



THREE  
BOYS  
AND A  
CAT

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Three Boys and a Cat

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*I*t is a truth universally acknowledged that every Form Five student who wants to get straight A's for their Sijil Penilaian Menengah (SPM) examination, must be in want of a good tuition centre. For many students, that tuition centre was Pusat Tuisyen Ilham. Its reputation for producing students who scored well in SPM had parents flocking to register their teenage sons and daughters.

Its location in the middle of Kuala Lumpur was advantageous too — students could easily loiter wherever they wanted after class, or in the case of Weishan, Aliff and Daniel, *during* class. Chemistry had always been a pain in the ass for them.

Weishan didn't think he would skip classes with them again, though. He had never skipped anything in his life and he could already feel the stabbing glare of his mother if she ever found out what he was up to. Doing well in the SPM was important; it meant he would get to attend a university with an excellent reputation, and that would lead to a bright future later on. This had been drilled into his head for as long as he could remember.

The three of them had been too sleepy to keep listening to the teacher, and had sneaked out when she had gone for a toilet break.

“We're going to get into so much trouble,” Weishan complained as he watched Aliff try out some of the glasses at a stall. The pair had rounded frames and Weishan thought it made his friend look like Harry Potter. Aliff probably wouldn't take that as a compliment, though.

Daniel brought an arm around his shoulder, and gave him a playful punch. “This is what normal people do on a Sunday, bro. Chill.” While the seller was busy trying to get their friend to buy everything, Daniel's arm reached out to take a pair of the glasses and Weishan's sharp eyes saw him attempt to slip them in his pocket.

He swatted Daniel's arm. “No stealing.”

“You’re no fun,” Daniel complained, and Weishan wondered how the three had ended up being friends for the last couple of months. Daniel was uncouth, unruly, belonged to a school with the worst disciplinary record in the city *and* Weishan wouldn’t have been surprised if he had some sort of juvenile criminal record. Aliff, on the other hand, was apparently a star athlete. He was a defender for his school’s football team and 55% of the time he was talking about Chelsea FC, 35% of the time he spent taking selfies (like he was doing right now with his potential shades) and 10% of the time he was talking about other important things in life — like his lunch.

“Aren’t you guys worried about teachers not being allowed to publish or talk about this year’s forecast questions?” Weishan pushed Daniel’s arm away. “SPM is in 115 days.” The number was drilled into his brain — his class monitor changed the countdown to SPM on the top of the class whiteboard daily.

“Who cares?” Daniel asked in a bored voice.

“We would have a better chance at getting good results if we had hints on what’s coming out,” Weishan said. He wished the exam question leak hadn’t happened last year. It had been a disaster; everyone had to re-sit their papers and there was a crackdown on tuition centres, which came under suspicion for exposing the questions to the public through Facebook.

But Weishan’s words fell on deaf ears. Daniel just shrugged and Aliff was blissfully unaware of the conversation when he returned with his new sunglasses. “I look like Fàbregas.” He lifted them ever so slightly, scrutinizing them, as if he could see a vision of his future through the dark lenses. “Girls are gonna fall for me.”

Girls, in fact, did not fall for Aliff after all. Unfortunately, he had forgotten that sunglasses weren’t supposed to be brought or worn in school. He thought he could make a grand entrance as he walked through the school gates (cue wind blowing and sparkles around his uniform), but a fierce-looking female prefect confiscated them before he could even get in.

“But *everyone* was staring at me.” He puffed out his chest. “Anyway, there’s a rumour going around in my school”—Aliff seemed to have a story to tell them about the going ons in his school almost every week. There were occasions when Weishan thought he lived in a ridiculous teenage drama. Just the other day, Aliff had texted them about two girls liking him at the same time. *In another episode of Popular Guy...* Weishan thought to himself, glancing over at Daniel meaningfully.—“that our tuition centre’s principal is a psychic. He’s able to

give accurate predictions of what's coming out for exams and *that's* why he has so many top scorers. Do you think it's real?"

"Of course it's not real," Weishan told the two boys flatly. "No one can predict the future, especially when they're *asleep*. How does that even work?" He turned a page of his biology textbook, even though he was sitting by the side of the basketball court.

Aliff dribbled the ball from right to left, trying to bypass Daniel. "According to the rumours, there was this one time when he"—He paused, jumping up and expertly aiming the ball towards the hoop, only to fail.—"fell asleep during a class, and then he started reading questions out loud. He couldn't remember anything afterwards."

"Where did you hear this, Aliff?"

"One of my friend's cousin's friend's sister was his student."

"Come on, no one would buy that," Weishan scoffed.

"If you think you're so freaking smart, Weishan—"

"I *am* smart, thanks."

Daniel stepped in between the two of them before Aliff could do something like tear Weishan's textbook into two. "Actually, I heard he could predict the future even when he's awake."

Weishan groaned. "Not you too."

"It won't hurt trying to get the questions out of him," Aliff said.

"Yeah, that's impossible anyway," Weishan argued. "The man's elusive. You only see him around during morning hours when he stops by to do admin work in the office. And he doesn't teach anymore, so there's no way we can get him to talk in class."

"I can spy on him," Daniel volunteered. "I'd be good at that."

"Okay, if we *do* get the forecast questions from him, wouldn't it be illegal?" Weishan wrinkled his nose. "Remember a few years back when a couple of people actually leaked the questions to the public before the exams? I don't want to go to jail."

"As you *said*, they're forecast questions." Aliff shrugged. "It doesn't mean they're real. Come on, Weishan." He gave him a nudge, lightly kicking his side with his shoe. "You want to know too, don't you? You want to go to university?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Weishan sighed. "Mr. Foo lives a couple of houses down from mine."

A mischievous grin spread across Daniel's mouth. "Even better."

"Hold up, we're not doing anything to his house." Weishan raised a hand.

Daniel rubbed his palms together in anticipation; he wasn't smiling, but his eyes were twinkling. "Whatever, we'll start spying on his movements at the tuition centre first, and we go from there with a plan."

You'd think that spying on a potential psychic would be interesting, but it wasn't. There was nothing very exciting about observing a quiet old man with a receding hairline, who seemed to wear the same t-shirt everyday (did he even do his laundry?), walk in and out of his office.

He also had a penchant for making instant curry noodles for himself.

Weishan and Daniel sat down on one of the benches in the hall where students usually gathered before classes started. They were way too early for theirs, and Weishan could see the receptionist shooting them suspicious looks. He couldn't blame her — he *had* been loitering about for the past few days without any reason; he had even left without going into class.

"She's looking at us funny," Weishan whispered, eyebrows furrowing. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Daniel answered, a little too loudly. "Don't you trust me? I'm good at spying. I gave you a rundown of his schedule."

Weishan folded his arms. "I bet you were being obvious."

In return, Daniel crossed his arms over his chest defensively. "I thought you weren't interested in our plan in the first place. Why do you want to know the forecast questions anyway? You get good grades, and your parents can afford to send you off to university without a scholarship."

Weishan was quiet for a moment, his hands falling to his sides. He could not quite meet Daniel's eyes. "The future's not a hundred-percent guaranteed," he said quietly. That wasn't the only reason, though he didn't say anything else.

"If it isn't guaranteed for you..." Daniel breathed out a sigh. "Then think about the rest of us."

There was no progress in their plan for two weeks.

For someone who usually had the answer to exam questions, Weishan was stumped. Then he was angry at himself for being stumped and caring too much because this had been *stupid* from the start. That spoiled his mood, and he ate his breakfast in angry mouthfuls.

"Do you have tuition classes today?" his mother asked him from across the table.

He finished the rest of his toast. “Not today, Mum.”

“You should consider quitting that place,” his mother said carelessly. “I heard there are forty students in one class? That’s too many. We can get you a personal tutor. There’s still time.”

“It’s all right, Mum. I like it there.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “This isn’t about you liking it or not, Weishan. Be practical. SPM is three months away and you should study in a more conducive environment.”

“I think it has been helping me study.” Weishan could already predict the scolding that would come out of her mouth within a matter of seconds.

“If your marks don’t improve this month, I’m afraid we’ll have to take you out of there.”

Instead of doing his revision — which was what he normally did before going off to the tuition centre — Weishan decided to take a walk around his neighbourhood. He rarely did this, but after the conversation he had with his mother, he didn’t feel like staying indoors. There had to be some sort of soundtrack for this moment in time — a soundtrack about how *unfair* life was.

He let his legs lead him wherever the empty roads went. The houses he passed by were just blocks of buildings where people lived, people he didn’t know. Weishan knew Aliff and Daniel better and they lived miles away; he saw them more than his own neighbours. The sunglasses stall that he had visited with his friends had more meaning than these structures.

No, there *was* one house he was familiar with.

He knew he wasn’t supposed to stalk around Mr Foo’s house; it was only a convenient *coincidence* that his feet had taken him there. Weishan peered through the white gate, noting the principal’s black BMW parked inside. He wondered whether the legend of the principal’s future predicting ways was real.

The front door opened, and Weishan skulked where he wouldn’t be seen. Now he definitely felt like a stalker. He watched as Mr Foo, still in his pyjamas, went to pick up the newspaper between the gaps of his gate. It was bizarre, seeing this man in his natural habitat.

“Here, kitty, come here,” Mr Foo called out, and a white cat came out of the bushes in the garden to join him, its tail swishing right to left as it followed its owner into the house.

Huh, maybe they could make this work after all.

The three boys skipped their tuition class that day, and waited until Mr Foo’s car was out of the driveway.

“So we’re gonna hold his cat hostage and ask for the forecast questions as ransom, right?” Daniel’s face was bright as he held up the plate of tuna-flavoured Whiskers that they had bought to lure the cat out.

“No.” Weishan rolled his eyes. “We’re going to kidnap the cat and pretend that we found it.”

“Eh, that’s not exciting at all,” Aliff complained as he pulled out the string he had brought along. “I’ve always wanted to try being a catnapper. Ha-ha, *get it?*”

No one laughed.

“What’s its name?” Daniel hissed.

“Kitty,” Weishan answered sceptically. “Hey, Kitty! Kitty, come out wherever you are.” He started clicking his tongue.

“I could break in…”

“Daniel, no.”

Waiting for the cat to appear was no joke, and as the minutes ticked by, the boys got more and more restless. Daniel was playing with the cat food and pretending to eat it (to Weishan’s disgust) and Aliff had resorted to texting. Sweat was already trickling down Weishan’s forehead as the hot weather scorched their backs. Whenever cars slowed down, the boys would pretend to be busy walking away from the house (only to come back).

“What if we ace SPM and attend the same university?” Daniel suddenly spoke up, relieving them from the boredom of waiting.

Aliff barked a laugh. “No, thanks. Can you imagine going to university with Weishan? He’d nag us all the time.” His eyes crinkled as he began to mime Weishan’s voice. “Have you studied? Have you finished your homework? Have you eaten? –You’d be worse than my mother.”

“I wouldn’t want to go to university with either of you,” Weishan retorted petulantly. “Too much babysitting to do.” But he laughed right after. Who wouldn’t want to attend university with their good friends?

Finally, *finally*, a white cat appeared from behind the bushes. Aliff’s red string had caught its attention, and it didn’t take much effort to lead the cat out of the gate. For nearly a whole minute, the air was punctuated with their incoherent shouts and an indignant “Daniel, that’s my *foot!*” from Weishan. It was enough to almost scare the cat away but Aliff, in his usual dramatic fashion, lunged to grab the white cat by its belly.

“I CAUGHT IT!!!”



“Now what?” They had placed the cat on Weishan’s bed, where it curiously sniffed the blanket, unfamiliar with this new place.

Weishan took a deep breath before exhaling; there was still some adrenaline rushing through him. “I’ll call Mr Foo up and tell him about the cat.”

“We’re going to be Mr Foo’s new favourite students and get him to predict the future for us!” Aliff joyfully picked the cat up, putting it on his lap. He laughed as the cat started gnawing on his kneecap. “This cat’s a little vicious.”

“Don’t let it pee on my bed,” Weishan warned before looking up Mr Foo’s number on his phone. He let the phone ring and waited for Mr Foo to pick up. Truthfully, he felt a little nervous, and it showed when he only managed to squeak out a small, “Hello, is this Mr Foo?”

“Yes, who is this speaking?” The man sounded devoid of emotion even on the phone. Weishan wondered how he could be so affectionate to cats.

“Um,” he began, and was met by a fierce glare from Daniel that clearly meant: *Get it together, Weishan Li*. Weishan cleared his throat. “I’m Weishan Li, your neighbour. I may have found your cat running around my house.”

“Excuse me? My cat is with the vet right now.”

“Oh.” Awkward pause. A loooong, awkward pause. “I see. So. This white cat – isn’t yours?”

“My cat has a black spot on its ear.”

Weishan could feel his heart drop. “Okay... Well, I’m sorry for bothering you! I’ll, uh, try to find the real owner.”

He hung up and the two of his friends stared at him in dismay. “Whatever, I’m keeping this cat,” Aliff said out loud and stubbornly as it settled onto his lap, purring. “It’s a she, I checked,” he added proudly.

“Let’s just give up,” Daniel wailed, flopping on to the bed like a beached whale. “Who cares about forecast questions from a psychic?”

Weishan played with the hem of his sleeve. They tried. That counted, right?

“That was fun, though,” he said, but his voice was a little empty. What if Aliff and Daniel didn’t want to hang out with him again, once they had given up on finding out the forecast questions?

“Fun?!” Aliff snorted, and collapsed into a fit of laughter. “Weishan, when exams are over and we get our lives back, remind us to show you what *real* fun is.”

Instead of complaining about Aliff’s terrible ideas, Weishan grinned. “Fine. After exams are over.”

--THE END--