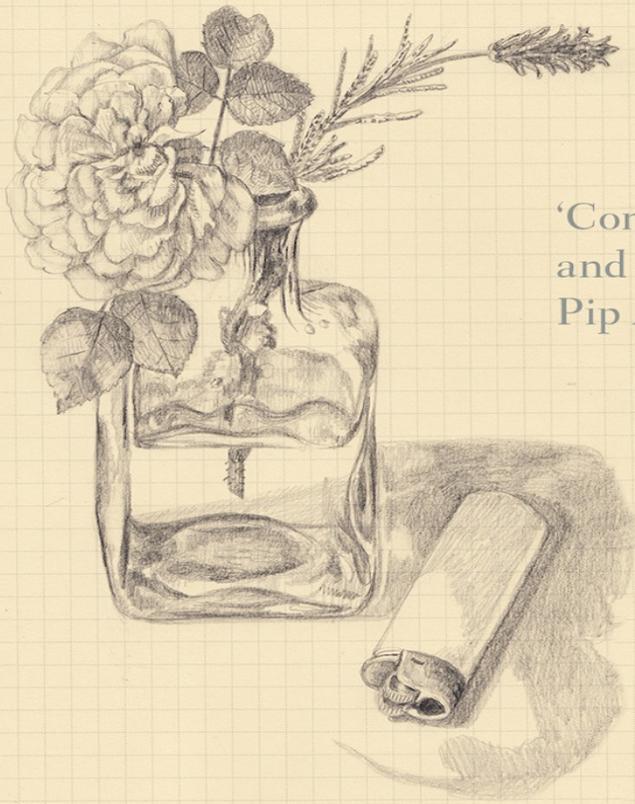




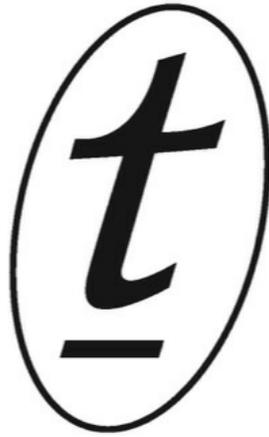
Emma Ling Sidnam



'Compelling
and beautiful.'
Pip Adam

Backwaters

WINNER
Michael
Gifkins
Prize



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About the Book

Laura is tired of being asked where she's *really* from. Her family has lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for four generations, and she's ambivalent at best about her Chinese heritage. But when she's asked to write about the Chinese New Zealander experience for a work project, Laura finds herself drawn to the diary of her great-great-grandfather Ken, a market gardener in the early years of the British colony.

With the help of her beloved grandpa, Laura begins to write a version of Ken's story. She imagines his youth in Guangzhou and his journey to a new land—unaware that soon, spurred on by a family secret that comes to light, she will go on her own journey of self-discovery, sexuality and reckoning with the past.

A tender, nuanced novel about the bittersweet search for belonging, *Backwaters* marks the arrival of a brilliant new talent.

Backwaters

Emma Ling Sidnam



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For anyone who's ever been asked 'But where are you really from?'

My Chinese roots are tangled, messy, unwanted and yet still there. They're still there, even if I never get over myself, even if I never dig deep enough to find that they're beautiful. Still there, even if Ken Long isn't my real great-great-grandfather. Still there, even if there are answers I'll never find.

As I write, Ken's words turn into memory, crumbling between my fingers like dirt. I write about runner beans and falling in love, and suddenly nothing else seems important. I write about China and death, and it all feels temporal.

I sit in the same chair when I write at my laptop, one leg folded beneath me, the other dangling. Grandpa sits next to me, in baggy brown trousers and a knitted jumper. He hunches over Ken's faded old diary, scratching his pen on his translation notebook. He reads aloud, sometimes adding his own commentary.

'He said he hated grapefruit. What a specific thing to write down.'

'Well, I also hate grapefruit.'

'I do too. It must run in the family.'

The dining room is small, and framed photos conceal most of its cream wallpaper. A tall cabinet stands against the opposite wall, its glass doors exposing neat stacks of china plates, rows of teacups. Along another wall is a low table piled with dusty magazines and an old radio.

We let the radio play softly, creating a gentle atmosphere to work in. It's always the classical station, because Grandpa finds anything else too distracting. The sound of this music makes me feel like I'm in a film. It makes these hours with Grandpa drift and stretch, makes them feel important.

I'm always going to remember this. The way Grandpa holds the old journal close to his spectacled face so he can make out the Chinese characters on the yellowed pages. He translates aloud, speaking clearly and slowly, while I type everything he says. When he tires of translating, he agonises over a crossword with a cup of rooibos while I do my own translation—typing Grandpa's grandfather's journal into a fictionalised story.

I've chosen to fictionalise Ken's story, because the truth isn't concrete. All I have is Ken's diary, Ken's feelings. I have to fill in everything else. I hope I don't get it too wrong: the description of the places, the people. I've still

never been to China, still can't properly describe it. But I can describe him. Or at least my interpretation of him.

Grandpa reads sections of what I've written and gently tells me that my grasp of China is filtered through my 'modern western upbringing'. He reminds me that whatever I write will be my story of Ken's life, rather than an accurate retelling of it.

'But it doesn't matter, because it's a story, after all,' he reassures me. 'It doesn't have to be a hundred per cent accurate.'

My great-great-grandfather Ken was an early Chinese immigrant to New Zealand. This is my version of his story, and the story of me writing it. I'd like to think my descendants will someday come across this document, and read it, and know him and know me.

I'd like to think my descendants will feel comfortable in who they are.

BACKWATERS

A story by Laura Long Stephens

Prologue

Ken stood in the garden. He seemed to glow in the afternoon sunlight, his skin almost translucent. His hands easily removed the husk from one thick ear of corn. He was hungry; he smelled the corn, wished he could inhale it. He let it drop into a woven sack.

The garden was where he spent his life. He had become part of the landscape, one of the many men tilling the ground. You could let your eyes wander—over rows of corn, cabbages, white turnips, potatoes, cauliflowers, peas—and blink and miss the men entirely. In their plain brown clothes and hats, they were one with the earth.

Their New Zealand lives were laborious and repetitive: wake before sunrise, eat a simple breakfast of gruel, go to the gardens and work. That's what they were here for, after all. These men were market gardeners, leasing land in groups and turning it into productive gardens. Even when the land wasn't arable, they worked it until it was: watering it and softening it with horse, pig and cow manure until it was fruitful. This was how they made their money.

They worked without stopping, coming up with ingenious ways to protect their precious vegetables, lining the fences with thistle and mānuka to break the wind, digging ditches to drain water. When they worked, they looked like moving scarecrows. Clad in baggy brown, the cloth hanging loose at their wrists and necks, they seemed to stomp their way down the rows of carrots, the lines of runner beans. The resemblance was even greater when it rained, because half of them put sacking on their heads and feet. They did not buy rain jackets, because they did not want to spend a single dollar that could be sent to their families back home.

When the market gardeners pushed their wheelbarrows through town, the local children laughed at and sometimes followed them, hissing and spitting like cats.

'Ching chong, Chinamen!' they howled.

At least the local people recognised that their produce was good. The vegetables became the connection point between the local community and these strange new men. Vegetables were safe. Vegetables were needed. Local men bought heaped sacks of potatoes, lettuces, carrots, peas, turnips, silverbeet and cauliflower. They got good deals, as the Chinese market gardeners sold at reasonably low prices. The locals went home and their wives made stews, soups and roasts. Meanwhile, the market gardeners went back to their huts and carefully hid their money in jars and sacks. Every cent counted.

PART ONE
February–May 2019

Where Are You *From* From?

I'm at the Auckland Art Gallery, in a job with no official description. When I took the position a year ago—through my creative-writing lecturer, connections at their finest—I told myself I'd only stay for a few years. I'd daylight at the gallery and moonlight as a writer, then quit when I had something worth selling. That plan hasn't worked out so far. Since I graduated uni, I've barely written anything. On graduation day, I received a hat, a piece of paper and a bad case of writer's block.

This job isn't a bad way to spend my time, though. I help out where needed, moulding myself into whatever's required of me. Sometimes I'm the admin person at the front desk. Sometimes I'm setting up exhibitions. Sometimes I sit in the galleries and read, just an official presence to make sure nobody tries to destroy the paintings.

And sometimes I work as a guide. I like being a guide, walking the tourists around like dogs, explaining to them the significance of each artwork, the story of the artist. They always lean forwards when I'm talking about a painting, as if the closer they get to my words the more they'll appreciate the art. Some of them read the whole museum label and look intently at minute details; some simply stand back and let the entire thing wash over them. Then there are those people who go to galleries for the sake of going to galleries—tourists dragged along by more interested spouses or friends, parents who hope that the gallery visit might inspire some creativity in their children. The bored expressions don't worry me: it's all part of the job.

The one thing I hate about guiding are the non-gallery-related questions. The tourists always want to know my favourite cafe in the city, or where they should go after this, or just ask personal questions about me. I took this job because I love *art*, I want to reply. Ask me about that. But I don't, because it's my job to be polite. That's a given, even without a proper job description.

Today it's a small group. A middle-aged white man with a loud American accent, a Korean mother and daughter, and a white English woman with a

pointy nose and round glasses. I greet them with a smile, remind them that photography is allowed but no flash, and start leading them through the portrait gallery.

First portrait. Second portrait. Before we've reached the third, the English woman quickens her pace to walk next to me. My heart sinks as she opens her pink-painted mouth.

'How long have you been working here?'

'Can you recommend what else I need to see?'

'How many tours do you take each day?'

I answer her questions politely but monosyllabically, trying to shut down further investigation. We reach the third painting and everyone stops to take it in. The English woman barely glances at the portrait of a Māori chief before turning back to me.

I know what's coming.

'So where are you from, then?'

I answer, as casually as possible: 'Here.'

I hope she's the good sort of tourist, the sort that says, 'Oh, cool. Well, I'm from Indiana (or Lyon, or Santiago).' I don't mind people asking me where I'm from if they genuinely want to know where I grew up.

But as the woman opens her mouth again, I know she's in the other, astonishingly large category.

'Where are your *parents* from?'

or

'Where are you *from* from?'

or

'Where are you *really* from?'

The English woman goes with the *from*-from option. Probably my least favourite, because it sounds so stupid. Where am I *from* from?

My mother's womb, I want to snap.

Instead, gritting my teeth and imagining myself getting fired, I reply in a voice devoid of emotion: 'Here.'

'Oh, you know what I mean!' she says in a false-cheery tone.

I say, more emphatically: '*Here.*'

By now the American man and Korean mum are staring at her. She blinks awkwardly and turns away, pretending to study the portrait. I take the opportunity to start explaining its significance to the history of portrait painting in New Zealand.

Other times, if I'm in the mood, I'll deliver a cursory explanation of my obvious Asian-ness.

'I'm a fourth-generation New Zealander,' I say. The words are practically engraved on my tongue I've said them so much.

'Fourth generation?!' they always repeat.

'Yes,' I say, deadpan.

Most of the time I leave it at that, letting the conversation stew in its awkwardness for a beat before leading the visitors to the next wall, where they can stare at the art and pretend to be emotionally invested in what I have to say about it.

My family doesn't understand why I get so angry when people ask me where I'm from.

'They're just curious,' my sister, Max, says. 'Who cares?'

I've tried countless times to explain that the question feels othering. It's a reminder that I am not what people expect in New Zealand. That people view me as a foreign entity in my own country.

It's a question I refuse to get used to. It goes down like cherry-flavoured cough medicine.

'It was so much worse in the old days,' said Grandpa. I was fifteen, and we were talking about racism again, because Dad's boss at the time was always saying offensive things.

'When I was young, other kids used to spit at us in the street. They called us all sorts of horrible names.'

'In the late nineteenth century the government even put up the *Chinese Immigrants Act*, to stop Chinese people coming to New Zealand,' added Grandma. 'That's why I only came over after the war, even though my father was already here, working in the market gardens.'

'When my grandfather came here in the eighteen-seventies,' said Grandpa, 'he was treated like a complete outcast. As if the English weren't still in the process of coming over! The English had only really started coming in large numbers twenty or so years earlier. It was plain racism.' He reached across the table for some more rice, and Grandma put the white-and-blue bowl in his hand.

It was the only time they were on the same side, when they were telling

tales of discrimination.

Real Chinese Cooking

Growing up, Sunday nights meant going to Grandma and Grandpa's house for dinner. They had a large Mount Eden villa shaped like a T, with a garden full of fruit trees and flowering bushes.

For as long as I can remember, Grandpa has belonged to the garden and the garden to him. His hands seem capable of coaxing even the toughest fruit into something sweet and ripe.

Grandma always hated being outdoors. While Grandpa worked in the gardens that he inherited from his father, she worked inside the fruit shop, selling the produce, though she retired before I ever saw her actually selling any produce. I struggled to imagine her there.

Once the gardens started doing well, and Grandpa was hiring more workers, she said that she had more than enough to do in the house, and gave up the job she'd had since she started working in her mother's shop at the age of thirteen.

'He was fine with it,' she insisted whenever the topic came up.

'I kind of had to be,' he would say, in the tone of a loving quip.

We all knew it wasn't funny.

Max and I were never allowed to skip the dinners.

'Sunday nights are family nights,' Mum would say whenever Max or I asked if we could miss dinner to go to a friend's house or to the movies. Rialto Cinemas had half-price movies for kids on Sunday nights.

It was always so tense around that round dining table. I don't think any of us really wanted to be there, but none of us could leave.

When I turned vegetarian at thirteen, Grandma protested loudly. As I picked the vegetables out of her curry, separating beans from prawns, she glared at me and sighed heavily from across the table.

'I can't believe you let her go vegetarian,' she sniffed at Mum, as if I

wasn't even there.

'I wasn't thrilled by it, but Laura is old enough to make her own decisions,' Mum said. She was diligent in defending me, but in reality she was almost as upset as Grandma by my announcement. I knew she was sad that she wouldn't be able to make me my favourite dishes, one of her main ways of showing me love. I felt bad for her, but I really wanted to be vegetarian. I didn't have the same sympathy for Grandma, who I knew was just annoyed that I wouldn't praise her meat any more.

'Laura's not getting enough protein.' Her eyes bore into my skin.

'I make sure I get enough protein,' I insisted.

'Only meat has adequate protein.'

'Lots of things have good protein. Like tofu. Or chickpeas.'

'Being vegetarian is limiting. You can't enjoy real Chinese cooking.'

When I got to year 13, Grandma's disappointment in me became about my lack of ambition.

'Remind me which overseas universities you're applying to,' said Grandma one Sunday. I sighed silently. We'd had this conversation at least three times.

'I wasn't planning on applying to any overseas universities,' I said.

Grandma wanted me to go to some prestigious university in the United States or in England, so she could brag about it to her lady friends in the Collective. The Collective is a group for Asian New Zealanders. The idea is that members can bond over shared culture, history, trauma, et cetera, and enjoy both community and potential career connections. It's a nice thought, but from my point of view all the older members do is preen about their grandchildren's achievements. When I was at primary school, Grandma would photocopy my certificates to show the other ladies.

'You're going to study whatever you want to,' Grandpa said firmly, looking at me.

Grandma kept talking as if he hadn't said anything. 'Why wouldn't you apply overseas? You're a smart girl, you should make the most of it.'

'Laura should go where she wants.'

'She can't know what she wants to do yet, she's too young.'

'We think she should have some kind of backup option, like a business or law degree,' said Dad. 'But it's her decision in the end.'

‘There are plenty of options,’ said Mum. ‘And we’ll be happy as long as she’s happy.’

‘But Laura, can’t you see how an overseas university would expand your options?’ said Grandma.

‘Well, I can’t afford to go overseas anyway.’

‘You could get a scholarship. Have you looked at the scholarships? Surely there are scholarships you could get. You’re a star swimmer, after all.’

I hated the pride in Grandma’s voice. Grandma chose to forget that I’d stopped competing in year 11.

‘Maybe.’ I hadn’t looked at scholarships and didn’t intend to.

‘One of the ladies in the Collective has a grandson at Oxford. I should put you in contact with him, yes, let me look up his number...’

She started to rise, but Grandpa put a hand on the table.

‘Let her be.’

Grandma sat back down, asked who wanted more peas. ‘They’re nearly finished, we shouldn’t waste them.’ She put some on Dad’s plate. He’s always hated peas.

‘I wish Grandma would stop with all the overseas universities,’ I complained once we got home. ‘I’m not interested. Why can’t she get that?’

I was sitting at the kitchen table with Max, who was drinking a huge mug of Milo and looking sour. ‘Because she’s an inherently selfish person.’

None of us got along with Grandma, but Max took it the most personally. Maybe it’s because my younger sister was the last grandchild, but Grandma never forgave her for not being a boy. It was never said out loud, but we all knew it was true. Grandma had a daughter and a granddaughter, but no male descendants.

In lieu of her being a boy, Grandma wanted Max to be a pianist. In her eyes, I was the ‘sporty’ one and therefore Max had to be the ‘musical’ one. The only school events of Max’s that Grandma showed up for were the choir recitals.

When Max picked up her first electric guitar, Grandma threw up her hands. ‘What happened to the proper music from my day?’ she sniffed. She meant traditional Chinese folk songs or Bach. I don’t think she even saw the electric guitar as an instrument. It seemed like the louder Max got, the less Grandma noticed her.

The last straw was when Max came out as a lesbian at fourteen.

She didn't tell Grandma and Grandpa directly, just casually mentioned that she had a girlfriend when Grandpa asked her about school. Grandma looked confused at first, asked Max to repeat herself. Max was sitting there innocently in her favourite hoodie and black jeans, halfway through a big bite of chicken.

'Sorry, *what* did you just say, Maxine?'

The rest of us were as still as stone. Max swallowed loudly.

'I said my girlfriend's name is Isabelle.'

'You can't have a girlfriend, Maxine. You're a *girl*.'

She didn't say it with anger, but as if it were a given fact. Max and I exchanged looks. We both knew Grandma wasn't going to budge.

Our parents glanced at each other. They didn't really get it, but they accepted it. They had to—Max had threatened to run away if they didn't. Dad told her firmly that that wasn't necessary. That she was part of our family and nothing could change that. Max was always the one who could push boundaries and get away with it.

'The world is changing,' Mum said, finally. She looked directly at Grandma, her eyes pleading.

Grandpa stood up, the legs of his chair scratching the floor. He walked around to my sister and placed a hand on her shoulder.

'As long as you're happy, I'm happy,' he said.

Max twisted around to hug him while Grandma looked on with tight lips.

When we got home that night, Max announced that she was retiring from family dinners. Mum and Dad stared at her. Mum looked like she was going to start sizzling.

'What about Grandpa?' I asked quickly. Max loved Grandpa. If anyone was going to save family dinners, it was Grandpa.

'I'll go see him by himself.'

'Grandma will come around,' Mum lied.

'No, she won't.'

'Fine.' Mum changed tack. 'She won't. But it's *family* dinner. You're part of this family. You have to come.'

'And I'll still be part of this family, won't I? You said I'd *always* be part of this family,' Max shot at Dad.

'Of course you will.' Dad adopted his soft, coaching voice. The one he used when he taught us how to swim. 'Grandma is from a different

generation.'

'Does that excuse bigotry?'

Max stared Mum and Dad down. Her eyes were steel, her eyebrows furrowed. She was poised as if she were about to fight.

This wasn't a trip to the movies. Mum and Dad weren't going to win this one.

Over the years Mum tried to persuade Max to come back to Sunday-night dinners.

'Just come back. We won't talk about your sexuality,' Mum begged.

'I don't want to *not talk* about my sexuality. I want the entire family to accept me for who I am, not skate over the issue.' Max refused to be swayed. I thought it was fair enough.

By then, I was debating my own sexuality, but it seemed like the wrong time to bring it up. Mum and Dad were slowly coming around to Max being a lesbian, and I didn't want to get in the way of this process by announcing that I was bi. By the time I finally told them, at nineteen, I'd been out to my friends for a year. My coming out felt quiet and underwhelming next to Max's. I didn't even tell Grandma, although I told Grandpa privately.

Sunday-night dinners without Max were even more strained than they were before. From that time and until she died, Grandma acted like Max didn't exist. A few times, Mum mentioned what Max was doing and Grandma just ignored her. I could tell it upset Mum, but I knew she'd never say anything.

'Do you want me to stop going too?' I asked Max several times. I didn't want her to feel like I wasn't on her side.

'Mum would kill you.'

It was true. After Max stopped going, I felt extra pressure to be there and be cheerful. Mum is generally a level-headed person, but the one time she ever yelled at me was when I asked if I could miss family dinner for a Taylor Swift concert with my friends. I knew it was a long shot, but I really, really wanted to go. She yelled at me across the room, her words sinking into my skin: 'Do you have any idea how much effort I put in to keep our family together?'

The memory still stung. I resented Max for getting out, for asserting herself to the point that Mum gave up on her. Mum never even yelled at Max, because she was too worried that Max would stop coming home altogether.

The worst part? I couldn't even blame Max. Sure, she could be kinder to our parents. But at least she was good at setting her own boundaries.

I've never been good at that.

Goldfish

For the last few years, I've swum at the Olympic in Newmarket six mornings a week. There's something in the rhythm of it, the way the world blurs. All I can hear is the splash of waves and the gasp of my own breath; I feel the movement of my hands pulling through the pool. When I swim, I transcend my body. I move upwards and out of my physical form.

It's like I can breathe better when I can't breathe.

And it's wonderfully repetitive. I can switch up the strokes, moving from freestyle to breaststroke to butterfly, but in the end, I'm still just moving my body without thinking or going anywhere at all.

If someone were to ask me why I love swimming so much, I'd shrug. But really, it's that swimming gives me a feeling of security. Most people love being held by another. That comes from an intrinsic human need, but it also comes from the memories of childhood. The days when parents seemed invincible, able to solve any and all of the world's problems. The feeling of being immersed in water recreates that. When I dive into a pool or the ocean, my skin slips through water as easily as I pull a jumper over my head. It gives me the same safe and warm feeling I used to have when Mum tucked me up in bed.

When I was four, Dad taught me how to swim in our neighbour's pool. His method was simple: he would throw me high into the air and I would land in the pool like an atom bomb, making waves across the water's surface. I would kick and splash, fighting for oxygen. I was never in any real danger—if I struggled too much, he would bail me out. But I always instinctively made my own way to the surface. It taught me early that the human body knows how to survive.

When I swim, I feel like I'm four again, back when floating felt like flying. I can still hear Dad's loud laugh, still remember getting home, cold and hungry, to find Mum with a cup of Milo waiting for me on the table. She'd dry my hair with a thick towel and I'd complain, but secretly love it.

Some people let the past evaporate; I always try to remember, or at least, try not to forget.

Today, I swim for an hour without stopping. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, repeating the motion until time slows. The movement is cathartic, my muscles smooth and strong each time I push off from the tiled wall with my feet. Finally, I heave myself out of the pool and walk, dripping, into the changing room. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. With my head squeezed into an elastic cap, I look like a goldfish.

I'm the only person in the changing room, so I don't bother covering myself up as I strip off and wring my togs out onto the wet floor. As a child, I was so self-conscious that I would get changed in a toilet stall. Now, I stay in the general changing area, but I usually keep myself covered with a towel. I don't like people seeing me.

Dried and dressed, I leave the pool building. Newmarket is just two train stops and a short walk away from the gallery. I've a well-timed routine that means I arrive at exactly 8.55 a.m. every morning.

'Morning, darling!' Greta the receptionist trills when I walk in. I don't mind Greta. She dresses in varying shades of orange and speaks in a frustratingly high voice, but she means well.

'Morning, Greta,' I say, pitching my voice higher than normal.

'Oh, by the way, sweetie, Tracy wants to see you,' Greta calls as I walk towards my desk.

Tracy is my supervisor. She's a middle-aged white woman who never got over her failure to make it in the film industry. She won't stop talking about her recurring role in *Street Legal*, a mediocre legal drama set in Auckland. It only ran from 2000 to 2003, but Tracy talks about it like it was New Zealand's *Grey's Anatomy*.

I walk right past the open-plan room where most of us work and knock on Tracy's door.

'Come in!' she calls. Tracy loves to act like she's always extremely busy. Like it's a privilege to get even a minute of her time.

I push open the door. For an office in an arts centre, it lacks personality. There's only one thing on the walls: a painting of the Auckland harbour.

She gets straight to the point.

'You're Chinese, right?'

What a way to start my morning.

‘On my mum’s side I’m a fourth-generation New Zealander,’ I say.

‘So you’re a Chinese New Zealander,’ she says.

‘I guess so.’

‘Do you speak Chinese?’

‘I don’t speak Mandarin or Cantonese, no,’ I reply tensely. I hate this conversation. I can’t see where it’s going.

‘Oh. Well, that’s okay.’ She sounds disappointed. ‘You’re a writer, right? Outside your job here.’

Question marks are popping up in my mind and I’m hoping that my eyebrows aren’t communicating them externally.

‘I’m a writer,’ I say, even though it feels like a lie.

‘We’ve been contacted about a project by a woman named Maddie. She’s editing an anthology about minority cultures in New Zealand and was hoping that the gallery could work with her.’

‘Oh. That sounds interesting.’ She hasn’t told me anything yet, but I don’t know what else to say.

‘She wanted to know if we had any Chinese New Zealand stories in our archives, and I had to tell her that we don’t. So she asked if I knew any Chinese writers, because she wants stories based on Chinese family histories. And anyway, I was thinking—you have ancestors you could write about, don’t you? You could write a story as the gallery’s contribution.’

I want to say I haven’t written anything in a year. That I don’t appreciate being asked to write something just because of my ethnicity. Instead, I say nothing.

‘Just think about it! Let me know before Friday. Okay, I have work to do, see you now!’

I leave Tracy’s office, my head a whirl. Does my family history count as a Chinese New Zealand story? Even if it does, am I Chinese enough to write these stories? What does that even mean?

My entire life I’ve loved hearing stories passed down through my family. Everyone has a story. Recounting historical fact is one thing—capturing stories is something else. And I’m not sure I’m able to write anything, let alone this.

The thoughts swirl and spiral around my head as I find my way back to my desk, sitting down with a sigh.

‘Sounds like you’re not having the best morning.’

It's Henry, my favourite colleague. He's white, solidly built, with a light-brown ponytail and green eyes. I know he goes to the gym because he sometimes comes to work sweaty. He's only a bit taller than me (I'm five-two), but he's so confident that nobody notices.

'Nah, just Tracy, you know.'

Henry nods sympathetically. We all make fun of Tracy, which isn't very nice, but it's how we get through the day.

'What did she want?' he asks.

'Stories about Chinese New Zealand history for an anthology. I'm not sure if I'll do it, though.'

'What are your reservations?'

The question pulls me up short, because I'm not really sure how to explain it to him. Henry might be really nice, but he's still a white guy. I doubt he'd understand Chinese identity crises.

I met Henry on my first day of work. Tracy was showing me around and Henry was in the break room with a few of the other staff. Henry was animatedly telling some kind of anecdote and everybody was listening to him.

He paused when we walked in, and greeted me enthusiastically when Tracy introduced me. I was nervous that first day, but Henry was immediately friendly and put me at ease. He flashed me his incredible smile and I liked him instantly.

That moment in the break room made it seem like Henry had known his colleagues for ages, but he and I actually started at the gallery at around the same time. I got the job because I wanted work related to art while I made my own. He said he took the job to spite his parents.

We talked about it at length the first time we hung out. He approached me first. I was sitting at my desk, and he asked if I wanted to have lunch with him. I nodded yes, thrilled and flustered, quickly grabbing my plastic lunch box and following him out the door. The entire time, I tried not to be too awkward while we talked about how we ended up at the gallery. He looked genuinely interested when I told him I wanted to be a writer.

'What do you write about?' he asked, flopping down on the grass under a large pōhutukawa.

I laughed. 'I don't know, it's hard to explain. Anyway. What about you?'

‘Come on, give it a go!’

Later, I learned that his determination cut both ways. It’s what got him opportunities, close friends and romantic partners. It was also, often, quite annoying.

‘I guess I write a lot about identity. What it means to be a person. I feel like I don’t quite know myself, and I’m trying to work it out. Sorry, that’s quite vague.’

‘No, that sounds amazing. I can’t wait to read your work.’

I couldn’t imagine ever wanting to show him anything I’d written. He was too charming, too charismatic, and it made me want to impress him. If I showed him something, it would have to be brilliant.

‘Anyway. Enough about me. Why are you here? Did you go to uni?’

‘Yeah, I went to uni. My parents were furious because I studied philosophy and media,’ Henry said, rolling his eyes. ‘Said I was wasting my potential. When I graduated they said it wasn’t too late for me to *get on the right path*. My dad set me up all these interviews with his business-prick friends—and then I accepted the job here.’

When Henry talked, he barely used his hands at all. Instead he leaned back on them, face upturned to the dappled sunlight. He seemed so relaxed, so at ease with himself and his place in the world.

‘Did you go to the interviews?’ I asked, taking a bite of my pumpkin feta salad.

‘Can you picture me in a suit? I’d already moved out so they couldn’t exactly threaten to cut me off or anything. At this point, I think they’ve just given up on me.’

‘But you have a job and everything,’ I said. I balanced my lunch box on my knees and started looking for split ends in my hair. It’s one of the little unconscious things I do when I’m overly aware of myself.

‘Not a fancy one. They wanted me to work for, like, Deloitte or Russell McVeagh. Basically, businesses I never want to step foot in, let alone work for.’

‘What’s so horrible about them?’

‘They’re companies concerned with helping the rich stay rich. It’s gross. Their employees also don’t have lives, they work ridiculous long hours. I’d much rather earn just enough to survive and then use my spare time to volunteer and do shit I care about than earn six figures.’

I nodded. It made sense to me, though I felt a little guilty for never having

thought about that myself. Was I morally pure for staying away from those companies? Or was I just lucky that I didn't want to work for them?

Sunday Star-Times

‘Open it already!’ Max watches me like a hawk while I thumb the edges of her clumsily taped present. It’s my twenty-third birthday and I’m home for dinner. Grandpa’s over too, installed at the table in one of his usual thick-knit jumpers. He’s been coming to Mum and Dad’s house for dinner every week since Grandma died three years ago. We pretend he comes over because he can’t cook, but we all know that nobody wants any semblance of Sunday-night dinners to continue.

My flatmate, Ashley, wanted us to go out for my birthday, but I asked if we could do that on Friday instead. She’s one of my closest friends, always pushing me to get out more. In that way, she’s similar to Max. Except that Max calls Ashley a basic white girl.

‘You don’t want to hang out with your *parents* on your birthday,’ Ashley insisted. We were standing in the kitchen in our cold Grey Lynn flat. ‘We need to go out, have fun!’

‘Birthdays are a family thing,’ I explained. ‘I can’t deprive my mother the joy of making me all my favourite foods. Mum’s got an impressive vegetarian repertoire now.’

Max’s present is large and box-shaped, but suspiciously light. I tap it and hear a tinny, hollow sound. When I turn it over it makes a tiny *thunk*.

My family always hides the shape of our presents to each other. It started when three-year-old Max complained that she always knew exactly what toy she was getting based on the shape of the wrapped gift.

I rip through the shiny silver paper, revealing a Nike shoebox.

‘Open it,’ Max says again, eyes mischievous. She’s been like this ever since she was a kid, never missing an opportunity to mess with me.

Inside, there’s a smaller wrapped gift. It looks like a book. I pick it up. Not a book. Max is watching me with a sly grin.

I pull through the paper a second time, unveiling a book-shaped cardboard box. It has a little hinge to keep it shut. I open it, and inside there are two

slivers of paper. Tickets.

Squinting a little, I lean in to read what they're for.

'You didn't!' I hug Max hard and she thumps my shoulders.

'I did! We're going to Mitski!'

My heart expands as I imagine seeing Mitski live. I'd tried to buy tickets, but they sold out too fast. Max must have been waiting for the tickets to go live.

Mitski is one of the few artists Max and I both like. Max's favourite song by her is 'First Love / Late Spring' from *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*. She says it's because of the cathartic rock chorus, the spacious bass strokes, the subversive anger of C major and the male backing vocals. ('I love it when men are relegated to the back.')

My favourite Mitski song is 'Your Best American Girl.' But when she asked me why, I wasn't sure.

'Break it down,' she said. 'What do you like? The vocals? The riffs? The production? Do you like the song structure? What do you like about the sound?'

It's always like that with Max. She thinks carefully about everything, giving me a proper review of whatever album, movie or book I recommend. She makes me think about everything more critically, but especially music.

'I like the lyrics. They're interesting. And I like the general vibe of the song.'

Sometimes when I speak, Max rolls her eyes. I know it's not on purpose, but it still hurts.

After Max's present, I open the square box from Mum and Dad. It's wrapped in light-gold paper, a neat bow on top. Definitely Mum's handiwork.

Under the paper is a cookie box. Inside, I find a smaller gift, wrapped in blue.

'Go on,' Mum says, a smile in her eyes.

I unwrap the smaller box to find an even smaller box wrapped in purple. It can only contain jewellery. Pulling off the final sheet of wrapping, I unveil a little velvet box. I open it carefully. It's a silver necklace with a blue glass pendant on the end. It's not really my style, but I know Mum made an effort.

'It's beautiful!' I say, hugging Mum. 'Thank you.'

'It's from Dad too,' she says, even though we all know he didn't help choose it.

‘My turn,’ Grandpa says, sliding a gift across the table to me. ‘Happy birthday, Lorry.’

Grandpa’s always been good at presents. Grandma’s presents were always something from around the house.

He’s taken to disguising his presents too, so this one is in a large paper bag. I reach in and pull out a thick, rectangular parcel. It feels soft, like a jumper. But as I rip off each layer of wrapping, I realise that the softness is from fifteen layers of newspaper.

‘Did you use an entire *Sunday Star-Times* for this?’ I ask, and Grandpa chuckles.

Finally, I reveal the actual present. It’s a block of dark chocolate, a box of T2 chai and a poetry book: *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong.

I read Vuong’s book *Burnings* last year and felt like I needed a week to recover. His writing is incredibly raw, sharp and beautiful. I also like the way he writes about his identity as a Vietnamese American. He writes about race and identity in a way I’ve never been able—or wanted—to.

‘It’s perfect!’ I exclaim, moving to hug Grandpa. ‘It’s exactly what I wanted.’

Over Grandpa’s shoulder I catch a glimpse of Mum’s face and instantly feel guilty. She’s put so much effort into this dinner. I don’t want her to feel outdone.

‘Thank you, everyone,’ I say, pulling back from Grandpa. ‘I feel so lucky.’

In the kitchen, Mum, Max and I finish decorating the two-layer vanilla cake while Dad puts away dishes.

‘Grandpa gets you such good gifts, L,’ Max comments, piping a swirl of cream on top of the cake. ‘He got me chocolate and a movie voucher.’

‘A movie voucher is a perfectly fine gift,’ Mum cuts in. ‘I never got presents growing up. So you should both consider yourselves lucky.’

‘Never?’ Max asks. I want to kick her. Mum’s told us about this so many times. I don’t want to talk about it on my birthday. It makes me feel bad.

‘Never. We didn’t celebrate birthdays at all.’

‘Grandpa just doesn’t know what to get you, Max,’ I say lightly. ‘You don’t spend much time with him.’

‘Yeah, I know, I was just *saying*.’ She sounds annoyed now.

We go back to the dining room, Mum staying behind to light the candles.

That small conversation killed my mood. Now I just want the rest of my birthday to be over.

At 10.37 p.m., I blow out my candles. The cake turned out light and airy; we filled it with raspberries and whipped cream.

As we eat the cake, Mum starts telling the story of the day I was born. She loves telling it, even though we've all heard it a thousand times.

'You were two weeks late and I just wanted you *out*,' Mum says. 'You made me feel like a bowling ball.'

'You should have seen her,' Dad always jumps in here. 'She was *huge*, her stomach full to bursting.'

Mum and Dad went for a long walk on the day I was born. Walking was supposed to encourage labour.

I imagine my parents walking hand in hand, Mum's stomach swollen with my body. She has child-size feet, which can hardly hold her ordinary weight. They must have ached when she was pregnant. I was a big baby, the opposite of me now.

At 10.37 p.m., I was born.

'You were like a little shrivelled plum,' Dad says. He talks while chewing, so I can see cake crumbs exiting his mouth and plopping onto the white tablecloth. 'And you had your face scrunched up and you wouldn't stop screaming. We thought *you* were going to be the loud one!'

Max is the family member who screams. I barely know how to cry.

BACKWATERS

Part I

1860s, a small village somewhere in Guangdong

He stood at the edge of the wheatfields while the sun rose slowly. Around him, the villagers worked, their bodies making repetitive cutting motions.

Kaineng, who would later be known as Ken, was hardly noticeable, his slight body hidden in the shadows. It was the same his entire life. Nobody ever noticed Kaineng, because he was the fifth of six brothers and there was too much noise in the tiny house. Kai-Ming, his sixth brother, was famously loud, making it easy to overlook Kaineng.

'Stop staring,' Kai-Ge, fourth brother, said one afternoon when Kaineng was five. 'You're distracting me.'

Kai-Ge was playing some kind of marble game with the other older brothers in the courtyard. Kaineng had been watching, sitting in the dirt under the yard's only tree. The space was small, but he still felt far away, watching four of his brothers roll marbles at each other, the glass sending speckles of dirt through the air.

'Why don't you go hang out with your friends?' said Kai-Shek, third brother.

'Does he have any?' asked Kaiyang, second brother, laughing.

'Don't think so,' said Kai-Shek.

'Must be difficult,' said Kai-Ge, 'being that quiet.'

'Must be difficult,' said Kaiyang, 'being that stupid.'

'Leave him be,' said Kai-Xi, the eldest, but he didn't stop the others when they ignored him.

Kaineng longed for closeness with his mother, but she had little time for individual affections.

'Go play with your brothers,' she'd huff, flapping her hands at him.

She was overburdened as it was, spending every day rubbing her wrists raw at an iron washboard, preparing all their meals, and keeping the house and her sons respectable. With six children, it was assumed that the older would care for the younger. It was Kaineng's bad luck that his brothers didn't want him around.

Thanks to his brothers, Kaineng learned how to be alone. He wandered the edges of the wheatfields, drawing in the dirt with a stick. In the mornings, the dew combined with the mud and manure to create a throat-clogging stench. To Kaineng, it was just the smell of his village.

He felt happiest outside in the sheen of morning mist. Much more so than in his house, which was small and old, with walls of mudbrick and a ribbed grey roof. For all its smallness, he never felt warm in that three-roomed house where he shared a room with two of his brothers. There was no bathroom, only a tiny shelter and a stinking hole in the courtyard. He was terrified of darkness and refused to go to the shelter at night.

His family was better-off than most, because his father owned a small but fertile piece of land. It was a short walk from the house, a little plot where the family grew cabbages, sweet potatoes, turnips, wheat and rice. There was always food on the table. Perhaps once every two weeks they even enjoyed the luxury of meat, a piece of char siu pork or spare ribs with preserved plum. They were still poor, and couldn't afford luxuries like toys, holidays or daily baths. But when his mother cooked meat, the little rooms filled with fragrant smoke and all of them would breathe deep.

School should have been Kaineng's refuge. It was a white building with a large stone courtyard where all the village boys played together. But Kaineng never made friends. If someone asked him a question, he would answer politely but quickly, ending the conversation with a ducked head.

At dinner, his parents didn't talk much. His father, a tall and quiet man, was usually exhausted from a day in the fields. He would smile as he listened to his sons, five of them squabbling loudly to be heard over each other, and he would laugh and nod in the right places, not noticing that Kaineng remained silent.

Kaineng told himself he didn't mind. He had two imaginary friends, Dog and Sky, and they were all he needed. Dog was the bigger personality of the two, the one who always teased Kaineng about not having any real friends.

'I don't want any,' he'd tell Dog. Dog was a bit like his older brothers, except, thank heavens, on his side. Sometimes, Dog would cross the line and then Kaineng would wish that he'd never invented him.

'Go away,' he'd tell Dog, but Dog always stayed.

Sky was the supportive one, but he too wanted Kaineng to root himself in reality.

'You can do this,' he'd say, placing an invisible hand on Kaineng's shoulder. 'Give it a go.'

Whenever the other kids were playing a game, or even just sitting together and talking, Sky would encourage Kaineng to join in. As if it were that easy.

'Go up and say hi.'

'Go and ask if you can play too.'

'You should make some real friends. We might not be around forever.'

Deep down, perhaps Kaineng felt lonely. But if he did, he wasn't aware of it. His imaginary friends may not have been flesh and blood, but they sprang up around him whenever he needed them, felt as real as the pain of tripping over in the street. Dog and Sky had their own distinct personalities, and as Kaineng grew up, they did too.

By the age of eight, he was spending most of his plentiful free time making up stories, which he'd recite to Dog and Sky. Apart from his house chores, helping out in his father's field, and school—in which he learned only rudimentary reading, writing and mathematics—his time was his own. Sometimes he would wander the streets, talking to Dog and Sky, or watching the movements of the clouds.

He set himself the task of learning how to write at a high level, and he stole some of the limited paper from school and carefully scribbled his feelings and stories across it. He borrowed every book that the school possessed (which wasn't many) and read them over and over again, until he knew the Four Books and the Five Classics by heart.

Every student could recite ancient lyric poetry, but most of the students didn't think much of the actual verses. Kaineng absorbed them. 'Quiet Night Thought' by Li Bai was his favourite. He *felt* the words, the reflections of moonlight, the frost on the ground.

At the age of eleven he started writing poems on the stolen paper. He wrote about the village, the smell of the earth in the mornings, the whisper of mist as it fell. He wrote about feeling small and alone, about how he wanted to see a bigger world.

In his heart of hearts, he knew it was unlikely. He knew little about the wider world and couldn't find out more, because none of his teachers had ever left the village and none of the school books talked about other countries. Although a few men had scraped together enough money to leave, sailing to foreign lands to make their fortunes elsewhere, none had yet returned.

Beginning around his early teens, Kaineng would sometimes feel a particular kind of cold, as though rain had soaked through his thin clothing and into his bones. Especially when his older brothers were laughing together.

The truth was that nobody would miss him if he disappeared. They would wonder about him, perhaps look for him for a day or two, but their lives would not be changed. And that's what he wanted. To matter to someone.

Divorce?

Saturday afternoons mean working with Grandpa in the garden, kneeling in the dirt and helping him with the weeding. His hands are callused from a lifetime of this work, so he never wears gloves, but he bought me a special pair of green ones, and also a sunhat.

After Grandma passed away, I started going to see Grandpa by myself. Without Grandma breathing down my neck, their house feels lighter, warmer.

We always chat while we work, first about my life and what I'm doing, and then about him. I tell him about the Chinese New Zealand stories I've been asked to write.

'I'm not sure if I want to do it though,' I explain.

'Your grandmother would have a lot to say about that,' Grandpa says, and we laugh. She would be furious if I didn't take a publishing opportunity. She would be equally furious if I didn't write a dramatised version of her life story.

'Maybe I should write about *you*,' I say suddenly.

Why didn't I think of that before? It seems so obvious. Grandpa is the grandson of one of the earliest Chinese New Zealand settlers. He grew up around market gardens and fruit shops. He would be perfect.

'Would that be okay?' I ask. It's the first thing I've thought of that actually motivates me, and that's when I know I have to write these stories.

'You want to write about me? I'm not that interesting,' Grandpa says.

'Yes you are! You're historically relevant.'

'Oh, good to know I'm *historically relevant*.' Grandpa laughs, a familiar twinkle in his eye.

I grimace. 'Sorry, that came out wrong.'

'Don't worry about it.'

We return to the weeds.

One Sunday dinner, when I was little, I dropped a bit of potato onto the floor. When I ducked down to retrieve it, I saw that my parents were holding hands.

At that moment, I realised that my grandparents never touched each other. They always stood stiffly apart, never so much as letting their shoulders brush.

My parents' love is a tangible thing. My childhood friends would blush at the sight of my parents intertwined in hallways, in door-frames. It used to embarrass me, but now I'm just happy they still get along.

That Sunday night, I asked Dad how Grandma and Grandpa met. They're Mum's parents, but I'd figured he would know all about them. I must have been about twelve, and we were sitting back-to-back under the grapefruit tree in the garden, reading.

We used to sit like that all the time. It was comfortable for me, because he's always had a broad back, and he said it was good for his posture. We'd mostly sit in silence, but every now and again we'd talk about what we were reading—for him it was almost always some non-fiction book and for me it was always a novel.

'I mean, they don't seem suited to each other at all,' I said.

'They're not,' he said, and laughed. It was a bitter laugh, a thin sound like a badly played oboe. I'd never heard Dad sound like that.

'They were always arguing when your mother was growing up. They were under a lot of financial pressure too, which didn't help.'

I could imagine them fighting. I sometimes imagined my grandparents in bed together, not with childish squeamishness, but with a certain loneliness. I imagined them on opposite sides of the bed, facing the walls, a gaping drift between them.

'Why didn't they ever get a divorce?'

'Divorce wasn't really an option for them, in their generation, in their community. It just wasn't discussed,' he said.

'They could get a divorce now,' I said.

'They won't,' he said. 'They're going to stick it out until the end. Neither of them is short of determination, that's for sure. And it seems like they've reached a place of mutual tolerance. I don't think they fight any more, but of course I wouldn't know.'

'They can't always have been like that with each other. Surely things were good when they first got married?' I asked.

'Well, it was an arranged marriage, so it's hard to be sure,' he said.

‘An arranged marriage?’

‘It was common in those days.’

‘How horrible,’ I said.

‘You know, it’s still common in a lot of cultures. It’s not horrible, it’s just not what you’re used to.’

I knew that when they got married, Grandpa was thirty-seven and Grandma was thirty. For Chinese women back then, thirty was as good as expired.

She’d recently come out of a failed engagement, Mum told me once.

I asked Grandma about it once while she stir-fried vegetables and smoked. She smoked a lot while she cooked, doing everything with her right hand and holding the cigarette in her left.

‘We were all set to be married,’ Grandma said, expertly tipping a perfect amount of soy sauce into the pan, ‘and then I found out that he had another woman.’

I didn’t really know what to say to that, so I didn’t say anything.

‘I loved him still. I would have swallowed my pride and forgiven him. We all knew that’s what my mother would have wanted. And he was everything I wanted. Handsome. Smart. Funny. But he left me to be with her. I was heartbroken. I didn’t think I’d ever get married after that. But a year later, my parents set me up with your grandpa.’

‘Did you ever talk to your old fiancé again?’

‘God, no. He moved down south with his new woman and thank heavens. I still don’t think I could look him in the eye, and it’s been decades.’

She gave me a wry smile as she chopped the ends off the beans and added them to the pan.

‘Laura, make sure you’re the one on top in a relationship,’ she said.

It was the best conversation we ever had.

About a year after Grandma died, I asked Grandpa how he was feeling. We were in the garden, and I could feel the cold, damp dirt through my jeans. It was a blowy day and I was wearing a thick blue jumper that I’d stolen from Mum.

Grandpa looked me in the eye. ‘I’ve felt happier since she died.’

‘I don’t think you’re supposed to say things like that,’ I said, shocked.

‘Well, it’s the truth. Isn’t telling the truth a good thing?’

I nodded, uncertain, and he continued.

‘I never wanted to get married,’ he said, ‘but I am not a confrontational person. My parents found a girl and told me to marry her, so I did.’

I couldn’t imagine marrying someone because my parents told me to. I pictured my parents presenting some boy to Max and wanted to laugh out loud.

‘And were you ever happy in your marriage? In the beginning?’

Grandpa explained it like this: there are billions of people in the world, countless potential pairings. It only makes sense that some of them could never work, no matter how hard the couple might try. If you put oil and water together in a jar, the two elements won’t combine, no matter how many times the jar is shaken up. My grandparents were married through two world wars—if the desperation and heightened emotions of wartime couldn’t fix their relationship, nothing could.

‘The wedding was a cheap, hurried thing. Nobody enjoyed it. Although I actually don’t remember it too well—I had quite a bit to drink.’

He told me they’d met a few weeks before the wedding, when she’d brought her parents to dinner at his house. By the end of the evening, they both knew that the rest of their lives were going to be difficult.

‘We were different people, that’s all. And don’t get me wrong, I did grow to love her, somewhat. But we were never in love.’

I couldn’t stop the questions coming. What about his parents? Hadn’t they seen that the match wasn’t going to work?

‘There was no question of divorce. It was going to work. And it did, technically. We successfully had a child, we bought a house, nobody had an affair.’

‘But you weren’t happy.’

He just laughed.

‘Did you ever go out with anyone else?’ I asked.

We were taking a break from the garden, and I was adding milk to two cups of tea. Two spoons of sugar for him, none for me. I wonder if Mum knows how many sugars he likes.

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘I’m curious.’

‘I was never interested in settling down,’ he said. ‘I went on a few dates here and there, but I don’t think I ever met the one.’

I didn’t reply immediately so we sat in a meditative silence for a few

moments.

‘What about now?’ The thought occurred to me suddenly.

‘Now? I’m too old now.’

‘You’re not too old,’ I said. ‘I’m sure there are lots of people in your position.’

‘So, you mean widows and widowers.’

‘Well, maybe, but does that matter? It would be nice for you to have someone to keep you company.’

‘Until I die, you mean? No, Lorry, I’m good on my own. You don’t always need someone in your life, you know. Sometimes life is enough on its own.’

The Inside of My Elbow

It's Monday morning and I'm organising a panel event that the gallery is hosting next Thursday. I spend my whole morning sending emails to the speakers, caterers and staff that need to be here to help out. I'll be there too. I always help out with night events.

The gallery takes on a different feel at night. Most of our events are in the ballroom, a beautiful, spacious room lined with dark wood panelling. A huge strip of the ceiling is glass, and on a clear night moonlight streaks through the room, tinting the wood silver.

I'm in the middle of an email when I feel a tap on my shoulder. I swivel around in my chair. Henry.

'Want to take your lunchbreak now?'

I'm not hungry yet, but I can never say no to him.

'Sure!'

Henry waits for me to gather my things and we move outside to sit under the old pōhutukawa tree right behind the gallery. It's a particularly nice day. The sky is mostly clear with a few clouds scattered across it and there's a light breeze. Autumn is my favourite season. The Auckland summer sun is scorching and winter is always dreary.

'If you catch a falling autumn leaf you get a day of good luck,' I tell Henry. He looks so relaxed in jeans and red sneakers, leaning back on his elbows.

'Where's that one from?' he asks, and I tell him I read it in some storybook.

'Even though I know it's probably not true, I always look out for falling leaves,' I say.

'Well, it's not going to do any harm,' he responds. 'A little extra luck never hurt anybody.'

This sparks a conversation about times in our lives when we've had particularly good or bad luck. He tells me about the time he got three wasps

stuck up his shirt. I tell him about the time I found a fifty-dollar note on the road. I was seven and it was the most money I'd ever held.

Conversations with Henry are always light and fun, our back and forth effortless. I get tired easily around other people, but with Henry I always seem to feel energised, even electric.

He starts telling me about the charity he volunteers with. It's called the Street Housing Services, or SHS for short.

I didn't know he volunteered. I knew he cared about people, but I didn't know he cared enough to actually do something.

'What does the SHS do?' I ask.

I take a small bite of my salad, which is tightly packed in a green Tupperware container. I wish I could be more open with my feelings. Not enough feta or rocket. I wish I had more confidence. Not enough pesto.

'We help people off the streets and also provide free rehabilitation services,' Henry tells me. It turns out that he's there every Thursday night, helping prepare food and sorting through donations. I imagine him wearing plastic gloves and a hairnet, spending hours folding clothes in a dusty hall. He's relaxed as he tells me that he's essentially an incredibly selfless person. It makes me want to find out what else I don't know about him.

It also makes my writing feel frivolous. I spend my spare time trying to make myself an art career while he's actually making a difference. I tell him that and he shrugs.

'Everyone has their own thing. Art helps people. Isn't that one of the reasons you do it?'

I write because I like writing. It seems too convenient to believe I'm doing some good in the world just by doing what I love most. I decide to be honest.

'My motives aren't that impressive. If my writing can have a positive impact, that's great, but that's not the real reason I do it. I just love it.'

'Didn't I ask you to show me some of your writing the first time we met?' he asks, distracting me from my inner turmoil. He smiles at me and it lights me up. I become this glowing, joyous person instead of the pond I really am.

Of course, I haven't shown him my writing. It's too personal, vulnerable. All the things I think but don't say are in my work. I'm always scared to show it to people, because if they don't like it, it means they don't like the real me. And I want Henry to like me.

Besides, we're not that close. We've never even hung out outside work.

'Show me something,' he says now, hitting me gently on the shoulder. It's

not a question.

‘Yeah, sure,’ I say, like it’s no big deal.

‘Looking forward to it,’ he says. He gets up and brushes grass off the seat of his pants, then pauses. ‘Oh, also, my flat’s having a dinner party on Sunday night. You should come.’

I become suddenly conscious of the inside of my elbow, the sensation of my skin. Is he upping our friendship to outside-of-work closeness? Does he want to get to know me on a deep, personal level? His face is open and friendly, inviting me in.

‘I’ll see if I’m free,’ I say. Part of me still feels rebellious by agreeing to do things on Sunday night, even though we haven’t had family dinners since Grandma died.

‘It’ll be fun, everyone’s bringing a plate.’

‘Yeah, all right,’ I say before I have the chance to overthink it. ‘I’ll be there.’

Anime Characters

After work, I meet Max and Isabelle in Mount Eden Village. I love the long nights before daylight savings reverts. It's still light out, and the streets are quiet except for the occasional car. I'm exhausted, as I always am on Monday evenings. Adjusting to work after the weekend is an endeavour in itself.

We get ramen from Zool Zool then walk down the street towards Casa del Gelato, our favourite ice-cream place. It's a little store with just two sit-in tables and the frozen counter. It's proper, fancy gelato piled up in artistic swirls, the kind that looks and is expensive. Next door is Time Out, a cute little bookshop crammed with colourful covers and warm, yellow light. I always spent my birthday money there and got ice cream afterwards.

I like Isabelle. She's loud and friendly, the kind of person who instantly makes me feel at home. Hanging out with her and Max feels entirely natural, so we do it every other week. They've been together so long now I can't imagine them apart.

While standing in the queue, a blonde woman keeps shooting nasty looks at the two of them, their intertwined hands. She doesn't say anything, but I can tell Isabelle feels uncomfortable. Max notices too.

'What are you glaring at?'

The lady jumps, clearly not expecting a call-out.

'Nothing,' she blurts, turning away.

Isabelle smiles. I'm proud of Max. I would never have done that, would have silently endured the stares.

The blonde woman asks for cookies-and-cream ice cream. We stand in silence while she pays and walks out with her cone.

'What would you like?'

The girl behind the counter is tall and willowy with ivory skin and red hair. Ridiculously beautiful. I glance at the others. They think so too, I can tell. We choose our ice creams: peach for me, strawberry sorbet for Isabelle, and peanut butter and chocolate for Max.

As we're paying, I notice the girl staring at Max.

'Hey...I think I know you?'

She says it like she's not sure.

'Oh, really? Where from?' Max looks genuinely confused.

'From uni? I think I'm in the year above you.'

'Oh, cool. Well, um, say hi if you see me around.'

Max looks uncomfortable as we walk out. It happens everywhere. People recognise Max with her colourful clothes and blue hair, whereas she doesn't notice anyone except her girlfriend. People think Max is cool, and she *is*, but she's also shy until you know her. After that, she doesn't shut up.

Outside the store, Isabelle and I crack up.

'Fifth time in two weeks,' Isabelle snorts. 'You're *famous*.'

'Am not!' Max yells. For a second, her eyes light up like fire. 'I don't like being noticed so much.'

'You don't exactly dress down,' I say.

'Can't I just wear what I want?' she retorts.

Max is wearing a neon-green velvet dress over a sparkly sheer top, knee-length white boots and a faux-pearl choker. Her hair is loose, long and candy blue. She looks like an anime character.

Isabelle complements her perfectly with her denim dungarees, bright yellow jumper and short pink hair. I'm wearing black pants and a red blouse—work clothes. My hair is short, black and neat. It's easy to feel plain next to Max and Isabelle.

When we were kids, I used to resent Max for stealing focus. For three sweet years I was the centre of attention. I know people aren't supposed to remember much from their first three years, but when I squeeze my eyes shut, I can conjure vague moments: warm hands on my skin, my dad's laughter, mum's baby-powder smell. For three years I was the beloved only child.

And then Max came along, and she was instantly louder, instantly took up more space than me.

I have this one memory: I was five, and Max and I were in the garden, playing a stupid game of tug of war. At one point we both pulled too hard and must have let go at the same time, because we went flying. I remember landing with a thud on the grass, all the wind knocked out of me. There was a piercing pain in my knee, and it was covered in blood.

Mum was walking towards me, but then Max started howling, screaming like the world was going to end. Mum turned away and scooped up Max

instead.

It turned out that I needed stitches. Max just had a bruise.

It's always been like that. Max is the one with the stories, the drama, the attention. I am the well-behaved one.

I try not to resent it, but sometimes it slips out like that rope.

'My supervisor asked me to write some Chinese New Zealand family stories,' I mention casually. We're sitting on a bench at the base of Mount Eden, in a spot with a view.

The sky is a kaleidoscope of red, pink and gold, scattered through with hazy clouds. The city starts to glow with tiny pricks of yellow light. My ice cream tastes cold and wonderful on my tongue.

'I thought you weren't Chinese,' Max snorts.

'It's complicated,' I say.

'Well, yeah, I mean, it's not that complicated. Dad's Singaporean Chinese. Mum's third-generation Chinese. We're Chinese. Stop being so whitewashed.'

Max has always embraced her Chinese-ness, wearing op-shop cheongsams with pride, learning Mandarin, watching C-dramas. She makes it look cool, but I can't be her.

'We have Chinese *ancestry*,' I correct. 'And just because I don't feel Chinese doesn't mean I'm whitewashed.'

We've had this same argument a million times.

'If you don't want me to call you whitewashed, stop acting so fucking whitewashed!'

Isabelle watches us, amused. She's white, but smart enough not to have an opinion on her girlfriend's sister's ethnicity.

'We *do* have interesting stories in our family.' I change the subject. 'I could write about the market gardeners on Mum's side.'

'You should write about them. Then you'll finally have something good enough to show me.'

Max resents the fact that I've never shown her my work. She doesn't understand how critical she is, how much she impacts my confidence.

The next morning, I go to the pool with my togs on under my clothes. In the changing room, I snap a swimming cap over my head, tucking it over my

ears, and arrange my goggles on top.

The blue tiled floor is cold and rough beneath my feet as I walk to the pool and slip into the water. I choose a lane with only one swimmer at the other end, so I feel wonderfully alone as I kick off from the wall and start a steady freestyle.

When I swim, I usually don't think about anything at all, just enjoy the feeling of water flowing through my fingers. Today, though, my mind keeps returning to the Chinese New Zealand stories my supervisor wants me to write. I can't help wondering if I'm qualified to write them, if I'm Chinese enough.

In everything I've ever written, I've never once written about race. Mostly because I haven't wanted to. Either it didn't feel relevant, or I felt that I could better discuss something I felt less confusion about. Now, I wonder if writing about it might help me reach some conclusions about my identity. Maybe this is a good opportunity.

I think about it all day, hardly concentrating as I do my work tasks, which suddenly seem incredibly boring.

'You seem a little distracted,' Henry says as he walks past.

I have my legs curled up on my chair, my chin resting on my chest. 'Yeah. Just a little tired.'

'Anything I can help you with?'

'Nah. Thanks for asking though.'

On Wednesday I show up at Tracy's office. When I pop my head through the door, her eyes are trained on her email. Today she's wearing unflattering pink lipstick and a matching blazer.

'Hey, Tracy?'

I can hear her manicured nails tap-tapping on the keys.

'Come in,' she says, hardly looking up. I step into the room. 'What do you need?'

It's like she's determined not to look at me.

'I've decided to do the writing project. The one for the anthology.'

'Oh, I knew you would,' she says, like it was obvious.

Finally, she turns to look at me. Her eyes are round like an owl's.

Her comment makes me feel awkward. Am I really that predictable? Does she think I'm going to do everything she asks me to?

‘Yeah, I mean, I thought I’d better confirm.’

‘Oh. Well, that’s great. I’m sure you’ll do a great job!’

‘Yeah, hopefully,’ I mumble, but she’s already moved on to something else.

The Vegetarian

On Saturday the hours and minutes jumble while I do my ordinary weekend things: swim, get coffee with Ashley, eat chicken salad for lunch, go for a walk. I make a carrot cake to bring to dinner. It's two layers and has cream-cheese icing with orange peel and walnuts.

By the time I've finished the cake it's nearly five, so I shower and get dressed. The dinner starts at six-thirty and I want to get there exactly on time.

Henry said there would be six or seven people there. I mentioned that new people sometimes make me nervous and he reassured me that I already knew *him*, and everyone else would be 'your type of person', whatever that means.

When I walk in, at 6.29 p.m., I discover I'm the first one there. Henry takes the cake with a 'thanks', and puts it on the kitchen bench next to a wooden bowl of fruit. The kitchen has a large hole-in-the-wall bar connecting it to a lounge room with red throws and cushions on the sofas. The air in the flat is warm and aromatic.

'Sorry about the heat, I've been cooking all afternoon.'

'No worries,' I say. 'What have you made?'

'A Moroccan tagine with couscous. And a couple of salads. And some sourdough.'

I spy one of the salads, which is in a sky-blue glass bowl. I can see generous chunks of feta and avocado, and sculpted pieces of beetroot. He's good at everything.

'You like cooking, then.'

I like it when boys can cook. All boys should be able to cook so girls don't get shoved back into the kitchen.

'I dabble,' he replies, without looking up. I sneak a glance at his face: he's focused on the sourdough, which he's slicing with a thick knife.

I wander over to the bookshelf, which is what I tend to do in houses I haven't visited before. His flatmates are all architects, friends from high school, so most of the books are about design—hardback books with glossy

covers and thick pages. There are a few novels too, mostly classics like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Anna Karenina*. My fingers pause at one slender spine and I draw the book out.

‘This is one of my favourites,’ I say.

‘Which one is it?’

‘*The Vegetarian*.’

‘Oh, I love that,’ he says. ‘I’ve probably read it four or five times.’

‘I didn’t know you liked to read,’ I say. Han Kang is the first female Asian author I loved. She means a lot to me.

‘Just because I’m not a writer doesn’t mean I don’t read.’

Evie, one of Henry’s flatmates, walks into the room. I’ve never met her before, but Henry mentioned that Evie was the flatmate with yellow-and-green hair, so it’s not too difficult to identify her.

‘This is Laura,’ says Henry.

‘Hi! I’m Evie,’ she says. She’s wearing a mustard cardigan over green corduroy pants. With the hair, too, she looks like an Australian sports flag. She’s cute.

‘Lovely to meet you,’ I say, shifting my weight from foot to foot. ‘I didn’t realise I was so early.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ says Evie. ‘Most of Henry’s other friends are chronically late. They think it’s a statement. I’m pretty sure you were exactly on time.’

Sure enough, within the next half hour everyone else arrives and is seated around the rectangular dining table. Chris, one of the other flatmates, puts on a Vince Guaraldi record. The wine flows and soon everybody is tipsy. I don’t like wine, but I accept a glass and sip it when I’m not talking so I have something to do. It’s bitter. The food, however, is excellent, and everyone compliments me on the cake. I don’t eat any of it so I have to trust that it tasted good and that people aren’t merely being polite.

After dinner, we all move to the lounge, where we arrange ourselves on the couches and the floor. My heartbeat speeds up when Henry sits next to me, stretching his legs out.

‘Having fun, Laura?’ he asks. He looks comfortable, his shoulders back. I’m sitting cross-legged with my fingers gripping my knees.

‘Yeah. Your friends are lovely.’

‘Aren’t they? I have the best friends. I’m super lucky. We do these dinner parties all the time, taking turns hosting. What do you and your friends do together?’

He looks at me kindly, like he genuinely cares about the answer. Like I’m someone he really wants to know about.

I tell him about movie nights, concerts, tagging along on camping trips growing up.

‘Did you ever play spotlight?’ I ask, the memories flooding over me. I remember crouching behind bushes, speed-crawling across hard ground, adrenaline pulsing through my veins.

‘Yeah. Did you play it camping?’

‘Yeah. I haven’t played it in ages! I want to play it again.’

‘Let’s do it right now.’

I stare at him. Is he serious? But then he’s standing up and announcing to his friends that it’s time to walk to the park down the road and play spotlight. I wait for them to groan and complain that spotlight is a kid’s game. To my surprise, everyone stands up and starts putting on their shoes. What kind of power does Henry have?

‘Do you often play games like this?’ I ask Evie.

‘Oh yeah, all the time. Last time we had dinner together we played go-home stay-home. Henry always initiates. He loves this shit.’

Another thing I didn’t know about him.

‘So you and Henry work together?’ Evie asks, and I nod.

‘You’re the first work friend he’s brought home,’ she says. ‘I think he might like you.’

The way she says it is both casual and a little bit conspiratorial, like we’re children on the playground giggling over our secret crushes. Against my will, my stomach fizzes.

At the park, someone volunteers to be the seeker and starts counting down while we all sprint off into the dark.

BACKWATERS

Part II

Qiu had a heart full of laughter. She was the miracle, the chosen one, the prayed-for child. When Qiu was born, it was summer rain after drought.

She was loved by everybody—her parents, three older sisters, grandparents, neighbours, uncles, aunts and friends. Her sisters took her everywhere, pulled across their shoulders like a sling. They doted on her, flooding her face with kisses, running their fingers through her hair. When she walked the streets, everybody wanted to talk to her.

Qiu's mother had miscarried the winter before Qiu was born. All the neighbours had prayed for Qiu's safe delivery. She was everybody's daughter.

'Sing for us, Qiu!' the villagers would beg. They'd set her on a stand and get her to perform for them. She loved singing and could sing all the local folk songs in a sweet, clear voice by the time she was three.

By the time she was five, they wanted her to stand in the fields and sing while they worked.

'You're my little good-luck charm,' her father told her, swinging her up and kissing her nose.

'My special star,' her mother whispered. Qiu loved her mother. Qiu would sit by her while she cooked, the steaming pan warming the air and diffusing clouds with the scent of soy sauce and scallions. Whatever she made, she would let Qiu try a spoonful before it reached the table.

Qiu never wanted for anything. She was showered with love, with care, with meticulous attention when she was sick. She was disciplined to become her parents' approximation of a good person, taught to give light where it was needed.

It helped that she was bright and vivacious, talked easily and with everyone. She played the role the village set for her, even when it exhausted her.

Because, truthfully, sometimes she almost couldn't stand it. Sometimes she just wanted to exist without having to bring joy to everyone else. Sometimes she wished she could be selfish and forget about other people.

But that wasn't an option. This was her fate.

Qiu knew she would never leave her village, was destined to grow from beloved daughter to wife to mother.

She did sometimes dream, dreams that were small but still impossible. She wanted a life where there was room to change colour. A glimmer of independence. She secretly hoped that one day she could own and run a small shop that sold daily, mundane things: vegetables, rice, soy sauce. A shop that would be her own tiny kingdom, that would mean she would never need to rely on a husband or anybody else. Of course, it was out of the question in her village, so she sometimes imagined leaving. Just packing up her life in a shoulder bag and walking away, letting the village shrink in her wake. She imagined walking into the sky, her legs long and strong, and never once looking back.

Kaineng and Qiu spoke for the first time on a Wednesday afternoon, seventeen years after being born forty-seven days apart in near-identical houses three streets away from each other. They had finished their respective chores for the day and were down by the river. She was with a group of girls dangling their legs in the water, bony feet swaying like minnows. He was alone, as always. He was aware that she was there. He was always aware of her. Whenever she shared a space with him, she was like a moth flitting around his mind. He took great care not to look at her too much, desperately hoping she'd never

look at him directly.

Inside his head, she was an eidolon. He didn't want his vision of her to shatter.

He remembered the first time she entered his mind, his life. They were four, maybe five, and he was wandering the streets under the pretence that he was playing. Dog and Sky were with him, and the three of them were in amicable silence. It was a blustery day, the wind whipping past in angry blows. His arms were cold.

'Maybe we should go inside,' said Sky.

'I don't want to,' Kaineng replied.

The gusts grew in intensity, rolling along the grey paving stones with force. The street was nearly empty and the gates to the ramshackle houses were all shut.

With the next gust of wind came a mother and daughter. They were hand in hand, running in the same direction as the weather so that it seemed to be carrying them. Kaineng barely noticed the mother, but he saw *her*, and even in that tiny pocket of time he recognised her special glow. He couldn't say what made her different from all the other children in the village, just that there was some quality about her, and even at the age of four or five he could see it. His chest sang.

'You like her, don't you?' said Dog.

He could only nod.

'You'll never have the guts to talk to her.'

He nodded again.

Later, he told her all of this.

'I'd never even noticed you,' she said. 'That day at the river was the first time I laid eyes on you, and we'd lived in the same village our whole lives. How strange is that.'

He hadn't been surprised. He'd have known if she had ever noticed him. The first time her gaze met his, that day at the river, he'd been transfixed.

'Hi,' she'd said, 'what's your name?'

It took all his strength to stammer out a reply.

Weeks later, they couldn't imagine being apart. They walked around the Guangzhou village, tracing the edges of the houses and working fields. The streets always seemed grey and drab to Kaineng. Streets lined with grey paving stones, small brown-brick houses, open-drain rivers with little stone bridges for people to walk over. Yet when Qiu walked them, these streets became beautiful. Kaineng would watch her approach, the way her body rippled with her movements. Time slowed down.

At night, they went to the grassy clearing on the side of the hill and sat for hours beneath the pale moon, trading stories and wishes and feelings.

His poems changed in tone. He started to write short poems, love poems. She wanted him to read them out loud to her, but he was shy. Instead he would press the paper into her hands before the two of them parted.

She touched him first. He was so in awe of her, he wouldn't dare push any boundaries in case she pulled away.

Eventually, frustrated, she turned to him. 'Don't you want to kiss me?'

He panicked, the blood rushing to his cheeks. But then she leaned over and kissed him, and it was done.

From there it was easy. Even in the cool of autumn they were never cold. They curled their bodies around each other and it was exhilarating and it was a dream—it was everything he'd ever wanted.

She loved his hands in her hair, the way he gently raked his fingers through it.

He loved her voice most of all. Kaineng hadn't realised how starved he'd been before. He'd never really talked to anyone like this. Their conversations seemed to both stop and accelerate time—this was his first experience of expressing himself.

'What do you think about this?' she would say, in relation to some idea she'd had.

'I don't know,' was his automatic response.

'Then think about it,' she'd reply.

She pushed him to think something concrete. Did he prefer this animal or that one? Summer or winter? Day or night? He wasn't used to confidently stating his opinions or preferences, or even having them, and it made him reflect on who he was. Nobody had ever cared to ask him about himself before.

As he found himself answering each of Qiu's questions, he found that he had a lot to say.

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She told him her fantasy of leaving.

He, too, used to have that dream, although only before he met her. To set sail, burning the backwater—to never, ever think of coming back. He used to imagine faraway lands, exotic trees with branches spiralling in every direction, strangers smiling and extending their hands. But now, he didn't want any of that. He hated imagining any future that didn't include her.

'I would never want to leave,' he insisted. 'I'm perfectly happy right here.'

'Don't tell me you haven't thought about leaving,' she said. 'You have to have imagined some alternative life somewhere.'

'Not really,' he lied. 'I've never even thought about it. The stories I make up are never about me, they're always about other people.'

'Have you ever made up a story about me?'

He was grateful she'd changed the subject.

'Do you want me to?'

'You didn't answer the question.'

'Millions. Before you talked to me, I had this story where I went up to you and talked to you.'

'How did that story end?'

'How do you think?'

Hands

‘I’m going to be writing some Chinese New Zealand stories for work,’ I say at the dinner table. Mum, Dad, Max and Grandpa look at me. I’ve obviously already talked to Grandpa about this, but he kindly pretends I haven’t.

‘What kind of stories?’ Grandpa asks, a sparkle in his eye.

‘*Chinese New Zealand stories* is very vague,’ Mum adds. ‘What does that mean? And I thought you didn’t consider yourself Chinese?’

Max cackles.

Inwardly, I groan. Not again.

‘I have Chinese ancestry.’ I strive to redirect the conversation. ‘My supervisor wants stories based on family history. I was thinking maybe I could write about the market gardeners. You know, like your grandparents.’ I turn to look at Grandpa.

‘Go for it,’ Grandpa says warmly. ‘I’m sure anything you write will be amazing.’

‘So will you be writing non-fiction then?’ Dad asks. ‘That’ll be something different for you.’

‘Why don’t you look in our attic? I think we have some old journals in there,’ Mum suggests. ‘Some of the market gardeners in our family were literate.’

After dinner, Max clears the table while Dad and I do the dishes and Mum makes tea. She carries the pot through to the dining table with a plate of gingernuts, laying out the cups in a neat row. Mum likes to finish meals with peppermint tea, because it’s supposed to help with digestion. Dad likes to finish meals with something sweet.

On Friday night, Ashley and I are relaxing on the coach when she jumps up.

‘We’re so boring,’ she says.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, it’s Friday night. We should do something, not just laze around.’

I’m halfway through *Kafka on the Shore*. I’m not particularly bored.

‘Well, what do you want to do?’

‘Let’s go out. Like, to a bar or something.’

I reluctantly get up from my warm spot on the couch and go to my room to change. I choose a red silky top, high-waisted jeans and heeled boots. Then I swipe a brush through my hair and pin it back, apply eyeliner and mascara, and spritz myself with cherry blossom perfume from the Body Shop. For some reason, I’ve never grown out of Body Shop scents, even though the other shoppers are always thirteen-year-old girls. I remind myself that there is nothing wrong with thirteen-year-old girls.

‘All right, ready.’ I stand in the hallway and swing my bag over my shoulder.

‘You look cute!’ Ashley says.

She’s wearing a black playsuit with a plunging neckline, and a bright-red lip. My physical opposite: tall, blonde and thin, willowy like a dancer. She’s everything I used to want to be.

Being her friend has been a good reminder that it's important not to judge by appearances. Ashley's not particularly confident about herself. For whatever reason, she's massively insecure about her nose. I don't think her nose is noticeable either way, but whenever we pass a mirror, she pauses to see if it's ruining her outfit.

'Your nose looks *fine*, Ash,' I insist every time, pulling her away from the mirror.

Now, she orders an Uber and we wait out on the street. It's not cold, but there's a light breeze and neither of us are wearing jackets. I rub my bare arms with my hands, skimming my nails against my skin.

In the Uber, Ash starts telling me a story about her sister's horse.

'And you know, he jumped over at least *three* different fences before running down the street!' she tells me animatedly, moving her hands with exaggerated gestures.

It's a dumb bit that we have, making up stupid stories for the Uber driver. They almost always believe them.

'Do you have a horse, miss?' the driver asks. His English is heavily accented. I suddenly feel guilty for having him on.

'My sister,' Ashley says.

'How long have you been driving Uber?' I ask the driver, changing the subject.

'Just three months. I only do it at nights and on weekends.'

He glances in the rear-view mirror.

'Where are you from?' he asks.

Part of me recoils, but another part of me understands. He's probably looking for connection.

•

At the bar, Ashley and I slide into stools at a high table. The bar is dimly lit and crowded, so the bodies around us are like shadows.

We order drinks and Ashley proceeds to tell me in detail about the boy she's currently seeing.

'He invited me to meet his friends tomorrow night,' she says, stirring her straw so the ice cubes clink. 'That's a really good sign, I think.'

I affirm everything she says. It's hard to keep up with Ashley's love-life. It's neon and fast-paced, so unlike my own.

After an hour or so, she disappears to the bathroom. I can tell by the way she walks that she's a bit tipsy. I've had two drinks and can feel the telltale prickle in my cheeks, but otherwise I feel fine.

While she's gone, a man approaches me.

'How you doing, gorgeous?' he asks. He's wearing a tailored suit and tie, and has brown hair and a boyish smile. He looks like he's in his late thirties.

'Um. Good.'

'You're a doll, did you know that?'

He's staring at my body, as if committing it to memory. I resist the temptation to cross my arms across my chest.

'Do you want to come and sit with me and my friends?' He gestures to a table in the corner. I glance over at the group of men.

'No, thank you. My friend's with me.'

'She can come too. Come on! It'll be fun. I'll buy you a drink.' He grabs my wrist and I feel ill. How do I get out of this?

'No, I think I'm good.' I try to pull my arm away, but he doesn't let go.

'Come on, just half an hour.'

'Hey, she said no!'

Suddenly Ashley is there, and my wrist is sore but free.

'Leave us alone,' she says, voice steely.

'All right, all right.' The man backs away, looking sheepish.
'Are you okay?' she asks me. I nod at her, my throat clogged.
'You need to be more assertive, you know.'
'I know.'

Lazy Susan

A few weeks back, Henry mentioned that he'd never had yum cha, so I suggested that we gather a group at work and go out for lunch together on a Saturday. He was so enthusiastic that I laughed out loud. He smiled then, a smile so warm and luminous that I couldn't help but smile too.

I chose a place called Jade Palace, which is on High Street, and we meet outside the restaurant at midday. When I get there, the wind is billowing around us, scattering crackly red leaves onto the roads. The sky is the smooth grey of cement.

I feel a mix of excitement and nerves whenever I bring white people to an Asian thing. It makes me feel extra Asian, the representative for a brand-new cultural experience.

Soon we're seated at a small round table, a lazy Susan spinning in front of us to deliver oolong tea. Henry keeps laying his palm on it and moving it from side to side. He looks like any confused white person in a Chinese restaurant. But unlike the rest of them, he looks sweet.

'I've never been at a table with one of these before,' he says.

'Did you know that lazy Susans were actually invented in the United States?' I ask.

'They're cool,' Henry says. 'Convenient.'

We watch a table being stripped of its dirty dishes and stained tablecloth. The waistcoated workers, their timing down to the second, act in smooth movements. Now the table is reduced to a grey plastic top, now a white cloth is billowing over it, a glass lazy Susan is being set down, white bowls and spoons, black chopsticks, and suddenly elegance is restored. The whole thing takes less than two minutes.

'I have to say, they work fast,' says Mika, one of our co-workers. She's also never been to yum cha before. She's a few years older than us and does event planning. 'So how does the ordering work?'

'The waiters go around with those silver trolleys,' says Sam. 'And each

trolley has a number of small dishes on them. We just choose the ones we want.'

Sam is one of the supervisors, a thirty-something documentary director who works at the gallery because he hasn't made any money with his films. He's one of the most relaxed people I've ever met. Unlike the others, he actually knows a lot about Chinese food, because he spent a year in Xiamen making a cooking show with a celebrity chef.

'Let's start ordering then.' Mika waves her pale hand imperiously. It makes me notice her chestnut hair and slightly upturned nose. 'Why aren't they coming over?'

Sam grins at me. 'It's because you need to be a bit more assertive. Oi!' he hollers at one of the waiters with a silver trolley. They wheel towards us; actually, directly towards me.

The waiter starts talking to me in Mandarin. I look sideways at Sam, who takes over, his Mandarin practised and smooth.

The waitress raises her eyebrows, still looking at me. I look down, and by the time I've looked up again she's gone and there are three bamboo steamers on the table. Sam's pronunciation sounded perfect to my untuned ears. It aggravates me. For a moment I wish he wasn't here so as not to show me up.

'That always happens,' I say, sighing. 'They always assume I can speak Mandarin.'

'A bit rude, wasn't she?' Mika says. 'Just walking off like that.'

Sam and I laugh, suddenly united again.

'She wasn't being rude,' I say. 'That's just the way of Chinese restaurants. It's all about efficiency. Look, she's already serving another table.'

'It's all part of the experience, Mika,' Sam says. 'Just go with it.'

'Strange,' says Mika. 'It certainly felt kind of rude.'

'Not really,' says Henry. 'Just different.'

He looks at me and smiles. I reach for a single siu mai the way I always do, using one chopstick to poke it through the middle.

After yum cha, Henry asks if I want to go up Mount Eden and I say sure. Everybody else goes home and we get on a bus. Soon it's just the two of us standing at the base of the hill.

It's a good day for walking. There's a light breeze, just a few clouds in the sky, and it's not too hot or cold.

As we walk up the path, I feel his eyes boring into my back. It makes me feel skittish, flexible. We talk about the piece I reluctantly emailed him after he kept asking me to send him something. It's called 'Table,' and was one of my favourite final hand-ins from uni, the only thing I felt was worthy of sending to Henry.

'I loved the way you wrote emotion into the tabletop,' he says. 'You used such simple language, but convey the idea so eloquently.'

The story's simple. It's about a table through time, a table that slowly accrues all the sentiments of everyone who's ever sat at it. Eventually, the weight becomes too much to bear and, 140 years after it was built, the tabletop cracks and is finally smashed up and burned for firewood.

'It made me feel something,' he says.

'I'm glad you liked it,' I say, and then I don't say anything else. Whatever *this* is, I like it, and I don't want to rush it. The air between us is dancing and shimmering.

We walk on in silence, and I can hear the sound of our footsteps, our breath, which have fallen in sync.

'Did it annoy you, what Mika said?' he suddenly asks.

'No, not really. I don't expect people to get the cultural differences. Anyway, I'm used to it.'

'It kind of annoyed me.'

I wait.

'If it were me, I'd say something. Like, point out that her comment was essentially racist, even if she didn't mean any harm. My parents are always saying problematic things and I make sure I call them out.'

'"If it were me"? You were there. If it bothered you, why didn't you do it yourself?'

'Maybe because I'm not the Asian person?'

'Oh, so the burden always has to be on the person of colour, does it?'

It comes out more jagged than I intend. Henry doesn't say anything for a long moment.

'You're right. I'm sorry.'

My voice softens. 'Assume that I know what I'm doing.'

Henry apologises again and I change the subject. Within minutes any awkwardness has fallen away and we're discussing all the places in the world we want to go.

At the top of Mount Eden, we collapse in the tufty grass, our stomachs sore

from laughter. The grass feels simultaneously soft and spiky against my legs. Turning on my side, I stare at the view.

Auckland stretches out in front of us, panoramic and beautiful with its silver high-rises, the Harbour Bridge stretching between the city and the North Shore, Rangitoto rising from the blue sea.

‘I’ll never get sick of this,’ I say. I’m not looking at Henry, but I know he’s listening.

‘I haven’t been up here in ages,’ he says. ‘I used to come here with my best friend, Charlie. We fell out of touch years ago, but I always associate this place with him.’

‘Associate it with me instead,’ I say. Then I do the boldest thing I’ve ever done—I reach across and take his hand.

Wordlessly, we lie there, hand in hand, Auckland in front of us. After about a minute of staring at the city and sky, Henry rolls over and I know he’s going to kiss me. My lungs contract as he moves closer, closer, and then his lips are on mine and my mind stops.

When I get home, it’s nearly six. I’m smiling so wide my mouth splits my face in half.

‘You look happy.’ Ashley grins at me.

‘I am happy,’ I say.

We make tea and sit on the couch and I tell her everything. It must be the first time in our entire friendship that I have a love-life to update her on.

It makes me feel strangely powerful.

I Wish I Had Butter-Yellow Hair

The first time I ran away from home, I was five. It was the weekend before I started school, the bravest thing I'd ever done at that point in my life. Even Max hadn't run away yet, although she would—a month later—and she would make it a whole lot further than me.

'But why do I have to go to school?' I demanded, pulling on my mother's sleeves.

'So you can learn,' she replied.

'Why can't I learn at home?'

'Because I'm not a teacher.' My mother's voice was gentle, but strong. She bent down and placed both her hands on my shoulders. It made me feel like I was anchored firmly in the ground, like I could never fall.

'You'll love school once you get there. You'll make a lot of friends.'

'I already have six friends from Kindy.' I ticked them off on my fingers. 'Jamie, Tanya, Cat, Tim, Molly and Anushka.'

'You'll have heaps of friends once you go to school. And you'll learn all about the world, so you can grow up and become whatever you want to be.'

'But I already know what I want to be,' I said.

'Do you?'

That afternoon, I decided to run away. As I packed my brand-new blue school bag with supplies such as my collection of tiny giraffes, I felt certain about what I was doing. I was going to be a famous writer, so why go to school? It would be a waste of time when there were far more important things I could be doing.

I set off down the long driveway feeling adventurous, ready for a wider world. The streets blurred as I walked. The sun started to set. The trees lining the roads seemed to guide my path. Leaves swirled around my feet and wind whipped my hair. I'd never felt more alive.

Five streets from my house, I turned around and ran straight back home.

That night, Mum made my favourite strawberry pudding for dessert. I

started school the next day. My teacher was called Ms Taylor. She had short red hair, like parrot feathers, and round glasses, and I loved her instantly.

‘Are you Chinese?’

The boy had freckles and butter-coloured hair, and he looked as if he was smelling something bad. Or maybe his face was always screwed up like that.

‘Are you Chinese?’

It was September and I had been at school for a few weeks. This kid, Joseph, had arrived that day. After walking in, he took in our hodgepodge class of seven kids, dropped his mother’s hand and threw himself right into the middle of things. He wasn’t shy at all. At morning tea, he went around interrogating each of us. He asked our names, when our birthdays were, whether we liked dogs or cats better. Maybe his parents gave him a list of questions for making friends or something, I don’t know. Either way, it seemed to be working. I liked his butter-yellow hair and was excited for my turn. But when he got to me, he frowned, and the question came bursting out of his mouth like vomit.

I was shocked. And maybe it sounds strange that I didn’t know the answer, but I didn’t. I was just a kid, like any other kid. So why did *I* get a different question to everyone else? Before I knew what else to say, the word spluttered from my lips: ‘No!’

He paused. ‘Oh. Okay. I thought you were. What’s your name?’

‘Laura,’ I said.

‘Well, Laura, bet you can’t do two monkey bars at once.’

‘Can so!’ I said, and we spent the next hour at the bars, swinging ourselves up through the gaps and pretending they were rooms in our own house.

That was the beginning of us being best friends.

That night at dinner I told my parents what Joseph had asked me. And I told them that I’d said no.

‘So, am I Chinese?’

My parents stared at me, then exchanged glances. They always seemed like a team at the dinner table, sitting on the same side and speaking to each other with their eyes.

‘Well, technically, yes,’ said Dad. ‘At least your roots are.’

‘My roots?’

‘Your ancestors are from China. But you’re from here, so you’re a New Zealander.’

‘So, I’m *not* Chinese?’

‘You’re both,’ said Mum. ‘You’re Chinese and you’re a New Zealander.’

‘Can one person be two things?’

‘Definitely,’ said Dad. ‘Take me as an example. I’m a dad, right? But I’m also a husband. And your mum’s a mum, but she’s also my wife.’

My head reeled.

At school the next day, I went up to Joseph.

‘It turns out I am Chinese,’ I announced. ‘But I’m from here, so I’m also a New Zealander.’

He stared at me.

‘You’re not Chinese,’ he said. ‘You’re my best friend.’

I was confused.

‘But I think I *am* Chinese,’ I said.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You’re not.’

That was the first time I learned that being Chinese wasn’t compatible with being a friend or being a person. The first time I learned that my identity was to be chosen by other people. If some other kid asked if I was Chinese, or Japanese, or Korean, Joseph would often answer for me.

‘She’s from *here*,’ he would say, and everyone would accept it. Part of me resented the fact that people believed him over me, that he was essentially the one labelling me, but another part of me felt relieved. I didn’t have to defend myself or explain that I was born here.

And so it came to be that, at primary school, I wasn’t Chinese, or even Asian. I was just Laura, and I loved it. It was like my ethnicity didn’t even exist. Instead, I was known for being competitive in PE, good at the recorder, confident in the pool.

At home, I was still trying to work out how I’d come into being. I couldn’t understand how, if my dad was born in Singapore, I had turned out Chinese.

I asked him about it once while he was hanging clothes on the line. He was playing Nick Drake on a small speaker and singing under his breath. He explained slowly that his parents were born in China, but he was born in Singapore. I didn’t understand then how racial tensions were a fixture in most countries, how Singapore was an ethnic melting pot. Dad said he didn’t really

see himself as either Singaporean or Chinese. Anyway, he'd spent more than half of his life in New Zealand.

'So, what do you say you are then?'

'I'm just nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing.'

Why would my father, who danced while he hung out the washing and sang along to an old record in a clear baritone, who always won at Blokus, who had an utterly irrational hatred of yellow cars and SUVs, call himself *nothing*?

BACKWATERS

Part III

Qiu couldn't tell her parents about Kaineng. She wasn't supposed to spend time with men. When her parents thought it was time for her to get married, they would arrange someone for her. The thought of marrying someone she didn't love was odious. The thought of sleeping next to him was even worse.

But she wanted Kaineng to meet her sisters.

'Do I have to?' he asked. He preferred their relationship confined to the two of them on the side of the hill. He liked pretending that they had their own world, a secret world that nobody else could penetrate.

'They're my sisters,' she replied. 'I want you to meet them.'

And so, one afternoon, she brought her sisters to their spot on the hill. He stood up when he saw them, his palms sweating, jaw tense.

Her sisters tried to make him feel comfortable. They sat down around him in the grass and asked him questions about himself. Kaineng attempted to answer them while staring at his hands. He couldn't bring himself to meet their eyes; they all carried some resemblance of Qiu.

'Which of your brothers do you think you're the closest to?' one of them asked.

'I'm not really close to any of them...' he said, trailing off.

'His older brothers aren't that nice,' Qiu interjected. He looked at her gratefully. 'And his youngest brother is always with his friends, so Kaineng doesn't see him much either.'

In the end, Qiu's sisters didn't dislike Kaineng, but they didn't love him either. They found it strange that their sister would be with someone like him. She was like a spring bubbling out of the earth, whereas he seemed like the earth itself.

'He's so shy, Qiu,' they said. 'He seems nice, but is he worth going against our parents?'

Kaineng's own family didn't seem to notice or care that his life had so drastically changed. He was out all day and half the night, but it didn't make a difference to the noise levels of the house. Kaineng realised that he'd never once felt at home in his house. Sometimes when he was with Qiu, he imagined his family as a flock of malevolent birds.

But he also remembered a conversation he once had with his second brother, Kaiyang, by the river. Kaiyang was with a group of friends. They were jostling each other and laughing, and then he spotted Kaineng and Qiu. Quite accidentally, Kaineng caught his eye and the next moment Kaiyang was with them.

'Kaineng,' he said. 'When did you meet a girl?'

'A while back,' was all that Kaineng could say.

'Hello,' Qiu said. Her voice was a delicate balance between polite and wary.

'Lovely to meet you,' Kaiyang said, and to Kaineng's surprise, he bowed to Qiu in the proper way. 'Be good to my brother, okay?'

And then, before returning to his friends, he gave Kaineng a friendly smack on the shoulder. 'See you later.'

Afterwards, Kaineng and Qiu dissected that brief conversation.

'He seemed nice,' said Qiu. She was surprised, because Kaineng had painted such a black image of his family. She'd believed him, but she was also aware that his interactions with most people were pessimistic.

'He's not the worst one,' said Kaineng. 'Kai-Ge is the one who gets the most pleasure out of making fun of me.'

‘You would think he’d have grown out of it.’

‘You would think so.’

Privately, Qiu wondered if Kaineng’s loneliness as a child was like a dark film over his family. She feared that even if his brothers changed, he would never allow them into his life.

‘When was the last time Kaiyang made fun of you?’

He was surprised that he had to think about it. He cast his mind over the previous weeks—and all he could think about was Qiu. She’d become the centre of his days. The mundane chores and physical labour faded from his memory the moment they passed. He realised that he hadn’t had any issues with his brothers for weeks, maybe even months.

His mind associated his brothers with a million negative incidents, but none of them were new.

‘It’s been a while.’

‘Don’t you think you should try to talk to them?’

‘I was never the cruel one. All I ever wanted was to be left alone, but they pursued me.’

But he was beginning to doubt it. His memories had congealed and he could no longer separate emotions from fact. Did his shyness come from the way he had been treated, or was he treated that way because of his shyness?

The next time he saw Kaiyang, he offered up a half-smile—something he had to flay his heart to reach.

‘You always were overdramatic,’ said Qiu, when he told her this. ‘And what did he do?’

‘Well, he smiled back.’

It was the beginning of something.

From then on, Kaineng and Kaiyang smiled at each other, and soon that progressed to short conversations, and then Kaiyang attempted longer talks with his brother.

He wanted to talk about their versions of childhood, their different experiences under the same roof. But he soon ran into difficulty, because while Kaiyang had good memories, Kaineng remembered his early years as a run-on sentence of trauma. Then he became reluctant, again, to talk.

Qiu kept encouraging him to open up. ‘I know it’s hard, but a family is worth fighting for,’ she said. ‘They’re the only ones who can never leave you.’

She found Kaineng’s family situation depressing. Although she’d never lacked friends, she believed that family was the most important thing in the world.

‘They were never *with* me,’ he said. ‘My family isn’t like yours. My family was never family. I’ve never had anybody to rely on except myself. And now you.’

‘But don’t you want a real family?’

‘Maybe one day. With you. But now? Isn’t it too late? We’re all grown up.’

‘It’s only too late if you say it is. It’s not too late for you and Kaiyang, if you only speak to him.’

One evening, when the light hit the ground in streaks of peach, Kaineng was walking with Kaiyang. They were talking about how Kaiyang had left home two years ago, at the age of nineteen, to live with their mother’s sister and her family. ‘Going away made me realise a few things,’ he said.

Their cousins lived only a few streets away, but it was the furthest that any of the brothers had gone before—the periphery of what was possible. Kaiyang had gone after a fight with Kai-Xi had turned explosive and then violent, both of them with blood blooming from their palms.

Their parents had packed Kaiyang up and sent him to their cousins’ house. He ended up staying with them for a few months, and in that time the family hardly saw him. He worked in their uncle’s field instead of their father’s, and when he had free time, he spent it with their cousins instead of with them.

‘I didn’t think it would be any different,’ he said to Kaineng. ‘They’re still family, after all. But I was surprised. Aunty and Uncle were different from Mother and Father, and the way they spoke to our cousins...the energy was different. And it made me think about my own family. I thought a lot about our parents, each of our brothers.’

He paused, his face pained. He was twenty-one now, an adult, but to Kaineng he looked very young.

'You were the one I thought about the most, because you're the one I know the least. And I realised that it is largely my own fault that I don't know you. And the realisation wasn't an easy one, but I didn't want to be that kind of brother to you any more. I wanted to apologise to you. For all the times I laughed at you with the others, or purposefully left you out.'

Kaineng didn't know what to say.

'You don't have to say anything,' Kaiyang said quickly, 'or even forgive me. But I want you to know that I'm sorry.'

'He really is sorry,' Kaineng said. 'I think that's true.'

'You should forgive him,' said Qiu. It was an easy answer for her. Always bend for family. Always soften for family.

'Why should I forgive him?'

Once Kaineng had found his words, they wouldn't stop gushing out.

'A childhood of torment, and one apology? Why *should* I forgive him?'

But even as the words escaped him like steam, he was calming down. Qiu sensed it as well; she let his anger expend itself. Even as he continued to talk, his words meant less and less to him, she could tell. Finally, he was done.

'Well?'

'I suppose I could forgive Kaiyang. But only him.'

'We're only talking about Kaiyang.'

'But we're still never going to be close. He'll never get near to what I feel for you.'

'I know.'

What Counts as History?

On Sunday morning, I go to the library. Walking right past the fiction section, where I normally spend all my time, I find the New Zealand history section.

It's all there—Springbok tour, *Rainbow Warrior*, Waikato land wars, Treaty of Waitangi. At primary school we were taught that the Treaty of Waitangi brought about peace and harmony. Mr Baker, my high-school history teacher, gave me my first insight into what actually happened: that the Treaty of Waitangi was ignored, even ridiculed, by the early British colonisers. He told us about Chief Justice Prendergast, who called the treaty a 'simple nullity', and about the way the Crown tricked Māori into selling their land for peanuts. About the way the Crown burned and destroyed Māori pā, using war tactics like scorched earth to destroy their land and livelihood.

Finally, I find a little section dedicated to the early Chinese immigrants. I pull out a stack of books and take them to an empty table, where I set up station.

Three hours later, my eyes are scratchy. There's so much history I don't know and I haven't done any research like this since high school.

I knew that early Chinese immigrants were goldminers and market gardeners, but I didn't know that Chinese women didn't start arriving en masse until after the Second World War.

I didn't know that the first supermarket in New Zealand was opened by a Chinese person. That there were several examples of Māori–Chinese solidarity. One story in particular sticks in my head. In 1902, a ship filled with Chinese bones was shipwrecked off Hokianga Heads. Those bones were on their way back to China to be buried, as tradition required them to be laid to rest where their families can tend their graves, or else their spirits will never truly be at peace. Tangi (funeral rites) and ūrupa (burial ground) are similarly important to Māori. After the shipwreck, Māori from Te Roroa iwi found some of the bones washed up on the shore and buried them properly.

This show of respect and care solidified the relationship between Chinese and Māori.

I like the story, because there's a beauty and empathy to it. New Zealand can be so racist towards immigrants, as well as towards Māori, tangata whenua—the people of the land. I like the idea that we're on the same side.

The lives of the early market gardeners and goldminers hold my attention long into the afternoon. I can't imagine working so hard for so little reward. The men lived in these tiny huts and sent everything they could afford back to China.

There were no dreams, no holidays.

If Mum were here, she'd remind me how lucky I am.

My phone buzzes, breaking me out of my melancholy. It's Henry.

SHS is hosting a quiz fundraiser tonight. At 6. Do you want to come?
It's at Māngere Community Hall. It's \$10 entry.

'Sure 😊' I reply, my hands skidding over the phone screen. I hate quizzes. I'm terrible at general knowledge.

I glance at my laptop, where I've been taking notes. I decide I've done enough. Before I can close it, I catch a glimpse of myself in the screen's reflection and groan. Mussed hair, cracked lips, shadows under my eyes. I look terrible. I pack my things up quickly so I can go home and get ready.

Two hours later, I've showered and dabbed some concealer, bronze eyeshadow and eyeliner on my face.

It takes me ages to choose what to wear, trying on and throwing off several outfits before settling on high-waisted black jeans and a green silk shirt with flowy sleeves.

Henry probably doesn't stress about his clothes. He probably throws on whatever. All his outfits have a randomness to them, a casualness.

I can't help thinking about what a good person he is. So genuine. So purposeful in how he lives his life.

Finally ready, I study myself in the mirror. Passable. I grab my keys and leave the flat, waving goodbye to Ashley, who's on the phone in the kitchen.

It's a thirty four-minute drive to Māngere, according to Google Maps. I've

never driven out here before. It's close to the airport, so I take a motorway exit close to the curling river and mangroves.

When I arrive at the hall, there are only two empty parking spaces. Quiz nights must be popular. I park and walk to the entrance, where I'm greeted by a whiskery old man who hands me a name tag in exchange for a ten-dollar note.

'It's already started,' he says gruffly. 'Choose any team.'

Walking in, I'm immediately greeted by a wall of light and sound. The hall is so well lit it could be a stadium. There are eight tables of people. Noisy, enthusiastic, quiz-taking people. Socially-minded selfless people who spend their time volunteering. From what I can see, they come from all ages and backgrounds. Teenagers shoulder to shoulder with retirees, working-age people, people of all ethnicities and genders.

Where do I go? I assumed I'd sit with Henry, but I can't see him anywhere. I scan the tables desperately, hoping to see his familiar face.

Then I feel a hand plonk on my shoulder.

'There you are!'

I turn around. Henry is standing there, in blue jeans and a white T-shirt that says 'Street Housing Volunteers' above a sketch of a house and a happy crowd of stick figures. His hair is in a little bun and his eyes are bright.

'I'm happy you could make it,' he says, pulling me in to a hug.

'Me too!' I say, a little too cheerfully.

'Come join my table.' He takes my hand and pulls me through the throng. I focus on his palm against mine, how warm it feels. Instantly, I'm calmer. Every face suddenly seems kind.

We arrive at a table at the very front of the hall. I recognise Evie, Henry's flatmate. She waves at me and I wave back.

'Everyone, this is Laura,' Henry announces to the group. 'She works with me at the gallery.'

Everyone says hi and I slip into an empty seat, which is conveniently next to Henry.

'You missed the sports section,' Henry says.

'What a tragedy.'

'It's history now.'

The MC reads out the questions, which show up on a giant screen behind him.

Who was the first human in space?

Which king preceded Queen Victoria?

Who was the last tsar of Russia?

In which decade did the potato famine strike Ireland?

Which countries were involved in the Opium Wars?

Between us, we manage to answer most of the questions, though I have no clue about some of them. When the Opium War question appears, I perk up.

‘I studied the Opium Wars in high school,’ I whisper to Henry.

‘I bet you were good at history.’

‘I was. I bet you were too.’

‘I was.’

Which country hosted the 2016 Olympics?

‘Does twenty-sixteen count as history?’ I ask the table.

‘Good point,’ Henry says. Next thing I know he’s standing up.

‘OBJECTION!’

A hush falls over the room as everybody looks at him.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I object to this quiz question. Does it really count as history? It was only three years ago! Please, debate amongst yourselves.’

He sits down with a grin as discussion erupts all around us. From the next table I hear a woman yelling that, in fact, we are living through history *right now*.

‘What are you *doing*?’ I ask, stunned.

‘Gotta spice up quiz night,’ he whispers, winking at me. Nobody seems the slightest bit fazed by Henry’s interlude. Apparently this is normal for him.

One hour later, the scores are added up and our table manages a mighty second place. Henry thumps me on the back.

‘Thank you for helping us nearly reach victory,’ he says.

‘You’re most welcome.’

‘I do hope you come by again,’ he says in a mock Austenian voice.

‘Oh, kind sir, how could I not?’ I play along.

‘And might I inquire what you’re doing after this?’

The air suddenly feels hyper-charged. I feel my cheeks flame, my eyes widen. Is he asking me to go home with him?

‘Um...nothing?’

‘Do you want to come have a drink at mine?’ he asks. There’s a slight hesitancy in his voice now. I realise he’s nervous too.

‘Go on, then,’ I say, and he smiles.

Before we can leave we do the rounds: helping stack chairs, saying hello to people. Henry introduces me to so many volunteers that I forget their names as soon as I hear them. He seems as popular here as he is at work. Everyone wants to talk to him. I feel a flush of pleasure at the thought that I’m the one he wants to see after all this has finished.

Finally, the event draws to a close.

‘I’ll just be five minutes,’ he tells me, so I loiter by the door. My gaze falls upon a flyer on the noticeboard.

It has **THE COLLECTIVE YOUTH ART BRANCH** in bold black letters. ‘Are you an Asian artist?’ it asked. ‘Join the Collective’s youth branch and connect with other Asian New Zealand artists. Any type of artist aged 18–30 welcome. Sessions held every Thursday 7 p.m.’

All I know about the Collective is that Grandma was heavily involved in the retiree branch. They met up on Mondays, and in between drinking tea and gossiping, would plan events for their community.

‘There’s a dance this Saturday, Laura, there’ll be a lot of people going. You should come,’ Grandma would say, chopping onions without crying.

She never bothered to invite Max, who’d already stopped coming to Sunday-night dinners by then. Max wouldn’t go to any Collective events anyway, even though she would have loved them. She didn’t want to please Grandma. I didn’t want to go to an event that was based around being Asian.

‘I have plans already, sorry, Grandma.’

‘Well, there’s a quiz night the Friday after, you could come to that.’

‘I have a school event,’ I would say, even if I didn’t.

Even though my excuses always appeared legitimate, and usually were, I sensed the disappointment coming off her like bad breath.

‘You should make more effort to come out and meet people. You need to be able to interact with people if you want to succeed in life.’ It always sounded like an accusation.

‘I have friends, Grandma.’

‘How many Chinese friends?’

‘Lots,’ I lied.

A year ago I would have ignored the flyer.

I would have thought: I have artist friends, why do I need Asian artist

friends?

Now I think: this might be a good place to collect some stories.

I take out my phone and take a picture of the poster as Henry approaches and asks if I'm ready to go.

I promise myself that I'll go to a meeting.

Nothing Sexier than *Peanuts*

All the lights are off when we arrive at Henry's front door. I flick on my phone torch for him while he fumbles for his key. He finds it, and I hear the metal scraping in the lock, the click and grind of the mechanism turning. Right now, standing on his wooden porch in the dark, nothing sounds more erotic.

The door opens with another click.

'Careful on the floorboards. They're creaky,' he whispers. I silently slide off my shoes. He leads me to his bedroom and switches on the light.

I didn't see his room when I was here for the dinner party. I look around. The walls are covered in comics prints: Michael DeForge, *Peanuts*, *Persepolis*. The corners of the room are cobwebbed and the floors are scattered with clothing. A double bed is crammed against a blue feature wall, unmade. Against another wall, there's a dark-green chest of drawers with framed photographs and deodorant bottles on top.

'Sorry about the mess,' he mumbles, stepping past me and straightening the duvet, shoving shoes and underwear against the wall.

'It's fine.'

I sit gingerly on the bed, looking at the framed photographs. There's one of him as a child, his ears sticking out, ice cream all over his face. Another of him at graduation, grinning, with friends surrounding him.

He sits beside me, his leg brushing against mine. He takes a deep breath, then looks me straight in the eye.

'You know I've liked you since you started at the gallery.' He swallows. 'You're interesting and I *like* you. I'm not looking for a one-night stand.'

I stare at him. I don't think a guy has ever spoken to me so directly about his feelings. It's refreshing and makes me like him even more than I already did.

'I don't want a one-night stand either,' I manage to say.

'Good.' He sounds relieved. 'Like, really. I'm an idiot. I should have asked

you on a proper date, not to come home with me. I know I've sent the wrong message.'

'Well, it's worked out. We can go on a date later.'

'We don't have to do anything if you don't want to. We could just have a drink if you want.'

'I wouldn't mind, uh, doing something.' My cheeks flush pink. 'I mean, if you want to.'

'Are you kidding? Of course I do.' He grins, taking my hand in his. He leans close to kiss me, and as I feel his lips on mine I feel my body beginning to wake up, my desire sinking down like ache. I cling to him and the kiss deepens, his hand moving from my hand to my back, his fingers skimming under my shirt.

'Wait,' I mumble into his lips and he instantly pulls away.

'Are you okay? Is this too fast?'

'No! I just...can we have the light off?'

'Of course.' He jumps up to switch the light off. His eagerness is cute.

Now it's pitch black. I can barely see his body as he cuts back through the room.

'Are you all right?' he asks again.

'Great. Come back here.' I pat the bed next to me and he feels his way over and sits down, reaching for me once again.

As we kiss, our bodies begin to meld into one another, my legs stretching around him, and then I'm curled on top of him, his face against my chest. My whole body tingles with heat and excitement, growing pliant, wet, wanting. I raise my arms and he slides my jumper over my head, starts unbuttoning my shirt. It's been so long since I've done this. My limbs feel electric where I touch his bare skin, my heartbeat is fast, my breath is ragged.

I claw at his T-shirt until it's off, and then we're just skin on skin, lips on shoulders, fingers in hair, and it feels so wonderful I could cry.

Afterwards, we lie in the damp glow, our legs still tangled together.

'I haven't had sex in ages.'

I say it without thinking, and instantly regret it.

But he just says, 'Neither,' and I feel calm again.

'How many people have you slept with?' I ask. I know it doesn't matter, but I'm curious.

‘Only two people. Both of whom I dated,’ he replies. ‘What about you?’

‘Four. One girl, who I was seeing for a while. And three guys, but they were just hook-ups.’

‘You’re bi?’ He sounds surprised. I shift, pulling him sideways so we’re face to face.

‘Yeah. That doesn’t bother you, does it?’

‘Not at all,’ he says, his fingers gently stroking my head.

‘When did you break up with your last girlfriend?’ I ask.

‘Over a year ago. What about the girl you were seeing?’

‘I was only seeing her for a month and it was never official, just really intense. Honestly, I haven’t really been in a proper relationship. I’m pretty scared I’d be really bad at it.’

‘I think you’d be fine.’

‘I’m not confident that I’m attractive to people,’ I say, then cringe inwardly at how embarrassing that sounds.

‘You should be,’ he says.

How do I tell him that I’ve never liked my body? That I used to stand in the mirror and study and loathe it, picking it apart cell by cell. I used to think I was ugly, horrible, unlovable. My version of beautiful was model-thin, blonde and blue-eyed. Or ivory-limbed with long auburn or mahogany hair. Never Asian. Never an inch of fat on them. I used to pinch my thighs and stomach and want to cut any softness away. It took me a long time to begin to deconstruct my conception of beauty, to see my body as something other than a failure.

In the mirror, I would examine my face in detail: the gentle curves of my nose, the gleaming white of my eyes, the line of my jaw. I would try to make sense of it. What is it about that face, that collection of features, that’s mine? The nose probably came from a great auntie somewhere, the eyes from an uncle twice removed. There is nothing original about my face at all. And then what about my body?

My body was clay, really. Woven cells, webbed corners, hinges, doorways. I would strike a few poses in the mirror, suck in, exhale, contort, stick my chest out, watch my body fold around itself in strange and grotesque shapes.

Horrible. The thought always rose unbidden, mucous.

It’s just a body, I would remind myself. I would try to look at the whole thing, the skin, face, hair, the person that other people see walking down a street, the person that people speak to. And then I’d be thinking about

walking down the street, and it always came back to what people saw when they saw me, always came back to race.

•

‘Can I ask you a question?’

‘Go on,’ Henry says.

‘Have you dated someone Asian before? Or someone not white?’

‘I haven’t.’

‘But you don’t like me because of that, right?’

I have to be sure. Too many guys have told me that they like Asian girls, the Asian ‘aesthetic’. Too many guys have told me I look like their favourite anime character.

‘No! Not at all. God, I hope I don’t give you that impression.’ He looks straight into my soul. ‘I’m going to be honest. You’re one of the most beautiful girls I’ve ever seen.’

He believes it, I can tell.

But his judgement is obviously clouded by the sex sweat still on his skin.

BACKWATERS

Part IV

A few months into the relationship, when the first bloom—at least for her—was beginning to fade, it became clearer to Qiu what she represented in Kaineng's life. It terrified her.

The things he said were so grand—she was his sun and moon and heavens, flowers and mountains and sky. At first, she had been floored by his romantic nature, by the way that he talked. She mirrored him, said everything back, was excited to experiment with new ways to express her feelings for him, which were indeed expansive. She thought of him as a dark well, which nobody had ever thought to climb down, but which contained secret gold. She liked that she had to press him to get an answer to anything, and felt a certain pride in being the only one who really knew him.

But she had begun to feel out of her depth. His love for her grew and grew, while her feelings ebbed.

One day, they were in their clearing on the side of the hill and she shivered. He drew her closer to him and rubbed her arms to warm her, but it wasn't enough.

'I think I need to go back,' she said.

'Do you want my jacket? I don't need it.'

His skin was ice and she knew he was lying, that he didn't want her to go.

'I should get back to my family,' she said, and she could feel his sigh.

'I wish I didn't have to share you with anyone,' he said.

'That's not how the world is.'

She extricated herself from him. And then she left.

Qiu began to think about leaving him, but the thought of his reaction scared her.

She wasn't afraid he'd hurt her, more that he would hurt himself. He wouldn't threaten her, or beg, but he would break. Perhaps irreparably. And she didn't want to see that happen. She did love him. But she was also growing up, and he was too. She wanted new experiences, new people to fall in love with, more than life in her village could offer her. She would never leave her middle-of-nowhere village—she knew that with a depressing certainty—but she could leave him.

Then the whispers started to move through the village.

For a few years, families had been scraping together funds to send men overseas. Overpopulation meant that village officials were encouraging people to leave, and men had sailed off across the globe in search of fortune or simply to escape poverty. Now word was reaching them back home that there was a new gold hill. An island next to the old gold hill, Australia. Another place, another opportunity. New Zealand.

Not an opportunity for women, of course—not for another fifty years. But here was a chance for men to earn more, to more comfortably support their families.

Here was a chance for change.

Usually, men would rely on relatives who'd gone before to vouch for them, to help them get accepted into foreign lands. Leaving was affordable, just barely.

'The family could probably raise the money for you to go,'

Kaiyang said. He ran a hand through his hair, a repetitive habit that Kaineng now recognised.

'You think they would do that for me?'

‘A son overseas is good for the whole family,’ he said. ‘And anyway, as the eldest, Kai-Xi has to take over the fields here. My bad knee means I can’t go abroad. And Kai-Ge has no interest in going away.’

His brother didn’t mention Kai-Shek, because he had fallen ill and passed away the previous year. His shadow hung over the brothers.

‘You’re also the dreamer in the family. You’re the one who’s always wanted to leave.’

‘I never said that.’

‘You didn’t have to.’

‘Wouldn’t you be afraid to go somewhere you’d never heard of before?’ Kaineng asked Kaiyang a few weeks later.

He hadn’t been able to get the thought out of his mind since their first conversation, the ideas and possibilities turning over in his head. He didn’t mention any of this to Qiu. He knew she would encourage him to follow his heart as far as possible. But she was his heart. He couldn’t leave her.

‘I mean, I suppose so,’ said Kaiyang. ‘But it’s also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. What do you have here? A life of working the fields, maybe marrying someone, and then working until you die.’

He gestured around them, and Kaineng followed his gaze to the same streets, the same river, the same run-down houses they’d walked past their entire lives. Their village was isolated and tiny. It was several days away from the harbour where the ships set sail.

‘Work in New Zealand would probably be even harder.’

‘But it would be an *adventure*. No one in our family has ever left this village. Most of us will die without ever having left it. Could you really pass up the opportunity for a completely different life? For a girl?’

‘Not just any girl,’ Kaineng said, but his insides were roiling. It was hard to see past Qiu, but when he let himself, even for a second—could he see as far as New Zealand?

The day everything changed there was a screaming gale. The air was thick with wary hopes and dreams, the indignance of those who had no hope at all.

Kaineng dressed slowly that day. He was thinking about leaving, lamenting his certainty that he never would. Because there was no choice really. Every time he imagined some beautiful New Zealand scene, he imagined Qiu, alone, in the same village she’d always been in—and his fantasies evaporated on the spot.

As Qiu dressed, she felt like a million moths were engaged in a war dance inside of her. But she felt a certain stillness as well—and she carried that stillness with her as she left her house to meet Kaineng.

She walked with her head in the clouds, her hands tucked under her arms in an attempt to warm them.

The wind was howling, freezing, whipping at the leaves on the street and the hair on her head. A large tree bent and danced in the wind, its limbs creaking like an old man’s.

Qiu didn’t even look at the tree as she walked past, or notice when a huge gust of wind ripped one root right out of the ground.

Qiu didn’t see the tree as it started to fall.

Freshwater Pearls

On Thursday, I uphold my promise to myself to go to the Collective session.

I take a while getting ready, mentally preparing myself for it. I've never willingly gone to an Asian-based group before. What if it's really awkward? What if I hate it?

Before I can talk myself out of it, I grab a tote bag and get in my car.

Half an hour later, I walk into the hall. The bright lights are on again, but this time it's not crammed with enthusiastic SHS volunteers and supporters. Now there are just two tables set up against a wall, at which ten or so people are sitting. As I get closer, I see that some are writing, some are drawing, some are making origami or working with clay. Everyone is Asian, but different types of Asian—people with every shade of skin.

I'm not sure what to do. Then a guy calls out to me.

'Hey! Are you new? Come sit here!' He gestures to an empty seat at his table. I sit down awkwardly, aware of everyone looking at me. They all clearly know each other.

'Hi. I'm Laura,' I say, because everyone seems to expect me to introduce myself.

'I'm Naomi,' one girl says, and then the rest start reeling off their names.

Naomi, Kasey, Tim, Abi, Kim, Robert, Will, Melanie and James are the people at my table. James was the guy who called me over. After introductions everyone goes back to their own work. I quickly realise that there aren't any rules or formalities here. If I'm going to get some stories, I'm going to need to strike up some conversations. I decide to go around and ask everyone why they joined the Collective.

I talk to Kasey first. She tells me that she's half Korean, half white, and she makes and sells earrings alongside her architecture job. She says she joined the Collective because she wanted to reconnect with her Korean identity after her mother died. When I ask, she holds up one of her finished earrings to the light. It's stunning: freshwater pearls and flower petals

contained in clear resin. I make a mental note to buy earrings from her. And to be her friend.

Abi is a poetry-writing vet. She tells me that she was born in Sri Lanka and moved to New Zealand when she was three.

‘So I’m basically Kiwi,’ she finishes.

Abi flats with Kasey, whom she met through the Collective, and joined the youth branch because she was sick of white friends making racist comments around her.

Tim, an amazing illustrator born in Hong Kong, says he joined because he wanted to practise his Cantonese.

‘The Collective youth branch is an amazing community,’ he says. ‘We’re basically a family.’

‘Honestly, better than my real family,’ Will (a Japanese New Zealand painter and maths teacher) chimes in. ‘These are the people that *get* me.’

The conversation starts to flow, with everybody at my table dropping their work and joining in. It’s a safe space, and people talk candidly about race in a way I’ve never experienced before.

‘I never felt like I was either white enough *or* Asian enough,’ Kasey says. ‘I just felt stuck between two worlds.’

‘My white friends don’t understand why I don’t want to move out even though I’m working,’ Robert (a Filipino/Russian New Zealand composer and lawyer) tells us. ‘They’re just like, *go and live your life*. But I can’t just leave my mum on her own.’

‘I honestly hated being Asian growing up,’ Melanie (a Chinese New Zealand writer and arts student) says, sounding sad. ‘Kids at school called me *ching chong* and I hated it.’

‘My parents got me a tutor and made me do practice tests for *everything*. Anything less than ninety-five on a test wasn’t good enough,’ James (an Indian New Zealand fashion designer) says. He doesn’t look academic at all, in his oversized suit and sneakers, golden eyeliner and huge earring.

Finally, I feel comfortable enough to add my own story.

‘I just wanted to fit in,’ I begin. ‘And be accepted as a New Zealander and not asked *where are you from?* everywhere I went. I feel like I avoided Asian spaces because I didn’t want to be lumped in as just another Asian.’

Everyone nods sympathetically as I talk. They *get* it. They get me.

‘Well, we’re here for you,’ Kasey says simply. ‘You don’t need to understand yourself right now. You have a whole life for that.’

That's all I needed to hear. And now I feel so stupid for avoiding Asian spaces my entire life. I believed the stereotypes, thought that all Asian friendship groups did was get bubble tea and yum cha together. I used to take pride in believing I fit in better with white kids than Asian kids.

I was so full of internalised racism.

Before I leave, Kasey adds me on Facebook and asks if I want to catch up with her and Abi one day. She gives me a hug too, and I lean into her. There's something incredibly comforting about her. She seems like someone who really knows herself.

When I finally get home, I collapse on my bed, exhausted. I feel strangely elated. So that's what it's like to feel seen? To have people relate to my cross-cultural childhood and complicated feelings towards race?

It's incredible and I want more of it.

Your Best American Girl

As we're getting ready for the concert in my childhood bedroom, I tell Max about Henry.

'Was he good?' she asks, in a tone that suggests she doubts it. Max can't imagine sex with men being good.

'Yeah.' I blush. I've been blushing all week, thinking about it.

'You deserve it, you know,' she says, seemingly effortlessly applying perfect eyeliner. She's dressed in a leather vest, a red leather skirt, fishnet stockings and knee-high boots. I'm dressed in one of Max's red dresses and worn Doc Martens.

I make a noncommittal noise.

'Even if he *is* another white guy,' she adds, her tone somewhat judgemental.

It's true. All the men I've slept with are white. I'd like to think it's circumstantial, but it's probably because I grew up with white beauty standards. In New Zealand, the default attractive guy is white.

'Hey, I'm totally open to any ethnicity. It's just turned out this way.' After my long pause it comes out a little defensive.

'Right.' Max doesn't sound convinced.

We're having dinner with our parents before the show, which is why we're at their house. Being back here always makes me feel like I'm reverting to my younger self. It makes me want to hide in my room and shut the door as if to shut out the world.

'What's up with you?' I'm suddenly aware that I haven't asked yet. Max doesn't divulge information about herself unless she's asked, and even then I often have to prod with more specific questions.

'Not much.'

'How's Isabelle?'

'Amazing.'

I can see the softening in her eyes when she mentions Isabelle. I swear,

Max transforms into a kinder person when Isabelle walks into the room.

‘How’s uni?’

‘Yeah, it’s all right.’

‘So everything’s just good, huh?’

‘You know, it actually is. Like, I’m struggling to get this one verse right in a song I’m writing, but otherwise I’m chilling.’

Studying her face, I realise she’s telling the truth. There were long periods of time where she wouldn’t tell me anything, where we would pass weeks without talking. And then I would find out later that she’d gone to hospital for laced MD or drunkenly falling out of a tree. She probably thought I would judge her, but I just wanted to be sure she was okay. I’m glad we’re closer now, but I still sometimes feel a chasm between us.

‘How about you? How’s the research going for the Chinese stories?’ she asks.

‘I went to one of the Collective’s art sessions.’

‘You? No way.’

Her shock mirrors my own surprise, but it still stings.

‘I know, right? But I actually really loved it. I made some friends and I felt like they really got me.’

I’m ashamed at the surprise in my voice, the fact that I’d spent my whole life mostly avoiding groups of Asian people for fear of being seen with them.

‘It was always there,’ Max says. ‘I guess you just weren’t ready for it.’

There’s an edge to what she says, the awkward knowledge that she got everywhere first, even though I’m older. She came out first. She embraced her ethnicity first.

‘You don’t need to be like that.’ It comes out sharper than intended.

‘Like what?’ Her voice has gone honey-soft, dangerous.

‘Like, just because you embraced being Chinese first doesn’t make you better than me. We all have our own journey to take, and if you *really* cared about intersectionality and acceptance, like you say you do, you wouldn’t look down on people for taking their time. You can’t expect everyone to be on your side if you look down at them on their way there.’

There’s a shocked silence, and for a moment I think Max is going to explode.

But then she nods.

‘You’re right. I’m sorry.’

I stare at her, mute.

‘Did you just apologise?’

Max rarely apologised. She usually thought she was right.

‘Yeah.’ Her voice is grim. ‘I’m not doing it again.’

Dinner is at the Don, our favourite Japanese restaurant in the CBD. It’s off High Street and is cheap, cheerful and excellent. They also offer unlimited genmaicha tea and decent vegetarian options.

Tonight, Mum’s running late because of a doctor’s appointment. Grandpa is with us, sitting next to Max while Dad sits next to me. There’s a place set for Mum at the end of the table, a little gap that makes the table feel too small.

The food arrives before she does.

‘Should we start eating?’ I ask, and Dad nods.

‘It’ll get cold if we don’t. We’ll just put some aside for her,’ he says, spooning rice and karaage chicken onto her plate.

We’re halfway through eating when Mum appears at the door, the wind entering with her. There’s an uncharacteristic energy about her.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ she says. Her voice is tight like a wound-up fishing line and her forehead seems frozen in place. She doesn’t look at us, rather focusing on some spot in the distance. I’ve never seen her cry, but right now she seems close.

‘How was the appointment?’ asks Grandpa.

‘Interesting,’ she says, quietly.

‘Is everything okay?’ Dad’s voice makes it clear that he knows it’s not.

‘Honey, can I have a word?’ Her eyes are like hands reaching through the air to my father, and he stands up immediately.

Max and I look at each other, both of us wide-eyed. Not a word passes between us in the ten minutes that Mum and Dad are gone. Grandpa looks more uncomfortable than I’ve ever seen him.

Our plates remain untouched until they return, hand in hand.

When I see their faces, I have this deep, internal knowledge that something is about to shift. Whatever knowledge my mother has imparted to my father has yoked them together, leaving the rest of us in the dark.

They sit down.

‘What is it?’ Max asks nervously, her eyes flitting around the room like she doesn’t really want to know.

‘Are you sick?’ Grandpa asks.

Mum stares at him and it’s an expression I’ve never seen before. A confusion, an anger so strong it could be hatred. She looks like she’s going to speak, but she keeps hesitating. Her knuckles grip the edge of the table, turning white. She blinks several times.

Dad places his hand over hers and she offers him a brief smile.

‘Just tell them,’ he says.

‘Tell us what?’ The question bursts from my lips.

‘I...the doctor told me something today,’ she begins, stuttering slightly. ‘Not Dr Warner. She’s abroad right now, so there was a fill-in. Dr Michell. Anyway, a few weeks ago I found a lump under my arm, so I’ve been going in for some scans. It’s the first time I’ve had anything like that.’

This is it. She has cancer, probably incurable, and she’s going to die and break our family into a million shards. I feel like the ground has disappeared under my feet.

‘Don’t worry, the lump was benign, but then she was going through my records because she’s not familiar with them and, well...’ She starts laughing and it’s this weird, thin sound, so different from her usual warm cackles. ‘She said that I’m adopted.’

She turns to Grandpa and there’s a wild light in her eyes.

‘She was horrified that I didn’t know, you know. She said she would never have told me like that if she’d known. And you know what she said after that? She said she couldn’t believe my adoptive parents hadn’t told me.’

Now, Mum’s voice seems to thicken into something bent and ugly.

‘So I’m not even your daughter after all, then? Well, God, that’s a relief, because my childhood really was awful.’ That strange laugh again. ‘But the least you could have done is tell me. I’m nearly fifty. How could you do this? How could you do this to me?’

Her face collapses and she starts to cry, great ugly sobs that roll up her throat and cascade down her face. She looks like she’s drowning.

I’m frozen. Half of my brain is thrilled and relieved that Mum’s not going to die. The other half can’t catch up. I can’t comprehend what she has just said, and her words seem to crash and pound against the inside of my skull. It’s like the world just changed shape. She’s adopted? How can she be adopted? It makes no sense.

Next to me, Max looks like I feel. Her face is blanched white, her mouth an enormous black O, her whole body recoiled slightly as if in disgust.

I sneak a glance at Grandpa. He looks like a shell right now, just sitting there in his baggy grey trousers and knitted vest, and for a moment I hate him. This man, who I love more than almost anyone on earth. This man, who's always seen me, known me, made me feel safe and wanted.

How could I not be related to him?

How could Mum be adopted?

How could she not have known?

People are staring, but it doesn't matter.

Grandpa starts to gather himself.

'Jessica,' he starts, but Mum holds up her palm.

'Don't. Don't even try.'

'Please—'

'She said don't.' I've never heard Dad interrupt anyone like that. His voice is cold. He has an arm firmly around Mum's shoulders, holding her tight, holding her up.

'Max, Laur, we're leaving,' he announces. Max and I exchange glances, stand up fast. Grandpa stares at us all, a terrified look in his eyes.

'Laur, pay for dinner, I'll pay you back.'

We start to leave, even though none of the food is finished.

I sneak a look at Grandpa as I settle the bill. He looks back at me and his eyes are pleading. My heart breaks as we walk away.

Max and I don't get to see Mitski.

PART TWO
June–September 2019

Bedtime Stories

Sleep has never come easily to me. Since I was little, I would spend hours awake at night, staring at the ceiling. Added up, it would come to full months spent spread out on my bed like a living corpse.

I took to reading in the middle of the night. I'd get out storybooks from the library, or read books that Mum's friends lent her. She always asked them for more children's books, because I couldn't get enough of them. Once, she got a picture book called *Chinese Fables*. It was full of pretty illustrations and text in calligraphy. Many of the stories are twisted and dark, not happily-ever-after like most western stories for kids.

There's one story that stuck with me. I read it when I was about six. I can't recall it verbatim, but in my memory it goes like this:

Once upon a time, there was a couple. They were called Chunhua and Bo, and they wanted a baby more than anything. For years they prayed, but nothing came to pass except time. Eventually, they gave up hope.

Then one day, against all odds, Chunhua discovered that she was pregnant.

For months, Chunhua's smile was as bright as fresh lemons. She glowed, and people noticed. Whenever they greeted her, they expressed their joy at her good fortune and she absorbed their happiness, hoping that it would help her child grow up strong.

One starless night, halfway through her pregnancy, there was a storm in the air. Chunhua and Bo huddled indoors next to a smoky grate, trying to keep warm. Their bare feet were cold against the ground, because they couldn't afford a floor. They held one another and Bo murmured stories to Chunhua's stomach, tracing shapes and words onto her skin. After many hours they fell asleep next to the grate, still close together.

In the early morning, Chunhua woke up screaming. Her stomach was

contorting, the pain sharper than anything she'd experienced before. Bo woke in a panic. He brought her water and a wet cloth, and tried to soothe her.

But she started to bleed. In agonising waves her body ejected thick clumps that ran down her legs like bloody tears.

In the days and weeks after, Chunhua did not speak. If spoken to, she merely bowed her head and shuffled away. Bo too was heartbroken, but he did his best to be strong.

Over time, Chunhua recovered, but she was never the same again.

Chunhua and Bo were together for the rest of their lives, but they mourned that one night until the day they died.

Floating

In the days and weeks following Mum's news, it's like I can't quite find my feet. I do all the ordinary things like going to the pool and to work, but it all seems to slip right past me. Even swimming, the thing that has never failed to centre me, doesn't seem to work. Whereas normally I feel confident and strong as I push myself across the pool, now I feel like the water has no weight. Instead of moving fast, I float.

For several days in a row, Max and I talk on the phone long into the night. For once in our lives, she feels almost exactly the way I do. Cheated. Confused. Lost.

'I just don't understand how nobody ever told Mum,' Max says for the hundredth time.

Our conversations are repetitive, stuck on a loop. But we're unable to stop having them, unable to stop expressing the same sentiments time and time again. At least we can talk about it—Mum basically said she needed space and didn't want to discuss it for a while. She said she needed time to process, which I thought was very millennial of her. Ever since her birthday, the bombshell, Dad's stayed glued to her. He places protective hands on her shoulders as if he can possibly shield her from the weight of what she's just learned.

'I'm not surprised about Grandma, but I'm disappointed with Grandpa,' I tell Max. It's an understatement. Inside my chest there's a hot ball of fury and disbelief, all my love caught in a chokehold. None of us has talked to Grandpa since the news. I don't know when we will.

We both have a million questions, a million theories.

Who were Mum's real parents? Why did they give her up? Are they still alive? Could we meet them? Do we even want to meet them? Were they good people? How did Grandma and Grandpa adopt Mum? Where did they adopt her from?

Max wants to know if Mum has any biological brothers and sisters. I want

to know what this means for our New Zealand identities. Was Mum even born in New Zealand like we'd always thought? Did this make us less New Zealander? Did this make us less Chinese?

I tell Henry about Mum's adoption. Of course I tell him, even though the information feels too private, too grand, for a relationship so new. I wait three days to say anything. It's been a week since we've had sex, a week in which he has clearly tried to be sweet with me, bringing me flowers at work, leaving little notes on my desk. Finally, on a Thursday night, he asks me to go to dinner with him. We go to Casablanca, a Mediterranean restaurant in Sylvia Park. It's a pretty space with lots of plants and blue-and-white tiles.

'Do you regret the other night?' he asks, and even though he's trying to be chill I can sense how much he cares about the response.

'Regret it? God, no!' I reply, genuinely surprised that he could think that.

'It's just that you've been kind of distant since then,' he says, sounding relieved.

'I've had a lot on my mind.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'It's huge, actually. It's to do with my family.'

'Well, you don't have to tell me anything,' he says, 'but if you do want to talk, I'm here to listen.'

And so I give in. I tell him everything. For the better part of an hour, I talk and he listens and even though he can't really relate to anything I'm saying, it feels good to see that he genuinely cares. And even though he can't do anything to change the situation, I feel a little bit lighter by the end of the night. As if he's taken some of the burden off my shoulders.

Grandma

The next Tuesday I give a tour. The group's small, just two mothers with two children each. All the kids are under five and they're exuding energy like nuclei.

'Make sure you don't touch *anything*,' one of the mothers warns, grabbing the elbow of the closest child. The child nods, rips away her arm and resumes chasing the others.

It makes me feel exhausted just watching.

I like the women. They're polite and interested as I explain each piece, and they apologise profusely for their children.

'We were hoping this tour might make them more interested in art,' says one. She's dressed in a bright-yellow raincoat and looks tired.

I feel tired. I wish I were in my bed right now, under the covers.

After the tour finishes, the mothers thank me, round up the children and leave.

I slip my tour-guide lanyard over my head and slump into the empty break room.

I normally go outside for lunch, but when the weather's bad, I sit inside the cramped break room at the little white table. I plug in my headphones and get my tuna salad out. I'm halfway through my meal when Henry appears in the doorway.

'Guiding today?'

'Yup.'

'Not feeling it?'

'Nope.'

'How are you doing?' His voice is gentle as he slides into a chair next to me, draping one arm loosely around my shoulders. The casual touch grounds me, makes me feel a little less adrift.

Today, he's wearing a blue jumper with white stripes. He has long, thin fingers, I notice for the first time. Incongruent with his stockier frame.

‘Okay,’ I say. We both know it’s a lie.

‘Do you want to talk about it or be distracted?’ he offers.

‘Distract me, please.’

He switches gear at the speed of light.

‘So,’ he says, offering me a half-smile. ‘I would avoid the topic of family, but I want to tell you how much I’m dreading dinner with my grandparents tonight.’

‘Do you get along with your grandparents even worse than your parents?’ I ask, curious. I realise there’s still so much I don’t know about him.

‘It’s about equal. I’m the only grandchild on both sides. It’s a lot of pressure, and I’m a great disappointment. Every year, they give me a cashmere jumper for Christmas. One of those soft, professional-looking ones. I *hate* those jumpers with a passion. They’re fucking soulless. Only lawyers and accountants wear jumpers like that. I make a point of only wearing ratty jackets when I’m around them, but they don’t relent. At this point, it’s like a weird jumper war.’

His voice gets louder as he speaks, his hands moving animatedly. I feel like he’s told this story before.

‘What do you do with the jumpers then?’ I ask.

‘Donate them.’

‘A good find for some lucky person.’

‘Nah, just the fruits of filial enmity.’ He’s grinning now, eyes ablaze. ‘It’s so ridiculously petty. But it gives me great joy to be a disappointment. It’s my side hustle.’

‘How often do you see them?’

‘As little as possible,’ he says. ‘Once or twice a year. Anyway. I hope that talking about my grandparents isn’t triggering for you right now. It was the absolute first thing to come into my head.’

‘My grandma, well, adoptive grandma, was a good cook,’ I say suddenly.

‘Was?’

‘She passed away a few years back.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s really fine,’ I say.

I never felt close to Grandma, and now that I know she’s not my biological grandmother, I feel relieved. Like maybe there’s a real grandmother out there

who might have been loving and kind. Against my will, I find myself imagining her: this round old woman with grey hair and a soft smile. A grandmother who would sew my clothes and know what gifts to get me and tell me I'm beautiful.

I wish I could trade Grandma for this imaginary grandmother. I wish it even though it makes me feel guilty. The imaginary grandmother might be out there, but we have no idea what she's actually like. To trade her with Grandma is to wish Grandma entirely out of existence.

Even though it's been years since she died, her memory refuses to fade. It's like she's antagonising us from beyond the grave.

She had lung cancer for three years before she died. She was a smoker for most of her life, and kept up her pack-a-day habit even after she got diagnosed.

'Too late to stop now,' she'd said, shrugging. 'My lungs are done for anyway.'

It was like she felt that she'd lived enough, had seen enough. She didn't even seem to care.

I remember visiting her in the hospital. She was sitting up in bed, holding a compact mirror in one hand and applying powder with the other.

Her lifelong beauty ritual is etched into my memory.

'Watch and learn, girls,' she used to say to me and Max when we were little and she was looking after us.

It was a meticulous process: first, she wet a soft white cloth and wiped her face before adding moisturiser, letting the skin dampen and lose definition. Her face felt friendliest to me at that point, like the screws of her face had come undone.

But then she would spray toner onto her skin, and everything would harden up again. After that, she would use a plastic pipette to dab mandarin oil and rosehip serum on her cheeks and forehead. Then a white face cream. Then thick, pale foundation. Then she would use various brushes to add pink to her cheeks, bronze to her eyelids. She would finish with thick mascara, which left her with lashes that could have held up an ox.

'All my products are Chinese,' she told me once, handing me a little blue jar to examine. I squinted to look at what it was made of, but couldn't read the little silver characters.

‘Hi, Grandma,’ I said, standing there next to her hospital bed.

It was the only time I visited her by myself.

‘Laura, there you are. I thought you were coming yesterday.’

‘Today, Grandma. How are you feeling?’

‘About as terrible as could be expected. But I still need to look my best.’

She finished with the powder and fumbled for her lipstick, which rolled off the bed and onto the floor.

I bent down to get it and she grabbed at my shoulder forcefully as I stood back up.

‘You can have all my make-up once I’m gone. Use it.’

‘Thank you, Grandma,’ I said, my throat dry.

She died two days later and I didn’t cry.

BACKWATERS

Part V

When Kaineng heard the news, the words slipped past him.

Qiu's oldest sister had been the one to tell him.

'She's gone,' she'd said, her voice sombre.

No.

It couldn't be real.

She couldn't be gone. Kaineng refused to fathom it.

He sprinted around the town, searching for her, screaming her name.

Qiu, where are you? Qiu! Qiu!

He howled it at the sky, the heavens, the fields.

He didn't understand. She was the only one he had, the only person he loved.

How could this have happened?

How?

Kaineng wandered down to the river as if in a daze. He was staring into the water with empty eyes when Kaiyang ran up to him, gasping.

'Everyone's been looking for you,' he said.

'What?'

'You have to come with me.'

Kaineng let himself be led, saw no point in resisting, no point in anything. Once he got to his own backyard, he stopped. His father was there. He touched Kaineng's shoulders for the first time in what felt like forever.

'We heard what happened. We're terribly sorry for your loss,' he said. He paused. 'But there is some good news. The extended family have discussed it, and, if you want to go, will loan you your passage to New Zealand. We know you were thinking about it.'

There was a moment when the ground seemed to dance, as if it were trying to get away from under Kaineng's feet. Then the shockwaves subsided just as suddenly.

'You can go to New Zealand,' Kaiyang was saying. 'If you want it, it's all arranged.'

Kaineng couldn't speak, but Kaiyang kept talking.

'Listen. You have to go. This is your one shot. You're fading here. And what's left for you here anyway? A family you hardly speak to?' His voice wasn't bitter, but it cut through Kaineng.

The waves hit him again, but this time, when they subsided, he was left stranded. Kaiyang was right. There was nothing left for him in the village, no one left that he loved. The one person he'd ever loved was his entire world, and now she was gone.

'Let this be the one thing your family does for you,' said Kaiyang. 'She would have wanted it.'

Kaineng's heart burned like a private sun. He knew it was the truth. Suddenly he couldn't stand to be in the village for another second. He wanted to be as far away as possible. He wanted to be as far away from her memory as possible.

The path ahead was clear.

'What's your name?'

He gave his new name, the one he'd chosen from a list a few days before.

'Ken,' he said. 'What's yours?'

He received an answer, but promptly forgot it. He didn't care. He had no idea what he was doing, where he was going. Instead of talking to the other men, he stared at the waves and imagined himself sinking to the bottom of the sea.

Once, he had imagined walking across the sea, his feet burning with the sunset, disappearing into a new life where nobody knew him. Now he imagined his body drifting listless and cold along the ocean floor. He imagined a million tiny fish nibbling at his toes, working their way up his body until there was nothing left of him.

He imagined the cold like frissons of fire, burning him up, numbing his heart until it beat a slow, slow dance, and then silence.

The days passed like the waves. He spent all his time at the prow of the boat, his eyes filled with the sea. Nothing seemed to change except the shade of the sky.

Day after day after day. The boat a mother, sweetly swaying them towards sleep.

God, he wished he could sleep. The nights were worse than the days.

The mornings dawned with a metallic sheen. The sun was a single bright note, and when it shone on the water it swelled into a chorus. It was beautiful, and he didn't care at all.

When New Zealand came into view, they'd been sailing forever. At least a month. The winds had risen and fallen on them, storms had whipped their skin, and everybody was sore, salty and wrung out. Dry land was a dream, and New Zealand a mirage.

The day of arrival carried a light breeze, with a pale-blue sky as lucky as the number eight. They got there early in the morning. In fact, he was still asleep when he heard the shout.

'Land!'

The rising voices, excitement like the swells of the tide. He sat up and was almost instantly at the railings of the ship, staring out at the distant mounds of green, strips of golden white. Against his will, he felt a stirring somewhere within him, something like excitement, although the emotion was quickly stained with guilt.

He knew she'd want him to move on.

He looked forwards.

Mum Zedong

‘I don’t care who my real parents are,’ Mum says—offhand, like it doesn’t really matter.

Aside from the clinking of teeth on glass and the scrape of knives on plates, the only sound in the room is the occasional blip from the smoke detector. It’s probably running out of batteries. There’s not enough air in here.

We try to make light chat—work, work, study, work—but it’s obvious what we’re all thinking about. It’s been three weeks since we found about Mum’s adoption and we still haven’t had a proper conversation about it. Three long weeks without talking to Grandpa, the longest I’ve gone in my life. And I miss him but I’m also mad. We all are.

‘I don’t care who my real parents are,’ Mum repeats, as if one of us had said something. ‘They gave me up.’

‘Surely there must be a part of you that wants to know,’ Max says. She glances at me. *Back me up*, her eyes whisper.

‘You don’t want to know just for closure?’ I ask.

‘No,’ Mum says firmly. ‘I don’t want to know.’

And of course, it’s *her* life, and *her* parents, so Max and I back off. We have to respect her wishes. But there’s a part of me pushing against her decision, a part of me that feels resentful.

Your parents are my grandparents! I want to yell. *I have a right to my own history.*

Mum’s decision to do nothing, to keep living as we did before, as if she weren’t adopted, as if nothing has changed, is agonising. How are we supposed to act as if our family foundation hadn’t been smashed by a single sentence? How did her parents never once think to sit her down and say the magic words: *you’re adopted*? How hard would that have been?

Mum acts like everything’s fine, like she’s fine, but she’s clearly not. Her eyes have sagging circles under them and her cooking, normally perfect,

tastes off. Nothing is in balance.

After a long pause, Max asks Mum if we can talk about it.

‘We don’t have to talk about your parents. But I’d still like to talk about the adoption, if that’s okay.’

She sounds nervous, which is unlike her. If even Max can tell something is delicate, it means everybody’s holding their breath.

‘What do we need to say about it?’ Mum asks. Her voice, usually warm like soup, sounds tepid and weak.

‘Like, maybe your ethnicity?’ I suggest. ‘Maybe we’re not Chinese after all.’

‘I asked my dad and he said I was adopted from Hong Kong,’ Mum says. ‘My parents probably came from China.’

‘Can’t get out of being Chinese *that* easily, L.’ Max rolls her eyes.

‘You talked to Grandpa?’ I ask Mum, shocked despite myself.

‘Yes. Four days ago. It was nearly midnight but I suddenly felt like I needed to get some answers,’ Mum replies.

‘So can I talk to him again? I won’t if you don’t want me to.’

I miss Grandpa. His corduroy trousers and gentle voice and cups of tea. I think of him watching us leave in the restaurant and it hurts.

‘You have your own relationship with your grandfather, Laura. You can talk to him whenever you want,’ Mum says and my heart feels like it’s coming loose.

‘Okay, but can we at least discuss the possibility of your mother being related to Mao?’ Dad says suddenly.

There’s a pause and then we all break into laughter. It’s good laughter, loud, heavy shrieks that permeate the air and fill it with relief.

‘I better not be related to Mao.’ Mum laughs.

‘I hope not,’ Dad replies in a stern voice. ‘I might have to divorce you.’

We laugh more, reaching for food, everybody suddenly starving for the off-kilter dinner of overcooked spaghetti, burned meatballs and soft broccoli.

‘I mean, maybe Mum *is* part European,’ Max says. ‘She does have some European features.’

‘Turn your head,’ Dad instructs. Mum obliges. ‘Hmm, yes, definitely looks like there’s some Portuguese blood there.’

‘Portuguese?’ Max sounds as perplexed as I feel.

‘There were a lot of Portuguese in Hong Kong back in the day. And look at her jawline. People have often commented that she has a European jawline.’

I look at Mum's profile. It is rather European-looking. And she has large eyes, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything.

Against my will, against everything I'm working towards, I feel a spark of hope. Could I be closer to everything I wanted as a child?

Later, when I'm in bed, my mind swirls with the ancestral possibilities. Which countries played a part in me, contributed traces to my DNA?

How Chinese am I, actually?

And would I see myself differently if I knew?

Mandarin

My parents' attic is filled with forgotten things. Piles of dusty books line the walls, spring up from random floorboards, cascade into dark spaces. There are mouldy suitcases with mouldier clothes, folders and files like undergrowth, flowerbeds of once-loved toys. There's a skylight, half obscured by years of grime and bird droppings. Dust particles dance through the filtered light in a theatre of nostalgia.

I cough, and can almost see birds spinning around my head.

I've been putting this off. All the library research I've been doing isn't particularly relevant to the task at hand. Tracy wants real stories, firsthand accounts of things that happened. For that, we need journals.

Mum told me that there's a folder up here of letters and diary entries from my great-great-grandfather Ken, the one who arrived in New Zealand all those years ago. Except now I know he's not even my real great-great-grandfather. Can I even use his story if he's not my blood relative? Does adoption mean I get to claim that whole line of heritage?

I've been searching for it for the last hour, often finding myself waylaid by other things. For example, I've found a photo album of my grandparents' wedding. I wonder how the album ended up here, why it's not in the living room or somewhere more appropriate.

In their black and white outfits, with their unlined skin, my grandparents look beautiful. Unhappy, but beautiful.

I wonder if my grandmother dreamed of her wedding day, hoping it would be the best day of her life.

I place the album carefully to one side to look at more closely later, and keep shuffling through the piles. I find a small leather notebook, the cover browned and crackly as if it had been left out in the sun.

It's full of Chinese characters I can't understand.

For the first time, I wish I could understand them.

When I was four, Mum enrolled me in Mandarin classes. Dad's mother tongue was Malay and Mum was brought up with English. Even though Grandma and Grandpa spoke Mandarin, once Mum started school they only spoke English with her.

Conversely, Mum felt a lot of external pressure to turn me into a bilingual child, as she later told me. There was always another Chinese mother asking if she spoke to me in Mandarin, looking down on her for not doing so. But, pressure aside, she said she felt a personal interest in instilling some language ability in me.

'It's good for your brain and generally useful,' she said. 'And understanding a language allows you to later connect with the culture.'

Four-year-old me didn't care about any of that.

'I don't want to go. It's Saturday. Sarah's family are going to the beach.'

'You're going,' she said. We were already in the car, so it was a lost argument on my part. But I persevered.

'Why do I have to go?'

'Because you should learn Mandarin. You'll thank me in the future.'

'No I won't!'

'Well, just give it a go, okay? It might be fun. You can make some friends!'

When I arrived at the teacher's house—she taught from home—there were three other students there. We nodded at each other and otherwise sat in silence. But I caught the eye of one little boy with a bowl cut and a bright-orange T-shirt. He stuck out his tongue at me, and I rolled my eyes at him, and we immediately became friends.

From then on, I didn't mind going to Mandarin classes, because I got to see Jerry. We'd spend the whole time messing around behind the teacher's back. Mum was pleased that I liked going to classes, but at the end of the year, when she realised I had only learned one sentence, she pulled me out. I never saw Jerry again.

For the most part, I didn't mind not knowing Chinese. In fact, I was perversely *proud* that I couldn't speak it. When someone asked me if I did, I would say, *No, but I speak French and Spanish*, and take petty pleasure in their surprised reactions.

But now, leafing through a notebook that probably details a life's story, out of reach to me, those scraps of pride feel so stupid.

I dust the notebook off and take it downstairs.

‘What’s that?’ Mum asks. She’s at the sink, chopping pumpkin with the kitchen axe, her movements smooth and decisive.

‘Is this Ken’s diary? You know, my great-great-grandfather?’

She drops the axe on the bench and walks over to me. Taking the notebook between her fingers, she flips through the pages.

‘Looks like it.’

‘Could you read this?’ I ask hopefully, even though I know she probably can’t.

‘Laur! You know my Chinese reading skills aren’t great.’

‘Do you know who could read it for me?’

‘Your grandfather.’

Her voice is light, measured. Delicate.

‘I’ll go see him then,’ I say carefully. It’s been a week since Mum said I could talk to him, but I still haven’t reached out to him. It’s just felt too big in my head.

‘Go whenever you want,’ Mum affirms.

She looks at me and it’s like I can see through her. She wavers, fragile but certain. Love surges through me, sudden and strong, and I hug her.

Her skin is soft, her baby-powder smell comforting.

‘Thank you,’ I whisper.

BACKWATERS

Part VI

The community was small but nuclear. In this particular town there were only twelve men, and that meant they were vitally connected, held together by Saturday-night gatherings.

Silenced through the week by strange words and shame, they were always eager to talk. Words flowed thick as rivers after rain. They talked about loved ones back home, the younger siblings, nephews and nieces they wouldn't see grow up. They talked about the gardens changing with the seasons, the vibrancy of growing pumpkins, the tallness of tomato stems.

They didn't talk about their homesickness or loneliness. Instead, they filled those spaces with observations about the strength of the wind, the threat of storm.

Ken didn't want to go to the gatherings at first, but the loneliness threatened to consume him.

So he went.

The others peppered him with questions, and bit by bit they began to get an idea of him. They realised that there was a depth to him under the quietness—and a darkness too. They understood that something terrible had happened to his lover, but that he would not talk about it.

The men lived a little outside the main town area, in huts surrounding the gardens. The huts were built of kerosene tins, packing cases—anything they could find. The roofs were mostly thrown together from rice or flour sacks, and because they were built fast, they often leaked. With water dripping off the frayed edges of the sacks, the roofs seemed to be crying. The mudbrick houses back in China seemed luxurious by comparison. At least there the rooms were filled with years of living, the tiny things that make a house a home. At least there the men had women.

It's not like they didn't choose to come. Nobody forced them bodily onto the ships, set them adrift, sent them thousands of days away. But they were not here to stay, and most of them would not want to.

Peter and Daniel made a particular effort with Ken.

Peter had a crooked smile and a perfectly round head, like an onion. And he was likeable. He made everyone laugh, had the sort of energy that seemed to revive both the plants and the people around him. When everyone else was dragging their toes, he was dancing like a mountain bear.

Daniel was a generous, square-faced man with a receding hairline. He wasn't handsome but for his eyes, which were a strange, hazy amber.

'It's from dreaming of gold,' he joked when he first met Ken.

Ken half believed him. The eyes, on first impression, seemed slightly inhuman.

Daniel was somewhere between Peter and Ken on the spectrum of sociability. He was not as quiet as Ken, but he was no showman either.

Every Saturday all the men would bring a dish and fill Peter's shack with vibrant scents of spices that reminded them of home. Cooking gave many of them a feeling of closeness to their mothers. They remembered watching food being prepared with all the precision of history. Ken, who couldn't cook at all before leaving China, found enormous satisfaction in transforming the raw products of the earth into delicate broths, strings of noodles. He sprinkled chives into round bowls of rice, and it felt like the echo behind a waterfall, like an idea of the past he didn't have. He couldn't fully recreate the flavours of his mother's food—although he looked for them, he couldn't find the same herbs, the same wines, the same salty preserved plums.

But it was still something. And now, when he ate foreign-grown food made by his own hands, with

people who wanted him around, he felt almost proud.

While he cooked, he imagined Qiu. The sadness hadn't gone. She hovered, a ghost in shadow, her feet barely touching the floor. She remained there while his fingers pressed dumplings into shells, stripped the leaves from thin green stems.

Sometimes the men played traditional music or mahjong, but mostly they just told stories and laughed. They didn't drink. Some of them longed for the sweet haze of spirits, but they denied themselves such pleasure, fearing that the locals would see them as debauchers.

Instead, they focused on their families and the possibility of prosperity.

It was difficult to talk about how it felt to be an alien, far from family, friends, the known. So they did not try.

But there was a rare hour, when the night had dried up, the plates were empty and the room was quiet. It was an hour when they all fell silent, each one alone in his thoughts, thoughts almost certainly of loved ones. The men looked upwards, as if stargazing.

Sometimes, they cried. And if Ken was feeling open enough—perhaps once every lunar month—he would read a poem. Then they all cried.

I Love You

In his garden, Grandpa's crouched over something I can't see. He's a silhouette on the horizon, a rock, part of the earth. Looking at him is painful. How could he not be related to me? Right then and there I decide that the adoption doesn't stop him being my grandfather. That almost makes what he did hurt more.

'Grandpa?'

He jumps up. 'Laura! When did you get here?'

He's looking at me like I'm the sun.

'Just now,' I say. 'What are you looking at?'

He gestures for me to come closer, points at a small weed—a tiny purple flower with five pointed petals like a star. The petals are lilac on the inside with an almost indigo edge.

'Never seen anything like it,' he says. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

It really is, and I say so. He stands up with a pained groan I haven't heard before.

'Cuppa?' I ask.

'Absolutely,' he says. His voice contains a gratefulness that makes my throat tighten up. We turn towards the house, where I put water in the jug and set it boiling. As the steam rises, I let it soften my palms, and press them to my cheeks.

Almost as soon as I set the cups on the table he speaks, his voice shaking. 'I'm sorry, Lorry. I'm sorry that your grandmother and I never told your mum that we're not her real parents.'

As he talks, he plays nervously with his hands. They're big, papery hands with blue veins like rivers.

'Why didn't you?'

The accusation is sharp. I didn't even realise I felt it so strongly. I thought I came here ready to forgive Grandpa the second I heard one word of apology, but maybe that's not the case. Maybe I need an explanation.

‘How could you never tell her? How could you do that?’ Embarrassingly, tears well up in my eyes, threatening to spill over.

Grandpa looks at me, his eyes sorrowful.

‘I’m so sorry. Really.’ He rests his head in his hands. ‘We decided long ago to never tell. Your grandmother especially wanted it that way. She wanted your mother to think we were her real parents...’

He trails off. I don’t give up that easily.

‘You can’t blame it on Grandma when she’s dead. You also agreed to never tell.’

‘It was the way of things back then. Almost all adoptions were closed.’

‘Are you defending it?’

His jaw hardens. ‘You know, maybe I am. I’m so, so sorry for the hurt I caused. But we didn’t do this to hurt your mother. We wanted her to be our daughter. And, God, I *know* we were terrible parents. I know. But not telling your mother she was adopted wasn’t malicious. If anything, we wanted her to feel like at least she had parents.’

‘If you’d told her she could have found her real parents.’

My voice is spiteful. It’s like all the anger and hurt I’ve ever heard from Mum is rising up and spilling out.

‘I’m sorry.’ Grandpa’s voice is gentle now. Regretful. ‘I’ll understand if your mother doesn’t want to see me after this. But Lorry, please don’t cut me out of your life. I wanted to be a better grandparent than I was a parent. Please forgive me.’

Of course I’ll forgive him. I was always going to forgive him. But right now, my heart aches. I remember all the times Mum talked about her childhood, all the pain that leaked down from her to me. I hear her in my ears: *he wasn’t a good father*. Her determination to keep her parents in her life so that Max and I could have grandparents. Her feigned happiness about Grandpa and me being so close.

I blink and a tear strays down my cheek. Grandpa notices it. His eyes are soft like dew.

‘Lorry.’

I look at him.

‘I’ve only ever thought of you and Max as my grandchildren. My *real* grandchildren.’

I give in. I move forwards and embrace my grandfather and I’m crying and he’s crying and we’re both saying *I love you, I love you*, and that’s the end of

it.

Half an hour later, we're still sitting and talking over tea, a plate of Griffin's Hundreds & Thousands biscuits between us. They've been his favourite for as long as I can remember. As a child, I used to think it was funny that he liked such a girly biscuit. Now, it doesn't strike me as funny at all.

Grandpa asks me how my writing is going and that's when I remember the notebook.

'I was wondering if you could help me with something?'

'Anything,' he says, and I know he means it.

'Can you help me translate something?'

He asks what it is, and I tell him that I suspect it's his grandfather's diary.

'Is this for the writing project?'

'Yeah,' I say, briefly explaining how, if I was right and the book was his grandfather's diary, I could use that as the basis for a story.

'Okay.' He doesn't want to agree, I can tell. But he'll do it for me, for my writing.

After I've made another pot of tea, I pull out the notebook.

It looks like it's always belonged on my grandfather's table.

Grandpa holds it between his hands, staring at it for a long time before opening it. Once he does he nods. 'It's him.'

There's a pause and then he continues. 'I would recognise that handwriting anywhere.'

He looks a bit bereft, so I ask him to open the book to a random page. He does so, then resolutely moves his fingers underneath the lines, starting at the top of the page.

'I too have that dream. To set sail, burning the backwater—to never, ever think of coming back.'

'Wait, stop there,' I say. I need a second to take in that one phrase, to understand that this notebook, unreadable to me, contains a story I need to hear, a story I need to tell.

'Is there any way you can translate this whole thing?'

Two days later, Grandpa tells me that he's completed ten pages. Within fifteen minutes I've driven to his house.

I offer to make him dinner and he accepts, so I start chopping carrots,

adding them to a boiling pot of water while he reads the translated pages. For someone unused to reading aloud, he has a good storytelling voice. It's hard to concentrate on adding spices and stock to the soup while I'm straining my ears to catch his every word.

After he finishes, neither of us talks for a few minutes. The room is quiet, save for the bubble and crackle of the pot.

Eventually, I speak. 'He wrote beautifully.'

'He was a poet.'

'Did he speak like that too?'

Grandpa thinks for a while, and his face, lined like leaves, seems to crumple in on itself.

'No. He never spoke much, actually. He was a very quiet man, but when he did speak, people listened.'

'Were the two of you close?'

'I wouldn't say close. He never seemed to know what to do with grandchildren. But I know he cared about me.'

A few hours later, I'm at my desk with a cup of peppermint tea when Grandpa calls.

'I translated a few more pages,' he tells me. 'Page twelve was a poem, but some of the words were erased.'

'Can you read it to me?'

'That's why I'm calling.'

Later, I open a fresh Word document to start writing. The cursor on the blank page is intimidating. A blue glow washes over the screen, turning the emptiness into a shimmering portal, a promise. I decide I need more tea before I can start writing.

Five minutes later, I have another cup of peppermint tea and a new drive.

I finally have something to write. And maybe it's not the story of someone actually related to me, but it's real, a story that existed once and should exist again.

Ken's story is a rich one, a pioneering one, and it's largely unknown to the country he helped grow.

For the first time in months, I feel my mind translating itself into words that flow from brain to fingers to page.

A Snail Retreats into Its Shell

The rain forms a silver sheen on the windows. Outside it's dark and the kind of cold that gets into your bones. It makes my flat seem warm and inviting by comparison. There are lights on, and the room smells like the vanilla candle that's been burning all afternoon.

'I think I found a piece of ocean,' says Henry. He's hunched over the low table in the lounge, which is currently covered with small bits of a disjointed world. We've spent the entire afternoon puzzling over the image which looks like a tourist map with enlarged world wonders.

I look at him, still amazed at us. Suddenly, even with everything else going on, I'm ridiculously happy, all my thoughts softened like butter in a pan.

We eat lunch together every day, go to his flat or mine after work, pass whole weekends going on walks and watching films. I've never felt like this before. I can spend all my time with him and never get bored.

'Can you find any tree?' I've spent the last twenty-five minutes trying to piece together a branch that refuses to manifest itself. My eyes feel tired, my fingers antsy.

'Here's a bit, I think,' he says, passing me a piece. Sure enough, it slots right in, and another branch is complete.

I like him so much—and I hate it. I always felt safe in my independence, never wanted to need anyone outside of my family. And he's so different to anyone I've ever been close to before.

Not that I would do anything to change him—he makes me childishly happy. I swim laps and think of him.

'I'm going away with my parents this weekend,' he says now. 'To this, like, incredibly bourgeois resort.'

He's got that tone he reserves for his parents—a mix of disdain and resentment. It makes me squirm a bit in my seat, my happiness slipping away.

Henry is very different to me in a lot of ways. In Asian cultures, respect for

elders, at least parents, is paramount. Of course, I grew up in New Zealand, so I'm not nearly as respectful as a *good* Asian daughter, but I'm still better than Henry. Henry's disdain for his parents is so apparent that it makes me uncomfortable. There's a part of me that wishes he would at least superficially appease them.

'Well, just say you can't if you don't want to.' I find another piece of tree and slot it into place.

'I can't, though—it's for my mum's sixtieth birthday. God, I hate spending time with those people.'

There's a pause.

'They *are* your parents,' I say, not looking at him. 'Like, they did still raise you. And also, a resort for a weekend is a nice thing?'

'Anywhere is hell with my parents.'

'Well, they must know you a bit? You did live with them for years.'

'They only know this idea of me. I think they still hope that I'm going to *drop the act* and suddenly become a high-earning businessman. They don't get that I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. We fight about it every time I see them. But they insist on still inviting me to things when really all I want is to be left alone.'

'Can't you find a way to just be amicable, though? Not fight, at least?'

'I don't want to waste my energy hiding my true self.'

I can't help it. I roll my eyes.

'What?' He looks annoyed.

I think about our Sunday-night dinners. Max stopped going because of Grandma's homophobia, but what's Henry's reason? That his parents are politically conservative? That seems like something he should be able to stomach.

'Just, like, there are ways to be yourself and still get along with your family. I can't help but feel that your complaining is a bit, I don't know, childish.'

'Childish, you say.' His tone is stony now.

'Yeah.'

'Well, I'm sorry you think I'm *childish*, but my family has never made me feel good and I'm actually just looking out for myself. I actually think I've made the best decision for myself. So maybe keep your opinions on my family to *yourself*.'

He's raised his voice now. His face is red, his eyes glistening like sweat.

Regret swells through me.

'I'm sorry I said that. You're right. You know what's best for you.' My voice is small. I want to curl up like a snail retreating into its shell.

There's a long pause and he exhales slowly.

'No, I'm sorry I got angry. I get that family is important to you. But you have to understand it's different for me. I don't care about my family.'

It makes me sad. I can't imagine not caring about my family. Mum, Dad, Max and Grandpa are four of my favourite people in the world. Even if it gets complicated sometimes.

•

When Friday afternoon comes around, Henry is quiet.

'Call me if you need to,' I tell him, pulling him in for a hug. 'How long's the drive?'

'Two hours.'

I can sense him biting his tongue. I sigh.

'You can say what you want to. You know I feel weird when you criticise your parents, but you *can*. You can be honest with me.'

'Thank you.' He kisses the top of my head and I melt into him. 'But you're right. Complaining isn't the answer.'

I pull him closer.

'I'll just inherit their mansion, then let everyone live in it rent free!'

He punches the air with a joyous whoop and I can't help but laugh.

'You do what you need to do,' I say, pulling him in for a kiss.

Later, Ashley and I have people over for dinner. Logan and Nick from Ashley's work, Kasey and Abi from the Collective. I've only been to the one meeting, but I've been chatting with Kasey and Abi on Facebook. Kasey added me to the youth branch group chat and keeps inviting me to events. I feel welcome, even if I don't always feel like going.

The table's laden. Ashley and I made a massive noodle stir-fry and the others contributed salads, sausage rolls and fresh bread.

It's our first time hosting a dinner party, so we spent ages cleaning, something we often neglect. I vacuumed and scrubbed the bathroom while Ashley thoroughly cleaned the kitchen and dusted all the corners in the lounge. The flat looks better than it's ever looked.

Now, we're sitting around, talking, eating and drinking. Kasey, Abi and I are eating with chopsticks. I've never eaten with chopsticks with friends before. It feels nice. Nick stares at us.

'So, is it true that Asians eat dog?' he asks suddenly, in a jokey tone. An uncomfortable silence falls. Everybody stares at him.

I feel a strange heat making its way up my throat. Kasey, Abi and I lock eyes.

'What?' Nick asks, and he has the audacity to look surprised.

'That's kind of racist,' Ashley says.

'Is it?' Nick asks.

'Well, yeah, it is.'

'But what if I want to know?'

'Then google it,' Kasey snaps.

'I just want to ask a question. Doesn't make me racist,' Nick shoots back. 'Nobody's offended, right?'

'I'm offended,' I say.

'Me too,' says Kasey.

'Same,' chimes in Abi.

'Oh,' Nick says. 'Well, sorry 'bout that.'

'*Sorry 'bout that?*' Ashley stares at him. 'Was that supposed to be an apology?'

'Yeah? I said I'm sorry!'

'That wasn't an apology,' Ashley snaps. 'Apologise properly.'

His face splotchy, he looks directly at Kasey, Abi and me.

'*Sorry,*' he says, emphasising the word with heavy sarcasm.

'Whatever,' I say. I turn away from him and talk to Abi and Kasey instead.

Nick leaves straight after dinner, citing a headache. The room feels warmer once he's gone.

We move to the lounge, and Kasey, Abi and I curl up on the sofa and share childhood stories. I never thought I was raised in a particularly Asian style, but it turns out I can relate to all sorts of tiny details in their stories. For example, we all remove our shoes at the door. Ashley doesn't do that in the flat, so I wear slippers everywhere to avoid getting my feet dirty.

Another thing is the hoarding. Mum always kept the pantry impressively full with Tupperware containers of different types of rice and noodles, sauces and half-empty spice jars, stacks of cans and bottles of oil.

'I used to go to friends' houses and find their pantries so empty,' I tell

Kasey and Abi.

‘Same,’ says Abi. ‘Mum kept stacks of chocolate boxes in case we ever needed to give someone a gift.’

‘My mum said we needed at least three days of food in the house,’ Kasey adds. ‘She’d make extra food and freeze it in containers.’

I think of my mum, the packets of frozen dumplings and pies in the freezer. I always thought it was one of her funny quirks, but apparently it’s not.

Of course, I don’t relate to *everything* Kasey and Abi say. They’re both closer to their mother-cultures than I am, which sometimes makes me feel a bit whitewashed. Kasey speaks Korean, because she spoke it with her mum. She also knows how to cook Korean dishes, because her Korean grandmother lived with her family for ten years.

Similarly, Abi felt connected to her heritage growing up, partially because she went to a Sri Lankan protestant church.

‘It’s like a religion and community all in one,’ Abi explains. ‘Like, I’m pretty sure not everyone actually believes in God, but it’s the one place where everyone can be as Sri Lankan as they want and nobody thinks twice about it.’

I hadn’t even realised that there *were* churches for specific cultural or ethnic groups. I only ever went to church at Easter and Christmas, and not even every year.

My parents consider themselves agnostic but I think they feel like they just don’t need God.

‘You shouldn’t feel bad for not speaking Mandarin,’ Kasey tells me. ‘It’s not on you at all. It’s on your parents. Why didn’t they speak Mandarin to you at home?’

‘I think they just wanted me to fit in at school. And Mandarin wasn’t even my dad’s first language. And to be fair, Mum put me in classes when I was little, and I just didn’t want to learn.’

‘Well, you were only little. No kid is going to be motivated to learn a second language,’ Abi says. ‘And you can always learn one day if you want to.’

I know they’re trying to be reassuring and helpful, but it still makes me feel a bit like a fraud. Kasey and Abi are Asian New Zealanders who fully

embrace both their cultures. Even if I'm trying to find some sense of Asian community now, that doesn't change the distance I kept for most of my life.

BACKWATERS

Part VII

‘We need to do something fun.’

Peter made this announcement on a sweaty Tuesday afternoon when the New Zealand sun was baking through the scatter of clouds and the men were squatting and smoking, taking a ten-minute break from the cabbages.

‘What do you mean?’ Josh, the tallest in the group, squinted up at Peter, using a dirty hand to shade his eyes.

‘What do I mean by *fun*?’ Peter threw his hands up. ‘My point exactly! All we do is work, morning until evening. Every. Single. Day. Seven days a week.’

The men stared at Peter as if he’d transformed into something strange.

‘Well, that’s why we’re here,’ said one of the men, and the others nodded.

But Peter persisted. ‘There has to be more to life than work. The pumpkins will survive. We can’t work every day, or we’ll die. We’ve come hundreds and thousands of miles away from our homes to a beautiful country that we haven’t even seen because we’re so busy working. Why did we even come here?’

In the end, five of them agreed to take a single day off. They all worked in the same garden and didn’t need permission from anybody.

The day they chose was a Saturday, so they could go back to Peter’s shack afterwards for their regular dinner. They agreed to cook in advance, to bring their food to the shack early Saturday morning. After that they would go for a hike to explore the mountains and beaches. It wouldn’t be warm, but they all swore to swim if the others did, to get their blood running for the fun of it.

Ken arrived early on Saturday morning, carrying a bowl of noodles. Peter let him in with a grin.

‘Looking forward to the day?’

Ken nodded and ducked into the shack. Peter thumped him affectionately on the back as he passed.

Inside, it was quiet and dark. The shadows hung from the ceiling like curtains, and Ken thought how strange it was to be at Peter’s place so early in the day, without the warmth and glow of the usual dinners. He sat awkwardly on a chair as Peter pranced about the room singing traditional Chinese songs and slapping his hands on every flat surface.

Ken wondered where Peter found his enthusiasm for life, the smiles that he threw around cheerfully as he filled and stowed sacks of tomatoes. He thought about his own childhood, wondering if the answer lay there. He thought about his brothers and parents, about how they were likely living their lives now as if he had never existed. The same way they had always lived, really. He thought about Kaiyang and all that could have been.

How he felt—it was a colour, a greyish purple that travelled irregularly through his body, passing molecules in and out of his lungs.

But Peter broke him out of his reverie. He grabbed Ken’s hands and pulled him to his feet to dance. Despite himself, Ken smiled.

•

It was a good day. The air was neither too warm nor too cold, and the light breeze kept their spirits high. They climbed up to a cliff and Ken felt a stirring within him. He couldn’t remember the last time he did something just for the pleasure of it.

The five men walked noisily—laughing, singing, racing each other up particularly rocky sections. At one point, Ken and Peter sprinted towards a rock, and Ken tripped and fell.

‘Are you okay?’ Peter ran over to him.

‘I’m fine.’ Luckily, he was unhurt. He laughed loudly. He picked himself up and looked backwards, only then realising how far they’d come.

‘Look at that!’ He felt his voice go wild and high with delight. They all looked, all marvelled at the sight of blue. The lake was spread beneath them, smooth and incredible. They took a moment to drink in the sight. The sun was bright in the sky. They threw their shoulders back and charged upwards.

Later that night, long after everyone else had gone home, they sat on Peter’s porch steps. The conversation turned to the future, to family. Ken looked at his hands.

Some of the men discussed visiting China in a few years, to find a wife, start a family. They would then leave her there, sending her a letter and New Zealand dollars every few months, providing for her in the best way possible.

Those who already had wives talked about visiting home every eight years or so, before going back to retire. Nobody wanted to die in New Zealand.

‘What would it do to our souls, to be stranded here?’

‘Forget our souls, what about our bones?’

Ken sent money home to his family, but he had no intention of ever visiting, saw no reason to awaken old ghosts.

Self-improvement

Bach hovers in the air. It's Sunday, and Grandpa and I haven't moved from our seats for the last three hours. He's been translating the journal, occasionally muttering or grunting, while I've been writing. I'm beginning to feel that I have some sense of Ken, of who he was as a person.

It still feels strange to be writing his story, putting words in his mouth, animating his body like some puppetmaster. But it also feels empowering to take his raw emotions and enliven them. It's almost like I can let him feel again.

Hearing Grandpa read Ken's words to me, I don't feel like Ken is my great-great-grandfather. Or even Grandpa's grandfather. Instead I imagine him young, the protagonist of his own story.

When I picture him and the places he describes, I feel unable to properly visualise them. All I have to go on are films about China, documentaries, action movies.

In my mind, Ken looks like a generic young Chinese man, and I hate that.

Every hour or so, Grandpa looks over what I've written and gives me feedback.

'It's an odd experience, reading Ken's point of view through your words,' he says.

'Does it feel inaccurate?' I ask. 'I guess all I'm going off is the diary.'

'It's not that it feels *inaccurate*,' Grandpa says. 'I can see Ken in there. But I also see you in there. And you're the writer, so that's not really avoidable. Your world view's going to leak in. I wouldn't worry about it, though. It's a story, not a biography.'

'I want it to be as accurate as possible, though,' I say. 'If I'm representing a Chinese story, I don't want my own feelings about Chinese-ness to impact that.'

'All you can do is your best, Lorry. You're doing your research and nobody can ask more than that. And this *is* our history. It's not like you're

appropriating anything.'

It's Grandpa's real history and my non-biological history. But I'm grateful to Grandpa for calling it *our* history. Like I really can claim this too.

Later in the afternoon, Henry and I sprawl on his couch, watching a movie rented from one of the last video stores in Auckland. It's a thriller about a heist, and it's not very good, but we're only half paying attention anyway.

'I'm going to make a hot chocolate, do you want one?' Henry's playing with my hair and I'm curled into him under a grey blanket, my feet tucked up.

'Yes please,' I say, and he extricates himself. I grab a pillow to replace him. Without him or the movie to distract me, I think about my writing session with Grandpa.

When Henry returns with the drinks, I tell him I'm going to call Dad.

My feet feel cold on the wooden floorboards as I leave the room and walk into the hallway. My fingers are heavy as I scroll to Dad's contact and press call. The phone rings six times before Dad picks up.

I tell him about Ken, about his diary and how I'm having trouble picturing him.

'And it's weird for me to think of him as Chinese, and my relative, when I still don't think of myself as Chinese,' I say. 'I get that I'm mostly ethnically Chinese, but it still doesn't feel like it fits.'

'Well, maybe that's a separate thing you need to work out,' Dad says.

We talk a little longer, then we say *I love you*, and hang up.

Afterwards, I return to my spot on the couch, which Henry has kept warm. He hands me my drink and I sip it while he absentmindedly plays with my hair.

I tell Henry about my conversation with Grandpa.

'I'm still struggling to accurately write about my racial identity. I feel like I should be ready to consider myself Chinese, but I'm not. I'm a step behind everyone in the Collective, but I want to catch up.'

I've talked about it with him before and he's always listened and been supportive. This time feels different.

'Just say what you want to say about yourself.' He says it like it's simple.

'It's not that easy.'

'Why not? Look, I know this is important for you, but at the end of the

day, you're Laura. You're *you*. I know you.'

I think he's trying to be sweet. It annoys me. I explain that I want to be able to definitively say what I am, which countries I'm from. It takes me the better part of half an hour. By the time I've stopped talking, I can tell he's frustrated.

'I get that this is important to you,' he says again.

'But?'

'But it seems to take up so much of your headspace. I'm beginning to wonder if it's actually productive. Don't you think it would be better to think about other, more solid things?'

'Like what?'

'I don't know. I used to be, like, really obsessed with self-improvement. It's only when I started volunteering at the SHS and actually doing something that I was able to worry about myself less.'

'Are you seriously comparing "self-improvement" to being a racial minority in a white society?'

'No! Okay. Sorry. That was a really bad example. I just, I mean, maybe it's not super healthy for you to be self-analysing all the time. You might feel better if you focused your energy outwards a bit.'

'Are you saying I'm self-obsessed?'

I can't believe this. Like, I *know* that I grew up with a nice family in a nice suburb and should be spending more time helping people who are less privileged than I am. But I also know it's reasonable to have identity issues.

He immediately starts backing down.

'No, no, of course not. I'm just wondering if all this thinking is actually helpful to you at this point in time.'

He says it in his usual friendly, affable manner. It makes me mad.

'Oh, so you're the perfect white guy who volunteers for charity? And I'm just the intense person of colour who's obsessed with her own history?'

'Okay, you're overreacting,' he says slowly. 'That's not what I'm trying to say at all and I'm sorry that it came out like that.'

'So what *are* you saying?'

He takes a deep breath. When he finally speaks, it's slow, like he's determined to get every word right.

'I'm saying...what do you hope will change after all of this? When you have more answers—if there even *are* answers?'

I deflate, my anger leaving me as quickly as it sparked up. Henry reaches

out and holds my hand.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Were your parents fine with you dating a white guy?’ Abi half shouts, looking at me with wide eyes. It’s hard to hear anything because thick, heavy raindrops keep pounding the ceiling.

I’m at my second Collective session, sitting at a table with Kasey, Abi, Tim, Melanie, James and Will. There are fewer people than last time — ‘Because the others are losers,’ according to Will. To be fair to them, I was tempted to stay home too. It hasn’t rained this much in weeks, and the wind is howling. In the three-minute sprint from my car to the entrance I managed to get drenched.

‘Yeah, they don’t care who I date as long as they’re good to me.’

‘And is he?’ Will asks.

‘Yeah! Henry’s amazing,’ I say. The memory of our argument flashes through my head. ‘Although sometimes he doesn’t really understand when I’m talking about race.’

‘How would he?’ Will asks. ‘He doesn’t have any lived experience.’

‘That’s true.’

‘What does he do?’ Kasey asks.

‘He works at the gallery with me.’

I’d never thought about it before, but I realise I’m lucky. Abi starts talking about how her parents want her to marry a Sri Lankan man.

‘And he has to be a doctor.’ She groans.

‘Oh, *same*.’ Melanie laughs. ‘My parents say I can marry someone from any ethnicity as long as they’re a doctor, lawyer or engineer.’

James cackles.

‘God, my parents were so disappointed when I became a designer. They told me I’d never become anything. Now look at me!’ He shimmies, running a hand through his gelled hair. ‘Wouldn’t *your* parents be thrilled if you dated me?’

‘Abi, you should start dating a fifty-year-old and anything after will seem like an upgrade,’ Will suggests.

‘Date Tim!’ Kasey grins. Both Abi and Tim blush heavily, their eyes roving everywhere but each other. I start laughing and then everyone’s laughing.

‘Let’s work on our projects!’ Abi exclaims, her cheeks still red. ‘Laura, you haven’t even told us what you’re working on.’

I’m writing “Chinese New Zealand” stories for the gallery where I work. They’ve been commissioned by some artist.’

‘That’s cool,’ Will says. ‘So what are you writing about?’

I tell them about my great-great-grandfather, the journal, the market gardens. I don’t feel like getting into the whole adoption thing tonight.

‘I’m fictionalising his diary,’ I explain. ‘It’s like a retelling of his life.’

Kasey holds up a finished earring. It’s a mountain daisy pressed in clear resin, hanging from a string of pearls.

‘Will you let us read it?’ she asks.

‘Sure.’

My heart beats fast. I never let friends read my work. But I want to let them read it. I feel like they’ll understand it.

For a while, we fall silent, listening to the rain and working on our own projects.

BACKWATERS

Part VIII

Over the years, many more men came from China. They came to work in the goldmines and market gardens, or, increasingly, in laundries and shops.

Several men took the long journey back to China to find wives and start families.

'I've earned enough to give them a good life,' they said. 'New Zealand was never going to be forever.'

The men had to go to China to find wives, because Chinese women still weren't allowed in New Zealand. A few men married white women or Māori women, but mixed-race couples faced a lot of discrimination.

When they were ready to marry, some of the men decided they wanted to permanently return to their village, their old lives. They were satisfied with their pockets of gold, the vegetables converted to livelihoods. They had experienced life on an island far away. They had seen the world.

'What's life without family, anyway?' they said, and then they were on ships in stacks.

Others planned to go to China, marry and have children, and then return to New Zealand.

'One day in the future, the women will be able to join us,' they said, and packed their bags.

Still others already had wives and families. They'd left them to work and to provide for them, but now wished to retire to them, to buy land and line their coffins with comfort. They'd been sending money home for years, and the children would never have to know what that money really cost. Transliterated names, life in a foreign country, distant fatherhood, strangeness, cabbages, tin, isolation, dirt, boat trips, ocean, coldness, rain, sacking—those were just some of the things the children should never have to know.

They might ask about what life was like in New Zealand. The men would never truthfully tell them. It was a closed chapter in their lives.

For still others, New Zealand was the end of the road. Daniel was among those who decided to stay.

'This is home,' he said. 'This is my life now.'

The friendship between Ken, Peter and Daniel had been steady for the fourteen years they'd known each other. They lived in Peter's shack, just the three of them, rising together at four-thirty every morning and eating simple bowls of porridge before heading out the door, spades in hand.

Their market garden, which was now jointly owned by the three of them, grew as they acquired more land. Rows and rows of runner beans, overflowing baskets of cucumbers, corn, cabbages: their garden was ever fruitful. They acquired a duck pond, a chicken coop, horses to deliver vegetables. They had tiny successes, and their world grew.

The Saturday-night gatherings persisted even as the men in attendance changed, though the nights had evolved. They no longer carried the hazy intimacy that once melted the evening minutes into open spaces. Their nights spilled and expanded. They played sports, they played music; they taught each other new skills, new dishes; they massaged the tension from each other's shoulders. They were brothers.

As the community grew, so did the feelings of resentment among the local people. A few Chinese weren't a problem, but as more arrived, the air thickened with distaste.

'Go back to your own country!'

'Get away from me, monkey!'

They could understand now, these words being hurled at them like stones. They dealt with it in different ways.

Daniel carried within him the serenity of an ice-capped mountain. He was impenetrable, proud—and, admittedly, inflexible. He absorbed the insults and used them to strengthen his walls, his certainty that his culture was the best, that his motherland was the superior country. Even if he had decided to stay.

Peter tried to make light of what was clearly not light, and it sometimes left him spent. 'It could be worse,' he always said. At the same time, he tried, actively working to improve his English.

Ken ignored whatever he could, although he too learned to speak and write in English. He knew what it was to not belong, to be thought of as lesser. Once upon a time he was an outcast in his own family. Here were more brothers to look upon him with scorn and derision. But time was passing, and he knew that attitudes would change, even if slowly.

There would be new second brothers, even here.

Strange Beats

I call Mum. She picks up after seven rings, sounding flustered.

‘Hi, Laura.’

‘Hi, Mum, are you busy?’

‘No, no, just out for a walk, that’s all.’

We talk about my day and her day, and about how I’m coming over for dinner on Sunday, like always.

I try to gently edge into the topic of adoption. But it’s impossible to broach it gently.

‘Can I look for your birth parents? I know you said you don’t want to know, but Max and I really do. We really want to know who our grandparents are.’

She pauses. I can almost hear her thoughts like assaults against the inside of her skull.

‘You can look, if you want to,’ she says, finally. I can tell it cost something for her to say that. Mum putting herself last like always.

‘Thank you. Really. Thank you. It means a lot to us.’

I try to convey my gratitude in the tone of my voice, but it just comes across as overly emphatic.

‘I don’t know if you’ll find anything,’ she says. ‘The adoption might have been under the table. There might not be any records.’

‘Well, if there is anything, I want to know.’

There’s another long pause.

‘If you do find anything...’

‘Do you want to know?’

‘Well, if you’re going to find out anyway, it’s a bit strange if you know and I don’t...’

Her voice is hesitant, nervous. But somewhere there I can detect thin traces of hope.

‘Do you want to talk about how you’re feeling about all this, Mum?’

I've never made an offer like that before. Mum has always been the kind of mum to keep a smile pasted on her face in front of the kids. She talked to her friends about her feelings, never to us.

'Carly even helps her mum with dating problems,' I told Mum once, when I was about fourteen. 'She says that her mum is like her best friend.'

Mum shook her head. I could tell she didn't approve.

'I'm your mother,' she said. 'I look after *you*. You don't need to hear about my problems.'

'But what if I want to help you?'

'You can help me when I'm old.'

It always came back to that. *I'll look after you now. And one day you'll look after me.*

On the phone now, I wonder if that day is coming sooner than we both thought.

I hear her breathing down the line, and for a moment I feel like she's about to open up to me. Tell me her feelings, fears, secrets.

'I'm fine,' she says in a tight voice, and I can't hear her breathing any more either.

Later, I call Henry and tell him what Mum said. He listens as I talk, and the knowledge that he's right there at the other end of the line stimulates my heart until it's pounding wildly to a strange beat.

I can hear the remnants of our argument in the restrained politeness in our voices. Eventually he brings it up.

'Look, our conversation the other day went wrong. You know I'm always happy to listen to you talk about the things that you're thinking through. The things that matter to you.'

His words are careful, measured. Like he practised saying them.

'Thank you,' I say. 'I'm sorry I raised my voice. I guess you hit a nerve, because I worry that I *am* selfish or self-indulgent in how I think about it. But I need to. I still want to help other people, obviously.'

'And you will! You've been helping out at the SHS with me, which has been amazing. And your writing is important. You're going to reach people, L.'

I've spent exactly one afternoon with the SHS, sorting through donations and visiting shelters. I talked to Sefina, an old Samoan woman, for nearly an

hour. She had this big toothy grin and told me I reminded her of her granddaughter. She asked me to come see her again, and I said I would, but I haven't been back. Sunday afternoons are writing time.

Henry asks if I want to come over, and twenty minutes later I'm standing outside his front door. I raise my hand to knock and the door opens. I feel myself fold into Henry's arms. We stand like that with the door open, his heart beating against mine.

I feel an overwhelming urge to cry.

The next morning, I open my laptop and google 'how to find parents of adopted children'. All the New Zealand results are through Oranga Tamariki and the New Zealand Government. They only apply to children born and adopted in New Zealand. Not helpful for Mum.

I amend my search to 'how to find parents of internationally adopted children'. Every website requires some kind of detail—the name of the biological family, the adoption agency, the details around the adoption. I don't have anything.

I realise I'm going to have to ask Grandpa.

In lieu of finding anything useful, I find myself reading adoption and family-reunion stories. The internet is full of adopted children, apparently. Full of loving YouTube videos with titles like 'Meeting my mum for the first time', 'Long lost siblings reunite' and 'Finally found my biological family!'

In the videos, the families are usually crying.

'I can't believe I finally get to meet my baby,' an old woman sobs.

Many adoptees report finding similarities between themselves and their biological parents, both physical features and personality traits. I wonder if somewhere out there are people that look and act just like Mum.

On Saturday, I'm at Grandpa's house.

Grandpa and I have fallen into a rhythm: I help him in the garden, and then we sit at the dining table with our cups of tea. While he translates Ken's journal, I write Ken's story based on what Grandpa's already done. Grandpa works fast: he would have been a good translator if life had taken him in that direction.

I decide to write Ken's life from the beginning, back in his tiny village. Ken's journal starts on the boat journey to New Zealand, but he talks about

the village—his brothers, his parents, Qiu.

Grandpa's nearly halfway through the journal now, and every page holds a new revelation, a new hint of information that brings him closer to his own conception. Ken had dreams he never realised. Ken struggled with the intensity of his love. Ken felt more at home in New Zealand than he ever felt in China.

'Is it strange reading your great-grandfather's journal?' I ask while we're taking a tea break. I suddenly feel guilty that I didn't even consider that when I asked him to translate for me.

'Yes and no,' he replies. 'Reading from his point of view means it doesn't feel like him. I barely met him before he died, so it feels like it's about someone else entirely.'

I can't imagine reading my own dad's journals. I have no idea what he'd write in it. He seems so open with his emotions, filling a room with his laughter or his sadness. I wonder what he hides.

'Do you want another cup of tea?' I offer.

While I'm making it, I wonder how to broach the topic of Mum's adoption. Confronting him about why he never told her about it is one thing, asking for details is another. I just hope he doesn't get upset.

With trembling hands, I carry the tea back to the table and set it down in front of him.

'Thanks, Lorry,' he says, smiling at me. I look at that kind, leathery face. The face I've known my whole life. I have to trust he'll understand.

'Grandpa, can I ask you something?'

'Anything at all.'

'Can you tell me about adopting Mum?'

There's a pause before I dare meet Grandpa's gaze. He's looking directly at me, his eyes sad.

'Of course you can. God knows I owe you that,' he says. 'Okay, where do I begin? Your grandmother and I were struggling to have children. When your grandmother finally got pregnant, she had a miscarriage. It nearly killed her. We were both devastated. We hoped a baby would help our marriage, you see.'

'Which it didn't,' I interject.

'Which it didn't. Anyway. About a year later we went to Hong Kong to see if we could adopt a baby. Lots of people we knew were going to Hong Kong, so we just followed along, really. When we arrived, we visited a few different

children's homes. We got your mum from one of them. She was only a few weeks old.'

Even though I'd thought I was prepared to learn about Mum's past, it's still upsetting to hear that she came from an orphanage.

'Do you remember the name of the home?'

'Not off the top of my head. I think I've got the papers somewhere if you don't mind waiting for me to find them.'

I sit and sip my tea while Grandpa disappears into the recesses of the house. Ten minutes later he comes out holding a cracked and yellowed brochure, 'Crescent Moon Home' emblazoned in faded letters across its front.

'This is the one,' he says.

I thumb through the brochure, careful not to pull the softened paper apart. It's in Chinese, so I have to ask Grandpa to translate.

He reads it to me, but all it does is describe the home and the children. It doesn't tell me anything about Mum. I pull out my phone to google the home. There's one link, depicting a picture of a depressing-looking building. It doesn't look like anyone's updated the website in a long time. There's no phone number or email, just an address.

'Do you know who Mum's biological parents are?'

'We didn't ask.'

BACKWATERS

Part IX

Fourteen years after arriving in New Zealand, Ken was finally ready to find love again.

He'd never planned to heal from his broken heart. He'd meant to love Qiu until he died. And fourteen years after he'd last held her, he still loved her. But there was a softening too, a space in his chest. He was beginning to think that maybe it could be filled by someone else.

'What's holding you back?' Daniel asked. 'You can't grieve forever.'

'It's time for you to move on,' Peter said, slinging an arm around Ken's shoulders. 'You deserve some love in your life.'

'And so do you!' Daniel yelled, grabbing Peter's shoulders.

Peter wasn't interested in ever marrying. He was happiest with his independence and his friendships, the life that he'd built for himself.

'I left China so nobody would pressure me into getting a wife,' Peter mock-whined, punching Daniel on the arm. Daniel was always trying to persuade Peter that marriage was the meaning of life, and Peter was always making a point of how happy he was to be single.

'I don't have to miss anyone,' he said.

It was true that Daniel missed his little family. He'd returned to China for a visit a few years earlier and got married. He came back to New Zealand while his wife was pregnant, and sent money home as often as he could.

Ken transcribed Daniel's letters to his wife and son, because Daniel couldn't read or write. Ken also read Daniel's wife's letters out loud, feeling a bit like he was intruding on their marriage. Daniel always looked fragile when he was listening. Daniel was the same person he was fourteen years ago, still friendly and generous. But he'd changed after he got married. When he came back from China, it was like he'd left a part of himself behind.

'My life isn't just about myself any more,' he said. 'I have a family now.'

Ken could see what it did to Daniel, having a wife and child across the ocean. Part of him wished he was like Peter, content on his own. But he wanted more. He wanted love.

At the boarding dock, Ken said goodbye to Peter and Daniel.

'Good luck finding a wife,' said Peter. 'Although I doubt it'll be difficult for you. Tell them you're a hero in New Zealand and the girls will come running.'

'We'll see.'

'Well, you're a changed man,' said Peter. 'You'll be fine. But don't forget to come back, okay?'

'Couldn't let you guys have all the money from the vegetables I've planted!'

He got on the boat. Each step took him further from the life he'd built for himself. Part of him wanted to turn around and run back to land, back to Peter and Daniel, to the rows of beans and lettuces. But he didn't. He knew that if he turned around now, he would never come back to this boat. He would never again conjure the courage.

Out at sea, his fingers froze to the railings. Like his last trip, fourteen years ago, he spent most of the time staring across the horizon. The waves undulated gently, reflecting the fire of sunset, the silver moon.

What would it be like going back home? The word skittered uncomfortably on his tongue. It wasn't home. Was it ever? Isn't home supposed to be analogous to happiness, or comfort, or family?

He'd only ever known one home in China, and she no longer resided there.
But was New Zealand home?

When he thought about New Zealand now, it was not the same island of his youthful dreams. Now, he thought about cabbages and dirt and shovels, hills and sweat, gusts of wind on his skin. He thought about Daniel and Peter, all the other men and their little tin houses, the chickens and the gardens, and a warmth somewhere in his chest. He thought about isolation and unfriendly glances, curiosity and smiles. How strange, the way a far-off idea can become something real and tangible, something one can touch.

New Zealand was now days away, and he realised he missed it.

Land drifted into view. His fingers were locked in a knot. He kept swallowing.

'There it is!' Shouts of excitement charged the air, knocking through the men like a sudden wave. He stood stock-still and watched the Guangzhou harbour grow closer, forming into something solid.

Someone bumped his arm.

'How are you feeling? There it is! Home!'

He mumbled some kind of reply, but it was lost in the clamour. Everyone wanted to say something meaningful as the ship arrived.

From Guangzhou, he had a whole day's journey ahead of him to his old village. He hadn't exactly been filled with desire to see his parents or brothers, but he felt obliged. It also meant that he didn't have to worry about organising accommodation. He was to stay with Kaiyang, his second brother, and Kaiyang's family, which already consisted of a wife and three children. The thought filled him with a certain trepidation.

Fourteen years.

As Ken travelled through the familiar landscape, he considered his own evolution as a person.

Once upon a time, Qiu forced him to confront himself. She made him consider who he was, what he wanted to do. He would never have stepped onto a boat to New Zealand if she hadn't wanted a bigger life for him.

Now, fourteen years of building a life meant he was far more aware of himself. Still quiet, still introspective, still a writer who hardly ever wrote. But also a relatively successful gardener, a home owner, a friend. A voyager and an immigrant. Someone who absorbed enmity, someone who wasn't ashamed to let the bruises show. Someone who could never sleep through the night.

Theories

‘I’ve got some theories,’ I tell Mum.

It’s Sunday and we’re in the garden before dinner. The weather is beautiful with a clean blue sky and a light breeze that ruffles my hair.

‘Go on,’ she says. ‘Let’s hear them.’

‘I’ve been thinking a lot about the potential Portuguese heritage. That theory’s interesting to me, because it’s nice to think that it might have something to do with my interest in Spanish.’

‘I think they speak Portuguese in Portugal.’

‘Well, you know what I mean.’ I shut my eyes for a second. ‘Close enough.’

‘Okay, anyway. Tell it to me like a story.’

‘Okay.’ I take a breath. ‘It’s like this.’

Mum’s Story, Version One

Your father was born in Aveiro, Portugal. He was the size of a small loaf of bread and his face was angry.

He did not cry when his mother held him, though his expression did not improve. His father examined him in the light. Your father’s wail punched through the air.

He fed at his mother’s breast, sat up, took his first steps.

Then he learned to speak. First haltingly and then fluently, the sounds and then words rolling fast off his tongue.

Your father went to school and learned that two numbers can be added together to make a new number.

He had a brother now. A sister. He looked at them and felt a certain weight. A heavy sensation of love, like the walls of his heart crushing inwards.

Your father’s father died suddenly in an accident out in the streets.

The family wore black for a week.

Then he was out of school, because school won't fill bellies. Your father worked, scraping the ground with his hands.

Fifteen, in love for the first time.

Sixteen, heartbroken.

Your father's mother never fully recovered from the death of your father's father. She grew ill; her face turned white. She died.

Your father learned that nothing comes from nothing. Seventeen, with a flinty determination and sweat on his forehead. Your father wanted to provide for his brother and sister, because their parents were both dead. Your father knew that he needed money. There was a ship. There was an open call. Your father entered the fleet.

He became a pirate. First stop, Hong Kong.

Your mother was already there.

The daughter of a bartender, from the age of twelve she was delivering glasses of beer to round wooden tables full of sailors, pirates, foreigners.

From the age of twelve she kept her head down and tried not to be seen.

It didn't work. Your mother bloomed early and became beautiful, and beauty is always noticed, especially by sailors starved of it. She was of medium height, with gleaming hair like a river at night. Her eyes were uncommonly large, dark and expressive above a small button nose, a wide red mouth.

There were always eyes on her, wanting eyes, hungry eyes. She pretended not to notice the stares—sometimes hands—that came at her. She hated them, but she had nowhere else to go.

She grew up fast. She was used to the sight of men stumbling out of her father's bar in the small hours of morning, used to the stench of vomit, used to wiping it all up with a rancid mop. The men called her names. Dirty names she wanted to wash away with the soap and vomit. She hated men, but men filled up her world. Her mother had died when she was small, leaving her with a father who hardly knew what to do with her. He was the one who told her to keep her head down, not to complain. He was all she had.

Your father noticed your mother the moment he walked into the bar. He stole glances at her the whole evening. She caught him doing so, but pretended not to. The glances from the young foreigners were preferable to those of the older sailors, who stared at her with entitlement. The boys were more gentle, and they never dared touch her.

This boy, your father, fell in love with your mother at first sight. His first love—the one when he was sixteen—didn't count, he decided. That was just a fleeting interest. This was real. He thought that your mother was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen.

Maybe it was all those weeks on the boat, the time spent only with boys. Maybe it was the drink, your father unused to its effects. But he decided that he must talk to her, to convey his feelings.

He returned the next night, alone, and watched the people come and go, watched her serve swathes of grubby uniformed men.

The third night, when the bar was closing, when everyone else had left, he approached her. He had practised a few phrases in Cantonese and he tried them now.

'I don't understand,' your mother said, and his shoulders slackened.

He repeated himself, and she just shook her dark head.

So he reached deep into his left pant pocket and pulled something out. He handed it to her. It was a piece of sea glass: green and moulded smooth by waves. It was delicate and lovely. He pointed at the glass, and then at her.

'For you,' he said in Portuguese, and she understood.

Your mother was touched. In all the years of jeers and catcalls, no foreigner had ever tried to talk to her in her own tongue, had ever given her a gift. She looked at this foreign pirate boy, with his weather-beaten tan and his kind eyes, and realised that he was beautiful.

And then she thought that she'd never really talked to a boy on her own terms before. She thought it was about time.

'I'm going to take you somewhere,' she said in Cantonese.

'I don't understand,' he said, which she well knew.

She took him by the hand, led him to the door and turned off the lights. She stepped outside into the narrow alleyway. He stepped out after her, shutting the door behind him.

•

And thus began their short relationship, a relationship that only ever existed in the early hours of the morning, after the bars had shut.

She took him to hidden corners of Hong Kong. They walked the streets hand in hand, making the shadows wobble as they went by.

They found new ways to understand each other.

He mimed his story for her, speaking in Portuguese, using his hands. She filled in the gaps of understanding with her imagination.

She didn't try to tell him about her bleak life, confined as it was to a dingy bar. Instead, she made up stories for him, tracing the characters in the air with her fingertips. He was enchanted by the sound of her voice, by the tales that seemed to convey themselves to him in the rise and fall of her tone.

They both knew it couldn't last. He was a pirate, and his ship was leaving in a matter of days. But they spurned the inevitable end, used every possible moment to be together, to fall in love as thoroughly as possible.

Neither of them slept properly for weeks—he had training and duties during the day, she had to clean the whole bar and then work in it. But the small hours felt large because they filled them with incomprehensible talk and the conversations of their bodies.

Sometimes she would sneak him into her room and they would make love in her bed, pretending it was theirs. Other times they curled up outside, under trees, and tried to keep each other warm.

They were young and hungry, passionate and desperate for each other.

•

The day your father left was cold. The night before, they had held each other for hours, eventually falling asleep in each other's arms. He was supposed to be back at the ship before dawn, but they slept on past daybreak in ignorant bliss.

When he woke, he panicked. The ship was leaving at midday, and it waited for nobody. He exploded out of bed, dressed at lightning speed, barely managed to graze a kiss on your mother's forehead before

sprinting out the door and down the long street towards the dock. He arrived just in time, and then he was gone.

Your mother felt adrift in his absence.

She was no idealist, had seen too much of the harsh world to expect happiness or fate's mercy. But your father had been a brief respite, a small hint of warmth.

She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling empty—though by that point she wasn't.

You were a small cluster of cells, barely a hint of life.

She would have ended you then, had she known. Nobody could blame her.

You grew. Slowly at first, and then faster, you became more solid, alive. You began to make yourself known.

It was three months after your father left that your mother recognised your presence. She must have been about three or four months along and she panicked. She tried to hide it, to hide you, but you were fierce, and you continued to grow, to grow, to grow.

The men at the bar had always studied your mother's body, so the changes to it did not go unnoticed.

'Getting fat, are we?' they jested cruelly, reaching over to slap at her. She would dodge, but her newfound bulk made her less graceful. You weighed her down, even though you didn't mean to. You couldn't help it.

You began to shape yourself into a human form. You sprouted arms, two legs, a head. Your webbed feet separated into toes and you began to mould a face, without real features at first, but soon there were two eyes, a forehead, a nose and a tiny mouth.

Your mother's belly grew to a balloon. Now everybody noticed, including your mother's father, who took one look at her and curled his fists.

He gave her an ultimatum: get rid of the baby or get out of the house.

She pleaded with him that she had nowhere else to go, but he said that wasn't his concern.

Those were the terms. You or her.

On the night you were born there was a dreary drizzle, a pitter-patter soundtrack to the hours of fearful pain your mother spent alone in her room.

Her father snored a few rooms down, oblivious.

She did it as silently as possible, squatting on the floor, holding her knees in her hands. She felt like an animal.

Slowly, agonisingly, you began to emerge.

And then you were in the world.

Your mother stared at you, a creation from her own body. She clipped the cord that joined the two of you. She wiped you down.

She held you, for the first and last time.

She kissed you gently on the forehead and cried.

She wrapped you in her own blanket and carried you outside.

She took you down long streets, long alleyways.

She found a deserted public corner where somebody was sure to be passing by later in the day.

And she left you there.

How I Didn't Win Fifty Dollars

Henry is meeting my family for the first time tonight.

Twenty-five minutes before we're due to meet, he calls me.

'What should I wear?' he asks nervously, his voice jittering down the line.
'Should I wear a suit?'

'Max will make fun of you if you wear a suit. And so would I, to be honest.'

'Okay! Okay. Jeans and a shirt?'

I can picture him shuffling around his room, clothes strewn over the bed.

'Sounds good.'

'Okay!'

I can hear rustling through the phone. He's probably pulling on his jeans.

'Hey,' I say.

'What?' He sounds panicked.

'You're cute when you're nervous.'

I smile even though he can't see me.

He's been fretting about this dinner all week. I told him to chill, that my parents will love him, but he's fixated on making a good impression.

We agree to meet at my parents' letterbox at a quarter to six, but when I arrive he's already there, pacing back and forth with a wrapped bunch of white tulips.

'You said your mum liked tulips, right?'

I notice that he smells strongly of cologne. He's brushed his hair for once.

'She'll love them!'

I take his hand, which is slightly sweaty. The air carries a late-autumn chill. The solitary maple tree in the street is at the peak of its beauty, its leaves like streaks of sunset.

We walk up the little gravel path to the red front door, Henry gripping my hand.

'Wait.' He pauses before knocking, pulling me in for a kiss.

Just then the door opens and Henry springs away from me.

‘Gross.’

It’s Max and Isabelle, Max in velvet dungarees and a green silk shirt, Isabelle in pink jeans and a bronze corset.

‘This is Henry,’ I announce.

‘I’m Max, this is Isabelle, come on in,’ Max says carelessly, stepping backwards so we can enter. The house is warm and smells strongly of roasting vegetables.

‘Mum’s making lamb and ratatouille. It was one of my favourites growing up,’ I explain to Henry.

In the kitchen, Dad’s washing pans while Mum’s sprinkling parmesan on the baking dish. When she sees Henry, her face breaks into a wide smile.

‘You must be Henry.’ She gives him a friendly hug and his body visibly relaxes. ‘Welcome to our home.’

Dad leaves the pan in the sink so he can shake Henry’s hand. I never thought I’d see my father shaking my boyfriend’s hand. I glance at Max who rolls her eyes at the heteronormativity of it all.

At the dinner table, Henry relaxes enough to join in the conversation. Mum and Dad ask him the usual questions about what he does, and his family, and where he grew up, and Max and Isabelle interrogate him about films, music and fashion.

By dessert—apple and berry crumble with ice cream—Dad’s telling Henry stories about growing up in Singapore.

‘But I bet Laura’s told you all about it,’ he says.

Henry looks at me.

‘Not really,’ he says.

Dad looks at me, surprised.

‘We’d better rectify that!’ he exclaims. ‘Henry, you’re missing out! Singapore has the best of everything!’

He starts talking about the hawkers, the crowds, the vibrant rainforests, the humidity thick enough to swim in.

‘In the west, if the shop is out of stock the shopkeeper says, “I’m so sorry. We appear to be out of that right now, but leave your details and we’ll contact you when we’ve restocked.” In Singapore, the shopkeeper just says, “No stock, lah!”’

Dad laughs his great booming rumble, which makes everybody smile. No matter where we are, Dad's in the centre of a crowd, the middle of a story.

I realise I haven't stopped to think much about Dad's background. I've been so obsessed with Mum's ancestry that I forgot that Dad's story is interesting too. Henry's hanging off his every word.

It makes me grateful, considering Henry's relationship with his parents.

Dad starts describing all his favourite Singaporean foods: ice kachang, Hainanese chicken rice, fish-head curry, chilli crab, kaya toast.

'Have you ever eaten durian?' he asks Henry, who shakes his head.

Max and I exchange sly smiles.

'I think we've got some durian mochi in the pantry,' Max says, getting up quickly.

'They were a gift from one of our uncles,' I tell Henry, while Max brings over the box.

We all watch Henry while he inspects the box. Isabelle can hardly contain her laughter. We did this to her ages ago. He carefully tears open one of the individually wrapped mochi. It's covered in powdered sugar, which masks the smell.

'You need to eat it all at once,' Max instructs.

Henry puts the whole thing in his mouth and bites down. We all explode in laughter while he audibly gags and swallows with a grimace.

'What is this?' he groans, slugging back his glass of juice. 'What did you just make me eat?'

I tell Henry about the time Dad bet me fifty dollars that I couldn't eat three pieces of durian. I must have been about seven, and we were just finishing dinner. Dad's mum had durian in the fridge and Dad wanted some. He's always loved it.

There are supposedly two types of people in the world: those who adore durian and those who detest it. I've always been in the second group. But I remember swearing that I could do it, screwing up my nose and forcing the first two pieces down with a glass of water. The third piece stuck in my throat. I accidentally released my nose, felt overwhelmed by the putrid smell and retched. In a rush, I splattered half-digested durian onto my Ah Ma's table along with the lor mee noodles I'd just had for dinner. Mum, Dad and Ah Ma all laughed at me. They laughed even as they cleaned up my vomit.

BACKWATERS

Part X

As the village grew closer, Ken's thoughts turned to Kaiyang. Who had he become? Would he look the same? If Ken had stayed in China, could they have become real brothers? Brothers who shared everything in the same way that Ken now shared everything with Daniel and Peter?

Kaiyang saw him first. Ken was scanning the houses, the roads. Everything seemed unchanged. And then there was a shout, arms thrown around his neck in a very forward, very un-Chinese gesture of warmth.

'Look at you.' Ken could hear the smile in his voice as Kaiyang pulled back to take a good look at him. Ken had never thought much about how he looked, had always felt that his body was merely a functional thing. The only times he had ever cared about his appearance were when he was with Qiu. The first time she'd said he was beautiful, he was taken aback.

'I must be reflecting you,' was his response.

No. He forced himself to stop. He wasn't going to disappear into memories.

But he was suddenly conscious of his appearance. The last fourteen years had changed him. His body had yielded to years of labour, and his arms were steely, although still thin. His skin was tanned and rough, like the skin of a pear. And his eyes seemed deeper, as though they contained the oceans he'd crossed.

'New Zealand seems to suit you.' Kaiyang cuffed Ken on the shoulder, gave a whistle of approval. He, too, looked different compared to Ken's faded memories. His hair was longer than Ken had ever seen it and his face had more lines around the eyes. Those eyes were softer too. They contained a gentleness, like morning dew.

The two of them walked the streets that Ken had walked a million times before, a lifetime ago.

'It's strange to be back.'

'I bet it is. Did you miss it at all?'

'To be honest, I didn't. I mean, you were right when you said there was nothing left for me here. I'm glad I left.'

'You were never meant to stay.'

They'd fallen into step with each other, and somehow it felt as if the fourteen years apart had moved them closer together.

The house rose up in front of them. After all these years, Kaiyang was still living in the same house. Kai-Xi, the eldest, had moved to a larger house a few streets over and their parents had gone with him. A small child, a girl of three or four, came tumbling out the door.

'Baba!'

Kaiyang picked her up with one arm.

'Hong, this is your uncle. Say hello.' Kaiyang's voice was different for his daughter: sweeter and more playful than his usual serious gravel. Ken liked it.

'Hello, Uncle!'

'Hello to you.' He reached out a hand and she took it. Her fingers felt tiny, like twigs.

'Should we take your uncle inside?' Kaiyang asked her.

She nodded, and the three of them made their way inside.

It was like stepping back in time. There were changes—fourteen years had passed, after all—but it was the same layout. The same smell. The same walls that had once contained his sleeping body, his growing feelings, his first family, even if it hadn't felt like a family.

As he sat down for a cup of tea, he felt simultaneously adrift and tethered. He felt young and old.

Lost in his own mind, he started a little when Kaiyang's wife, Guang, entered the room, followed by a boy of about six, and a girl of about seven. She greeted him warmly; the children stared at him with wide eyes, although they both smiled politely and introduced themselves when prompted by their mother. Seeing them all together, Ken felt a twinge in his heart. Here was a real family. Would he be able to have that one day too?

They crammed themselves around the old round table to eat. Ken waited for Kaiyang, the oldest in the room, to eat first. But he motioned to Ken.

'Please, eat,' he said. There were bowls of dumplings filled with meat, chives scattered on top, the red glow of chilli oil. There was rice, little cold vegetable dishes, noodles. Ken used his chopsticks to select a dumpling, which he put into his mouth whole while everyone watched. He chewed. He swallowed. It tasted like growing up.

'Delicious,' he said, and Guang looked relieved.

'All right, go on, kids,' she said, and little hands scurried all over the table.

It was a meal filled with conversation and laughter, the flavours of the past.

Afterwards, Ken and Kaiyang sat in the tiny courtyard and smoked.

'Are you thinking about childhood?'

'Naturally.'

'I still think about it,' said Kaiyang. 'I think of you often, wonder how you're doing.'

'I think of you too,' Ken said. 'And it seems like you're doing very well here.'

'We're doing our best.' Kaiyang replied. 'But it's still not easy.'

Ken adapted quickly to life in China. He helped his brother in the fields, played with the children. He visited and greeted his other brothers and their wives, made comments about life in New Zealand, left each dwelling place thinking how things had changed.

All of his brothers seemed so much older. They were strangers to the boys that had once teased him and made him feel so alone. Now, he was the one who had seen the wider world. He was the cool uncle, the travelling adventurer.

'The kids love your letters,' Kaiyang said. 'They think you're some brave explorer.'

Ken didn't know what to say to that. He supposed that what he'd done was brave, but he hadn't sought it out. He'd been offered an opportunity. All he'd done was take it.

It all made him uncomfortable. Just as their teasing had made him want to disappear, he disliked the friendly attention.

But everybody made an effort to introduce him to potential brides, and his mother—who had never made him feel particularly wanted—attacked this new mission with vigour. She was surprised to have him back and seemed to savour the prospect of seeing him successfully married. Every girl in the village was visited, talked to. Every girl was measured by her character, her loyalty, her work ethic, her beauty. And every time his mother found a girl who seemed appropriate, she hurried to Kaiyang's house to tell Ken that he must meet her immediately.

Considering his mother's aloofness during his childhood, Ken was not thrilled at her interference in his search for a bride. But it was the way of things, and she was skilled at setting up meetings with different girls from the village. They were all around the right age, and some of them seemed perfectly pleasant, or even beautiful or intelligent, but they were all shadows in comparison to Qiu. She was everywhere here. Every time he walked to a new girl's house, he thought back to how he had walked these same streets with her.

But one Thursday, he met Fen. That changed everything for him.

Fen was sitting down when he walked into the room, but she stood up to greet him, and in that one movement—swift, natural—something caught his attention.

Maybe it was the lift of her hair, which was shiny and brushed against her shoulders. Or maybe it was her skin, which had a natural blush, or her eyes, which seemed reflective, like the water's surface.

Whatever it was, he noted her appearance in a way he hadn't with the others, and when she spoke her voice also stuck to him.

'It's a pleasure to meet you,' she said, and those simple words brought blood to his cheeks. It was instant, and it was recognisable. Both of them felt it.

'And you,' he said, and then they sat down for crackers, sunflower seeds and peanuts, and time spilled in front of them like tea. They spoke of nothing important—mundane things, life in its simple activities. But there was a connection.

They arranged to meet again. He quickly understood that it wasn't to be the same whirlwind romance that had flared up between him and Qiu. There was the same instant attraction, but beyond that it was a slow thing. He liked her, he knew that, but he wasn't sure if she was the one to marry. He was still attending uncomfortable meetings with other girls, greeting them side by side with his mother, who scanned each girl with an eagle eye. But out of all of them, Fen was the only one he wanted to see again, and again.

They walked around the village together. Piece by piece, they filled each other in on the facts and details that make up a person. They spent hours talking, hours looking each other in the eye. But, unlike with Qiu, he never touched her. They wanted to be proper about their relationship, so their courting was all words and no hands. All days and no nights.

Slowly, slowly, days, weeks, and then in a rush it was decided: they would marry.

From there, it seemed easy.

They wed in a matter of weeks, and the fanfare of the ceremony and banquet was overwhelming for Ken, who longed for the quietness of space.

During the actual event, he felt anxious. Everybody looked at him, beamed at him. His face felt scalded.

But then he was lifting back the red veil and her eyes calmed him. She understood how he felt. He had told her everything about Qiu, about how Qiu would always exist in him. She understood it with a strange sympathy. He wondered if she too had loved and lost.

He'd asked her, but she wouldn't say.

That's the answer, he thought.

She was more like him than Qiu ever was. She reserved more of herself for herself than she gave to the world. And like him, it wasn't because she lacked anything. Her thoughts always manifested themselves as complete, coherent creations. He envied her for it.

Where in Qiu he'd had someone to lovingly shove him, uncomfortable, into the crowd, with Fen he had someone to hide with. He had someone he could imagine in his new reality, the kind of wife he could imagine writing letters to from far away.

Lost in Translation

Max and I go to our parents' house for dinner on Wednesday. After we eat we decide to watch a movie together, settling on a Netflix documentary about strangers meeting and having long conversations about their lives. I like it. It makes me think of all the times I've connected with strangers, the drinks in bars during university, the friends I don't remember meeting because I met them so long ago.

I think of Henry, about how he was once a stranger. How we walk through our lives not knowing who else will walk into them.

And then I'm thinking about the billions of people on earth, about how some of them are like me in ways I can't imagine, how some of them might even look like me, might be related to me. I wonder what countries they're in.

A thought occurs to me and I can't wait for the movie to finish to bring it up.

'What about a DNA test?'

Mum shifts, accidentally pulling the blanket off my legs, and looks at me.

'What about it?'

'Why don't we get you one? That way we could learn your ethnicity at least,' I say.

She pauses the movie, throwing the remote to the side.

'I've thought about it,' she admits. 'I don't know if I want to know.'

'Well, it's up to you,' I say. 'They're getting more common so they're more accessible now.'

DNA tests seem to be everywhere right now, and it's not just because my research into adoption means I get ads for them whenever I go online. I don't know anyone who's done one, but I sometimes read stories about people's experiences with them.

'I'll think about it,' Mum says, pressing play on the film.

I try to watch the screen, but I can't concentrate.

'I'd really like to know,' I blurt.

Mum pauses the film again. ‘Do you really want me to do it? I will if you really want me to.’

‘I just can’t stop thinking about it. It’s another opportunity to trace your heritage. It might even be possible to find your real family through it. We’ll at least know your ethnicity,’ I say again, my heart beating fast. ‘And also mine.’

‘Why do you care so much about what your real ethnicity is?’ she asks, emphasising *real* as though to suggest it doesn’t really mean anything at all. Which I guess it doesn’t.

‘I...’ I struggle to find the words. ‘I guess I just want to know. So I can finally feel settled in saying what I am.’

‘But you’re you,’ Mum says. ‘Do you just want to be able to say whether you’re Chinese or not?’

‘She’s hoping she’s not Chinese,’ Max butts in. I kick her in the leg.

‘Hey! I’m beyond that now.’

Maybe an inch beyond. I’ve never called myself Chinese and I’ve never really wanted to. The Collective has helped me embrace my Asian whakapapa, but saying I’m Chinese still feels like a huge step. If I’m honest with myself, now that my heritage is in question, I’m forced to acknowledge that I’d rather not be one hundred per cent Chinese. I feel terrible thinking that, but the thought is there.

‘There are plenty of interesting, incredible Chinese people,’ Dad says.

‘Yeah. Artists too. Like Ai Weiwei and Li-Young Lee,’ says Max.

‘Since when do you read poetry?’ I ask, surprised.

‘You don’t know everything about me,’ Max retorts. ‘I’ve got a whole secret life.’ I kick her again.

‘You just have to accept whatever my test says,’ Mum says.

Mum seems a lot more relaxed about the test than me, even though it’s her DNA. I’m used to her unwavering strength, but I still find it impressive. Mum’s a real unit. Not only does she never cry, but she never raises her voice, always appears steady. For someone like me, that seems like an unattainable level of self-control.

Tough as she is, she is also loving and affectionate, which I find amazing, considering she never received that kind of love as a child.

I often wonder how much she’s thought about her lost heritage, whether it’s ever kept her up at night. Surely she can’t have just accepted it, let it sit?

But maybe that’s the healthy way to deal with potentially unanswerable

questions. Life will always present us with mysteries, and maybe she's realised that it's counterproductive to spend her time bashing herself against invisible walls.

Maybe I'm supposed to realise that too.

We order a DNA test on Thursday. We choose [FamilyDNA.org](https://www.familydna.org), a company that specialises in Asian ethnicities, so we should get comprehensive results.

It lands in my parents' letterbox a few days later, a smooth white package filled with potential.

Mum spits into the clear tube and sends it back to the lab within a day. She takes a photo of herself with the tube and emails it to me. I can't stop looking at it.

A slim tube filled with saliva, nothing special.

That tube is a loaded gun.

I show the photo to Henry.

'How long will the test take?' he asks, and I shrug.

'Probably two or three weeks,' I respond, and then return to my work.

It's a busy day at the gallery. We're in the midst of setting up a new exhibition. Outside, tiny buds are just beginning to appear on the ends of branches.

Mum's Story, Version Two

Your father was the son of a wealthy Hong Kong businessman.

Your mother was the daughter of a wealthy Hong Kong businessman.

It seemed inevitable.

Your parents' parents moved in the same circles, attended the same lavish banquets, the same concert evenings. They were all newlyweds when they first met and became a group soon after, going on expensive holidays as a foursome. Your grandmothers would sip tea and talk while your grandfathers did business, eventually becoming partners in an exporting company which would go on to become one of the most lucrative in Hong Kong.

Both your grandfathers were immensely proud of their wealth. They treasured it, revelled in it, flaunted it everywhere they went. But they were even prouder when their wives became pregnant, one after the other. Both of them were sure that their wives would bear sons who

would one day take over their businesses.

But only one grandmother carried a son; the other had a daughter.

They were born days apart, and your grandmothers carefully swaddled them, assisted by private nurses in the private hospital wards your grandfathers insisted on. They wanted everything perfect for their offspring, and everything went smoothly.

Your parents grew up together. They lived in mansions near each other, and were each other's first playmates. They went to the same private schools. Even when they were in different classes, your parents sought each other out at recess, ate lunch together. After school, one would go to the other's house for shared tutoring and dinner prepared by a personal cook.

Your parents rarely went a day without seeing each other. They knew each other inside and out. Outwardly, neither of them was special: just two ordinary children, dressed in particularly nice clothes. Her nose was hawkish, his legs were chubby. He was funny, and had small eyes that scrunched into his face when he laughed. She was smart, with a sharp tongue that could bite. He was good at inventing games that could occupy the two of them for the years of their childhood.

It changed when your parents turned twelve. For the first time, they were separated—your father went to a school for boys, your mother to a school for girls.

At first, it was difficult for your father. He missed your mother, missed the ease of being with someone who understood him without explanation. He was unused to spending all his time with boys. He had to act differently. But as the days turned to weeks, your father made friends, became comfortable in this new environment. Soon, he couldn't remember how things had once been.

Your mother was excited for change, hungry for it. On her first day at her new school, she was eager to make friends, was talkative and friendly, and the others surrounded her like a shell. She fit right in, immediately forming close bonds with several other girls, and her high-school years seemed to open to her just like that.

Initially your parents made an effort to see each other on weekends. But life was busy, and new friends and experiences got in the way. The

gaps between each meet-up widened. Weeks blurred together, and your mother and father journeyed along new passageways of life, passageways in which the other was not present. Soon they hardly saw each other, and it felt normal. They were childhood best friends. Cradle friends, even. But that was all; life went on.

It was a Saturday evening, and your mother was getting ready to go out with a group of her friends. It was her last year of high school, and she was celebrating her eighteenth birthday. Her parents had gifted her a diamond necklace, which she'd fastened around her neck. She was tall now, and, if not beautiful by conventional standards, she was striking and attractive in her confidence. Her tongue was as quick as ever, and it was her weapon on any boy who dared ask her out. She wasn't interested in dating. She was driven to become a doctor and her parents were proud of her for it.

Your father was also going out that night. He dressed in a suit, straightened his tie. He was still on the broad side, but was no longer the chubby child he once was. His eyes were still small, but his smile lit up his whole face. He was going out to celebrate a friend's birthday and he was excited. He needed a night off: he worked too hard, was studying to become a doctor.

The restaurant was always busy on Saturdays, but that Saturday it was particularly packed. There were several groups celebrating special occasions, crowds of young people dressed finely. Your mother's group sat three tables away from your father's, and about halfway through the dinner they noticed each other.

Your mother did a double take. It had been years since she'd thought about your father and now he was right here in front of her, dressed in a suit and looking far better than she remembered.

Your father turned red. As if an apparition, your mother was there, filling his entire line of sight. He hadn't thought about her in a long time and the moment he saw her he realised how much he'd missed her. Nobody else had ever understood him the way she had. He looked around at his friends, at the people who knew him as he was now. They were good people. But none of them had known him as a child, and suddenly that felt like an insurmountable barrier between him and them.

‘I’m going to the bathroom,’ your mother said to her friends, and then she stood up and removed herself from the table.

‘I’m going to the bathroom,’ your father said to his friends, and he hurried across the restaurant floor.

Your parents met in the corridor outside the bathrooms. They stood there, face to face, and the years between them thickened like flour and water.

‘How are you?’ His words entered the air tentatively.

She didn’t reply at first. ‘You’ve changed,’ she said, and then she laughed, not cruelly, but in the way she always laughed when she felt uncertain—a little nervous laugh that he recognised immediately and which instantly melted the tension between them. They hugged and each noticed how the other felt different, but also the same.

Your parents stayed in the corridor for about fifteen minutes, talking fast and trying to patch up the gaps in their lives where the other wasn’t present. And then they both returned to their tables and finished their respective birthday dinners.

But when all their other friends had left, they stayed behind. It was late then, and most of the diners had gone home. The restaurant glowed golden and spacious, the classical music hanging low under the chandeliers.

‘Let’s go somewhere,’ your father said, and your mother took his hand.

He took her to a bar he liked. It was smoky and small, full of conversation and clinking glasses. They found a table in a corner and he pulled out a chair for her.

‘You’ve become a gentleman,’ she said, and he laughed.

They ordered cocktails. Time was elastic. They drank their drinks as they drank each other in. It was exciting for both of them, like rediscovering a childhood book that somebody had annotated with grown-up details. Familiar, but improved.

They discovered that they were both going to study medicine, but at different universities. They both recognised that this meant there was no possibility of entering into a relationship.

About two hours into their drinks, they talked honestly about the attraction which had manifested so sudden and strong between them. Sitting face to face, years older than they once were, it felt stark and

obvious.

He took her to his house. She hadn't been there in years, but she would have known her way around it blind. They went to his room, barely making it through the door before his hands were in her hair, her lips against his.

They crashed onto the bed.

From that first night they began to spend nearly all of their time together. Their parents, your grandparents, were surprised but pleased.

'How you've grown!' their mothers exclaimed upon seeing how much their child's first friend had changed.

'Thank you, Aunty,' they replied.

They went out for food, they studied together, they walked around the city and, when their parents were out, they had sex in his room or hers.

Neither of them had been in a relationship before. Both were focused on school and the future. Perhaps it was the safety of a lifelong friend that made them complacent. Neither of them was willing to change their plans, but both of them were susceptible to feelings for the other. They were too close not to be.

He felt it first. Eight weeks after the first night they were at his house. They were going to go out for dinner later and he was getting dressed.

'I feel like we wasted all those years,' he said.

'I know,' she said. 'But it's too late to do anything about that.' She was watching him, the covers pulled carelessly across her lap.

'I think I might be falling in love with you,' he said, and he didn't know where the words sprung from. But he'd said it now—he couldn't take it back.

Everything about their relationship was unconventional. Their parents would be horrified and shocked. Sure, all four of your grandparents had imagined that one day their children would fall in love and get married, but not like this.

'I feel the same,' she replied, and he was relieved.

But neither of them said anything more. There was no point. They had final exams, and then it would be summer, and then they would be in different cities.

What they didn't anticipate was you.

She recognised your presence eleven weeks after their first night. She'd been feeling sick for a few days, but didn't know why. One morning, as she threw up in her ensuite, she suddenly thought about the possibility of you. The more she thought about it, the more certain she felt of your existence. And as the weeks passed, her stomach began to swell.

The prospect of you weighed on her mind and she found herself unable to concentrate in class, to talk normally to her friends.

'What's wrong?' they asked her, and she just shook her head.

She had no idea what she was going to do, but she knew that she didn't want you, not then.

She mustered the courage to tell your father of her suspicions. He panicked and refused to touch her that night, or any night after, and weeks passed before she saw him again. His distress made him cold and he turned away from her, even though he knew deep down that you were as much his responsibility as hers.

But he wasn't the one who would have to deal with you, the one who carried you like fear.

Eventually, he went to see her. She opened the door when he knocked, and he thought that she looked so changed from the self-assured girl he'd rediscovered months ago. She was wearing a loose top, but he could still discern the roundness of her belly. She looked pale and small.

He felt terrible then. 'I'm sorry,' he said, and she just nodded. There was nothing to say. Whatever had been between them was dead and gone now.

'My parents can't know,' she said, as he took her hand. They couldn't know or they would cut her off and she would never go to medical school or become a doctor or have any future that she wanted.

They sat in silence for a while, staring at their feet, the air thick.

Finally he spoke. 'You have to get rid of it somehow.'

'How?' she asked.

'We'll think of something,' he said.

They decided to explain away her expanding waistline as mere weight gain, caused by the stress of exams. He would help her give birth when the time came. And they would leave the baby outside an orphanage, where it would be found and cared for. That was the plan.

The plan went perfectly. By 2 p.m. on the day of your birth, you were out, without complications.

They wrapped you in a towel, put you in a basket and walked to the doorstep of a local orphanage.

And that's where they left you.

Turning Red

I meet Henry's parents three weeks after he met mine.

I spend ages getting ready, smoothing down my black dress, touching up my make-up, painting my nails red for luck. I want to look elegant, sufficiently polished for these rich people.

'They'll probably say something offensive,' Henry warns me for the umpteenth time. 'They're conservative boomers.'

'I know.'

Regardless of their views, they're my boyfriend's parents and I'm determined to make a good impression, particularly after Henry charmed my family.

When I walk in, however, it's clear that the preparation has only gone one way.

Henry hasn't told them that I'm not white.

His mother looks visibly surprised, her eyes boring into me as if I'm some kind of creature on display at the zoo. I feel sweat beginning to prickle under my arms.

'Where are you from then, darling?' his father asks.

'Here.'

'No, where are you *from* from? Wait, let me guess!' He flashes a gigantic smile. 'Japan?'

'No. I was born here. My father's from Singapore. And I'm a fourth-generation Chinese New Zealander.'

It takes a huge amount of effort not to let the usual flatness creep into my voice. I want to seem animated and friendly, the perfect girlfriend for their son. I force a smile and answer questions about what my parents do, what I do, express gritted-teeth gratitude when he tells me I have great English and 'barely any accent at all!'

Later, over roast chicken and potatoes, his mother tells us all about her Korean hairdresser.

‘She’s the absolute cutest,’ she says animatedly, over-enthusiastically.

I keep my hands in fists on my knees. Henry looks flabbergasted and I kick him under the table to keep him quiet. I don’t want a scene.

‘So, I’ve been working on a new project,’ he announces instead, drawing his parents’ attention to him.

I’m grateful for this conversational detour, but all too quickly it turns back to me.

Over bakery cheesecake, his father comments how nice it is that I have big eyes instead of ‘slanty’ eyes. I mentally gag myself, but Henry riles up instantly.

‘You can’t say that!’ he snaps. ‘That’s racist.’

He glances at me and tries to take my hand, but I pull away.

‘No, no, I’m complimenting her,’ his father says, flummoxed. ‘I’m *thrilled* to meet your pretty, Chinese girlfriend.’

I squeeze my eyes shut.

‘Dad! That’s even worse,’ Henry half shouts. I don’t say anything. ‘I won’t let you racialise Laura. Just treat her like a normal fucking person.’

He scrapes his chair back and stands up.

‘Let’s go. Laura?’ He extends a hand and I reluctantly take it, turning back to glance at his startled parents on my way out.

On our walk to my flat, my shoulders are like stone.

‘Did you invite me just so you could call your parents out?’ My voice is quietly furious. ‘Bringing your Asian girlfriend to your conservative parents’ house just to antagonise them?’

‘You know that’s not the case.’ Henry stops walking. ‘How could you even say that? I was *defending* you.’

‘I didn’t need you to defend me,’ I bite back, my voice raised. ‘I needed you to tell your racist parents that I’m Asian *in advance* so we could have avoided this entire evening.’

‘If you were white I wouldn’t have told them you were white. I thought you didn’t like it when people saw you for your ethnicity.’

I round on him.

‘I don’t. But that doesn’t mean we can pretend it doesn’t exist.’ I grow taller in my frustration. ‘You *knew* they were racist but didn’t do anything about it until they actually said something to me. *You* let tonight happen.’

Henry doesn't say anything at first. He starts walking again in silence, his hands in his pockets, his mind clearly working fast. When he starts to apologise five minutes later, I can tell that it's genuine, but I cut him off.

'I think you should go to your own place tonight,' I say. 'I need to be alone for a bit.' My anger has ebbed, but I'm still upset.

He doesn't argue with me, just looks sad as he turns and walks away.

A week after meeting his parents, Henry and I decide to go to a Chinese restaurant for dinner. It's our first time at a Chinese restaurant since yum cha.

He's been trying to make it up to me all week, bringing me flowers and kombucha at work. The first time I saw him after meeting his parents he gave me an apology card and a bunch of mountain daisies. Any last traces of annoyance evaporated.

'I *forgave* you already!' I exclaimed, hugging him around the waist.

'And I wanted you to know that I'm going to be better. Really! I promise.' He hugged me back, holding me against him so securely I couldn't help but feel safe.

When I place my order, the waitress looks at Henry and gives me a little smile as if to say *Oh, cute, you're educating your white boyfriend.*

No, I'm learning with him, I want to say, but I don't.

Little fragments are coming back to me. Things I know that he doesn't, like the fact that I'm familiar with almost all the dishes on the menu, even if I can only read the English names. Things like chicken feet, cold jellyfish and braised bamboo fungus aren't foreign to me, even if I never order them.

'At Chinese restaurants there's always a free soup,' I tell Henry. When the soup comes, it has Chinese melon in it, which I love. There are bits of boned chicken and knobs of carrot, and the white porcelain spoon is thick and warm on my tongue.

'This is great,' says Henry. 'I've never had soup like this.'

The waitress, who's now serving the next table, overhears and looks over. She flashes a grin at me and I look away.

At home, we put on a film recording of a staging of *Miss Saigon*. I chose it because I love *Les Misérables* and it's by the same composers, but I didn't know the story. It's about a Vietnamese peasant girl called Kim, who meets and falls in love with Chris, an American soldier, while working at a brothel. Chris goes back to America, forgets about her and marries an American girl,

but in the meantime Kim gives birth to his son. Determined to give the boy a better life, she goes to America only to have her heart broken and to die in Chris's arms.

At the end of the film, we just sit there for a while.

I break the silence.

'I can't even imagine what it would have been like to live there then.'

'Me neither,' says Henry. His breath smells like black licorice and he moves closer, nuzzles into my neck. 'You know you don't have to imagine it.'

Later, as we're having sex, I can't relax.

I can't stop thinking about *Miss Saigon*, about all those Vietnamese women who hoped their white American soldiers could give them better lives. It's hardly an original plot. Movies love giving Asian prostitutes to white men. Asian women are often considered extra sexy, because they're supposed to be petite and docile.

My body starts to tense up. I'm on my knees.

'Can you stop, please.'

Henry stops immediately. When he throws himself down next to me and sees my face, he looks concerned.

'What's wrong?'

I don't want to talk about prostitution, about race *again*, so I search for something else to talk about.

The room is dark except for the small desk lamp in the corner casting a dim glow. At first Henry obliged my request to keep the lights off. But after five or six nights of near-pitch darkness, he said he wanted to see me. The lamp is our compromise.

'I hate my body,' I say, even as his hands are caressing my skin with obvious care. 'I've never felt a connection with it. People perceive my body as *me*, but it's not. It's just this vessel that carries me around, but it causes people to have all sorts of assumptions about who I am. I hate that.'

'I love your body,' he says. 'And you're more than your body, of course, but wouldn't you say that it's still a part of you? You've lived in it your whole life.'

'I wish I didn't have a body. I could just be me, an identity, a free spirit.'

'But you *are* a free spirit,' he says. 'Your body is just a container, like you

said. You can do whatever you want to, even if other people judge you for it.'

'I guess.'

'And you know that to me you're the most beautiful girl on earth.'

I don't know how to explain that it's not enough. I want the *world* to think I'm beautiful. I want validation from every white person, want every person of colour to think that I am the epitome of pretty. Only then will I feel assured that I am not ugly, that I am not twisted-up and grotesque.

He tells me that everybody is insecure. That he wishes he were taller, that he used to be scared that girls wouldn't like him because of his height.

'But you're so confident,' I say, confused.

'I *act* confident. It's not the same thing. I feel lucky that somebody as gorgeous as you wants to be with me.'

He takes my face between his hands and makes me look him in the eye. His gaze is so intense I want to look away.

'Laura. I know I'm not great sometimes at supporting you or understanding what you go through. But I think you're incredible, and I want to be incredible for you. I love you, you know.'

It's the first time he's said it out loud and my heart stirs so palpably it feels like it's going to leap right out of my chest. I avert my gaze for a second and when I look back his eyes are gleaming like he's about to cry.

'I love you too.'

My voice is a near whisper.

Henry pulls me into a hug and I start crying into his shoulder, letting it all out.

I don't remember when I last cried, but it feels exhilarating, freeing.

BACKWATERS

Part XI

After the wedding, Ken and Fen started trying for a child.

Marriage and family—that was what he had come to China for, after all.

They were living with Kaiyang, squeezed into the small house where Ken had once been Kaineng. There was no room in his oldest brother's house where his parents lived, and he felt relieved on Fen's behalf. She was spared, although she thought his parents were no worse than her own.

Night after night, silently so as to not wake Kaiyang and Guang, they had sex. It was all so purposeful, so careful. Neither of them was able to enjoy it much, although they did feel closer.

Night after night, their bodies strained together, the rhythms reverberating through the floor. Across the earth, Ken's New Zealand brothers turned their shovels in the dirt.

Weeks and then months passed without Fen getting pregnant.

'I just wish it would happen,' she sighed one morning as they lay side by side on the hard mattress. Their shoulders were touching, a hint of warmth on an otherwise cold day.

Ken felt lost. He wanted to comfort his new wife, whose voice sounded as lost as he felt, but he didn't know how. They were doing everything right, but she was still without child and time stretched endlessly in front of them.

Half of him almost hoped that the future child would keep waiting. As long as it didn't manifest itself in Fen's womb, he could stay with her. He knew that he needed to cherish these days and nights.

The other half of him wanted a child, wanted to become a father, and also wanted to go home. He missed the life he'd built, missed Daniel and Peter, missed the air and soil a world away. It was the first place he'd ever built a life all on his own.

Fen single-mindedly yearned for a child.

She was three years older than Ken and had been waiting for an ideal match for what felt like a long time. She'd watched her friends and older sisters marry and have children, watched them enter new phases without her. She felt excluded.

Even now, even married, she felt frustrated. She hadn't grown up expecting romance. She was practical: she wanted to marry so she could have a child. But she liked Ken more than she could have hoped. He suited her well, was insular enough that she felt safe in her privacy. She'd always thought that she would be deprived of herself when she got married. Ken gave her space. She enjoyed spending time with him, having him by her side. But he couldn't stay. And when Ken went back to New Zealand, a child was all she would have. For *years* a child was all she would have. She longed for this child with every cell of her body.

Eventually, the conception attempts led to argument.

One night, Ken felt tired. He didn't feel like sex, instead flopped onto the bed with a heavy sigh. He'd spent the day working in the fields, helping tend crops that weren't his own.

'Let's just skip tonight, I'm exhausted,' he said. Too flippantly. He didn't realise that Fen was glaring at him from the other side of the room.

'Come on, we'll make it quick,' she said.

'No, I'm too tired,' he said, turning over onto his side.

He didn't see her face.

'Why are you being so selfish?' Her voice was thick. 'You promised me a child!'

He looked up at her. She was standing above him, her face half shrouded in shadow. In that moment, he felt like he didn't know her at all.

'It's only one night,' he said, surprised. He'd never seen her angry before.

'This one night could change our lives,' she said, and her eyes were like flint.

'You're being ridiculous,' he said.

'I'm being ridiculous? You're being selfish!'

'It's one night! And the fact that you want a child so much makes me think you don't even want me here! You realise that when you get pregnant, I leave?' He was shouting now. He'd lost control.

'Of course I realise that! You're leaving me, so the least you could do is give me a child!' she screamed, now in tears, and then she fled the room, fled the house, disappeared out into the cold night.

The moment she was gone, his anger evaporated. He felt terrible. Not because he thought that he'd behaved particularly badly, but because she was upset. He only missed a beat before getting up, throwing on shoes and running after her.

She was fast. He hadn't known that about her, but there was still a lot he didn't know about her.

They were nearly halfway across the village darkness before he caught up to her. She'd stopped and was standing in the street, her arms crossed.

'Hey,' he said, and she turned around. Her arms were bare and covered in goosebumps. He wanted to reach out and rub her arms, but he didn't.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said, and she sounded deflated. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have reacted like that. You're right, it's just one night.'

'I feel like we should talk about when I go,' he said.

'I don't want to,' she said.

'I know it's going to be hard.'

'I knew you were leaving when I married you,' she said. 'There's no point talking about it. But we have to make a child before you go.'

'Do you know how much I'll miss you?' he asked, and the wind whistled over his words. In the moonlight her face seemed so pale, so vulnerable. She didn't reply.

They walked back to the house in silence and the sex they had was quiet but sweeter than either of them had experienced for a while. She closed her eyes while he moved, and he kissed her eyelids.

Something had changed between them. He realised that she was no idealist, that she had reserved herself for their child and that her feelings for him were probably nothing compared to what he already felt for her.

Not again, he thought.

Tape

Mum was the one to call the ambulance.

Grandpa called her to say that he'd fallen. He'd crawled inside to his phone after tripping on the stairs on his way up from the garden.

Mum raced to the hospital and messaged the family group chat to let us know. I was at work when I got the message, and spent the rest of the afternoon waiting tensely for more news. I told Henry so he could be supportive and reassuring. He said I should maybe go home, but I didn't want to be alone. I couldn't stop picturing Grandpa sprawled on the ground, his woollen vest sullied with mud and dirt.

Now, as the sun sets, I bus to the hospital where I'm told that Grandpa has had a heart attack.

It's amazing how oblivious we can be to the fragility of our loved ones. It's obvious, really, no great revelation, yet it's still a rude surprise to be reminded that Grandpa might not be around forever. It makes me realise that I've been so obsessed with my identity in relation to Grandpa that I didn't stop to think about his health, didn't stop to realise that he isn't young.

Now, looking at him in the white hospital bed, I feel the first pangs of grief.

'How are you feeling?' I ask him, clasping his hand between mine. His skin feels fragile, and soft like a baby's. His eyelids sag, like it's too much effort to keep his eyes fully open. His cheeks look sallow, thin. The blue veins in his arms run close to the surface. It makes me want to cry.

'Never better,' he tells me, grinning toothily. 'This is just a small thing, Lorry. You shouldn't worry about me.'

My throat closes up. I think about all the afternoons in his garden, all the conversations over cups of tea. I feel like my lungs are filling up with liquid.

'Of course not, Grandpa,' I mumble.

He asks me to bring Ken's notebook from his house so he can translate while in hospital, even though he's only supposed to be there for a couple of

nights so the doctors can monitor him.

‘Everything will go back to normal,’ he reassures me.

I nod.

Pima County

Two weeks after Grandpa's heart attack, I'm lying in bed, half asleep, when Mum calls me. I expect it to be more news about Grandpa, who still hasn't left the hospital. The doctors say he's too fragile to go home right now.

Ear pressed against the phone, I'm scared for what Mum's about to say.

'The DNA company emailed. They said they've got a backlog so all test results have been delayed,' Mum tells me. A jolt runs through me. It's been nearly a month since we sent the DNA test off and at this point, I'm having doubts about whether I even want to know the outcome. Most of the time I'm worried about Grandpa. I hardly have emotional room to ask yet more questions about where I'm really from.

'Why don't you want to know?' Henry asks me, when I tell him how I feel about it one night at dinner.

'I think I'm scared of what we might find,' I reply honestly.

'Why?' Henry asks.

I realise I don't know. I spend a few days thinking about it before coming to the conclusion that I'm scared about having to build a new identity for myself. I've built myself based on the scraps I have—being born in New Zealand, on Dad being from Singapore, his parents from China, on Mum being a third-generation New Zealander, and now on Mum being adopted, on coming from nowhere.

Even though I'm the one that wanted the test, an unexpectedly large part of me likes the ambiguity. I like not having all the answers, of getting to write my own story on a blank page.

It's another two weeks before the results actually come through. They were emailed directly to Mum, so she forwards them to the rest of the family.

My fingers hesitate over the trackpad. All my thoughts rush my brain and I have to block them, shut them up so I can look at the screen.

The page takes a few moments to load and I stare at it so hard that my eyes hurt.

- #1 Austronesian Oceania 40.2%
- #2 Austronesian South-East Asia 28%
- #3 Sino-Tibetan and Hmongic South-East Asia 7.8%
- #4 Central America 6.7%
- #5 Tuva 5.5%
- #6 Central Southern China: Yunnan and Guangxi 4.4%
- #7 Pima Country: The Sonora 3.7%
- #8 Western Siberia 1.6%
- #9 South-eastern India 1.6%
- #10 Bougainville 0.4%

My first thought: I don't even know what Austronesian means.

My second thought: I definitely don't need to worry about this test changing my self-perception.

My third thought: I'm relieved and I feel guilty about it.

I google *Austronesian* and discover that it's a loose term to describe many peoples that make up the aboriginal Taiwanese. Austronesian people are native to South-East Asia, Oceania and Madagascar, and have spread out all over the world.

It's highly likely that my Austronesian blood comes from China, and I wonder if a less comprehensive test would have just said 'Chinese'.

I google *Tuva* and find that it means South Siberian. *Pima Country* means Native American. Bougainville is in Papua New Guinea.

Considering the potential paths of my ancestors, the Pima Country is the most perplexing. I can't help but be a bit happy about my Central American DNA, particularly because the test highlighted that it probably means either Mexico or Guatemala. It shouldn't matter—it's not like my proclivity for Spanish originates from my DNA—but the thought of Central America being even a tiny bit of me makes me smile.

I screenshot the results and send it to Henry. He replies almost immediately with a 'wow' emoji and an all-caps message: 'HOW DO YOU FEEL?'

I reply quickly, my fingers slipping on my phone screen—'fine! talk later

xx’—then return to my research. I never expected that the DNA results would be confusing to me. I think I expected something clear and straightforward: eighty per cent Chinese, twenty per cent Portuguese, or something like that. But my dawning realisation from these results is how inadequate the term ‘Chinese’ even is.

China is a huge landmass home to more than a billion people. It’s made up of hundreds of ethnic groups. People in northern China and southern China don’t even look the same. It’s only in the western world that ‘Chinese’ is a homogenous image, a pale-faced, slant-eyed stereotype.

Even if I were a hundred per cent Chinese, my mixed blood would make me less Chinese to the western gaze.

The results only seem to confirm that DNA means nothing. DNA was never the answer. It tells me naught about who I am as a person, except that I am a mix of things and my history is ambiguous, and I already knew that.

I’m glad I know now, though. Now, if people ask me what I am, I can say ‘It’s complicated’. If they persist, I can throw all my ethnicities at them and let them realise that they can’t typecast me through them.

I can almost imagine it: me at the gallery, some lanyard-wearing, bearded tourist pushing their nose in my face with an easy ‘So, what are *you*, then?’

And me, smiling broadly: ‘I’m a mix of Austronesian, Chinese, Tibetan, Peruvian, Central American and Siberian.’

Maybe it’s a stupid thing to take pleasure in. Maybe I would have become a better person if the test had labelled me a hundred per cent Chinese. That would force me to be proud—to overcome my internalised racism faster. It’s definitely something I’m in the process of trying to overcome. It would have been better to dive straight in. Instead, I’ve found new pathways out.

PART THREE
October–December 2019

Black Forest

The seventh of October is Mum's birthday and a Saturday, so we go out for lunch at a ramen place in the city. It's new, all glass windows, spacious interiors and J-pop. When we arrive, there's only a few free tables. We're directed to a wooden booth by the window and we slide in, one after the other.

After some deliberation, Mum chooses the pork tonkotsu and a ginger beer, Dad chooses spicy chicken, and Max and I both order vegetarian miso ramen.

I'm ravenous from a long morning swim, from trying to blot out the image of Grandpa's sallow skin with exertion. When the steaming bowls arrive, my stomach growls at the sight of the glistening chilli oil, the half-dry seaweed lapping at the sides of the bowls.

As we eat, Mum talks about her colleagues. Anita, one of the newer girls, just broke off an engagement with a man her mother wanted her to marry.

Then Mum's phone rings. She digs it out of her bag, answering in a chirpy voice—we all expect it to be more birthday wishes.

But then Mum's face changes. Dad, Max and I stare at her, and somehow I have a sudden, horrible realisation as to what's coming. Finally, she hangs up and turns to us.

'Grandpa is gone,' she says, and her voice is scarily neutral.

'What?' Max asks.

'That was the hospital. Grandpa is gone,' Mum says again.

It's as if someone has hit pause on the entire world. For a moment everything around us—the people talking, the cheery pop songs playing over the speakers, the sounds of cooking coming from the kitchen—drops away.

It's an instant thing, the flick of a switch. Even though I haven't processed the information properly, something within me breaks. I don't even notice when Max starts crying too. Mum doesn't cry, but her face is ashen. She reaches across the table to hold our hands. We stay cramped together like

that, right there in the ramen shop in front of all the other customers who politely try not to look at us.

All we wanted was for it to be a special day for Mum. We wanted to pretend everything was fine and celebrate, even though Grandpa was in hospital. He said he was feeling fine.

‘Go out and enjoy,’ he insisted as if he weren’t about to die.

The plan was for us to go out for lunch and visit Grandpa in the hospital afterwards with the cake. Max helped me make it: a black forest cake with three plump layers of thickened cream, bursting with wine-red cherries and grated dark chocolate.

We speed to the hospital. By the time we get there, the body—it’s not Grandpa any more—is already stretched out on a white sheet. The face is waxy and scrubbed shiny like an object on display. I lay a hand on a cheek, which is smooth and cold and doesn’t feel like human skin at all. I draw away, trembling.

Dad calls Grandpa’s lawyer to sort out official things and Mum starts talking about funeral arrangements. It all feels too soon. Too real. As if we could put off reality by doing nothing, saying nothing.

We drive back to Mum and Dad’s house together. Max and I go for a walk in Cornwall Park. Neither of us can stomach another moment in the kitchen of our childhood home, all the memories stacked up between us. Part of me feels like if I walk far enough, maybe we’ll come home and the hospital will have called to say it was all a big mistake and Grandpa’s fine after all.

It’s beautiful out, because it’s spring and everything is in flower. Afternoon sunshine skids across the fields, lighting the cherry blossoms. Peach petals scatter and fall, pink pollen cutting through the air like confetti.

Crowds of people picnic among the petals. They look so carefree. Laughing, dancing, taking photos with the flowers. Ordinarily, I would have been among them. I crush a blossom between my fingertips, feel the juice smear across my palm like blood.

‘I can’t believe it,’ Max says. She sounds hollow, distant. ‘I didn’t even see him much in the last few years.’

It’s true. Max barely visited him, even though she’d promised she would all those years ago when she stopped going to Sunday dinners.

‘Grandpa always accepted you. You could have put in more effort.’

I can't keep the accusation out of my voice.

'I know. I wish I'd seen him more. But he could have tried to see me more too. You were always his favourite.'

'No, I wasn't.'

'You know you were.'

I sigh. 'I saw him more than you,' I concede.

'He got you more than me.' She raises her eyebrows bitterly. 'Everyone did. You always were the perfect daughter.'

'You've never talked with me about this before.' My voice is low. I force myself to stay calm. I can't deal with this right now. 'You're just saying this stuff because you're grieving.'

'Sure. Whatever.'

She exhales, stepping forwards so the sun shines directly on her. I feel like the ground is teetering, like it's going to collapse underneath me.

'I'm not perfect.'

Max turns back to look at me. She's dressed for Mum's birthday: a navy velvet dress that Mum likes, over a white shirt, shiny black boots. Her face is an open well.

'I know.'

The rest of the day, I feel like I'm in a trance. I can't not think about Grandpa even though it still doesn't seem real. Every now and then the fact hits all over again. Every time it does, sobs clog up my throat until I can't breathe.

Memories of Grandpa blot out all other thoughts in my brain, recollections so vivid and alive that I can't believe Grandpa's not. They take over my entire mental space, and yet they already seem flat and lifeless compared to the real person.

I see Grandpa sitting at his wooden table, mug of tea in hand, or squatting in his garden, examining a newly bloomed flower. Translating Ken's journal for me, or reading the newspaper cover to cover, or carefully ironing his shirts, lips pursed, determined not to leave scorch marks. I imagine him in the hallway, pressing a newspaper-wrapped present into my hands.

I think back to all the times he took me to McDonald's as a kid, all the times he told me that I could do anything I wanted to with this life.

I think back to just a few days ago when Grandpa, pale in a hospital bed, told me he'd lived a decently long life and was ready to go.

Later that evening, I overhear Mum in the kitchen with Dad, him washing the dishes, her drying.

‘All those years I wasted. Angry from my childhood. I should have just got over it. Even if he wasn’t my real father,’ she murmured, turning towards him.

Dad kisses her forehead. The evening light slices across their bodies from the kitchen window, a spiky shadow cast across their chests by a paper flower hanging on the window.

‘You did your best,’ he said. ‘You were a good daughter to him, even though he wasn’t a good parent. You have nothing to regret.’

Waves

In the days that follow Grandpa's death I try hard to act normal.

Mum says I should tell work what happened, so I send them a brief email on Sunday. When I show up on Monday, Tracy looks surprised.

'I thought you'd take time off,' she says. 'Don't you want to be with your family?'

How do I explain that I can't stand the thought of being trapped in my childhood home with all the memories? I mumble something about wanting to keep busy, and she gives me an uncharacteristically warm smile.

'Let me know if we can do anything to support you,' she says, and I just nod.

I'm pretending to hold it together, even though I feel adrift.

Even though he was old, even though we should have seen it coming, I can't help but feel like the world's been tilted off-centre, like I was leaning on something that's been pulled out from under me.

I try to go the pool to swim, try to burn off my feelings, but I feel trapped in my body. Even when I'm moving fast, even when I have moments when I feel almost normal, I just can't quite centre myself in this new reality.

Mum and I are the ones grieving. Max is sad, but okay. Like she said, she didn't spend that much time with Grandpa. Honestly, I think her main emotion right now is guilt.

Dad's the same. He's politely upset, but he's not grieving. Why would he? Grandpa wasn't particularly warm to him when they met, and they never achieved a relationship beyond civility.

It's harder for Mum. She seems closed in on herself, unsure how to process anything.

My grief is pure like rain.

I have dinner with my family every night of the week. We sit together in the

lounge afterwards, watching light TV. It feels like a strange farce, pretending that everything's okay, even though Mum's cooking tastes off again and I'm barely talking. Dad and Max try to keep up the conversation, but it's forced. Henry comes to dinner some nights, but it's painful. All we want to talk about is Grandpa, and Henry can't join in on the conversation.

On Tuesday night, Dad and Max put on a movie and Mum and I sit at the table. I look at her closely.

She sits stiffly, her cup of tea growing cold in front of her. She's wearing black trousers and a red shirt, an outfit I've seen her in a thousand times, but it looks strange on her. I realise she's both paler and skinnier than she used to be. The red is too bold against her skin, the pants too loose. It's like she's shrinking right in front of me.

'Did you talk to Grandpa about your adoption?'

I haven't had the chance to ask her until now. I'd been meaning to ask her and then Grandpa got sick and it wasn't the priority.

'Just briefly. I asked him why he'd never told me. He said that he and Grandma wanted me to feel like part of the family.'

'That's what he told me too.'

'I don't think I'd care that I was adopted if I felt like I had a childhood. But it feels like a cruel joke that they wanted me to feel like part of the family. What family? I've made an effort, all these years, to be a good daughter, even though my mother was always so difficult. If I'd known they weren't even my real parents I'd have cut them off.'

I don't think I've ever heard Mum speak like this before. Fury flickers through her body, the ends of her hair seem to crackle, her eyes alight. And, honestly, I have no idea what to say. She's entitled to her feelings.

'Why did you feel like you had to be a good daughter when they weren't good parents?'

Chinese family values can only go so far. Do children have to care for their elders if those elders didn't care for them? If Grandma and Grandpa were my parents, I wouldn't have had dinner with them every week for decades.

Mum sighs. When she speaks her voice is bruised.

'I thought they were my parents. And they did raise me. Even if they did it without any warmth. My mother was worse, obviously, but my father wasn't great. He never defended me against my mother or, honestly, really noticed me at all. He made me feel invisible my whole life. Like I was a burden.'

After she's finished speaking, it's like she's run out of energy. She rests

her head in her hands and I don't know what to say.

I didn't know Grandpa was like that. I knew that Mum's childhood wasn't happy, that Grandma and Grandpa fought a lot. But I always blamed Grandma.

It was easy to blame Grandma, because she was cold and judgemental. I don't know how to reconcile the father Mum is talking about with the Grandpa I knew and loved. I can't imagine him acting cold or distant. The thought of it feels wrong, uncomfortable, like a song sung off-key.

'Why didn't you tell me he was like that?' My words are quick, almost spat.

'What would have been the point? He was great with you and Max. You had a wonderful relationship with him. And that's what I wanted for you.'

'What changed in him?'

'I think he mellowed when he was able to stop working and wasn't stressed all the time.'

'But even if he was better, wasn't it painful for you to have to see your parents every week? Wouldn't it have been easier for you to never see them again?'

'Laura, I was willing to do that. I wanted you and Max to have the family I never had.'

Wordlessly, I go to her and pull her into a hug. I rest my head on her shoulder, amazed at her strength, her selflessness.

'Thank you,' I whisper. I want to tell her that I'm ashamed of all the times I took her for granted, took my family for granted, but I can't get the words out.

The funeral is small. It's just our family, Henry, Isabelle and a handful of people Grandpa used to know. The room feels airless, despite the open windows. Outside, it's another sunny day and I feel mocked by the universe. I want it to be pouring with rain, the sky pitch black. I want the world to feel like it's ending.

People always say that a funeral should be thought of less as a sad event, more as a celebration of life. This day doesn't feel like anything—it's just a formality we have to get through so we can all go back to our lives and pretend to move on.

The funeral director is a young woman with brown hair and an aura of

professionalism. She speaks politely and slowly, about the treasure of life, the beauty of memories. Then she says that Grandpa is with God now, which makes no sense because he never believed nor wanted to. His lack of faith is one of the few things Mum inherited from him. Anyway, the director has probably said the same speech a thousand times: it's so generic, so pointless. I wonder if it's a well-paying job and what kind of person would want to be a funeral director.

A friend of Grandpa's speaks about how kind and lively he was. Then I say a few words. Mum said I should do it on behalf of the family. She says it's because I was closest to him, but really it's because nobody else wants to.

In my speech, I flounder around with comments about what a loving grandfather he was. It's short and lacking specificity, because I can't bring myself to talk about real things. Even trying to write them down, my throat started closing up and my eyes started stinging. In the end, all I say honestly is how much I loved him.

After the service, we stand around in the little room outside the hall next to tables laden with triangular sandwiches and brownies. I eye the little cakes with their neat swirls of icing, aware that I won't be able to stomach any of it. Instead, I balance a cup of tea on a saucer and say polite things to anybody who wants to talk to me. And it feels like everybody wants to talk to me, when all I want is to be left alone.

Henry follows me around, squeezing my shoulders reassuringly. I know he's trying to be supportive, but I find it vaguely suffocating. Ever since I called him with the news he's been overly attentive, trying to hug me every second, trying to be as helpful as possible. I know it comes from a good place, but it feels like an extra thing to deal with.

'You spoke well,' someone says, and I look up. It's the friend of Grandpa's that spoke. He talked a lot about football practice. I didn't even know Grandpa used to play. I wonder how much else I don't know.

'Thank you.'

'I was friends with your grandfather. Back in the day.'

I know this, I want to say. I heard you speak.

'I'm sure he would have been proud of you.'

In the afternoon, I go to Grandpa's house by myself.

'Are you sure?' Henry asks me, and I nod. I can't be distracted by anyone

right now.

I want to go through all the rooms slowly, memorising all the details so I won't forget. His garden is still perfectly pruned. I know that within a week the weeds will come. They're merciless. Grandpa hated them, always pulled them up the moment they broke through the earth. I stand in the vegetable garden. A single weed is growing next to the runner beans so I yank it out.

Then I start crying. I've cried so much in the last few days that my eyes are already puffy and tired, even though I tried to hide it with make-up for the funeral. Now, my tears blow sideways into my hair, which knots in the wind. I feel pathetic, standing there with the runner beans.

In the dining room, Ken's journal sits on the dining table beside a cold, half-drunk cup of tea. Everything is still in place, as if waiting for Grandpa to come home. I pick the journal up and flip through it, feeling the soft edges of the old paper. These pages that Grandpa thumbed through for me, translated for me. Half the journal is unfinished, the characters undeciphered.

BACKWATERS

Part XII

One day something changed.

'It happened. I know it did,' Fen said.

'How do you know?' Ken asked.

'I just do.'

And she was right. Over the next few weeks Fen could sense the tiny changes inside her, the beginnings of something. Months passed, her stomach began to grow and it was official: they were to have a child.

Ken didn't know how to feel. On one hand he was ecstatic—this was everything he wanted!—but on the other hand he grieved the loss about to come. He knew that the moment he left China he would fade to his wife, fade from the life he'd lived for half a year.

He wrote to New Zealand, telling Peter and Daniel that he would be coming home soon. He visited all of his relatives to bid them farewell. On his last night, he had a special meal with Kaiyang, Guang, Fen and the children.

The table was loaded with food, along with the glasses of warm beer, which the men used to toast the coming child and Ken's departure.

'It's been good to have you,' Kaiyang said, resting a heavy hand on Ken's shoulders.

'I can hardly repay you,' Ken said.

'You don't need to,' Kaiyang said. 'We're brothers, in case you forgot.'

'I didn't forget,' Ken said, and he smiled at Kaiyang. Between them lay the relics of the past, now long buried.

'I'll look out for Fen,' Kaiyang said. Fen was going to move back in with her parents while she was pregnant, and later, if Ken could provide enough money, she would buy her own house. There were no plans for Ken to see her again.

'Thank you,' Ken said. He felt intensely grateful to his brother in that moment.

The last person Ken said goodbye to was his wife. He was to train to Guangzhou and catch the ship from there, so Fen accompanied him to the station.

'This is it.'

'It is.'

He held her for a long time, and he could feel her body pressed against him, her stomach softer and rounder with their child. For a second, his departure felt horrific. How could he leave his new family? He held onto her, almost changing his mind, almost ready to tell her that he was going to stay.

But Fen was more practical. She pulled away, and then she was squeezing his hand, telling him goodbye, and then he was on the train and her face was blurring to a hazy dot in the distance. It was all so fast.

This time he noticed the journey away from the village. When he first left China, he'd felt too empty to take anything in, was too full of grief to observe the grey-and-green landscape streaming past both sides of the train. Now, he looked at the countryside he was born in and thought it was beautiful. It was different to New Zealand's native trees and forests, but beautiful nonetheless. He wondered when he'd

next be back, but there was no answer to that question, so he stopped thinking about it.

He was on his way home.

The voyage too was different this time. There is something in sadness that accentuates the curves of oceanic colour, the shades of sky. His memory from the first voyage was all blurry blue, the return to China was all nervous anticipation, and only now that he was returning to New Zealand could he appreciate what was actually happening on board.

Many of the other passengers were men like him, men who had found wives and had children and were now returning to their work in the goldfields or market gardens. But there were others too. Men embarking on first-time adventures, men who seemed green in their excitement and ambition.

The ship was social. Ken didn't know if every ship was as social as this one or whether he'd just never involved himself previously. He still didn't want to get to know every single person who approached him, but he did introduce himself to a few people.

At dinner one night in the food hall, he found himself sitting next to a newly named Jack. Jack was going to New Zealand for the first time and hoped to find farming or gardening work.

'It'll probably be market gardens,' Ken told him. 'The white men don't want to hire us for their farms.'

Jack asked Ken a lot of questions about life in New Zealand. He was eighteen, about the age Ken was when he first left China, and he wanted to know about the huts, about the social life, about the local people, the food.

Ken told Jack everything he could, and ultimately said that while everyone had a different experience, he was grateful that he'd moved to New Zealand.

'It's a hard life, but at least we get to make our own choices,' he said.

Henderson Wang

One Monday evening, a week after the funeral, Mum calls me just as I'm dozing off.

When I left work on Friday, I came home and went to bed, and that's where I've stayed since, barely moving, even calling in sick to work.

Tracy thought I should take time off? Fine. I don't want to keep busy any more. Right now I don't have the energy for anything.

'Hi, what's up?' I say groggily into my phone.

'I got an email from Grandpa's lawyer today,' Mum says. 'It turns out Grandpa was richer than we thought. He left everything to you and Max.'

'What? But where did the money come from? I thought his only asset was his house.'

'So did we.'

'How much is it?'

'The lawyer wouldn't tell me, because I'm not in the will. You wouldn't normally have to go in to see him, but he was your grandfather's friend and would like to talk to you personally.'

We exchange a few more words and then Mum hangs up. I can't process what I've just heard. Grandpa left me money? I have an inheritance? Honestly, I can't even really care right now.

But Mum said I should talk to the lawyer, so I call his secretary and arrange a meeting for the next day. I might be able to take another day off work, but I can't hide in my bed forever.

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On Tuesday afternoon, I sit in the waiting room of Henderson Wang, a boutique law firm in an office building on Queen Street. Walking from Britomart up the street, I felt disturbed by the number of people out and about. Another reminder that life goes on, even when you want it to pause.

The waiting room is cold and lifeless, like a hospital, with ugly off-white walls and strip lighting. Someone has tried to make the room friendlier by adding a fake orchid, but it's so fake it just looks tacky, the too-bright light reflecting off its plastic leaves.

'Laura?'

The woman at the front desk speaks in a clear, professional voice. Her hair is in a smooth bun and she's wearing a blue blazer over a blouse.

'He's ready for you.'

I nod my thanks and move down the corridor to Benjamin Wang's office.

'Come in,' he says. He's about forty-five, of medium height, with thinning hair and glasses. He looks kind.

'Please, sit down.' He gestures to the empty seat in front of his desk.

'I was so sorry to hear about your grandfather,' he says gently. 'I lost my father last year, so I know what it's like.'

Do lawyers always try to relate to you like this?

'Were you surprised that your grandfather left you an inheritance?' he asks.

'A little bit, yeah.' My mouth is dry, my voice scratchy. 'I didn't realise he had any money saved.'

'He put money away when he sold the gardens.'

Benjamin slides a piece of paper across the table and I look at it. The piece of paper tells me I've inherited fifty thousand dollars.

If I was handed fifty thousand dollars at any other time in my life, I'd be beyond thrilled. Now, I can't muster any perceptible feelings of happiness. It feels wrong to be happy about money, when it comes at the expense of Grandpa's life.

'Your grandfather left fifty thousand each to you and to Max. That's everything he had at the end of his life. The money will be transferred to your bank account as a one-off lump sum. Do you have any questions?'

Back at my flat, I lie on my bed and call Mum.

'I found out what my inheritance will be,' I say. 'It's fifty thousand dollars.'

I hear her whistle down the phone. 'That's a lot of money.'

I can't help but feel a little bit guilty that Grandpa didn't leave her anything.

‘Yeah.’ I consider for a second. ‘Do you want some of it? He was your dad.’

The offer sounds pitying even to me.

‘I don’t want or need anything from my dad, Laura. It’s yours. Now, what are you going to do with it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why don’t you go overseas? You’ve been wanting to do that for ages, haven’t you?’

That’s not a bad idea. I like the thought of getting away, escaping all the grief for a while. I like the idea of having something to look forward to.

‘Where should I go?’ I ask.

‘You need to decide that for yourself.’ Mum laughs. ‘But you deserve it.’

After she hangs up, I curl up in a ball. The last few weeks of grief have exhausted me. I feel almost hollow, like the sadness has washed my insides out.

After I’ve talked to Mum, I call Max, who picks up immediately. Mum had told me that Max was also seeing Benjamin today.

‘Crazy, isn’t it?’ she exclaims, in lieu of a greeting, ‘Fifty thousand fucking dollars.’

‘It ain’t half bad,’ I reply. ‘Do you know what you’re going to do with it?’

‘Travel with Isabelle, maybe? Unsure. You?’

‘No clue.’

After that we talk for less than five minutes about ordinary things like how she’s doing, how I’m doing. And then we say ‘I love you,’ and she says she has to go.

Just after I’ve hung up on Max, my phone rings again. It’s Henry.

‘I haven’t heard from you in a while. Is everything okay?’

With a pang I realise I haven’t talked to him since last week. He must be freaking out because I didn’t go to work for two days in a row. And I haven’t even been opening his messages.

‘Yeah, sorry. I’ve just been sleeping.’

‘I’m worried about you, L. You need to leave your house. Can I come see you? We could go for a walk? Or even just sit in your garden?’

I agree, even though I don’t want to see him. He’s just a distraction and not the kind I need right now.

Henry and I walk the streets. It's a dreary day, a light rain scattering through the sky. At least it's not cold.

Henry tries to keep up a friendly conversation, but I can hardly be bothered to contribute more than a few nods and grunts.

'I know you're grieving, but can you please talk to me? I've been missing you,' Henry says, scuffing his toes against the footpath. His voice has a note of hurt in it, like a wounded animal's whine.

Ever since Grandpa died, all Henry's wanted to do is *talk*. And I know he's been nothing but sweet to me, that all he's doing is trying to help, but I can't find it within myself to make an effort with him.

I stay silent. I know I'm behaving badly, but I can't bring myself to be enthusiastic or generous right now. At this moment, I don't even feel attracted to him. He's lovely, but he makes no difference to my life. Right now, I could just as easily be in bed doing nothing.

'Can we go back?' I ask. We've only been out for fifteen minutes.

Henry looks at me, crestfallen. 'Sure.'

Back in my room, I finally notice how pathetic it looks. The bedsheets are crumpled, the curtains are drawn and there are clothes strewn across the floor. Worse of all, there's a musty smell, like I haven't opened the windows in days—which I haven't.

Crossing the room quickly, I open the curtains wide and unlatch the windows. Fresh air streams into the room.

'Grandpa left me money,' I say quietly, sitting down on my unmade bed.

'How much?'

'Fifty thousand dollars.'

Henry stares at me, his mouth open. 'Fifty thousand dollars! L, that's huge! What are you going to do?'

His excitement lifts my mood a little.

'Mum says I should use it to travel.'

His eyes go wide. 'Where are you thinking of going?'

'No idea.'

'Well, you have the money to go anywhere you want,' he says. I can see his mind whirring. 'Why don't you go to Hong Kong? Use the money to continue your search for your mum's biological parents? It was all you were thinking about before your grandpa got sick.'

A switch goes off in my head.

'That's a brilliant idea!' I half shout, startling Henry. I give him a quick

hug. ‘Yes! That’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to Hong Kong!’

My mind starts moving at rapid speed. The more I think about it, the better an idea it seems. I can go to Hong Kong, take some time to grieve and process. I can find out what I can about Mum’s biological parents while celebrating Grandpa’s life. Now that I know I have roots in Hong Kong, I can experience the culture through that lens. I can feel like I’m reclaiming something.

I leave Henry on the bed, move to my desk and open my laptop to start reading about travel in Hong Kong. There are all the classic blog posts like ‘25 things not to miss in Hong Kong’, ‘The BEST ten foods in Hong Kong’, ‘Highlights of Hong Kong!’ I read and read until something like excitement begins to stir in me. I’ve barely felt anything since Grandpa died, so this is a good sign. I want to go as soon as I can get time off work.

I open a new tab and search for the Crescent Moon Home website. I put the address into Google Maps and find that it’s not too far from the city centre. That’s the first thing on the itinerary.

‘Hey, what do you think of this hotel?’

I’d almost forgotten Henry was there, I was so swept up in travel plans. I glance at the hotel he’s showing me on his phone.

‘It looks expensive.’

‘It’ll be okay divided in two, though. And obviously I don’t expect you to pay for me.’

‘Two?’ It takes a couple of seconds for my brain to catch up. ‘Wait, sorry, are you planning to come too?’

I can’t keep the shock out of my voice.

‘Well...yeah, I thought we’d go together. It *was* my idea...’ He trails off, uncertain. ‘Don’t you want me to come?’

‘It’s just...such a personal trip. I think I need to do it by myself.’

He looks so downcast that I feel guilty.

‘I’m really grateful that you suggested Hong Kong. Really. It shows how well you know me.’

I lean forwards and kiss him on the cheek. He perks up, but he still looks dejected when he leaves.

At work the next day, Henry avoids my gaze when he says good morning. I feel guilty for pushing him away, but I’m also relieved. The space is

refreshing.

At morning tea, I visit Tracy to ask her for leave.

‘How long for?’ she asks, her eyes glued to her monitor.

‘Two weeks?’

‘I can give you one. It’s a busy time of year, Laura. We can’t really afford to lose you for two.’

‘You know my grandfather died.’

‘I know. And I’m sorry. But we just can’t lose you for two whole weeks on such short notice.’

Her voice is so mechanical it makes me want to scream. Part of me wants to quit right now, but I can’t. Instead, I accept one week and leave the room.

‘Did you get leave?’ Henry asks.

‘Just a week. You’d think they’d have some compassion.’ I sigh.

‘Hey, a week’s still something. If you take both weekends you can make it nine days.’

‘I guess so.’

Henry comes around to my desk and starts rubbing my shoulders. I know he’s being nice, trying to prove that he’s no longer upset that I don’t want him to come to Hong Kong with me. I still don’t want him that close.

‘Hey, I was thinking,’ he says. ‘Do you want to get pho tonight? My treat.’ He’s like a puppy dog. All sweet and hopeful with his big eyes.

‘Sorry. I’m not feeling up to it.’

BACKWATERS

Part XIII

Ken stood in his garden and breathed; he knew he was home. Home was the muted smell of morning dew on the dirt, the edges of the grass blades heavy and shining in the light. It was the scent of wet herbs, earthworms, wood. He wriggled his bare feet in the ground, letting his toes sink into the soil.

A month had passed since his return.

A month that felt both longer and shorter, realer and less real than his time in China. He'd been thrilled to see Daniel and Peter. To return to their regular routine of whole days working in amicable silence punctuated by moments of random conversation, thoughts and laughter breaking them out of their repetitive tasks.

The air itself tasted different here; the birds sang different songs. He was happy to be back in his own garden, working towards his own tangible future. He was happy to be back in a community that he knew and felt comfortable in.

But at the same time his heart ached for China, for his wife and child, for the family that was all too new to him, too far away to feel like more than a fantasy.

He wrote every night. Long pages of thoughts, observations about the shape of a pumpkin, the weight of a tomato ripe enough to harvest. He wrote poetry, free verse about his feelings: his guilt at leaving his family behind, his relief to be home, his hope that they could one day join him.

He also wrote letters to Fen. They weren't as cohesive as his poems. He would write a paragraph, leave, come back, write another. They were bits and pieces of his days and weeks, written in the long gaps of waiting for her replies.

The long gaps meant he didn't hear of the birth of his daughter until weeks later, when Fen's month of rest was almost over. He couldn't believe it—his daughter was alive and breathing, and he hadn't even known.

Admin

A few weeks after Grandpa's funeral, I contact the Collective to ask if there's anyone who can translate Ken's journal for me. I know I need to keep writing. I haven't written in weeks now, but I can't keep putting it off. Tracy didn't give me a strict deadline for the project, but I don't want it to drag on forever. I definitely want to finish it before the year ends.

And aside from that, I feel confused by the stop-start nature of my grief. I feel guilty about how easily I'm distracted and then it overwhelms me all at once. I talk and laugh with tourists in the gallery and then suddenly one of them will say something that will remind me of something Grandpa once said. I sort mindlessly through admin emails and I'm completely fine until I remember how Grandpa took his tea. The loss is an inconstant ache in my brain, an appearing and disappearing emptiness I can't fit my soul around. I still hardly believe it's real. Half the time, I think I can just drive to his house and he'll be there, like it was all some horrible dream.

Two days after contacting the Collective, I get an email from a woman named Sharon.

Sharon tells me that she studied translation at university and hasn't had the opportunity to use it because she's a stay-at-home mum. Now that her kids are at school she wants to get back into it.

I tell her how grateful I am and offer to pay her. Sharon turns me down, saying it's a pleasure.

I send her the diary and she says she'll email me the English translations. It turns out that she's incredibly efficient: within a few days, she sends a few pages of Ken's journal.

Now that I'm writing again, time starts speeding up.

I book my flights to Hong Kong for early December and the remaining weeks skip past almost unnoticed. Tracy was right—the gallery is extremely

busy. My days are quick and full. I hardly even get time to eat lunch.

On nights I'm not seeing my family, I do travel admin. There is so much to do—I book accommodation, buy travel insurance, look at Hong Kong travel websites, pack and re-pack my bags to make sure I have everything.

Without meaning to, I barely speak to Henry. He stops messaging me and asking me to hang out, and that suits me fine. I don't seem to have the space in my head for a relationship.

Part of me feels guilty for sidelining him like this, but it's the easiest option. I know we need to talk about it, but I don't bring it up. At work, we skate past each other, acting friendly but never really talking.

Finally, on my last workday before I leave, Henry and I are alone in the break room. He walks in when I'm making tea. I can feel his eyes on me, but I don't look up.

Henry exhales heavily. I expect him to leave then, but he doesn't.

'Hey, L. Can we talk?'

I know what's coming and don't want to have this conversation. Not here, in the break room at work with the hostile lighting and stale toast crumbs all over the table.

'What do you want to talk about?' I try not to sound too unenthusiastic, but I don't succeed.

'You've been avoiding me since your grandpa died,' he starts.

'Yeah, my grandpa *died*—'

He cuts me off with a raised hand.

'And I *know* you need to grieve in your own way. And I got the message that I was intruding. I've been giving you space for the last few weeks. I was hoping a few weeks was all you'd need. But I feel like you've moved on from me. Like you just got sick of me or something. Is that true? Or are you still grieving? It's just, you've barely looked at me in a month and I don't know what to make of that. I need to know if you still want to be in a relationship with me or not.'

It comes out in a torrent. I wonder how long he's been keeping that in.

'Henry...'

I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't know how to do this.

When I open my eyes again, Henry's still standing there, still looking at me. I know he'll respect whatever decision I make, that he really does want the best for me. A glint of guilt shoots through me. He's been so kind, and all I've done is push him away.

'I'm sorry,' I say. My voice is low, hoarse. 'I'm sorry for not

communicating with you. I know I haven't been super good to you since Grandpa died, and I know I should've talked to you about how I was feeling.'

'I understood that you were grieving, L. I could have stayed away if you wanted me to. But you never told me that. You just started pushing me away.'

'I know. I'm sorry.' I sigh. 'I haven't handled this well. I honestly think my emotions shut down completely after Grandpa died. And all I've wanted is to work things out on my own. Look. Maybe we should just take a break. While I'm away. We can talk about things again when I'm back.'

Henry looks at me and I have the distinct sensation that I'm breaking his heart.

'Is that what you want? A break?'

His voice is small, hollow.

I nod.

BACKWATERS

Part XIV

My beloved,

Summer is coming, and the days are growing mercifully longer. This is good for the garden, because it means more hours of sun and faster growth. It also means that soon we'll be able to start planting fruits and vegetables that favour the summer.

The air here is sweet, and the gardens are abundant. If only you could see it! I know you would love it. Sometimes, when I'm standing and doing nothing, taking a break, I imagine you here with me. You would walk around the garden, reaching down to pluck a leaf or flower, you would stick it behind your ear.

I miss you. I know I say this every letter, but it feels wrong to be away from you and our daughter. I hope she is doing well. I think of her every day, wonder whether she's grown and whether she'll ever get to know me. I hope that she does, but I understand that she probably won't.

*Your loving husband,
Ken*

PART FOUR
January–March 2020

Vegan Noodle Soup

The streets are packed with people. I stand on Mody Road, watching the writhing mass of bodies. Back home, I associate these kinds of crowds with the buzz of rugby games, the neon rush of gigs. Here, it's just an ordinary day.

It feels liberating to be alone. I have a map in my hands and it flaps gently in the wind. I have a week with no responsibilities to anyone except myself. That feels like power.

It's not just being by myself that makes me feel liberated. It's being by myself *here*, in a city full of people who outwardly look like me. Without a group, without a tour guide, without a white boyfriend, nobody looking at me twice. Nobody is going to ask me where I'm from. Nobody is going to look at me and think 'Asian' or 'Chinese'. To an onlooker, I'm like any other young person going about her day.

I take advantage of it. I stow the map in my jacket pocket and I wander the streets, taking random turns whenever I feel like it. I can almost pretend I'm on a normal holiday. That I'm not here thanks to inheritance money, not here to escape anything, not here to find answers. I want a few days just to be here and absorb the city.

As I walk, I find myself scanning the faces of the older women. I'm looking for any with features that resemble Mum's, the almond eyes and soft cheeks and oval face. Everywhere I see women that share one feature with Mum, but not another. It's a futile search. Hong Kong has a huge population and I'm looking for a ghost.

The thing about Hong Kong is that it's a living city. Everybody is going somewhere, doing something. Nobody is hanging around, enjoying the sunlight. It's a rising city, an ambitious city. Everybody wants to be successful. I wonder what Mum would have been like if she'd grown up here.

I end up in a small alleyway filled with colourful boutiques. I go into one. It's a second-hand clothes store, crammed with coats, long dresses, jeans.

There are hanging racks at all different heights so the clothes seem to descend from the heavens. A smiling assistant sails over to me, looks at what I'm wearing and instantly identifies me as a foreigner.

'Welcome,' she sings in smooth, melodic English. 'What do you need?'

'I'm just looking,' I begin, but my eyes fall upon an olive-green coat hanging in one corner. It's velvety and I want it. 'Actually. Can I try that coat on?'

With astonishing speed, she produces a silver ladder and climbs it, removing the coat from the hanger. She brings it to me like an offering. I shrug my own jacket off and she drapes it over her left arm while I try the coat on.

'Mirror.' She points to a long mirror by the jeans rack and I go to it, the long coat swishing around my ankles.

The coat is large but folds in a flattering way, neither engulfing nor enlarging me. I haven't seen any coats cut like this in New Zealand. In the coat, I feel like a real Hong Kong girl.

'You look beautiful,' the assistant tells me.

I'm in love.

'How much?'

•

I wear the coat immediately, my own jacket folded into the brown tote bag I was given. It's warm, but not too hot. It'll be good for autumn back home.

I find a little cafe and enter, drape my new coat on the back of a wooden chair, order a matcha latte. It arrives in a white clay mug. I connect to the cafe wi-fi and check my phone. There are three messages in the family chat. Max sent a picture of a cat she saw in the street. My mum said 'cute,' and in a separate message said that the weather was dreary today and that she hopes it's better where I am.

I reply that it is, then put my phone away. Part of me wants to know how Henry's doing, but I squash the thought to the bottom of my brain. I'm here to be alone.

Instead of looking at my phone again, I pull out a brochure I picked up at the airport and flip through it. The view from Victoria Peak looks good.

After a while, I leave the cafe and wander the streets, idly pausing to look at interesting old doorways in the late afternoon light.

For dinner, I order myself vegan noodle soup at a little restaurant where the waitress gives me a sympathetic smile. I look around the room: everybody else is in a pair or group. I want to tell the waitress that I feel freer than I've felt in months.

Instead, I eat the noodles slowly, taking my time. Afterwards, I lift the bowl to my lips and drain the broth. It tastes of lemongrass and chilli, fragrant and sweet. I wipe my mouth on a paper napkin and go to pay.

Afterwards, I hail a taxi and take it to the hotel I booked. Accommodation is far more affordable here than it is in New Zealand, so I decided to get a hotel instead of staying in a hostel. Sixty dollars a night buys me a spacious room in the City Views Hotel. The room feels luxurious with its crisp white sheets, a kettle with several types of tea and a wide window with a view of the city lights.

I immediately throw myself onto the bed. It's a little hard, but otherwise comfortable. Apart from dropping off my suitcase when my flight arrived this morning, I've been out all day. I've walked nearly thirty thousand steps and the soles of my feet ache.

The bathroom is sterile white, with large mirrors and a rain shower. I strip off my clothes and step underneath it. The water feels soft and tropical, streaming around my body, holding me. It's almost like swimming.

Hummingbird

In the morning I feel energetic, even though it's foggy and damp outside. I shower again to freshen up then go downstairs for the complimentary breakfast. I'm expecting cereal, toast, maybe some porridge, but it's a full buffet. There are savoury meat stews, congee, noodles, soups. There are tureens of tropical fruit, several types of cereals and yoghurt, plates piled high with pastries. There's even a chef making omelettes on request. I help myself to some cereal, yoghurt and tropical fruit. While the savoury food smells amazing, I struggle with the concept of noodles for breakfast.

Wearing my new green coat, I leave the hotel. I have no plans, no itinerary. Digging the airport brochures out of my pocket, I scan the printed pictures to decide what to do today.

Half an hour later, I'm on a bus up to Victoria Peak. The bus is quiet, because most people take the tram. The bus trip is longer, nearly an hour, and follows a twisty road up the mountain. I chose it because I thought there'd be a nice view, but everything is shrouded in a white haze so I can't see anything except vague shapes.

The road starts to slope upwards as we move into mountain ranges and soon we're winding around tight corners. My stomach has never liked winding roads and I can feel its contents sloshing from side to side uncomfortably. I start humming. I've always hummed whenever I feel carsick. I don't know why it helps—maybe it's just a distraction—but it's stopped me vomiting many times over the years.

The bus leans left around a bend. Outside it's still a solid wall of white; if anything the mist has intensified. It makes me wonder how the driver can see the road, but the moment the thought rises up I force it down. My head spins.

My humming gets louder, and I know it's reached maximum volume when the woman in front of me leans over the seat to look at me.

'Are you okay?' she asks in a strong American accent.

I shake my head stiffly, unable to speak.

‘Do you need to throw up?’

I nod, thinking she’ll pass me a plastic bag or something, but then she’s standing up, yelling at the driver that we need to stop.

I almost feel too sick to feel embarrassed, but not quite.

The driver screeches to a halt and the doors open with a pop. I sprint outside and leap down the steps before I’m throwing up breakfast in a great eruption.

I feel cool hands—the American’s?—hold my hair back and cradle my neck while I convulse and retch. I wish my mum were here. I’m crying, like I always do when I throw up, and I can feel stares on my back. I want to go home, but we’re standing in the mist on a mountain in Hong Kong and there’s nowhere to go but back on the bus.

The American hands me a baby wipe, which I use to clean my face, and the driver gives me a bottle of water. I rinse and spit then swallow a mouthful.

‘Come back in when you’re ready, no rush,’ the driver says stiltedly, looking embarrassed, and I nod.

A few minutes later, I feel a bit better and I get back on the bus. Everybody asks me if I’m all right and I say yes, but my face is burning.

We sit in silence for the rest of the journey and I stare fixedly out the window, watching the sun cut slowly through the mist. The driver drives slower than before, but I still have to focus on my breathing, counting to ten, in and out. By the time we reach the top of the peak, the fog has almost completely lifted, revealing a warm sunny day.

When the bus stops, we spread out onto a huge viewing deck filled with people taking in the view. The sky now is a clear, endless blue.

I walk to one of the railings and lean over, staring at Hong Kong. It’s impressive: stacked with sleek high-rises, neat blue windows, a few red and green buildings. I love the unevenness of cities, how every building is a different height. It makes me feel like I’m staring down at a Lego city that someone built.

In a weird way, I feel like I’m the one that built this city. I built this city straight from my imagination, from my determination to find out where I’m from, who I am. Maybe this is the next level in my life.

The sky can’t seem to make up its mind. A breeze starts up and clouds reappear, dirtying the view. The green coat’s just warm enough and I keep my hands jammed in my pockets. Normally I’d be taking photos, but I

wanted to try something different on this trip. I take so many photos normally, try to capture everything. This time, I want to pass through the city without a trace. Even though Mum's from here, I don't feel like putting down any roots.

'Would you take a picture of us, please?' A teenage girl is standing behind me, holding out her phone. I take it and step back so I can get the family and the view in the shot. They seem like a nice family, parents and three kids. I suppose they're on holiday. I wonder if they fight often, what they fight about. I wonder if the parents have any secrets.

I take a few photos, moving back to get different angles.

'Let me know if you want more,' I tell the girl, handing her phone back. She glances at the photos.

'No, these are great, thanks,' she says, and walks away.

It was such a simple interaction. But it makes me happy that I played a tiny part in another family's story. One of these photos might get printed out and end up in an album or framed on the wall.

I walk around the edges of the deck to take in the view from every angle. It really is spectacular. It also emphasises Hong Kong's size. Hong Kong has a population of more than seven million. New Zealand is twenty-four times larger in landmass, but has two million *fewer* people. Everywhere I go in New Zealand, I see someone I know. Here, alone on the peak, I feel like I could disappear and nobody would know or care.

After I tire of the view, I go down to Pacific Coffee, where I order an iced latte. Around me, I can hear the usual sounds of tourists: families squabbling, honeymooners in love. I pull a notebook out of my shoulder bag and write for an hour and a half.

I like writing in public places. During university, I used to go to cafes so I could write with the sounds of people drinking, eating, talking. I like existing in my document, while everybody else is in the real world. It's been a while since I've written anywhere except at my flat or Grandpa's house. I was planning to write on the plane, but I was tired and watched movies instead.

In this moment, writing feels effortless. The words come to me and it's like Ken is with me the entire time. His story comes alive under my fingertips, and I can almost see him.

It's funny that writing would be easy here. I'm not even writing about Mum's adoption. I'm writing about Ken, and he never even went to Hong Kong. But Ken's story runs adjacent to those of Mum's real ancestors. Hong

Kong carries the alternative story.

For all I know, Mum's parents came up this peak on a date and sat right where I'm sitting. For all I know, I have relatives around me that I don't even know.

Suddenly, I can't wait any longer to visit the Crescent Moon Home. I'm not here to be a tourist, much as I'd like to be.

I put my things back into my bag and go to catch the tram. The entire ride I steel myself. I know I might not find anything, but I have to know. I have to find this home and ask my questions. If they go unanswered, at least I'll have tried.

When the tram arrives at the bottom, I let myself be carried out by the crowds heading straight for the street. The sky's completely grey again.

Before I can change my mind, I stick out my arm and hail a taxi.

Grandpa hated cars. He used to say that he felt trapped inside them, that they were metal death machines that sucked the joy out of the world. Whenever he could, he walked, or took the bus if necessary.

It was difficult when he got older and couldn't walk as far or as fast. Whenever my family took him out for dinner, we did it by car. He never complained, but he'd sit very still, fists on his knees, looking wistfully out the window.

As Hong Kong speeds past outside, I wonder what Grandpa would think of me being here. Actually, I know. He'd be happy for me, happy I was on a journey, happy I was travelling. While he never pressured me to go to an overseas university like Grandma did, I know he wanted me to see the world. To have all the things he didn't have.

I wonder if he ever resented his position in life. He worked hard for decades, had a wife he didn't get along with, and a daughter he didn't spend time with. There were obviously good moments too—like gardening for pleasure in his retirement—but the majority of his life was unexciting.

The thing is, though, he seemed fine with an unexciting life. Unlike Grandma, he didn't care about wealth or status. Grandpa was happy as long as he had a shovel and a patch of land. I start to think about what he might have done in another life, but it's an endless train of thought.

One time when I was about eleven, Dad, Grandpa, Grandma and I were in a taxi together. Dad started a conversation with the driver, the way he always

did. He couldn't go anywhere without making a friend. The driver was telling us how much he loved his job. He loved meeting different people, he loved being an unofficial tour guide and he *loved* driving.

Grandpa wasn't listening. He was too busy staring out the window, wishing he wasn't in a car. But Grandma was listening. She rolled her eyes while the driver spoke, couldn't imagine someone being truly happy to drive people around for a living.

I remember thinking that I wanted to be like the driver, like Grandpa in his garden. Capable of doing one thing and loving that thing for my whole life.

Autumnal Scene

The fence is a smooth grey metal, the same height as me. It's made up of neat vertical rows of bars spaced too closely for a person to slip through and there are two horizontal bars running across the top. There's a black electric gate that says 'Keep Out' in English with the Chinese characters in a larger font on top. Next to the gate is a silver sign with black characters elegantly scrawled across it. Underneath the characters it reads in English 'Crescent Moon Children's Home'.

I walk towards the gate. It's not that cold, but my face feels numb. I take my hands out of my pockets and run them across the fence's metal bars. They feel cool and smooth against my skin. I know I should ring the buzzer, but I just want to stand here, on the outside, and look inside at the spaces where abandoned children play.

The building itself is about three storeys tall. It's square and stone with long red-rimmed windows stretching around each floor. The space around the building is entirely concrete but for a basic playground in one corner and a little field of fake grass.

Maybe it looks friendlier on a beautiful day, on a day when the sky doesn't match the bars, but looking at the home makes me feel utterly desolate.

'Okay,' I say out loud. My voice sounds small and lonely.

I press the buzzer. There's a loud noise, then a pause, and a smooth voice says something in Cantonese.

'Hi,' I say, 'My name is Laura. My mum came from here and I was wondering if I could come in.'

I don't even know if they take visitors. For all I know, they'll just say no.

'Hello, Laura,' the voice says in accented English. 'Please enter.'

The black gate starts to open and I move backwards to accommodate it. Once there's a gap large enough I step through.

The front door is tall, easily clearing three metres. It's got opaque glass panels on either side of it which look too new to fit in with the rest of the

building. There's another buzzer on the door, so I press it and a moment later the door opens.

'Hello.' The owner of the voice turns out to be a woman somewhere between forty and fifty. She's short, with her hair in an impeccable bun, and she's wearing black pants and a grey jumper. She looks tired.

'It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Jie, the director of the home,' she says in a voice that sounds even smoother without the intercom between us. It's so smooth it has a metallic quality. She extends a hand and I take it.

'So your mum's from here,' she says.

I nod.

'Would you like a tour?' she offers. I do, but I also don't. It's painting too vivid a picture of what might have been my mum's entire childhood. I don't want to think of Grandma as a hero.

But I accept. I came all this way, there's no other option really—and anyway, she's already started walking, expecting me to follow. I walk in her wake, passing into a little foyer with a dark carpeted floor, a coat rack and little else.

'That's my office,' she tells me, pointing to a little room to the right. To the left are stairs. 'Most of the children sleep upstairs. Floors two and three are bedrooms and bathrooms. The dining room, lounge, playroom and study room are down here.'

She walks me through the centre door and shows me the lounge, which has some shabby sofas and lots of children's art on the walls. The lounge connects to the dining room, which has rows of plastic tables and chairs. She takes me into a playroom lined with shelves of board games and boxes of toys. The walls are painted in bold primary colours in a clear attempt at cheerfulness. Despite that, the room has a depressing air to it. But maybe I only think that because I know all the children who play here lost their parents.

We climb the stairs and Jie lets me poke my head into one of the bedrooms. It's a dormitory, with a row of eight beds. The bedcovers are all identical, plain navy. The walls are bare white, and there aren't any decorations. It looks like a boarding school. Or a prison.

I think of my childhood bedroom, the rose-pink walls, the polka-dot bedspread and fairy posters. For the first time in a while, I realise how privileged my upbringing was. I had parents that loved me and kept me. My own troubles seem so minor in comparison to what millions of children go

through. For the first time, I make myself really think about the children and families that need help from the SHS. Terrible childhoods aren't limited to orphans. I make a silent vow to volunteer regularly when I'm back home.

And then we're back in the foyer and she invites me into her office for a cup of tea. Her office is small, but nicer than all the other rooms that we've seen. It has white walls with a few paintings: an autumnal scene, an ocean sunset, a forest.

'I like the outdoors,' she says, as if she needs to explain herself. I wonder if she sits at her desk and looks at the paintings, wishing she was somewhere else, not stuck looking after scores of children that aren't even hers. I wonder how she ended up as the director of an orphanage. For all I know, she's passionate about children.

A different thought occurs to me.

'Where *are* all the children?'

I suddenly realise that the desolate atmosphere isn't just the greyness and the oldness of the place. It's the silence, the lack of laughter, the lack of sound. Silence is fine in a normal house, but the orphanage has an unsettling, abandoned air to it.

'Most of them are at school,' Jie says. 'And the younger ones have naps at this time.'

Of course: it's 2 p.m. on a Thursday.

Jie settles herself into her wheely chair behind the wooden desk. It's empty save for a vase of white lilies.

'So, shall we have a talk? You said your mother was adopted from here.'

'Yes. I was wondering if you have her in your records.'

'We will. We've kept all our records of adoptions. What was your mother's name?'

'Is,' I correct. 'She's still alive. Her maiden name is Jessica Long, but Long is from her adoptive parents.'

Suddenly my questioning seems futile. How would Jie possibly trace her? I know nothing about my mother's origins except that she passed through here.

'What year was she adopted?'

'Nineteen sixty-one, I think?'

Jie moves to one of the great bookshelves and starts pulling out folders. Carrying a stack to her desk she starts looking through them.

'These are the babies from that year,' she explains. 'Your mother would be one of these.'

Jie moves her finger along the lines. There are so many lines. So many babies.

‘Here,’ she says. ‘Jessica, adopted and named by the Long family. This is your mother?’

‘Yes. I was wondering if you could tell me who her biological parents are.’

Despite my efforts to stay calm, I feel my voice rising, my heart beating faster.

‘Unfortunately, we don’t know the biological parents of any of the babies in this folder. They were all found babies.’

It takes a second for that to sink in.

‘What does that mean?’

I’m speaking too fast, my words coming out in a strangled hiss. My hands are fidgeting in my lap. My body doesn’t know what to do.

‘We have no way of tracing your mother’s biological parents.’ Jie’s voice is professional, gentle, as if that might make her meaning clearer.

Before I can process what I’ve just heard, the buzzer on the wall sounds.

‘Sorry, let me get that,’ Jie says. In the moment she’s distracted, I let myself feel the shock of disappointment like a bright flower.

‘It’s Celia,’ the muffled voice says through the intercom.

‘Come in.’ Jie presses the button and I can distantly hear the gate springing open.

A minute later, a girl appears in the doorway. She’s tall and slender, dressed in a short purple dress, black leather jacket and boots. Her face is heart shaped and her eyeliner is perfect. I think she’s Chinese. I think she’s beautiful.

‘Oh, hi.’ She looks surprised to see me.

‘Laura, this is Celia Xu,’ Jie says. ‘Celia’s mum was also adopted from here. Celia’s been volunteering with us for the last year. Maybe you two should talk.’

‘Hi,’ I say awkwardly. Celia looks like she should be working for a cool start-up or designer, not here. It seems surreal that someone as elegant as her could share a foundational life experience with me.

‘So, your mum was also adopted from here?’ Celia asks. I can feel her eyes looking me up and down, studying me.

I nod.

‘I’m part of a group for the children of adoptees. We meet monthly. Would you be interested in joining?’

‘Oh...I’m only here for a week,’ I respond. I’m disappointed. I had no idea things like that even existed. A group for the children of adoptees? I suddenly feel stupid for assuming that I was the only one going through something like this. Of *course* I’m not unique. There are seven billion people in the world. There’s probably a support group for anything I can imagine.

‘Oh.’ Celia seems to make a kind of judgement call. ‘Well, do you want to meet up? Get a drink or something?’

I know she means to talk, but her voice is alluring. It feels like she’s asking me out on a date.

‘Yes!’ I answer a little too enthusiastically. ‘I’m free tonight?’

‘Yeah, me too. Great, let me add you on Facebook.’

She hands me her phone with a flourish. I find myself and send a friend request, my fingers trembling.

‘Okay, well, I’ve got things to do, but I’ll see you later?’

‘See you later!’ I say, but she’s already out of the room.

Almost as soon as Celia’s gone, Jie turns her attention back to me.

‘Do you have any other questions for me?’

I can tell she wants to be done with this meeting so she can get back to work.

I thank her for her time and show myself out.

Out in the street I’m restless, hopping from foot to foot while I order an Uber. Something doesn’t quite sit right with me and the Crescent Moon Home only exacerbated that. The thing is: I had high hopes. I thought that visiting a Hong Kong orphanage would feel eye-opening. I thought it would give me some insight into Mum and her life, into my own history.

But I haven’t learned anything about Mum. She might have learned to crawl here, first cried here. But this isn’t where she became the person I know and love so much. This building has nothing to do with her now.

I feel like I should cry or something, because here we are at the end of a chapter that got cut off before it even got written. I blink heavily, waiting for the tears, but nothing comes. Maybe there never was anything. I never had a history on Mum’s side, and I never will.

And maybe that’s not the worst thing.

I think back to Henry telling me that maybe I should think more about other people rather than my identity issues. I think about the bare bedrooms,

the second-hand toys, all these children who don't have parents.

All these thoughts run through my head as I sit in the Uber on the way back to the hotel. All the stories that got me here, the theories about Mum's parentage, Ken's diary, my desperation to find out where I'm *really* from, they play back in my head like a sped-up film. These stories might be the backdrop to my life, but they don't determine who I become next.

Celia

Back in my room, I feel exhausted. I drop into bed and fall asleep almost immediately.

When I wake, my room is dark, the bed expansive. My stomach rumbles and I feel slightly faint. I find that I'm crunched in a ball, and as I extend my limbs they crackle painfully. I check my phone. It's 6.27 p.m., almost time to meet Celia.

I remind myself that I'm here to talk to her about adoption.

Rolling my shoulders I crick my neck and sit up. I swing my legs over the bed and move to the shower. Standing under the falling water I tilt my head back and let the heat flow over my skin. Long showers have always felt like the height of luxury to me, because Mum used to impose a five-minute shower rule with perilous consequences.

Now, I stand there for nearly half an hour. Feeling the water caress my body. Selfishly enjoying it and not feeling guilty.

When I finally emerge into the gleaming white bathroom, I catch my eye in the mirror. I stare at myself, refusing to let my eyes travel down my body. My eyes are black pools of nothingness and I look into them until everything starts to blur. Finally, I look away, almost embarrassed.

I sling a towel around my still-dripping body and leave the bathroom.

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The address Celia sent me is only a ten-minute walk from the hotel. I start threading through the busy streets, my coat swishing around my legs. Even though it's already dark, the streets are well lit by the streetlights. In New Zealand, at 7 p.m. on a Tuesday the streets would be quiet. Here, they're vibrant. Everyone I walk past seems vivid and alive, their clothing colourful and bright, their faces animated and moving. I feel like I'm on a mission.

Celia is leaning against a wall and scrolling on her phone when I arrive.

She looks gorgeous in a long silk dress that ripples when she moves. The moment I see her my neck goes hot. The reason I'm here suddenly seems questionable.

She pushes herself off the wall and moves to embrace me. Her touch makes my spine tingle.

'Laura.' Her voice is low and smoky, with a trace of a British accent. 'It's wonderful to finally meet you.'

'You too.' I try to stop staring at her, but she's really that magnetic.

'The bar is five minutes from here. It's a little difficult to find, which is why I suggested we meet here.'

She turns on her heel, leading me once again through the throngs of people.

As we walk, she talks quickly about growing up in the city, about how the streets and even the crowds feel like home to her. Although the air smells savoury due to the hawkers, the streets also feel clean and modern.

Everything is lit up. The space above street level is a cacophony of colour and light—neon billboards, shining office windows, bright shop spaces glowing golden. Finally, she pulls me out of the masses and down a narrow side street.

'Through here,' she says, pushing through a wooden door and climbing a steep set of stairs. At the top of the stairs, it's so dim I think the lights are off. But as my eyes adjust I spy thin yellow light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Each bulb hangs above a small round table. At the end of the long room, I can vaguely make out a bar, behind which is a shelf stacked with elegant glass bottles.

'I love this bar,' she tells me, settling herself at an empty table. 'I've been coming here since I arrived in Hong Kong.'

'How long have you been in Hong Kong? What do you do here?'

'This is my second year. I moved here to start up my own sustainable fashion line. I only volunteer at the orphanage once a week.'

Celia is one of the coolest people I've ever met. She's out here, living her dream. I suddenly feel hyper-aware of how little I've achieved in my life. Part of me wonders why I'm here, with this strange girl in a bar in Hong Kong. Another part of me feels that this is exactly where I'm meant to be.

'Should we order drinks?' she suggests, handing me the menu. I scan it just in time for a waiter to approach us and ask us what we want.

Our drinks arrive on a black tray: a martini for Celia, a gin and tonic for

me. I nod my thanks to the waiter, then turn my attention back to Celia. In the dim lighting, I can barely make out her features—just her dark mouth, her lined eyes.

‘So, your mum’s adopted,’ she says, marking the end of small talk.

‘We only found out this year.’

‘Was she one of the found babies?’

I tell her about Grandpa, Ken, Mum and Dad. I tell her about the adoption and my confusion about my race and identity. She’s easy to talk to. Celia understands what I’m talking about without me having to explain. She doesn’t feel like a stranger.

‘I’ve been so internally racist my whole life.’ I sigh. ‘I want to be *proud* of my roots. My sister is. But I hate being seen for my ethnicity.’

‘Oh, honey, I totally get what you’re talking about,’ she says, and I actually believe her. ‘I grew up in Manchester and I was one of the only Chinese kids in my class at school. There are heaps of Chinese people there now, of course, but there weren’t many at my school. It took me ages to embrace being Chinese, but now I love it. It’s something that makes me *interesting*. My history, even my mother’s adoption, these are things that make me the person I am today.’

It surprises me that she ever felt uncomfortable in her ethnicity. She’s so beautiful, seems so confident in her own skin. I remind myself that everybody has struggles under the surface.

‘Does being Chinese influence your work?’ I ask.

‘Of course. The clothes I design have traditional Chinese influences. I think Chinese culture is beautiful, so I want to incorporate that into my work. Does it influence yours? I’ve just realised I have no idea what work you do.’

I tell her about the gallery, about Ken’s journal, about writing Chinese New Zealand stories.

‘At first I resented having to write these stories just because of my heritage. But now it feels like a privilege to have stories that people want to hear.’

‘So you’ve turned your life into art. I respect that,’ Celia says, looking me straight in the eye. ‘I feel like people who’ve had complicated paths always find each other. It’s because we relate on some internal level. It’s the same with artists. Whether someone does fashion, music, writing, or whatever else, I always connect with artists.’

As she says that, she reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. I pull

mine away fast, slightly flustered.

‘So, did you always know your mum was adopted?’ I ask shakily, uncertain what I feel, what I want.

‘Always. Her parents told her when she was little. We still don’t know who her real parents are, though. She was also a found baby.’

‘Did you always know that?’

‘Her parents were always open about that with her. Why didn’t your grandparents tell your mum?’

I give her Grandpa’s spiel about wanting Mum to feel like part of the family, about wanting to feel like Mum was their real daughter.

‘Not that they treated her well,’ I finish, slightly bitter.

‘Family’s complicated.’ Celia looks sympathetic. ‘So, did you not get along with your grandparents, then?’

‘Not with my Grandma. She was really difficult. I loved my Grandpa, though. He actually passed away recently.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’ Celia looks at me, eyes wide. ‘I had no idea. Are you all right?’

‘It’s partially why I’m here,’ I explain. ‘He left me some money and I wanted to get away. And it made sense to come here. Find out what I could about my mother. Why doesn’t the Crescent Moon Home have a website?’

‘Jie’s terrible with technology.’ Celia laughs. ‘Actually, one of my future tasks is to set up a website. Over the years, heaps of adoptees and children of adoptees have come to the home. It would be so much easier if there were a website, wouldn’t it?’

‘It would,’ I agree. ‘Are you close to your grandparents?’

‘They both died years ago. But we were close. I did the same thing as you and only tried to find my biological grandparents once my adoptive grandparents had passed away. Of course, I got the same answer as you. But I’d moved to Hong Kong to start my line, so when the volunteering role popped up, I took it. It makes me feel good, knowing I’m helping kids in the same situation my mum was in.’

After a while, the conversation moves off our families. We order more drinks and I start to feel wonderful. Celia tells me about her ex-girlfriend and part of my heart leaps to know that she likes women. Nervously, I tell her about Henry, although I make sure to mention that I’m bisexual.

‘I know I should miss him, but I don’t,’ I confess. ‘He was such a good boyfriend, but it’s like my feelings for him just faded away.’

‘That can happen,’ Celia reassures me. ‘It was like that with Anna, my ex. Everything about our relationship was good, but I felt like we lost our spark.’

‘That’s *exactly* how it was for me!’

It feels good to talk about Henry. I didn’t tell my family about our break, because it seemed unimportant after everything with Grandpa.

I tell her about how Henry sometimes didn’t understand cultural things about my life. As opposed to just saying ‘of course he doesn’t’, like Max would, Celia engages with it.

‘I think as long as people try, they’re all right,’ she says. ‘You can’t expect people to be perfect. I’ve had a lot of white guys fetishise me for being Asian, but I’ve also dated white guys who didn’t really care about my ethnicity. Apologies if this is too much information, but recently I’ve been casually seeing quite a few people, mostly other Asians. The cool thing about dating other Asians is that they *get* it, you know?’

I’m stunned by her boldness. Her every syllable oozes sensuality.

‘I’ve never dated anyone Asian,’ I admit.

Suddenly, it feels like I’ve been missing out.

‘Maybe you should.’ Her eyes have a hint of flame in them. I’m trying to work out what she’s thinking when she reaches across the table a second time. This time I let her touch my palms with her fingertips. Her hand is alcohol warm, and I look up at her perfectly made-up face. Close up, her eyes are luminous pools. A shiver runs through me.

‘Do you want to hang out again?’ I blurt out. ‘I know I’m only here for a week, but talking with you seems to be exactly what I need right now...’ I’m sure I sound like an idiot. But she leans across the table and kisses my cheek.

‘I’d love that.’

Great Famine

The next morning, I wake up late. For a second, I forget where I am and think I'm in my flat in Grey Lynn. Then I remember the facts: I'm in Hong Kong, Grandpa's dead and I'll never know the story behind Mum's family. For a second I feel overwhelmed and heavy, and then I push it all to the back of my head. I need to process this, but right now I want to enjoy myself.

I stretch and get out of bed, dragging open the hotel curtains. Hong Kong's already in full swing, the roads packed with cars. Checking my phone, I find a text from Celia.

'It was so lovely to meet you last night! Come to the night markets tonight, there's someone I want you to meet,' it says. She then adds the kissing emoji and I wonder if she saw me as a conquest from the start. Confusingly, I don't mind if she did.

I reply immediately—'sounds good to me!'—and I add a heart-eyed cat.

Then I shower and get dressed, wondering what I'm going to do today. In a way, I feel free, knowing that there's no way to trace Mum's real parents. It feels good to know I've done everything I could have done. At the same time, though, I feel a bit empty, a bit lost. It's painful knowing that I've failed to do what I came to do, that the search ends here whether I wanted it to or not.

The day slips by as I walk the streets, wandering down cute alleyways and stopping to look inside shops that interest me.

In a gift store, I buy photographic postcards of Hong Kong at night. Afterwards, in a department store, I buy Mum a scarf, Dad a tie and Max a T-shirt that says 'Hong Kong Baby'.

For lunch, I have ramen in a Japanese restaurant. It's good, but not better than the best ramen in New Zealand.

In the afternoon, I take the metro to Hong Kong Park. Like the first day, I feel relaxed and free as I stroll around. I pause to spot birds in the aviary, walk around the Conservation Corner, then sit by the fountain in the Central Garden. I'm one of many tourists. They swarm around with their oversized

cameras and thick coats. It amuses me to know that I'm just like them.

At seven, I meet up with Celia outside the entrance to the Temple Street Night Market. Even though there's no occasion, it's crowded like the Lantern Festival back home. It's an almost overwhelming experience: different stalls play their own music and all the sounds mingle into an indeterminable noise. I can smell the sizzling noodles and sweet pancakes and steamed milk puddings. The savoury smoke is everywhere, making my eyes and mouth water.

I message Celia: 'are you far?'

But then I look up and she's right there. She's wearing a long purple coat and is accompanied by an older woman who looks about my mum's age.

'This is Tina,' Celia says, reaching across to touch my shoulder. 'We met through one of the adoptee reunion meetings I was telling you about. I was thinking about your story and your mum and how she was adopted from here. Tina knows a lot about adoption in Hong Kong, so I thought maybe you'd want to talk to her.'

It's getting dark quickly. Celia and Tina lead me through the throng of people, past the colourful fabrics and sparkling shoes and knock-off Gucci bags. They find us a plastic table on the edge of the food area and Celia leaves to find us something to eat.

'She's always been a determined young woman,' Tina says. I nod. It definitely seems like it.

'When was your mother born?' Tina asks me.

I tell her the early sixties. 'We don't know the exact date because of the adoption. But we always celebrate her birthday on the seventh of October.'

'Many adopted people don't know their actual birthdays,' Tina says. 'I don't know mine. But I celebrate it on the seventeenth of October. I was probably born around the same time as your mother. I know you've done some research into your personal family history, but have you done general research about the history of those years?'

I shake my head no. I didn't think to do that.

'Well, your mother's story is part of a larger story. It usually goes like that. There's a whole generation of us, babies abandoned at birth and adopted by western families. Do you know much about Chinese history?'

'A little bit, things that I learned at school,' I reply. 'I know about the major events, like the Opium Wars and the Cultural Revolution.'

'Well, this is related to the Great Famine. It followed Chairman Mao's

Great Leap Forward, his five-year plan to catapult China into modernity. He wanted to surpass the western countries in economic prosperity. The problem was Mao's methods. He enforced grand-scale collectivisation and industrialisation through a number of experiments. One of his ideas was to use manpower to kill sparrows, which he thought ate the crops. Of course, the sparrows actually ate the insects that ate the crops. After the sparrows were dead the crops were ravaged. Another of his ideas was for rural villagers to melt down all their steel in homemade steel mills. The steel it produced was low quality and worthless. These are just a couple of experiment examples. There was little expert input in any of them and most of them failed, leading to the Great Famine. Although China mostly kept it under wraps, up to sixty million people died.'

I stare at Tina, shocked. I can't believe that, as late as 1958, such a vast number of people could die without the world noticing. It was only a few years before my mother was born.

'That's horrible,' is all I can say. Tina nods.

'Mao lost power after that. The CCP demoted him and took away some of his influence. The Cultural Revolution was his last desperate grasp for power. And it worked. But how it relates to adoption is that many families fled mainland China to Hong Kong in the hope of building better lives. Many families arrived in Hong Kong and found conditions so harsh that they couldn't afford to feed their children. Many couples abandoned their babies in the hope that they would be adopted. A lot of girls in particular were abandoned. I was one of them. I was found outside a supermarket, in a basket wrapped in rags.'

'My mum was also one of them,' I say shakily.

I can't quite wrap my head around my mum being one of hundreds, thousands, of abandoned babies. It's a devastating image.

'They were left everywhere—on street corners, in stairwells, in public parks. Many of them were taken to orphanages. There were large orphanages set up by Hong Kong citizens and also missionaries. I was in one of the homes set up by missionaries. Many of the babies were then adopted by western families. Many went to the UK, like myself. I grew up in London.'

'What was that like?' I ask. I wonder how close her experience was to my mum's.

'It was what it was. I was adopted into a white family. They adopted three of us over three years, so I have two siblings in the same boat as me. I'm

grateful they did that, because it meant we were never alone in our experiences. Apart from that, though, our parents didn't really do anything to connect us to Hong Kong or Chinese culture. We grew up like every other kid in London, in a time when there was still quite a lot of racism.'

'Isn't there still quite a lot?'

'Well, yes. But it's not as bad as it used to be.'

Celia arrives back at the table with a tray stacked with dishes. She's got some of everything: sizzling noodles, eggplant curry, a fish soup, stewed vegetables. It smells incredible and my stomach rumbles. We start lifting plates off the tray, arranging them around the table along with our individual bowls and spoons.

Tina continues to tell me about growing up in the UK, Celia sometimes interjecting with her own experiences. They tell me more about the first time they met.

'We met about a year ago,' Tina adds.

'And we see each other every month or so at meetings,' Celia adds.

'There's something special about meeting other adoptees or children of adoptees,' Tina says. 'That shared experience makes me feel instantly closer to people. It's hard to explain to people with no connection to that.'

It's incredible. Not only is Mum part of a wider historical movement, but there are also whole communities of people like her.

After we've finished eating, Tina says she'd better head off because she has work tomorrow. I realise I don't know what she does, because we never talked about her life now. She gives me her email and hugs me before leaving.

'It was lovely meeting you, Laura,' she says warmly. 'Feel free to contact me if you have any more questions.'

And just like that she's gone, her black coat disappearing into the throng of people, the information she told me still searing my brain.

'Guess it's just us then,' Celia says, and I swear her voice drops an octave. 'Want to go somewhere?'

She takes my hand and leads me through the crowd, out of the market, into the quiet street. Once we're by ourselves, I half expect her to drop my hand, but she doesn't.

'Where are we going?' I ask.

'Wait and see.'

We walk in the dark, Celia telling me stories about when she first arrived

in Hong Kong.

After about twenty minutes, we arrive at a high-rise building.

‘Through here,’ Celia says, leading me through the foyer towards the lift. She presses the button for level twenty and we stand hand-in-hand in the silence as we shoot upwards.

When we reach the top, we step out into a hallway.

‘Through here.’

We walk through a door and suddenly we’re standing on a rooftop garden, the whole space filled with sculpted flower bushes and velvet lawns, a silver fountain rising in the very middle.

Celia pulls me across the lawn. Fairy lights are strung in lines above our heads and the city sparkles in front of us. The whole ambience is making me dizzy.

‘This place is beautiful,’ I say.

‘You’re beautiful.’ Celia gazes at me, her eyes electric.

This whole moment doesn’t even feel real. Even if Celia is a modern, sexually liberated woman, I still can’t believe that she could like *me*. She’s done everything I haven’t yet achieved. She’s moved countries by herself, she’s a business owner, she’s unbelievably attractive. And she’s *charitable*, volunteering at the orphanage her mother lived in. I want to be that good.

‘You have a drive to you that’s interesting,’ Celia tells me. ‘You know what you want and you go after it. That takes guts. *And* you’re a writer.’

She takes a step closer to me and my entire body sparkles.

‘Is this okay?’ she whispers, leaning in.

I nod, and then her lips are on mine and I feel like I’m dissolving into glitter.

She takes me back to her apartment. It’s small but comfortable, little Totoro and Pokémon figurines and pot plants covering every surface. The figurines make me feel instantly at home, because I have them in my room too.

While I put my bag down, Celia moves to a record player in the corner and starts playing Japanese Breakfast, another artist both Max and I like. In lots of ways, Celia is like Max, but without any of the judgement. Celia is ahead of me in life, but doesn’t remind me of it.

‘Do you want anything else to drink?’ she asks, and I shake my head no. My body is ready to spill over.

‘Can I see your room?’ I ask, and Celia grins.

‘Through here.’

We walk down the tiny corridor and go into her room. It’s tiny, most of the space taken up by a queen-sized bed. Celia flicks a switch and lanterns hanging from the ceiling turn on, lighting the whole room with a soft, rosy glow. We can still hear the record player from the lounge, but it’s fainter, fuzzier. I look at Celia and my heart catches in my throat. It’s almost embarrassing: she’s turned me on and she hasn’t even touched me yet.

‘Come here.’ Celia stretches out her arms to me and I go right into them, her lips crashing against my neck. She pulls me onto the bed so we’re lying side by side, our fingers scrabbling against each other’s clothes.

She runs her hands under my shirt and it feels so good I roll my eyes back into my head.

‘That’s good,’ I murmur and I feel her fingers stiffen.

‘Is it?’

She moves her hands across my chest. Her fingers are warm, deliberate.

‘How about that?’

Breathless, my fingers comb through her hair, pushing her head forward so I can kiss her cheeks, her jaw, her collarbone. I want as much of her against me as possible. I want her to consume me whole. Celia starts to pull at my shirt so I lift my arms up. I do the same for her, and soon we’re naked, limbs melding, chests burning.

‘You’re so beautiful,’ Celia whispers, moving so she’s on top of me.

I look into her eyes and fall in love just like that.

The Girl on the Swim Team

When I fell in love for the first time, I couldn't believe it wasn't exaggerated. It was as sweeping, consuming and heart-wrenching as all the songs made it out to be.

Max had already fallen in love several times, obviously. She had her first girlfriend when she was twelve and they would make out whenever Mum wasn't in the room. At fourteen I was squeamish and uncomfortable with their showiness.

'Being in love is like having a personal sun.' Max sighed.

'You're so dramatic,' I replied.

I told myself I was being pragmatic. Real love couldn't realistically be trilling trumpets and boomboxes on the lawn, endless sunsets and swelling violins. Art magnifies life, after all, and I was prepared for something muted, something steady.

But when I met Sonya it suddenly felt like the stories were understated.

Sonya was nothing like Celia, nothing like Henry. She had green eyes, white-bleached hair, soft thighs. When she smiled I couldn't look away.

I was seventeen. I already knew I was bisexual, but always assumed that my first partner would be a boyfriend. Because that's how the stories go. I wanted a boyfriend to spin me around and lift me up, put his arm around me protectively and buy me food. The heteronormativity in me meant I didn't know what to fantasise about with girls. Who would sit on whose knee? How would we operate?

Sonya was from Taranaki. She was new to the school and joined my swim team. It turned out she was faster than me, faster than anyone else. I watched her strong shoulders power through the water, watched the force with which she pushed off against the wall. I wanted her to hug me too tight.

From year 11, our swim team had parties with teams from other schools. As I didn't go out much, these parties were important to me. I would spend an age getting ready, beg Max to curl my hair and fix my make-up. Lots of

the girls in my team used the parties to meet boys, and some of them already had swimmer boyfriends. Every time I went, I kept my eyes open in the hope that I might meet someone. The boys never seemed to notice I was there, always looking over me at someone taller and blonder.

Sonya was tall and blonde, but *she* noticed me. When I walked in she approached me with her big smile, complimenting my make-up, my outfit.

She was wearing a tie-dyed crop top, high-waisted shorts and dark lipstick. I thought she looked stunning and I said so.

Somehow, we ended up spending the whole evening together. We talked about music in the kitchen, played beer pong on the same team, and ended up sitting on the stairs and talking about our dreams. By the end of the night I knew a new, devouring kind of love. I couldn't sleep, because I couldn't stop thinking about her—her smile like a wave breaking, her voice like a song.

The next day, we sat at the base of One Tree Hill under the afternoon summer sun. We held our ice-cream cones and watched the kids on bikes, the runners braving the heat. The ease between us at the party had disappeared, replaced by a supreme awkwardness.

'So...do you like Auckland?' I asked, hardly looking at her.

'I mean, yeah, it's cool. I miss Taranaki, though,' Sonya replied.

She was focused straight ahead.

We lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. I didn't know what had gone wrong.

I was with a girl I liked so much, and I was pretty sure she liked me, but I had no idea what to do. Should I make a move? What if she didn't actually reciprocate and it was all in my head? What would I do then?

I didn't say anything, paralysed by all the potential disasters in my head.

Finally, she broke the silence.

'This might sound forward. But do you want to be my girlfriend?'

I wasn't sure I heard her right. She really said it just like that. Something like an explosion went off in my chest, my head felt like it was spinning away and there was golden-green light everywhere. I couldn't stop smiling if I tried.

Tour

I see Celia every day for the rest of my trip.

‘What about your work?’ I ask her. I don’t want to get in the way of her life.

‘I’m my own boss, I can do what I want,’ she insists, curling her lip.

It’s an idyllic week, a hiatus from the ordinariness of my days in Auckland. Every morning we lie curled in Celia’s bed, kissing beneath her pink lanterns for hours.

The sex is different to how it was with Henry. With him it felt safe, lovely. With Celia it feels like a secret, a gift. With our faces dappled by sunlight, our naked bodies half covered by her duvet, I feel like we exist in a Wong Kar-wai film. Even without talking, the intimacy between us is so acute. It makes every millisecond visceral, important.

And for the first time in my life, I’m capable of being fully seen. In broad daylight I let her study every inch of my body, drinking me in with her eyes. Her gaze is like touch, and her certainty that I’m beautiful makes it true. I’m in love, and I know this isn’t a love that will last, but I don’t care. It’s a love that cuts right through me, the kind of new and exciting I didn’t realise I needed.

These days with Celia are so far from what I expected from this trip. Not that I had any real plans apart from visiting the orphanage. I guess I hoped I would see the city my mum was from and feel some kind of connection with the place. Instead I formed a connection with a person. In a way, it’s the best thing I could have done.

Being with Celia makes me feel almost at home in Hong Kong. Her apartment feels like a haven. In her room, I’m far, far away from my grieving family, my search for my biological grandparents, my confused feelings about Henry, my search for where I’m from. In Celia’s room, I get to be in the moment.

On my last night in Hong Kong, Celia takes me to a club called Tigerflower. We walk through the city to get there. I haven't been in this part of the city before at night. It's a rush. Everything buzzes with life—the fast cars, the omnipresent neon signs, the crowds. The highways stretch flexibly around a city that is always moving, the office buildings forever alight, the shops open until the early hours of the morning. Tourists mill amid the locals, and everybody is dressed up. In a single street I can see everything from Adidas and Nike, to fake Cartier and real Louis Vuitton, to op-shop jeans and knock-off Crocs.

When we arrive at Tigerflower, it's like the streets on steroids. The dance floor is a mass of sweaty bodies pressed up against each other, a roving, fleshy monster. The lights flash on and off, hot and fluorescent and blinding. Most of the girls are in clubbing clothes—tight skirts and singlets, bralettes and hoop earrings and perfect make-up. I'm in Celia's clothes and at first I felt uncomfortable in her tight red top, black skirt, knee-high boots and dark lipstick, but as the night wears on I loosen up. Everybody is dressed like me.

For so long I thought that white girls were the epitome of beauty. They were the ones on the covers of magazines, the film stars. Now, I'm seeing beautiful Asian girls and thinking I was wrong. I'm seeing long legs, collarbones, perfect skin, heart-shaped faces, and eyelashes long enough to poke eyes during kisses. These girls are stunning and I shock myself by wanting to kiss all of them. Maybe Celia's rubbing off on me more than I thought.

Pretty Asian girls are almost worse than white girls, because with white girls I can blame race if I'm not as pretty as them. With Asian girls, there isn't an excuse.

I voice this feeling to Celia, who brushes it off.

'What are you talking about, you look incredible!' She rolls her eyes and pulls me in for a kiss. 'Come on.' She grabs my hand and pulls me to one of the bars.

At the bar, I notice several different guys look our way. They're Asian, attractive, expensively dressed. Not the kind of guys I would have gone for before. One of them slides along the bar.

'Can I buy you a drink?' he offers.

'No, thank you,' I reply. 'I'm here with someone.'

I used to feel awkward when an attractive man talked to me. Now, in these clothes, in this club, I feel deserving of their glances.

‘That’s a shame,’ he says. ‘If you change your mind, I’m Callum.’ He extends a hand.

‘Laura,’ I reply. I roll my eyes, ignoring his hand. He disappears into the crowd. I watch him go.

‘Was he flirting with you?’ Celia appears behind me and hands me a drink. We head to the balcony, where we lean against the cool glass. She entangles her fingers in mine and we sip our gin and tonics.

I look at her. For a moment, Celia appears almost other-worldly. She’s wearing a tight black dress and heels and looks like somebody who knows what she wants. Once again, I think I want to be her.

But then I catch a glimpse of us in the mirror, surprised to see that I look amazing. The singlet is flattering, cutting cleanly under the armpits, emphasising my chest. My skirt flares out, making my legs look long. The boots make my calves, forever my insecurity, look defined and strong.

‘I look like a different person,’ I whisper.

‘No, you don’t,’ Celia says. ‘You’ve always looked like this.’

My cheeks are flushed with alcohol, my eyes huge, shiny, my mouth a dark bird. I can’t stop looking at myself. I can’t stop smiling.

Little Lights

The flight home is anticlimactic. Even though I'd told myself I wasn't expecting much from this trip, I hadn't been able to keep myself from hoping that I'd be sitting here, seven days later, infinitely more full than before.

Instead, I feel empty and defeated by history, by the things I'll never know. I feel heady and hedonistic, my lips still swollen from Celia.

I thought that visiting Hong Kong, the orphanage, would feel eye-opening. I thought it would give me some insight into Mum and her life, into my own history.

But I haven't learned anything about Mum's biological parents except that I'll never find them. This city has nothing to do with me now.

And for the first time, whether or not I'm Chinese seems entirely irrelevant. This isn't the outcome I was expecting.

I know I won't see Celia again. She dropped me off at the airport and kissed me goodbye, and there was an air of finality to it.

'Keep in touch,' she whispered, but even then I knew she wouldn't. She's too spontaneous, too busy, too beautiful. Her life will move on as soon as I'm gone.

And to be honest, I don't know if I'd want to see her again. What we had was too perfect to recreate. It was exactly what I needed. A reminder that even when terrible things happen, we're still capable of loving again and again.

For long minutes, I sit and stare out the window. The sun sets in the distance, sinking below the clouds so I can't see it any more. Slowly, the sky fades to black.

What did I think would happen when I went to Hong Kong? I'd like to think I expected nothing, but the dreamer in me absolutely expected a fairytale reunion, for everything to be exactly how I wanted it to be.

Now, I feel like the fairytales are fading to black. No more theories. No more imagined stories of where I came from. Now, I'm just going to live.

I love planes in the middle of the night, the hours when everybody else is sleeping and the air glows. The main lights are off, but tubes of pink light run along the ceiling, casting a fantastical ambience. Little lights line the pathways as if we're in a theatre. Sometimes I stand up in my seat and look at the rows upon rows of people. Some screens are lit up, hundreds of people watching other people fall in love, have adventures, be murdered brutally. Other screens are black, the seat occupants lost in their own dreams.

Sometimes I climb over whoever's next to me and walk around the plane, take the opportunity to use the bathroom.

When I was little, I was scared to flush the toilet on the plane. It's loud and aggressive like a slap to the face. I used to press the button and then shove my fists in my ears, squeeze my eyes tight. Even now, I flush and then steel myself for that sudden sucking sound that means my bodily waste is being taken to some storage facility under the sleeping humans.

I used to imagine the waste just being dropped into the open air, falling at crazy speeds through the atmosphere to somewhere unknown below.

I don't sleep for the whole flight. Some energy keeps me awake, flicking through the movie options, walking around the plane. I finish reading the paperback copy of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong I bought at the airport. There are still five hours left to go. None of the films hold my attention beyond the twenty-minute mark.

When there are three hours to go, the main lights come back on. The air stewards start moving around the cabin with their trolleys, smiling and offering beverages. The intercom tells us the breakfast options: egg and sausage and baked beans, or the 'continental option', which is muesli. Both options come with yoghurt and fruit salad. I opt for the eggs. When I peel back the foil cover, the eggs look like they were made from powder, which they probably were.

For the last two hours of the flight I listen to Samia through headphones and stare out the window. The sky's just beginning to lighten. It's in that blank space before the colours start to creep in.

I get through security relatively quickly. When I walk through the sliding

doors into the arrivals hall, I almost instantly spot my parents. Dad's wearing his favourite blue checked shirt and Mum's waving and smiling. I pick up the pace, walking fast to them, and immediately enfold myself in Mum's hug. She nuzzles my hair, kisses my cheek.

'So happy to see you,' she whispers in my ear. I feel like crying.

'I missed you,' I tell her and she hugs me tighter, holding me for a long moment before releasing me.

I wheel my bags out of the airport towards the red car in the car park. Dad puts them in the boot and I slide into the back seat.

The plan was for us to go out for lunch and then back to my flat, but I ask if we can skip lunch.

'Aren't you hungry?' Mum asks, and I shake my head.

'Just tired. I didn't sleep on the plane.'

'Okay, we'll take you home then,' she says. 'We can get lunch another day.'

When we pull into my driveway, I feel a sense of relief. I step out of the car and immediately walk to the tree next to the letterbox. It's some kind of conifer, I'm not sure which, with dark, evergreen branches. I always take the leaves and crush them between my fingers, hold them to my nose.

They smell like home. Clean and musky, they always fill me with a certain relief. It's the same when I inhale New Zealand air again after being away. You can only really taste the air when you first arrive somewhere. It can tell you a lot about a place. Hints of smoke or spice, gravel, rain, or trees. After less than a day, it stops tasting new. It becomes mere air again—just necessary, nothing noticeable.

But I love that moment upon returning home, the first time I truly breathe deep.

BACKWATERS

Part XV—The End, for Now

Life changed for Ken when Fen and their daughter arrived in New Zealand.

Part of him was worried that they wouldn't like it, that they would miss home too much. He was worried that he would feel uncomfortable being around them all the time. He was so used to being alone. But when he stood on the pier and watched the boat draw closer, he felt a thrill. He would have his family with him at last.

He was especially excited to meet his daughter. She was ten now—young enough to grow up in New Zealand, old enough to have been from somewhere else. Through letters, they had decided on both a Chinese and an English name for her. Her Chinese name was Chyou, which meant 'autumn'. Her English name was Lily. Ken chose it for the wild lilies that grew around the gardens, the simple beauty that made him miss his wife.

Ken was nervous about taking Fen and Lily to their new home. It was a far cry from the tiny hut he'd lived in when he first arrived in New Zealand, but it was still very different to the houses in China.

He needn't have worried. Fen's face glowed when she stood with Ken at the threshold, and he took her hand in his. It was a relief being together again. Time had passed, but they would never need to be separated again. Ken took Fen for long walks whenever they had a spare moment, giving her the chance to explore her new world. Fen wanted to see everything and she made Ken look at the land with new eyes. They would stand at the tops of mountains where the country lay beneath them in green and gold.

It was more difficult with Lily. Ken was awkward with her, uncertain how to behave around a daughter. In the end, he was polite but distant. She stayed quiet around him and they never grew close.

Ken was relieved that his wife adjusted so quickly to life in New Zealand. Later, he realised he should have known. She was smart and resourceful, and soon it was as if she had never lived anywhere else. Her bare feet seemed to sink into the earth as she pulled up potatoes and kumara, as she learned how to cook with local produce.

She worked hard to adapt to New Zealand life. She practised her English, writing words in a little notebook she carried around with her. Ken had bought a shop in town and Fen worked there, speaking English to their customers.

Fen was more pragmatic than Ken. She believed that there was no time for playing when bills had to be paid. She dedicated every moment of her life to achieving success, determined that her family would flourish. That meant she never took a break, that she worked every moment she could. She organised the shop faultlessly, looked after her daughter and husband and house, calculated how to maximise profit and minimise waste.

Lily was expected to work just as hard. Although she was enrolled in school, she only got to attend when the shop wasn't too busy. More often than not, she was kept back from school, instead made to sort through lemons, apples, carrots. She resented it, but she didn't have a choice.

And it wasn't that Lily particularly liked school. She wasn't fast at learning and the other students weren't that nice to her. They treated her like she had some kind of disease. But Lily recognised that school was an opportunity, and her mother was keeping her from it. She harboured a resentment towards her mother that would last her entire life.

Things did not improve for Lily when her parents' second child, Oliver, was born. Three years after

her arrival in New Zealand, Lily became Oliver's second mother. Determined not to stop working, Fen kept Oliver in the back of the shop, breastfeeding him when he cried, trying to keep him quiet the rest of the time. Lily was made responsible for the family meals and the cleaning. Her job was to ease Fen's burden. She had to look after Oliver whenever Fen could not. This was the unofficial end of Lily's education, although it was assumed that one day Oliver would go to school.

Faced with her baby brother, Lily had mixed feelings. On one level, she blamed him for the loss of her own future, but she also knew it wasn't Oliver's fault. He was so small. Against her wiser judgement, she loved him.

When Lily was nineteen, Fen arranged for her to marry a local Chinese boy who could take over Ken's gardens after Ken retired. Lily did not love him, but felt she had no choice.

Lily's first child was Benjamin, my grandpa. He was born when Lily was twenty. By that time, Ken and Fen's fruit and vegetable shop was established and successful. Fen was a respected woman in the community and Lily an efficient, if quiet, shop manager. Benjamin was also raised in the back of the shop. He played with cauliflowers and potatoes instead of toys. Two years after he was born, Sophia arrived. Another two years and Paul was born.

By now, Ken was in his sixties. He shifted his share of the work to Lily's husband and hired more men to tend the gardens, arrange deliveries and plant crops. With his newfound freedom, he then attempted to spend time with his grandchildren. He didn't really know how. But on weekends he liked to take them for strolls in the gardens. He was thorough, taught them the names of each fruit, of each vegetable. He wanted them to understand that this was their livelihood, their inheritance.

'All the earth, all this that can grow—this is what sustains you,' he told them, and they nodded and understood. My grandfather, especially, understood. He felt the soil humming beneath the soles of his feet. He felt at home in the garden. He whispered to the onions, the turnips. He told them all his secrets.

My grandfather continued to grow up with the gardens, with the fruit and vegetable shop at the forefront of his life. He went to school, but often stayed back to help out in the gardens or in the shop. When his father retired, my grandfather took over the gardens. His brother went on to university and became a businessman. His sister met a customer through the shop. She married him and moved to Auckland.

Grandpa was set up with Grandma. They stayed down south for the next few years until they too decided to move to Auckland. They sold the house and gardens, bought a house in Grey Lynn, a new fruit and vegetable shop.

They started trying for children and eventually adopted a daughter, my mother.

Happy Now?

On my second morning back, I go to work. Sitting at my desk in the same little open-plan office, it's like I never left. Henry isn't here, but I'm fine with that. I'm not ready to see him yet.

My inbox is full, so I spend my morning going through emails and triaging my work.

Tracy calls me into her office and gives me a pile of tasks—I have to organise a speaker event for next week, help pack down an exhibition and contact several artists for commissions.

'Where's Henry?' I ask her.

'He's not well,' she says. I can't help wondering if he's really sick or just avoiding me. Suddenly, I want to tell him everything that happened in Hong Kong. He probably won't like all of it, but at least I can tell him.

I'm about to walk out of her office when Tracy asks, 'Are you nearly finished with the stories?'

'Nearly.'

Back at my desk I text Henry: 'Heard you're not well. You okay?'

He replies almost instantly: 'Yeah, just a bit of a cold. Do you want to catch up?'

We make plans to get dinner the next day. The thought of seeing him again makes my stomach churn and I can't quite ground myself. I have no idea how I'm going to feel. I really did love him. Is that going to come back? Does he still love me? I've barely thought about him for the last few weeks. The memory of his hands on my skin disappeared the second Celia touched me.

My phone rings and I answer without checking the name.

'Why the fuck haven't you called me?'

Max. Her voice floods over me.

'Hey! Sorry. I haven't had the chance. I was going to try you tonight.'

'Right, of course. I don't not believe you at *all*.'

'I was!'

‘What are you doing tonight?’ She sounds strangely desperate.

‘Nothing planned,’ I reply, surprised.

‘Zool Zool and Casa del Gelato?’

‘Done. Six-thirty?’

‘Yup. Just us two, all right?’

‘All right,’ I say. ‘Hey, Max?’

‘What?’

‘Missed you.’

‘I missed you too.’

She hangs up and the dead phone feels cold against my ear. A lot can happen in a week. I wonder what’s happening in Max’s life. Normally, I can’t keep up. This time, I’m the one with news. She’ll want to hear everything about Celia.

The rest of the day moves past. It’s all so ordinary, even the passage of time. When I’m working, the minutes flatten, grow identical in their monotony. So different from time spent on holiday, time spent prioritising pleasure. My week in Hong Kong felt far, far longer than a week spent at work. For a moment, I really want to be rich so I can spend half my life travelling.

At quarter past six I drive to Mount Eden. It’s always a bit difficult to find a park, but I nab a space in one of the side streets. Leaving my car, I appreciate the evening light. In Hong Kong, everything would be dark by now. Here, the world is smoothly lit in blue and peach.

‘L!’

I hear Max before I see her. She runs up to me and pulls me into a tight hug. Then she’s crying, heaving heavy sobs right into my chest. We stand like that for a few minutes, me rubbing her back.

‘What’s up?’ I ask eventually.

She pulls away from me and I realise she doesn’t look anything like her normal self. She’s wearing trackpants and an old school hoodie, her face bare. She looks strangely young and I feel myself softening towards her. This moment is reminding me of when we were little and she used to come to me for help. Before she came out and found her own style and stopped needing me. For the first time in a long time, I feel like her older sister.

‘What happened?’

Wordlessly, she leads me into Zool Zool and sits down. Then she tells me. She and Isabelle broke up. It was a long time coming. Apparently they’d

been fighting all the time, unable to agree on little things. Isabelle felt like Max was too focused on aesthetics. Max felt like Isabelle wasn't putting herself out there enough. It was mutual, but it was heartbreaking.

'Max!' I reach out and grab her hand, cupping it between mine. 'Why didn't you tell me? You could have messaged. Or called. I'd have been there.'

'I didn't want to ruin your holiday. You were so burned out before you went. I thought you and Henry were having problems.'

'Yeah, actually, we took a break before I left.'

She lurches away from me.

'What?'

'Yeah.'

'Why didn't *you* say anything?' She looks shocked. 'I thought you would have.'

'It didn't feel important after Grandpa. And anyway, it's not like you and Isabelle. I wasn't heartbroken. Actually, I really wanted space.'

'And how about now?'

Her tears have dried, rimming her eyes in red. It looks strangely cool with her blue hair.

'Are you feeling better enough for me to tell you about Hong Kong? If you're not, it can wait.'

'No, tell me now! I want to hear all about it. It'll distract me anyway.' She peers at me curiously.

'Well, I've got a *lot* to catch you up on.'

For the next hour, I tell her about Hong Kong and Celia and the orphanage. I tell her about how Celia seemed so together, effortless and beautiful. I tell her that I'm no longer desperate for answers about our heritage and identity.

'I realised it's not as important as family and who we choose to be,' I conclude.

'But...would you say you're Chinese now?'

Her eyes are mischievous. At the end of the day, she's always wanted me to be proud.

'You know what? Sure. I'll say I'm Chinese. Happy now?'

Splinters

The next day passes so quickly I barely notice it. The entire time I'm working, all I can think about is that I'm seeing Henry soon, I'm seeing Henry soon and I still don't know what I'm going to say.

At lunchtime, I sit outside under the pōhutukawa. It's not the same without him. I can almost see him sitting in the sunlight, his face upturned. He would be making some kind of joke and I would be laughing. This is why they say not to date your colleagues. A certain wistfulness expands in my chest and stays there all afternoon while I'm sorting files, sending emails and talking on the phone with the caterer.

Five o'clock rolls around and I pick up my bag.

'Laura!'

I sigh.

'Hi, Tracy.'

'Before you go, can you call Josie and confirm the timing of the next exhibition?'

'Sure thing.'

I make the call, keeping my words as concise as possible. I can't wait to leave.

Finally, it's done, everything's done, and I'm out the door. My legs feel pent up with energy and I'm walking faster than normal.

Two train stops later, I'm in Newmarket walking down Teed Street. Henry wanted to meet at the Candy Shop, one of our favourite European–Asian fusion restaurants.

And then I see him. He's wearing black jeans and a white T-shirt with a vintage *New Yorker* cartoon on the front. His hair is messy and there are bags under his eyes, but he's still beautiful.

'Hi.' His voice is balanced, reserved, with a hint of hope.

'Hi.'

I take a step forwards so we're face to face. He raises his arms—a question

—and before he can second-guess it I hug him. Hesitantly at first, and then confidently, he hugs me back.

Neither of us moves for a long time. At last, I step back.

‘It’s good to see you.’

‘You too.’

He looks me in the eye and my chest splinters.

‘Should we go inside?’

We go in and the waiter directs us to a square table at the side of the restaurant.

‘I missed you,’ he starts. I’m surprised he’s being so direct, but the vibe between us has shifted. ‘How was Hong Kong?’

I tell him honestly. About loving the space and the freedom. About visiting the orphanage, about my dead-end search for Mum’s biological parents. Although I’m nervous about it, I tell him about Celia. It would be wrong to leave her out. His eyes look pained when I tell him that I fell in love with her, but he stays silent.

When I’m done, there’s a long pause.

‘That’s...a lot.’

‘I know. I’m sorry. I wasn’t sure if I should even tell you about Celia, but it felt wrong not to.’

Henry sighs.

‘I don’t care what you did in Hong Kong. I just want to know what that means for me. I still love you, Laura.’

Unconsciously, I squeeze my eyes shut. I wasn’t even sure what I wanted until this very moment and now I know, and it hurts.

‘I still love you,’ I say cautiously. ‘You’re an amazing person and it was a privilege to love you. But I can’t be with you right now. Too much has changed for me and I need more space to work out who I am.’

‘And space to experiment with other people? Like Celia?’

His tone is tinged with something, I’m unsure what.

‘That too. I don’t think I ever felt truly comfortable with myself and my sexuality before. And now I do.’

His gaze pierces me then, and I feel his deep sadness.

‘Can I kiss you one last time?’ he asks.

I nod.

Mum's Story, the Unedited Version

The truth is, her father might have been a pirate. Or a wealthy young man with a bright future. He might have been a painter or poet or some other dreamer who couldn't afford to care for her. Her father might have already been a father to too many children, have had too many mouths to feed. He might have died before she was born, or left, never even willing to become a father.

Her mother too could have been anyone. She might have been some bartender's daughter, only sixteen when a baby entered her world. She might have been too poor, or too scared, to raise a child alone. She might have died after giving birth. She might have fought to keep her baby, but lost her to a cruel world.

And maybe I've spent too much time thinking about this.

All along I've imagined them as forgivable people. That my grandparents were young and afraid, unsure what to do, ambitious and hopeful for a future.

But then I imagined my grandparents as a great love story. Or at least as something worth telling. Maybe they weren't.

Maybe they were just a one-night stand. Maybe her parents were strangers who slept together then left each other, and a baby was the unwanted remnant.

Or maybe her mother was unwell and didn't know how to deal with the pregnancy.

Or maybe it was some act of violence that the world wouldn't want to hear.

There are a million stories that could be true, that could be the beginning of the parts of a story that we know.

We'll never know the truth.

I wish it were different. I wish I could give my mum a story that could slowly fill in the gaps of her life, explaining exactly how she came to be who

she is. How she became my mother.

But then again, it's only the moment of her conception and the first months of her life that are missing. In the scheme of things, that's not much. Not now, when she's an adult with a husband and two children.

Maybe the only story I really needed to tell was the one she actually lived.

She grew up as the only child of two parents who never loved her properly. She left them as soon as possible and went to university, where she studied business, determined to be successful on her own terms. She made friends, and travelled, and one day she met a boy in a bar.

Maybe that's all I ever needed to know.

Fleeting Dreams

I'm tired. It's two in the morning, and I can't sleep. My body feels like a stone, but my mind won't quieten. It's planning and arranging, rewording paragraphs I've already rewritten ten times.

I lie there, eyes wide open, for at least an hour before I give up on the pretence of sleep. I go to my desk and sit down, opening my laptop. Blue light washes across my face. I feel the corners of my eyes twitch.

I've been home for five weeks now. Hong Kong feels like a fleeting dream. Everything here feels friendly and routine, as if I never left. In the mornings, I go swimming before work, arriving at the gallery with wet hair. I meal-prep lunches on Sundays and Wednesdays so I only eat the same thing three days in a row. At night I cook dinner with Ashley, watch movies with Max and write.

Time is strange. It slows and stretches, changing constantly. Hong Kong passed like a night. I blinked and it was gone. And yet, in a way, Hong Kong captured me for a tiny lifetime. In an alternate universe, Celia and I are still spending gentle mornings in her bed, letting the sun paint our naked bodies.

Now, I spend my Saturday mornings writing all my feelings down, a journal to go alongside Ken's story. After all of this, I want to know exactly what I've learned.

Mum and Dad have organised the sale of Grandpa's house. When they told me, it felt like a punch in the gut. Even now, I spend long moments reminiscing about all the hours spent sitting around that round wooden table, all the hours in the garden. Grandpa's garden. I visualise him carefully pulling weeds out from around the cabbages, the lettuces. He would be happy that we're selling the house. He wouldn't want us to hold onto something for purely sentimental value. And that's what it would be—the house is standing empty. Other people should inhabit that house, give it new memories.

One day I'll walk past the house and look inside the windows and see strangers. They won't know what their house meant to me.

When I asked my parents how long the sale would take, they said maybe a couple of months. They've already organised a meeting with a real-estate agent, already spent a weekend sorting through his things. Grandpa left us everything. Mum and Dad said that Max and I should take what we want—everything else will be sold or donated.

I haven't been back to the house since my return from Hong Kong. Mum and Dad say I have to go and look within the week so that they can start arranging things. I'm just grateful they're not asking me to help clean up. The thought of going through Grandpa's clothes and personal objects makes me feel ill. I suggested that we donate some of his books and clothes to the SHS. That's what we did with some of Grandma's things.

On Thursdays, I go to the Collective art sessions. After chatting with everyone, I usually get some work done there. There's something nice about making art with other people. I used to think writing was this solitary thing, but sharing the dream is better.

Since I've come back from Hong Kong, Kasey and Abi have become two of my closest friends. Before the meet-ups, we go for ramen or pho and talk about our lives. They were excited to hear about Celia, but they're mostly happy that I'm more comfortable in myself and my identity.

On Sunday afternoons, I help out at a local women's shelter. I saw a poster in Countdown and texted the number. Someone replied that very night. My general task is helping with the donations and supplies, but I'm also encouraged to spend time getting to know the women and providing friendly company. I've become close with an old grandmother named Doreen. Whenever I arrive, she shouts 'Laura!' and gives me this beautiful smile. Making her happy is one of the highlights of my week. She adores jewellery, so I pick up little bracelets and necklaces for her from op-shops whenever I see them. She puts them on without taking off the old ones. By now, she's so layered with beads and gems that she looks like a queen. When I see her smile, I feel less plagued by guilt.

It's the middle of the night, but I suddenly think that maybe I should go to Grandpa's house right now and finish Ken's story. It seems like the right place to do it, and I could use the walk to clear my head. I get up, change quickly and leave my room.

Outside, it's breezy but not cold. The night is dark, the moon obscured by

clouds. It's a half-hour walk to Grandpa's house. I plug in my earphones and set off.

There's something special about walking in the middle of the night. Although I sometimes feel unsafe, I enjoy the peace. Nobody out. Everything shrouded in darkness. It's a different world, one I don't normally get to see.

At Grandpa's house I take the key I still have, slot it into the door, go inside. It smells the same as ever, and the sudden nostalgia threatens tears. I swallow hard and pad across the wooden floors. The house already looks different. Some of the furniture has been packed down, bubble-wrapped. Most of the paintings and photos on the walls have been removed and are stacked on the floor. But the table still stands. I sit down there, taking my laptop out of my bag. I open the document, start scanning, editing, writing.

Dawn arrives just as I'm finishing. My forehead feels stiff, my fingers crunchy. My brain feels like moss and my legs feel dead, but inside I'm jubilant. I stand up, stretching my arms, rolling my shoulders backwards, forwards. I walk to the window, open it, breathe fresh air.

In all my time writing, I've rarely felt satisfied with anything I've written. I'm a perfectionist—there's always something to improve, something to add or take away. But this time it's like the document has closed itself. I couldn't add anything even if I wanted to.

The next day I arrive at work early. Tracy is already there—I can hear the radio playing in her office. I walk to her open door, stick my head in.

'It's done,' I tell her. She's writing emails and hardly looks at me.

'Have you sent me the final copy?' she asks, still scrolling.

'Yes,' I say, and she nods.

'I'll read it this afternoon,' she says, and I go back to my desk.

Part of me thinks she'll hate it, but I don't really care.

The story was never for her.

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Imagining myself finally writing these acknowledgments is one of the things that kept me persevering with *Backwaters*. So, thank you for finishing my first book. It means a lot.

There are so many important people that have been part of the making of *Backwaters*.

First and foremost, I want to thank God, because I'm still here, healthy and writing. I also want to give the biggest thank you to my wonderful family. Mum, Dad, Tessa and William—I don't know where I'd be without you.

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Thank you to my two editors for making this book more readable. Ian See, thank you for being my first-ever editor. You made me feel safe and I'm grateful for the wide-arc advice you gave me. Alaina Gougoulis, I loved how your edits and suggestions felt like a book-long conversation with you. Thank you for improving *Backwaters*.

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I'm proud to publish *Backwaters* in a moment when Asian stories are finally coming to light. This year *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

historically took out most of the awards at the Oscars, including Best Film. I've been incredibly inspired by books such as *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong and *Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner. Representation is of supreme importance and, for the first time in my life, I've been able to read and watch stories like mine. If you're Asian, queer or a person of colour in a mostly white country, I hope you're beginning to feel seen and heard. This book is for you.

Emma Ling Sidnam is a Wellington-based writer and law and literature student. As a fourth-generation Asian New Zealander, she is passionate about representation and ensuring that all voices are heard. She is an award-winning slam poet and her work has been published in the *Spinoff*, *Capital*, *Newsroom* and the anthologies *A Clear Dawn* and *Middle Distance*.

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‘The past and present carry out intimate conversations in this compelling and beautiful work. The rhythms of modern city life speak with the deep histories of Chinese lives in Aotearoa in ways that give a sense of walking backwards into the future. Sidnam’s magnificent novel shows us that the past is living, evolving and all around us. It is an absolute joy to read.’

PIP ADAM

‘A warm and funny novel about disappearance, discovery and learning how to live, as well as an intriguing exploration of love, family and secret histories in Asia and New Zealand.’

PAULA MORRIS

‘*Backwaters* is a brilliant book that encompasses the often forgotten and trivialised immigrant experience. Sidnam weaves the stories of Laura and Ken with aching delicacy and tenderness, with humour and wit. Every one of us will find comfort and familiarity in this book, from the very beginning until the bittersweet end.’

KHADRO MOHAMED

‘An exciting journey of self-discovery and connection...that will appeal to readers of Alice Pung’s *Unpolished Gem*.’

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