

From "Disco" by Alfian Sa'at

*Editor's note: Aged 35, Robert had just left his wife to come out of the closet. He now wondered what the gay life held for him. The extract comes from about a quarter of the way into the story.*

On Sunday nights, Robert would go to a club where most people were younger than he (or so he believed). Some of them wore eye shadow, and yet some carried what looked like handbags, but with straps to wear on their backs. Then there were those with chests so big they looked like fossilised pillows. When Robert looked at them, he was scared and thrilled at the same time. He imagined what it was like to have those pectorals, how soft or hard they were. Robert believed that they were firm, like breastplates, but he recalled that when he saw his muscular neighbour jogging bare-bodied across the front of his house, he caught them shaking like soft flesh. Robert wondered if it would be possible to pay someone during the night just to let him touch his chest, to see how it would yield to Robert's curious, probing fingers. He would do it not like the way one would press fish in the market but with the same tenderness in which he would soothe a headache at the temples.

Robert would sit in his car first, watching the queue and waiting for it to shorten as the night wore on. He didn't want to be part of the queue. For one thing, he was not dressed properly. He didn't have a tight top on, his hair wasn't gelled in lethal spikes and he didn't have a cigarette as an accessory. To Robert, this was how he saw the boys in the queue, and sometimes, he even caught some of them throwing glances at him. He liked to imagine that they were looking at him inside the car, although it was pitch dark, rather than at his Rover. The Rover he had managed to secure, whereas his wife got the house. At the moment, Robert was living in an apartment in Holland Village but it was only a temporary arrangement. He was simply caretaker there until his friend, Wan Tung (the one who had told him to taste the fresh air, and who often nagged him like a broken recorder that "closets are for

mothballs”) came back from a holiday in Australia where he had gone to ‘observe’ the Sydney Mardi Gras.

At about 12 midnight, Robert, finally tired of the deejay babbling inanities on the car radio, walked out of his car. He fingered into his wallet and fished out 15 dollars at the door, glancing away from the bouncers and offering his hand to be stamped.

One of them was telling a joke to the other and they were both laughing. The bouncer who stamped Robert’s hand held his wrist clinically, as if Robert was about to donate blood. When Robert looked at the bouncer, he smiled and said, “Enjoy yourself.” He was bald, and the top buttons of his shirt were undone. His teeth were large enough to inscribe letters on them, like a billboard on a game show.

It was his fourth time at the club, and still Robert did not know how to make an entrance. He felt the music blast into his face like the rush from an oven. The thumping bassline invaded his stomach. Robert took a deep breath and walked up the steps that led into the club, and he placed his hands in his pockets to check if his car keys were still with him, although he knew that it was just an excuse to hide them. He had no idea what to do with his hands. To hold on to the handrails was something too childish for him, and he did not believe he had the rhythm to swing them by his sides without any self-consciousness.

As Robert looked around him he was again filled with wonder. He had never seen so many beautiful men before. Where did they come from? What did they do in the day? Robert walked around, still with his hands in his pockets, and was disappointed to find that his usual spot had been occupied by a group of teenagers. There were four of them, coolly surveying their surroundings. Two of them were

smoking, and when one wanted to light his cigarette he would turn towards his friend and let his friend's lit cigarette end touch his like a godly fingernail.

Robert remembered a movie he had watched a long time ago, when a glowing finger touched a human one, and a cut was healed. It was a date movie, and Robert smiled as he recalled the elbow graze, the shoulders leaning against one another, and then two hands suddenly finding grooves in each other. He remembered the long hair and his cheek pressing into it, strumming like fingers against a broken harp, and not understanding any of it. But at the present moment he could not remember the name of the movie, nor the subsequent wedding, even trivial details like how many tiers there were on the cake. And he forced himself not to remember her name, because he would have to shut his eyes for a while to erase it out of his mind, and he did not want to do that in a crowded club. All that came back to him was a certain kind of warmth in a darkened theatre and two fingers on screen constituting some kind of magic.

The four boys seemed uninterested in what was going on around them; they did not get up to dance and their eyes glossed over people without any spark of interest or recognition. They were like mirror balls, faraway planets, sending out splinters of light that skated across faces and bodies like luminous fish. A stone chorus, watching intently from their red velvet sofa, so still as if not breathing, such that each time one of them blinked it was like an exhalation, and Robert himself exhaled in relief.

As usual, the music they played was not Robert's type. When Robert was once asked by Wan Tung what type of music he liked, he had said, "the sentimental kind". When Wan Tung asked him further what that meant, Robert could not tell him exactly. But in his mind he knew it was something with some light piano, and candlelight, something romantic. But Peter realized that like 'sentimental', 'romantic'

did not say much about his taste in music either. It was just one of those words that could mean something or nothing at different times.

In fact, the song blaring over the speakers annoyed Robert, what with its frenzied beats and the brassy wailing of a female singer. He looked around him to see so many people writhing to it, some flinging their arms up into the air and some shaking their heads around like dogs trying to dry themselves after rain. Then there were those whose bodies were still, but whose feet tapped restlessly, their eyes closed, and their heads tilted upwards as if receiving some holy light, some ecstatic revelation. Robert decided to walk over to the bar counter and order a tequila. As he was walking, two men brushed past him, and he caught a whiff of the cologne they were wearing. Or maybe it was perfume, Robert thought wryly. You could never tell in a place like this. But the momentary friction of one of the men's exposed biceps against Robert's shoulder gave him a tingle, and he reassured himself that despite the music that roused nothing in him, this was the place for him to be.

When Robert got back to his spot, the boys were still there. Robert smiled and took more sips from his glass of tequila, and he felt generous. For the past three times he was at the club, that sofa had been his; he had sat there because it was the only way to disguise the fact that he could not dance. Now four boys had taken that place from him. Robert assumed that like him, they were not into dancing. Perhaps some of them had a certain clumsiness that was best hidden from a crowd that was quick to spot beauty and quick to expect that the beauty would come in a total package, with attendant talents. (But how good they were at concealing it!) Robert felt comforted and no longer believed that he had been dispossessed of his one oasis in a whirlpool of shattered light and thunderous music. He had company. After realizing that his glass was half empty, Robert decided to take a closer, though guarded, look at the boys. There was one sitting nearest to where he was standing, who had cheekbones so sharp and angular they were almost shiny. He was wearing a baseball

cap whose peak was folded severely down the middle, and beneath it his eyes glimmered, appearing almost metallic in the chaos of the lights. It was this boy whom Robert approached suddenly, with the tequila still warm in his breast and the ice in his glass tinkling mutely.

End of extract