

The background of the cover is a dark green, textured surface. Overlaid on this is a stylized illustration of a person's face. The person's hands are raised to their eyes, with fingers spread, completely covering them. The person's mouth is open in a wide, toothy grin, showing their teeth. The illustration uses a limited color palette, primarily shades of brown, tan, and white, with some green highlights. The style is reminiscent of a woodcut or a high-contrast digital illustration. The overall mood is one of mystery and suspense, fitting for a horror-themed book.

Who's There?

A Collection of Stories

DIMAS RIO

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WHO'S THERE?

*Who's there, crouching like the moon behind the
gray clouds?*

*Who's there, writhing about like a pouncing
thunderbolt?*

Crawl out of the darkness, my child!

Called the Jungle, to the restless Hunchback.

Don't you know? Darkness is my blood.

Howled the cursed Hunchback.

The Jungle cracked a smile, red and ripe.

Then you are my beloved.

The cold and salty ocean breeze caressed the face of the wavy-haired man sitting with his arms folded on the table. His gaze ran around the evening sky that veiled the universe. Neither the fizz of the waves crashing on the beach nor the drizzle of the rain filling the air could make him feel one with nature. He still felt like an outsider looking in. Forever a tourist on earth. A cactus in the snow. A bat in the daytime. An anomaly.

“Adam?”

The voice interrupting his reverie belonged to Angga, a man of his peers sitting right across him. Adam shifted his gaze toward Angga, the stocky, dark-skinned 30-year-old sitting next to Farah, an exotic-looking woman whose cascade of jet-black hair fell over her brows.

“Where’s Gita?” he heard Angga asking.

Waving his cell phone, Adam let his friend know that he had sent Gita a text. “She’ll be here soon.” Adam turned back his gaze to the shore, a mere eight meters from the beach bar where he currently sat. A few foreign tourists were seen making their way around the pools of rainwater forming in the holes on the street. Some

seemed to have been ahead of the game with their raincoats and umbrellas to anticipate the November weather of the 15-km² island that lay at the center of the archipelago. The others didn't even bother to cover themselves from the rain shower. Many of the women looked comfortable jogging and cycling in their everyday clothes, unprotected.

He heard Angga teasing him that it could be his last week to freely lay his eyes on the voluptuous bodies roaming the street in front of him. His friend's remark made his stomach churn. In the same manner, he replied that it was exactly why he asked his fiancée to take her time coming after them to the bar.

"So, are you really ready or not?" he heard Angga asking him again after their laughter subsided.

"Well, I have to be," said Adam before he drained his glass of light-green cocktail. He liked it when the ice cubes clinked and slid together toward his lips, surrendering to the control of his hand. The burning sensation from the vodka drink managed to dissolve the lump that had been blocking his throat.

“Why did you say it as if you don’t have a choice?” asked Angga. “You know what, Babe? I don’t think this boy is ready,” he added to his wife, Farah, with a conspiratorial sidelong glance. The wife seemed to agree with her husband’s hypothesis. Adam knew his best buddy was just teasing him as usual. He presumed that whatever he said would be quickly countered with a witty remark from his friend, which would further drive him into a corner. He believed the police characters in television series also used this trick to make their suspects slip up, become defensive, and finally look as guilty as criminals. He hated such characters. But of course he didn’t reveal this sentiment to his friend.

“Well, it’s no different than when *you* were getting married,” Adam retorted. He saw his friend’s face twitched in panic. On impulse, Angga tried to hide his horror by laughing. His voice sounded incredibly shrill when he replied, “*I* was the one who wanted to rush her into marriage! *She* may have been the one who felt forced to marry me!”

Adam laughed along with his friend, more because he was relieved that he’d been able to stop his friend’s

fast train of jokes before it crashed through the hidden cavities of his soul, where creatures like anxiety, shame, and fear resided. These creatures were undetectable by the senses, but they continued to squirm. Pester. Crave, like a snake. Adam had always been reluctant to acknowledge their existence to anyone. Not even to his best friend, and especially not to his fiancée. To him, these bugs were like terribly embarrassing family members who deserved to be locked up behind walls, far away from the light of day, to be left alone until they died and rotted. But they never did. Hiding them seemed to have made them flourish. He could feel them starting to crawl out from his pores, from his eyeballs, from the mucous membrane of his throat and spill out of his lips. He feared his fear so much, but didn't want to kill it instantly. He felt the fear was the one who had been shaping him, making him the way he was. He owed his life to his fear. He wanted to keep feeding them, and yet prayed for those creatures to choke on their own meal and die.

Adam ordered a bottle of tequila from the bar. He saw surprise in his friends' faces when the gleaming

bottle of the golden liquor, along with three shot glasses and a plateful of lime slices, landed on the wooden table by their elbows. Raising her eyebrows, Farah said, “Seriously?”

Adam dismissed her with a wave of his hand. He asked the two to consider tonight as the substitute for his bachelor party. The only difference was that he would pay for everything, on the condition that they finished any drink he ordered from the bar.

“So, apparently last night wasn’t enough, huh?” asked Farah in a complete disbelief. Adam knew exactly what the woman was implying, though he couldn’t recall most of what had happened the night before. And when she said ‘night’, she was referring to the hours between 2 and 7 a.m. this morning. Or what Adam *believed* was 7 a.m. for the sun was glaring right on his eyes and roasting his entire body.

‡

He vaguely remembered how his body felt like it was shrouded in suffocating fumes. He was sweltering in his own skin.

I wish I could skin myself. Adam groaned to himself that morning, tottering to the side of the street, aiming for the shade next to a pile of garbage. Like a vampire desperately seeking refuge from the sun's deadly lick.

He could feel the two hands on his shoulders, catching him from an ungainly nose dive. He heard Angga saying "*Let's go home, let's go home*" repeatedly like a mantra, while he was helping him maneuver down the street, avoiding several menacing-looking men in front of a pub where the four city boys and girls spent their time the night before. Angga's unsettled voice sounded ludicrous to his ears. Maybe because he never saw his friend that nervous in all the years he'd known him. Through the hundreds of fluttering wings playing tricks on his eyes, he managed to catch a glimpse of Farah and Gita hurriedly walking past him. Wrapped in an ethnic printed cloth, each of his fiancée's strides looked determined and intense, as if wanting to leave her alcohol-reeking husband-to-be as quickly as possible. Farah put her arm around her friend and gave her a gentle squeeze to send her an unspoken 'everything will

be alright' message. A phrase that, to Adam, made everyone who said it end up becoming liars.

‡

Adam looked down at the knuckles of his hands, which were red and swollen. The sting he felt served as a reminder of what he did a few hours ago. Fragments of what had happened that night and early in the morning flashed inside his head like dim images projected to a dark wall.

He remembered that bit in the morning, when he rubbed his face with all his might in front of the mirror above the sink to get rid of the annoying twitches that were suddenly invading his facial muscles. He let the water rush from the open tap, hoping that the sound of it going down the drain could help slow down the pounding of his heart, which—based on the sluggish feeling he was suffering from—seemed to have betrayed his body and transformed into a blood-sucking organ. He also wished that the hard rub could somehow scrape off the face of the stranger looking back at him from the

mirror a few minutes ago. The face was as white as a limestone, with red vines of veins creeping its eyes, making them look infected. When he lowered his hands, the face in the mirror was still there. That pair of red eyes were still watching him. He knew that no matter how hard he rubbed, the face wouldn't go anywhere because it had now become his.

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