



"Sugar, We're Salt of the Earth Too"

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translated from Indonesian by Tiffany Tsao



I. VASE

The day's first quarrel at the salon is over a maple red vase.

The aunt, who Tiurma has secretly dubbed “Madam Sign of the Cross,” is trying to corner Mr. Karti into admitting he’s wrong—that he shouldn’t have insisted on changing the vase color to teal. (“See for yourself,” yells the aunt, stabbing her finger at the treatment room next door, where her niece is. “She looks like the living dead!”) The aunt goes on to say that after conducting extensive research in the family archives, she’s arrived at the careful conclusion that the color maple red was an integral part of her late sister, alias the biological and legal mother of her niece. (“How can a color be ‘part of who she was?’” Mr. Karti sneered as he munched on his afternoon risole. That was after the first long debate over the interior of the living room where the girl’s mother had died.) (“Maple red was our late aunt’s favorite color,” Madam Sign of the Cross had explained. “She and my sister were very close. Too important to change, don’t you think?”) (“Who cares?” Mr. Karti fumed, swallowing the last of the risole. “I thought our job was to help her precious niece stop shutting herself in her room!”)

As with all the previous times, Mr. Karti keeps his composure and listens to the aunt. At

one point, he opens his mouth—as if to say something—but then he shuts it again. Tiurma knows Mr. Karti is actually in the midst of deploying one of his signature counterattacks. The aunt doesn’t know it, but he’s offering his arm, guiding her into believing he’s giving her argument serious consideration. *BOOM*, writes Tiurma on her tablet as the first thing that slides from his lips is a firm no. (“The key to success in this biz, sugar, is a bottomless well of an ear”: Mr. Karti opens every staff motivational meeting with these words.)

The issue of vase color first bobbed to the surface during the girl’s second visit. Ever since, Mr. Karti has been adamant that they need less association with blood. At the time, he even tried to coax the aunt into changing the color scheme of the living room in real life to cerulean blue.

**("When you plant
a memory, the real
world's gotta follow,
sugar. Consistency,
here, is the key.")**



But the aunt refused. ("Are you sure, ma'am? This method has been clinically proven to reduce anxiety in girls your niece's age." This is another classic tactic of Mr. Karti's: magazine-grade science.) Absolutely not, the aunt replied, explaining how the family had issued a long string of no-no-nos regarding the girl's treatment. No messing with the decor, they'd said. You have to understand, the aunt told Mr. Karti, the whole house was designed to reflect the family's traditional values—values that had seen them safely through evil regimes and economic recessions. ("You can't imagine what it took to bring her *here*," said the aunt, right hand still clutching the cross around her neck.) ("Rich people. Whatevs. Don't get 'em." said one of the models to Tiurma, after work, after downing her whole glass of beer. "Take Mr. Karti. He's the poorest rich guy we know, and even him. *Totally* whatevs.")



Even the wisest of the oldest are apt to forget: the biggest wars always start with a broken vase.

What this meant for the girl: one morning, she found her mother's body lying on the floor in the normally immaculate living room. *Maman died today*, to quote a novel from prehistoric times. *Or maybe yesterday*. In this case: clearly yesterday night. And the contents of her skull were spattered all over the floor.

The girl had snored through it, snug as a bug, thanks to the high-quality soundproofing in the

walls. As usual, she'd woken up early to do her quiet time. Bible in hand, she'd gone into the living room, screamed, and lost all control. That was how the maple red vase came to play such a key part: the girl had stepped back, onto one of the shards.

And if Tiurma's learned anything from working three years at this salon, it's that memory is more bodily than you think. And embodied memory beats out abiding memory any day of the week. Imagine finding your mother dead—in the blink of an eye, your trauma goblet fills to the brim—before a glass blade slices into the sole of your foot, leaving a ten-centimeter gash. ("She stays in her room all day crying and sleeping," Madam Sign of the Cross sobbed as Tiurma and Mr. Karti exchanged glances.) ("Fact is, sugar," slurred one of the models, doing her best Mr. Karti impression, "the tears of the rich are the pearls that feed the world.") ("Lols. These rich folk," said another model. "They think our memories are meds.") ("No, no, sugar. Nah, nah. We're the ones who feed the world, not them. We're the ones who keep the world from ending, sugar honey baby doll. The pastor's wrong. *We're* the salt of the earth.")



Tiurma sets down her tablet and watches Mr. Karti fighting with the aunt. There's one fact that never fails to surprise her: scenes like this are now just part of everyday life.

Tiurma, contrary to her ex-coworkers' accusations, refuses to forget. The events of

three years ago glisten in her mind, like an ice palace in a snow globe. With great clarity she remembers sending in an application, not long after the salon first opened. She recalls how O.B., from her old workplace, emailed her a list of job ads. There were barely a dozen memory salons in this city back then. But Mr. Karti's was the only one on the outskirts, open to people with a health certificate rating of C+ and below: people like her. At the time, Tiurma had truly given up all hope. She nearly collapsed with gratitude when the interview request showed up in her inbox. She woke up early on interview day, but still arrived late because her helcert rating meant she had to take a roundabout train route. She stood in the salon entrance swaying from exhaustion, as if pressing the doorbell had drained her of all blood. But Mr. Karti didn't shoo her home. In his office, he squinted at Tiurma, sizing her up—obviously, she was exhausted from standing for almost three hours on a crowded train. He said the salon desperately needed a data technician. ("You worked as a journalist for a year? And you've just turned...twenty-one? What are you, a child prodigy?")

Mr. Karti gave Tiurma her second chance.



Something interesting about Mr. Karti: even now, not a single employee knows where he got the startup capital for the salon. He swears he doesn't come from money—though whether "rich" to him means only Neo Rich or Oldschool Rich and his family's only Military-

Money rich, who knows? ("My blood's red as yours," Mr. Karti jokes whenever it comes up.) ("Yeah, yeah. No. Doubt. At all," said one of the models, touching up their lipstick.) ("Sometimes I think he's a spy," said another. "But talk about low quality. Maybe he just launders money.")

Something interesting about Mr. Karti's salon: working there has actually brought Tiurma closer to power. As if she's fallen asleep on a train and woken up at the station where she started. The first customer Tiurma helped treat was the youngest daughter of a local official. The girl had a severe phobia of insects. Her father heard about the salon from a friend whose kid had also undergone treatment there. ("The ones closer to us are so pricey," the girl's mother eventually confided to them, hands wringing her purse.) ("Business runs better even if you're a distinguished member of the small-fry rich," a model commented, retying her hair. "A little sweet talk and boom! Your wallet's full of cash.") Since the girl had lived in the city her whole life, Mr. Karti decided to plant a cosmetic memory about holidaying in the countryside. After two visits, her phobia subsided.

As Tiurma watched Insect Girl and her family leave after their initial visit, she thought: *welcome to your new life, Tiurma the Trauma*. She feels defeated even now, as she witnesses the vase-color argument rage on. But at least she can afford to eat without borrowing money from friends. Tiurma the Trauma, she thinks to herself again. But at least sourness no longer scrapes at her stomach walls.



An interesting bit of trivia about Tiurma: she doesn't hate her job at the salon—and not just because she's too emotionally exhausted to expend any energy on hate. Rather, as a novelist once said, froth is the evidence of things unseen.

All salon employees are required to undergo at least one treatment themselves.

At the time, Tiurma was tempted to blender her father out of recollection entirely. But she ended up going with a more cosmetic treatment: a long holiday in Vietnam. ("Paris?" Mr. Karti snorted, knocking back her first idea. "Come on, sugar. Who's got the helcert for *that* visa?") But Tiurma didn't mind. On the helcert she had (and still has), she wasn't even allowed to leave the city, much less fart in the vicinity of the international airport. How nice it would be to have a stretch of shimmering sand and water in her head, on call, ready to surface whenever required. Tiurma then ordered up a date with a Vietnamese woman at the war museum, followed by a watermelon feast with multiracial friends by the river. Mr. Karti greenlighted every request. She had to admit: it really lifted her spirits. She's done a few sessions and sleeps much deeper now. Yup. Tiurma the Trauma.

A bit about the salon: it has twelve memory models. Some are middle-aged, overflowing with life experience, feet callused from all

their travels. Travel memories are always bestsellers, and these models are the salon's main assets, their memories repeatedly raided, then molded anew like play dough. Some of the models are very young—there's one who's twenty-two. But they've all found a common enemy in the thirty-five year old. Word is, he's the ex-husband of a diplomat. ("Infidelity's stupid, hun," one of the models whispered. "Get caught and it's bye bye, privilege.") ("He probably got a job here for the free treatments—so he can forget how hot his rich ex was.")



A salon employee escorts the girl into the meeting room. The session has ended. The tension in the room instantly dissipates. "We're going shopping, aren't we, honey?" says the aunt in a sweet singsong. "I'll buy you a Zenny Choo." This is the girl's third visit, and so far they've: (1) erased that morning's rainstorm; (2) changed the fragrance of the air freshener in the living room from jasmine to green tea—Mr. Karti thinks jasmine reeks of the spirit realm; (3) removed all blood spatter from the carpet and tablecloth. But damn it, there's been no real change. The girl still can't fall asleep until daybreak. ("It's so depressing," the aunt said, wiping her eyes. "She eats breakfast until she's full, and only then does she go to bed.") Mr. Karti has tried suggesting a more serious treatment—a memory implant, for instance—but the aunt has outright refused. ("Oh, another tip," said Mr. Karti during Tiurma's job

training. “If a patient doesn’t trust what we do? Let ‘em go, sugar. They’ll fly far away, then come back. Like a butterfly.”)



Actually, when the girl’s mother died several months ago, the news was on everyone’s lips. But Tiurma and Mr. Karti only learned about it when they’d started doing their usual research. Through the gossip network, Tiurma discovered that the girl’s mother had been a member of Pohonan—one of the many cults out there who believed that this planet was too full of people and that voluntary carbon restoration was the key to salvation. “Voluntary carbon restoration”—a.k.a. euthanizing yourself and turning your body into fertilizer for new trees. Initially, the movement’s main supporters were the elderly, but it quickly gained traction among the young. At long last, centuries of human civilization had arrived at a point where death was the “in” thing. But then, what a shame: the president declared it was against the law. (“Of course, those government crooks were in favor of the madness at first,” said a model back when the girl was the hot topic around the salon. “That is, until their own kids started signing up.”) (“Darl, I just want to come home, lie down, and watch my shows,” said another model. “Now even being alive is wrong?”)

Wouldn’t you know it, the girl’s mother, Tiara, died the night before her euthanasia appointment. Conspiracy theories on the internet said she was shot by her husband. Or daughter. Or maybe her personal assistant. And just two meters from where her body fell, a maple red vase broke and shattered all over the floor.

Mr. Karti once joked that Tiurma was the real boss. Tiurma the Trauma. Fluid as sexuality, Tiurma became a pro at mining data and conducting secret investigations, at calculating statistics and analyzing results. An uninteresting consequence of Tiurma’s fluidity: she’s now more or less Mr. Karti’s personal assistant. She brings him hot coffee. He drinks it. She tells him underworld secrets. He eats them up. He’s like the government-sanctioned history drilled into her head by years of propaganda. That’s how well she’s come to know him. Tiurma can jump into the pool of his thoughts any time she wants. And right now, she knows he wants to discuss the matter of the girl’s father again.

Fact: 89% of treatments are more effective if the father figure is improved.

(“If he’s a bully, we make him a cat lover. Or a gardening enthusiast. As all the French novelists say: ‘A good father a life keeps the doctor away,’” says Mr. Karti with a wink.) (“Well, we’re all fans of noble fathers, aren’t we,” sneers one model after Tiurma unloads about her dad. “That’s why treatment’s always easier when the father’s been dead for a while, sweetie. No new trauma.”)

At all three visits, the aunt has changed the subject whenever Mr. Karti tries to bring up

her brother-in-law. The aunt once said, in her usual cryptic manner, that father figures were a sacred part of their family tradition. “We, by which I mean the family, have reservations about Annika undergoing too serious a treatment.” The aunt clutched at the cross on her chest as she spoke. “My uncles especially are a little . . . hesitant.”

For a second, Tiurma wondered whether they were concerned about the safety of such treatments, or whether merely getting a treatment was a sin. (“Yeah?” said Mr. Karti after the girl’s first visit. “If you ask me, sugar, I bet her dad’s a general’s kid.”)



And damn it: he was right. Tiurma uncovered this fact less than five minutes into her research. The girl’s father is the youngest child of a prominent army general whose family ties lead back to the loins of Soeharto himself. Mr. Karti says the girl’s family is clearly trying to avoid any trouble with the military—the reality is, memory alteration’s still a sensitive issue for the more conservative class. According to Mr. Karti, the aunt just can’t bear to admit that her sister’s killer is untouchable. Strictly off limits.

You remember what you wish to forget, novelists say. But Tiurma has *chosen* to remember what she wishes to forget. Fact: when offered the chance to try a treatment, her first thought was actually not of her father, but her old job. She’d often reflected

on how much easier life would be if her work experience were ripped out of her head. But then who’d hire her, Tiurma, Tiurma the Trauma? Less than four years ago now, what seemed like a whole army battalion turned up at her desk in the news center and escorted her out. (“Hey, don’t blame me,” said her boss—an editor and acclaimed revolutionary poet—“You’re the one who wrote it. You’re lucky they didn’t send a bullet to the head.”) All because of the short article she wrote about some retired general’s kid who’d secretly signed up for a mass euthanasia session. (“This story. My God. So necessary,” the editor had said at the time. “It reveals so much of what this country’s become.”) And then, not even a month later, the letter arrived: a decision by local government authorities to downgrade Tiurma’s helcert rating to a C+. The pretext was her parents: they’d died in 2020 during the Great Pandemic. (“*This critical information has only recently come to our attention?* Yeah right!” fumed your friend and ex-officemate.) (“I’m so sorry,” read the reply from HR—someone named Laksmi. “We can’t possibly consider hiring a C+.”) (Sorry, ma’am, you’re not allowed in,” said the security guard at the city library.)

Tiurma considered making an appeal, but she didn’t have money for a lawyer. She tried to make the case go viral, but the head of the news center shut it down. And the fact was: no one really cared. (“You want to borrow money again? What about the five hundred from last time, Tiurma? You still haven’t paid me back!”)

With her new helcert, she couldn’t even take the main train line through the city. She

couldn't even shop at big supermarkets. She was a threat to public health, a foe of common consensus, an unexploded mine drifting in a human being sea. She'd drag herself from her rented room to buy food, then drag herself back, listless as a ghost roaming the earth. Debts clung to her hair like nits. She had no hope. Then she found Mr. Karti and his salon.

III. SAVE

And the first problem at the salon today? The girl.

She's waiting at the entrance, leaning against the wall. Tiurma looks at her watch: 7:30. The girl looks exhausted because, obviously, she hasn't slept all night. She also looks annoyed, like she wants to yell at Tiurma. She looks Tiurma in the eye. "Where's your boss—the overdramatic conman?"

At first, Tiurma is too stunned to answer, but she promptly recovers and says that Mr. Karti usually arrives at half past eight.

"Text him. Tell him to come *now*," says the girl. "And don't let him know I'm here, if you want to keep your head."

Her tone is so chilling, so ominous, that Tiurma is compelled to obey.

"Open the door," the girl orders. "I haven't slept. I want to sit down." Tiurma is too intimidated to speak. All she can do is nod.



The girl sits in silence for a full thirty minutes. Her face looks golden in the morning light.

Tiurma tries to make conversation. "Why so early?"

"I'm not here to talk to you," snaps the girl, turning red.

Tiurma is annoyed but she responds with a neutral "okay."

Five more minutes of silence pass and the girl reaches into her purse for a chocolate bar. She starts eating it. "I just can't believe how stupid you and your boss are—making me suffer for a whole stupid month; teaming up with my stupid aunt to force me to keep revisiting what happened. You must be bulletproof, baby. Is that it? Or that better be one powerful amulet you got from the dukun."

Tiurma breaks out into a sweat. "I...we...just want to help you get better."

"Stupid. My whole life is a living hell. I can't escape. Even Mom tried to get out and failed. And you're bigheaded enough to think *you* can help?"

"Well, yes. We think—"

The girl raises a finger and waggles it—that age-old gesture to get people to shut up. She takes another bite of chocolate and takes



her time chewing. "I don't want anyone to get hurt, you know. I've been trying to get the treatments to stop. But your stupid boss is obsessed about a vase. By the way, how old are you?"

"Twenty four," Tiurma says nervously.

"For real? We're only five years apart! I'm nineteen. So why don't you get what I'm going through?"

"Sorry. I don't have parents. They're dead."

"Hmm, I see. Fine. I'll ask Daddy to let you live. But your boss—he's beyond saving. Or as your boss would say: 'Sorry, sugar, I can't save everyone.'"

Tiurma wonders if the girl is serious. "So you came here by yourself to get Mr. Karti to stop the treatments?"

"Don't be ridiculous," says the girl. "That's not enough. You've got to pay damages. What I want is an exorcism."

"What do you mean?"

"Pretty much what I said. I want autonomy. I want to decide what I remember." The girl narrows her eyes. "I'm not stupid, like you, or your boss. Who cares about the vase? What happened to my mom was horrible, sure. She was a good person. But I can handle it, you know."

An exorcism? Tiurma wants to laugh. And five minutes ago the girl said Mr. Karti was the overdramatic one.

"Wipe me clean, darl,"

says the girl. "Everything. All of it. My aunt, my family, and the Holy Ghost. I want to discontinue this future. It's not living up to the hype." The girl bites off another mouthful of chocolate.

Tiurma wants to know more details, but she replies instead with: "Uh...okay."

"I don't know if you'll get what I'm about to ask, but: do you ever think about how some futures get retired early?"

"What's your point?"

"My point is, well: Life. You know, when she died, Mom and I were making plans to go on a weekend vacation. Turns out she'd already secretly signed herself up for mass euthanasia—had set the date for when she'd die. Turns out our vacation future was retired early. Discontinued. Rotten even before it could ripen or get plucked from the tree. Am I right? But, well, that's life. Hilarious, huh?"

Tiurma thinks of her old job. When she lost the job and more—her entire future as well.

The girl pauses for breath. "...not only that. Turns out Mom's future of choice got sent to early retirement by my dad. He lost it when he accidentally found out about her euthanasia plans. Okay, but let's be fair about it. Life changes. The future too, as the present shifts. And, yes, the past dictates the present, blah blah, blah, the philosophy of time, the smile on a dog. But still, isn't it ironic that she did get to

die, just not the way she imagined she would? And more ironic still? The fact that I'm holding on to this obsolete vacation for dear life."

The girl keeps going. "I mean, she didn't even end up dying on the *day* she wanted. Shot at 11:59. What a scam."

Tiurma senses the girl is about to cry. "Do you miss her?"

"Of course I do! I miss her terribly and angrily. Holiday and suicide. What kind of birthday gift is that for your daughter?"

Oh wow, thinks Tiurma. It happened around her birthday. She tries in vain to recall if it was around her own birthday when the helcert downgrade letter arrived. Tiurma the Trauma. Yes, every now and then, for reasons she herself can't understand, despite herself, she forgets.

"And that's why I..."

The girl's voice seems to fade away as the morning light streams through the window—a morning light that seems otherworldly somehow. She hears herself think this and it tickles her. It's just plain old sunshine, she tells herself, determined to keep melancholy at bay. But in a flash, that young Vietnamese woman rises up in her mind—her fantasy lover from Hanoi. And the fantasy lovemaking session from the fantasy vacation that still, and always, feels so real, so alive in her memory. They're lying side by side on the beach by the Đuống river amidst watermelon rinds and their friends have already gone indoors to seek relief from the sweltering sun, and her lover's laughter

rings in the air before she mentions out of the blue that it takes around eight minutes for the sun's rays to reach Earth. Which means if the sun goes out one day, they'll only feel the darkness after eight minutes' delay. "I want to wait with you for the world to end," her Hanoi lover says. Tiurma bursts out laughing. "How cliché can you get," she exclaims happily. "But what a shame. You're going back to Jakarta in two days," her lover says with a grin. And Tiurma laughs again. Who knew eight minutes could be so deceitful, thinks Tiurma before drawing a conclusion: How short-lived the future is. Nothing special at all, it turns out.

But her lover's name? What is it? Quynh? Nhã T.? Red, maybe? Tiurma can't recall. And where did that cheesy line about the sun come from? Lifted by Mr. Karti from one of his cheap novels, perhaps?

Turma genuinely has no idea.

The tablet buzzes and Tiurma's mind returns to the salon, to the seconds slowly ticking by. The girl is still talking. And Tiurma isn't scared enough of her anymore to keep listening. She looks down at the screen.

"It's Mr. Karti," says Tiurma. "His ETA is two minutes."

The girl recrosses her legs and smiles sweetly. "Good," she says, before continuing to ramble on about who knows what.

