

EDITOR'S PRIZE WINNER- ISSUE 2



THE WELL

By Julian Matthews

I remember when it first happened it was the first time I heard the word "schizophrenia"

I did not know how to spell it even though I was a good speller

I remember when I tried to pronounce it, it was as if my tongue had tied itself in a knot and hung out of the side of my mouth, salivating like a dog's.

I remember they said you had an "episode"

I did not know at the time what an episode was except as a programme on TV

Lassie would always find Timmy no matter how many times he fell into a well

The Professor would invent some ingenious way to get off the island and bungling Gilligan would always thwart him

The Skipper would call him "crazy", conk him on the head and everything would be swell

I hated Zorro though

Because it always ended with a cliffhanger

I needed my TV shows to resolve its conflict in 45 minutes, including commercials

With a brand new episode every week

I know when Peyton Place came along there was so much hype and anticipation of the serial where each episode led into the next in a never-ending cycle

I never knew why they called it a soap opera

I thought it was because someone would be singing, in the shower

Before being stabbed dead like in "Psycho"

I never liked the lovey-dovey, kissy-kissy scenes between Rodney and Allison

They were so icky to me I had to cup my eyes tight with my tiny hands.

But that night, I had to shut my ears too

Your first episode opened with a Bang!

You locked yourself in the kitchen, loudly rifling through the cutlery until you found the chopper

Then began chopping anything from the fridge, screaming devilish profanities as vegetables flew all around mum's immaculate kitchen

We were playing Gin Rummy or Scrabble in the living room and dad tried to distract us by continuing to play as if everything was swell

It was like our entire family turned quiet, timid into this new, darkened well

We were silently shipwrecked on an island of your "madness"

No lassie was going to come to our rescue because we didn't raise the alarm

This was turning out to be yet another frustrating, tense cliffhanger

Suddenly, you came out, chopper swinging.

We froze

Dad froze too and did nothing

We younger kids were shoed upstairs by mum, the only one who kept her head while everyone was losing theirs

I remember hiding in the room, on our knees, frightened and praying so hard together

I remember my heart was a clenched fist, bone-white, trying to punch its way out

I don't remember what happened next

-- Or I blacked it out --

It was like an episode of Twilight Zone where a man woke up and found all the people in town had gone missing and he could not remember how he got there

Amnesia. I knew how to spell that

He wanders around trying desperately to call someone, anyone, and thinks he's going crazy

Then Rod Serling, the narrator, comes on at the end saying something profoundly ambiguous about the fine line between loneliness and lunacy

I remember even when young I always knew what the word "gila" meant

My mum would say "kireke" in Tamil and rotate her index finger round her temple

I knew that if you were gila they would send you to Tanjung Rambutan

Or a mental ward

I remember once reading in the Malay Mail, the Paper That Cares, of a woman who lay in the middle of the road daring a bus to run over her in traffic

They arrested her and sent her to the GH mental ward, said the report

That "gila" woman in the story was you.

It was another episode

I remember mum and my brother once tying you up at the back with ropes and raffia string -- anything they could find -- and you protested, wild-eyed, shrieking, like you were possessed, before the ambulance came

It was just another episode, they said

During family gatherings, the older ones would whisper to others, heads cocked, parrot-like, saying: It ran in the family

A cousin, an auntie, an uncle, all "cuckoo"

We all had a touch of the "kireke"

Dipped from the same well

I remember when I first heard the word "manic depressive" I thought they named this illness after Mannix, the private detective

Perhaps, only he could resolve this episode in 45 minutes...

— It's been 45 years —

I know now not to use the words mental, mad, psycho, cuckoo, crazy, lunatic, possessed, devil, gila lightly anymore

Because, there were times, I found myself in a cold and dark place, curled up like an island, my eyes and ears shut, as the waves came in.

I see how I too failed to accept my own episodes washing up on this shore between us

I see with clarity the episodic anxiety in the inner circle around me now

A touch of the "kireke", perhaps?

We each have to learn to accept and organise our own rescue

Mum and dad are gone now

The episodes have stopped, for now

I don't watch any TV these days anyway

I can't stand the cliffhangers and season-enders

Perhaps you still do

I hope that you are...

Well

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gila = (Malay) mad

kireke = (Tamil) mentally unsound

Julian Matthews is a former journalist and trainer finding new ways to express himself during the pandemic through poetry and fiction. The Malaysian-based poet was most recently published in *"Unmasked: Reflections on Virus-time"* (Heliconia Press), an anthology curated by author Shamini Flint, *Poetry and Covid* ([poetryandcovid.com](http://poetryandcovid.com)), a project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, and also in the *WordsFest Zine* (Insomniac Press). He can be reached at [instagram.com/trinetizen](https://www.instagram.com/trinetizen)

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