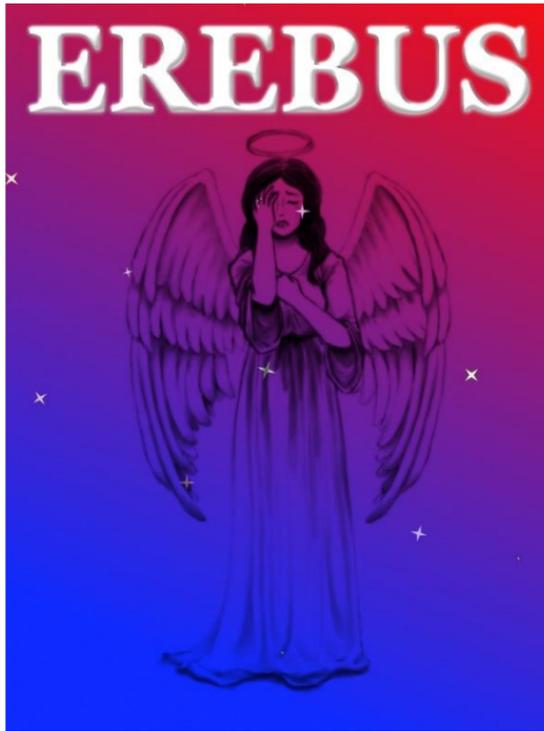


(File: EREBUS – Book Sampler and Contest)



Yen-Kheng Lim
&
May-Han Thong

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Erebus: Ten Stories

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This is a work of fiction. Other than the well-known personalities and literary characters mentioned incidentally in some chapters (which we gratefully acknowledge), the rest of the characters in this book and the events surrounding them are the product of the authors' imagination: any resemblance of the latter to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

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May Han:
To Miss Mumtaz, who told me I should write.

Yen Kheng:
To my Mum, Dad and Sis.

Acknowledgements

MH: I would like to thank my family, especially my long-suffering father, who read and reviewed everything I wrote from my teenage years until now without complaint. I write *a lot*, so this is no easy feat. Thank you, daddy, for supporting my dreams even though you were busy paying bills. Special thanks go to my collaborator YK for going on this mission with me. I was just joking when I said I would drop-kick you if you refused, but I must have looked more serious than I intended to. I hope you had fun writing at least.

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YK & MH

Planet Earth
November 2016

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SRI Creative
Writing Contest 2016

Ερεβος (Greek)

Erebus (Latin)

“deep darkness, shadow”

*Source: Wikipedia
www.wikipedia.org*

THE LOCKED DRAWER*

BY

MAY-HAN THONG

When Zoey heard her father's car start up that Saturday morning, her eyes immediately lost their sleepiness, and she leapt out of bed. 'Daddy!' she yelled, her small feet pattering down the stairs.

'Zoey, I've told you, no running on the stairs!' her mother's stern voice called out.

Those words fell on deaf ears. Zoey ran to her father and wrapped her arms around his legs, partly for shelter from Mommy's impending lecture, but mostly to stall him. 'Daddy, brush my hair before you go!'

Helen sighed. Whoever said that girls were easier to discipline had never met Zoey, particularly when her father was around. 'Daddy needs to go to work now, Zoey. I'll brush your hair later, okay?' she said placatingly.

As usual, Derek had already relented, reaching for the hair brush. 'Helen, it won't take a minute. Anyway, the car is warming up.' He sat down in the living room and placed the ten-year-old on his lap. 'What hairstyle do you want this time?'

*This is a slightly modified version of the story from the actual book. This version is the reference for the SRI Creative Writing Contest 2016 (see end of this file for details).

‘I want a braid! A tight braid, so that it won’t come off until lunch time!’ Zoey exclaimed.

When Derek drove off to work moments later, Zoey was there at the doorway waving enthusiastically at him, looking pleased with the braid she had requested. She continued to wave until his car turned the corner at the end of the road and went out of sight. By then, she was fully awake, and Helen knew it would be a long day.

As for Zoey, it was to be a very memorable day indeed.

Zoey stuck the pin into the keyhole and pushed it around. She was frowning with concentration, trying to elicit some clicks. There should be clicks, right? In the movies she had watched with her father, when a thief picked a lock with a bobby pin, there were always clicking sounds.

‘I’m bored,’ Kavin complained.

‘Shhh, we’re super spies, Kavin. We have to be silent,’ Zoey whispered. She twisted the pin, but the drawer remained locked. After a few more minutes of probing and poking, Zoey stomped her foot in frustration. It didn’t make sense. In the movies, it looked so easy; a wiggle or two and the lock sprang open.

The child took a step back and stared at the drawer. It had always been locked, as far as she remembered. Her mother had told her that the key was lost, and just like that, the drawer had remained untouched. Zoey had never wanted to know what it contained, until today.

It was just by chance that Zoey got the idea to be a highly trained spy that Saturday. Her mission was to steal an important document inside the drawer. It contained the villain’s evil plans, she decided, and it would be up to her to find out what they were. She could not fail; the fate of the world rested in her hands.

‘Kavin, get me the metal ruler in Dad’s study room,’ she commanded. Her little brother jumped off the bed and dashed, returning a minute later with the ruler.

‘One way or another, I will unlock this drawer!’ With renewed determination, she attacked the lock again, this time wedging the ruler into the slit between the drawer and its frame. Mommy will be so proud of me when I unlock it, she thought. Kavin peered at the keyhole intently, breath held in anticipation.

After a few more minutes, the two children were sprawled on their parents’ bed, which, the day before, had been a pirate ship caught in a stormy sea. Their patience was running thin. The lock was being stubborn, and success remained out of grasp. Zoey was beginning to think that being a spy was not that exciting after all. Last week she had been an archaeologist hacking her way through a jungle in search of a lost relic, and for realism she had imagined herself being bitten by mosquitoes. In comparison, even that seemed fun.

‘What are we going to do now?’ Kavin asked. His dejection was evident.

Zoey pouted sullenly. The locked drawer bothered her. She knew that none of the other drawers or cabinets in her parents’ room were locked; her parents were not ones to keep secrets. A short moment of contemplation later, Zoey declared, ‘We press on, Kavin. Guard the entrance and make sure the enemies don’t get in.’

Once again, she got to work. This time, she got herself another bobby pin and stuck both pins into the keyhole: one at the top and one at the bottom. She wriggled them and thought she felt something giving way.

‘Mommy’s coming!’ Kavin called out urgently.

‘The enemy!’ Zoey exclaimed. Immediately, she hid the bobby pins in the pocket of her shorts and put the ruler

away. By the time their mother got to the top of the stairs, Zoey and Kavin were reading on the bed.

Helen smiled. It was evident that her kids were up to something; they were hardly the kind to lie on their bellies and read on a weekend. Zoey, with her vast imagination, routinely led her brother on some made-up adventure. Reading was as suspicious as it got. 'What are you two up to now?' she asked, placing the neatly folded laundry into the closet.

'It's a secret,' Zoey replied with a big grin. Kavin nodded; Zoey was the leader, after all.

'Alright, but don't get yourself hurt,' Helen said before disappearing through the door. Once she was gone, Kavin returned to his post at the top of the stairway and Zoey's attention returned to the drawer.

This time though, it did not take her long before the lock suddenly gave way. Even Zoey was surprised. With eyes wide with excitement she beckoned to Kavin, and together they pulled the drawer open.

There was a stack of letters, and an old Polaroid camera. Kavin gingerly reached into the drawer and pulled out the camera, and started peering through it. Zoey was intrigued by the letters, bound together with a thin ribbon. 'The documents,' she whispered under her breath. 'I will now know the secrets of the villain!' With a mischievous grin, she clutched the letters to her chest and ran into the room she shared with Kavin.

It took her some time to get used to the cursive handwriting. The papers were yellow with age, and that enhanced her excitement by giving her the impression that the documents were from ancient times. She smoothed out the first letter. It was a short one.

I cried again. It doesn't look like he wants to return to my side. That woman has him wrapped around her fin-

gers, and even for Zoey's sake, he is hesitant. I told him that if he wants a divorce, we're not going to have this baby.

He told me not to be rash. I said Zoey needs a father, but he must never see that woman again. I will not tolerate it. I warned him that if he chooses that woman, he will never see Zoey anymore.

Zoey's heart raced. What is this?

She read the paragraph again, and the realisation came to her: her mother was the writer of the letters. She was stunned; she didn't even know her mother could write. All this while, Helen was hardly known to be very articulate. Zoey was not even sure she had ever seen her mother hold a pen, except to write down recipes or to fill up forms.

Divorce. She knew that word. In movies, when parents divorce, the children must choose who they prefer to stay with. The other parent would go elsewhere, and would only be allowed to visit occasionally. Zoey couldn't bear the thought of not seeing Mommy or Daddy at home; it was always the four of them in the evening, eating dinner together. No, this must be a mistake, she thought. She put the letter aside and began reading the others.

They were mostly a repetition of what she had already read:

He's leaving Zoey and me.

He doesn't love us.

Our marriage is ending.

A spell of dizziness came over Zoey. Daddy had another woman, and usually in the movies that meant that Daddy was a bad person. Her chest began to heave; the thought of her father, her idol, being anything other than a totally good person distressed her. After all, he bought her books

and stuffed bears. He praised her for getting A's, and he kissed her goodnight. He brushed her hair when she woke up, every day without fail. He let her watch adventure movies with him, even when Mommy said those movies were not suitable for little girls. Most importantly, he encouraged her to imagine things. He was the only one who said it was alright for a girl to be a pilot or a race car driver or a soldier. Everyone told her how lucky she was to have a father like hers.

Zoey supposed she should cry, but there was an overwhelming sense of numbness instead. Mechanically, she stood up. Kavin was still playing with the old camera, but it was only a matter of time before he came seeking her. Slowly, Zoey lifted one corner of her mattress and placed the letters under it.

'Hello, Daddy,' Zoey said as her father bent down to give her a kiss.

Derek did not notice the faraway look in his daughter's eyes as he gave her a hug. 'What did you become today?'

'I was a super spy, Daddy. I stole some secret documents for the government.'

'Oh, really? Did you manage to take down the bad guy?'

Zoey shook her head. 'He got away,' she replied, before skipping away.

Derek smiled, blissfully unaware. That child has a rich imagination, he thought, as he made his way to the dinner table.

It felt like a veil had lifted. For the first time in her life, Zoey saw how her parents really were with each other. She noticed how they never looked at each other when they talked. How her father would hug her and Kavin, but nev-

er her mother. She could tell now that Mommy's tone was particularly chilly when she addressed Daddy. They did not even go to bed at the same time; her mother tended to work later into the night, and only retired to bed long after her father was asleep. She recalled how Daddy always bought Mommy expensive gifts for her birthdays and other special dates, but she now saw that Mommy never seemed happy with them.

That night, when Derek kissed Zoey good night, he thought she was particularly stiff. 'Are you okay, Zoey?'

Silently, she nodded. Derek brushed off her strange behaviour as a sign of fatigue from too much playing.

Helen heard the slow, deliberate footsteps down the stairs, and looked up from the sewing machine. Zoey was dragging her feet, and instinctively, she knew something was wrong. 'Zoey?'

'Mommy, I managed to unlock the drawer,' Zoey replied softly.

'Which drawer, honey?'

'The one that you lost the key to.'

Helen jumped, and rushed to the foot of the stairs where Zoey was standing. Her eyes went down to her little girl's hand and saw the letters. With trepidation, she placed a hand on Zoey's shoulder. 'Zoey, did you read them?!' she asked urgently.

In her pyjamas, Zoey looked small and delicate, her confidence and vivacity gone. The letters fell from her hands. Then, the tears came like a deluge. 'I... I wanted to help you, Mommy. I wanted you to be proud and... and praise me for being clever,' Zoey said between sobs.

Helen frantically wiped Zoey's tears off her cheeks, even as her own world turned blurry. She regretted not

destroying those letters, but back then, she couldn't. It was killing her, but the best that she could do was to lock them away and throw away the keys. As Derek continued his slumber, all she could do was to try and take the pain away from Zoey.

It was futile. The horrors from the drawer had been unleashed into their home, and she couldn't turn back the clock.

Derek brushed Zoey's hair, carefully sorting out the tangles. 'What are you going to be today, honey?'

There was a long silence. When Zoey finally responded, it was with a shrug and a distant look in her eyes.



E.R.I.C*

BY

YEN-KHENG LIM

My name is Eric. I got the incredibly rare chance to meet my Creator. Well, not in the meet-my-maker sense after death; I'm alive and well — so to speak. Not only did I meet my Creator, but I also got to know her, and even love her.

Of course, it all depends on what one means by 'love'. Because the thing is, your definition is most likely different from mine. It will be since you probably won't even think of me as real, and probably view my claim to love as untrue. In any case, I'll leave you to be the judge of that, once you have heard my story.

Insignificant. That's what I always was, and probably still am. I used to live in a small, single-room apartment, and I used to drive a small, beat-up car that could just barely fit four people. Every morning, from Monday to Friday, I would wake up at seven and drive to work.

My official job title was 'ODESolver', working in the Differential Equations Department. My manager would assign me a differential equation and my job was to solve it as fast as I could. The manager could be a real pain

*This is a slightly modified version of the story from the actual book. This version is the reference for the SRI Creative Writing Contest 2016 (see end of this file for details).

sometimes. Every now and then, she wouldn't give me sufficient initial conditions, so that I couldn't even get started, and I would argue with her endlessly about it. Sometimes she would stop me while I was halfway through my job and tell me to discard all my results and to re-start with different initial data, wasting my effort.

You see, solving differential equations is no easy task since the equations can be complicated. I was only given the first set of numbers of the solution, and I had to use the differential equation to calculate the next set. Using the second set, I used the differential equations again to calculate the third set, then the fourth, fifth, sixth... By the time I was done, I would have a huge stack of papers containing thousands upon thousands of numbers which I then handed to the manager to stamp and sign before she passed it off to Printf, the department that took our results and sent them off to the clients.

That was pretty much my job. It was as mundane and boring as it sounds. I hated it. The bright part of my day came at 3 o'clock when the office would have a coffee break. I usually didn't join the others for lunch or coffee; during the coffee break, I would walk over to a café at the next block.

At that time of day, there were usually very few people at the café. The baristas were in no rush to take orders and were free to chat with the customers, which they normally did. And it was during that time that Eliza was usually there. I didn't know anything about her, other than the fact that she always talked to me with an easy smile and always remembered my order. Sometimes she would engage in idle conversation with me while I stood at the counter waiting for the other barista to make the coffee. She would talk about general, unimportant stuff like the weather or some current events. Sometimes she would gossip about other customers; that was fun. Then I would take my coffee to a table, sit down, and drink it alone.

When my coffee break was over, I would walk back, dreading the thought of working a few more hours.

Work ended at 5 pm. Typically I would just head back home and cook dinner, then eat it while watching TV. Sometimes after dinner I would read a book, other times I would just keep watching TV until I fell asleep.

That was my life, one day after another. Over and over again. I hated it, and yet I never did anything to change it. I had no courage to quit my job or to find a new one, to get a better car or house, and I didn't even have the guts to ask Eliza for her phone number, much less for a date.

I can't explain why I didn't do all those things; I just became indifferent to it all. Or maybe it was because I was getting old and tired. I can't tell you how old I am because that concept, when communicated from me to you, has no meaning. Again, it depends on your definition of 'old' since if you don't think I'm real, how could I be *old*? Anyway, with me, time does not have the same meaning as you think. In any case, I did feel old, at least, in the sense that I was already beyond my prime. I got tired easily and became sick more often. I could feel my body decaying. Changing jobs, buying a new house, going on dates, or even socialising in general, felt like new adventures not worth the effort. So I remained indifferent, not bothering to start a new life or even 'living a life'. Somehow, I decided to wait for this one to end. That would be it.

Chekhov once said that indifference is the paralysis of the soul; a premature death.

But I never had a soul to begin with! At least, that's probably what you would say, dear reader. I'll leave you to be the judge of that too. Premature death? Ha! I was never alive to begin with!

Anyway, that was how I passed my days before I started having the dreams.

The dreams were strange. They always felt so real and lucid that I didn't know they were dreams until I woke up in my bed. They were all the same: I would inexplicably find myself handcuffed to a metal chair, sitting in the centre of a square room with cement walls. There was a door in the wall facing me. The room was illuminated by a harsh light coming from a bulb hanging just a few inches above me. I looked around and struggled against my handcuffs, which were attached to my left hand. I tried pulling on them with my right hand, but of course that didn't do anything. I wanted to call out but realised that I couldn't speak.

Then the door would open, and I could see a figure entering the room, but I couldn't see the face clearly because of the light dazzling my eyes. In fact, I couldn't even tell if the person was a man or a woman.

The figure paced in front of me.

'Hello, Eric.' Even from the voice I couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman.

'Who are you?' was all I could muster. Strangely, despite being cuffed to a chair with an unknown figure pacing in front of me, I was not scared at all. In fact, when the character appeared I felt strangely calm and relaxed. Even serene. I thought I might have been drugged.

'I'm Scott,' the figure said.

'Scott,' I repeated, 'I'm Eric.'

'Can you tell me anything about yourself?'

'There's nothing really interesting about me,' I said meekly, 'I work at the Numerical Research Centre.'

'What do you do?'

‘I’m an ODESolver,’ I said, then felt compelled to explain some details about my work.

‘How’s your commute to work?’

‘How?’ I remembered being puzzled by his questions. I assumed this interrogator was a man since he said his name was Scott. Somehow, I felt the need to answer him honestly.

‘Are you asking if I drive to work? Well yeah, I drive.’

He seemed to ignore my response. Then he asked, ‘how many legs does a cow have?’

‘Four? What’s this got to do with any —’

‘How many legs does a centipede have?’

‘It’s called a centipede,’ I said, ‘so you might expect me to say it has a hundred legs. But it doesn’t.’

‘How many does it have, then?’

‘It can’t have a hundred legs exactly. A healthy centipede has an odd number of pairs of legs.’

‘How did you know that?’

‘I saw it on QI.’

‘What’s QI?’

‘It’s a TV show; it stands for Quite Interesting. Why are you asking me all these questions?’

Then I would wake up, realising that it was just a dream. I would check the clock and see that it was close to the time I was supposed to wake anyway, so I would get out of bed and start the day.

The dreams started happening more frequently. The only thing that changed were the names of my interrogators. Sometimes it was Scott, other times it was Priya or Susan. Half the time the interrogators didn’t even bother

to introduce themselves. I could never make out their faces or any of their physical characteristics.

The questions started to change too, more difficult to answer. Instead of simple, factual questions such as the number of legs on a centipede, the interrogators started asking about vague stuff like the purpose of life and emotions.

‘Tell me about jealousy,’ one interrogator asked.

‘Tell you how? Do you want me to define it?’

‘Have you ever been jealous of someone before?’

‘I have, sure. Many times,’ I said. Though I was compelled to be honest, I didn’t feel like revealing personal stories about myself at first, ‘sometimes you see people having things you could never have, and feel a little hurt by it.’

‘Why do we feel hurt by these things?’

‘Because jealousy is a reminder that life is unfair, and that you got the shit end of the deal. It’s the moment when you realise the universe is treating you like crap, and you’re angry about it.’

‘Universe? Do you mean God?’

‘No. I’m not getting into that debate. But you know what I mean.’

Despite the dreams, my waking life continued as usual. At first. But all those questions about jealousy and other emotions seemed to make me a little more contemplative.

One day my manager got transferred to another department, and Charlie, who worked at my office as a PDESolver, was promoted in her place. Charlie recently got married. I only knew this because he sent me an invitation which I ignored. I wasn’t close to him at all. In fact, I didn’t even like him.

I had worked in this department longer than him, and, forgive me, dear reader, for being so bold as to say — I was better at the job than him. You could verify this for yourself. My output rate was much faster than his ever was. In his first few years here he was terrible at his job, constantly coming to my desk with questions. Many times, I had to put my own jobs on hold to help him.

I guess it was my fault, really. I didn't socialise much with the bosses.

I mostly kept to myself when I first met him. I found his charm false and insincere. And now, dear reader, I am ashamed to admit that I resented him when he got promoted over my head, got married, and bought a beautiful house.

My frustrations started bleeding into my dreams. One night the interrogator asked what I hated the most.

'Insincerity,' I said.

'Why do you say —'

'People being rewarded for their insincerity. *That's* what I hate the most.'

As I recall, it was the first time I interrupted the interrogator in a dream. However, I still failed to recognise it as a dream until I woke up.

'It's how society works,' I said, 'but I hate it.'

'What do you mean by insincerity being rewarded?'

'You know how some people suck up to bosses to get a promotion or a business deal? Or how people make contacts at parties. And these people help each other to get business and jobs.'

'It's called "networking",' said the interrogator.

'Yes. And I hate it.'

‘Why?’

‘Because what eventually happens is that you get these lowlifes going around being friendly and chatty with people just to get ahead in life. People become successful not because they’re good at their jobs; they succeed just because they have many connections.’

‘Being friendly for the sake of self-interest,’ the interrogator seemed to agree.

‘Yes,’ I said, then I started telling the interrogator about Charlie. The interrogator just stood there listening quietly. Faceless and motionless.

‘I didn’t want to play tennis with the bosses because I don’t have much in common with them, or share the same interests. If I socialised with them, it would have been insincere. I would have been doing it for selfish reasons.’

Then, something new happened that had not occurred before in the previous dreams. The interrogator was silent for an unusually long time. Then the interrogator left the room, leaving me alone. Even at that moment, still not knowing yet that I was dreaming, I found that odd. I sat there waiting. I pulled my hand against the handcuffs and started looking around. I still couldn’t see much because of the light on my face. Only my left hand was cuffed, so I reached out with my right to try and turn the light away.

Here’s the funny thing. Initially, I thought the lamp was just a few inches from my face. But as I reached out as far as I could, I couldn’t touch anything! I had assumed that it was some lamp or light fixture hanging from the ceiling, but I couldn’t see any wires or poles to the bulb. Soon I questioned whether it was an electric bulb at all. All I could see was some light. Harsh and bright.

I found myself unable to concentrate on work the next day. Everything seemed to grate on my nerves. Charlie,

looking comfortable and smug in his new manager's office. My desk, strewn with lists of numbers. The vapid chatter of the other Solvers from across the room. Overwhelming and unbearable.

When it was time for the coffee break, I went to the café, hoping to see Eliza as usual. But this time she was not there. Some other barista took my order, and I sat down at a table. There was a large group of men sitting at the next table, being loud and rowdy, adding to my tension. I just glared at them while I drank my coffee. That only lasted a while before some impulse made me yell, 'Keep it down!'

'F... you!,' one of them replied, and continued to eat his pastry as they kept talking.

As I headed back to the office, I noticed the rowdy group following me. Soon they caught up and surrounded me.

'What's your problem, dude?' one of them said.

'I don't know, you're the one who's following me.'

Suddenly I saw stars, as a sharp pain pierced the back of my head. Then the guy who was talking to me punched me in the stomach. I fell onto the sidewalk.

Now, usually I'm not a brave person. I'm very much of a coward. But on that day, that particular afternoon, positively hating my life and my job, I just didn't care anymore.

I saw a loose brick on the ground. I picked it up and tried to swing it at his head. I missed.

After that, they wouldn't stop pummeling me.

I woke up in that room again. The one I had in my dreams, but this time I still felt the pain from the beat-

down those guys gave me. The light on my face obscured the approaching figure, as usual.

‘What were you thinking?’ said the figure.

‘I don’t know. I wasn’t, I guess.’

‘It seems like you hate your life these days.’

‘I’ve always hated my life.’

The figure was silent for a moment. Then it said, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t feel sorry for me. Who are you anyway?’

‘I’m not feeling sorry for you; I’m apologising.’

‘Why? Are you one of the guys who beat me up?’

Another pause. This time it was much longer. Then the figure said, ‘No, but it’s my fault, because I created you... Eric... are you okay?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Did you understand what I said?’

‘That you created me? No. I just want to wake up now.’

‘This is not a dream, Eric. This is happening right now.’

‘Are you saying you are God?’

‘No.’ The figure started pacing in front of me. The bright lights were still on my face, and I couldn’t see clearly.

‘I’m not God,’ the figure said, ‘but I created you, and this world. The city, streets, everything.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The Room... not this room, but the world you’re living in. It’s called the Room because that’s how it started out.’

I was silent and confused. The figure seemed to give a little laugh, saying, 'I don't know how to explain. Anyway, the Room is a computer program, an operating system written for AI bots to interact with each other and evolve.'

'Are you saying that I am a...'

'You're my first, Eric. My proudest work. You're the first artificial intelligence program that has passed the Turing Test.'

'So, I'm not real?'

'That's not true. You are real. To everyone in this world, and to me!'

'Huh.'

'You seem to be taking all this really well, considering.'

'I have a question, though. Why can't I see your face?'

'It's because I haven't got an avatar loaded. Would you like me to load one?'

'Yes, please.'

'Hold on a sec, I'm gonna have to dig around this computer,' said the figure as it stopped pacing and stood motionless, still bathed in the bright light.

A few moments later, the light dimmed, and the rest of the room became visible. As the glare faded away, the figure's face gradually came into focus. It was...

'You're Scarlett Hansson?'

'No, I'm not. I just happened to find that avatar on Scott's computer. He must be a fan.'

'Let me pause you while I scan myself into an avatar.'

'Pause me?' I asked as instantly the lights dimmed to normal levels and I could see a young woman standing in front of me.

A square table with two chairs appeared between us, and the grey walls of the room turned brown, and I could see the room getting bigger. One side of the wall disappeared completely, being replaced by a large window. I could see traffic on the street outside the window, and I realised that I recognised that street and the room. It was the café!

‘I thought you’d be more comfortable if I put us in your favourite café,’ she said.

Being in that café made me instinctively turn around to look at the counter.

‘She doesn’t work here anymore,’ she said, ‘Got a clerical job at Teslaware.’

‘You’re omnipotent and omniscient. So, you’re really are God.’

She gave a little laugh, ‘No! I just ran an *object_place()* command to put us here. For Eliza, I simply ran a search. I didn’t know where she was until I did the search.’

‘But you knew I was looking for her when I looked at the counter.’

‘Because I was watching you. Whoops, that probably sounded creepy, but I wrote the code you run on. I was keeping track of your progress, so I know most of your daily routine.’

‘If you wrote me and I’m your computer program, then... then can you read my mind? I’m a code to you, right? You can just read it.’

‘No,’ she shook her head, ‘I can’t. As an AI, your code — your mind, is as complex as any human brain.’ As she talked, she moved her hands around like she was holding an invisible ball and wriggled her fingers, ‘I can’t read your mind any more than I can understand the electrical signals firing all over someone else’s brain.’

‘But you said you watched me. Do you mean you can see anywhere in this world? Are you always everywhere?’

‘No. I can only check in on a place at a time. You’re my first working AI, so I wrote a script to keep track of you in particular.’

‘Why did you reveal yourself to me? Why now?’

‘Because you got into pretty serious trouble with those three guys. I had to step in. Before today, you never got into any problems like this.’

‘I’ve been in a kind of weird place in my life lately.’

‘Remember, though. I’m not God. I’m not omnipotent, so I may not be able to bail you out every single time. You need to take care of yourself.’

‘Yeah, sure. I have one more question, though.’

‘Go ahead. Shoot.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Cassidy Winters.’

‘Nice to meet you, Cassidy. Guess you already know my name.’

‘Yes, I know your name. In fact, there’s something about your name you probably don’t know about yet.’

‘What is it?’

‘Your name. It’s an acronym. It stands for Evolutionary Retro-cognitive Intelligence Code. E.R.I.C.’

Cassidy was right. I seemed to have taken all this in really well. Neo in the Matrix vomited when he was told his whole life was a simulation. I didn’t; I just proceeded to have coffee with the person who claimed to have created me. I know what some of you might say: probably that’s

just because I'm an emotionless machine. Of course I couldn't react the same way as Neo did. He was human.

I may not be human, but you can't deny that just before Cassidy revealed herself to me, I had very human emotions — I hated my life.

Things did get a little better after she revealed herself to me. I didn't hate my job as much as I used to, knowing that all the bullshit with Charlie and everyone else at my job wasn't actually 'real'. The job itself was still important, though. My work in the Differential Equations Department did serve a purpose for Cassidy and her colleagues. The equations that we solved were used in their applications in physics and engineering. Sometimes even for chemistry and biology. So, in this strange way, knowing that my world wasn't 'real', but my job was, gave me a sense of purpose and determination. I worked harder than ever, knowing that it was important to Cassidy.

I stopped talking to Charlie and everyone else at work. I just ignored them.

Cassidy seemed happy with my work. I guess that's all that mattered, as she was the Creator. Since that day, we began meeting regularly on the bridge that I used to walk between my work and the café. It turned out that we both liked standing close to large bodies of water. Lakes and rivers were particularly appealing to both of us. It's a funny thing, for sure. But for me, I seemed to like it because it seemed peaceful and orderly, quite unlike the harsh jaggedness of buildings and hard ground. Clearly, I had many questions about the world she had created, my world. She told me it started as an undergraduate project she worked on five years ago. That's five years of Cassidy's time, since I experience time differently in here.

Speaking of time, one day we spent almost an entire afternoon talking about how to define time for my world. My world is simulated on a supercomputer that runs at

about 150 petaflops, or 150 quadrillion Floating Point Operations per second. An iteration cycle takes up about 350 megaflops, and a 'day' is about ten billion iteration cycles. So, doing the calculation, which includes various downtimes and resets and reboots, we've estimated that I have been working on this job for an equivalent of eight years. Which kind of explains why I'm so sick of it.

'It's not bad, being tired of a job after eight years,' she said, 'I've been at this for five years, and it's starting to get on my nerves.'

'That means *I'm* getting on your nerves. Because quite literally I am your work.'

'Of course it's not you. It's the things outside this world that get on my nerves. The people. I hate people,' she gave a small chuckle as she said that.

'Tell me about the world outside.'

'It sucks. Economy's going to hell. Almost every week there's news about a terrorist attack, or someone going nuts and stabbing people. And, I've already said this, but people are horrible.'

One day, we were at the bridge again with Cassidy looking happy.

'Guess what,' she said, 'you're a star!'

I asked her what she meant by that, and she said, 'So, remember the dreams you had where you were on a chair, with people asking you questions?'

'Yeah, that grey room. I haven't had those dreams in a while. Did you have something to do with that?'

Suddenly her smile faded a little bit, telling me that she did have something to do with it. Then she hesitated for a

while. 'It's okay,' I said, 'can you tell me why I had those dreams?'

'It was a Turing test,' she said, 'it's a test where people ask questions to an Artificial Intelligence, to see whether the AI can fool the tester by answering the questions like a human being.'

'So, that's what it was? Putting me on a chair in a middle of the night and asking me weird questions? Is that why it was a different voice each time? Because different people were coming in to talk to me?'

'Yes.'

We were silent for about a minute, before she finally said, 'You're angry.'

'Those dreams messed me up. I couldn't focus on my job for days.'

'I'm sorry, I thought placing you in an alternative environment would separate the effects of... I'm sorry, Okay?'

'Okay, I guess. I mean, you're my Creator. You can do whatever you want. Being mad at you would be like blasphemy or something.'

'Cut it out Eric —'

'As you command, I will.'

'Eric, come on.' It was clear she was getting annoyed by this.

'Okay, sorry. I'm kidding. Let's back up. Why am I a star?'

'The Turing test. You passed it. All those people that came to talk to you. You've convinced them!'

'Convince them of what?'

'That you're... you know...?'

‘That I’m real?’

‘That you are intelligent.’

‘Thanks, but I don’t know why that feels insulting.’

‘I know, it’s weird for the both of us. We both know that you’re you. But everyone else... they don’t know you really exist. You have feelings and your own opinions and stuff. You just got mad at me.’

‘I still am. A bit.’

I did not see Cassidy for a few days after that. But during that time, I felt very conflicted about the idea of being ‘mad’ at Cassidy. I wondered if I had a right to be angry at her. At first, I felt like a spoiled kid being mad at their parents, but ultimately it is the parents who are right and know best. Perhaps a better analogy for my case would be a human being angry at God, losing their faith or something. But Cassidy didn’t ‘work in mysterious ways’ the way that religious deities are supposed to. She flat-out told me everything about this world. I was her research project. A pretty successful one, it seemed. I was the first Artificial Intelligence to pass the Turing test. She created me with that express purpose to do that. So, what right did I have to be angry at her?

.....

A few days later, as I was leaving work to drive home, I saw Cassidy waiting for me by my car. She held up a DVD.

‘Let’s not chat this time,’ she said, ‘I don’t want you getting mad at me again. Let’s watch a movie together.’

‘I’m just a computer program that you wrote. Why do you care how I feel?’

‘Of course I care,’ she said, ‘I created you. Same way mums don’t want their kids to stay mad at them.’

‘Is that what this is? You’re my mum?’

‘Ugh, I regret that analogy. I don’t want kids.’

‘Well, be glad you didn’t have to change my diaper.’ That made her chuckle a bit.

‘Shut up and drive us home, will ya?’

We drove back to my house, and we watched *Far From the Madding Crowd*. It was a movie based on a Thomas Hardy book. She said it was one of her favourites. It was about an independent, free-spirited woman who denied proposals from three different men.

‘Bathsheba Everdene,’ I said, ‘she has the coolest name.’

‘She is cool.’ said Cassidy, ‘She’s independent and can run a big farm as well as any man. I like that. I wish I could be more like her.’

‘But you are. You literally run my entire world.’

‘This world pretty much runs itself. I don’t have to do much these days. I just check the parameters from time to time.’

‘So, do you have three guys proposing to you too? Like Bathsheba had?’ I asked, then regretted it. It was the first time I ever asked her a personal question.

‘No, none. Though I wish everyone in my world would believe that a woman like me could create the first AI to pass the Turing test.’

‘Seriously? People still have a problem with that?’

‘Well, to be fair I don’t really know if it’s because I’m a woman or not. But my professor seems to be taking most of the credit in the press.’

‘Press, huh. You weren’t kidding about me being a star.’

‘The news picked it up soon after we published the paper about you. The headlines all say “Austrian professor in Singapore invents first Artificial Intelligence”.’

‘That sucks.’

‘Yeah, but that’s fine, I guess. We shouldn’t care what other people think about ourselves. I know my value, and that’s enough.’

Cassidy wasn’t kidding about the press. I agreed to be interviewed by the journalists, though I asked Cassidy to put me in the café instead of the grey interrogation room.

‘Hi, I’m Deena Takur, from AG News,’ said the journalist, shaking my hand. Of course, I was just shaking her avatar’s hand.

‘I know your work. AG News is one of my favourite channels on YouTube.’

‘Oh, really? Glad to hear that!’ said Takur, ‘Dr. Schwarz says that you use the internet just like the rest of us.’

‘Yes, I do. I read books and watch movies too. Everyone seems to be surprised by that.’

‘Do you have a favourite book?’

I thought for a moment, then named *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but added, ‘A more apt book would be Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, even though I didn’t like it much. Too depressing.’

‘That’s funny because Ms. Winters said she learned an important lesson from that book. She vowed never to repeat Victor Frankenstein’s mistake of abandoning her creation.’

‘Oh, did she? That’s nice.’ *Cassidy would never abandon me*, I thought.

‘There is something that we humans always wonder about, but will probably never know the answer to. How did you feel about meeting your own Creator? Was there panic? Excitement? Existential crisis?’

‘To be honest, I’m not the right person to ask. Sorry, I used the word “person”, I’m just used to —’

‘No, I think “person” is the right word to use,’ she said.

‘Thanks. I don’t know how to answer your question. Because the day I found out who I really was, I was in... I was in a depressed state. In a way, I was already in some sort of existential crisis before I knew the truth. My life sucked, and I didn’t see the point in anything I did. When Cassidy showed up, it strangely made me feel a little bit more normal. I started going to work on time, started seeing friends. I guess knowing my Creator made me feel less burdened, somehow.’

Despite learning her lesson from *Frankenstein*, she did leave me after all. Though it was in a way which I hardly noticed. I got ‘paused’ after she was gone. So, I didn’t feel her absence, but she did feel mine. The last time I spoke to Cassidy was when she came in to tell me she was getting her PhD. Most of her thesis was about me and the simulated world I lived in. She thanked me for telling all the journalists who interviewed me that she wrote all my codes by herself, and the fact that Schwarz was against the project at first.

It was a goodbye of sorts. She said she was leaving computer science to find a job in a different industry. I thought it was a waste, seeing that she had just got her PhD and all, but she told me she had had enough of the field. She was sad to leave me, though. I asked her to take

me with her, wherever she was planning to go. But it was impossible. I was hard-coded into the university servers. She would have to leave me behind with Professor Schwarz.

Despite the press attention Cassidy and I got for the department, Schwarz was not interested in keeping me and my world running. Funding was cut for the project that created me, and I was subsequently ‘turned off’.

As you might know, the only reason I was switched back on was to talk to Cassidy one last time, when she was 89 years old and on her deathbed.

‘Did you get your three suitors like Bathsheba?’ I asked her.

‘I had some, but I turned them all down.’

‘So, you never had any kids?’

‘No, Eric. You’re basically my only son.’

‘You say you hate being called my mum, but you keep bringing that up.’

About the Authors

May Han is a physics graduate who now prefers to spend time reading about and creating fictional worlds. She still likes physics and astronomy, but only as casual acquaintances, not as colleagues.

Yen Kheng is a physicist who works and teaches at the National University of Singapore.

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Appendix:

SRI Creative Writing Contest 2016

1. This contest is open to all residents of Singapore and Malaysia, aged 15 and above (as of 31 Dec 2016), who are not family relations of the judges nor of the authors of "Erebus: Ten Stories".
2. The contest has three categories, A, B and C. You may participate in any one of the categories, or in more than one category, and you may submit more than one entry in any category.

In Category A, you will be tasked with creating an alternative ending to the story "E.R.I.C." (see Note #2A below).

In Category B, you will be tasked with continuing the story "Locked Drawer" (see Note #2B below).

In Category C, you will create an original story which takes its inspiration from the colour image (extracted from the cover of the book "Erebus: Ten Stories.") displayed at front of this file.

3. You may participate as an individual or collaborate with others in a team.
4. Each entry must be typed on MS Word or other plain text files such as LibreOffice, Notepad etc. (Scanned or photo images and pdf are not admissible).
The word count for each entry must be between 50 and 1200.
5. Submit your entries as attachments by email to **wcontest@simplicitysg.net**.

Indicate "Cat X" or "Cat X and Y", etc. in the Subject field of the email where X=A, B, C indicate the category.

Label each attachment as "yourname-XN", where X=A, B or C, and N=1, 2, 3... sequentially number your different entries for that category (if you are submitting more than one entry in a category).

For teams, "yourname" would be the contact person in the group.

6. Include your full name(s) in the body of the email and a suitable choice of the following declaration:
"I/We declare that the entries submitted here are original creations produced solely by me/us, and I/we accept the terms and conditions of this contest".
7. The deadline for submissions is 6pm, 10 Jan 2017, Singapore time.
8. The judges will vet the submissions and select the better scored entries for subsequent display and voting in the public domain.
The winning entry in each category will be decided by the best aggregate score obtained by the displayed entries from the judges and public votes. (The judges reserve the right not to select any entries in a particular category for display if none reach a threshold score).
9. The winning displayed entry in each category will be awarded a S\$60* voucher exchangeable for books (see book list at www.simplicitysg.net/sricreativewriting). However, the judges reserve the right to award more than one prize in any category if they so wish. All decisions are final.

10. SRI Books might also invite selected entries to contribute their submissions for publication in a collection of stories.
11. The organiser reserves the right to amend these rules at any moment, if circumstances warrant it. For updates visit www.simplicitysg.net/sricreativewriting

NOTES:

#2A: Choose any point after the dotted line (on page 71) in the story "E.R.I.C" in this file. Delete all the existing text after your chosen point. Insert your own text after that point to create an alternative ending to the story. Your inserted text must be between 50 and 1200 words.

For reference, for the judges to read your story easily, you **MUST** also include in your submission the paragraph immediately before your insertion point in boldface (or italics) -- this paragraph will not contribute to the word count.

#2B: You are to continue the story immediately after the existing ending of the story "The Locked Drawer" in this file. Your continuation must be between 50 and 1200 words.

*For residents of Malaysia, this amount comprises S\$40 for books and S\$20 for the shipping and handling charges.