

Germaphobia Singapura

by

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Glossary

Ang Moh – a racial epithet that refers to Caucasians in Singapore.

Esplanade – Singapore's premier performing arts venue.

handphone – term for mobile phone in Singapore

kiasu – a term referring to Singaporean's 'afraid of losing out' mentality.

MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) – Singapore's subway system.

Singlish – the English language as it is spoken in Singapore.

ulu – a Malay term used to denote the remoteness of a place.

Roy awoke to the buzz of his handphone tucked under his pillow, the alarm vibrating to half past seven in the morning. There was a dry taste in his mouth from the constant air-conditioning meant to keep the tropical Singapore heat out of his tiny rented room.

Ms. Cheung had been up early that morning crushing chili and spices in her little stone pot, the constant pounding of stone upon stone making those precious last bits of sleep somewhat chaotic.

Roy rolled out of bed and put on a pair of shorts, grabbing his shaving kit before sneaking out of his room, carefully shutting the door.

The bathroom was in the rear of the kitchen, so whenever he needed to visit the lavatory he had to face the other tenants, including Ms. Cheung, occupying the general living area.

He crept through the living room past Jilu, who was sitting on the canary yellow two-seater sofa smoking a spiff of tobacco and watching a Taiwanese variety show on the tube. Roy glanced into the open door to his right and caught a glimpse of Sylvia Tan's slender thigh as she sat on her bed chatting to distant friends in Guangzhou from her laptop station in that tiny Singapore flat.

As Roy crept along the white tile floor, he tried to minimize his movements and keep to a straight line. As the only 'Ang Moh' living there, he felt as if the eyes of the other tenants were constantly on him, curious as to what he would do next. So he played the straight man, trying to keep himself as inconspicuous as possible, erasing his tracks as he crept through the dense urban wilderness.

He managed to sidle past Ms. Cheung without the irritating ritual of the morning greeting that so grated on his nerves before his first cup of coffee and quietly shut the bathroom door.

The bathroom was in the usual sparse Singapore style with a lavender sink jutting out of the wall, a mirror, a matching toilet and shower head poking out from above, all crammed into a closet-sized space. Roy stood on his tip-toes trying to limit his exposure to the slime of soap, used shower water and whatever missed the toilet that was coating the floor. The morning ritual used to be a joy back home. But here, it was near torture as he attempted to clean himself in the filth. He quickly shampooed his hair, rinsing with the shower head above the encrusted toilet and

put on a slap-dash shave, forgetting to brush his teeth in his haste as he felt the contaminants surrounding him, penetrating into his tip-toes.

Roy had always had a bit of trouble shaking hands, touching doorknobs and overusing cans of bug spray. And here in Singapore with so many people living so close together, his proclivity to give in to his phobic tendencies had, shall we say, increased.

After toweling off and pulling on his shorts, he opened the bathroom door and jerked back. Ms. Cheung was standing there, not a hair's breadth away with a big toothless grin on her craggily face.

“Good Morning, Roy!” She greeted him cheerily in her amusing accent.

He could smell her breath.

Roy didn't mind Ms. Cheung, but he was a bit put-off when he had to make conversation with her. He taught English all day, every day, except for Sundays and when he was off work he tried to avoid tutoring freeloaders as much as possible.

“Morning, Auntie.” Roy mumbled.

He squeezed passed her and hurried to his room, dressed in his uniform of short-sleeve business shirt and knit tie and, glancing one more time at Sylvia's perfectly smooth legs, left the flat towards the MRT station. Luckily, the station was only about ten meters away. It was the one selling point Roy had seized on when he agreed to the two-year sublease.

It was just past eight. He was in a good mood and had a few minutes to spare that morning, so the sight of the multitude rushing and cramming onto the escalators in order to make it to their desks before their bosses arrived was only mildly irritating. Sweat was beading on his forehead and dripping down his back as the thick humidity assaulted his freshly-washed body. And there was no respite from the heat as he sunk down into the depths of the station, careful to avoid touching the germ-ridden handrail. He plugged in his earphones and turned up his player. Life was so much easier here on this cramped island if you could drown out the rat-a-tat-tat of Singlish and avoid all unnecessary eye contact.

Roy topped up his MRT card and made his way through the turnstile of the litter-free station and then to the platform. He stood on the yellow arrows that showed where the door would open when the train stopped, facing the glass door and looking at his translucent reflection.

Do you know that uncomfortable feeling when someone is staring at you? At that moment, Roy felt someone furiously staring at him. Normally, the feeling doesn't register until you've

glanced around and locked eyes with the space invader. He quickly looked to his left at the leathery old man in his silk shirt waiting at another yellow arrow a few meters distant, convinced he was the culprit. But the old man wasn't staring at him, he was just picking his nose, and fiercely picking his nose at that, digging and digging away with his index finger buried to the first knuckle.

Roy retched at the sight and quickly looked forward again, the imprint of the probing finger at the forefront of his mind.

He could feel the rush of stale underground air through the crack between the doors as the train arrived.

By now Singaporeans were crowding around and already a few had squeezed into the few centimeters between Roy and the door, pushing towards the closed entrances to the approaching train. The doors opened and before anyone could step off, the crowd rushed inside, Roy carried by the momentum. It was the same log-jam every morning, the pushing, the refusal to give way, pure kiasu. Eventually, the chaos subsided, all had disembarked and boarded and the train sped off.

Roy lived at the end of the purple MRT line far from the city center, so he had a good twenty-five minutes to relax and listen to the music he imported illegally through Sylvia's computer when she was being nice to him. He grimaced at the unnecessary touching; one guy ruffled a Chinese newspaper against his back, an older Malay woman elbowed his ribs as she wrote a text message on her phone, an Indian girl poked her shopping bag against his shin.

Roy shut his eyes for a few moments.

He had that feeling of someone intensely staring at him.

He cracked open his right eye and saw a little girl with red ribbons in her hair plunging her pinky into her nostril and then her mouth, back and forth, back and forth, again and again.

He clamped his eyes shut for the rest of the trip, carefully balancing like a surfer to avoid touching any handhold or railing.

The train reached his stop and he quickly walked to the small private school where he spent the majority of his time.

Roy taught three English classes for a total of a nine-hour teaching day. The morning commute was soon forgotten in the repetition of the past perfect simple and formation of conditional sentences.

That evening, on his way back to his ulu flat Roy was too exhausted to pay attention to that nagging feeling, which was trying to draw his attention to a middle-aged civil servant wiping his nasal secretions on an empty seat beside him.

Roy arrived home at about half past eight and stepped into the living area with a polystyrene container of chicken rice to be smuggled into his bedroom for dinner. He found to his frustration that Ms. Chueng and the neighborhood aunties were beginning a mahjong session that was sure to last until the early hours of the morning. She had a terrible habit of gambling away the incoming rent money to those avaricious housewives who were much better players than her.

So it will be a night full of Hokkien curse words and intermittent tile shuffling, Roy thought with an exasperating sigh. He reminisced for a brief moment on his tranquil days before his life here, of university classes and waiting tables in a familiar and comfortable environment. He still had eighteen months of a two-year teaching contract left before he could return home with enough cash to again support himself on part-time work while attending graduate school.

Roy unlocked his bedroom door, stepped inside and secured the lock. His room was no cleaner than the rest of the flat, but for Roy it was spotless because it was his filth; his pile dirty clothes on the floor, his microscopic flecks of skin floating in the air, his bottles of urine stashed under the bed.

He ate his chicken rice with disposable chopsticks and afterwards tied the container up in a plastic bag with a double knot to keep out the cockroaches. He knew they were waiting, patiently lurking in the dark recesses of his room for the cover of night.

As usual, Roy quickly fell asleep and slept fitfully until the buzz of his handphone awoke him to yet another long teaching day. After the bathroom ritual, Roy left the flat for his morning commute, glancing briefly at Sylvia's firm buttocks as she bent over to make her bed.

He was on the train, listening to music and traveling towards the city center when his attention was drawn to a pretty Chinese woman dressed in a black business suit standing beside him. She had a long ponytail with an ivory clip holding her silken hair away from her porcelain smooth skin. Roy watched her intently, aware that she probably sensed his bold stare. The train stopped and she disembarked leaving a space that was soon filled by an overweight teenager in blue jeans and red flip-flops who immediately began to scratch the back of both his nasal cavities with an index finger and forefinger, a double-barreled search for mucal gold.

Roy tried to move away but the train was too full, packed with silent and obedient employees on their way to their white collar cubicles.

He gagged as the teenager continued mining both cavities, making small hurried noises of urgency as he dug. No one in the train took notice of the spectacle, as performing bodily hygiene tasks, usually reserved for the privacy of one's bathroom, such as nose picking or nail clipping or zit squeezing seemed to be as common on the public transport system as instant messaging and Sudoku. And while this offensive social behavior was nothing new to Roy as he had been living in Singapore for over six months, this little scene, this tiny incident was the last straw ... even if he didn't know it yet.

At his stop, Roy jumped out the door of the train and bounded up the escalator, pushing aside inconsiderate commuters blocking the right side of the moving stairs and hence impeding his ascent.

The double digits of the teen continued to dig holes into his deepest thoughts.

Roy's teaching that day was sporadic and fraught with erroneous grammar advice. He couldn't seem to shake the image of the index and forefinger plugged into that pimply nose. Roy knew that he couldn't mention the incident to his colleagues as they knew of his condition and rolled their eyes whenever he pulled out his sanitizing lotion from his desk and began to furiously rub the germ-killer into his hands.

The day wound down and eventually turned into evening as Roy ended his last class with a speaking exercise involving plastic dominoes and the passive tense. By the time class was finished, he felt that he had pulled himself together and was back in top form teaching the class like the excellent teacher he believed he was. But apparently one of the overachieving rich little spoiled nerds he was teaching had a different impression. As he was about to leave the teacher's room, Roy's boss, the Academic Coordinator asked him to come for a private meeting in his office. According to his boss, Roy had made one too many mistakes and the informing student had threatened to withdraw from the school and take his parent's money to enroll elsewhere, as he expected teaching perfection in return for the private school's outrageous fees. Roy was dressed down and warned to pull it together. His boss even handed him an English grammar book to brush up on that night, a final humiliation to a long and tiring teaching day.

Roy skulked down to the MRT station, the morning's double picker and the grammar book weighing heavily on his mind. He boarded the packed train and noticed that the pretty Chinese

woman he had seen that morning was again standing beside him. He felt drawn to her and wished he had something to say, but he was too timid and unsure of himself to be so forward. He watched her out of the corner of his eye while the train stopped at each station towards the end of the purple line. She was holding one of the dangling handles above, her other hand on a strap of her oversized designer handbag. Roy saw her hand hesitantly let go of the bag's strap and slowly rise up towards her face, her nose. Flashbacks of the double picker consumed Roy's thoughts as he watched her index finger begin to stretch towards her delicate nostril.

He couldn't take it.

Roy reached out and grabbed hold of the young woman's wrist.

Perhaps it was the crazed look in his eye or that he refused to let go after she tried to pull away again and again, but the girl began to scream, "See Ang Moh molest me! See Ang Moh molest me!" at the top of her lungs.

All of the train's passengers near Roy and the girl created a wide berth around them, none of them aggressive enough to help the girl but all watching with the attention of spectators at an Esplanade show. A Malay man whispered for help into the train's emergency intercom system.

Finally, Roy let go and the girl was still screaming, "See Ang Moh molest me!" pushed her way through the crowd away from Roy, who was looking at his offending hand and wishing for his bottle of sanitizer.

The train arrived at the next stop.

Four armed police boarded with tasers in hand and lead him out of the station and into an armored van. Police are rarely seen in Singapore, but when they are called the response is swift and the citizens fearful.

At the police station, Roy's prints and photo were taken, his employment pass copied and his backpack searched.

The police confiscated the English grammar book as evidence.

Justice is swift in Singapore.

He was sent before the magistrate early the next morning. Since he refused to pay the outrageous fees for a useless criminal attorney, he stood before the judge alone. The judge was a middle-aged woman in a white wig reminiscent of an English court. He could tell by the look in her eye that she was sharp and wise, which was true, she had a keen eye for justice and international affairs. Knowing that she needed to appease a public enticed by the sensational

incident of an Ang Moh molester, she had to convict him and give him a stiff sentence. But since all the perpetrator had done was grab the female victim's wrist, she knew the international press would condemn a heavy sentence for such a minor incident. Roy was convicted of insulting the modesty of a woman and sentenced to seven months in jail. However, in lieu of the sentence, the judge ordered that Roy be put on a plane that night and sent back to his own country, banished from Singapore forever.

Surprisingly, Roy felt relieved as he flew away from his isolated Singapore life and his now broken two-year teaching contract. He didn't have enough money to start graduate school, but at least he didn't have to read that damned English grammar book again or witness the constant public grooming, which was adversely affecting his mental health.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

The plane was three-quarters of the way to Japan and soon he would be over the Pacific on his way back to the states.

Roy was drifting off to sleep when he felt that familiar sensation again, you know the one, that uncomfortable feeling when someone is intensely staring at you...

The End.

Works by B.M. Hodges

Horror

Zombie Fever 1: Origins

Tomas decides to spend the summer with his father, who works as a security guard for Vitura Pharmaceuticals. Soon after his arrival, his father disappears without a trace. Tomas searches for his father, only to discover Vitura is more than it seems to be.

Zombie Fever 2: Outbreak

A young woman is cast in a reality TV show. Zombies are running rampant. The contestants race cars deep in the Zombie Quarantine Zone. Who will become infected with zombie fever? Who gets eaten by the zombie horde? And most importantly, who wins the million dollar prize?

Zombie Fever 3: Evolution

In less than twenty-four hours, the Zombie Fever virus has mutated and is out of control. Vitura has sent Jayden to hunt down Tomas and Abigail and bring them back, dead or alive. Tomas must find Abigail and get to her to safety. Only they can stop the virus from becoming a global killer.

Science Fiction

The Martian Escape Plan

After leading a failed effort to colonize the Planet Earth, Darius Janner thinks he's finally found a way home.

Dystopian Rodent Literature

Buddy the Rat

An innocent rodent subjected to fickle fate.
Sent to a house filled with the worst of humanity.
Escaping and finding solace in a forbidden love.
Yet peace will not be had. Onward he travels...

Short Stories

Germaphobia Singapura (An Annoying Short Story)

Roy had always dreamed of living abroad in the tropics, somewhere remote and exotic. So accepting the offer to teach in Singapore was a no-brainer. But poor Roy failed to anticipate how living in one of the world's most densely populated cities would arouse his intuitive preoccupation with cleanliness.

Naively Irrelevant (A Bitterly Short Story)

An ode to the anguish and bitterness of infidelity.

About the Author



B.M. Hodges studied in the United States and Singapore where he was awarded a Master's Degree in Literary Studies. He began his writing career in 2008 with the dystopian rodent literary novel *Buddy the Rat*. In 2012, he published *Zombie Fever 1: Origins* and *Zombie Fever 2:*

Outbreak and, most recently, *Zombie Fever 3: Evolution*. He is currently living in South East Asia and working on the fourth installment of the *Zombie Fever* series that will be released in 2013.