



“Sudden and bracing and true.”



CHARLES YU, acclaimed author of *Sorry Please Thank You*



THIS IS



WHERE



I WON'T



BE ALONE



STORIES



INEZ TAN



“There is much to admire about this collection: precision, humour, audacity. But what gives these stories depth is that, beneath the experimentation with form and tone is an emotional honesty that manifests in the telling details, in the occasional sentence that knocks you back, and in many of the stories’ endings, which are often sudden and bracing and true. This is the first I’ve read of Tan’s work, but it won’t be the last.”

CHARLES YU, acclaimed author of
Sorry Please Thank You

“What is it like to be caught between several cultures? Inez Tan’s spare, observant stories brilliantly capture the complexities of navigating multiple generations and cultures while searching for love, community, and one’s own identity. These are stories to cherish.”

ANDREA BARRETT, National Book
Award-winning author of *Ship Fever*

“*This Is Where I Won’t Be Alone* is hilarious and heartbreaking on the nature of home, and on the fearsome and magnificent force of family, and especially about Singapore—a place as well as a state of mind—rendered with devastating deadpan wit, enormous compassion and furious love. This is a hugely impressive collection.”

JIM SHEPARD, Story Prize-winning author of
Like You’d Understand, Anyway

“A beautifully well-written collection of poignant short stories about home and belonging. Inez Tan’s heartwarming authenticity will touch the heart of every Singaporean reader, no matter which corner of the world he or she currently resides in.”

NING CAI, bestselling author of *Misdirection*

“*This is Where I Won’t Be Alone* marks the debut of a thrillingly inventive talent. Inez Tan’s stories of Singapore and Singaporeans—by turns knowingly affectionate and deeply affecting—positively shimmer with wit and insight.”

PETER HO DAVIES, Booker-longlisted
author of *The Welsh Girl*

THIS IS
WHERE I
WON'T BE
ALONE

STORIES

INEZ TAN



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To my parents

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Edison and Curie

CURIE CHAN WAS always better known as the twin sister of Edison Chan, the boy who had shown great promise at an early age. At 12 years old, Edison had been the first student to top his cohort with a perfect score of 300 points in the Primary School Leaving Examination. In secondary school, he had garnered 12 A1s on his O-Levels, won an ASEAN essay competition, delivered a speech on racial harmony before the president and completed a pioneer internship in biomedical research at A*STAR, the Agency for Science, Technology and Research. Shortly after that, both twins matriculated at Stamford Junior College, widely acknowledged to be the best JC in the nation. Stamford students were a specialised elite, trained in the most hostile of environments, striving for excellence in all aspects of life. Hence, several of them knew what to do at 9.30am on the Monday in November that Edison stood up during a lecture and opened both his wrists with a penknife.

In the middle of an auditorium packed with five hundred people taking frantic notes on kinematics and projectile motion, he rose to his feet, held his right arm high (palm forward, as though eager to ask a question), and then reached up with his left hand and whipped the blade across his wrist. He repeated the gesture with his other hand. It took a moment for the silence to set in, and almost no time for it to be broken: the tutor started screaming like a stuck pig. The head prefect, who was on the judo team, tackled Edison to the ground. A cluster of girls from St John's First-Aid Brigade made a quick, assured circle around him and began tending serenely to his wounds. White-faced, Edison made no effort to resist as they bound his wrists with the judo prefect's navy blazer and elevated them over his head. No one paid any attention to Curie, who was attempting to fight her way through the crowd without much success, yelling, "You were supposed to help me!"



But back in January, when Edison and Curie arrived at a crisp 7.40am for their first day at Stamford, all that was yet to come. Tall and skeletal, Edison took long strides and swung his arms stiffly by his sides. Curie had to walk quickly to keep pace with him, hugging several books bound with a red Velcro strap. As they made their way into the building, Curie heard people whisper, "Edison Chan." A teacher stopped them, forcibly shook Edison's hand, pounded him jovially on the back and exclaimed they were honoured to have him here. Edison's response

to this was to look queasy and concerned. "How do they know who I am?" he muttered to Curie, when the teacher was out of earshot.

"They must have seen your photo in the news," said Curie. She herself had enjoyed a brief taste of such fame. Once, for completing an outstanding community service project in secondary school, her name had been printed in a special column in *The Straits Times* where it was largely ignored. Still, she believed she was an excellent student in her own right. She had always loved school, for it was all she had, and she was determined to be one of the best students Stamford had ever seen. "Oh, new school," she said happily, as she and Edison climbed the stairs to their fourth-storey classroom. "New teachers. New friends."

"New textbooks," said Edison. "New science, new maths."

"New uniforms!" said Curie. Stamford's students wore all white—trousers and collared shirts for the boys, pinafores for the girls. Alumni sometimes joked that you went to Stamford to learn how to eat and menstruate in white clothing.

Edison and Curie turned into their classroom and a hush fell. One student knocked over his chair standing up to get a better look at Edison, who hunched his shoulders as though attempting to hide his head between them. Curie knew her brother was mortified; they had all been conditioned to think themselves unworthy of attention. She couldn't help but feel a little stung as no one took any notice of her. Then again, she told herself,

it was rare for any of her classmates to look at anything beyond their own interests. Take for instance one of her closest friends, Annette Low, who spent almost all her waking moments practising the violin. Though she was considered the finest youth violinist in Singapore, she nonetheless developed a strong inferiority complex that manifested in her putting others down in order to maintain her self-esteem. Alone in her room, she often shed tears of self-loathing as she played. The sports boys and the dance girls were vacant and aloof. The anime lovers sat in a corner during recess reading manga right to left in the original Japanese and not speaking unless they were spoken to. The philosophers frequently posed one another thought experiments: If monkeys learnt to talk, should they be granted the same rights as citizens? Was baby-flavoured ice cream abhorrent if it contained no real babies? For a while they courted Edison for their ranks, but when he displayed distaste for circular reasoning, they stopped sending him word of their gatherings.

Classes began that morning, and Curie set out gamely to get her bearings at Stamford. The school year ran from January through the end of November, and in her planner she marked the major term exams, which fell in March, May, September and November. Every other month, of course, was equally occupied by midterms and prelims. Flipping back weeks before each date, she would pencil in the cheery phrase *Start revising now!* In spite of her careful planning, the first three weeks of school seemed to fly by like the view from a moving train. After the first month, which was known as the honeymoon, their workload ratcheted up and

became draconian.

As the headiness of the new school year wore off, Curie began to worry that she wasn't accomplishing as much as she would have liked. True, she had been appointed as a prefect, while Edison had not. (This was taken to indicate a lack of interest on his part rather than of aptitude: that Edison Chan would make an excellent prefect was a given.) Furthermore, she had risen quickly to a position of leadership within the Stamford concert choir, supervising a small section of sopranos. Yet she considered singing a low art, as did everyone else—it lacked the prestige of something like programming, which might lead to a lucrative career, or playing an instrument, which was an indication of talent and discipline. No one knew that for years she had taken private piano lessons from an edgy spinster who had bound all her furniture and the lower halves of the walls in thick glossy plastic sheeting to keep them spotless. Once when Curie had pressed one palm up against the covered wall while taking off her shoes, the spinster had screamed, "YOU HORRIBLE WEASEL!" and delivered such a blow to the incriminating arm that Curie crashed to the floor.

"When Beethoven was a boy," Curie's mother used to tell her, as she passed her squirming on the piano bench, struggling with scales, "his father would wake him up in the middle of the night and make him practise. Young Beethoven would play until the sun came up, and then he would help with the household chores without breakfast. That's how he became a brilliant musician." But try as she might, Curie could not find inspiration in that story, and her playing showed little improvement. When her

mother finally hinted that the money they were spending on her piano lessons could be better used to buy things for Edison—like a more advanced graphing calculator or a new set of textbooks on computational physics—Curie caved in and abandoned her dreams.

Annette consoled her. “I’m so talented that I feel cursed,” she confessed. “Sometimes I wish I were more normal.”

“You are special and wonderful just the way you are,” said Curie tiredly. She had boiled her responses from many previous conversations down to that one pithy statement.

“I don’t know. I only got 82.5 on that last Bio exam,” said Annette, and which Curie already knew, having sneaked a peek at her friend’s marks while Annette looked over at hers (76).

It was March now, a week after their first comprehensives, and Curie was feeling more than a bit disappointed with her academic results. But she answered, miserably, “Oh, 82.5 is good! At least you were above the mean and the median,” and then spent the next twenty minutes shoring up her friend’s ego. Afterwards, she recalled that in Chinese, a colloquial way of describing flattery literally translated as “slapping the horse’s buttocks”. She had a sudden unpleasant feeling that the proverbial horse might bolt out from beneath her and that she, like a character in a cartoon, would hang suspended in the air, poised a moment away from plummeting down.



“If you do better next time, you’ll still be able to pull up your marks,” said Edison that afternoon, apropos of nothing.

They were standing at the bus stop across the road from Stamford, waiting for bus number 44.

“That’s true,” said Curie lightly, although she felt like she’d been punched in the stomach.

“Though for physics, you would need to score an average of at least 85.5 on your next paper in order to get A, and given that 85.5 is significantly higher than what you earned on your first exam, the probability of you being able to do that is quite low.” He said this absently, shielding his eyes with his hand from the late afternoon glare. It looked as though he were trying to spot her poor prospects somewhere on the horizon.

Curie, trying not to get angry or worse, tearful, said, “Thanks, but I can calculate my marks on my own.”

“I know you can,” said Edison amiably. “But if I give you the correct answer, then you can double-check your calculations. You might even have gotten slightly better marks if you’d done that on your exams.”

“True,” she said again, through gritted teeth. She supposed he was only doing what he thought, in his own relentlessly logical way, would cheer her up. But her chest hurt when she thought of how all week, teacher after teacher had announced that the top scorer for their exam was Edison Chan, and she’d had to join the class in applauding. How little her brother knew about the way each clap felt like a slap in the face to every other person in the room.



Stamford prided itself on its core values, which were spelt out in large black letters mounted on the sides of the buildings surrounding the quadrangle:

Studious
Team player
Assiduous
Mindful
Focused
Obedient
 well-**R**ounded
Dynamic

The principal and board who had come up with the core values about twenty years ago had been especially proud of *mindful*; they had done well, they thought, given what they were obliged to work with. (Early suggestions: *moral, methodical, meritocratic*.) Students constantly made fun of *assiduous*: it was such an easy target that the others were left mostly alone.

As she stood gazing out over the school values one dreary March afternoon, Curie felt sure that she was letting all of Stamford down. She had just come from the teachers' staff room, where she had gone to beg for three half-mark increments to her last Physics exam. Mrs Georgina Lam, who taught five sections of the subject and was also Curie's form teacher, had a reputation for being kind, if religious. After Curie had compared her work to the answer key, she had been sure the extra marks were hers, but after flipping silently through the pages, Mrs Lam added a single half-mark, which rounded Curie's score up to a still-painful 54. Some time later, crying outside the staff room, Curie looked up to find Mrs Lam looking down at her with a mixture of pity and bemusement.

"There, there," said Mrs Lam, gently pushing a tissue her way. "Let me tell you a story. I failed my first Maths exam in JC. When I walked home that day, I kept praying that a car would run me over. So that I would die."

"No!" gasped Curie, covering her mouth with her hands.

"Yes," said Mrs Lam gravely. "But God protected me. He sent His angels to defend me."

She was not making much sense, but Curie recognised the intent, and the tissue her teacher had pressed into her hand felt as soft as a blessing.

"And," Mrs Lam continued, leaning forward earnestly, "I went home and studied hard, and the Lord blessed me to get an A on my next exam! And He said to me: Georgina, I who created the laws of the universe also created you. I ordained your unique talents, I gave you your gifts. I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope. He is saying those same words now to you, Curie, right now. Do you hear His voice?"

Curie did not hear any voice but Mrs Lam's. Yet she was deeply moved to know that there was someone who believed she might have a future and a hope. She began going to see Mrs Lam every day after school, because as long as her teacher kept talking, she could forget her woes. Nodding from time to time for Mrs Lam's benefit, she daydreamed of regal seraphs, tiny winged babies and miracles.



Before long, May rolled around. Though the definitive A-Level university placement exams were still over 18

months away, rumours were circulating that Edison had already worked through the ten-year series of previous exams. Typically, students hired private tutors to keep them a comfortable margin ahead of their schoolwork, but once again Edison had drastically outpaced them. Curie knew for a fact that the claims were false, and tried to tell others as much, but no one believed her, so her attempts served only to augment Edison's reputation, the golden aura of perseverance that hummed around her brother's brainy head.

The pressures of having an unsurpassable sibling were difficult to bear, and she often felt aged by the strain. Sometimes she thought she couldn't possibly be his twin, but some kind of wizened monkey freak child, unplanned-
10 for and unwanted.

"Your answer is wrong," said Edison one night, as they sat across from each other at the kitchen table doing their homework.

Curie was jerked out of her calculations. "What?" She looked up at her brother. "Did you just read my paper upside-down?"

"It's a glaringly obvious mistake," he said mildly.

She held her tongue but crossed out her answer with such fury that she tore a hole through the page. Since Primary One, every night after Curie cleared up the family's dinner, they had sat opposite each other at the kitchen table, cleaved by symmetrical stacks of books. It was impossible to avoid him. And now this was becoming a familiar addition to the scene: Edison pointing out her mistakes when she hadn't asked for his help.

"You know, you don't have to keep correcting me," she said, forcing a smile.

"But I have to if your answers are wrong."

They glowered at each other, each feeling perfectly justified.

Something had changed between them. The ground had split and the gulf was ever widening. Having no choice but to grow up at exactly the same time, the siblings were quickly perfecting the art of living separate lives together. Outwardly, they maintained their routines. They continued studying together at the kitchen table. Their parents allowed them to listen to the radio as they worked so that they could drown out the sound of their younger sister shuffling around the flat, mumbling to herself. (She had severe autism and spent most of her days at the Active Minds Special Needs School, stacking blocks together and knocking them down.) They flicked between Power 98 and 98.7 FM when advertisements came on. Curie liked the music, while Edison did it to improve his understanding of people his age. They even divided the flicking equally.

But now Curie avoided speaking to Edison as much as possible. She felt a little guilty when she thought about it. She knew that Edison had no friends at school, only rivals. At home, the two of them had occasionally chatted about something that had happened at school over a game of weiqi before they went to sleep, but now days could pass without her hearing his voice, except when he was volunteering his flawless answers in class. He made it look so easy, but if anyone had thought to ask her, Curie would have told them that he worked harder than anyone else. He stayed up later

than she did, poring over his books, and woke up earlier than she did to do it all over again. On exam mornings, before leaving their home, he looked ill enough to vomit. Lately, he seemed thinner than usual, his brow creased and strained. He had also developed some kind of odd, nervous tic of wiping his palms on the front of his thighs. He must have been lonely, Curie thought.

But for his part, he seemed to be avoiding her too, and going out of his way to make sure it affected her. For example, he had been taking longer and longer in the toilet, for no reason that Curie could discern other than that it annoyed and inconvenienced her. Perhaps he wasn't lonely at all, not in the way she could be. After all, she reasoned, he knew practically nothing about the world outside his schoolwork. Before their mother excused him from chores so he could focus on his studies, he used to wash their dishes without detergent. Once, dispatched to buy lunch for their family of five, he had come home with one packet of chicken rice and three bananas. There was some basic form of knowledge Edison didn't know he lacked, Curie thought: for all his genius, he couldn't seem to figure out that he depended on her.

(Later, she would conclude that her real mistake had been thinking she could be anything like him.)

Their mother often said that she loved them both very much and yet, if only they had been born a year or two apart, they could have saved so much money handing Edison's things down to Curie. This irritated Curie to no end. When she was applying to junior college, Curie briefly considered taking a different subject combination from Edison's, one

more balanced towards the humanities, which she liked to think were just as worthwhile as the sciences. But her mother's wistful sighing at the dinner table galled her into deciding to take whatever Edison took just so that her mother would be forced to buy two sets of identical books, which was how both siblings ended up embarking on the same gruelling combination of Physics, Biology, Chemistry and History. It was only as she got back her marks from the May exams that Curie began to realise she might have made a serious error. But even as spite had driven her away from her brother, spite would drive her on.

Besides, the June holidays were just ahead, peeping behind a mountain of schoolwork. She was looking forward to catching up on her studies and her sleep. Perhaps she could even watch as many as two hours of television per week. Furthermore, the Stamford choir was scheduled to make a modest short trip to Malaysia to sing in a festival. She had never been out of Singapore, and she was looking forward to exploring a new country with her choir friends.

"I knew I was forgetting something," said her mother with satisfaction, when Curie brought her the consent form. "Your uncle said he needed some help at work, and I told him one of you could spare the time. Edison can't miss his science competition, so you'll have to do your part for the family."

Edison was leading a team of students to compete in the World Science Olympiad at CERN in Geneva.

"Our trips take place during different weeks," said Curie. "What if we took turns helping Uncle Beng?"

Her mother's face darkened. "Edison needs to prepare himself, and money doesn't grow on trees," she said stiffly. "His plane ticket was paid for by the school, but everything in Europe is expensive. Your father and I can't afford to pay for the both of you to travel the world and have fun."

"We'll have to demote you," said the choir mistress solemnly, when Curie informed her that she was unable to make the trip for family reasons. "It wouldn't be fair to others to let you keep your position when you can't be there for your group."

So Curie spent her June holidays brooding and bored out of her mind. Helping Uncle Beng at work consisted of sitting at a push cart in a shopping mall, attempting to sell mobile phone protectors while her uncle ate long, leisurely lunches and napped in the back of the food court. Whenever she tried to study, her enormous files of notes knocked all the phone cases off the cart, scattering showers of loose rhinestones across the floor. When she scrambled to pick them up, they winked at her mockingly, even as shoppers carelessly crushed them underfoot.



In July, Edison and his team returned from Geneva in a blaze of glory—they had come in first! First in the whole world! Another amazing achievement for Singapore! The whole school cheered as the principal ascended the stage to present the team with their gleaming trophies at morning assembly. Every school day began with the 8am assembly—the students standing in neat rows by last name and by class year, singing the national anthem as

the red and white flag slinked limply up its pole. (Windy days were rare.) On Mondays, they sang the school song as well, and that morning, it had been Curie's duty as a prefect to raise the blue Stamford flag. From her position on the stage, she followed Edison with her eyes as he walked up the stage to shake the principal's hand. The principal beamed at him, parting his lips to reveal an oblique array of horsey, tea-stained teeth. Together they held the golden, gleaming trophy aloft while the whole school burst into applause. As the noise died down, Edison suddenly straightened and leaned over towards the principal's standing microphone. He wiped his palms a few times on the front of his thighs, then said hoarsely, "Excuse me, sir, could I please say a few words?"

The school fell silent. Clearly this was spontaneous, and therefore shocking, but everyone was feeling generous. How they loved Edison Chan! Yet Curie felt a sudden twinge of foreboding.

They had gotten into an ugly spat the night before. Edison had been at the kitchen table, lovingly buffing his trophy with his shirtsleeve. Curie hadn't said goodbye to him before his trip, which she still felt bad about. Feeling that she should at least acknowledge his triumphant return, she paused in the doorway and said, "Congrats."

She was about to leave when he cleared his throat. Was he going to apologise? She waited. He seemed to take a long time choosing his words. "On the flight coming back," he said slowly, "I thought I would be glad to come home. I was looking out the window as we flew over Singapore. And everything was so small. The buildings were like toys... It was

like a dream. For a moment, all of life felt so insignificant.” Setting the trophy down, he pressed his palms to the front of his thighs.

Curie had never seen him in an existential mood before. He always went from success to success; why should he ever be sad? It worried her, which annoyed her, since he was the last person on earth she wanted to be worried about. Instead, she tried to imagine what it would be like to be on an airplane. “I think I would be scared to look,” she admitted. “It would be a long way down.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding, “a long way down indeed.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, and she felt suddenly impatient to leave. “Well, congrats again,” she said, turning to go.

Then he said it. “Well.” He cleared his throat. “It’s good to speak with you again, Curie. Let me know anytime if you need help with your homework. I assume you’re still making many of the same basic mistakes.”

No doubt he had meant this as a peace-making gesture, but Curie’s jaw dropped. He was right, of course, and she had never hated him more. For a second, she simply stared. Then she ran to her room and slammed the door. In the living room, their younger sister Elise started shrieking. Curie sat on the floor, stifling her sobs with one hand and gripping the doorknob with the other in case Edison tried to come in. He didn’t. From the sound of things, he was also ignoring their sister. He had never really liked her. He possessed an almost unearthly ability to tune Elise out; it was as though he could push her completely out of his range of hearing. Curie, meanwhile, remembered that she’d left a

pile of incomplete homework in the kitchen that needed as much time as she could possibly give it. About an hour later, when she finally ventured out of her room, she found Edison still at the table with his hands in his lap, asleep or meditating. “Shh, it’s okay,” she said to her sister, whom she supposed looked as red-eyed and ragged as she did. Curie made Elise a hot Milo and helped her find a documentary about deep-sea creatures on television. (Curie had been the first to notice the girl’s mysterious obsession with marine life.) Together, they watched a trio of squids surge through a churning cloud of ink. Edison’s eyes remained closed, his face reflected smooth and golden in the side of his trophy.

Now Curie watched him as he stood before the microphone. Emotions struggled across his face, though she knew hardly anyone else could perceive it. He pressed his palms repeatedly against his thighs. At last he cleared his throat and said, “Everything we’ve achieved—what is it worth?”

A murmur flickered through the crowd. Edison seemed to struggle some more, wiping his palms on his thighs again and again. He took a step towards the edge of the stage and stared down. Curie held her breath.

But then he stepped back. He seemed to stand taller, and he shouted, “What matters are the accolades that will follow!” to thunderous applause.

Curie bit her lip, not persuaded. The previous night, she had dreamed that he was the sole passenger aboard a rocket, flying quietly beyond the moon. In her dream, he’d wiped his hands over and over on the front of his thighs: his mind was the only thing keeping the spacecraft aloft, and somehow that was under threat. Curie’s thoughts

About the Author



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INEZ TAN holds a Master of Fine Arts in fiction from the University of Michigan, and is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry at the University of California, Irvine. Her work has appeared in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Softblow*, *Rattle*, *Fairy Tale Review* and the anthology *A Luxury We Must Afford*. *This Is Where I Won't Be Alone* is her debut short story collection. Find her online at ineztan.com.



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